Ultima ratio

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Ultima ratio - the last resort. At last the day of the Final Battle against Lord Voldemort has come. Harry, Ron and Hermione fight bravely against their nemesis - but then something goes wrong. And Hermione finds herself alone in a precarious situation.
"Hermione, come on. You know we are ready." Harry tried to soothe his friend. "This is it! We have to do it now."

"He's right, you know, Hermione." Ron told her while his arm was wrapped comfortingly around her shoulder.

The three friends were currently sitting in what appeared to be a small apartment when in fact it was a magically enhanced tent. Said tent stood in a secluded area in the north of England far from any dwelling, magic or muggle.

"But…but…" Hermione stuttered. "It's tomorrow. He's attacking tomorrow. We can't do this."

She started to panic slightly. She had felt this way ever since they had learned about his plans to attack the ministry. It had been pure coincidence combined with Harry's invisibility cloak that they now held an advantage over the Dark Lord. He was going to attack the heart of the magical community: the Ministry of Magic itself. And if the Ministry fell so would England. And all would lie at the feet of Lord Voldemort. The three friends knew this. And they had to act to prevent that from ever happening. They had worked so hard. Ever since Albus Dumbeldore died at the end of their sixth year at Hogwarts the three friends had lived and fought only for one purpose, to rid the world of Voldemort. And now there was the long awaited opportunity. They knew his plans, they knew he was finally vulnerable. It was time to hit.

"Hermione, " Harry said in a calm voice. "this is our chance. We have to take it."

"I know!" Hermione choked. "I do! But, what if we fail Harry? We know of his plans only since five days. We couldn't take all possible scenarios into account. We are far from ready. I can't do this."

Harry sat down on the couch beside Hermione. Ron was on her other side and still held her in his arm. Harry took one of her hands and held it reassuringly.

"You are right Hermione. It was just five days ago. That's not enough time to set up a plan to take down Voldemort." He paused as if to decide how to best phrase his next words. "But it was not just those five days. It was a lucky stroke that we learned of his attack plan tomorrow. But this whole thing? We planned this for how long now?" Harry asked, then answering himself. "Two years, Hermione! Two years."

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "We are ready. Don't worry!" Then Harry let go of her hand and stood up.

Hermione knew he was right. So far their way had been hard and difficult. They had struggled to find and to destroy Voldemort's Horcruxes. They had sacrificed so much but in the end they had succeeded. All of the Horcruxes were gone. The diary, the ring, Slytherin's locket, Ravenclaw's
diadem, Huffelpuff's cup and Gryffindor's dagger were now no more than broken trinkets. Just one piece of the Dark Lord's soul remained and that was residing in his body. But that last piece had proven to be very difficult to get. Since his rebirth four years ago Voldemort had grown in power. His army of followers was now strong enough to take over the country. He was just one step away of achieving his goals. Voldemort may not be immortal any more but he still was powerful and dangerous. If he succeeded tomorrow and took down the Ministry he would become the ruler of their country. And then, Horcruxes or not, he would be untouchable.

So ever since Harry had heard of Voldemort's plan to attack he had decided it was time to fulfil the prophecy.
A flash of green light and Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic, was dead. Voldemort stood, wand still raised, in the Minister's office and laughed insanely over the dead body that had fallen half way across the desk.

Hermione could feel Harry stiffen beside her. They couldn't see inside the office but they could still see the green shimmer of the deadly curse through the milky windows.

"It's time. We should hit" Hermione stated with more calm than she actually felt.

"How many?" Harry asked, no emotion betraying his voice.

"We have to take down the two outside the door first," said Ron who then cast a spell to sense sources of Dark Magic and closed his eyes "Four inside the secretary's room. And then there is Lestrange and Voldemort inside the Minister's office."

Ron didn't struggle over the Dark Lord's name.

"OK! Ron and I take down the two guards at the door. Silently!" Harry nodded to Ron "Then we barge in. While Ron wards the place we take down the four, Hermione. And then…" he trailed off but they all knew what would come next.

"That's it then." Harry paused as if he wanted to say something but then decided against it "Ron, on three. One….two….three!"

Harry and Ron both cast a silent curse. The two death eaters at the door were both simultaneously hit by a purple curse and fell down without making any noise. They walked stealthily to the door that led to the antechamber. The door would open to the inside so Harry and Hermione positioned themselves on either side of the door. Ron crouched down behind Hermione and closed his eyes again.

"Two in the far end of the room I think they are guarding the door to the Minister's office, one seems to be sitting somewhere in the left side of the room. The last one is pacing the room," Ron stated.

"Ok, we know what to do. Ron, after you ward the room help Hermione," Harry whispered.

Hermione felt fear bubbling inside her as her breathing became laboured. She couldn't focus her thoughts any more.

_Oh god, I can't remember one single curse_, she thought, panicking. In that moment Harry caught her eyes and smiled slightly. Then he whispered so softly that she could barely understand.

"Whatever happens now, Hermione. We did our best, we have nothing to regret. There is a chance to win."

Then his eyes hardened and the smile disappeared as he gave the signal to go. Harry blasted the door open with a spell and then took down the Death Eater sitting on a sofa that once was supposed to make the time visitors had to wait for the Minister more comfortable. Now it was turned over and the Death Eater that had occupied it moments before was sprawled behind it. His mask had come off his face and Hermione could see the surprise still present on his now lifeless face.

Hermione knew he was dead. They couldn't afford to spare him. It was too risky to leave behind
stunned enemies as they could always be enervated. The trio had learned that the hard way long ago. Hermione shuddered as she remembered that day. Neville Longbottom wouldn't have lost his life if she had just killed that Death Eater.

But now was not the time to dwell in guilt.

The three remaining Death Eaters had in the meantime overcome their surprise and started attacking. Harry was forced to cast a shield charm as Hermione and Ron entered the room. Hermione had to stay near Ron to protect him while he was warding the room to prevent other enemies from entering. She raised her wand and brought it down in one fluid movement. A sickle of yellow light left her wand and headed towards one of the Death Eaters. The Death Eater had seen the attack and raised a shield of his own. As the yellow light collided with the shield it stopped and Hermione could see the Death Eater smirk behind his mask. Hermione wasn't concerned though as she knew his defences were useless. And sure enough the yellow light intensified its glow and absorbed the bluish shield. After that it continued its way like it never had been stopped. The smirk of the Death Eater hadn't left his face as the light collided with his chest. He fell backwards as blood flowed down his front. Hermione felt the now familiar pang of guilt wash over her as she knew she had ended another life.

In the corner of her eyes Hermione could see Ron casting the finishing spells to erect the wards while Harry was fighting one of the remaining Death Eaters. The other one was attacking her now. She cast a shield charm in order to protect Ron. The curses now hitting the shield were strong and Hermione had to concentrate to maintain her shield.

In that moment the door to the Minister's office was flung open and in strode, calmly as if he had no concern in the world, Lord Voldemort. He was clad completely in black, his skin sickly white and his eyes glowed in crimson as he surveyed the room. He was followed by Bellatrix Lestrange whose face was contorted into a cruel mask of glee.

"Ah, I knew you would do something stupid," Lord Voldemort said in his cruel high pitched voice. Both duels had stopped upon his entry.

"Your efforts are futile," he added his voice now icy cold and devoid of any emotion. "You can never beat me, Potter."

He strode towards Harry and the Death Eater who had been duelling Harry before backed away to make room for his master. Harry and Voldemort were now standing three metres from each other. Each staring at the other, crimson met green. Harry's face was determined while Voldemort still wore an eerie smirk that made him look even more dangerous. Hermione could see Harry twitch and she knew that his scar must hurt him. But aside from the small twitch he didn't let it show. Voldemort's eyes narrowed and his smirk disappeared.

"I see you have learned how to occlude your mind even when you stand before me." His voice was still emotionless, but Hermione could now sense an underlying anger.

"An impressive feat. But it will be of no use to you."

"You will not win this one, Riddle," Harry stated with a strong voice.

"You dare!" Voldemort snapped at him. His face now a mask of hate and anger as he whipped out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"Yes, I dare. Tom Riddle." Harry now pointed his wand at Voldemort.

"Bella, take down his followers," Voldemort ordered his lieutenant without breaking eye contact
with Harry. "Do not interfere in my duel!!"

Hermione could not follow their conversation any more as Lestrange and the remaining two Death Eaters started to attack Ron and herself. She could feel an impact on her shield as Lestrange's curse hit it. Bellatrix laughed insanely as she fired another curse at her. This time the force of the curse was too much. Hermione's shield shattered and she stumbled back a few steps.

"Ah, little Mudblood. Did you really think you could win against me?" Bellatrix mocked her.

Ron having finished warding the room was now fighting the remaining two Death Eaters at once. Hermione knew she was on her own just like Harry and Ron now had to fight alone.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted Bellatrix.

And a burst of green light shot towards Hermione. She jumped to the side and the Killing curse missed her by inches.

"Very innovative, Lestrange." Now it was Hermione's turn to mock though she didn't feel half as sure as her voice sounded.

She was still crouched down on one knee as she moved her wand in three slashing movements at Bellatrix. Bellatrix formed a shield that took most of the force of Hermione's curse. The rest of her curse scratched Bellatrix' shoulder and blood started to flow down her arm.

"You filthy scum!" Bellatrix screamed furiously.

She flung her wand and Hermione could feel the force behind this dark curse. She had no time to move out of the way so she recast her shield. Bellatrix' curse collided with the shield but neither did disappear. Instead black veins snaked over the surface of the shield like a spider web. The black of those veins contrasted harshly with the clear blue of Hermione's shield. Hermione could feel the web of the dark curse pushing against her shield threatening to break it. And she knew if her shield broke the net would engulf her instead and she would die. Bellatrix, wand still raised to maintain her curse, cackled insanely. Hermione could feel the force of the curse double. Her shield lost its power by the second. Hermione closed her eyes. *Now is not the time to despair,* she told herself. *Harry and Ron need you. If you don't stop her now she will attack them instead.* Eyes still closed she got up from her kneeling position.

"Ah, what now? To proud to die snivelling on the ground?" Bellatrix asked, still smirking.

Hermione ignored her. She held her wand now with both hands in front of her the tip pointing at the ceiling. She summoned all her magic and opened her eyes. She then extended her arms to the sides and pushed with all her might at her shield and the dark curse. Slowly the shield gained in volume. Bellatrix' eyes widened in shock and she tried to maintain her curse. But Hermione did not stop pushing and finally the shield burst with a blinding light and took the dark curse down. Bellatrix gasped as her curse was broken. Hermione did not pause and flung a curse of her own at Bellatrix. It collided with her and this time Bellatrix fell to her knees.

"You little shit!" Bellatrix clenched through her teeth.

At that time Ron fired a powerful curse at his adversaries and both Death Eaters fell to the ground. Hermione saw that Ron had his back towards Bellatrix and her and she somehow knew what would happen seconds before it did. She looked back at Bellatrix who had her wand pointed at Ron with a malicious grin on her face.

"Avada Kedavra!"
The green light spurted towards Ron.

"Ron, no!" Hermione screamed to warn him.

Ron spun around and his eyes widened in shock as he saw the green curse coming towards him. It was too late he had no time to dodge it. The light hit him square in the chest. Hermione could only watch in horror as he fell backwards and hit the floor where he remained lying. Ron was dead.

Hermione was shocked and it was pure instinct that she raised her shield to avoid the curse Bellatrix flung at her.

"No, not Ron!" this time it was not Hermione's voice but Harry's.

"Do you see now, Potter?" Voldemort said amused, "First you let your parents die for you. And then your friends step in front of you, and die one after the other. You sacrificed them. You are worse than me. I never let others fight for me."

His wand was still raised menacingly at Harry, smirk in place but his eyes' cold gaze never leaving his opponent. Whereas Harry's eyes were darting between Voldemort and Hermione.

Hermione saw that Harry was losing his cool. She could not let that happen. Harry needed to concentrate but he would not as long as she was in danger. She looked away from Harry and towards Ron. He was still lying were he fell. She could not belief how empty his face looked. As if he was long gone already. And there was no way back for him. Hermione felt a desperate sadness grasp at her chest.

_Not now! _she told herself. _Get a grip!_

Then she took a deep breath and her eyes darted to Bellatrix. As her eyes moved away from Ron and towards Bellatrix her sadness changed into a fury she had never felt before.

"You are going to pay!" Hermione said softly and every syllable was seeped with cold hate.

This time Bellatrix did not mock her. She raised her wand and cast a curse at Hermione. This one the most powerful in the duel so far. Hermione didn't raise her shield nor did she utter a counter curse. She just let the dark curse rush towards her. At the last moment shortly before the curse would hit her she slammed her wand in the path of the dark curse and changed its course so it hit the floor a metre away from her position. She used the same motion she deflected the curse with to mutter one of her own.

"Inflammo!"

Bellatrix who was completely unprepared for this sudden counterattack had no time to defend herself. The curse hit her and the dark witch was engulfed with violet flames. Bellatrix Lestrange did not have time to scream as she burst into ashes. Hermione fell to her knees her magic drastically depleted. She looked into Harry's eyes and nodded.

Hermione felt so faint. She could barely focus her eyes. There were black dots dancing in her vision and she felt sick. Unconsciousness was very tempting now. She just had to give in to it and all this pain and despair would be gone. But no! That would only be temporary. And Harry was fighting against Voldemort right now. Hermione took a deep breath and fought the sickness. After opening her eyes again she tried to concentrate on the two other wizards in the room.

"-and of course Gryffindor's dagger." Hermione could hear Harry saying "Did you really think no one would find them, Riddle? I mean those hiding places weren't exactly original."
Hermione was proud of him. He was facing the darkest wizard alive and Harry was being so brave.

"You will pay, Potter!" Voldemort snarled furiously. "I will kill you and every one that followed your delusional ideas."

"The only one delusional is you, Riddle." Harry's voice was still strong.

Hermione whose vision was now back to normal could see the two wizards were still standing were they had stood before and had still raised their wands at each other. But so far neither had cast a curse. Though Hermione could feel Voldemort radiate a vast quantity of dark magic the force of which made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

"You may have destroyed my Horcruxes. But what good does that do you?"

Hermione noticed that the Dark Lords voice was now back to being calm and held again the controlled hate. That was much more unsettling than the screaming.

"I can create new ones. But first, Potter, you are going to die." Each word from the Dark Lord's mouth felt like knife stabs. "And I promise you your death will not be as easy as your friends." Voldemort gestured towards the fallen body of Ron.

"You will never win, Riddle. Because I know something you don't," said Harry with confidence.

Hermione was impressed how Harry could still stand that raw, dark power which seeped from Voldemort. It seemed to engulf the whole room and made breathing difficult.

"What are you talking about? Do you really think you have an advantage over me?" Voldemort sneered. But he still did not attack. Harry had him mesmerized.

"That wand of yours. Is it new?" Harry asked coldly.

Hermione knew the answer and so did Harry. That wand was once Dumbledore's and it was one of the three Deathly Hallows.

Voldemort stiffened as Harry concluded, "The Elder Wand."

"So you know? And you are still foolish enough to challenge me?" the Dark Lord's eyes narrowed. "Yes, you are right. I own the Unbeatable Wand. I took it from Dumbledore's dead hands."

"Maybe. But you are not the one who beat Dumbledore, are you?" Harry said. "So, that wand does not belong to you."

"Idiot boy!" Voldemort sneered "Snape beat him, of course. I ordered him to kill the old fool. And after that I killed Snape. And now the Elder Wand's allegiance lies with me."

"Oh, but you see. Snape might have taken Dumbledore's life but the one who beat him before that was Draco Malfoy," said Harry "The wand's allegiance never was with Snape."

"But what does it matter?" Voldemort was now angry. "We are duelling on skill alone then. You cannot win, Potter. And after I kill you I will get to Malfoy."

"Too late, Riddle. I got there first. I beat Draco months ago."

Hermione could see the Dark Lords eyes widen in shock at Harry's words.

"So, what do you think? Doesn't that make me the master of the Elder Wand?"
Hermione hadn't seen it coming but just as Harry had finished the sentence. Voldemort attacked.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry obviously had seen it coming as he cast his own spell.

"Expelliarmus!"

Hermione could see the Elder Wand leave Voldemort's hand. It spun and then attacked the one who threatened its owner. Lord Voldemort was hit by his own Killing curse. He fell backwards and hit the floor. His eyes staring lifeless at the ceiling.

Hermione could feel an enormous relief. They had made it! Finally! It was all over! She struggled to stand and then stumbled slowly toward Harry. She needed to hug him now. It was over! The biggest menace to the wizarding world, no to the world in general, was dead. Tears of joy were running down her cheeks.

But then Hermione saw it. Something was not right with Harry. He was in pain. And...he was clutching his scar.

"Eight! Eight, Hermione." Harry struggled to get the words out.

His hands left his face as he locked eyes with Hermione. She could see pain and fear. Then he threw his wand away. It hit the floor a few metres behind Hermione with a clacking sound and then rolled a short distance until it lay still. Hermione stared at Harry bewildered and concerned.

"I'm sorry. He is too strong. Finish him!" It seemed each word cost him tremendous effort to get out.

Their eyes remained locked for another few seconds. Then Harry closed his eyes his hands again holding his forehead and his whole body trembled. Hermione didn't know what was happening. What eight? She didn't understand. Harry was in pain but she didn't know how to help.

Suddenly the trembling stopped. Then Harry removed his hands slowly from his face. But as he opened his eyes again they weren't green anymore. They were glowing red.

Hermione stood frozen in place staring at Harry. That couldn't be possible.

*He cannot possess Harry.* Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. Desperation was bubbling up inside her. *Harry told us so the day Sirius died.* But that arrogant posture those pitiless eyes, it couldn't be her Harry.

"Who...Who are you?" a terrified whisper from Hermione.

"Oh, I think you know perfectly well who I am, Mudblood," he answered with Harry's voice but at the same time it was not Harry's voice. Hermione had never heard Harry speak so cold with so much venom. She was scared.

"Give him back!" Hermione sobbed.

"I don't think so. He is gone and you will follow him" answered Harry cruelly. "You failed, your saviour is dead." Harry took some steps back as he spoke.

Hermione still stared at her friend's face but she could barely recognize it. It was a smooth mask betraying absolutely no emotion. Despite his eyes, they glowed red with malice. Harry's face wasn't supposed to look like that. He always showed emotions, happiness, joy, laughter, sadness, anger and
even hate. But not this absence of every feeling. Hermione couldn't move a muscle. Harry on the other hand still retreated. *Wait…he retreats? Voldemort never retreats. And certainly not from a 'Mudblood'.*

Hermione's eyes darted to the floor. There, just one step away from him lay a wand. The Elder Wand. Of course, he was unarmed now. Harry had, with a last effort, thrown away his own wand. He had known what was coming and had tried to help her.

*'Finish him! Finish him! Finish him! Finish him!'* His last words were replaying in her head. They ripped her out of her stupor and she raised her wand at Harry.

"What are you trying to do now? Do you really think you can stop me? A Mudblood?" Harry cackled insanely.

He now stood right beside the wand. He just had to pick it up and she and the world along with her would be doomed.

"Your precious saviour failed. I killed him. The prophecy is fulfilled. No one can stop me now!" Harry's voice was now hard as steel.

"No…you are wrong" said Hermione softly her voice shaking. "He did not fail. He won. I just have to finish it for him."

Her grip on her wand tightened. She was still shaking, still scared but at the same time determined.

They locked eyes again. Those red orbs were so full of hate. Hermione was scared to no end. How could she beat that bottomless hate? But she had to. Harry counted on her and so did Ron. Hermione could feel Harry emanate the same dark magic that Voldemort had before. It was crackling around both of them. The air seemed charged with electricity.

Then she saw it. A flicker in his eyes. And suddenly he launched for the wand.

*No! You don't!* Hermione screamed in her mind. His hand now closed around the Elder Wand.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

A too familiar green light. The aim was true and another soul was ripped from the body never to return.

Hermione could still feel it surging through her, the power of the curse. Why this one? She didn't know. She had never used one of the Unforgivables before. She looked down at Harry lying at the floor. His right hand was still clutching the Elder Wand uselessly. The colour of his eyes was back to green. But they were empty and dull now, lifeless. His skin was turning grey and waxy. He was dead.

Hermione walked to him like in trance. She was feeling painfully empty as she kneeled beside him. How long she sat there beside her dead best friend she didn't know. But she was not crying. This pain was beyond tears. Her body was still breathing but it felt like her soul had left it, gone along with her friend's. Then after a long time she reached her hand out to his face. Slowly she closed his eyes for the last time. Then she bent towards him and kissed him on the forehead.

"Harry, my friend….my brother," Hermione whispered lovingly. "We made it. We succeeded. It's finally over. Don't worry, Harry. I will look after you. I'll bring you back to your parents. You can lie beside them in Godric's Hollow."
She held his cheek cupped in one hand. And looked at his face. He had been so brave and good.

Hermione stood and walked to were Ron lay. She crouched down beside him too. He was looking so grotesquely peaceful as if he were sleeping.

"Ron, my love. I don't know what to say." Her voice was hoarse with emotion. "You were everything to me. I don't know how to go on now. This was not supposed to happen. You were not supposed to leave me behind. We should have gone together or not at all."

She bent over him and kissed his lips. They were unreacting and icy cold.

"I'll bring you back to your family, Ron. You can rest beside your sister, your brother and your father."

Hermione got up. This dreadful feeling of emptiness still there. Her hands were shaking and her head swirling. How could she go on now? The day they had all been waiting for finally arrived. They had won. But she was alone now. They had lost so many people in this war. It had started with Cedric Diggory and then Sirius and Dumbledore. From there on it just got worse and worse. Even her Muggle parents got killed. But however bad it got they had always been there for her, Ron and Harry. They had comforted each other. But now in their triumph she was alone.

Hermione had started to pace the room. And now she found herself staying before the source of her misery. She looked down at the remains of Lord Voldemort. His red eyes, now empty, held no trace of their former malice. It surprised Hermione but she felt no hate for her enemy any more. It was gone. Maybe died together with her friends. There remained just the sadness. It had all been so pointless, this war. No one had gained anything. She kneeled down beside Voldemort and closed his eyes just like she had done with Harry's.

"I don't know where you wanted to be put to rest. I guess you didn't even know yourself. Never thought that would happen, did you?" Hermione sighed.

She got up again. What was she supposed to do now? Waiting for someone of her side to find them? She looked around the room. She hadn't left the energy to do anything anymore. Then her gaze fell an Harry's wand. It still lay where he had thrown it before Voldemort took over.

_He would want it back._

She went to retrieve it and then brought it to Harry's still form.

"Here, Harry" she put it down on his chest. "Your wand is a million times more worth than this evil thing."

She took the Elder Wand from his hand. But as she touched the smooth wood of the wand she could feel a surge of energy run through her body. She shrieked and fell back, the wand still in her hand. That was pure magical power running through her body. And it all came from the wand in her hand.

She looked at it in wonder. How was that possible.

_The wand, it is now bound to me?_

It was a nice feeling to have this much power. With this wand in hand she could do anything. Right all the wrongs. Put the world back on the right track.

But then her gaze fell on Harry's body and the euphoric feeling left her as quickly as it had come. Of course the wands allegiance was now with her. She had killed its previous owner, her best friend. As
she now looked back at the wand in her hand she could almost see it covered in blood. This small piece of wood had cost countless lives. It was an evil thing. Hermione suddenly felt unbound hate towards the wand.

"Nothing good ever came from you!"

She took the wand in two hands, each hand on either side of the wand. And then she applied pressure unto the wood. After a while the wood gave in and the wand snapped with a loud crack in two. The moment it snapped Hermione could feel the magic from the wand, that had moments before peacefully flown through her body, go wild. It thrashed at her own magic, whirled forcefully through her, ripping at her body. Wave after wave of magic came from the two pieces of the wand clashing and joining with the magic already inside her body adding to its force. It felt like her body was ripped open. It was so much worse than the Cruciatius curse. Every nerve in her body screamed in pain. Hermione lay at the floor thrashing and screaming. And still there was more magic flowing from the wand into her body. Hermione tried to let go of the wand pieces but she was unable to open her hands. They were cramped around the pieces. There was now so much magic it encased her form in a golden light. The pain still intensified by the second. It felt like her skin was peeled from her body. Hermione just wanted to die now. She couldn't take any more. Her vision became blurry and she could barely make out the room. And then the room began to swirl around her until it became a blur of different colours. Hermione couldn't distinguish up from down anymore. It felt like she was falling. But were to she didn't know nor did she care. The pain and the falling feeling remained for an eternity. Hermione had lost all feeling of time. It felt like dying und she just wished she would lose her life already.

And then it stopped. She hit solid ground, hard. But it didn't hurt so much. Nothing like the pain before. Hermione opened her eyes but she couldn't focus her vision. It was bright and she lay on something green but that was all she could see before she lost consciousness.

She did not know how long she lay there unconscious but after a while she regained her senses. Hermione's body was sore and she felt dizzy. What had happened? What had that stupid wand done to her? She opened her eyes still sitting were she had fallen and cringed at the brightness. When the world came back into focus she could see she was lying on a grassy field. There were even some cows a distance away, grazing. The fields stretched on and on, some with more cows some with yellow, ripe wheat. Hermione could hear birds singing and the sun was shining. She was in the middle of a postcard countryside idyll. However had she gotten here? One second she was standing in the destroyed office of the Minister of Magic surrounded by her fallen friends and foes then she experiences the most excruciating pain she ever had to endure and then she wakes up in this peaceful scene. Hermione was at a loss here.

Well, she couldn't lay here forever. And the ground was a little bit chilly. As she tried to get up a sharp pain shot through her left arm. Hermione gasped at the sudden pain. She crouched into a sitting position and examined the injured arm. Her lower arm stood in an odd angle. She could barely move the fingers of her left hand. She rolled up her sleeve which sent new waves of pain through the arm. The skin was bruised dark purple and the bone was obviously broken. It could have happened when she had landed here. She vaguely remembered that her impact had been far from gentle. Luckily her wand was still in the holster at her right arm. She flicked her wrist and the wand landed in her hand. She then muttered a spell and bit her teeth together as the broken bones re-positioned themselves into their anatomically correct position. She then summoned bandages and secured the arm. There was really nothing else she could do about it. To mend the bones she would need some potions. Still sitting on the grassy land she examined her body for other injuries. She couldn't find anything else that required her attention. Her body was covered in bruises, cuts and dried blood but nothing
serious. She took another look at her surroundings. Nothing had changed. Still peaceful, still calm. No enemies were in sight. Hermione was so used to being always alert. She had lived on the road for the last two years. Harry, Ron and she had been on the run. It had been essential to be wary of their surroundings because they never knew when the enemy would strike next. As she thought about Harry and Ron the memories of their last fight were coming back in mind. Hermione saw the still form of her boyfriend before her. Then there was Harry being struck with the Killing curse which had come from her own wand. Hermione closed her eyes. Despair and sadness were ripping at her heart again. She took a deep breath to steady herself again.

_Compare! Get up!_ she told herself. _I need to get away from here. Wherever 'here' is._

She stood up and was immediately hit by a wave of nausea. Hermione needed a moment to steady herself again. She felt weak. So weak in fact that she didn't dare to apparate away from here. The risk to splinch herself was too high. But she could always use the Muggle way. So, she walked slowly away from her little grassy field. After half an hour of wandering through the countryside she reached a small road. She decided it was best to follow that road as it would eventually bring her to a village or town. There she could seek some transportation back to London. She didn't exactly want to return to the Ministry but she still had things to do. The Aurors were sure to have arrived by now. Hermione would have to sort out what had happened with them. And of course, a bang of cold grasped her chest, she had to retrieve the bodies of Harry and Ron.

After a while of wandering along the road she heard the distant sounds of a motor behind her. She looked back, and sure enough there was a car coming her way. It was still far away. Hermione felt relieved. She was really tired by now. It would be nice if that car could take her to the next town. Hopefully the driver was nice enough to take a hitch. She quickly rubbed at her face with the sleeve of her robe to get rid of the blood and grime. Then she clutched her black witch's robes tightly around her to cover her tattered clothes. She didn't need to scare the driver away with her appearance.

After a while the car had nearly reached her and she stood at the side of the road waving at the car. The car seemed to be an antique car, Hermione noted. But was obviously well cared for. As the car neared her she could see a man in the driver's seat. The car slowed down and Hermione felt relieved as it came to halt right beside her. The man driving the car had the windows pulled down and was now leaning a little bit out of the driver's window to look at her.

"Hello, Missy. Do you need help?" asked the man.

He stared at her strange attire but seemed friendly enough. He was in his late forties, a little plump and had short brown hair in an old fashioned hairstyle.

"Yes, I was wondering if you would be so kind as to take me to the next town, sir," Hermione answered politely.

She could see he was still staring at her robes dubiously. But she couldn't blame him. She was wearing witch's robes and he was obviously a Muggle. Of course he would think it strange. He considered her for a moment but then seemed to come to a decision.

"That would be Steepleton, Missy. That's just were I'm headed." The man motioned to the other seat beside him. "Please, take a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

Hermione walked around the car and got in the passenger seat. The car took off again. And Hermione leaned back in the seat.
"It's just another fifteen minutes to Steepleton," the man informed her. "So, what were you doing, wandering around alone? Did you get lost?" he asked.

"Yes, kind of," Hermione answered.

She didn't want to talk about how she ended up here. She didn't even know where she was exactly. The man seemed to sense her reluctance and didn't ask anymore for the next ten minutes. The road reached the top of a hill and Hermione could see a village in the valley.

"That's Steepleton," the man said. "Lovely town. Lived there my whole life."

Hermione nodded.

"You could go to Mrs Janeson," the man suggested in a friendly talkative way.

Hermione was bewildered. Who is Mrs Janeson?

The man answered her unspoken question. "She is the best tailor I know. I'm sure she has something for you."

He glanced at her clothes again. Hermione raised a brow. She looked down at herself. Sure her witch's cloak was a little bit out of the way but it covered her ripped and bloody t-shirt. And her jeans were perfectly normal. A little bit dirty, okay, but otherwise just fine.

"And she is not that expensive," the man added helpfully.

You are one to talk. Hermione thought looking at the man again. He was obviously a vintage freak. First the car then his hair and to top it of he was dressed completely in vintage clothes.

But she answered, "Yes. Maybe I'll try that. Thank you."

The man smiled friendly at her. The car had reached the village in the meantime. It was just as small as it had seemed to be. But Hermione could see a bakery just a little bit ahead of them.

Perfect! I just need something to eat and I'll be able to apparate back to London.

"Could you stop here, sir?" Hermione asked.

"Of course." The man pulled the car from the road.

"Thank you for driving me." Hermione got out of the car.

The man behind the wheel looked at her rather concerned.

"Are you going to find your way now?" he asked.

Hermione thought it was nice of him to be concerned but there really was no reason for him to be.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "Thanks again for driving me. Have a nice day."

"Yes, good bye," answered the man smiling and waved at her. He then took off again down the road.

Hermione felt dizzy again now that she was standing. She looked longingly at the bakery. Unfortunately she didn't have Muggle money on her right now. But she really needed some nutrients now if she ever wanted to reach London again. She looked around. There was an old man sitting on
a bench a few houses ahead from where she was standing. But he was asleep. A small woman came down the alley towards Hermione but she entered the bakery. So Hermione stepped in the shadow of one of the houses. With the flick of her wrist her wand was in her hand again. She tapped her head with the wand and experienced the familiar feeling of eggs rippling down her body. She was now invisible to the eyes of muggles and most wizards. She then took off to the bakery. Through the window she could see the woman paying. And as the woman left the shop Hermione slipped in.

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Hermione was sitting on a narrow wall surrounding a garden. A large grapevine was right beside her and covered her from any passersby. Her thieving trip to the bakery had been a success. No one had spotted her. Unfortunately the assortment hadn't been very big. She just got some old bread and a few pieces of apple pie. But as she had felt starved to the point of feeling faint everything had tasted delicious. Now she was leaning back on her wall catching some sunrays. She really felt better. Her strength had returned to her. Not all of it of course but she definitely felt up to the apparition now.

Now were to apparate to?

The easiest thing would be to apparate inside the Ministry of Magic as that was her destination. But she didn’t know for sure that the Aurors had the situation under control now. Voldemort might be out but his Death Eaters could still be running free. No, Hermione didn't want to end up on a battle field again.

Then maybe Diagon Alley?

Yes, that would work. There was an apparition point at Diagon Alley. Then she just had to reach some Ministry official and hopefully this nightmare would finally be over.

Now that this decision was made Hermione got up and concentrated on Diagon Alley. She spun on the spot and the familiar feeling of pressure surrounded her. It was not exactly a very nice feeling but Hermione welcomed it. She was glad to be able to leave this village. She couldn't put her finger on it but it had been a tad bit on the strange side.

She arrived at the apparition area in Diagon Alley and stepped immediately aside from it as she didn't want to disturb other travellers. Hermione took a few steps down the Alley when she noticed something was off. There was Flourish and Blott's the bookstore right where it should be but the sign above it read Flourish and Geare. And further down the Alley she could see on the left side a new store were Florean Fortescue's should be. It was now an Antiques shop Hermione could see as she passed it. That was rather odd. There were more shops missing or other new ones she'd never seen before. Now that she thought about it something else was strange. The shoppers that passed her were staring at her. Not a recognizing glance in her face, no, they were fixed on her clothes. Some even shook their heads and muttered something under their breath. What was so strange about her? She was still wearing her black cloak opened in the front underneath she wore her shirt and the tight jeans. Really, nothing out of the ordinary, at least not in the wizarding world. The other people wore normal wizard's or witch's robes. Hermione couldn't see anyone with Muggle's clothes but that was not surprising. They still didn't know that Voldemort was defeated and didn't want to look like Muggleborns. But whatever happened to those staring people Hermione honestly didn't care right now. There were other more pressing matters. She still needed to contact the Aurors.

How best to do that? Or I could use the tram to the Ministry.

Deep in thought, Hermione passed a newspaper stand. She glanced at the Daily Prophet absentmindedly and stopped dead in her tracks as something caught her eye. She walked the few steps back and took a look at the newspaper. The caption read:
Grindelwald strikes again – New attacks in France.

That was just not possible. Hermione grabbed the paper. Grindelwald was dead. Voldemort had killed him to get information on that blasted wand. But here it read he had obviously attacked a secluded wizarding village in the north of France just a few days ago. Many were killed and even more injured. Was that some sick joke?

"Hey, you read it, you buy it!" the wizard selling the papers scowled at her.

Hermione looked up at him then reached in her pocket and handed him some sickles. Still clutching the paper she walked over to a bench right across Gringotts' gates and sat down. She gulped and opened the paper again.

Still there. That obviously fake article. Her eyes scanned the paper for further information. Then she read something that made her stop breathing. There over the caption in a corner was the printing date. Hermione felt like someone had boxed her in the guts. The printing date read:

Oct. 12, 1943

Okay, don't panic! Hermione thought. Desperately trying but failing this resolution. There has to be a perfectly logical explanation.

She then started to examine the paper. It seemed new. If this paper was indeed from the forties it should be yellowed. But it was not, it even smelling of printing ink. Was this a prank or something? But she had walked by the newspaper stand on pure coincidence. No one could have known beforehand. And there had been more copies of the paper. Why would someone make this up anyway?

Hermione felt sick as she now remembered all those tiny details she had noticed since waking up on the field but had been until now to preoccupied to pay attention to. The driver of the antique car and his vintage style, the village of Steepleton and the odd bakery, the undeniable changes in Diagon Alley.

They were strange but could be explained if she really was in…. but no, that would be, Hermione made a quick calculation, 54 years!

That was just not possible. No one could travel that far back in time. She had researched time travel in her third year. That year Professor McGonagall had granted her the time turner and Hermione had been a little bit obsessed with the concept of time travel. She had in fact read several books on the topic. The time turner was the only means to travel back in time. And Hermione hadn't had one since the end of third year. Even if she had a time turner she only could have gone back a few hours. That was the time frame a time turner worked with: a few hours not several decades. The farthest anyone had gone back was the inventor of the time turners Arctus Blimble. He had gone back for 63 hours if Hermione remembered correctly. But 54 years? Entirely impossible.

She thought back trying to reconstruct her actions. Maybe there was something she overlooked right now. It always helped to recapitulate things if something was amiss. First she had fought Harry/Voldemort. She had won. Hermione couldn't help but feel the misplaced guilt again. By defeating Harry - no Voldemort - she had acquired the allegiance of the Elder Wand. She had felt it's power when she had picked up the wand. Then in a fit of anger she had snapped it. The magic of the wand had then seemed to attack her. Hermione shuddered as she remembered the pain this had inflicted on her. She had passed out from the pain and had woken up on the field. But there had been more, she now remembered. A slightly familiar feeling. Beside this being-skinned-alive-feeling there had been this falling and swirling motion. It had been intensified tenfold but that feeling was
comparable to her time turner experiences. Hermione shivered and clutched the Daily Prophet in her hands so that it crumpled. She was very pale now.

But it was still an assumption, yet. She had to check. The wizarding world was too static there wasn't much development in customs or styles. But the muggle world had been subjected to huge changes in the last 50 years. If she was indeed in the forties she would recognize it in Muggle London. So Hermione stood, threw the paper in a waste basket and walked down Diagon Alley to the Leaky Cauldron. The people were still staring at her and Hermione hastened down the Alley suddenly very self-conscious. As she reached the Leaky Cauldron she passed the bar accompanied by the stares of the customers and left through the front door.

Hermione stood there in the middle of London and was on the verge of tears. Her face was drained off all colour. That was not her London. The cars on the street, and there were not many, were all ancient and the buildings were just wrong. Some of them were destroyed. The worst of all were the people or what they were wearing. The women all wore skirts and blouses some even tiny hats and the men were in slack cloth pants and shirts. All wore unmistakeably forties styles and all stared at the strange woman standing in front of a rundown shop.

So the paper had not been a stupid prank. She was indeed stranded in a totally different decade. Hermione didn't know what to do now. In the last few hours her life had been turned upside down. First the loss of her friends and only family she had left and now this. There was just so much she could take and all of this had been much too much.

After another minute of staring at this foreign city and refusing to believe she turned around and re-entered the Leaky Cauldron. She wasn't in the condition to make any big decisions. She was tired and hurt. She hadn't slept for ages. She really needed rest now. Maybe the best plan of action would be to get a room in the Leaky Cauldron and have some rest. And if she was lucky this nightmare would just prove to be that, a nightmare.

But before she got a room she went back to Diagon Alley and searched for an apothecary. She really needed some healing potions. The apothecary was quickly found and Hermione bought some bone mending potion, a blood replenishing potion, bruise and cut ointment and a bottle of dreamless sleep potion. After that she returned to the Leaky Cauldron. Inside she went straight to the barman.

"Excuse me," she asked politely "Do you have a free room I can rent?"

The barman was a tall and muscular man in his forties with short dark hair. He took a look at Hermione but seemed to not care about her attire. For that Hermione was grateful.

"Of course, Miss. Do you need a single or a double bed room?" her asked in a deep and pleasant voice.

"Single, please." Hermione answered.

"Very well. That is two galleons a night, Miss." Hermione nodded in agreement to the barman's answer. "You can have room number 4. I'll get someone to show you the way." The barman handed Hermione a key then turned and shouted in the kitchen. "Louisa, show this customer to her room!"

After a few moments a woman stepped from the kitchen. She seemed to be just a little bit older than Hermione herself. She was not very pretty but had a friendly smile on her face.

"So, you are staying with us?" she asked "Which room did he give you?"

"Number four." Hermione held the key up.
Ah, that's up the stairs. Follow me!" The woman began to climb a narrow staircase.

"So, were are you from? I've never seen you here before," the woman asked Hermione as they reached the second floor. "And your clothes are so exotic."

This woman seemed to be rather talkative, Hermione noticed. She didn't need nosy people right now. What was she supposed to answer? No, I'm from London actually. But I travelled back in time more than 50 years, that's the reason for my clothes. Yes, that would go down well. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I was on the road for some time now," Not exactly a lie. "I've always wanted to see London though. Is it nice here?"

Hermione hoped her question would divert the woman's attention.

"Oh, yes. And Diagon Alley is really interesting," she answered enthusiastically. "Sadly, Muggle London is not safe right now. What with their war going on."

Hermione was bewildered for a moment until she remembered where or rather when she was. Of course, the Second World War was raging right now. And it wouldn't end for another two years.

"So, that's your room." The woman had stopped in front of a wooden door. "Have a nice stay."

"Thank you!" Hermione answered and opened the lock with the room key.

The room was rather small. There was a bed on the left side. Its covers were old and worn but clean. On the other side of the room was an old wooden closet. It looked like it could fall apart any moment. Hermione guessed the only thing holding it together was magic. A small window on the wall opposite the door showed a view of Diagon Alley. There was another door by the closet. Hermione checked it. It lead to a bathroom which was windowless and rather small but clean enough. Hermione took off her cloak put down her bag with the healing potions and sat down on the bed. She took her wand out and cast several warding spells, a charm to alert her of possible intruders and a locking charm on door and window. She did the spells mechanically and without thinking about them.

Now that she sat in this relatively secure room and nothing needed her immediate attention the moment she had dreaded had finally come. Since that duel in the Ministry she hadn't had time to think about what had happened. She had actually tried to suppress all thoughts about it. She didn't want to think about what she had lost this day. She closed her eyes and all she could see were their dead faces. They were staring at her accusatory. She had killed them both.

Tears were running down her cheeks. She had allowed Bellatrix to kill Ron. It had been her duel and her responsibility to stop the witch. In the end her hesitation had cost Ron's life. And Harry? She had personally cast the Killing curse on him. Hermione curled up in a fetal position on the bed. Sobs were now shaking her body. She knew it wasn't really her fault. They had fought in a war. They all had been prepared to die. Hermione was sure neither of them would blame her. But that didn't change the fact that they were dead now. She was left behind.

Since her parents had died almost one and a half years ago Harry and Ron had become her family. She had loved them both. Harry like a brother and Ron as her boyfriend. Hermione lay on the bed and cried desperately for their lost lives. She just couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face. This war had taken everything from her.

She stood before her parents' house that had been completely wrecked just like all the other houses
in the street. There had been nothing left despite the smouldering remnants of her childhood. Harry had had a vision of the attack. And they had left to help. But they were too late. Hermione stepped on the area that once was her home. She took a few steps her head was swirling and she couldn't think straight anymore. Then she came upon something. It was a corpse. Barely recognizable as human and burnt to cinders. The skin was blackened. The material that once had been clothes was merged with the body. The face was completely burned off making the body unrecognizable. But Hermione knew… and she fell to her knees….

It was a triumphant feeling. They had finally reached another one of the despicable horcruxes. It was the cup of Huffelpuff, a beautiful trinket. That something so beautiful held something so foul made Hermione sick. They were deep underground, below even the oldest of Gringotts’ vaults. This hiding place had been warded with so many dark spells, Hermione was surprised they had made it. But here they were. Harry, Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville and herself. Nothing He put in their way could stop them. Hermione was so proud. Without Luna they wouldn't have been able to get here. So she was the one to have the honour to take the cup. As Luna touched the cup she was suddenly surrounded by a bright white light. The light then seemed to be sucked into her body. Hermione saw with horror as her friends face contorted in pain. Then Luna screamed. Blood was running from her eyes, ears and mouth. Her skin split open everywhere on her body. More and more blood flowed from her and gathered in a pool under her fallen body. And still she screamed in agony. Hermione could do nothing to help her friend. She held her as the life seeped out of her…

Hermione started up in the bed. At first she didn't know where she was. But as she remembered the events from last day the bewilderment was replaced by a dull aching feeling. She must have fallen asleep. It was dark outside. She checked her wrist watch: 5:34 a.m. As she got up from the bed her whole body hurt. The worst was the throbbing pain that radiated from her left arm. She felt nauseous and sat back on the bed. On the floor she found the bag with the healing potions.

Time to use them.

She emptied the bag on the bed. First she took the vial with the bone mending potion. She downed it in one go to get it over with. It was a viscid goo and tasted of burnt plastic. The throbbing sharp pain in her arm subsided and left a dull ache behind. Hermione removed the bandage. The arm still hurt a little bit but it would do so for the next few days. At least the bone would be mended. Next Hermione took the blood replenishing potion. It tasted only slightly better than the mending potion. After taking it she felt instantly better. The nauseous feeling left her. Next she should use the bruise and cut ointment but before that she needed a shower.

She stepped in the bathroom and took her clothes off. She glanced in the mirror. Her face was pale and there were dark rings under her eyes. Her hair was filthy and dishevelled. Her right side was caked in blood as there was a large cut that reached from her belly over to her side. It was the remnant of a cutting hex. She couldn't remember when she had received it. Several minor cuts and bruises were all over her body. After examining her injuries in the mirror she stepped in the shower. The water stung on her open wounds but the warmth still made her feel better. She even found a small piece of soap.

After the shower she stepped out of the bathroom, the towel wrapped around her. She then closed the curtains of the window and began to apply the cut and bruise ointment to all the places that needed it. She cast a quick Scorgify and Reparo on her clothes before donning them on. They were still rather tattered but it would do until she could buy new, time appropriate ones.

She wasn't sure why this being stranded in the wrong time affected her now so little. After having
read the paper she had been shocked. But now that she thought about it didn't worry her that much
anymore. Probably because there was nothing waiting for her in her own time. The worst had
already happened at the Ministry. Everything else seemed to drop in the background.

But she still had to go back. This was not her time and she didn't belong here. Hermione knew the
rules of time travel. Well, the first she'd already broken: You must not be seen. But she couldn't help
that. The next said that no one was allowed to change time. How had McGonagall phrased it?

'Aawful things happen to wizards who meddle with time.'

Hermione snorted. Awful things had already happened to her even without her meddling with time.
But McGonagall had been right. Hermione mustn't change anything while staying here. In her time
the war was finally over. The people were save again. Hermione wasn't going to jeopardize this
victory. She was tempted to do something to prevent her friends from dying but everything they had
done had been necessary. She wasn't sure she could save them even if she tried to. Then there was
Harry. There was no way to save him. Hermione had thought about his last words.

'Eighth', he had said.

Hermione hadn't understood back then but now she had time to think it through it was rather
obvious. Harry being able to speak parseltongue, the strange connection between his mind and
Voldemort's and of course his surviving the killing curse when he was a baby. It all made sense now.
That night Voldemort had attacked the Potters he had, unknowingly Hermione assumed, created
another Horcrux, Harry.

'Stupid prophesy, Hermione thought. 'Neither can live while the other survives'? Obviously what it
should say is; neither can live. Period.

Hermione sighed as the lump in her throat was back again. It hurt to think of her friends. Just to stop
her thoughts swirling around her lost friends she decided to ponder her options now. She was
stranded in a foreign time period. What she needed was a way back to her time. But how to do that?
To travel forward in time was, as far as she knew, impossible. So the first step of action would be to
research and get information. She could go to the Ministry and tell them everything. Maybe a
department was involved with time travel. But Hermione didn't trust the Ministry. They had done
more damage than help in her time. The most likely scenario if she were to tell them was them
sticking her in some cage like a lab rat. Or they would put her under Veritaserum and squeeze out as
much information about the future as they could get. No, the Ministry was not an option. Then
maybe, Hermione hesitated to finish that line of thought, Hogwarts?

The castle did hold one of the biggest libraries of Britain. If there was a book about time travel that
was useful to Hermione she was bound to find it at Hogwarts' library. And there was also the Elder
Wand. The wand had been the trigger of her time travel of that she was fairly sure. She had snapped
the wand and then this magic had flowed inside of her. It must have been the Elder Wand's magic
that had sent her back here. But where were the broken pieces of the Elder Wand now? Hermione
hadn't had them when she had awoken on that field yesterday.

Currently the Elder Wand of this time period was with Grindelwald. Maybe she should get that
wand? But Hermione had already fought one Dark Lord. That was enough for her. She didn't intend
to start a war with Grindelwald. But she knew Dumbledore would beat Grindelwald in the end thus
acquiring the allegiance of the Elder Wand. All she had to do was lie low at Hogwarts win the trust
of Dumbledore and then after he was master of the Elder Wand…steal it? Borrow it?

Hermione sighted loudly. That wasn't going to be easy. And she really didn't want to reveal
everything to him. He had been a great wizard, Hermione had liked him and it had been a great loss
for her side as he died but he still was one manipulative old man.

_I bet he was in Slytherin when he went to Hogwarts_, she chuckled.

Now that she thought about manipulative Slytherins. There was another one of those currently attending Hogwarts. Hermione groaned. She hadn’t thought about that. Tom Riddle would be at Hogwarts now – maybe a good chance to just assassinate him?

_No, I already determined: no changing the time line._ Hermione stood from the bed and started pacing the room. _I would probably fail anyway. He already is a powerful wizard. So, no attending Hogwarts?

But Hogwarts was the best solution. She could kill two birds with one stone. Getting information on time travel and the Deathly Hollows and a chance to steal the Elder Wand. Where was the problem anyway? Hogwarts was a big school. She would just have to stay out of Riddle's way. He was in Slytherin and she would make sure to end up in Gryffindor. Dumbledore was after all Head of Gryffindor. Yes, Hogwarts seemed to be the best way to go.

Hermione left her room and went down to get something to eat. It was still early, half past six, but there already sat a few customers eating their breakfast. After that she went back to Diagon Alley. To implement her plan she had to sort out a few things. First of all open a vault in Gringotts. She was currently using the money Harry and herself had stored in the beaded bag she always carried along. The beaded bag held everything they had ever needed in their two years of hunting horcruxes. There were beside other stuff books on every topic imaginable, the tent they had lived in, some rather volatile potions, potion ingredients and of course the money. Hermione had cast the complicated Infinitio spell on the bag and ever since it had been a bottomless pit. Now, she didn't have to carry the bag around everywhere. In fact, that would be suspicious especially the books which were all printed well after 1943. Best to deposit everything in a nice, safe vault. She had already altered the galleons with a little transfiguration as they had a mintage that would lead to inconvenient questions.

Hermione entered Gringotts. It looked just like it ever had. The entry hall was giant and intimidating. In the far end were the counters where she needed to go. When it was her turn the goblin turned to her and said in an indifferent voice,

"Welcome to Gringotts. My name is Grinax, how may I be of service?"

"I would like to open a vault," Hermione answered.

"Name?" the goblin, Grinax, asked bored as he reached for a piece of parchment and a quill.

"Hermione DeCerto," Hermione said without hesitation.

She had decided to not use her own surname. That could lead to time related problems so she was going to use a pseudonym.

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After nearly an hour during which Hermione had to sign various papers, give the goblins her magical signature and even provide them with a sample of her blood Hermione was the proud owner of a Gringotts vault and a tiny key to said vault. She left Gringotts with the key hanging around her neck on a fine golden chain.

Now to the next step in her plan. She needed to contact Hogwarts and ask for a place at the school. Hermione bought a few sheets of parchment and then entered a café which she didn't know from her time period. After she ordered a coffee she began to write her request:
To

Armando Dippet

Headmaster of Hogwarts

School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Professor Dippet,

I have recently arrived in the UK as I had to leave my home due to dire circumstances. I lived with my parents in La Calique a small village in the north of France. I am sure you know the perilous menace that at the time threatens France. My family fell victim to this war as did many others.

As I had to leave the country in a rush I had no time to prepare my stay here. I apologize if this may seem sudden to you but I would like to ask you for a place at your school.

I have been home tutored but I am sure my state of knowledge will qualify to follow the lessons at Hogwarts. I would be attending sixth family left me with enough money so I will need no funding to pay for the student fee and my books and equipment.

I would be very thankful if you would consider my request.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione DeCerto

Hermione reread the letter once more as she absentmindedly sipped at her coffee. It would do. She hoped her cover story wasn't easy to expose. She had really visited that village, La Calique. It was in the summer after her third year. She had spent two weeks there together with her parents. That had been a carefree time.

Hermione leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes as she wallowed in her memories. Everything had been so easy back then. And the wizarding world had still been a place of fantasy and fairy tale to her. But that happy, innocent and naïve Hermione was long gone now. She wondered if there was still something of that Hermione left in her. She doubted it.

With a sigh Hermione stood up, left a few Knuts on the table and left the café. Back out on Diagon Alley she noticed that there were more people now doing their shopping. And predictably the staring began again. She really needed to buy some clothes. But first she went to the owlery to sent the letter to Hogwarts.

A shopping spree later Hermione finally arrived back at her room in the Leaky Cauldron. She had several bags full of forties style clothes. After trying on various skirts and blouses and what not it was safe to say that she really didn't like the forties, at least not the fashion. And the hairstyles were hardly any better. Did they expect her to waste hours in front of a mirror to tease her hair into those locks? Really, she had better things to do. She wore her hair open in a mop of curly hair or as a ponytail which held her hair perfectly out of her face. Very useful in combat situations.

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Welcome To Hogwarts

Dear Miss DeCerto

I have received your request. It is a very unusual one as Hogwarts never had a transfer student before. But of course one has to ponder the difficult times in which we are living right now. I am very sorry to hear from the awful things that happened to you.

As I don't want to worsen your situation I will offer you a place at Hogwarts. Enclosed to this letter you will find a list of the things you will need at Hogwarts.

Please use the floo to get to Hogwarts. It will be opened for you at the 18th of October at 4 o'clock.

Yours sincerely,
Armando Dippet

Headmaster of Hogwarts

Hermione had received that letter two days after she had sent her message to Hogwarts. She had been relieved. Now she was standing in a queue to use the floo fireside in the Leaky Cauldron. She had her trunk in one hand. It was filled with all the things she would need at Hogwarts. When it was her turn she took a little bit of the floo powder in her hand and stepped into the flames. She then threw the powder while saying clearly,

"Hogwarts, Headmaster's office!"

Just a few seconds later she stepped gracefully out of the fireplace in the headmaster's office. She took in her surroundings in a quick glance. It was the office she remembered but the interior decoration was completely different. Dumbledore's office had been rather sloppy, with delicate objects scattered here and there. And one side had been covered in shelves with books. Dumbledore's office had been warm but this room was something entirely else. The room was very tidy, nothing seemed out of place. In the middle of the room stood one big, intimidating desk made of dark wood. Behind that desk stood a shelf covered in medals, trophy cups and awards. The atmosphere of this room was a complete opposite to what she knew from her time period. The purpose of the room was clear though: to impress. Behind the desk sat a man. He had grey hair which was trimmed short. His face was wrinkled and his grey eyes looked rather stern.

"Ah, you must be Ms DeCerto. Welcome to Hogwarts." Dippet said, as he got up from his chair and walked over to Hermione.

He offered Hermione his hand and she shook it.

"It is nice being here. Thank you, Headmaster, for taking me in," said Hermione quietly and politely.

"Yes, it is rather unusual to accept a transfer student. But we have to help our fellow witches and wizards from the mainland," Dippet answered pompously. Hermione was reminded of Percy Weasley, but in a bad way.

"Now Ms DeCerto, you wrote that you would like to attend sixth year. How old are you?"

Hermione had the impression Dippet wanted to get it over with quickly.
"I am seventeen now, sir," she lied.

Hermione was in fact eighteen but she wanted to attend sixth year. That would give her nearly two years till her graduation. Time she could use for researching and getting her hands on the Elder Wand.

"That would indeed classify you as a sixth year. But you have to understand that we have to test you." Dippet sat down in his chair. He did not offer Hermione to sit down.

"Yes, of course, sir." Hermione wasn't concerned. She was very confident with her spell work.

"But before that, you will be sorted in one of the houses. I'm sure you know about our house system?"

Hermione nodded.

"Your head of house will then test you and place you in an appropriate year."

Hermione wasn't surprised he shuffled that task off on somebody else. Dippet waved his wand lazily and the Sorting Hat sailed from a shelf and onto the desk. Dippet then gestured to Hermione to put it on. She took the hat and placed it on her head. In her first year it had been so big it had slid down over her eyes. Now it was still too big but it didn't slide down so far.

"Ah, a new student? Aren't you a little late?" Hermione heard the head speak in her mind.

"I'm a transfer student," she answered.

"I see," the head said. And Hermione could feel the alien presence in her head probing her occlumency shields.

"Your mind is expertly shielded, dear. I wonder why you would need to occlude your thoughts so... But you have to lower your shields or I won't be able to sort you."

Hermione had seen that coming.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. Can't you just put me in Gryffindor?"

Hermione hoped the hat would cooperate.

"Now, dear. It is my job to sort. You can't just pick a house yourself," the hat answered amused.

"But I thought you would take the choices of the students into account. You did that for a friend of mine." Hermione tried to sound convincing. "You wanted to put him into Slytherin but he asked you to be put in Gryffindor. And so you did."

"Did I now? I can't remember," the hat said. "But okay. If you insist, dear. I put you into GRYFFINDOR." The hat shouted the last word.

"Thank you," Hermione thought before putting the hat back on the headmaster's desk.

"Excellent!" Dippet exclaimed. "I will fetch Professor Dumbledore. He's your new head of house."

Dipped walked over to the large fireplace and threw a little bit floo powder in the flames. Then he stuck his head into the now green flames and talked to someone on the other end.

A few seconds later a tall form stepped out of the fire place. Hermione was shocked to see her old
headmaster alive. Of course she was prepared to see him alive. But now that he was standing unharmed before her, she was nearly moved to tears. This younger Dumbledore had auburn hair. His beard was as long as ever but equally auburn. And, Hermione noticed with a grin, he was still wearing those ridiculously colourful robes. He wore a bright red robe with little silver stars all over it. His eyes were twinkling. Just like she remembered them.

"Ah, you must be our new student." He beamed at her.

"Yes, professor. My name is Hermione DeCerto. I was just sorted into Gryffindor," Hermione answered

"And a fine house it is, Ms DeCerto." Dumbledore grinned at her. "Now, I think it best we go to my office. Unless you have to say something more, Armando?" Dumbledore turned to Dippet.

"No, not at all, Albus. Go ahead," Dippet said.

He had already started to read some parchments and wasn't really paying attention anymore. Dumbledore went to the entrance of the office and opened it for Hermione.

"Thank you for your time, Professor Dippet," she said to Dippet who didn't look up but waved a hand at her. She then exited the office together with Dumbledore.

They reached his office in no time as Hermione was busy staring at the corridors, the moving pictures and the suits of armour standing in a row in the corridor. She was thrilled to be back at Hogwarts. She hadn't known until now how much she had missed it. Dumbledore on the other hand would have been surprised if the new student hadn't been goggling at the castle. All new students were doing that, first years or not. Of course he didn't know Hermione had spent six years in the castle already and was just feeling a little bit nostalgic right now.

Hermione followed Dumbledore in his office. It was a nice and cosy room. And sure enough all the ominous silver objects and the ancient books she had been missing in Dippet's office were scattered all over the transfiguration teacher's office.

"Please, take a seat, Ms DeCerto." Dumbeldore made an inviting gesture towards one of the comfortable looking armchairs beside the fire place.

Hermione accepted the offer and sat down as did Dumbledore on the other arm chair.

"Can I offer you something? Maybe tea?" Dumbledore asked.

"Tea would be nice, thank you," Hermione answered.

And seconds later two cups of tea appeared on the side table.

"Now, Ms DeCerto, Professor Dippet asked me to determine your state of knowledge so we can put you in the right year." His eyes twinkled at her over his cup of tea. "Nothing to be afraid of though. I'm sure you will do well."

"Let's begin with my field of work. Can you transfigure this teaspoon into a humming bird?" Dumbledore held his teaspoon and passed it to Hermione.

Now, transfiguring an animal into an inanimate object was a relatively easy task. But to change an inanimate, soulless object into something alive was a lot more difficult. Hermione flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. Dumbledore raised one brow but didn't say anything. Hermione thought that maybe her quick-access wand holster was not very common for students. At least if they
were not fighting against random Dark Lords.

*But back to the task.*

Hermione concentrated her magic. She tried to imagine a humming bird in her mind, the long beak, the feathers glistening green. As she had created an image of the bird in her mind's eye she waved her wand in a complicate pattern and thought,

*Mutatio res!*

No visible spell left her wand but the teaspoon began to change into a tiny green humming bird. The bird began to swirl around Dumbledore's head.

"Wonderful!" Dumbledore exclaimed his eyes twinkling "And even nonverbal. Very good Ms DeCerto."

He waved his wand and the humming bird transformed back into the spoon and then fell into Dumbledore's outstretched hand.

"Now, let's see how you perform in the other subjects."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and beamed fondly at Hermione.

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An hour later found Hermione before the entrance to the common room of Gryffindor. Dumbledore had tested her in many subjects and a few of his tasks had been quite tricky but Hermione had performed well. So well in fact that Dumbledore wanted to put her in seventh year. Hermione had declined. She really needed those two years to solve the mystery of her time travel. She had told Dumbledore that she would need some time to get used to the new school and she thought it better to have this extra year to accommodate. Dumbledore had accepted that and the rest of the hour they had had a nice game of wizard's chess. After the game Dumbledore had accompanied Hermione to the common room.

So Hermione was now standing before the painting of the fat lady. She had a little less than an hour till dinner in the Great Hall. Hermione felt nervous and was rather reluctant to enter Gryffindor common room. The last time she had been in there was at the end of sixth term in her time. Harry, Ron and herself had been planning their cause of action for the hunt of the horcruxes. That room held so many memories. Good ones and bad ones. Hermione didn't know if she was ready to face those memories.

"In or out? Decide now! I don't have all day!" the fat lady pronounced in her usual rough but amiable way.

"Aardvark," Hermione said giving the password to the common room.

The portrait swung forward permitting her in. Hermione stepped reluctantly inside the common room. Though she had tried to brace herself she was not prepared to see the Gryffindor common room again. She took in a sharp breath of air. It was just like she remembered it to be. The walls were a bright red with little golden G's all over them. On the side farthest from the door was the fire place in which a merry fire was crackling right now. Several brown leather armchairs were positioned before the fire. Hermione could see they were occupied by some third or fourth years finishing their homework or chatting. On her left side she noticed the two stairs leading to the dormitories.
As the lessons were over for today the Gryffindors had gathered in their common room. The students were sitting around talking and laughing. Some were having a game of exploding snaps or chess. Hermione had a warm feeling as she looked at the scene unfolding before her. But at the same time she felt a sorrowful longing tearing at her. She longed for her fellow Gryffindors sitting there having fun, for her friends waiting for her returning from one of her extensive library visits. The room might have been an old, dear acquaintance but the people were definitely not. Each face was foreign to her.

"Hey, who are you?" Hermione was jerked out of her musings by a male voice addressing her.

She looked up at a smiling face. The face belonged to a boy with blond hair. He was rather tall with a muscular build and a mischievous glint in his blue eyes.

"Umm…I'm Hermione. Hermione DeCerto," Hermione stammered still surprised by his sudden appearance.

"What a nice name. Hermione." He seemed to test her name on his tongue. He then extended a hand to her. "I am Marc Longbottom. Nice to meet you, Hermione."

Hermione was surprised to hear a familiar name but took his offered hand anyway.

"Oi, Longbottom! What are you doing?"

Another boy appeared beside the blonde one. He was equally tall with windswept red hair and brown eyes. He whacked Marc Longbottom playfully on his shoulder.

"Hitting on pretty girls again, are you?"

"What are you thinking of me, Weasley?" Longbottom answered in mock-surprise. "Why, I would never do such an undignified thing like that. I just welcomed this lady in our common room."

Hermione had stopped listening as she had heard the other boy's name.

"Weasley? A relative of Ron!" Hermione stared at the redhead. She could see the family likeness. He had the same sparkling brown eyes, the same long adorable nose and his face was freckled all over. A lump formed in Hermione's throat. Luckily the two boys hadn't noticed her losing her composure.

"Let me introduce Hermione DeCerto to you," Marc Longbottom said, then he turned towards Hermione. "And this rude bloke here-" He gestured to the Ron-look-a-like. "-is Richard Weasley."

At that Richard Weasley bowed to Hermione, took her hand and kissed it. "My lady," he said, grinning. "What stroke of luck brought you in our humble common room?"

Hermione couldn't help but blush. He looked so like Ron it was unnerving.

"I'm a transfer student," she surprised herself at how steady her voice sounded. "I was sorted into Gryffindor."

"Ah, now our luck doesn't end there," Longbottom exclaimed happily.

"Really? A transfer?" Weasley asked amazedly "Never had one of those, had we? Which year are you attending?"

"Sixth," Hermione answered.

"And it gets better and better." Longbottom smiled at her. "We are sixth years, too."
"Ah, but where's you uniform, Hermione?" Weasley asked and added with a grin. "Not that I don't like what you are wearing right now."

"Um! Yes, that's why I'm here. Prof Dumbledore told me the uniform is in my dorm. I need to change before dinner."

Hermione was still a little bit distracted by his resemblance to Ron.

"Of course! Wait, I'll get you a guide," Marc Longbottom turned towards a group of girls.

They were sitting on a couch right under one of the huge windows.

"Hey, Diana!" he called.

One girl of the group, she had jet black, long hair looked with raised eyebrows in their direction.

"What do you want? I'm busy," she returned.

And sure enough the group of girls were hanging over what seemed to be a fashion magazine.

"Could you show Hermione here to the sixth years dorms? She's new," Longbottom asked her.

The black haired girl, Diana, and a few others of the group glanced with prying eyes at Hermione than Diana got up and walked over.

"You're a new student?" Diana asked Hermione but before she could answer Diana continued.

"Okay, follow me! I'll show you our dormitory. I'm sixth year too."

She assessed Hermione with a glance then turned and walked towards the stairs to the dorms. Hermione, with no other option left, followed her.

"If there's no room for you, you can always stay in our dorm, you know," Weasley called after her grinning until Longbottom whacked him over the head.

Hermione followed Diana to the dorm. She actually didn't need Diana to lead the way after having lived there for a year. But Hermione mustn't expose her time travelling experience. So she had to play her role as the new girl who never had set foot in Hogwarts before.

Hermione entered the dormitory right after Diana. The dorm hadn't changed very much, just like the common room. The biggest difference was surprisingly that this room was tidy. Not that her dorm in the future had been a dump. But here in this dorm there seemed to be nothing out of place. No clothes on the floor, no books scattered over a bedside table, all the beds were made with no fold out of place. Hermione wasn't a sloppy person herself but this was a little bit frightening actually.

"Who's that, Diana?" A girl with dirty blonde, long hair asked.

She was sitting on her bed writing in what seemed to be a diary. At least Hermione guessed from the pink fluffy cover of the book. The bedcovers on which the girl sat were disturbingly pink too.

"She's a transfer," Diana answered brusquely.

"Oh, really. What's your name?" a cold voice asked.

Hermione turned in the direction and saw a girl who stepped out of the bathroom. She had a pale even skin and short brown hair styled in the forties fashion. She was beautiful Hermione had to admit.
"I'm Hermione DeCerto," Hermione answered.

"My name is Viola Brown," the girl answered in the same cold conceited voice. "That pink freak is Lucia Reeves and Diana Potter you've already met"

Hermione was surprised to hear that her guide wore Harry's family name. First Ron and then Harry. She didn't know how she was supposed to react to that. Harry and Ron had been the closest persons to her. Here she met their ancestors and was supposed to act like they were strangers.

"And that last bed belongs to Rose Smith, another sixth year but she's not really anyone worth knowing," Brown added in a smug voice.

"Viola!" Diana chided though Brown didn't seem to care.

Hermione wondered briefly if that Brown girl was somehow related to Lavender Brown. She seemed to be rather mean. Hermione hadn't exactly liked Lavender either especially after she had had that thing with Ron but Lavender had been an angle compared to this girl.

"Right," said Hermione "I really need to change into my uniform now."

She didn't want to small talk with those girls anymore.

"Of course. You can take this bed," Diana pointed to a bed at the end of the row. "I believe your trunk is already there."

"Thank you."

Hermione walked over to her bed and sat down. She was tired. It had been a long day and it was far from over. She still had to go down to dinner. And if she had Dippet's character down correctly he planned to introduce her to the rest of the school with one of is pompous speeches. Hermione sighed. Her gaze then fell on her uniform which lay neatly folded at the head of her bed. She picked it up. The uniform consisted of a white blouse, a forties style grey skirt, which made Hermione sigh, and the familiar black outer robes. Hermione found the red and golden Gryffindor seal on the black robes. The black robes looked almost exactly like the ones from her time period. Those robes were connected with so many happy memories. She had worn them during her years at Hogwarts. The world had seemed so much brighter back then and she had still been that carefree innocent Hermione. Now though, there wasn't much left from that time. Her family was gone, her friends were gone and even her innocence was lost. Hermione fought back the tears that built up inside of her. She took the uniform and walked to the bathroom. She didn't want to change in the dorm as her body was still bruised all over. The other girls weren't supposed to see that. They would surely inquire how she had come to get those injuries.

'Those cuts? I got them while fighting the Dark Lord's followers. Don't worry though, I killed them all.' Hermione almost snorted. Now, that would make a fine topic for small talk.

It was a quarter to six as Hermione walked down to the Great Hall accompanied by her new dorm mates. Her dorm mates were occupied with a pointless chatter about who had a crush on whom and what colour best to use for eyeliner. Hermione thought it was rather irritating. She had finally met the last resident of her dorm, Rose Smith, a plump small girl. And though Hermione didn't like Brown she had been right; Rose Smith was annoying. She was endlessly talking about one of the Ravenclaw boys who apparently was beauty divine. The only other beside herself who didn't contribute to the pointless conversation was Diana Potter. She was the only person in her dorm that seemed to be half-decent though a little bit rude. Hermione liked her but that might have been caused
by her relation to Harry.

Dumbledore greeted her in front of the entrance of the Great Hall.

"Ms DeCerto, I hope you've made yourself comfortable in your new home?" he smiled serenely at her.

"Yes, professor, thank you," Hermione was glad to see the old man.

"If you could accompany me. I think Professor Dippet wants to introduce you to the school," Dumbledore explained.

Before she could stop herself Hermione sighed loudly. She could hear the girls giggling behind her.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I thought you would like it."

He then led her to a side entrance to the Great Hall. It was situated right beside the teachers table in the Great Hall. Hermione could see that in the mean time all students had settled at their house tables. In the far corner was the Gryffindor table. It seemed to be the loudest of all. Then there were Huffelpuffs, some of them laughing good naturedly, beside them were the Ravenclaws. Hermione wasn't surprised to see some of them reading books. She, not for the first time, wondered why she hadn't been sorted into Ravenclaw. The last table belonged to Slytherin house. Hermione tried to get a better view of that particular table. She was scared but at the same time wanted to see the young Lord Voldemort. But from her point of view she couldn't detect him.

"Now, before we begin our dinner. I have to make an announcement."

Hermione heard Dippet's booming voice and started to get nervous. She really didn't like to be the centre of attention.

"From today on we will have a new student. She will be attending sixth year."

He beckoned Hermione towards him. As she walked to Dippet she heard the whispers which had started upon his proclamation. All the eyes in the hall were now staring at her and she felt uneasy. As Hermione arrived beside Dippet he took one arm around her shoulder and said,

"Welcome Hermione DeCerto. Ms DeCerto is from France. But unfortunate circumstances caused her to leave her home. That is the reason for her to finish her final years of education here with us at Hogwarts. She already was sorted into Gryffindor house. I hope you all give her a warm welcome and treat her well."

Dippet again shook her hand and with the same motion shoved her towards the Gryffindor table.

Obviously Dippet was finished with his introduction for which Hermione was thankful. She walked over to the Gryffindor table which had started to clap for her. Hermione felt happy at that gesture though the self-consciousness remained. The hall was still full of whispers and stares. She just wished she had Harry's invisibility cloak. She saw Longbottom and Weasley waving at her enthusiastically. She smiled and walked over to them where she slid onto the bench, relieved. That was the moment as the food appeared on the tables. She hoped that would distract all those people from gaping at her. Honestly, she couldn't be that interesting now, could she?

"Hey, Hermione. Nice to see you again," Longbottom beamed at her. He was sitting on her right side.

"How do you like Hogwarts so far?" asked Weasley.
His hair was still windswept and rather looked like Harry's untameable hair. Hermione had to chuckle at that thought. Richard Weasley looked like a cross between Ron and Harry. Rather disturbing that.

"Well, I haven't seen much. But I think I like it."

Hermione smiled at him and started to load her plate. She was quite hungry now as she hadn't had the time to grab something for lunch back at Diagon Alley.

"If you need a guide I would be more than pleased to show you around," Longbottom grinned at her.

"Hey, Longbottom," Weasley complained to his friend. "You can't go and have Hermione all for yourself. And I'm sure she prefers nice guys." He tapped his chest with one hand.

"Maybe," Longbottom retorted still grinning. "I'm sure to tell her if I see one then."

"You now, next Quidditch match I might hurl a Bludger at your head," Weasley said swinging a chicken wing threateningly at Longbottom.

"Aren't you in the same team?" Hermione asked bemusedly.

Both boys stared at her in mock-surprise.

"No, really? Did you know that?" Longbottom turned to his red haired friend, still maintaining a shocked voice though the corner of his lips were twitching upwards.

"I had honestly no idea. Maybe that's the reason we nearly lost last time?" Weasley was looking equally shocked at Longbottom.

"Don't pay too much attention to them. They are insufferable jerks."

Hermione looked at the boy who spoke. He sat across from them. He seemed somehow familiar to Hermione but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Lupin, don't tell lies about us. She's new she doesn't know that you are the insufferable jerk," Longbottom took a chicken wing and threw it at the other boy who caught it and ate it nonchalantly.

"And they are thick, too," the other boy stage-whispered to Hermione.

"Wow, you really should consider to play Quidditch yourself, Lupin. You would be the perfect Seeker. With your reflexes. I've always told you," Weasley tried to convince the other boy.

"No, definitely not," Lupin laughed. "I'm rubbish on a broom."

"That's Amarys Lupin by the way," Longbottom informed Hermione. "He's in sixth too. And a nice bloke if you ignore his anti-Quidditch attitude."

"Well, it is damn dangerous. You broke your arm last game if I remember correctly," Lupin threw into the conversation. "Anyway, nice to meet you Hermione."

Hermione smiled at him. He had dark blonde hair and a friendly face. There definitely was a resemblance to Remus Lupin. Though hopefully not in his werewolf nature.

They introduced her then to the other sixth year students and a few of the other years. But there were so many she couldn't get all their names. Though now she felt uncomfortable again, being the centre of attention. They all were very inquisitive about how she had ended up at Hogwarts and bombarded
her with questions like,

"Were in France did you live, Hermione?"

"Did you have to flee from there because of the war?"

"What about your family?"

or even,

"Are you muggleborn or pureblood?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

That last question came from a grinning Marc Longbottom. Hermione tried to answer their questions without giving away too much. She had decided on her cover story before she had come to Hogwarts. She was a girl from a pureblood family. Hermione had grudgingly decided to conceal her Muggleborn heritage. She knew that during Grindelwald's time Muggleborns were looked down upon by many purebloods. She didn't need that additional attention. She had furthermore lived with her family in a small village in the north of France. That was exactly where Grindelwald was most active at the moment. And after his latest attacks she had had to leave the country. That was how she ended up at Hogwarts.

This story seemed to satisfy the curiosity of her fellow Gryffindors. And Hermione could spend the rest of dinner talking and laughing with Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin fairly undisturbed. They were really nice. A little bit crazy but otherwise nice. After a while Diana Potter switched into their conversation. And they started to discuss whether it was safer to ride a broom or try to tame a dragon and ride it instead.

Later, Hermione lay in her bed and reminisced the day. It had been a strange feeling being back at the castle. But it wasn't the same, she decided, without Harry and Ron. The castle looked the same but something had changed. The people, the atmosphere everything was different.

*Or maybe, Hermione thought bitterly. it's me who has changed.*

She rolled over to her side. It was one in the morning. But she couldn't get to sleep.

The other students had been nice enough. She liked Weasley and Longbottom already. And Lupin seemed to be a little bit quieter than his two friends but he was likeable too. The girls were another story though, Hermione thought. The only things they seemed to worry about were their next day's outfit. Well, save Diana maybe. But Hermione wasn't worried about that. She had always seemed to get better along with boys. She had shared a dorm back at her Hogwarts for six years with the girls but they had never gotten really close. Well, she wasn't here to get friends anyway. They were all so carefree, so innocent. Their worst problems were the NEWTs next year. Hermione felt detached from them. She was nothing like them. The problem was, that at one point in time she *had* been just like them. And she knew there was no way back to that. But she longed to get that innocence back.

*Don't be stupid. She scolded herself. What's lost is lost. No use crying over spilt milk.*

She had a purpose here. The only reason she had gotten back here was the information the castle held and the Elder Wand that Dumbledore had or would have after taking it from Grindelwald. She needed to maintain a low profile, fly under the radar so to speak.

*No changing the past. That would be fatal.*
She thought about dinner. How she hadn't dared to look in the direction of Slytherin table. She knew he had been there, Lord Voldemort. She was scared to meet him or even look at him. Everything was so damn complicated. She rolled over on her other side. She wanted Ron now. A tear trickled down her cheek.

*Not now, Hermione. That's not going to bring him back.*

*She was standing on a battlefield. There were curses flying everywhere. She had to duck sometimes to avoid a spell. The Death Eaters had attacked the Order of the Phoenix itself. Voldemort was becoming bolder and bolder. He knew without Dumbledore they were weakened. Hermione could see a red robe, an auror. He was duelling a Death Eater right now. They were throwing spells at each other so fast Hermione couldn't follow with her eyes. But she wasn't here to watch the fighting, she needed to find Harry. He was somewhere here. She could only hope he was alright. She crawled away from the duel. As she moved forwards she came upon a body. Her blood ran cold. It was Remus Lupin. She closed her eyes at the view. But the picture of his mutilated body was burned in her mind now. Half his head had been blown away. There was blood everywhere. His legs were ripped off. Hermione choked as she crawled away. Leaving behind the mangled body of her former teacher and a piece of herself…*

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Tom Riddle got up early, like every day and left the Slytherin dungeon perfectly dressed, like every day. Not one strand of his thick dark hair was out of place. He really liked that air of perfection that was swirling around him. Because that was what he was: perfect.

He strode to the Great Hall with graceful steps. When he arrived he went over to his place at the Slytherin table. Yes, it was his place. No one ever dared to sit down on this particular spot because they all knew whom it belonged to. There were a few Slytherins sitting at the table and greeting him with reverence. Riddle ignored them and sat down. He poured himself a cup of coffee and reached for a Daily Prophet not caring whom it belonged to. He was scanning the newspaper bored and sipped at his coffee when he saw her scuffle into the hall, the new girl. An early riser in Gryffindor that was something unheard of, he thought, the corners of his mouth forming a smirk. He watched as she sat down at Gryffindor table.

*Whatever happened to her hair?* He wondered in disgust. *Are birds nesting in it or what?*

And now she was loading her plate like there was no tomorrow. Maybe she planned to stuff her face again like she did yesterday. Really, had that girl no dignity? And sure enough she started to shovel the food in her mouth. Why did she even bother using the fork? Riddle put down his cup of coffee and continued to stare at her. She was not very tall and had a slender figure, almost scrawny actually. A miracle with her eating habits. Her face was nothing remarkable. Though she could have been rather pretty if she'd put any effort in her appearance.

Then she suddenly stopped eating and looked around the hall. What was she searching for now? Her gaze fell on his table and then she locked eyes with him. He was mildly surprised, had she somehow sensed him looking at her? He leaned back in his chair elegantly not breaking their eye contact. She was still looking at him with this oddly blank face. Well, of course she couldn't take her eyes off him, he thought smugly, he was the best looking guy in Hogwarts. No girl could resist him.

He put on his most attractive smile. Seducing someone like her was almost too easy. And really he should know. He had done that to so many of them there was no challenge in it anymore. And this stupid girl was no exception, he thought while he continued to smile at her. Now she looked surprised, her eyebrows high and her eyes wide open. He almost snorted, so predictable. Next she would blush or start giggling stupidly.

But she did no such thing. She scowled at him. Actually scowled. At him. Who did that bitch think she was? Now she got up from her table and left the hall hurriedly, still that disgusted look on her face.

What was wrong with that girl? How dare she look at him like that? He felt anger creeping up in him. After a while of pondering the new girl he felt more than saw someone taking a seat beside him.

"Riddle," he heard a smooth voice greeting him.

"Lestrange," he acknowledged the boy in a cold voice.

"We were wondering when the next meeting would be taking place," Lestrange asked warily.

Riddle really wasn't in the mood to deal with this idiot right now.

"Next Saturday," he said brusquely.

"Ah, but that's a Hogsmead weekend," Lestrange whined.
Riddle turned around to him looking at him for the first time.

"If you have better things to do, Lestrange, I won't force you to come," his voice now deathly cold.

Lestrange flinched away from him with a fearful expression, Riddle noticed pleased.

"No, no, of course not. I...I'll come," he stuttered not looking Riddle in the eyes.

Riddle got up, pleased at how Lestrange cowered before him. But he had to attend a class now and he didn't want to be late because of this idiot. He left the Great Hall and stalked confidently to the charms classroom.

Hermione was lost. She had been walking, still disturbed by Riddle's twisted behaviour in the Great Hall, to her charms classroom. Only to find that in this time period the room was obviously not the charms classroom. It housed now the second years' History of Magic class. She had been searching endlessly in the vicinity for the right room but hadn't found anything. Well, beside that broom cupboard which was so crammed with old brooms, buckets and other stuff that everything had fallen on her head as she had opened the door. She was now late for her first class even though she had been one of the first to rise. So much to the advantage of her knowing the place. Swearing loudly she marched down a corridor.

"That is no way for a young lady to talk!" a strict voice reprimanded her.

Hermione turned around and saw a teacher she didn't know walking towards her.

"Five points from-" The teacher eyed Hermione's robes. "-Gryffindor."

Hermione was annoyed now. She was already late without this stupid woman criticizing her. But she answered politely,

"I'm sorry, professor. I seem to be lost. I'm new you see."

"Well, that is no reason to revert to language like this," the woman answered.

Hermione estimated her age at about forty. She was tall, thin, with black hair and a pointed nose. Her face looked kind of sharp and unappealing.

It turned out that the woman, Austeria Legifer, was the teacher of Household Charms and Spells. Hermione'd never heard about that particular class but she obviously would be attending as the teacher informed her.

"Whatever!" she thought exasperatedly.

After nagging at Hermione for another five minutes. 'What happened to your hair?', 'Your uniform is crinkly!' and 'Is that your schoolbag or a filthy, old sack?" She finally revealed the way to Hermione's charms classroom.

Thank you very much, Hermione thought sarcastically. Now I'm really late.

Hermione had hastened to her Charms class and was now standing before the door. She knocked hesitantly at the door then opened it and entered her very first forty style lesson.

"Yes, dear? How can I help you?" the teacher, an elderly lady, asked her friendly.
"Um…Sorry to disturb your class, professor. I'm Hermione DeCerto. I got a little bit lost on my way here."

"Ah, of course. Ms DeCerto. I've been wondering where you were," the old lady beamed at her kindly. "I am Professor Merrythought. Please sit down, Ms DeCerto. And don't worry about being late it happens to the best of us"

"Thank you, professor."

Hermione looked around the room. It was a Gryffindor and Slytherin class she noticed. In the back row she could see Weasley and Longbottom waving at her. She smiled at them. Unfortunately there was no room there for her. She searched again for a free space and realized with horror that the only free spot in the entire classroom was next to Tom Riddle. He was sitting on a place at the window smiling arrogantly at her. Seeing no other option she walked over to him. She chucked her bag at the floor beside the table and slumped into the chair beside Riddle. That day was getting better and better. She took her charms book and some parchment and quill out of her bag and tried to ignore the fearsome Dark Lord sitting beside her.

Professor Merrythought had in the mean time resumed her lesson and was now talking about the Procella charm. Hermione knew everything about that charm already. By using it one could create everything from a light breeze to a full blown tornado. Not really useful in duels though. It needed a lot of time to create something half way harmful and much magic to maintain the charm until it could strike your adversary. But the professor wasn't talking about combat situations, Hermione noticed. She recommended the charm for hot summer days.

\textit{Well, of course that could work, too}, Hermione thought and shrugged.

She risked a glance at Riddle. He was gracefully sitting in his chair and took notes with his elegant neat handwriting. He seemed to be most attentive to the professor.

\textit{Yeah, as if,} Hermione rolled her eyes. \textit{Probably plans how to take down the world. Or whatever it is dark, evil people like him usually think about.}

His dark hair was now falling lightly in his eyes. Hermione was surprised to see his eyes were a beautiful shade of grey. She had half expected them to be the familiar ruby red. His nose was straight and rounded at the end, his jaw strong. The colour of his skin was very pale but not sickly so, it even seemed to enhance his beauty. And Hermione had to admit it, he was positively dashing. If she didn't know that he was a homicidal psychopath she might have called him handsome.

\textit{Maybe the most handsome guy I have ever seen?} Hermione was disgusted at her own train of thought. \textit{Yeah, so he is handsome. What does that matter?}

Hermione saw the corners of his lips were beginning to form a smirk. He put down his quill and looked up at her one eyebrow ached gracefully. Oh Merlin, he had noticed her studying his face judging from the smug smile he now wore. He had locked eyes with her and was staring at her expectantly. His eyes were really the most unusual colour Hermione had ever seen. They were an impossible light shade of grey. They even sparkled in the light coming from the window. His smile had now become inviting, no trace of a smirk left. Just an honest smile.

But that was fake, wasn't it? In reality he was nowhere near the nice persona he was acting. Hermione had seen how he truly was. Cold, merciless, calculating, in short: evil.

She looked away from him. Never returning his smile. She didn't want anything to do with him.
What had she thought back at Diagon Alley? That she could simply avoid him? And now at her very first day she was sitting right beside him. It was frightening actually.

For the rest of the lesson she didn't look his way again. And as the lesson was over she stuffed her things hurriedly in her bag and was about to leave when a smooth melodious voice called her,

"Wait."

She turned around and saw Riddle following her. He was rather tall, Hermione noticed. Maybe a head or more taller than herself. What did he want now?

"Yes?"

"I believe we haven't met before. My name is Tom Riddle."

He extended a hand smartly at her, his charming smile back in place. Hermione hesitated again but she couldn't see a way around it so she took his hand. It was warm and pleasant.

"I'm Hermione DeCerto," she answered shortly.

"Yes, I know. The headmaster announced it yesterday. So how do you like it at Hogwarts?"

_I would like it far more if you weren't here._

"Oh, it's quite nice."

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Tom Riddle was sitting in his charms classroom. He had taken his usual seat right beneath the window. Merrythought was droning about one spell or other when there was a knock on the door. Riddle looked up from his notes and saw the new girl entering the classroom. Nearly ten minutes too late, he checked his watch. She had left the Great Hall way before him. How did she manage to be this late? And her hair was still in this fearsome mess. Even more so if that was physically even possible.

She was now looking for an empty seat. Well, the only one left was right beside him. When she noticed that, she had again this look on her face. The look she had shown in the Great Hall too. Like she was disgusted by him. He really didn't like that look. It actually made him quite angry. But he mustn't let that show. So he tried to ignore her as she walked over to him and sat down beside him ungracefully.

Merrythought resumed her lesson. She was now talking about the Procella charm. He groaned inwardly. Could this lesson get any more boring? The Procella charm was just one thing: useless. He took notes anyway, writing down everything the professor said. He had to hold up his reputation after all. And Merrythought was very fond of him. Well, all the teachers were. Who could resist his charm?

After a while of scribbling down the professor's superfluous explanations he noticed the new girl wasn't taking any notes. So he risked a look from the corner of his eyes. And of course, she was staring at him, taking in his features. It was about time she noticed how absolutely gorgeous he looked. Well, that girl seemed to be rather dull, didn't she? Now she sat so closely beside him even she was bound to notice. He knew she would fall for him like all the other stupid little girls. They just couldn't help it, poor things.

He looked up at her. His face carefully arranged in a charming smile. He really didn't know why he
was doing this. The girl was obviously way beneath him. But that incident in the Great Hall this morning had really annoyed him and had somehow awakened his spirit of the challenge. So he was going to make her fall for him and then ignore her for the rest of the time.

She looked flustered now as he had caught her staring at him. He had to really work to prevent his 'genuine' smile from transforming into a smirk.

But then she did it again. She sat there with a blank face, no blush no giggling. He could even see the contempt in her eyes. And then she just looked away from him. He was taken aback. That girl was really beginning to get on his nerves. He resumed taking his notes but couldn't concentrate on the lesson anymore. He glanced at her again but she seemed to ignore him. How dare she ignore him?

For the rest of the lesson he tried to get his temper back in control. At the end of the lesson he really wanted to just crucio her. As if she had heard his last thought she now tried to get away from him as fast as possible.

"Wait," he tried to stop her.

"Yes?" she asked impatiently as if he was bothering her.

"I believe we haven't met before. My name is Tom Riddle." His perfect mask was back in place. Time to play the gentleman.

She shook his hand hesitatingly, Riddle noticed annoyed.

"I'm Hermione DeCerto," she answered shortly.

"Yes, I know. The headmaster announced it yesterday. So how do you like it at Hogwarts?"

As if I'm really interested, you insolent bitch.

"Oh, it's quite nice," she answered distractedly while looking at something over his shoulder.

Then she waved at someone, at that Weasley and Longbottom arrived by her side.

"Hey, Hermione," the Weasley idiot said. "Oh hey, Riddle."

How he despised the whole lot of them. But he fought a smile on his face, after all he was a respectable prefect and good friends with everyone.

"Hello, Weasley, Longbottom."

"Hello," Longbottom forced out. Riddle knew that the git didn't like him.

"Well, if you excuse us, Riddle," DeCerto said. "There's a History lesson we have to catch. And I don't want to be late again."

With that the three took off and left him behind. After they had left the classroom he was the only one left. His smile transformed into an angry scowl. That girl was really starting to infuriate him. She had left him standing here like an idiot. She needed to be put in her place. He wasn't going to tolerate her insulting behaviour.

Had Hermione known his dark thoughts she would have been frightened. She was currently sitting at
the Gryffindor table having a nice lunch. The History of Magic class had been incredible boring. The only interesting thing that happened had been as the professor entered the class. It was Professor Binns, but not the ghostly form of him that she knew from her time period. No, he was very alive and human. Hermione had been surprised to see him like that as she was so used to him being semi-transparent. Sadly, that remained to be the only difference between this Binns and the ghost Binns. His class had been insufferable. And even doubly so as Hermione had heard it one time before. So she had been glad when it was over and she could go to the Great Hall to have lunch. She sat again with Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin. They really started to grow on her. Well, they had saved her from Riddle after the Charms lesson.

"Really, DeCerto. How can you load your plate so much?" Viola Brown was sitting at her other side and stared disgustedly at Hermione's plate.

"Well, I'm hungry," Hermione shrugged.

"You'll get fat," Lucia Reeves piped up with a look on her face like that was a fate worse than death.

Hermione had been living on the run for the last two years. And that included not having a steady supply of food. Sometimes they had to go on for days without food. So now this three meals a day felt like luxury to her.

"Hey, let the girl eat if she wants," Weasley threw in.

At that moment Hermione saw Riddle entering the Great Hall. He was accompanied by a group of Slytherins. He strut confidently towards the Slytherin table, the other boys following him reverently.

"Oh, look, it's Riddle!" Rose Smith said with a glassy look in her eyes.

"Yeah, doesn't he look just hot?" Lucia had now the same glassy look.

"Oh, please!" Longbottom said indignantly, "That evil git!"

"Evil?" Hermione asked innocently.

"Yes, he's an arrogant bastard!" Longbottom narrowed his eyes at Riddle.

"Aw, come on, Marc. He's not that bad, you know." Weasley looked at his friend exasperated.

"You only say that because he helped you with that herbology essay," Longbottom countered.

"Is he really that bad?" Hermione now wanted to know what they thought about the evil Dark Lord-in-training.

"Yes! He is one conceited little creep!" Longbottom said with conviction.

"Don't listen to him, DeCerto," Rose said. "He's just jealous."

Longbottom huffed at that.

"Yeah, Riddle's really nice," Lucia threw in. "He's a prefect and top of every class. And of course he looks gorgeous. He's really popular too. There's even a Riddle fan club. Want to join, DeCerto?"

"Um… no! I think I pass."

"Finally, a girl with some sense!" Longbottom exclaimed.
Hermione looked back at Riddle. He sat now at the Slytherin table and was talking with the boy beside him.

No, not talking. Hermione thought, ordering him, sounds more like it. Longbottom's right, he is an evil bastard.

Author's note: What do you think about the story so far? Like it? Hate it? Please review, so I know!

And finally Tom had his appearance. What do you think of him? I'm trying to stay close to his character in the books. But honestly we don't know very much about his school days. Thankfully that's leaving me a lot of room to describe him.

Hermione didn't seem to be very enthusiastic with meeting him, did she? Well, it's not going to be a 'Love at first sight' story. I thought that would not be very plausible. After all Hermione has just lost her boyfriend and somehow it was Tom's fault, too.
It was Friday and Hermione walked down a corridor to her next class. The week had flown by as she had arrived Monday evening and had therefore missed the Monday classes. It was easy getting used to the old routine at school. Hermione had missed it very much after having left after her sixth year. But there still was this odd detachment she felt. Like she didn't belong here. And not as in 'here in the forties'. She didn't belong to this school anymore. She wasn't one of them. She had seen too much. There had been a time where lessons, tests and homework were very important things to her. She had had to excel in every class. Oh, the hours she had spent studying in the library, Hermione remembered with a smile. But now, that was just a distant memory to her. She had learned that there were more important things than getting an O in every subject.

She reached her classroom. The professor hadn't arrived yet, she noticed. The students were still crowding the hallway. It was going to be her very first Household Charms and Spells class. She wasn't exactly looking forward to it as she didn't like the teacher, Professor Legifer. That woman had really annoyed her with her nagging. And she was the reason Hermione had been late for charms at her first day and consecutively had to sit beside Riddle.

"Hello, Hermione, over here," someone yelled at her.

Hermione turned and saw Lucia waving at her. Next to her stood Diana, Rose and Viola. All her dorm mates being assembled, oh joy!

"Hey," Hermione walked to them, and noticed that this class consisted of students of all the four houses.

That was unusual. And there were only girls. Hermione had a sinking feeling as to why there were only girls but she had to ask anyway.

"Where are all the boys?"

They looked at her like she had grown an extra head.

"Why would there be boys here? It's Households, Hermione, Lucia looked at her bewildered.

"Don't tell me you don't learn Household charms in France," Viola said in her self-important voice. Sure, the forties, Hermione thought, and there fly women's rights out of the window.

"Um... not really. No," Hermione said just to spite them.

"And that is where your problem lies, Ms DeCerto," a sharp voice behind Hermione declared.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to get her temper back under control. It didn't work. So she turned around anyway and there stood Professor Legifer. She was still tall with black hair teased in an indestructible-looking hairstyle. There was not one hair out of place. How the woman did that Hermione could only guess. Her clothes were equally impeccable. Her outer robes black and squeaky-clean. Underneath she wore a white blouse and a long grey skirt. Everything was perfect nothing out of place.

"Now, in, ladies." Professor Legifer had opened the door.

The girls streamed in and took their seats without saying a word. Hermione followed her dorm mates
and took a seat at their table. Unfortunately it stood in the front row.

"Who can tell me what we learned last lesson?" Professor Legifer asked instantly. "Ms Thomson, please."

A nervous looking Ravenclaw girl stood up and said in a rather squeaky voice, "We... We learned about the different cleaning methods."

"Correct. And what are the cleaning spells called, exactly?" Professor Legifer continued her inquisition, "Ms Yaxley?"

A Slytherin stood up, "*Tersus cella* and *Extrico*, for tidying up a room."

"That is correct. Now we continue with laundry spells," Professor Legifer started to pace up and down the classroom. "Ms DeCerto, what do you know about cleaning the laundry?"

"Ehm! I know the *Scorgify* spell, professor," Hermione had been surprised by being addressed.

"In my class you stand up when you are spoken to, Ms DeCerto. Five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione stood up, she was beginning to feel angry again. "I know the *Scorgify* spell, professor,"

"And that is all you know about laundering?" Professor Legifer was standing now right before Hermione.

She looked at Hermione's hair and clothes and seemed to be personally offended at what she saw. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes.

"And how do you fold the laundry after cleaning it? How do you remove stains that can't be removed by a simple *Scorgify*?"

"I don't know?" Hermione answered cheekily, though she did know. The muggle way, aka washing machine. Did they have washing machines in the forties? She didn't know.

"Another five points from Gryffindor, Ms DeCerto. And given the state of your clothes you would do well to pay attention to this lesson."

Professor Legifer walked away from Hermione's table and began to lecture about her oh so important laundry spells. Hermione slumped down in her chair. That lesson was a farce, she decided.

"... want you all to practice this spell. Take one of those robes here." Professor Legifer hold up a box filled with different robes. "And try your very best."

Hermione had drowned her out for the last fifteen minutes so she didn't know what spell they were practicing right now.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto, there will be no need for you to take one of those." The professor gestured at the robes with an evil grin. "You can train with your own robes. They seem to be dirty enough."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her but said nothing. When the box arrived at her she took one of the robes it was rather muddy.

"So what are we supposed to do?" she whispered to Rose who sat next to her.

"You have to wave your wand like this." She made a few swishes with her wand. "And
Okay, seemed easy enough, Hermione thought. She flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand.

"What in Merlin's name is that, Ms DeCerto?" Professor Legifer was standing behind Hermione.

Hermione was bewildered. What had she done now? She looked at the professor blankly. While the whole class looked at Hermione.

"Show me your arm!"

For a short moment Hermione thought she was talking about her left arm which was still rather bruised after her time travel crash. But the professor took her right arm and rolled up the sleeve of her robe, exposing her wand holster.

"Aha!" the professor said as if she had just found the Dark Mark on Hermione's forearm and not a harmless wand holster.

Hermione frowned at her, "So what?"

"A girl does not use such a thing, Ms DeCerto. That's indecent," she screeched.

"Well, it's dead useful. How am I supposed to duel without it?" Hermione shook her head at that woman's naivety.

"D…d…Duel?" the professor looked scandalized. "Ms DeCerto, you are incorrigible. A hopeless case. I really do not envy your future husband."

With that she let go of Hermione's arm and stalked away. Hermione stared after her unbelieving. *My future husband?* her left eye began to twitch.

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"Wow, Hermione. That was so brave of you. Standing up to the old dragon like that," Rose said.

They were walking to their next class, Transfiguration. Hermione was still irritated by her previous lesson. When she had arrived back at the forties she hadn't thought about the old-fashioned role of women she would be confronted with.

"Pffh! That woman, who does she think she is? Talking about 'my future husband'? My ass!" Well, Hermione was still annoyed.

"You should be cautious, Hermione," Diana said evenly. "I mean you will need those spells later. Who would marry a girl that can't even do the simplest of household spells?"

Hermione was taken aback because this comment was coming from Diana. She had seemed, so far, to be the only one sane of the whole lot.

"Well, I don't have to know those wretched spells," Viola said conceitedly.

"And why's that?" Lucia asked.

"Because my husband will be a pureblood. He will be rich and the house elfs are going to do the all the work. That's why."
At this point of the conversation Hermione decided to drop out. She couldn't bear to hear more of that nonsense. She could just hope that at her next lesson in Household Charms and Spells she wouldn't lose her temper and kill the woman. How would Ron or Harry act if they could see her now? Ron would probably laugh at her and say: 'Better you than me, Mione!' And Harry? With his saving people thing, he would burst into her next lesson and drag her out. Hermione smiled sadly as she thought about her lost friends.

They arrived at the Transfiguration classroom. As she entered the classroom she at once saw Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin sitting in the front row. There was one free seat so she joined them. Everything to get away from those talkative girls.

"Hey, Hermione," Longbottom greeted her, smiling. "How's it going?"

"Oh, just fantastic!" she grumbled sarcastically.

"What happened?" Lupin asked.

"Professor Legifer," was the only answer he got.

She heard someone chuckle at that and turned around in her seat and groaned. Right behind her sat Tom Riddle. That just made her day! Transfiguration was a Gryffindor-Slytherin class? She hadn't noticed while entering. It was the first one since Charms. And of course, he had to sit right behind her. How reassuring, having the Dark Lord sitting behind your back.

He sat in his seat nonchalantly and flashed her one of his charming grins. He looked just as attractive as ever, Hermione noted.

"And what are you laughing about?" Hermione said rather unfriendly.

She did think dimly that it may not be the best idea to talk to Tom Riddle like that but at the moment she just didn't care. His friendly and even flirtatious manner had gotten to her nerves since their Charms class. No, since he had tried to woo her in the Great Hall. He had smiled at her and tried to befriend her. He. The man who was going to kill all the people that meant the world to her.

At her response Riddle's smile faltered a bit. He still maintained it, though his eyes seemed to change completely. Before, they were inviting and even friendly now they grew cold and hard. There was a murderous glare behind this smile of his. Hermione shuttered.

How dare she talk to him like this? Riddle was enraged. He felt that familiar cold anger taking hold of his mind. That girl, DeCerto, was going to pay.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you," he said in his kindest voice and shot her a humble smile.

She seemed to buy it and turned around restarting her conversation with those three dorks. The classroom door opened and Dumbledore entered the room. Oh, how he despised the crazy old man. Even the magic Dumbledore radiated disturbed Riddle a great deal. It made him feel uncomfortable.

"Hello, class," Dumbledore beamed at them.

Well, he beamed at everyone but Riddle. The old fool reserved a glare just for him. Riddle looked back at him with a blank face.

"Today we are going to have a practical lesson."
At that announcement the class seemed to be so much more enthusiastic.

*Idiots!*

"But before you start with the wand work lets go over the theory first," Dumbledore said. "I want you to transform these Honduran Blacklizards into a chalice." As he said that he held up a box full of shining black rather big lizards.

"Now who can tell me where the problem by doing this might occur?"

The problem will be that those inapt jerks don't even know how to transfigure a match into a needle. I wonder whose fault that is though, Riddle successfully suppressed an evil grin while looking at Dumbledore. Of course, *Riddle* knew why it was difficult to transfigure the lizards. But he wasn't going to raise his hand. Transfiguration was the only lesson in which he made no effort. Really, what for? Dumbledore would ignore him. And Riddle didn't want to waste his time with trying to charm the man. It wouldn't work anyway. Dumbledore hated him and suspected him of doing all sorts of felonious things. Not that he was wrong, of course, but Riddle hated how the man could look right through him. The only thing that stopped him from throwing Riddle out of school and into Azkaban was that he had no real evidence of Riddle's crimes.

*Not so smart after all, the old fool.*

He was brought out of his musings when the girl sitting in front of him raised her hand.

"Yes, Ms DeCerto?" Dumbledore looked fondly at DeCerto.

Riddle began to dislike her even more. Anyone who Dumbledore was fond of was an obstacle.

"Sir, the difficulty with transfiguring Blacklizards is that they are magical beings," she answered speedily.

*Pffh, so she knows what a Blacklizard is. Probably because there is a colony living in her filthy school bag.*

"That is right, Ms DeCerto. And do you know why it is difficult to transfigure a magical being?" Dumbledore asked her.

"Sir, Wilson's first law of magical equilibrium states that it is not possible for a wizard to overcome any object, being or spell which is magically more powerful than the wizard himself.

Furthermore Jackson says in his publication: *Transfiguration and the magical threshold value* that before transforming a magical object or being it is necessary to subdue the magical energy of said object or being.

Taking into account Wilson's law, Jackson concludes that it is only possible to transfigure magical objects or beings that are of lesser magical energy than the caster himself."

After her statement the whole class stared at DeCerto. Riddle had to admit, that he was slightly impressed himself but he didn't stare by principle. Dumbledore though seemed not to be surprised by her knowledge and smiled at her contentedly.

"Very good, Ms DeCerto. Take ten points for Gryffindor."

Riddle felt his anger rising again. Ten points for knowing this basic stuff? If *he* had answered Dumbledore's question he would either not been awarded any points at all or he would have been
thrown out of the classroom for speaking out of turn. His hate for Dumbledore overshadowed his dislike for DeCerto.

*Maybe I should just curse the both of them.*

"Ms DeCerto has been completely right." Hermione heard Dumbledore say. "That is why I have picked these Blacklizards. They are of magical origin thus form a higher resistance against transforming their shape."

Dumbledore began pacing in front of them.

Hermione was absorbed in his lecture. She had been looking very forward to having her old Headmaster teach her. He had been a great wizard. And his death two years ago had been a huge blow to her side. In fact his death had marked the true beginning of Voldemort's war against the Order and the Ministry. Without Dumbledore there had been no one to stop him anymore. The immediate time after Dumbeldore's death had been marred by disappearances and murders. No one had been safe anymore. Many people had joined Voldemort's side out of fear. And many more because they had been too afraid of Dumbledore before. To see him now alive and well was comforting to Hermione. She had never been close to him like Harry had but she had always known what a truly formidable wizard and man he had been.

*Even with all his faults,* Hermione added with a grin.

"These lizards are in fact a highly powerful source of magic. Their shed skin is one of the most potent potion ingredient. It is known as Powder of Tegucigalpa. So, now everyone take a lizard and try your best." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at them.

At that Dumbledore gave the box of lizards to Lucia who was sitting at a table in the front row. She reluctantly took the lizard box and eyed the black reptiles with disgust. She took one lizard out of the box and shrieked when it wriggled in her hand. Her table neighbours Rose and Viola were even more reluctant to touch the animals. Hermione rolled her eyes at their antics. After a short while the box reached her table. Weasley, Longbottom and Lupin seemed to have no problems with dealing with the reptiles. Hermione took one herself. They were rather beautiful lizards.

"You may begin now," Dumbledore said after he made sure everyone got one lizard.

Hermione observed the other students first. She wanted to know how good they performed. Obviously the task was difficult as no one had successfully transformed the lizard yet. Rose had only managed to enlarge her lizard so far which only added to the shrieks coming from their table. A Gryffindor boy, his name was Jorkins if Hermione remembered correctly, had managed to form a black cup. But he couldn't maintain its form longer than a few seconds.

"Watch it, Weasley!" she heard Lupin beside her grouch.

Weasley had somehow managed to enlarge his lizard's sharp teethed mouth and it was now trying to eat the other boy's lizard.

"How did you manage that?" Longbottom asked conversationally. His lizard still unaltered in his hand despite his many tries.

"I have no idea. Could have even invented a new spell here," Weasley added with a mischievous grin.

Hermione decided it was time to try herself before her lizard was eaten by its cannibalistic brother. She took her wand and concentrated her magic. Then flicked it and thought,
She could feel her magic reaching out to the lizard taking in his form. She then tried to influence its form. At first it felt like any other transformation but then she hit something like a barrier. It stopped her efforts. That had to be the inherent magic of the lizard. Hermione had to draw on her magic more to overcome the barrier. Just as she could feel the barrier give away there was something else. It was another alien magic and this time it wasn't coming from the lizard but rather from inside herself. At first it wasn't distinguishable from her own magic but now that she had to concentrate she could feel it. Interweaved with her own magic were strands of another kind of magic. Hermione tensed. That was not supposed to happen. She tried to free herself of that magic but it was useless it was too tightly wrapped together with her own magic. She tried to draw upon the alien magic but it was useless too. The more she concentrated on it the more it seemed to slip away from her. Hermione didn't know what was happening to her. Something was seriously wrong. She felt panicky now.

"Hermione? Are you all right? You look pale," Lupin asked her concerned.

"Pull yourself together. Now is not the time to lose your head. Hermione breathed in deeply and used her own magic to bowl over the lizard's defences. The lizard instantly changed its form and transformed into a silver chalice.

She looked up at Lupin and said, "I'm alright. Don't worry."

Lupin and Weasley and Longbottom along with him stared open mouthed at her chalice.

"Wow, wicked, Hermione. You made it," Longbottom reached for the chalice.

"Hey! Let me touch it too," Weasley snatched the cup away from him.

"How'd you do it?" Lupin eyed the vessel impressed.

Dumbledore had noticed the commotion and walked over to their table.

"Ms DeCerto! Excellent, excellent," he exclaimed as he took the cup from Weasley. "An expertly done transformation. 20 Points to Gryffindor."

Hermione blushed at Dumbledore's praise. It hadn't been that difficult. And if her magic hadn't been invaded she could have done it even sooner. Had really no one else managed the transformation? She then remembered Riddle sitting behind her. Surely he was capable of doing it? But Dumbledore was standing right before her he would see if Riddle had transformed his lizard. And then Slytherin would be awarded 20 points too.

She risked a glance back at Riddle. He was sitting at his table arms folded before his chest. His face was warped into a blank mask giving nothing away. But she could read his eyes. They were so intense. Hermione could swear there was a gleam of red in them as Riddle glared at Dumbledore. He looked ready to murder the other man.

Before him on his desk stood a beautiful, richly ornamented golden goblet.

Hermione looked back at Dumbledore in bewilderment. She didn't know him as one to be biased. But he obviously ignored Riddle's accomplishment. There was no way he couldn't see Riddle's golden goblet standing right in front of him. As long as Hermione had known the old man he never was prejudiced, even to a fault. But here he was ignoring the work of a Slytherin while praising a student of his own house. Or maybe that was a personal thing between Riddle and Dumbledore and had nothing to do with the houses? That may be the most likely explanation, Hermione mused. Harry had told her and Ron that Dumbledore never trusted Riddle. Even when they were student and
teacher at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had always suspected Riddle to be behind the murder of Moaning Myrtle even though he couldn't prove it. When did that happen again? In Riddle's fifth year, Hermione remembered. So that was one years ago. Of course Dumbledore didn't want to award house points to a student he suspected to be a murderer. Hermione could hardly blame him.

While she had been thinking about his relationship with Riddle, Dumbledore had proceeded with his lesson. He was now lecturing about the problematic nature of magical entities and transfiguration. Hermione had to concentrate hard to follow his explanations as she was still pretty shocked about that foreign magic she had experienced. On top of that Dumbledore seemed to have the habit of talking about one thing and then springing abruptly to another and then back again. It was difficult to follow him. Hermione only managed because she already knew about the topic. But after the lesson it felt like she had learned more about the nature of transfiguration than she ever knew. Her parchment was scribbled full of notes. After the lesson she could see Riddle leaving the classroom as fast as possible. He still wore that look of barely controlled rage.

"Hermione, that was awesome!" Weasley said as they were walking back to the Gryffindor common room.

"Yeah, who would have thought! Not only are you a walking encyclopaedia, no, on top of that you know how to do the spells you're talking about," Longbottom added.

"Come on. It wasn't that great," Hermione felt uncomfortable with all the praise.

"Not great? You were the only one who managed to transform the lizard," Lupin said, then added. "Well aside from Riddle. But he doesn't count. He always manages every spell."

At that comment Longbottom rolled his eyes.

"I noticed," Hermione said innocently. "His goblet was even better than mine. But Dumbledore didn't give points to Slytherin. I wonder why…"

"I'm not sure why," Lupin said. "But Riddle and Dumbledore don't get along very well-"

"The understatement of the year," Longbottom grinned.

"He's normally on top of every class," Lupin continued as if he'd never been interrupted. "The only exception is Transfiguration. Riddle's not even trying there. Though I guess he is really good at Transfiguration. I'm surprised he tried today."

"Ah, why are you so interested in Tom Riddle, Hermione?" Lucia asked triumphantly. "Wanna join the Riddle Fan Club after all?"

Hermione didn't deem that worthy of an answer and just looked at Lucia disgustedly.

"You guys noticed it's a Hogsmeade weekend tomorrow?" Rose piped in.

"Yeah, you are right," Longbottom said enthusiastically. "I really wanna go to Zonko's. I need to get something to get back at Avery for nearly killing me last Quidditch match."

"Neat. What are you gonna buy?" Weasley grinned evilly. "I recommend the Colour Changers. One drop in his Pumpkin Juice and he'll have Gryffindor-red hair for the rest of the week."

"Are you coming too?" Lucia asked Hermione while the two boys continued to plan the demise of Avery.
"Um… No, I think I pass this one. I really have to work on this essay Professor Binns gave us."

"Aw, come on Hermione. You still have next week to get that done," Weasley threw in.

"Well, I still have to catch up in a few classes, you know," Hermione lied.

She didn't need to catch up on anything. But she wanted to finally start her research on time travel. Tomorrow most students would be in Hogsmeade. Thus giving her the opportunity to do that unobserved.

"But you'll totally miss everything," Rose said.

"I'll come next time," Hermione promised.

It was near midnight as Hermione finally entered her dorm. She had been sitting in the common room with her fellow Gryffindors. They had been laughing, talking and playing games. It was like being back in her time; like those jaunty days during her time at Hogwarts. Well, almost like back then. She missed her friends so much. Every time she entered the Gryffindor common room she expected them to be there sitting in a corner and having fun.

But they are gone!

Hermione stepped in the bathroom and locked the door. She stripped off her clothes and examined the wounds she still wore from the fight in the Ministry. Her left forearm was bruised but it didn't hurt anymore. The smaller cuts and bruises all over her body seemed to be healing quite well thanks to the bruise and cut ointment she applied every night. Even the deep cut on her side started to heal. The slash looked still raw and red but it would heal eventually and would only leave behind a scar. Hermione sighed. There were already more than enough scars on her body. She wondered briefly when someone would invent something against magical scars.

At least not in the next 54 years, she mused as she put on her pyjama. Harry would have been grateful for something to get rid of his scar. Magic could leave the worst of scars on the body. Magic…

She hadn't forgotten about the incident during Transfiguration. There was something wrong with her magic. Hermione closed her eyes and summoned her magic. She could feel it flowing through her body. It was a comforting steady pulse of energy. But there was nothing left of that foreign magic she had felt as she transfigured the lizard. She couldn't find those strings of foreign magic that had been entwined with her own. What could have caused this incidence? There had been nothing out of the ordinary…besides Riddle sitting directly behind her. Maybe he did something to her? But what for? He didn't know her. There was no reason for him to attack her. And that foreign magic hadn't felt like him at all. It hadn't been dark or threatening. No, it seemed to mingle quite nicely with her own magic. But if it wasn't Riddle who else? Hermione didn't appreciate it at all that there was now another problem added to her already large enough pile of problems But right now she couldn't do anything about it. Maybe that strange magic inside her was just a one-time occurrence anyway. Hopefully…

Hermione stepped back into the dorm. The other girls were still down in the common room. Aside from Diana. She lay sleeping in her bed. Hermione went to her own bed and lay down. She was really tired now and fell asleep the instant her head hit the pillow.

"We have to go, Hermione!" Harry screamed at her, shaking her as he tried to get her out of her...
They had been found. Death Eaters were apparating everywhere around them. Hermione was scared to death. They had been following a trail to the next Horcrux but somehow they'd triggered a ward. And now Death Eaters were after them. Harry dragged her along with him. Ron followed them shooting curses over his back.

"Hurry. We have to get away!" he screamed.

Curses were flying everywhere. Hermione tried to fire some of her own back. But there were so many Death Eaters it hardly mattered. Then she saw a Death Eater creeping up on Harry. And before she could utter a warning the masked man fired a curse at Harry's back. They couldn't lose Harry, Hermione thought desperately. He was the only one who had a chance against Voldemort. The purple light shot towards his back as Hermione made her decision. She twirled Harry around so that she stood in the line of the curse. She could see Harry's surprised face as the curse hit her in her back. The instant it hit she was thrown into a prison of pain. Knives slashed at her flesh. Slitting it open. The cuts were going deeper and deeper until Hermione thought they would rip her body in shreds. The last thing she felt before unconsciousness took her was her own blood flowing down her body...

"Hermione!"

"Hermione, wake up!"

Hermione groaned and tried to pull the blanket over her head. She was still so tired. She felt like she had hardly slept at all.

"Mmmm…whutyuwan?"

"Come on, Hermione. Wakey! Wakey!"

Hermione rolled over and opened her eyes. She saw Lucia standing before her bed trying to drag the blanket away from her.

"DeCerto, really. You should get up. The inspection is today!" Hermione heard Viola's blunt voice saying. The girl was rummaging inside her trunk.

Hermione sat up. Still sleepy.

"What inspection?" she said while stifling a yawn.

"Oh my, did no one tell you?" Rose screeched.

She seemed to be in a state of panic. Why though, Hermione didn't know. It was Saturday after all.

"Er…No."

Hermione got up and searched for some clothes she could wear. As today was weekend she didn't have to wear her uniform. But as she sorted through her forties style clothes reluctantly she really thought about not changing at all and wear the pyjama all day. What would the forties etiquette say about girls running around half naked? With a sigh she took a plain blue skirt and a black jumper.

"So, what inspection are we talking about?" Hermione was slowly getting annoyed by the other girls hectic.
They were running around the dorm like mad. She wondered how she had slept during all that commotion.

"It's Professor Legifer," Diana told her while she smoothed some non existant folds out of her perfectly made bed. "She's inspecting our dorm today."

"She's what?" Hermione hoped she misheard that.

"Every month or so she looks into the girls dormitories. And if your place is not perfectly tidy you're going to get punished," Lucia frantically tried to fold her clothes neatly.

Hermione stupidly noted that she wasn't using the spells Legifer had taught them last lesson. Well, had tried to teach. Hermione for one hadn't paid her any attention. Now this 'inspection' was outrageous. What did that woman think who she was? Hermione decided to just ignore this asinine spectacle and headed for the bathroom.

Ten minutes later she emerged again into the dorm. She now wore her skirt and the black jumper. The other girls still run around trying to establish some order in their things. Really, this was worse than the army, Hermione thought amused.

"Legifer!" yelled a terrified Rose.

And sure enough after a while Professor Legifer entered the dorm. She looked impeccable like always. Hermione wondered how she managed that... or even why. Legifer stalked through the room. Her joyless face taking in every detail. She stopped at each bed. First was Diana's. Professor Legifer looked at the neatly done bed with a raised eyebrow. She then even opened Diana's trunk. The content of the trunk was as tidy as the rest of Diana's things. Legifer left Diana's bed without saying anything. Obviously that was something good, Hermione assumed, as Diana let out a relieved breath of air. Next Legifer examined Viola's and Lucia's beds with the same sour face she so liked to sport. But they seemed to be just as fine as Diana's had been. Rose wasn't so lucky like her friends.

"What is that, Ms Smith?" the professor asked while holding up a crumpled piece of parchment she had found under, yes under, the bed. Why the woman looked under the bed was beyond Hermione. Well, actually the whole thing was beyond her.

"You are on thin ice, Ms Smith," Rose seemed to whimper under the professor's glare. "Next time I see something like that it is detention."

Hermione snorted at that.

"Ms DeCerto. Let's see what you can present me," Legifer hissed evilly while turning to Hermione's side of the room.

She walked the few steps to Hermione's bed and took in the clothes that where still laying here and there scattered over the unmade bed. She raised one eyebrow at the open trunk that revealed an organised chaos. At least to Hermione it was organised. Legifer's face transformed into an evil grin as she saw Hermione's little desk that was crowded with books, quills and parchments. She actually looked like Christmas had come early. That didn't bode well, Hermione thought.

"Well, well, well, Ms DeCerto. I can't say I'm surprised," Legifer said with a fat smirk on her face. Hermione raised an eyebrow at that. She really despised that foul woman. Legifer gave one of the books a nudge with her wand. She clearly didn't want to touch anything with her fingers.

"That is, I think, worth a detention, Ms DeCerto." She looked at Hermione with a smug smile
playing around her lips. "Next Tuesday, 6 o'clock."

"Are you kidding me?" Hermione couldn't help but being rude around that woman. It wasn't in her nature at all to be impolite to anyone but the woman seemed to have the ability to bring the best out of people.

"That is another detention, Ms DeCerto. And if you don't want to spent the rest of the year in detention I suggest you hold your tongue now."

Hermione really wanted to give her a piece of her mind but she didn't want to spend any more time with the hag than she already had to. After that Legifer floated out of the dorm leaving behind a very angry Hermione.

"Oh, Hermione! That's so unjust," Rose lamented. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you yesterday. But we just forgot you are new and don't know."

"It's only two detentions. Could have been worse," Lucia tried to soothe her.

"It's okay. Really! I think she just hates me. Nothing I can change." -or want to change. Hermione shrugged.

After a leisurely breakfast at Gryffindor table Hermione said good bye to the others who went off to Hogsmeade. Hermione was a little bit curious about Hogsmeade herself. She wanted to see how it had changed during those five decades which lay between her last visit and now. She had always liked the Hogsmeade weekends back in her time period. But she had other things to do now. Like getting herself back into the right time period without changing the past and thus probably sentencing her future to a terrible fate.

No pressure there. Hermione sighed tiredly as she walked the corridor to the library.

"And what are you doing here on a nice day like this?" Ms Peters the librarian smiled at her friendly.

"Just a little research, Ms Peters," Hermione answered. She really liked Ms Peters. She was so much better than Mrs Pince had been. Ms Peters was actually helpful where Mrs Pince had been downright disturbing.

"Ms DeCerto, you spent way too much time in here," Ms Peters chastised Hermione gently.

Hermione smiled at her. She then walked into the library and searched for a nice secluded table. She found one in a corner that couldn't be seen from the entrance. Hermione sat down on a chair with her back to the wall. No one would be able to sneak up on her. She didn't need anyone getting suspicious of her interest in time travel. Or the Deathly Hallows for that matter. She left her bag at the table and went to browse the shelves.

After several hours of searching, reading and a little bit of cursing Hermione still had to find something useful. She had so far only come across books dealing with the nature of time in general or books about time turners. There even was a detailed book about how to actually create one. Hermione had wondered briefly if it was a good idea to not restrict that information at all. But after she read the book she knew why. It was incredibly difficult to create a time turner. The spells involved where way beyond her and the material to form the time turner with where nearly impossible to come by.

But she didn't need a time turner anyway. What she needed was a device or spell that would enable
her to go forward in time. A time turner was definitely not the way to go about it, Hermione reasoned after she looked through the tenth book about time turners. They were not constructed to go forward in time. It wasn't a matter of changing a few of the involved spells and one could travel forwards in time. It's sole purpose was going back. Travelling forward was utterly impossible. The books just confirmed what she'd already known.

The books on the nature of time in general on the other hand where were very informative. But again they didn't help her solve her problem. Hermione closed a rather large tome about time and its nature with spell work - rather useless - with a sigh. So far she hadn't learned anything helpful.

Maybe that's not the way to go about it after all, she pondered. The source of her problem had been most probably the Elder Wand. So if that wand had sent her back it should also be able to go forward in time. Maybe she should try to find something on the Deathly Hallows. She looked at her wrist watch. Nearly 5 o'clock. She had spend the whole day here for nothing. Hermione took her head in her hands. She was frustrated. It would be best to stop now and resume her search another day.

She left the library with the feeling of having failed. She yawned loudly as she walked down a corridor of the fourth floor. Most of the students still were in Hogsmeade having a nice day. Maybe she should go outside for a bit of fresh air. She mused about her plans of the afternoon as she rounded a corner and ran directly into someone. She stumbled back a few steps looking at whom she had run into.

The tall and muscular boy seemed to be a sixth or seventh year and was wearing the colours of Slytherin. Behind him she could see he was followed by more boys whom all belonged to Slytherin and all in their sixth or seventh year. They were staring at her and wore grim faces.

What are they up to? Hermione thought suspiciously. With a jolt of anxiety she noticed how secluded and dark this corridor was. And those Slytherins didn't exactly look delighted to meet her here. She unconsciously fell into her duelling stance.

"What are you doing here?" the boy Hermione had run into asked in an aggressive manner while he took a threatening step towards her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know it was forbidden to walk around in this school," Hermione answered sarcastically, once again surprised by the lack of emotion in her own voice. She didn't know when she had developed that particular skill but Harry and Ron had been impressed by it in more than one occasion. For Hermione it was more unsettling than anything else.

"Watch your mouth, _Gryffindor!_" one of the others said venomously. He spat his last word so that it sounded like an insult.

Hermione noticed that his hand went to his wand as he spoke. Why were these people so aggressive? It was like she had walked into something they really didn't want her to see. This seemed to be more than the normal house rivalry.

"Avery, please, there is no reason for a tone like this." Hermione heard a smooth poised voice say.

She could see the boy who had spoken to her before tense. The others parted to make room for whoever spoke last. Hermione had a sinking feeling that she knew who it was. Someone, she hadn't noticed before because he stood behind the others, was walking towards her. The sound of his authoritative steps now the only sound heard in the corridor. As he strolled confidently towards her Hermione could see that it was indeed Tom Riddle. He wore a smug smile on his otherwise handsome face. He stopped in front of her and Hermione took an involuntary step backwards. He smirked at that.
"Ms DeCerto, a pleasure meeting you again," Riddle said politely while smiling at her.

But Hermione wasn't fooled. She could see the underlying coldness. For the first time she noticed how tall Riddle was. He was towering over her. Merlin, she wished she had just gone to Hogsmeade with the others.

Here she was again. The nuisance that had bugged him since her arrival at the school, DeCerto, the stupid girl. She constantly affronted him despite his efforts to flatten her. That was just not the way it goes, Riddle thought furiously. *No one* could resist him. And certainly not this filthy slut. He walked towards her satisfied by noticing how his servants hurriedly made place for him. He stood now right in front of her. And DeCerto seemed frightened by him. That was much better than her indifference.

You *should* be frightened by me, DeCerto.

She even took a step back from him. And was now standing with her back on the wall. No way to run any more.

"Ms DeCerto, a pleasure meeting you again," he said, barely able to keep the scorn out of his voice.

She looked up at him and he could see the fear in her hazel eyes. She darted a look at his followers standing now behind him before looking back at him.

No way for you to escape, my dear. And I really don't need those idiots to stop you.

"What do you want from me?" she said forcefully, and Riddle was a little bit taken aback at how strong her voice still sounded.

That little bitch really *doesn't* know her place, he fumed inwardly.

"Why, Ms DeCerto, I was merely trying to be nice to you. No reason for jumping into my face," he said softly but made no effort to sound nice or polite anymore.

If this girl wouldn't accept his superiority the easy way he was going to show her what it meant to cross his way. He didn't need her running around thinking she could do whatever she pleased after all.

Her voice was dripping with sarcasm as she answered, "I'm sorry. Never meant to offend you."

He had to breath in slowly to stop his temper from exploding and cursing her on the spot. He could feel his magic going berserk anyway. It was crackling around him. He knew that was making others uncomfortable but he didn't stop it. Obviously DeCerto had noticed his magic too for she was looking very frightened again. An evil smile broke out on his face.

Hermione was chastising herself inwardly. Whatever had come over her to speak to Riddle like that? But she had said those words before she could stop herself. Now he was really furious. She could feel him emanating dark magic. It assaulted her body and made breathing difficult. She could even see his followers taking a few steps back. There was panic building up inside her. Riddle was glaring at her, his grey eyes deathly cold. Why did she have to insult him so openly? She tried to take another step back from him when she felt her shoulders touching the cold stone wall. Riddle had trapped her against the wall.

Then Riddle suddenly leaned forward. Hermione tensed as he bent his head to speak in her ear, his lips almost touching her. His body barely touched hers but his onslaught of magic now really trapped
her against the wall. He was way too near to her. Hermione could feel her legs giving way underneath her.

"An advice for you, DeCerto," he whispered maliciously in her ear. Hermione shuddered as she could feel his breath on her skin. "Do not cross me! You should not make me your enemy!"

He leaned back again. Hermione shivered as she looked up at him again. His face was completely blank now. But his eyes were boring into hers and Hermione could see the same coldness, disdain and the immeasurable hate she had seen in his older counterpart from her time.

He took a step back from her and said in a disturbingly normal, friendly voice, "It was nice meeting you, Ms DeCerto." With that, he smiled kindly at her.

But although his face was now a mask of affability Hermione could still see the ferocity and cold anger underneath it. Then he turned and walked arrogantly away from her. His servants tensed as he passed them and then they followed him in a respectful distance.

As they had left Hermione slid down the wall she was leaning on. Her whole body still shivered. She closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing again. That was not good. Not only had Riddle noticed her, something she had tried to avoid ever since she arrived at Hogwarts, no, he now had a dislike for her. He had even threatened her. She still couldn't believe how she could have been so stupid as to mock him. He may be only sixteen but what she had seen right now confirmed that he was already very dangerous.

What to do now? Maybe it had been a silly idea to come to Hogwarts from the very beginning. The best thing to do now would be to leave instantly. It wasn't safe to stay here. She didn't want to fight against him again. If she really needed that information about the Deathly Hallows so urgently she sure could find it somewhere else. After all Hogwarts held not the only library in England. Yes, leaving seemed to be the best option.

Hermione pulled her legs to her body and rested her head on her knees. She still felt very shaken. Her first impulse was to get away from that monster as far as possible. But was that really the most logical step to take? The information she could get somewhere else but what about the Elder Wand? Dumbledore would gain it eventually so she needed to stay close to him. She didn't know the exact date he would fight and win against Grindlewald. There had been contradictory data in the books of her time. And she had never asked him herself. No, she should stay close to Dumbledore. Then eventually an opportunity to get her hands on the wand would surely arise.

But what about Riddle? Hermione leaned back at the wall resting her head on the stone. Riddle definitely was a problem now. He was suspicious of her to the extent that he had felt the need to threaten her.

She slowly got up from the place she was resting on.

No use sitting around and cry. I have to get my act together!

As she walked around the next corner she recognized her surroundings. This was the corridor with the Room of Requirement. Maybe that's were Riddle and his cronies had come from. What had they done in the Room of Requirement? Maybe a Death Eater meeting, Hermione reasoned. Those Slytherins had had those brutal looks about them that had marked the Death Eaters of her time. Hermione swallowed at the thought of having just met the forerunners of the Death Eaters.

With those dark thoughts she walked back to Gryffindor common room as fast as possible. She let out a relieved breath of air as she stepped inside the common room. She felt safer here. No evil
Slytherin could get to her here. The common room was rather crowded. Obviously most of the students were already back from Hogsmeade. They were hanging around laughing and talking.

"Hey, Hermione! There you are!" Rose waved.

The group of them was sitting in a corner of the common room. Hermione walked over and sat down beside Lupin and Lucia on a sofa.

"What's happened, Hermione? You are as pale as a ghost," Weasley sat on an armchair across from her and eyed her worriedly.

"Yeah, you look kinda sick," Rose said.

Hermione knew only one reason for her looking so pale. Well, the Dark Lord threatened me right now. But it's nothing to worry about, I'm sure.

"I think I'm just tired," she answered instead.

"Have you been in the library the whole day?" Longbottom asked in incredulously.

"I've forgotten the time," Hermione offered as explanation. And then changed the topic of their conversation. "So, did you get what you wanted by at Zonko's?"

Longbottom's mouth broke into a grin. "Yep, the finest Shape Shifters they've got," he announced proudly.

"What do they do?" Hermione hadn't heard of them before.

At that Longbottom grabbed in his bag and produced a package of what seemed to be innocent looking candies. He offered her one. Hermione took a candy and eyed it suspiciously.

"Go on!" Weasley said and added as Hermione still hesitated. "It's nothing really bad. At least if you're not a Slytherin."

Hermione shrugged and tucked the candy in her mouth. It was rather sticky and tasted of caramel. Hermione swallowed it and waited for something to happen. At first nothing out of the ordinary happened but then she could feel her clothes changing. She still wore the black jumper and her skirt. But as she looked down on her she saw that her clothes were changing into her school uniform. After a while she sat there completely dressed in her uniform.

"Well, that's impressive. But how's that getting you revenge?" Hermione looked back at Longbottom.

"Because, my dear Hermione, these candies are changing the clothes of whoever's eating them into the school uniform. But not any school uniform. It will be the Gryffindor one," Longbottom grinned at her. "And of course, Avery being the Slytherin Quidditch team captain, will really appreciate the nice colours of his new uniform."

Weasley laughed at that.

"Yeah, and the best is even if you change your clothes the candy will still transform the new clothes. It will only stop after you eat one of the yellow wrapped candies."

At that he took a yellow candy out of another box and handed it to Hermione. Hermione ate the candy and after a few seconds the uniform changed back into her normal clothes.
"Not bad!" Hermione grinned at them.

"Now, we only have to find a way to get Avery eat them," Longbottom said.

Lupin rolled his eyes at that and looked at his two friends. "Really, can't you find something more productive to do with your time?"

"Ow, come on Lupin. You're such a spoil sport," Weasley exclaimed.

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Dance With The Devil

It was Monday again and Hermione started her second week at Hogwarts in the forties. She had barely left the common room during the weekend, having tried to avoid Riddle as best as possible. She had to admit she was really scared by him. Well, she had been scared of him before too. But this was a whole new level. After his attack on her in the corridor Tom Riddle had become Voldemort again in her mind. There was no denying it. He may look different but he was Lord Voldemort. Those pitiless eyes had told her so. She didn't want to be near him ever again. And if her logical side hadn't insisted that she stayed because of the Elder Wand she would have had fled the castle by now. But as a very huge part of Hermione's mind was logical she had stayed and was now headed for her first lesson this week. Unfortunately it was a potion class. Unfortunately because it was a Gryffindor-Slytherin class.

She was a little late now. She didn't want to go to the class so she had lagged behind. But now there was no delaying it. She took a deep breath and entered the familiar potion's classroom. The other students seemed to have arrived already. She could see Lupin and Longbottom sitting at a table in the back. Weasley wasn't there as he took Divination instead of potions. Hermione sighed as she envied him. Who would have thought that she ever wanted to go to a Divination class?

She looked around in the classroom to find herself a free seat. There was only one left. Hermione tensed as she saw it was a seat at Riddle's table. She looked at him and saw him openly smirking at her. She had the feeling that this free seat wasn't as coincidental as it seemed to be. With no other option left she walked reluctantly over to him.

"Why, if it isn't Ms DeCerto," Riddle sniggered at her.

On his left side sat another Slytherin. Hermione recognized him. He was one of Riddle's followers, a Death Eater. Hermione shuddered. He had been part of the group that had threatened her in that corridor. He was a fair-haired boy with pale skin. He was quite handsome, Hermione noted. Nothing compared to Riddle's dark beauty but handsome nonetheless. If it weren't for that look he sported though. He looked conceitedly at her as she sat down beside Riddle. Like she was some kind of particularly disgusting trash.

"Oh, I think I haven't introduced you yet." Riddle laughed darkly. "Meet Abraxas Malfoy. Malfoy, this is Hermione DeCerto."

The fair-haired boy, Malfoy, barely inclined his head towards her, never abandoning his stuck up look. Hermione just stared at him. Of course he was a Malfoy. Did members of this family had to make her life miserable, she wondered.

"Now, DeCerto, were are your manners?" Hermione turned back at Riddle. "I thought you would have taken my little advise at heart?" His was tone conversational but there was an underlying malice in his words.

'Do not cross me!' Of course she remembered. That evil git!

He looked at her expectantly. His evil smirk still plastered all over his face. Hermione could see triumph glistening in his eyes. But what really enraged her was this amusement and scorn he showed off.

No more pretending to be prince charming then, eh?
Somehow Hermione preferred it that way. This friendly façade had been quite unsettling. She pressed her lips together in a thin line. Her right hand itched to curse him. Right then and there. But she mustn't do that, she told herself.

_Just ignore him._

Hermione was saved from this conversation as Professor Slughorn entered the classroom.

How inconvenient, Riddle thought as he saw Slughorn enter. He would have really liked to jibe the girl some more. He studied her features as the professor droned on about some potion or other. She avoided his gaze and seemed to be scared by him, he noticed satisfied. It had been a stroke of good luck when they had met in that corridor. He had decided to show her then that he was not one to be trifled with. But there still seemed to be a little bit of resistance in her. He needed to put away with that. He felt an evil smirk beginning to form on his face.

Hermione felt sick. He was staring at her. She could feel it. Like he was boring a hole in the side of her head. What did he want from her? Why was he suddenly so interested in her? Hermione couldn't concentrate on the lesson. Slughorn had greeted her as she was a new student but she had only been able to nod stupidly at him. Then he had started to lecture about a potion. Hermione didn't even know which one so distracted was she by Riddle.

"...is mainly used by the Aurors to determine the age of underage troublemakers. Takes a little time to brew. But I have confidence in you. We'll begin on the potion after the Christmas break. I would advise you to take the time to prepare as the grade you'll get for the potion will influence your final grade in potions greatly. I want you to join together in groups of three. Hmm, it's best you stay in the groups you are seated right now." At these words of Slughorn Hermione couldn't hold back a groan. Riddle raised an eyebrow at her. And Hermione chastised herself at her lack of self-control.

"How does the potion work, sir?"

Slughorn smiled at the student who had posed the question.

"Well, Mr Nott, firstly a little bit of blood of the test subject is needed. That blood is then mixed with the Ortus Potion. Applied to a piece of parchment the mixture will then reveal the year of birth of the test subject."

Hermione didn't like what she was hearing right now. The Ortus Potion? She'd never heard of that before. A potion to reveal the year of birth? That was the last thing she needed right now. Her year of birth was 1979. How would she explain that outcome? Or maybe the potion would just estimate her age and then give a year of birth according to that. So that would be 1925. But she couldn't be sure. That stupid potion could ruin everything. Typically Slughorn, he just knew how to make her already miserable life even more miserable. She had to look up that potion though she doubted there was anything to find about the effects of time travel on the Ortus potion. Then her last solution would be to sabotage her own potion. Good luck, with Riddle breathing down her neck. She nervously played with her quill.

_Not now, Granger,_ she told herself. _Riddle's sitting right beside you._

He would notice if she was upset about something. And then he would try to find out what it was she was upset about. She had to calm down. The potion needed some time to be brewed. She had still time to find a solution.

For the rest of the lesson Slughorn continued to lecture about the different age revealing potions and their advantages and disadvantages compared to each other. Hermione couldn't really concentrate.
What with Riddle sitting right beside her and the Ortus potion hanging over her like the sword of Damocles. She was relieved as the lesson was over and she could leave the potion classroom.

Hermione's next class was Defence against the Dark Arts. Normally she liked Defence very much. It had been a really helpful class in her time period. But now she dreaded to go there. She had learned that DADA was, like potions, a Gryffindor Slytherin class. So Riddle would be there too. She could see it coming, he would mock her just like he did in Potions.

She entered the classroom together with her Gryffindor friends. Hermione nearly groaned as her gaze fell on Riddle. He was sitting in the front row. And right now he was looking at her with a smug smile plastered on his face. Hermione looked away from him. She followed Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin to their table which luckily was situated far far away from Riddle.

"So, what are we doing today?" Hermione asked more to divert her thoughts away from Riddle.

"I'm not sure. But I hope we are duelling again," Weasley answered.

"Oh, we are duelling in this class?" Hermione was mildly impressed. Aside from the disastrous Duelling Club in her second year they had never taught duelling in her time period.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Lucia said. She, Rose, Diana and Viola were sitting at the table right beside Hermione. "You don't have to attend the duelling. In fact all girls aren't."

The other girls at her table were nodding at that. Hermione inwardly rolled her eyes. What did they think? That an evil Dark Wizard wouldn't attack them just because they were women? At that the professor entered the classroom. Hermione looked up at him. Rather young for a teacher, she thought. He was a tall, thin man with blonde short hair.

Riddle saw the professor entering. He was new. Started this year and Riddle didn't know how to gauge him yet. He seemed to know his stuff. But then again: Defence against the Dark Arts. The subject in itself was just a waste of Riddle's time. He smiled smugly at that. Why would he need to defend himself against something so beautiful and exciting?

"Hello, class," the professor greeted them and then discovered DeCerto.

Well, she wasn't easy to overlook, Riddle thought. With her hair looking like a lion's mane.

"Oh, you must be Hermione DeCerto."

"Yes, sir," DeCerto answered shyly.

"Nice to have you here, Ms DeCerto," McGray told her.

Riddle rolled his eyes. No, it was definitely not nice to have that chick here.

"But now let's continue with our lesson. I hope you all studied the spells I suggested to you. Because today we are going to duel again." A murmur went to the room and in some cases a groan.

"For the ones who decided to not participate in duelling," McGray turned to the girls of the class and held up a few sheets of parchment. "I prepared these assignments. Kindly go to the library and work on them. I will come and collect them after class."

McGray started to hand out his assignments to the students who wouldn't participate in the duelling. Riddle shook his head. Those gits where even to damn daft to know how to hold a wand. He watched as McGray went to the Gryffindors to give them their sheets. As McGray offered a sheet to
DeCerto Riddle heard her say,

"Sir, I would prefer to participate in the duelling. If that's possible."

So that stupid slut thought she knew how to duel? Riddle snorted at that.

"Yes, of course Ms DeCerto," McGray smiled at her.

An idea was forming in Riddle's mind and a smirk on his face as McGray returned to the front of the class and announced, "Please, take your wands and follow me. You won't be needing anything else."

He opened a door beside the blackboard. The students got up and an excited murmur broke out. Riddle followed the other students in the next room. It was twice the size of the classroom. The other students gathered around the professor. Riddle made sure to stand near DeCerto. If he was lucky he could get her without breaking any school rules.

And sure enough McGray said, "Please find yourself a partner. You know your skills so find someone that matches them."

At that Riddle strolled towards DeCerto.

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A duelling lesson was finally, something exciting. After the fiasco at her previous lesson Hermione looked forward to a little physical activity. It seemed ages since last she had duelled. Maybe she could partner up with Lupin. He seemed to be quite good with his spell work.

"Wow, Hermione, are you sure you don't wanna come with us?" Lucia asked her as Hermione stood to follow the professor.

"Yes, don't worry. It's just a lesson after all," Hermione answered.

She really couldn't understand why they didn't want to come. But after Legifer's near fainting episode after seeing Hermione's wand holster she shouldn't be surprised. This time period seemed to be pretty hard on women. The professor led them to another room. It was huge. It looked like the Room of Requirement had during their DA meetings. There was more than enough room for several pairs of duellers.

"Please find yourself a partner. You know your skills so find someone that matches them," the professor announced.

Hermione sniggered. Such a risk free way of fighting. She was used to something much more sinister. At that she felt a tap on her shoulder. As she turned around she found herself once again trapped in Tom Riddle's gaze. He smiled again but the coldness in his eyes was still present.

"Would you like to partner with me?"

At first Hermione didn't get what he wanted. When she finally did understand she turned pale and just wanted to run away, screaming. Riddle was still waiting for her response though.

"Uhm…" she stammered.

Damn, she really needed a way out of this. She looked around but it seemed everyone had partnered up in the mean time.
"Come on. I won't bite," he said laughing attractively.

*Yeah, sure.* Hermione thought. But there was no way out of it now. If she refused he would become even more suspicious of her than he already was. And that was the last thing she wanted. The Dark Lord on her case.

"O…Okay," she said in a very small voice.

He smiled contentedly and walked over to a free space. Hermione was forced to follow him. The other pairs had already started to duel. Riddle was waiting for her. Standing there, he carried an air of authority. He twirled his wand casually in his hand. Hermione could see a glint of gold on his right hand. She recognized the golden ring with the black stone. That was the Gaunt's ring. If Riddle was wearing it now that meant he had already killed his father and grandparents. Information Hermione really didn't need right now. Panic was slowly starting to override her. She couldn't face him again. Her breathing was becoming faster. They were standing in a perfect duel distance now. Riddle still smiled at her but there was an evil glint in his eyes.

"Ready?" he asked politely.

*No, no, no, no, no, no!*

"…yes," a very soft voice.

Riddle held his wand now properly and bowed to her. Hermione's mind was clouded with fear but she managed to flick her wrist and her wand landed reassuringly in her hand then she bowed at him never breaking eye contact.

*So she knows how to duel?* Riddle thought amused as DeCerto bowed at him. *At least the pleasantries.* Oh, he was so going to enjoy this. She looked frightened now. That was exactly how he liked them.

Hermione was shivering. *Calm down,* she told herself. *Focus! Now is not the time to lose your nerves!*

She tightened the grip on her wand and faced Lord Voldemort. He stood a few metres from her and looked calm, self-assured. Combined with his murderous glare he made a fearsome impression. The other pairs of duelers were busy with their own fights. Hermione could see them out of the corner of her eyes. But they were only using simple spells. An Expelliarmus here and there, maybe a Stupefy or something equally innocent. Hermione doubted *her* duel was going to be innocent.

That was the moment Riddle chose to strike. He sent a curse her way and Hermione was surprised when she recognized it as a simple Jellylegs Spell.

*What was he playing at?*

With a casual wave of her wand she deflected the spell off its course. She could see Riddle raise an eyebrow at that but his smirk was still in place. Next he raised his wand and brought it down a blue spell left the tip of his wand. That was another harmless spell, the Confundus charm. Hermione didn't even have to raise a shield to block that charm.

*What did he plan?*

She couldn't end her train of thought as he had sent another curse her way. This time the Reducto curse, and this time Hermione *had* to raise her shield.
Protego!

That curse was not really powerful but it certainly was more powerful than his preceding spells. Hermione could see now what he was doing. He was testing her out. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. He was still smirking offendedly at her daring her to attack.

Well, if you insist. Have it your way.

She flashed her wand and yelled, "Stupefy!"

The red light of the stunner left her wand and sped towards Riddle. He waved the spell away lazily. Never losing his composure. But Hermione hadn't expected him to. Of course a Stunner wouldn't bring down Lord Voldemort. But she didn't want to really attack him. That would reveal too much of her skills.

He had to admit, she wasn't bad. Actually he had expected her to lose right after his very first spell. But she seemed to know a little bit. Riddle sniggered cockily. She was more amusing than he had hoped for. She had even attempted an attack of her own. Not that he claimed a Stunner to be an attack but he had to applaud her cheek. Even so, now it was time to take off the gloves. That girl deserved punishment after all, for annoying him and being an eye sore. What spell best to use? Ah, yes, that would do just fine. She would be carried off to the infirmary and he would claim it was an accident.

Now he was lagging again. Hermione was bewildered. But his hesitancy bode nothing well, of that she was sure. He seemed too amused by their duel. He was definitely up to something. Riddle flashed her a grin and sniggered at her. Then he flicked his wand expertly in a complicated pattern. Before he was finished Hermione had recognized the spell by the movements. She felt a chill running down her spine. It was the Acidula curse. That curse would form a mist of acid that would burn everything upon contact. Nothing life threatening but certainly painful.

A sickly green mist left Riddle's wand and sped towards her. Hermione had to raise a shield. But a simple protego wouldn't do. The protego charm protected the caster only from one side. The Acidula curse couldn't be stopped by that. It would just wobble around the shield and attack her from behind.

Hermione concentrated her magic and summoned one of her stronger shields.

Scutulatus!

A white light emerged from her wand it gained in size until it was a diamond-shaped shield and incased Hermione completely. The green mist connected with her shield but couldn't penetrate it. It flowed around the whole shield as if searching for an opening. Hermione needed to get away with it.

She raised her wand and pointed it with her arm outstretched to her right side above her head. Then she brought the wand down in an angular motion so that in the end it pointed to the floor left of her. The green mist disappeared with the movement of Hermione's wand as if she had woven it away. After that she canceled her shield as it was using up to much magic. She looked back at Riddle. His smug smile had vanished and was now replaced by a furious scowl. He snarled at Hermione as he waved his wand in another attack and a purple curse sped towards her. This time she didn't recognize the curse and she had no time to avoid it. So she crossed her arms before her body, summoned her magic and then spread her arms to the sides.

Subsisto!

A thick yellow shield formed itself before her. Riddle's curse smashed into it with a resonating crash.
As the yellow shield absorbed the curse's power it turned dark orange before it flickered and died. The last remnants of the curse that the shield hadn't absorbed rushed to Hermione and sliced open her left shoulder. She could feel her robes soak up the blood that spilled from the cut.

Hermione looked back at Riddle. He was radiating so much raw magical power that the air crackled with it. She looked in his eyes and could see a flicker of red. It was like being back in the Ministry. Another dark haired boy had attacked her there but the eyes had been just the same. She was trapped in his gaze. Hermione felt faint. Riddle and her mental image of the possessed Harry merged inside her mind. Those eyes, so full of bottomless hate. She had to stop him. Hermione no longer realized that she wasn't fighting Lord Voldemort but teenage Tom Riddle. She forgot she was in Hogwarts right now, on safe ground. For her only Voldemort existed.

_Cinis!_

Hermione thought as she waved her wand in the familiar motion. A ray of bright light shot from the tip of her wand. It rushed towards Riddle with a swishing noise. Riddle's eyes widened as he recognized the spell. He had no time to raise a shield so he flung himself sideways to avoid the spell. The spell smashed with a loud crack into the floor. It dissipated and left behind a small hole which was drilled deep into the stone floor. The brinks of the hole were white hot molten stone.

Hermione saw that Riddle had momentarily lost his balance so she sent another curse his way.

_Verbero!_

White smoke emerged from her wand. It buffed in Riddle's direction but the nearer it came the more solid the smoke was. More and more smoke came in a thin line out of Hermione's wand. The spell looked like a silvery grey rope whose one end was still smoky and connected with Hermione's wand tip the other end was very solid and snaked its way towards Riddle.

Riddle was still on one hand and one knee on the floor as he saw Hermione's new attack. He got up on his feet again and rose a shield of his own for the first time in this duel. Hermione waved her wand and the point of the silver rope gained in momentum. It smashed into Riddle's shield and breached it. Riddle's eyes widened in shock as the rope wound itself around his torso. Hermione smirked at that and pulled sharply at her wand and the rope. The rope tightened its hold on Riddle and Hermione could see Riddle wince in pain.

He shakily waved his wand and the outline of the whole rope became smokier and smokier until after a few seconds it lost its solidness completely. Riddle straightened up but still held his left arm wrapped around his abdomen. He looked at Hermione in astonishment. But his predominating emotion was rage, Hermione could tell. His face was determined and an angry frown formed between his eyebrows.

Hermione looked at him. Her face equally determined. She wasn't going to give in. Voldemort was not going to hurt her. Not anymore. He had taken so much from her. She was not willing to give him anymore. They both took simultaneously the dueling stance and locked eyes. This duel was far from over Hermione realized. She steadied her breathing and summoned her magic. It formed again the familiar, reassuring flow of energy in her body.

Then Hermione could see Riddle beginning with his attack. He whirled his wand. But this time she wasn't going to just take his curse. She waved her own wand and transfigured her outer black robe into many small shining arrow heads. With a wave of her wand the cloud of sharp cutting edges floated in front of her. Just as Riddle finished his curse Hermione ordered her army of knives to attack him.
The curse of Riddle sped towards her at the same moment as Hermione's knives rushed towards him. Suddenly a huge iridescent pale blue barrier formed between the two of them. Both curses smashed into the barrier. Just a few of Hermione's daggers crossed the barrier and slashed into Riddle who groaned in pain. The power of Riddle's curse was broken as it crashed into the barrier. But a little bit of it came through and hit Hermione. She fell on her knees as the curse ripped at her body. She could feel a blinding pain running through her. But after a few seconds the pain ebbed away and Hermione opened her eyes again.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" She heard someone screaming.

She looked to her right and saw Professor McGray. He stood with his wand raised. He had obviously cast the blue barrier that had stopped both of their attacks. McGray looked livid.

Hermione got slowly on her feet again. Her whole body ached and she could feel her left shoulder throbbing. She blinked and looked around her. During the duel she had at some point totally forgotten where she was. But now everything came back into focus. The huge hall with its stone floor and the many mats lying neatly arranged on the floor to separate the various dueling pairs from each other. But mainly Hermione noticed the other students again. They had all stopped dueling. And if Hermione had to make a guess they had done so a while ago. Every face in the hall was staring at her and Riddle who had gotten now on his feet as well. The hall was completely silent. Hermione could see the other students looking at her with different emotions: astonishment, awe, disbelief and in some cases even fear.

"DeCerto, Riddle! Follow me!" McGray hissed at the both of them before he turned towards the other students. "You stay here and wait for my return. And don't dare cast even one spell while I'm not here."

McGray went for the door. Hermione saw no other option as to follow him. Riddle had come to the same conclusion as he too limped after the professor. McGray waited for them in the classroom. When Riddle and Hermione entered the door was slammed shut behind them.

"Do you have any idea how irresponsible that was?" he yelled at them both. "I can't believe you used those spells. They are dangerous! You could have killed each other."

Hermione raised an eyebrow but didn't dare to point out that that had been the general idea. "Mr Riddle, I really expected more of you," McGray turned to Riddle who looked rather contrite.

"I am very sorry, professor. I got carried away. It was never my intention to harm Ms DeCerto," Riddle said his voice an example of repentance.

Hermione couldn't help but admire his acting skills. She nearly rolled her eyes. McGray obviously couldn't see through his act as his eyes softened a little bit.

"Professor, there is nothing to excuse my behavior," Riddle pleaded with him his voice dripping with honesty. "But I really didn't mean to injure anyone."

If Hermione hadn't been at the receiving end of his wand she would have believed him. He was incredibly convincing. Time to get her own act together.

"Sir, I don't know what got into me," she said carefully forming her voice into a soft whisper. She hung her head as she continued. "I am very ashamed of myself."
There, Riddle! I'm not a bad actress myself.

"Very well. Ms DeCerto, Mr Riddle, what you have done today was very wrong," McGray looked at them his voice still strict but his eyes had gone soft again. "But I can see that you regret what you have done."

"Yes, of course, sir," Riddle muttered, he still looked contrite.

*Rather persistent, aren't you?* Hermione thought at that. But she too tried to look ashamed herself. Though she really didn't know why she should be. It was Riddle after all who had attacked her so viciously. She had just defended herself.

"But I still have to punish you. 50 points from each of your houses. And you will both be serving detentions with me," McGray said sternly. "And now I want you to go to the infirmary. Mr Riddle I hope you can show Ms DeCerto the way without causing anymore harm."

"Of course, sir," Riddle answered softly.

Professor McGray returned to the dueling hall and left the both of them standing in the classroom. Hermione suddenly felt very alert again. The last thing she wanted right now was to be in a room alone with Tom Riddle. She looked from the now closed door back to Riddle. His eyes were shooting daggers at her while his face was again totally blank. Hermione was ready for the next attack when he abruptly turned away from her and stalked to the door. She remained were she was, rooted to the ground, as she stared after his retreating back. He crossed the whole length of the room but as he passed through the door he stopped. Without turning around he said impatiently,

"What are you waiting for?"

Hermione jerked as he spoke to her. *What? Oh, yes, the infirmary.* She walked tentatively towards him.

They walked in silence to the hospital wing. Hermione fell in step beside Riddle. That was a fairly awkward situation, she decided. Maybe she should just go back to her dorm. Admittedly her shoulder *was* hurting but she was sure it wasn't anything serious. Just a cut. Nothing to really worry about. And the Gryffindor tower was in the opposite direction so she wouldn't have to walk any longer with Riddle. She looked from the now closed door back to Riddle. His eyes were shooting daggers at her while his face was again totally blank. Hermione was ready for the next attack when he abruptly turned away from her and stalked to the door. She remained where she was, rooted to the ground, as she stared after his retreating back. He crossed the whole length of the room but as he passed through the door he stopped. Without turning around he said impatiently,

"What are you waiting for?"

Hermione jerked as he spoke to her. *What? Oh, yes, the infirmary.* She walked tentatively towards him.

They walked in silence to the hospital wing. Hermione fell in step beside Riddle. That was a fairly awkward situation, she decided. Maybe she should just go back to her dorm. Admittedly her shoulder *was* hurting but she was sure it wasn't anything serious. Just a cut. Nothing to really worry about. And the Gryffindor tower was in the opposite direction so she wouldn't have to walk any longer with Riddle. She glanced at him. He strode along as elegantly and arrogantly as ever. Though Hermione could see him limping a little bit. She felt quite satisfied at that. His robes were torn open in a few places and Hermione could see he was bleeding underneath it. Well, her little daggers had been a success then. The only down side was that she had to buy a new robe now. She *could* transfigure the daggers back into her black school robe but she really didn't want to use it again. Not after being drained in that git's evil blood.

Riddle was… absolutely shocked. How did DeCerto know all those spells? That was just impossible. He had never met another student who could equal him in a duel, and a girl at that. Even most of the teachers couldn't take him on. But she had blocked his curses expertly. The shields she had used were highly advanced magic. Very difficult to learn and certainly not taught at any school. Hell, most grown wizards didn't know how to cast them. It wasn't worth the trouble to learn them unless one really needed them. And her attacks had been equally advanced. He had been barely able to counter her attack with the smoky rope. He had had to tweak the magic a bit and depend on the Dark Arts to stop the rope from strangling him. He had always refrained from using Dark Magic in presence of others aside from his followers. He was very lucky McGray hadn't seen him using it. How did DeCerto *know* how to fight like that? He glanced sideways at her. She was walking beside him, seemingly deep in thought. Riddle could see her shoulder. There was a deep cut there. Her black sleeveless pullover and her white blouse were soaked in her blood. But she just didn't care.
Every girl he ever knew would be crying by now. Most of the boys would too. But she was walking calmly beside him as if there was nothing wrong.

They had reached the infirmary and he knocked on the door.

**Finally!** Hermione thought relieved. That walking alone with him had been highly unpleasant. She had been alert all the time to him attacking her. She was actually surprised he had really led her to the infirmary and not to some secluded dungeon to finish her off. He knocked on the door and then opened it. A brunette woman in her twenties came rushing towards them.

"Oh my, what happened to you?" she asked in a worried voice. "Come, come! Sit down here! I'll fetch the healer." She sat them on a bed and hurried in the adjacent office.

After a few moments she came back accompanied with a man. The man was small and had white hair and a very wrinkled face. In fact he looked ancient. A wonder he was still standing on his own two feet. He wore the lime green healer's uniform with the golden buttons down the front that Hermione knew from the healers in St. Mungos. And now he hobbled towards Riddle and herself still followed by the brunette.

Upon arrival he eyed Hermione and Riddle closely. He bent and pulled the cut material of her blouse a little away to have a look at the wound on her shoulder. He tsked at the sight. Why though Hermione didn't know. Either he wondered why she wasted his time with this small an injury or he just disapproved of destroying a perfectly nice blouse.

"So? What did happen?" he asked, not sounding too interested.

"Defence against the Dark Arts," Riddle offered as explanation.

"I always say they are too risky those classes," the brunette woman said shaking her head.

"Now Now, Madame Dulan. I'm sure it's not that bad." The old healer patted her on the back. "Can you look after the cut on the shoulder of this young lady? And you-" He turned to Riddle "-follow me."

Riddle got up and followed the healer behind the drapes but not without sending Hermione one of his nasty glares.

Hermione sighed at that. The brunette woman misinterpreted her sigh and said, "Don't worry, dear. It won't hurt at all."

Hermione looked at her and smiled. This woman seemed to be nice. At least she showed a little bit interest in her patients. Not like the old healer.

The woman took out her wand while she asked, "What's your name, dear. I haven't seen you around?"

"I'm a new student, Madam. My name is Hermione DeCerto."

"I see. A new student. And now you got injured already." She shook her head again disapprovingly. "Those classes are just too dangerous."

She then waved her wand and the cloth around Hermione's shoulder vanished.

"I'm Madam Dulan by the way."

Hermione nodded at that.

Madam Dulan started to clean Hermione's shoulder of all the caked blood. Hermione glanced sideways and could see the cut. It looked quite deep and had started to bleed again. Madam Dulan reached for a vial with a bluish liquid inside.

"Now, that can hurt just a little bit, dear," she told Hermione.

Then she drizzled some of the liquid on Hermione's cut. It stung a little but nothing really bad. After that Madam Dulan went to get a potion for Hermione. She offered the cup with a green potion to Hermione.

"Here drink this. It'll help you and you'll feel better."

Hermione took the cup and drank. The potion was warm and despite its sickly colour it didn't taste too bad. Hermione felt a pleasant warmth spreading through her body. She really felt better now. Somewhat refreshed. After that Madam Dulan began to bandage Hermione's shoulder. As she was finished she said,

"That's all I can do for you. The cut is quite deep but I think it will heal just fine. You have to come tomorrow so I can change the bandage." She smiled at Hermione kindly. "Now you just rest here for a while, hm? Just lie down for a while. You can go back for dinner."

"Yes, thank you," Hermione answered.

At that Madam Dulan left and headed for the office. Hermione leaned back on the bed. What a day it had been again. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Since she got here things had gone from bad to worse. After this little display of her skills Riddle was bound to become suspicious. But there had been no other way. She had had to defend herself. The curses he had used had been too dangerous. That evil prick!

Even at such a young age Lord Voldemort was already very powerful. That duel had been so intense. And he hadn't even used his evil dark ways to fight her. Hermione didn't know if she could beat him if the two of them fought in a real battle. She doubted it. Riddle was not easy to assess, she decided. She was brought out of her reverie as she heard steps coming towards her. She looked up and saw the subject of her musings standing before her. Riddle glared down at her. Hermione saw a white bandage around his left hand and she could see something white flashing through the cuts in his clothes. Well, at least she had managed to hurt him as much as he had hurt her. Her gaze went back to his face. He had again that fearsome glare plastered all over his face. But what unnerved Hermione the most was the calculation underneath.

"DeCerto, it seems I have underestimated you. A mistake I will not repeat, rest assured," his voice was a whisper but that didn't make the force behind it any less.

She looked in his stormy grey eyes and gulped. Then she surprised herself again as she answered him in a steady voice, "Well, then you should just stay away from me, shouldn't you?"

After that daring retort she could see his face morphing into a mask of fury once again. He leaned forward, his arms on either side of Hermione's sitting form on the bed. His face was now mere inches from hers. Hermione shied away from him but couldn't move very far as she was trapped again.

Then he spoke in a deadly cold hiss, "Careful, DeCerto. Don't start a war with me. You would regret it very much."
Hermione wasn't able to say anything to that. She wasn't even able to breathe right now as she stared into his eyes. They were boring into her daring her to contradict him. He continued to stare her down for a few more moments. Then after what seemed to be forever to Hermione he abruptly got up again. He looked down at her shaken form with his pitiless eyes and smirked at her before he turned and walked away, out of the infirmary.

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What Is It Like To Be Hated?

As Hermione finally left the infirmary it was evening already and she headed down to the Great Hall for dinner. The story of their little duel during DADA should have reached the other students by now. Hermione really didn't want to be the topic of any rumour or gossip but at the moment she couldn't change that. Her original plan of maintaining a low profile was slowly crashing down around her. What would Prof McGonagall say if she could see her now, mucking up the time line? *Would probably hex me on the spot*, Hermione smiled.

She reached the entrance to the Great Hall and stepped through it. Most of the students already sat at their house tables and were eating. As Hermione entered, the murmur in the Hall died down. All of the students began to stare at her. Not so much stare, Hermione noticed bewildered, but they threw her hostile glares. She had been prepared for the Slytherins staring her down. She had, after all, fought with their evil leader. But it wasn't just the Slytherins' dark glares she had to endure. No, similar glares were coming from the Ravenclaws and Huffelpuffs and, Hermione noticed with a jolt, even from Gryffindor. What had she done wrong? That couldn't be about the duel now, could it?

Suddenly very self-conscious Hermione hurried to the Gryffindor table. She could feel those glares following her every move. As she arrived at the table she searched desperately for an open seat to sit down and get out of the spotlight. But every time she found a free space it miraculously vanished upon her approach. Obviously no one wanted her to sit beside them. Hermione didn't know what had gotten into them. She had gotten along with nearly everyone before. Why did they shun her now? After some time Lupin caught her eye. He silently invited her to the place beside him. Grateful, she walked over to him and sat down.

"Thank you," she whispered softly to him.

He nodded at her without a smile.

The chatter had started again around her but she could still feel the hostility towards her. No one was talking to her. She wanted to ask Lupin what happened but she didn't dare do it now while everyone could eavesdrop. She loaded her plate with a little bit of the sausages and fried potatoes and began to eat but wasn't very hungry anymore. She could hear her name mentioned in a few of the conversations going on around her. After a while of shoving the potatoes around on her plate she stood up and left the Great Hall. As she walked out of the Hall someone bumped into her. Hard. Hermione felt a sharp pain coming from the cut on her shoulder. The shove was strong enough to slam her into the wall. A group of Ravenclaw girls passed by. Obviously it was one of them who had shoved her. They all looked at Hermione as if she was a particularly disgusting piece of filth. Some of them even grinned evilly as Hermione held her shoulder painfully. As Hermione watched them pass by she could hear one of them say,

"Slut!"

The other girls laughed at that spitefully. In bewilderment and a little bit hurt by their behaviour Hermione walked back to the Gryffindor common room. She stepped through the portrait hole into the room. It was deserted. The others were still in the Great Hall, eating. As she had nothing else to do Hermione walked up the stairs in the dormitory. The tidiness of the room annoyed her now.

*Stupid Legifer!*

She sat down on her bed.
What was with them? Hermione leaned back on her pillow.

This hostility couldn't be explained solely by her duel with Riddle. Sure it had been stupid of her to engage herself in a fight with Riddle, of all people. But at the time she hadn't had a choice. But why would the others hate her because of that duel? Well, she had lost some house points. But not that many. No, it was something else. Something must have happened during the time she had been in the infirmary.

She then heard someone coming up the stairs. As the door opened her four roommates stepped in. They glared at her, though Viola looked more indifferent than hostile. Lucia went to lie on her bed next to Hermione's. She slid to the side of the bed farthest away from Hermione and began to write in her pink diary. Viola disappeared into the bathroom and Diana rummaged through her things. Rose looked over one of her essays, every now and then she looked up and glared at Hermione. Hermione was really annoyed by them now. She hadn't done anything to deserve something like that.

After a while she yelled at no one in particular, "What's wrong with you?"

Diana ignored her outburst completely and Lucia stared at her and frowned but said nothing. Rose looked up from her essay and hissed, "Nothing's wrong with us. But you are a snaky little bitch, aren't you?"

Hermione was stunned by the cutting sharpness in her voice. Rose normally never spoke like that. And no one, not even Diana, objected to her use of insults. Hermione didn't want to discuss anything with them right now and pulled the covers of her bed shut. She grabbed her Arithmancy book and began to read the chapters they were going to cover the next day in class. She really had other things to worry about than those stupid school girls trying to harass her. Others had tried that before. After a few hours of reading the book slid down and Hermione fell asleep.

"You worthless Mudblood!" the Death Eater spat and kicked Hermione in the side. She lay rolled up into a ball at his feet. How could she have been so careless? She had left their hiding place to go to the village for some food. They hadn't been able to get anything to eat for days. A full blown war was raging now between Voldemort and the Ministry. Voldemort's Death Eaters were everywhere. It was getting harder and harder to find a safe place to put up their tent. Every Death Eater knew their faces. They couldn't just go into some shop and buy something to eat without the risk of getting caught.

"Where is Potter?" another Death Eater asked. There were five of them, encircling her. Hermione didn't answer. So the Death Eater pointed his wand at her and hissed,

"Crucio!"

The familiar agonizing pain of the Cruciatus curse was ripping at her. And though it was familiar there was no getting used to that pain. It was slicing down to the very core of her being until there was nothing more left than this all consuming it stopped. A hand grabbed her arm and pulled her brutally into a sitting position.

"Where is Potter?" the Death Eater asked again.

Hermione looked up at him and shook her head. She was never going to tell them. The Death Eater then spat out on her and slapped her. She was plunged to the side. Blood was dripping down from the corner of her mouth.

"You ugly piece of shit!" he yelled at her. "I should just kill you now, Muggle-whore!"
Hermione cried. They were going to kill her eventually. But not before they had tried to get the information out of her using every means possible…

Hermione woke up and felt tears trickling down her cheeks. Merlin, get a grip! She chastised herself. The population of the school ostracizing her was no reason to cry over. It could complicate her work on getting back to her own time but it was no reason to despair. Hermione got up, changed and then left the dormitory. The others hadn't spoken one word with her. They were outright ignoring her. Hermione thought about going to the Great Hall for breakfast but decided against it. She wouldn't be able to eat anyway while everyone glared at her like they had yesterday. So she headed for the History of Magic classroom.

The History class was horrible. Professor Binns was unbearably boring as he droned on about one Goblin war or other. The other students were ignoring her most of the time. If they were not ignoring her, they were trying to curse her. Some time into the class her inkwell exploded. She got covered in her black ink from head to toe. No one had tried to help her get rid of the ink. Everyone had laughed at her evilly.

Later that day, Hermione walked to the Great Hall for lunch. She really didn't want to go there but as she had skipped breakfast she was now quite hungry. Further down the corridor she could see Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin. Time to get behind the mystery of her being shunned, she thought.

As she caught up to them she greeted them, "Hey!"

Longbottom looked at her. Hermione could see disappointment in his eyes. Why was he disappointed with her? He didn't say anything but walked away from them. Hermione couldn't help but feel hurt by his behaviour. Lupin and Weasley seemed less offended by walking beside her and stayed.

"Now, can anyone tell my what's wrong?" she said impatiently.

Weasley and Lupin looked at each other uncomfortably until Lupin said, "Well, it's about you and Riddle."

"What about me and Riddle?" Hermione asked when he didn't explain any more.

"They know about you asking him out and…" Here Lupin dropped out.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked indignantly.

"You did ask Riddle out, didn't you, Hermione?" Weasley said more forcefully.

Hermione stared at them. What?

"No, I did no such thing!" she said disgusted by what they were insinuating.

Weasley raised his eyebrows. "You did not?"

"Of course not!" Hermione was annoyed now.

"I thought so," Lupin said.

Hermione turned back at Lupin. "Then tell me what this is all about."

Lupin cleared his throat and then told her, "There's this rumor, Hermione. They say you went to talk to Riddle and asked him on a date. But he declined."
"What did I do?"

"There's more I'm afraid," Lupin continued. "After he turned you down you got angry and started to yell at him and insult him. And as he still didn't want to date you, you threatened him."

"I threatened Riddle?" The whole thing was grotesquely funny, Hermione thought. She, threatening Riddle?

*It's the other way around!*

"I'm sorry but that's how the rumor goes." Lupin looked at her sympathetically. "To get your revenge on him for turning you down you attacked him during the DADA class."

"You're kidding, right?" Hermione couldn't believe her ears. "He was attacking me. I had to defend myself, hadn't I?"

"Well, you *did* use some pretty serious spells on him, Hermione," Weasley threw in. "Like that bright light. It melted a damn hole in a stone floor."

Hermione shrugged at that. Yes, that spell *was* really dangerous. But no spell was strong enough if cast on Lord Voldemort. He'd deserved it.

"His spells weren't harmless either. But who started those silly rumours anyway? Like I would ever ask Riddle on a date." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I don't know." Lupin frowned. "But the bad thing is, everyone's believing it."

"Yeah, even Longbottom," Hermione said bitterly.

"He's stupid, Hermione," Weasley tried to console her. "He's just so touchy with anything concerning Riddle. He really hates him, you know."

Hermione sighed. "I just hope they'll realize how wrong they all are."

This rumour explained everything. Tom Riddle was a very popular guy. Hermione had grudgingly to admit that. He had built himself a perfect reputation among the student body and even the teachers. For them he was the poor but brilliant orphan. So brave and handsome. The girls fell for him head over heels and the boys respected him and wanted to hang out with him. He had them wrapped around his little finger. Hermione doubted there were many people who knew the real Tom Riddle. Dumbledore was certainly one of them. And Riddle's Slytherin followers, the future Death Eaters, knew him and feared him. But beyond that? Hermione didn't think there were many people who even suspected him. And now she, the new girl, had attacked their golden boy. Of course they would hate her, attack her and in short make her life as miserable as possible. Hermione had to think back at Riddle's words.

'Don't start a war with me. You would regret it very much.'

Maybe that war between them had already started? And Hermione was now experiencing his first attack. She was pretty sure it was Riddle himself who had started this cock and bull story.

Lunch was as pleasant as the History class before. Hermione had tried to eat fast so she would be able to leave the Hall again. Somehow those death glares weren't very relaxing. After a Bad Bogey Hex had hit her in the back she had somewhat lost her appetite. So she left the Great Hall and headed to her Charms class. Now that would be nice considering who her desk neighbour was. Hermione sighted. She did that a lot lately, she noticed.
I wonder why?

And she had started to use too much sarcasm too.

As she arrived at the Charms classroom she sat down on her seat wishing she could sit somewhere else. The students arrived one after the other at the classroom and went for their tables. But not before throwing her a few nasty glares. It was getting old, Hermione thought. But as long as they didn't throw curses at her she couldn't be bothered.

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Riddle strode elegantly to his Charms class. He had just informed Primus Lestrange about their next meeting. Lestrange would see to it that the others were informed. Those meetings slowly grew into an inconvenience. Riddle had started this little group all those years ago to have someone to practice the Dark Arts with; or rather on. But today he really didn't need practice anymore. So maybe it was time to disband the group? On the other hand those meetings were an excellent recruiting ground. He could sway all those stupid little pureblood wizards to his cause. The heirs to a few rich and influential pureblood families were already loyal to him. They were rather useful to do the dirty work for him, too. No, he had to maintain those meetings. The benefits were just too big to ignore. So he had to go through those meetings however dull they were. Maybe he could crucio someone on the next, that would be fun.

He rounded a corner on his way to the classroom as a girl bumped into him. Couldn't those imbeciles look where they were going?

He put on his charming smile. No one could resist him then and said, "Are you alright? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

The girl, a Ravenclaw, blushed deeply. She was rather pretty. Riddle thought he knew her somehow. Her name was something like Denvin... or Dunhill. He wasn't sure. And really, he didn't care.

She answered in a jumpy high voice, "No, I'm alright. It was my mistake."

Yes, it was your damn mistake. I would so like to curse her now.

Riddle was about to continue his way to the classroom as she asked, "Tom, I wanted to ask you if you are okay. After that new girl attacked you so insidiously."

Tom? Who gave her the right to call him Tom? He could feel a burning hate rise in him. He looked back at her. She shied away a little. Damn, his hate must have shown in his face. He fixed that and smiled at her again. But why did she dare call him 'Tom'? Now that he looked closer, she was rather familiar. Where was that again? Riddle pondered. Ah, yes! He could remember now. He had shagged her. That was it. He nearly sniggered at that. Too easy. Those girls were just too easy to get. But still it didn't give her the right to call him 'Tom'.

He answered in his sweetest voice, "Don't worry. I wasn't hurt that bad. Just a few cuts."

At that the girl muttered something indignantly like "How could she!" He didn't know. He wasn't really listening.

Then she said, "Is it true? Did she attack you because you turned her down?"

At that Riddle nearly laughed out. Oh, his little rumour was spreading very nicely. But he answered in a hesitant voice, "I'm sure that's not related."
She smiled at him in a way she definitely considered to be flirtatious but was just ridiculous, "You are just too nice, Tom."

He really had to go now or he risked breaking down and laughing insanely. "I have to go to my class now. It was nice talking with you."

And with that he walked away from the deluded girl.

His rumour had worked nicely. DeCerto was now shunned from the whole school. He had quite enjoyed creating that little attack on her social life. But still that girl was a mystery. Her dueling abilities had been a surprise. He had to find out more about her. Maybe she would join his group after all. She would definitely be a powerful follower. But somehow he doubted he could persuade her to join. She had seemed to hate him from the very first day.

At the very least she distracted him from his other problem. Where he now seemed to be in a dead-end. But he would definitely use the ring…

He arrived at his classroom. DeCerto was already sitting at their table. Riddle could see the other students glaring at her. DeCerto was reading in her charms book and seemed to be rather unconcerned by the hostility of the rest of the class. Riddle felt a bit irritated by that. He walked over to his place and sat down.

"DeCerto," he greeted her.

"Riddle," she said blasé, never looking up from her book.

That infuriated him even more. Why was that girl so insistent on ignoring him? And why did he care anyway? But he did.

"So, how was your day?" he asked in a sugar-coated voice. *Well, how good could your day have been? With the whole school hating you?*

He could see the knuckles on her hand holding the book turning white. She looked up at him and her eyes were burning with anger. So, she probably surmised that it was him who started that rumour. He smirked at her.

She answered him in an equally sweet voice that didn't quite match her face right now, "So, how are your cuts?"

That insufferable bitch! How could she talk to him like that? He leaned in to her and whispered so that only she could hear, "How do you know all those spells, DeCerto? Tell me!"

His last two words had been spoken with so much force and authority that Hermione felt cold shivers running down her spine. But she wasn't going to tell him. So she whispered as softly as he had spoken,

"Well, how do you know all the spells?"

His grey eyes were boring into her again, shining with anger, "Sooner or later I'm going to find out anyway. Why do you have to make it so difficult for the both of us?"

That prick! Hermione was really pissed now. Why did he have to be such an asshole? And why, oh why, was she the only one to see him for what he was – evil?

And now that he was so close again she could see this impossible colour of his eyes again. They
were a pure grey with small dots of dark blue around the pupil. His face was well-proportioned and his dark hair fell elegantly into his eyes. He was so handsome. And that pissed Hermione off even more. How could he say those things and look like that? In her time, Lord Voldemort had at least had the decency to look just as evil as his soul was.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief, "Pff, like I'm going to tell you anything."

There it was again. How she addressed him and how she looked at him. There was hate in her eyes, but with the hate Riddle could live. No, there was also a great amount of contempt. Like he was something way beneath her. The worst of it though was this glint of pity he could sometimes see when she spoke to him.

He narrowed his eyes at her and hissed, "There will come a time where you will beg me on your knees to let you tell me your pathetic secrets."

At that DeCerto chuckled. How could she laugh after such a declaration of war? Then she leaned into him. He tensed as he could feel her hand brush his arm.

She whispered in his ear emphasizing each word, "In your dreams."

Before Riddle had a chance for a retort the door to the classroom opened and Professor Merrythought stepped in. Hermione leaned back in her chair and glanced sideways at Riddle. He still looked at her. His face was a blank like always but somehow Hermione could interpret the many little nuances in his face. Underneath his emotionless mask Hermione saw disbelief and anger. And to her surprise he looked a little bit flustered. Lord Voldemort was flustered? By her? She had the irresistible urge to laugh out loud but instead smiled at him sweetly. That seemed to infuriate him even more she noticed satisfied.

All those emotions he was trying to hide told Hermione something about Tom Riddle. He was not Lord Voldemort yet. At least not the Lord Voldemort from her time. He had been cruel and ruthless. He knew no mercy and would never have looked flustered in any situation. Hermione knew Riddle was by far no nice and normal boy. He had already killed at least four people. But he was not like the Voldemort of her time. That Voldemort had had no emotions. Not because he was better in hiding them but because he simply didn't have emotions like any normal human being. Hermione wondered what had happened during those fifty years that had changed Riddle so much. She just knew that somewhere during the progress he would lose his humanity. How terrible! she thought as an inexplicable sadness took hold of her.

Professor Merrythought brought her out of her musings as she said in her kind voice, "Now, class, last time we have dealt with the Procella charm to create wind. Let's move on to the other weather charms"

Professor Merrythought beamed at the class. She clearly enjoyed teaching very much. Hermione remembered Professor Merrythought from her time. She had been one of the examiners of her OWL exams. In her time Merrythought had been ancient. Hermione had been beyond nervous through her OWLs but she remembered how Merrythought had helped her calm down. Hermione liked her now even more.

"Now, who can tell me what the other weather charms are?" the professor asked.

Hermione saw Riddle raise his hand beside her. She quickly scanned the classroom. He was obviously the only one who did know the other weather charms. Well, aside from her of course. Hermione decided to raise her hand too. Now that Riddle seemed to have an interest in her anyway there was no need for her to hide her knowledge.
Merrythought smiled at the both of them fondly and said, "Yes, Ms DeCerto. Can you name another weather charm?"

"Yes, professor. Aside from the Wind charm there are four other weather charms. The first is the Pluvia Charm with which it is possible to create rain. The second is the Snow charm, though the incantation is the same as in the Pluvia charm but with slightly different wand movements. The third is the Caligo charm. It creates a thick fog around the caster. The last is the Solismico charm, the Sunshine charm. It does not actually create sunshine but it is the counter curse to the other weather charms"

After that little speech Hermione could see Professor Merrythought's smile growing even wider, Riddle scowled at her and the rest of the class threw her evil glares. But Hermione really didn't care what the others were thinking and smiled back at the professor, who said,

"Very good, Ms DeCerto. Those are indeed all the weather charms. Take 10 points for Gryffindor."

She turned to the whole class and continued, "Today we will be practicing the Snow charm. It is pretty easy to perform after you know how to use the Rain charm. The only differences, as Ms DeCerto correctly explained, are the wand movements."

Then Merrythought droned on about how that charm was invented, how it could be used and showed them the correct wand movements. Hermione wasn't paying much attention as she already knew how to perform all the weather charms. The only remotely useful of them was the charm to create fog. It could be used to hide in it. Unfortunately the counter charm was as easy to perform as the Fog charm itself. So it wasn't very safe to use it while sneaking over enemy territory.

After some time of daydreaming Hermione heard the professor say, "Now, I want you to practice the Snow charm. And don't forget the incantation is Pluvis."

Hermione heard the familiar rustling of paper and scraping of chairs that usually followed such a statement. A soft murmur broke out in the classroom. Merrythought started to walk between the students and help whoever had problems with the charm. Hermione watched the other students trying their luck with the Snow charm. Some of them had managed to produce sleet falling down around them, wetting all their school things. The only one how managed something that actually looked like real snow was Lupin. Small snowflakes were raining down on his table. Merrythought had noticed and awarded him 5 points. Hermione smiled at him. He smiled back and waved at her. Hermione could see that Marc Longbottom who was sitting beside him still ignored her. It really depressed her that he wouldn't even look at her anymore.

"So, what school did you attend in France, DeCerto?" She heard Riddle beside her ask innocently.

Subtle, Riddle. Subtle! She thought as she turned to him with one eyebrow raised.

"Shh, I'm trying to learn here," Hermione smiled at him. Then she waved her wand as she thought, Pluvis!

White fluffy snowflakes were beginning to fall softly on Riddle's black hair. Before he could curse Hermione in turn Prof Merrythought ended the class.

"I want you two write a one foot essay on the weather spells. To be handed in next week."

Hermione hastily got up from her seat and left the classroom. She didn't want to argue with Riddle anymore.

Riddle waved his wand lazily and the snow falling down on him stopped. That girl was really
something else. He stared after her as she left the classroom. He got up, took his bag and left the room. She was still contradicting him. Even after all the things he had said and done. No one of the other students had ever dared to talk to him like that. And certainly no girl at that. But here she was, standing up to him. He had seen the fire in her eyes. That just didn't work. He was fascinated by her fire but at the same time he desperately needed to extinguish it. He needed her to look at him with the same fear and awe like everyone else did. But he felt like he would lose something if DeCerto changed into one of the others. Around the next corner of the corridor he heard voices. He stopped to listen in to the conversation.

"-to have the audacity to sit beside him after all you've done, DeCerto."

Riddle recognized the voice. It belonged to Susan Yaxley a Slytherin sixth year. He didn't like her. She was always trying and failing to seduce him. Now she seemed to be talking to DeCerto, and continued in a sharp, mean voice,

"It would have been better if you had stayed in France, you bitch. Maybe then Grindelwald would have killed you."

Riddle raised his eyebrows at that. There was a strange feeling in his stomach at the thought of DeCerto being killed by Grindelwald.

"Yes… maybe that would have been better," DeCerto answered softly and it sounded more like she was talking to herself. Then he could hear her walk away.

Riddle was surprised by the severity in her voice.

What was that? Never before had he heard this tone in DeCerto's voice. Her voice was normally full of emotions. The predominating emotion was hate if she talked with him. But that answer she gave Yaxley had just been void of anything.

Stupid cow! Hermione walked to Professor Legifer's office. It was five minutes to six and Hermione had to go to her detention with the professor. A detention for being a little bit messy. Hermione was very infuriated. Whatever would come next? A detention for having the wrong hair colour? As she arrived at the office she knocked a little bit harder on the wooden door than was necessary.

"Come in!" Hermione's anger level rose as she heard Legifer's cold voice.

She opened the door and stepped inside the office. Legifer was sitting at her desk where she had been grading some essays. Hermione nearly shook her head.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto," Legifer smiled at her cruelly. "Five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione stared at her incredulously. "Why?"

Legifer indicated to the clock hanging on a wall. "You are late."

The clock showed one minute past six. Hermione felt her anger boiling over but she managed to keep her mouth shut. For the first time ever she could comprehend how Harry must have felt about Snape. Legifer still smiled at her smugly.

"So, Ms DeCerto as you so obviously don't know what cleanliness is I want you to read through those essays." Here she gestured towards a huge pile of parchment lying on the desk before her.
"They are from my first year students. I think you can learn a lot from them," Legifer elaborated in her piercing voice as she took one of the essays in her hand and held it up so Hermione was able to read its title.

_The chores of a house witch_? Hermione felt like she would snap any minute but tried to not curse the foul woman sitting in front of her.

"Yes, professor," she managed to say in a rather pressed voice.

She stepped forward and accepted the essays from Legifer who smirked at her. Then Hermione sat down on the chair in front of Legifer's desk and looked furiously down at the pile of parchment in her hand. She had never thought that the day would come were she wanted to burn a pile of homework. But here it was. Hermione had to resist the urge to look around in Legifer's office for a fireplace. Instead she took the first essay from the pile. It was from a Malissa Stanson, a Ravenclaw first year, Hermione read. She continued to read what Malissa had written in her spidery writing:

'It is the responsibility of every good wife to keep order in her home. So her husband can relax when he comes home from his work. A good wife should also prepare a meal so that her husband can have something healthy for dinner. The good wife should wait for her husband and welcome him home after his long day in the office.'

Hermione could almost physically feel the indignation taking a hold of her. What was that? She couldn't believe what she had to read here. She was suddenly so glad that she had been brought up in the eighties and nineties. It seemed here in the forties the emancipation of women had still a long way to go. The worst of all was that these innocent girls, like Malissa Stanson, had to write nonsense like that. Maybe they even came to believe it.

"Keep reading, Ms DeCerto!" Hermione nearly jumped as Legifer hissed at her. "I can see when you stop."

Hermione glanced at her professor. Legifer still sat behind her desk grading some essays. She didn't look at Hermione but Hermione could still see the smug smile on the professor's face. Hermione had to fight to not lose her composure. She balled her hands into fists, nearly crumbling Malissa's essay.

"Yes, professor," she answered mechanically and was surprised herself at how unemotional her voice sounded.

Hermione left Legifer's office more than three hours later. She couldn't believe that foul hag had kept her that long. She could have used that time for something useful. Like going through the library for books on time travel. Even sitting on a chair and staring at the wall would have been more productive than that stupid detention. But now it was nearly ten already. The library was closed by now. Hermione decided to go back to her dorm, let her room mates insult her a little, as they obviously so liked to do, and then try to get some sleep and forget this day had ever happened. As Hermione rounded the next corner she saw a boy walking in her direction. When he came closer she recognized him as Ledo Avery, a seventh year and the Slytherin Quidditch captain. And of course member of Riddle's little Death Eater group. She groaned at that.

Well, it could have been worse. Could have been Riddle.

Avery seemed to recognize her too because he had started to smirk at her darkly.

_Great!_ Hermione ignored him and tried to walk by him. But he suddenly blocked her way.

"If it isn't little Ms DeCerto!" he said in an oily voice. "What are you doing this late in a dark
Hermione didn't like that disturbing glint in his eyes as they glided appreciatively over her body.

"I don't see that being of your concern," she answered in a steady voice but her right hand tensed. She just needed to flick her wrist and her wand would fly in her hand.

"Aw, DeCerto, why so dismissive?" Avery took a step nearer to Hermione. "I know you must feel disappointed that Riddle turned you down. But I'm sure I could comfort you very well."

Hermione was disgusted as he winked at her lasciviously. "I don't think so. And now go out of my way!"

To her surprise he really stepped away. But as Hermione passed him she felt his hand closing around her left wrist. She hissed in pain as he wrenched her back. She collided with his chest.

"Ah, that's much better," he purred in her ear as he entangled his muscled arms around her waist.

Hermione wriggled and tried to get away from him but he held her firmly. "Let me go!" she yelled at him indignantly.

But he just smirked at her. Now, Hermione had had enough. First Legifer's stupidity and now this horny ruffian. She flicked her wrist and felt her wand reassuringly land in her hand.

"I think that's enough, Avery!" Hermione heard a quiet voice say just as she was about to hex Avery to kingdom come.

Riddle had just left the library after having browsed the books in the restricted section. For the tenth time! He just couldn't find the information he needed. He couldn't believe that he was the first one to ever have this idea. Wasn't that the obvious next step one had to make? Apparently no-one ever had done that. Or they were smart enough not to write it down. He sighed and fiddled with the golden ring on his right hand. Maybe it was just Hogwarts' policy of banning any book that was remotely useful. If the information wasn't to be found in a book then maybe he should try other sources. Who would know? Dumbledore surely knew something.

Yeah, that would work. He rolled his eyes. All he had to do was knock at Dumbledore's door and ask him nicely.

How about McGray? No, that wouldn't work either. McGray was a new teacher. He wasn't yet under Riddle's charm. Riddle doubted that he knew anything anyway. McGray was a disturbingly 'good guy'.

Then maybe Slughorn? Yes, that was better. Slughorn was a sneaky little bastard but he knew a great deal about the Dark Arts. More than he let normally show. But Riddle would have to plan his proceeding very cautiously. What he wanted to know was a sensitive subject after all. He didn't want to make Slughorn suspicious of him.

As he walked down the corridor on his way back to the Slytherin dungeons he heard an angry voice, "I don't think so. And now go out of my way!"

That was DeCerto! He sneaked nearer to hear some more. He heard some footsteps and then a rustling. The noises were coming from another corridor. He stepped cautiously nearer, always remaining in the shadows. A little bit ahead he saw DeCerto. With a jolt he realized that someone
was embracing her. Who was that? He narrowed his eyes.

"Ah, that's much better."

Riddle recognized the boy now. That was Avery. DeCerto was now trying to get away from Avery. Obviously that embrace wasn't a mutual matter, Riddle realized relieved. Wait, why did he care anyway? He just turned to walk away as he heard DeCerto yell in an angry voice,

"Let me go!"

He looked back and saw how DeCerto flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. Avery obviously hadn't noticed as he continued to hold her. A sinister smile began to form on Riddle's face. He would really enjoy seeing DeCerto curse that idiot. Yes, or he could 'save' her and then try to get some information out of her.

He stepped out of the shadow and said, "I think that's enough, Avery!"

Hermione looked over Avery's shoulder and saw Riddle standing a few metres away in the corridor. How great! Now it was not only Avery but also Riddle she had to deal with. Right now, she would prefer to battle a mountain troll. Avery had in the mean time let go of her and stepped a few paces away from her as he turned towards his leader. Riddle strolled towards them and stopped in front of Avery. Avery was a few inches taller than Riddle but right now he somewhat cowered before the other. It was clear who was in command here.

As Riddle spoke his voice was quite but deathly cold. "Avery, I think it would be a good idea for you to go back to the dungeons."

"But I-"

"Now!" Riddle said, his voice never rising in volume but it was clear he would not allow any contradiction here.

Avery winced at that and nodded. Hermione was surprised he didn't say 'Yes, Master!' before he turned and walked away. She shook her head and turned to continue her way back to the Gryffindor common room.

"Aren't you going to thank me, DeCerto?" She heard Riddle's smug voice behind her. He obviously had abandoned the deathly touch to his voice and was now teasing her again.

Hermione turned her head around and looked at him. He was standing in the corridor, looking as attractive as always and smirked at her. His eyes shining with amusement.

Hermione answered, "I don't see why. For all you knew I could have been snogging Avery."

She then continued to walk away from him. She heard him chuckle and then he fell in step beside her.

"Feisty, DeCerto. What got you so angry? And by the way your 'Let me go!' didn't sound like you enjoyed Avery's affection very much."

Hermione snorted at that. "Oh, and you felt the inexplicable need to save me or what? Let me tell you one thing: I can look after myself!"

Riddle chuckled again. He really began to infuriate Hermione. "I know that. I do remember our duel after all." He looked at her before he continued conversationally, "Just tell me, that curse you used,
the rope, what is it called? I never heard of it."

"Course you didn't. That curse was invented in 1974. But Hermione enjoyed knowing more than Riddle about magic. She realized they had nearly arrived at the entry to the common room.

"I don't think I'm going to tell you, Riddle. Don't want you to use it on innocent people."

Riddle abruptly stopped and as Hermione turned to look at him he grabbed her arms and pushed her against the wall. She looked up at him shocked. His look had now a predatory air around it. Riddle let go of her and placed his hands on either side of her head on the wall, trapping her effectively. Hermione felt her heart beating very quickly now. She really didn't want him so near her. It was unsettling. He was again emitting that raw magical energy. It surrounded her and breached her body painfully. She looked up at him, her eyes widened.

"W… What are you doing?"

He smirked down at her. He enjoyed seeing her so afraid of him, Hermione could tell. His eyes were assessing her. She shuddered at their intensity.

"Why are you so hostile towards me?" he whispered in her ear now. "What is it you are hiding, Hermione DeCerto?"

Hermione gulped. He couldn't know anything. That wasn't possible. But he obviously guessed that there was something strange about her.

"Not good!"

Hermione had planned to keep a low profile at Hogwarts. And now just a mere week after arriving she had the Dark Lord on her tracks.

She looked away from him and said, "I… I don't know what you are talking about."

Riddle chuckled at that. He moved closer to her. His chest was now nearly brushing her. Then he took her chin with one hand and forced her face to look up at him again. Hermione knew her eyes were wide with fear now but she couldn't help it. Riddle was smirking down at her darkly.

"DeCerto," his soft voice was now compelling. "There is no use fighting me. You can only lose."

His eyes were boring into her with such intensity that Hermione was feeling faint. His warm hand was still holding her chin softly in place. Hermione was terrified. She was trapped and she wouldn't be able to use her wand. Riddle was not as stupid as Avery. He would notice if she tried anything. She just wanted to get away from him. This commanding aura he was radiating was just disturbing. She needed to get away.

"Please, let me go," she whispered shakily.

His smug smile widened at her plea and her display of fear. But surprisingly he did let her go and stepped away from her. Hermione breathed out, relieved. Riddle smiled at her disheveled form contently and said,

"Just don't forget who is in command here."

And with that he turned and with a swish of his black robes he was gone.

Hermione leaned on the wall for support and tried to even her breathing. Sometimes in the classroom
or the Great Hall it was easy to forget who Tom Riddle really was. But right now she had been dealing with Lord Voldemort. Her hands shook terribly and she felt slightly sick. He was so damn frightening it was unsettling.

She needed some time to calm down enough to be able to enter the Gryffindor common room. The warmth and chatter in the room comforted her a little bit. She loved the red and gold colours of the common room now even more. With them she felt at home. In a far corner she saw Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom. Weasley had obviously seen her entering as he was waving her over. Hermione hesitated because Longbottom was sitting with them. But Lupin was smiling at her, so she decided to walk over to them. She sat down on the sofa beside Weasley.

"Hi," she said timidly, not looking at Longbottom.

"Hello, Hermione," Lupin said while he still smiled at her. Hermione was remembered of Remus Lupin now even more by his calm manner.

"Hey, Mione." Weasley grinned at her, "You don't mind if I call you Mione, do you?"

"No, not at all." Hermione smiled at him.

Lupin cleared his throat and said while glancing at Longbottom. "I think someone has to say something?"

Hermione looked confused from Lupin to Longbottom. Longbottom was fiddling around with the quill in his hand while staring guiltily at the ground. Lupin nudged him softly in his side.

Longbottom looked up and faced Hermione.

Then he said awkwardly, "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione frowned at him, still confused.

"Lupin and Weasley told me," Longbottom continued contritely. "That you never asked Riddle out. And that everything is a lie. I'm sorry I believed it." Longbottom looked at her anxiously.

Hermione understood now. He was apologizing for being such an idiot lately. She smiled at him.

"Its okay, Marc. You are not the only one who believed those lies."

Hermione felt relieved that Longbottom spoke to her again. She felt isolated enough in this time period without everyone hating her.

"Apology accepted. But you owe me now a nice butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks," she added teasingly.

The three boys laughed at that relieved. They seemed to be as happy about the reconciliation as Hermione was.

"So, now everything's all right again?" Weasley asked, "Because your stupidity was slowly getting to me," he said to Longbottom who laughed again.

"Yeah, I think so," Longbottom answered happily looking at Hermione.

Hermione was very glad to be on speaking terms with him again. Somehow those three were the only friends she had in this time. And they reminded her so much of Harry and Ron. They seemed like a lifeline connecting her with her lost friends.
"Yes, everything's alright." She smiled.

The four of them sat in the common room, joking and laughing. Hermione enjoyed that intimacy very much. It felt like the old times when she had been sitting in this very room talking with Harry and Ron. In a time before everything had gone bad. A time were she had been completely happy. It seemed like an eternity lay between those happy times and now. But Hermione enjoyed it to pretend, even if it was only for a short time, to be that happy Hermione again.

It was nearly midnight as she stepped in the dormitory. The other girls were all lying in their beds asleep. Hermione preferred them that way. She took her pyjama and went to the bathroom. After changing and brushing her teeth she gladly lay down on her soft bed. She closed the red curtains around her finding solace in the solitude.

The old Hermione she had been playing down in the common room, she wondered when she had died. Was it after Sirius' death? That had been a heavy blow not only on Harry but on her too. Sirius had been the first victim in the war she had personally known. Diggory and Crouch Sr. had both died before him but Hermione had never even spoken to them. Their deaths had been shocking but they had been dampened by the anonymity.

But even after Sirius had died there had still been hope in her. This burning spark in her hadn't yet gone out.

Then Dumbledore had died and after him so many more. But she had always been on the move then. She had always been fighting. There never had been the time to dwell in those deaths. Maybe that change in her had been more of a process. And at its end stood this bitter and hardened Hermione. She felt sad at that thought but she also knew that this process was irreversible. There just was no way for her to go back to her other innocent self.

Her thoughts went back to Voldemort. He was the reason for all the misery in her life. All the suffering she had had to endure. And now she had to face him again. He was still as frightening and dangerous as ever before. The coldness and ruthlessness wasn't yet present but Hermione had seen a glimpse of his darkness today. And she didn't want to face it again. She was tired. She had been fighting for so long now and had lost everything on the way. I need to go back home even if I'll be lonely there. I can't bear to stay here.

Hermione walked down a lane. She had her hood pulled down deep in her face. She was alone in the middle of the night walking down this backstreet in London. She was searching for a Horcrux and she didn't even know what it looked like. A creation of Ravenclaw. But what was it exactly? And more importantly she didn't know where he had hid it. His old orphanage was only a guess. And a poor one at that. Hermione didn't believe it herself. She couldn't see him hiding something so important in a place he despised so much. But Harry and Ron had agreed with her not to take anything for granted. So she had been checking the place. She had convinced Harry and Ron that if she went alone the possibility of her being caught would be lower. Alone she was inconspicuous. But her excursion had been in vain. The orphanage didn't exist anymore. And Hermione hadn't found any Horcrux in the near vicinity. It was time to go back to the tent and tell Harry and Ron that she hadn't been successful. It was discouraging.

Suddenly she heard an inhuman scream somewhere down a dark intersection. It made the hair on the back of her neck stand. A burst of insane laughter followed the scream. Hermione's blood run cold as she stared in the direction the voices were coming from but she couldn't see anything in the dark. The laughter died down and then someone whispered an incantation before Hermione heard the soft pop of a disapparation. She gasped as she saw the disgustingly familiar green sign taking shape in the nightly air. A snake was coiling around a skull. Hermione sneaked into the dark alley.
Maybe she could help? Deep down, she knew that hope was unfounded.

As she stepped closer to the gleaming green sign she came upon an abominable scene. There, lying on the grimy ground was a mangled body. Hermione saw dark-blond long hair. The body had belonged to a woman. She wore muggle clothing. Everything else was barely recognizable as human. Her limbs were broken. Bone was protruding the skin on several places. A pool of blood was building under her. Her right side was a bloody mass. Having been smashed by something into a pulp. Bowels were sprawled on the pave stones. All the while the moonlight illuminated the scene serenely diving it in an otherworldly sheen.

Hermione gagged and stumbled back. Then she turned and ran away. Away from the blood, from death and it's sickening smell. Gulping in large breaths of the cold air. But the feeling of being stained never left her. And somehow Hermione knew it would never leave her ever again…
Hermione sat in the library. It was midday now. Her Herbology class had just ended. As she didn't feel very hungry she had decided to skip lunch in favour of another library session. Herbology had been refreshingly quite. At least nobody had tried to curse her. Ever since that little rumour about her and Riddle had started people were hexing her wherever she went. It was slowly getting a bother. Even with her war-hardened reflexes a few curses had breached her defences. As a result she was limping around since that leglock jinx had caught her after breakfast. So Herbology had been quite a rest for her. Her Gryffindor housemates had been too distracted by picking the needles off a Spanish curse-pine. And though the Hufflepuff students were better at Herbology they obviously didn't like Riddle as much as the rest did because they hadn't cursed her either. Or they just didn't revert to using hexes to get to her. Because quite honestly, they hadn't been any nicer than the other houses. For example other than the teacher, Professor Sato, no one had talked with her during class. But what did she care if they were talking to her or not? She didn't need them. She even preferred it that way. She would be leaving here anyway so why bother with the people here?

That was getting her back to the problem at hand: returning to her time.Regardless of how huge this library was there seemed to be no book with the information she needed. Hermione had never thought it possible but she started to hate the library. She had spent every free minute she could spare in the library but so far she hadn't found anything remotely helpful. There were so many books about time travel she couldn't believe they were all useless. But they were. She had even read some of them twice. But that didn't improve their contents. So she had decided to find some information on the Deathly Hallows. But to her horror those books were even worse than the time travel books. The tale of the Deathly Hallows was a myth. And that was what the books about them were like: Full of fairy tales. Luna would have liked them very much.

The information she could gather from all that rubbish was mostly on how to find the Hallows. It was just that Hermione didn't need to find them. She already knew were exactly they were. The Elder Wand was with Grindelwald, the Potter family was in possession of the Invisibility Cloak and the Resurrection Stone was part of the Gaunt's ring that was currently worn by Riddle.

What she needed was not an advice on how to find the Hallows. She needed information on the powers of the Elder Wand. And though the Elder Wand was the Hallow she could find most of the information on, no book mentioned it's time traveling ability. She hadn't expected to stumble over a step-by-step instruction on how to activate the Elder Wand's time travel mode but she had hoped to at least find some hint. But there was just nothing. Not on the Hallows and neither on other time travel methods. She was in a dead-end here. But how to proceed now? The library was obviously no use. She needed someone who knew a great deal about magic, about the essence of magic.

She could still go to the Ministry, she mused. Talk with someone from the Department of Mysteries. But just at the thought of trusting the Ministry she felt slightly nauseous.

Then who else? There was one she had always been able to go to ask for help. Until his death that is. Dumbledore! He was the most powerful wizard alive. Hermione longed to tell him everything. He had always been able to sort out all problems. Or so it had seemed. But no, Hermione would not, could not ask him for help. She was in this alone. Dumbledore didn't know her in this time, why would he trust her? And did she trust him? Trust him to do what was best for her?

_Dumbledore and the Deathly Hallows…_

Hermione knew at some point in time he had been obsessed with them. Finding them and use the stone with the ability to bring back the dead. So he probably had researched them. When was that?
Hermione leaned back in her chair at the hindmost table in the library. Maybe she was onto something here. She skimmed her fingers along the spine of the last book she had read.

She just had to slip into his office and then maybe, if she was lucky, Dumbledore had been more successful with his research than she had been.

Hermione checked her watch. A quarter to one. She had to go to her next class now, Arithmancy. Another class she liked, just like Herbology. First of all no Slytherins and that meant no Riddle. And there were aside from her only Ravenclaws in Arithmancy. And only boys at that. So she wouldn't have to deal with vindictive Riddle fan-girls there. Hermione strolled to the exit of the library.

"Ms DeCerto you really shouldn't always spend your precious breaks reading old books," Ms Peters the librarian chided her gently. She looked at Hermione concerned.

"You are right, Ms Peters," Hermione smiled at her. "But there is so much to do. I have still to adjust to Hogwarts' curriculum."

"I see. But you really shouldn't overexert yourself. There are still other things besides study, hm? Don't forget to enjoy life." Ms Peters winked at her.

Hermione smiled again. "I won't forget. Don't worry."

With that she left the library.

Don't forget to enjoy life. Don't forget to enjoy life. Enjoy life!

How?

At some point in time, way back when she still had been the innocent Hermione, she had known. Not anymore. No, there were just the missions. Get the Horcruxes…kill Voldemort… get back to your time…

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Riddle sat on the floor leaning his back on the shelf full of books behind him. He normally wouldn't assume such an undignified position but at the moment he didn't care. And as it was lunch time now it wasn't very likely for any students to stumble upon him. He really didn't know why he still tried though. None of those books were any help. Slughorn seemed to be the best idea now. He could ask him at their next meeting. He would have to handle the delicate matter with caution so Slughorn wouldn't get suspicious. But after all Slughorn was very fond of him. Riddle just had to use his charm and his powers of persuasion and Slughorn would tell him everything.

Riddle absentmindedly traced the beginning of the scar that marred his left forearm and ran up until it reached his upper arm. This scar was a constant reminder of what he was fighting against: weakness. Then after a while he stood up from his brooding place on the floor.

Even if Slughorn didn't know anything Riddle would still do it. There was just no way he could fail. He pretty much knew the original incantation, the procedure and the necessary items. At least for that the stupid library had been useful. Well, it had cost him nearly two years to gather the information but it had all been here hidden in the books of Hogwarts' library. Actually he shouldn't be surprised that maybe he really was the first to have the idea to create more than one. He was brilliant after all.

Riddle walked down an aisle as he heard a soft sigh coming somewhere from one of the tables. He frowned. Maybe he was not as alone as he had assumed. Then he peered over the books on the shelf at the table in a corner. He was surprised to see DeCerto sitting at one of the tables. She was bent
over a large ancient looking book. She looked frustrated and apparently angry at the book she had been reading in.

*Maybe too stupid to understand human written language?*

No, Riddle knew since their duel that DeCerto wasn't stupid. And her performance in class was good too. Come to think of it her performance had improved lately. Had she needed some time to adapt to Hogwarts or had she been holding herself back before? Damn girl! There were so many things about her that didn't make sense. He needed to find out the truth about her. Her elusiveness was frustrating and annoying.

DeCerto leaned back in her chair she was obviously contemplating something. Maybe he should just go over there and force the truth out of her. Why not? No one was here, so no witnesses. He saw DeCerto checking her watch, a really silly looking wristwatch. Then she got up, waved her wand so that the books on her table flew back in their shelves and left the library.

Riddle left his hiding place behind the book shelf and strolled over to the table the Gryffindor girl had occupied just moments before. His fingers skimmed over the old wooden surface of the table as he passed it. He walked over to a book shelf someway behind the table. He had seen one of the discarded books flying that way. He scanned the shelf and sure enough there on the left side stood the old dusty tome DeCerto had been reading in. He reached for the book and pulled it from its place on the shelf. He flipped it over so he could read its title: *Fables and Myths of Olden*. He frowned and opened the book. The parchment was yellowed and fragile and the writing was bleached out and hard to read. He checked some of the chapters, *The Apologue of the Weaver's Wife and the Dragon King, The lying Flower of Wisdom, The Mermaid's Bestowment for the poor Stable Boy*.

What was that? A book of fairy tales? Why had DeCerto read it? She didn't strike him as the girl to read children's stories. He remembered her frustrated look as she had stared at this book. She had been searching for something. And that something was certainly not a nice bedtime story. Riddle closed the book again and looked at its brown leathery cover. No, there was definitely something more to this book. Riddle was brought out of his musing as his gaze fell on the big grandfather clock standing not far from him. This late already? He would be late for his next class. He hated to be late. *Damn you, DeCerto!* He hurriedly left the library but not without checking out the ancient brown book.

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"Really, DeCerto! Can't you keep a little bit order in your things?"

Hermione woke up to the annoyingly nagging sound of Lucia's voice. She opened her eyes and saw Lucia kicking angrily at Hermione's trunk. The trunk's lid closed with a loud bang and Hermione was now wide awake. She sat up in her bed glaring at the other girl. In fact Hermione wasn't a sloppy person. No, she rather liked a neat and clean room herself but here she didn't put any effort into cleaning up her space of the dormitory. Maybe it was because Hermione knew it annoyed her room mates who were not very nice to her lately or it was some form of stupid mutiny against Legifer's inspections, Hermione didn't know.

"Why, I never knew it bothered you," she told Lucia in a sugar sweet voice.

The other girl glared at her sinister for a moment then turned and ignored Hermione completely. Hermione shrugged, then got up and made her way to the bathroom. As she closed the door she could hear Lucia whisper to Rose,
"Did you hear that? Really, who does she think she is?"

Hermione locked the door and walked over to the sink. She leaned down on it and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was bushier than ever, which she had never thought possible, and her face was rather pale. She sighed.

"A good morning to you too."

After washing up she took off the t-shirt she had been sleeping in to have a look at the cut on her left shoulder she had received during that legendary DADA class. She removed the bandage and cringed as she ripped off a little of the caked blood. The wound looked still raw and fresh even after one week. Apparently the potions and ointments Madam Dulan had used to heal it weren't working properly. Maybe the curse Riddle had used was preventing the wound to be healed by magical means.

*That bastard!*

Well, she would have to let it heal the natural way then. If she was right about the spell he had used then any attempts to heal it magically could make matters even worse. So Hermione wasn't planning to go back to the Hospital Wing and take that risk and she didn't need the help of Madam Dulan anyway. She knew perfectly well how to take care of an injury like that. Luckily Riddle hadn't caught her right arm. Hermione waved her wand and conjured white mull out of thin air. After another wave of her wand it wrapped itself tightly around her shoulder. She then dressed in her uniform and left the bathroom again. The others had already left for breakfast and hadn't felt the need to wait for her. No surprise there.

On her way to the Great Hall someone behind her flung the Bodybind Curse at her. But Hermione had been ready. She had cast the counter curse in no time. She turned and saw a group of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor fifth year girls hiding behind a corner. Really it was getting old. But she still couldn't get over it that even her own housemates chose to side with Riddle. He was the future Dark Lord for God's sake. Hermione shook her head and resumed her way to the Great Hall.

As she arrived there her eyes immediately fell on the Slytherin table. She saw Riddle sitting on his usual place holding a cup elegantly in one hand as he read in the Daily Prophet. He stopped reading the newspaper and looked at her. A smirk was forming on his face as he scrutinized her. She glared at him angrily then turned away and took a place at the Gryffindor table between Lupin and Longbottom.

"Morning, Hermione," Lupin greeted her.

"Morning," Hermione replied unenthusiastically as she reached for a jug of orange juice.

"Ready to face yet another day full of new interesting classes?" Longbottom asked while nudging her in the side.

Hermione scowled at him but didn't dignify his question with an answer.

"What's wrong?" Longbottom asked as he buttered his toast.

Hermione sighed. "Legifer."

"Oh." Longbottom patted her back understandingly. "Yeah, she is one evil witch."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at his accurate description of her. "But you don't even have her in class!"
"True! I'm just lucky I'm a guy, huh?"

At that the owls were flying into the Great Hall to deliver the morning post. To Hermione's bewilderment two owls were landing in front of her.

"Oh, look you've got letters, Hermione," Weasley offered superfluously from across the table.

"Stating the obvious today, are we?" Lupin asked him.

Hermione took the letters from the two owls and offered them a little bit of her bacon. They took it, hooted friendly and then flew away. Hermione took the first letter and opened it,

Dear Ms DeCerto,

Your detention will take place today at 7 p.m. We will meet at the Front Gates. Please be prepared to spend some time outside.

Kindly,

Professor McGray

"What's it about?" Longbottom asked beside her.

"My detention with McGray," Hermione muttered.

She glanced at the Slytherin table and could see Riddle reading a letter too. So they were probably spending their detention together. How very comforting. Hermione reached for the second letter. The envelope was of green parchment. Hermione opened it.

Dear Ms DeCerto,

With this letter I would like to invite you to a little Club I have established some years back. Many of your school mates have already joined and I would be delighted if you would also join us. I do hope to get a positive answer in our next class on Monday.

Sincerely,

Professor H.E.F. Slughorn

An invitation to the Slug Club? Hermione was confused. Why did he invite her? She looked up at the teachers table. Slughorn was sitting there talking animatedly with Merrythought. As he saw her looking at him he smiled and waved at her. Why did he want her to join the Slug Club again? She had attacked his favourite student after all. Hermione knew that Slughorn was very fond of Riddle.

"Who wrote you?" Weasley asked from across the table.

"Really, must you two be so nosey?" Lupin chastised the two other boys.

"Its fine, Amarys," Hermione told Lupin. "It's a letter from Professor Slughorn. Apparently he's inviting me into some club of his."

"Oh, the Slug Club," Longbottom said excited.

"What?" Hermione acted ignorant as she wasn't supposed to know that name.

"It's a club Slughorn founded. All the students from well-known families or with a famous relative
are members. I really wanna go too. I've heard the parties are great."

"Well-known families? Why did he invite me then?" Hermione asked.

"Well, he's also inviting bright students, isn't he?" Longbottom said.

"It's no wonder then you weren't invited," Weasley shot at Longbottom and then he turned to Hermione and said, "'Cause he's going to want you Hermione. You're brilliant. Just like Lupin, he's a member too."

Hermione looked at Lupin. "Really?"

"Yeah," he answered humbly.

"So, you think I should join too?" Hermione asked, wondering if she had another choice without making herself suspicious.

"Sure!"

"Why not?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't, Hermione"

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Hermione stepped into the Household Charms and Spells classroom and made her way to her table. She tried to ignore the evil glares the other students were throwing at her. Hermione was increasingly irritated by their antics. She really wanted to curse those stupid girls – with the Cruciatus Curse and then I'll laugh insanely and become the next Dark Lady.

She really needed to find a way back home or one of these days she would burst from all the accumulated sarcasm. She sat down on her seat beside Lucia and Rose, who were edging away from her.

"It's not like I've got the plague."

Hermione still thought that they shouldn't ostracize her for hexing Riddle, they should be handing her a medal. Her already gloomy thoughts weren't brightened by her least favourite teacher entering the classroom.

"Good morning class!" Legifer's sharp voice greeted them.

Today she wore another of her impossibly flawless outfits, a neat black skirt and a white blouse underneath her outer black robes. Her black hair was put up in a strict and perfect hairdo. All this perfectness made Hermione rather dizzy.

"Today we won't have a practical lesson," Legifer declared. No-one dared to groan at that as they would have done in their other classes. "It will be a lesson about the duties and the behaviour that are expected from house witches."

Hermione felt a headache starting in her temple. Maybe she should have just stayed in bed and accepted the detention for skipping class like a man… or like a house witch. She chuckled at that thought. Legifer glared at her coldly but fortunately didn't say anything.

For the next hour and a half Hermione tried to daydream the time away. Sometimes she really had to work to blind out Legifer's persistent, shrill voice and all the offensive things she lectured about.
"Good luck, Hermione!" Weasley waved after her as she left the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione thought that she very well needed good luck as she was heading for her detention with McGray. Not that she was afraid of the professor. No, it was more the company that unsettled her. She was pretty sure to meet Tom Riddle standing in the Entrance Hall. And she was not to be disappointed, she noticed as she stepped down the last steps of the stairs. Riddle was leaning nonchalantly against the wall beside the front door. He had his arms folded before his chest and looked rather annoyed. He wore a thick black cloak and heavy boots. So he was prepared to spend some time outdoors as McGray had written. Angrily Hermione had again to admit how incredibly attractive he looked. She walked over to him but didn't acknowledge him in any way as she stood a few steps beside him. He glared at her but didn't say anything either. What the hell was he so annoyed about? Hermione scowled at him. After all it was entirely his fault that they had to do this detention. If he hadn't attacked her during DADA they never would have gotten into this mess. Hermione heard someone approaching and turned around. McGray was walking towards them.

"Good evening, Ms DeCerto, Mr Riddle," he greeted them. The professor wore a cloak similar to Riddle's but his was brown instead of black.

He took in their appearances. "I see you are prepared for a little bit of outside activity. Today we are going into the Forbidden Forest. Professor Sato asked me to retrieve a few fresh blood-acorn seedlings. You are going to accompany me."

Riddle nodded at that curtly. "Yes, professor."

Hermione wondered briefly why so many detentions at Hogwarts included strolls into the Forbidden Forest. It was forbidden for a reason after all.

But she also nodded and said politely, "Of course, sir."

"Good good. Now follow me!"

McGray then turned to the Entrance Door and opened it. He walked outside and Hermione and Riddle had no other option but to follow him. As Hermione stepped outside the cold autumn air assaulted her. She was glad she had bought the warm winter cloak back in Diagon Alley.

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Riddle was pissed. He really had better things to do with his time than to waste it away with stupid detentions. He waited in the Entrance Hall for McGray. He still couldn't believe he had to do a detention. It was years ago since he had to spent his last detention. He was very cautious to never let the teachers catch him or his followers at open wrong-doings. Tom Riddle just didn't do detentions. But now he stood here.

*And whose fault is this?* he asked himself.

He looked up as he heard someone approach him. It was DeCerto. His level of annoyance rose a few notches. Her hair was ridiculously frizzy as usual. She wore a heavy black cloak, he noticed. Not very trendy but practical. He didn't know another girl in Hogwarts who would abandon their sense of fashion to these extents. He somehow liked how DeCerto didn't dress up like all the other girls. Those fashion dolls were rather tiresome. Riddle was suddenly annoyed that there was something he liked about DeCerto. He glared at her. And his glare grew even darker as she started to scowl at him in return. DeCerto was saved from him cursing her as McGray approached them. The professor
greeted them and announced that they would be spending their detention in the Forbidden Forest. Riddle wasn’t that surprised as he had seen something like this coming. He glanced at DeCerto beside him and was surprised that she didn’t seem to be scared by the prospect of going into the Forest. But then again, thanks to him, no-one was talking to her anymore, so maybe she didn’t know about the Forbidden Forest.

Riddle followed the professor outside. As they walked towards the edge of the forest the professor said, "You will stay close to me when we are inside the forest, understood? No running off alone. It's dangerous in there."

Riddle suppressed a sarcastic smirk on his face. He glanced sideways at DeCerto. She walked beside him, still not looking scared. Riddle narrowed his eyes, maybe he should change that?

"Is it true that there are Centaurs inside the Forest?" he asked McGray innocently. Centaurs were widely feared by wizards, he knew that.

"Yes, right you are, Mr Riddle. There is indeed a colony of them living in the Forbidden Forest," McGray answered.

Riddle looked triumphantly at DeCerto. Surely now that stupid girl would be terrified to have to go inside that forest. He was surprised to find her still calmly walking beside him. She didn't seem to care about the Centaurs at all.

"How far do we have to go inside to find the seedlings?" Riddle now asked.

"I'm not sure. But not very far I think," McGray answered reassuringly and DeCerto smirked. Riddle cringed inwardly. Now it was looking as if he was afraid to go inside.

Hermione knew what Riddle was trying to do. He wanted to scare her. I'm not afraid of a little walk in the dark, scary forest, mister.

They had now reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest and McGray turned around to them.

"Now let me repeat: You are not to go off alone. It's easy to get lost in that forest."

It's easy to get eaten, you mean. Hermione didn't need another lecture about the dangers in the Forbidden Forest. Really she had faced worse. Much worse. McGray began to walk into the forest. Riddle and Hermione hot on his heels. Hermione took a deep breath. The air was damp and spicy and smelled of earth and decaying wood. The noise of their steps was now muffled by the many layers of old leaves on the ground. Hermione liked the forest. For the last two years she had practically lived in forests. Harry, Ron and her had preferred to put up their tent in isolated regions. It had been too dangerous for them to be seen near settlements so they had often apparated to remote places. There they had sometimes enjoyed the rare feeling of safety. Even if that feeling had been nothing more than an illusion, Hermione still liked the forest very much. They walked in silence for some time. McGray in front, Hermione in the middle and Riddle at the rear. Then Hermione saw McGray stoop down. He examined something on the ground.

"Look at that," he exclaimed and held up his hand.

Hermione saw that his fingertips were covered in something that looked like blood.

"I think the blood-acorn should be somewhere around here. Keep your eyes open."

The forest was especially thick here. The thicket seemed to be one impenetrable wall. But McGray began to fight his way through it. Hermione followed him and glanced back at Riddle. He seemed to be even more annoyed than at the beginning of this excursion.
Probably thinks it's beneath him to stumble through this mess. Hermione thought as she wormed her way through the thicket. After a few more steps she broke out of the coppice and ended up standing on a clearing. In the middle of the little clearing stood an impressive old tree. It was pitch-black and its trunk was at least a meter in diametre. Although it was just the middle of October there was not one leave on its many branches. It looked dead like the trees of late winter. Hermione could see in the moonlight that a viscid fluid was running down its black bark. She walked over to the tree where McGray was standing. Riddle who had arrived at the clearing was following behind her.

"That is really an impressive specimen," McGray said.

Hermione extended a hand to the tree and run it over its bark. She looked then at the palm of her hand which was now covered in something that looked like blood.

"Yes, professor, we're lucky to have found it," she said in a soft voice.

"Yes we are," McGray agreed as he rummaged through his bag.

He extracted two little bags and handed one each to Hermione and Riddle.

"Here, look around on the ground and collect the fallen acorns. Professor Sato will be very grateful if we can bring her a few. The bark of the blood-acorn is a main ingredient of the blood replenishing potion."

Hermione accepted the bag and saw Riddle reluctantly do the same. They then started to go over the area and picked up the fallen acorns. After a while Hermione had collected quite a lot of the tiny little nuts. She just stooped down to pick up another as she heard a soft thud. She looked up and saw that a threstral had landed on the clearing. It sniffed the air and assessed the three intruders of its territory with curiosity.

Threstrals were, in Hermione's opinion, no beautiful beings. They were built like horses but the reptilian touch evoked in any observer the feeling that something was not right with them. Their greenish skin was stretched over their body and made the threstrals look more like a skeleton than a living being.

Hermione watched the threstral which had just landed on the clearing folding its wings together. It was certainly no beauty but just like all threstrals it radiated a certain aura of dignity. Ever since Hermione had seen her first threstral she had liked them. She hadn't liked the circumstances which had led to her being able to see them. But the animals themselves were just fascinating.

"Watch out, Ms DeCerto! A threstral just landed a few steps in front of you," McGrey warned her.

Hermione looked behind her. A few metres away stood her professor. He obviously could see the threstral and had tried to warn her about the animal's presence. Of course he wouldn't know that she, too, was able to see it. Hermione glanced at Riddle and nearly jumped as she found him staring at her. She was pretty sure he would be able to see the animal too. After all he had killed his own father. So he had seen death and that enabled him to see the threstrals. But why was he staring at her? Hermione turned back to the animal and walked towards it.

"Ms DeCerto, stop. You are walking right in its direction!" McGrey warned her again.

Hermione turned her head around and said softly, "I know. I can see it."

The animal hadn't moved so far and it now stared at Hermione with its vigilant eyes. Hermione reached the creature in a few strides. It was a rather large threstral, Hermione observed.
"Hello, there!" Hermione said in a soft voice to the horse-like creature.

She extended her hand towards it. The threstral shied away a little bit but in the end its curiosity won and it sniffed at Hermione's hand. Hermione smiled at that. Gently she touched the creature's neck and petted it. The threstral's skin was smooth and warm to the touch. Hermione wondered how these gentle beings that appeared so full of life could be seen as omens of death in the wizarding world. The threstral bent its head down and nuded Hermione's left hand. Then it started to lick the palm of her hand. Hermione looked down and saw that her hand was still covered in the blood-like liquid from when she had touched the tree bark. The blood-acorn was obviously the reason for the threstral to be here. Hermione laughed softly as the slippery, forked tongue glided over her skin.

What a stupid detention! Riddle stalked around at the little clearing and searched for fallen acorns. Really if he had wanted to waste his time he could have had a chat with one of the insufferable girls who so enjoyed to idolize him. He glanced at DeCerto who was also collecting the acorns. Well, she certainly wasn't one of those girls. She might even be the only girl in Hogwarts who didn't have a crush on him. She was an odd one, he decided. What infuriated him was that she still wasn't in the least bit scared to be here in the Forbidden Forest. That would have been a little bit entertaining. But no, she was walking through the woods as if she did it every day. She even seemed to enjoy it. Riddle wished he would be alone with her now. Then he could just crucio her.

Riddle's gaze fell on something on the dark nightly sky. He narrowed his eyes at the black mass that seemed to be headed for the clearing. His hand went to his wand. After a few more seconds he could recognize the black mass as a threstral. His hand released his wand. Threstrals were no dangerous beings. Quite ugly, yes, but not dangerous. The creature landed on the clearing a few metres ahead of DeCerto. A smirk crept on Riddle's face. Maybe that detention was now getting a little bit more interesting. Only those would be able to see a threstral who had seen someone die. Riddle didn't know if DeCerto would be able to see the animal. She was coming from a war zone in France after all so it could very well be possible that she could see it. Either way, he was fairly sure she would not like the threstrals presence.

"Watch out, Ms DeCerto! A threstral just landed a few steps in front of you," Riddle heard McGray say.

DeCerto looked back at McGray. She didn't answer to his statement. But to Riddle's immense disappointment she didn't look in the least bit alarmed. She turned then back to the threstral and walked towards it. Obviously DeCerto was able to see it, Riddle concluded.

Riddle heard McGray again mumble needlessly a warning. And this time DeCerto answered him in a soft and calm voice, "I know. I can see it."

Riddle watched as DeCerto approached the threstral. Her steps weren't hesitant. On the contrary she seemed to be rather confident. As she reached the creature she offered the threstral her hand and then started to pet it. Riddle could see DeCerto's face. She was looking at the threstral serenely. Like she just met an old acquaintance after a long time. But Riddle could also see sadness shining through her eyes. He was surprised at how changed DeCerto now looked. He desperately wanted to know what had caused it that DeCerto was able to see the animal. Whom had she seen dying? Riddle could feel his anger building up in him again. He hated it not to know things. And so far DeCerto had been able to hide her secrets from him very well.

"Ms DeCerto!"

Hermione felt someone take a hold of her arm. She turned away from the threstral and saw that
Professor McGray was standing right beside her. He now pulled her away from the creature.

"That's quite enough!" McGray said sternly.

He led her back to where Riddle still stood. Hermione glanced at Riddle and was not really surprised to find him glaring evilly at her.

"It's late. I think we should head back to the castle," McGray announced.

"Yes, professor," Riddle said in his most polite voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. Did that prick ever stop to play the teacher's pet? Merlin, that was a little bit too much even for her. They walked back out of the forest in silence. Hermione felt a bit sad to leave the realm of the forest behind. She didn't want to go back to the castle. She did like Hogwarts but she hated its inhabitants currently.

As they reached the castle's huge wooden door McGray said, "Even though tonight was very successful I trust that we don't have to repeat it. I hope you won't do something like the incident of our last Defence class ever again."

"No, professor," Riddle seemed to be ashamed of himself. And once again Hermione admired his acting skills.

"Okay. I have to bring these-" McGray raised the bag with the acorns up. "-to the greenhouses. I trust you bring Ms DeCerto back to her common room, Mr Riddle?"

Hermione frowned at that. Was that another forties thing? Where a girl wasn't able to find her way to her own dormitory?

"That won't be necessary, Professor McGray," Hermione said. "I'm sure I can find my way back all right."

"No no, Ms DeCerto," McGray chastised her. "It's really late. I don't want you to wander about alone. And Mr Riddle is a prefect so I'm sure he won't mind."

"Of course not, sir," Riddle replied.

Hermione sighed at that. McGray didn't hear that but Riddle who stood right beside Hermione did, she was sure but didn't care. She really didn't want to be alone with Riddle. The last time he had tried to pry information out of her again. But Hermione couldn't see a way around it. And so it came that once again Hermione found herself quite alone with a certain Mr Riddle. They were walking side by side to the Gryffindor common room. Hermione felt very stressed. Her right hand twitched and was ready to release her wand from its holster.

"Why so tense, DeCerto?" Riddle smirked at her.

Hermione didn't answer. She didn't want to provoke him in any way but at the same time she felt unable to not insult him if she answered him. So the best way was to not say anything at all. She glanced at him and could see that he still smirked at her smugly. She was sure he could see how infuriated she was.

"Did you enjoy our little trip into the Forbidden Forest?" Riddle continued conversationally. "It was, after all, your fault that we had to do it."

Now, that was enough, Hermione felt anger bubbling up in her. "My fault?" she yelled angrily.
"You attacked me in that duel. I was just defending myself. And then you sent all those harpies after me."

"What are you talking about?" Riddle stared at her in mock surprise. "You attacked me so viciously. And it really is not my fault that everyone in this school hates you now."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him but didn't answer. He was clearly trying to rile her up. He looked at her and chuckled. Hermione could see that he was amused by her anger. She turned away from him. Why was that damn common room so far away?

As Riddle spoke the next time, Hermione could hear that all scorn was gone from his voice. It was cold and threatening again, "Now, are you finally going to tell me what you are hiding?"

Hermione stared at him. There was again that malicious glint in his eyes. Hermione gulped.

"I still don't know what you want from me," she managed to whisper.

Riddle grabbed her wrist harshly. Hermione hissed in pain as he turned her sharply around so that she was facing him.

"Don't play games with me, DeCerto."

He grabbed her other wrist too, so that she had no chance to get away from him or to pull her wand. She was utterly frightened by him. He towered over her and held her in place while he stared at her. She was unable to look away from him, caught in his demanding glare. There was a flicker of red in his hypnotizing grey eyes but Hermione hoped it was just a trick of the light. She was trembling now and she knew that he could feel it through his hold on her.

"Where are you from?" he demanded in his cold voice that wouldn't tolerate any resistance. "What do you want here?"

Hermione was terrified by him but she knew she couldn't cave in now. "I… I'm from France," she stammered timidly. "I'm a refugee…"

Riddle wrenched her arms brutally as he commanded, "Don't give me this shit. Tell the truth!"

Hermione whimpered at his words and at the pain in her wrists. She was sure she would get bruises where he held her so tightly. But before he could do anything else they heard voices coming from ahead the corridor. Hermione felt relief wash over her as the voices grew louder and louder. Someone was coming this way. Riddle had turned his head and was looking in the direction the voices were coming from. Hermione could see an angry frown forming between his eyebrows. He was clearly not happy with those intruders interfering with his interrogation. But Hermione couldn't be more relieved.

Whoever was coming their way Hermione could now recognize that the voices belonged to girls. Maybe two or three. When they were just a few meters away around the corner Hermione jumped as she saw Riddle suddenly smirk at her. He then took a few steps back until he hit the wall of the corridor with his back. All the while he pulled Hermione along with him. As the voices of the girls were really close Riddle suddenly said loudly,

"DeCerto, please stop this now. I am NOT going out with you."

Hermione stared at him incredulously. He was smirking down at her while his voice had been so severe – with just the right amount of indignation and apprehension. She heard the voices stop but she dared not turn her head and look at the place she knew the girls would round the corner very
soon. Hermione heard a few more footsteps and then the sharp intake of breath told her that the girls could now see them standing in the corridor. She glanced in their direction and saw three girls standing there. They were from Gryffindor and maybe fourth or fifth years.

Hermione knew perfectly well how the whole situation must look to them. Here she was, the crazy new girl a known stalker of the popular and handsome Slytherin prefect, standing with her victim in a lonely corridor. Riddle was now pressed against the wall and had a look of shock on his face. Oh, he was an amazingly convincing actor. He still held to her wrists fiercely but he had his arms now pressed to the wall as well so it looked more like Hermione was pinning him down.

He turned his shocked looking face away from her and to the three girls standing in the corridor. Hermione glanced again in their direction and could see them staring angrily at her.

Great, she thought, now they think I'm harassing him!

She felt Riddle release his grip on her wrists and she instantly took a few steps away from him. She knew that that wouldn't exactly help her convince the girls of her innocence but couldn't help it right now.

"Look, DeCerto," she heard Riddle say in a soothing voice. "I'm sorry, okay? But I don't want to date you. Please accept that."

Hermione felt sick at this apparent honesty in his statement. That was just one big lie but she knew how convincing he was. There was no way those Gryffindor girls wouldn't believe him.

"Is everything all right?" Hermione heard one of the girls ask suspiciously.

Riddle turned towards her and looked at her relieved while he said in a somewhat embarrassed voice, "Um… yes," he then smiled charmingly at the girls and Hermione felt like throwing up when she saw the girls blush at that.

"I was just walking back to my common room," Riddle continued.

He then took a few steps away from Hermione and towards the three girls.

"I… er, just go then okay?" Riddle told them.

"Do you want us to accompany you?" the girl with the brunette long hair asked him while she stared wickedly at Hermione.

Riddle laughed attractively and replied, still sounding embarrassed, "No, no. That's not necessary."

Then he looked back at Hermione hesitantly. Hermione knew the girls would see this and she knew they would misinterpret it. And of course that was the sole reason Riddle did it in the first place. Then Riddle bid them goodnight while ignoring Hermione completely and quickly walked away.

Hermione stood in the corridor and stared at his retreating back. She was dumbfounded by his audacious behaviour. How could he still look in a mirror after doing stuff like this? Hermione had never met someone so incredibly devious and manipulative. Not even the Voldemort from her time was like this. He would never have lowered himself and acted in such a way. Not that her time Voldemort had been morally superior to this Tom Riddle, no, he most certainly was not but at least he had never pulled a stunt like this.

Hermione had to stop her train of thought as she heard a shrill voice yell at her, "How can you do something like that, you vile bitch?"
Hermione looked back at the three girls still standing in the corridor. One with long brunette hair, the other with blond locks and the last with short brown hair. Hermione was sure that those girls were normally nice and friendly and in different circumstances Hermione could have even been friends with them. But right now the three girls wore similar expressions on their pretty faces which reigned from rage and fury to disgust and indignation. And all of those hostile feelings were directed at her. Hermione wondered shortly what she should do now. Explaining to the girls that it was all Riddle's fault in the first place would be wasted time. They would never believe her. So maybe going back to the common room was the best cause of action?

"Hey, slut, I'm talking to you!" the girl with the blond hair spat at Hermione.

Hermione was yet again surprised how many swearwords those girls knew. What would Legifer say to that? she thought stupidly. Maybe award them some house points as they were insulting her. Hermione chuckled at that.

"You hear that? She's laughing! Crazy bitch!" the blond girl whispered indignantly to her friends and then continued aggressively to Hermione, "You keep your hands off Tom. He doesn't want you. If you keep it up you're going to get it. Understood?"

Hermione looked at her with a blank face. This was so absurd. These girls were actually defending Tom Riddle. How could they be so blinded by him? But then again, he wasn't yet the Dark Lord. And if Hermione didn't know that he was a lying creep she too would believe every word that fell from his mouth.

Hermione shook her head and said quietly, "Whatever you say." Then she passed the three girls and headed for the Gryffindor common room.

As she stepped through the portrait of the Fat Lady she could see the common room was crowded. Students were sitting here and there on the chairs or sofas, doing their homework or just chatting. Hermione just wanted to be left alone and thus headed for the dormitory.

"Hey, Hermione. How was the detention?" a voice called after her. Hermione turned and saw Longbottom. He was apparently in the middle of a chess game with Weasley.

"Lovely," she replied dryly.

"That bad, eh?" he said with a lopsided grin on his face.

"… I'm going to bed." Hermione really wanted to leave the common room.

She didn't want to be there when the three girls would arrive to add a new rumour about the crazy girl who harassed innocent, handsome prefects. As Hermione entered the dormitory she was relieved to find it abandoned. She knew she wouldn't appreciate company right now.

She changed into her pyjama and after washing up she lay down on her bed and pulled the curtains shut around her. For a moment she considered putting up a warding charm on her bed. She didn't exactly expect her room mates' behaviours to improve after the new lie Riddle had created about her. She sighed and waved her wand to create a minor warding spell. She was faintly reminded of her fourth year. There had been a similar rumour about her going around. It was the year of the Triwizard Tournament and the stupid cow Skeeter had written in the Daily Prophet that Hermione was Harry's girlfriend and that she was cheating on him with none other than Victor Krum. Oh, the girls had hated her back then too. One day she had awoken and found that all her things had been transfigured into a pile of dead insects. She still wondered how they had managed that. And in their fourth year at that. So, that little warding spell was in order, she thought as she yawned loudly and
lay back on her bed.

Hermione felt the familiar twinge in her stomach as she thought about the people from her time. She wondered vaguely what had happened to her old dorm mates. After she had left Hogwarts two years ago she had never met them again. She could just hope that they were alright. But then again, they weren't even born yet. The absurdness of her situation hit her again. All the terrible things that she had had to live through hadn't happened and yet her memories of them were as real to her as the world she now lived in. She needed to end this nightmare as fast as she could before she really went crazy. There had to be a way to transport her back. Dumbledore's office, she told herself before she dozed off. He must have found something on the Deathly Hallows.

Curses were flying everywhere. Hermione was ducking behind a pillar. Neville was sitting right beside her.

"How many?" he screamed over the noise of the incoming spells.

Hermione leaned to one side to have a better view of her surroundings. "At least five I can see!" she yelled back at him.

They were currently in the old building of the Ministry of Magic sitting in a hallway in the upper floors. This building had housed the Ministry of Magic until it had been abandoned in the late 1960s. After that the Ministry had moved to another, bigger location. The old Ministry building had been used since then as a museum of sorts. And as an old and prestigious part of wizarding history Hermione was convinced that Voldemort had used it as a hiding-place for one of his Horcruxes. That was the reason Harry, Ron, Neville and herself had infiltrated it. Somewhere here the Dagger of Gryffindor must be hidden.

A curse hit the pillar heavily and parts of the stone cracked away.

"We have to move!" Hermione yelled.

Neville nodded and then the both of them left their cover and attacked the Death Eaters. Hermione had no idea how they had found them but she hoped Harry and Ron didn't run into some of them as they managed to struck down the Death Eaters without getting hurt too badly. Hermione sent a Stunner at the last Death Eater and saw him fall down.

"Okay, let's get going!" Neville said as he stepped over one of the bodies on the ground.

Neville walked towards Hermione as she saw the last Death Eater she had hit getting up again. He was behind Neville so he couldn't see the danger he was in. Hermione screamed a warning and Neville spun around. But it was too late. The Death Eater had sent a curse his way. The bright red curse rushed towards Neville and Hermione heard a crunching noise as it collided with Neville's chest. As Neville hit the ground Hermione sent a curse of her own at the Death Eater. He fell back and lay there motionless.

Hermione ran towards the fallen form of Neville. She fell down on her knees beside him. Blood was flowing out from a huge wound on his chest. He moaned and whimpered in pain. Hermione pulled away his shirt. She gasped as she saw how badly wounded Neville really was. His thorax was ripped open. She could see parts of broken bone everywhere. Dark red blood poured out of the horrible hole in his chest. And she knew there was nothing she could do. Neville was going to die.

She held him as he struggled against his fate. But this time he lost. His moans were getting quieter and quieter until even his breathing died down. Hermione trembled and cried as she repeated one sentence over and over,
"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Her fault that he was dead. No-one else's...
Hermione woke up the next day very early and didn't feel rested at all. As it was Saturday the other girls were still sleeping when she got up. She was grateful for that. With a wave of her wand she ended the ward she had put on her bed last night. Then she headed for the bathroom. As she slipped into her clothes she noticed that she needed to change the bandage on her shoulder again. She removed the old bandage. The cut was still not healed. There was caked blood but she couldn't see any progress in the actual healing. That wound seemed to need abnormally long to heal. She wondered, and not for the first time, which spell Riddle had used to create an injury like that. As she steadily worked on her shoulder her gaze fell on her wrists. They had purple stains on them. That was where Riddle had grabbed her yesterday.

Well, my initial plan of staying away from him seems to work really well. She rolled her eyes at that.

When she finally stepped out of the bathroom her room mates were still sleeping. Hermione walked over to her bed and started to rummage through her trunk. She needed that bruise ointment she had bought in Diagon Alley. After some time she angled the small pot with the ointment out of her trunk. She opened the pot just to find it empty. With a frustrated hiss she threw it back in her trunk. Obviously she would have to let her wrists heal the natural way. There was no way she would go to the infirmary. She looked down at her sore wrists.

That bastard!

Hermione walked down to the Great Hall to get some breakfast. She entered the Hall. There were some students already there. Most of them were Ravenclaws. As she walked to the Gryffindor table she felt the other students glaring at her. She sat down at the table as far away from the other Gryffindors as possible. They wouldn't want her near them anyway. Hermione loaded her plate with some toast, sausages and scrambled eggs. She then reached for a jug of pumpkin juice. As she began to pour the juice in her glass the jug suddenly exploded. Hermione was soaked in juice. The tiny class shards of the broken jug flew everywhere. Some of them injured Hermione's hands. Blood was flowing down the back of her hands. Hermione looked up to see what had happened. The other students had obviously noticed her mishap as they were looking at her. None of them tried to help her. On the contrary they even smirked at her. She saw a girl at Ravenclaw table laughing loudly at her. Hermione couldn't prove it but she was fairly sure that one of them had hexed the jug. She was furious and disgusted by the behaviour of the other students. Right now she would really like to curse the lot of them. The first would be Riddle. She looked at the Slytherin table and sure enough there he sat smirking at her.

That manipulative prick!

She clenched her fists as she narrowed her eyes at him. She could feel the blood dripping from her fists. Riddle raised his eyebrows at her as if to ask where her problem was. Hermione had to breathe in deeply to stop herself from throwing a hex at him. Then she stood up and flicked her wrist. Her wand landed in her hand. She clasped it firmly as she held her gaze with Riddle for a few more moments. He was staring at her unemotionally, still having that sickening polite smile on his face. As if to dare her to attack him. Hermione closed her eyes and then turned around. She waved her wand casually. Her clothes cleaned themselves and were dry again. Another wave of her wand and the mess on the table and the floor was cleaned. Then the tiny glass shards began to hover and gathered together floating over the table. Even those embedded in her hands joined them. Hermione jerked as they left the wounds on her hands but she didn't care right now. She waved her wand a last time and the shards melted together and reformed the jug again. After a few seconds the jug landed on the
table looking as if it never had been destroyed. Hermione took the toast from her plate nonchalantly,
tucked it in her mouth and left the Great Hall.

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Riddle walked to the Great Hall. He had gotten up very early though it was a Saturday. He really
hated to get up so early and was accordingly in a foul mood. But he needed to finish that Ancient
Runes essay for professor Nota. Because of that stupid detention yesterday he had lost time and was
now lagging behind. If it weren't for that dumb girl, he could have finished the essay yesterday. But
no, she had had to drag him into the detention. His thoughts went back to DeCerto. Slowly she was
really getting on his nerves. She still stubbornly refused to tell him her secrets. Riddle didn't think
that they were that interesting but still he wanted to know anyway. The more she resisted his attempts to
wrest the secrets out of her the more he needed to succeed.

How did she know all those spells and curses? Where did she come from and why was she here? He
had started to doubt the story she had told them. And what the fuck made her so different? She
seemed so confident, self-assured and so fearless. True in some occasions she had shown some fear.
When he had cornered her yesterday after the detention for example. But even then there still had
been this fire burning behind her eyes. She might have been afraid of him but she was not broken.
He had the feeling that that girl would never bow down to him no matter what he did to her. And
that thought infuriated him to no end.

Riddle entered the Great Hall and walked over to the Slytherin table. He sat down on his place and
started to fill his plate. He noticed that the Slytherin table was fairly empty. He was pissed that the
others still lay sleeping in their beds. He looked up from his plate as someone sat down beside him. It
was Melanie Nicolls a fifth year. He suppressed a groan as he looked at the girl beside him. She had
dark brown long hair and a pale porcelain skin. He had to admit that she was pretty. That was the
sole reason he had shagged her. It had been in his fifth year. And ever since she had tried to seduce
him again. But he really wasn't interested anymore. She might be pretty but she was a pain in the
side.

"Good morning, Tom," she greeted him. "Up so early?"

"Yes, Melanie. I have some homework to do," he answered politely.

"Oh, come on. You are top of every class anyway." She laughed and her hand skimmed over his
arm.

He flinched away from her touch not wanting her anywhere near him. "Yes well, maybe that's
because I actually do my home work."

She laughed at that. Riddle looked her in the eyes. He saw admiration and lust in those eyes. He
shuddered at that. Nicolls eyes were brown, the same colour as DeCerto's. But their aura was so
different. DeCerto never looked at him like Nicolls just did. Nicolls was pathetic. She was one of
those stupid chicks who so easily fell into his traps.

"Oh, look, Tom." Nicolls brought him out of his musing. "It's that new girl."

Riddle looked to the entrance door. And sure enough DeCerto had just entered the hall. She was
now walking over to the Gryffindor table. She held her head high and walked confidently over to a
seat at her table apparently oblivious to the hostile glares the other inhabitants of the hall sent her.
Riddle was disgruntled by her behaviour. She seemed to be immune to the little rumour he had
created about her and the resulting dislike the school's population now held for her. She just ignored
it like she ignored him. As if the whole thing was just beneath her… as if he was…
"Are you all right, Tom? You look so pale." Nicolls leaned in to him and her hand grasped his arm.

"Yes," he answered. He really shouldn't let DeCerto get to him like that. Now he had Nicolls clinging to his arm.

"You know, Tom," Nicolls continued in a soft, seducing voice that made Riddle want to just crucio her. "Next week's a Hogsmeade weekend."

Riddle tried to not roll his eyes at her blatant try to coax him into a date with her. Don't make me laugh. A little shag? Maybe. But I'm not spending time with you were I have to actually listen to your pesky voice.

So he answered distractedly, "Really… ?"

Fortunately right then something happened at the Gryffindor table that put an end to this pointless conversation. Riddle looked to the Gryffindor table as he heard a loud clash followed by stifled laughs. It didn't take him long to find the source of this commotion. DeCerto sat on her place and she was covered from head to toe in pumpkin juice. He could see glass shards covering the table. Obviously someone had hexed that jug of juice so it exploded in her face. Riddle could feel the corners of his mouth curl slightly into a smirk as he saw her flustered face.

"Oh, it's that stupid slut again," Riddle heard Nicolls comment bored.

He felt slightly angered that Nicolls called DeCerto a 'stupid slut'. Nicolls of all people hadn't the right to call anyone stupid. Riddle decided to ignore her unnecessary statement and continued to watch DeCerto. He was surprised to see her face now morph into an angry scowl. Any other girl would have fled the hall by now. Crying. But he really shouldn't be surprised, he mused. It was DeCerto after all. Now she looked around, maybe to identify the perpetrator. He wasn't surprised that her gaze fell on him very fast. He could see the angry fire burning behind her eyes as she glared at him. He was by now really amused and raised his eyebrows at her. He knew this would infuriate her even more. And it did. She abruptly stood up, still glaring at him. Riddle was mildly astounded as she pulled her wand. She wasn't really going to hex him now, was she? He looked in her eyes and saw that she seemed to at least consider it at this moment. His gaze went back to her wand. He noticed that blood was running down her hand. Those glass shards from the jug must have hurt her. Good!

…though he should curse whoever did it…

DeCerto suddenly turned away from him, apparently having decided that it was not a good idea to attack him when so many witnesses were present. Well, actually it wasn't a good idea to attack him at all. Witnesses or not. She could never beat him. He saw her waving her wand and thus cleaning herself and the surrounding area off the juice. Another wave and the glass shards assembled, hovering over the table. Riddle raised his eyebrows in surprise as they reformed the jug. Not a scratch remained on the jug as it landed softly on the table. That was no easy spell DeCerto had just performed and nonverbal too. He watched annoyed as DeCerto grabbed a piece of toast and walked calmly out of the hall as if nothing had happened.

Good! …though he should curse whoever did it…

Hermione strolled down the corridor, away from the Great Hall, still nibbling at her piece of toast. Her gaze then fell on her right hand and the cuts in her skin. It seemed the act Riddle had played yesterday was working out well for him. This was the first time that one of those stupid girls had drawn blood. Those cuts were not severe or anything but they showed Hermione that now Riddle's fan-girls had taken their gloves finally off. Hermione cursed rather colourfully as she walked down the corridor.
"Ms DeCerto!" a sharp voice hissed at her indignant ly. "Watch your mouth!"

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. She knew that voice and she had come to hate it. Slowly - very slowly - Hermione turned around while trying to school her features and ban the disgusted expression from her face. And sure enough there, standing in the corridor, was professor Legifer. She wore her usual spotless black robe, her starched blindingly white blouse and a grey pleated skirt. Her hair was made into a bun with not one strand of hair out of place and right now she looked at Hermione with a frown between her eyebrows and a scandalized look on her face. Hermione had to really work to not roll her eyes at her least favourite teacher.

"You are incorrigible, Ms DeCerto." Legifer's piercing voice echoed through the corridor and Hermione felt a headache beginning to throb in her temples.

Did the world hate her? First Riddle, then his vindictive fan-girls and now Legifer. She couldn't escape anything today it seemed. Whatever did she do to deserve something like this? In the meantime Legifer walked towards Hermione and was now standing right before her. Legifer glared at her and raised one of her thin eyebrows as her hard gaze wandered over Hermione.

"I have never met such an undiscerning girl like you, Ms DeCerto," Legifer said while she shook her head. "One should have thought that after the disaster during your first lesson in Defence against the Dark Arts you would come to see how wrong you are. And that you would then abandon your indecent attitude"

Hermione frowned at the professor. What was she talking about? Not the duel with Riddle, surely? Legifer had obviously seen Hermione's confused face as she said in a triumphant voice, "Yes, I have heard all about your unacceptable behaviour during professor McGray's lesson."

"Unacceptable behaviour"? Hermione felt anger boiling up in her as she continued to stare in disbelief at Legifer. What was this woman going on about?

"I must say, I am ashamed of you, Ms DeCerto. Attacking poor Mr Riddle like that!" Legifer continued to chastise Hermione. "I tried to convince professor McGray to release Mr Riddle from the detention as he was clearly not responsible for your presumptuous behaviour."

Hermione gaped at the professor.

But Legifer, it seemed, wasn't yet finished with her, "I hope you now see that there is no place for girls in duelling lessons. You just don't have the intellectual grasp nor the magical power to compete with your male fellow students. Let this duel with Mr Riddle be a lesson to you, Ms DeCerto. And I advise you to apologize to Mr Riddle for your insolent behaviour."

After that Legifer threw another of her nasty glares Hermione's way before she turned on her heels and walked away.

…leaving behind a very speechless and very pissed Hermione.

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It was late afternoon as Riddle was on his way towards Slughorn's office to one of the professor's private get-togethers where he only invited his most priced Slytherin students. And of course what would such a meeting be without Tom Riddle? Riddle smirked as he walked down the corridor that led to Slughorn's office. He absentmindedly twiddled the gold ring around his finger. Today he would finally ask Slughorn what he so badly needed to know. He would have to be careful and he would need all his power of persuasion but then Slughorn would surely spill his secrets. After all
who could resist Tom Riddle…

Riddle arrived at Slughorn's office and knocked at the door. Moments later the door was opened by none other than Slughorn himself.

"Ah, Tom, m'boy, we just wondered what kept you," Slughorn said in his booming voice.

Riddle smiled at him smartly and then said in his smooth voice, "But professor, I would never miss one of our little meetings."

Slughorn beamed at him and stepped out of the way so Riddle could enter. Riddle stepped inside and quickly scanned the room. There were seats arranged around Slughorn's ridiculous winged armchair. Riddle saw that Primus Lestrange, Abraxas Malfoy, Ledo Avery, Alfold Black and Anthony Alba were already here and seated on the chairs. He had to suppress a smirk from forming on his face at the thought that they were all his devoted followers and only Slughorn was totally clueless. Riddle could send the Killing Curse at Slughorn right now and no-one of the people in this office would ever testify against him. But that would be imprudent. After all Slughorn was still useful…

Riddle walked over to one of the seats the others had obviously reserved for him as it was standing right in the middle. He sat down and watched Slughorn returning to his own fluffy seat. He sank down, put his feet on a velvet pouffe and picked up a small glass of wine from the side table. Riddle noticed pleased that the box of crystallized pineapple he had ordered Malfoy to send Slughorn in Riddle's name was also standing on the side table. If one wanted to get information out of people the first step to success was creating an opportune moment.

… and it appeared Riddle had to wait really long for that opportune moment to arrive. Slughorn was babbling on and on about his famous ex-students. Soon Riddle was only inches away from just hexing the potions professor. He needed to intervene now as he couldn't stand this stupid twaddle any longer.

Riddle smiled disarmingly at Slughorn and asked, "Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

Riddle had picked up that little information as he had eavesdropped into a conversation between Dippet and his least favourite teacher, Dumbledore.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn while wagging his finger at Riddle but winking at the same time. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy. More knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle flashed Slughorn one of his most innocent smiles.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter – thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favourite-"

Smooth, very smooth. Riddle inwardly rolled his eyes at Slughorn's blatant obviousness.

But the professor wasn't finished yet. "-I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple, I have excellent contacts at the Ministry."

Riddle fought to keep his modest smile plastered on his face. He really had to work today to get his information.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," Riddle said. "I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing."
Riddle saw the smirks the other boys cast at each other. So they knew, or rather suspected, who he was related to. *Good to know.*

"Nonsense," Slughorn said briskly. "Couldn't be plainer you come from decent wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you'll go far, Tom. I've never been wrong about a student."

Riddle could feel the first signs of losing his temper. *Decent wizarding stock'? Yes, of course!* He remembered his uncle Morfin, the sottish old lunatic. If that was 'decent wizarding stock' then Riddle didn't want to belong to them anyway. His uprising temper prevented Riddle from hearing what Slughorn said next but judging from the others getting up Slughorn had just dismissed them.

*Showtime, then.*

Riddle stayed behind as the others left the office.

"Look sharp, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you are a prefect…"

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

Here it was, Riddle's chance to find out whether his researches had been correct or not.

"Ask away then, m'boy, ask away…"

Riddle looked at Slughorn while his face was carefully arranged into a mask of innocent curiosity. "Sir, I wondered what you know about… about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn considered him for a while. Riddle knew he was wary now but that was to be expected. "Project for Defence Against the Dark Arts, is it?"

Of course Slughorn never expected that Horcruxes were a topic in Hogwarts' curriculum, so the truth was required here.

"Not exactly, sir," Riddle said with the needed amount of hesitancy in his voice. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it."

"No… well… you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom. That's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed."

*You have no idea what one can find in the Restricted Section if one knows where to search,* Riddle sneered at Slughorn in his thoughts. But then braced himself for his next act.

"But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean a wizard like you-"

*First a little bit adulation.*

"Sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously. I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could – so I just thought I'd ask."

*Then attack his pride.*

As he ended with his little speech Riddle held his breath. He had planned what to say for some time. Now it would be decided if Slughorn would tell him anything.

"Well," Slughorn said rather reluctantly. "Well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul."
"I don't quite understand how that works though, sir," Riddle said. He needed confirmation that his researches were right.

And Slughorn answered him, "Well, you split your soul, you see, and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form… few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable."

Then most people are idiots! Riddle thought as the fingers of his right hand skimmed over the scar on his left forearm.

"How do you split your soul?" Riddle asked Slughorn. He knew how. He had read it. But was it really true? He needed Slughorn to confirm it.

"Well, you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature," Slughorn told him, seemingly disgusted by the very idea behind the Horcrux.

"But how do you do it?" Riddle pressed. He needed exact instructions.

Slughorn answered him but only reluctantly, "By an act of evil – the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: he would encase the torn portion-"

"Encase? How-?" Riddle interrupted Slughorn.

The spell, I need the spell!

"There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know!" Slughorn said and then continued agitatedly, "Do I look as though I have tried it - do I look like a killer?"

What's the big deal about it? Riddle thought but said in an apologetic voice, "No, sir, of course not. I'm sorry… I didn't mean to offend…"

"Not at all, not at all, not offended." Slughorn stared at Riddle then he continued, "It's natural to feel some curiosity about these things… wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic…"

"Yes, sir," Riddle said.

He didn't need Slughorn to find excuses for Riddle why he delved into the Dark Arts. What he needed were answers. So now, the next question was maybe the most important one. The others he mostly knew the answers to and just wanted Slughorn to validate his information. But this, he hadn't found any information about.

"What I don't understand, though – just out of curiosity, I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces? I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven-?"

"Merlin's beard, Tom!" Slughorn yelped. "Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case.. bad enough to divide the soul… but to rip it into seven pieces…"

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now as he stared at Riddle. And Riddle disappointedly realized that he had lost him. Slughorn wouldn't tell him anything anymore… but from his scandalized
expression, Riddle could deduce that Slughorn had never before heard of a person having more than one Horcrux.

Interesting.

"Of course," Slughorn said though he still seemed rather troubled. "This is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic…"

Of course, belie yourself, why don't you? "Yes, sir, of course," Riddle said innocently.

"But all the same, Tom… keep it quiet, what I've told… that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know… Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it…"

Riddle felt anger rising up in him. Of course, if Dumbledore doesn't like the topic then we are not allowed to speak about it.

"I won't say a word, sir."

Riddle then left the potion master's office. And as he stepped out into the dark corridor the evil smile that had been hidden behind his mask of innocence finally found its way unto Riddle's face. Though the professor hadn't answered all his question that conversation had still been more than enlightening. Riddle now knew that his researches had been correct. He knew how to create a Horcrux.

The supreme act of evil'

Riddle chuckled darkly. It would be a gratification to create one of those 'evil' Horcruxes right under Dumbledore's nose. But Riddle wouldn't stop there. He would do what no wizard had ever done before…

A few weeks went by and nothing changed Hermione's situation with the other students. They, aside from Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin, either shunned her or were openly hostile towards her. And Riddle's little act after their detention with professor McGrey hadn't exactly helped her situation. The whole thing would have been easier to bear if Riddle hadn't been silently mocking Hermione whenever they met. She tried to just ignore the whole thing. It was utterly ridiculous. The other students were being hostile towards her because they thought she had threatened Lord Voldemort? The whole situation was so bizarre it would have been almost funny if Hermione didn't have to constantly watch her back for evil curses coming from misguided Riddle fan-girls. Though she always told herself that she would be home soon and shouldn't let Riddle get to her she couldn't prevent herself from becoming slightly thin-skinned.

One day Hermione was on her way to the library - she hadn't yet completely given up on finding something useful there - as she rounded another corner she felt a little shift in the magic surrounding her. After all those attempts to attack her during those last weeks she had become very cautious. So she had cast a weak warding charm around her that would alert her if any magic was directed at her. And right now she could sense magic coming towards her. She turned around and simultaneously cast a Protego. She saw as a red spell, most likely a Stunner, crashing into her shield and then it died down. She looked at who had cast the spell. Two Slytherin girls were standing not far away and glaring at her. One of them still had her wand raised.

"Ugly hag! Leave Tom alone!" one of them spat at Hermione before they all turned and swiftly walked away.
Hermione shook her head. How stupid could one get? Really! First they throw a totally harmless spell at her and to top it of they actually turn around and walk away while baring their back to their supposed enemy. Not very smart. But Hermione had to admit she was a little bit relieved that they had been from Slytherin. She was used to being hated by Slytherins. What really got to her was her own house mates hating her.

Stupid Riddle!

That bullying was slowly getting to her. Maybe she should do something against it? She mused about her options as she entered the library.

"Hello there, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters greeted her. "Back again?"

"Good morning, Ms Peters," Hermione was thankful to see a friendly face at last.

"Don't stay too long. It's really nice weather outside," Ms Peters told her kindly.

Hermione strolled to her usual place in the back of the library and started yet again her quest for information on the Deathly Hallows. She searched and searched for hours but she didn't find anything. The Elder Wand was as elusive as ever. Hermione closed the book she had been reading with a loud thud. It was rather disappointing. Hermione felt a little bit betrayed by the library.

Now that the library seemed to be a dead-end that left Dumbledore's office as the most important source of information. She just had to break in, get the information and get out. Nothing too difficult. At least nothing she hadn't done before. And this time if she got caught, that would only mean a detention or at the worst expulsion. Not a horrible death. Hermione sighed. Maybe someday she could earn her money with this breaking and entering business. Because after this episode she was bound to really get good at it. Hermione got up from the chair, produced her bag from under the table and left the library. She headed for the common room. She needed time to plan her next steps of action. If she was to break into Dumbledore's office she needed to know his routine. When was he normally in his office? She needed a time frame where he left his office. The best time would be after curfew as there were no students in the corridors thus a lesser risk at getting caught. Of course then the patrolling teachers and prefects would be a problem. Well, she had to avoid them then, hadn't she? Now that she had decided what to do next she instantly felt better. It was always good to have a plan, she thought. It made her situation a little bit more bearable.

Hermione was brought out of her reverie as she sensed a spell coming towards her. Not again! she thought frustrated. She turned on the spot while pulling her wand and saw a blue spell spreading towards her. The caster stood a few meters away. Hermione recognized the spell. It was a Reducto. And a badly aimed one at that. She didn't raise a shield as the spell would never hit her. Sure enough the spell hit the wall behind Hermione. Unfortunately it was strong enough to damage the stone wall. Fragments of stone were now raining down on her. One of the stones hit her on the head. Hermione could feel the skin on her left temple split open. Her hand shot to her head. There was blood seeping through her fingers. Through all of this she had never let the caster of the spell out of her field of vision lest she tried another spell. With a jolt in her stomach she identified the caster as a Gryffindor girl. And she was not alone. Hermione now recognized the three girls. Those were the same three girls who 'caught' Hermione while harassing Riddle. The girl with blond locks who had sent the Reducto looked shocked at the destroyed wall behind Hermione. She was obviously surprised by the power of her own spell. But apart from that shock Hermione could also see disappointment. She was furious as she realized that the girl was disappointed that the spell hadn't hurt her more. The two other girls seemed to be a little bit shaken, too, by the destruction the curse had caused but it didn't stop one of them to yell at Hermione furiously,
"You perverted bitch! Don't you get it?"

Her friend standing beside her continued in an equally hostile tone and spat at Hermione, "Do we have to spell it out for you? You are not welcome here!"

"Yeah! Go back to the whorehouse where you belong! And leave Tom alone!" The girl who had cast the Reducto obviously thought it necessary to make her little contribution.

Now Hermione really was a patient and generally mild-mannered person but enough was enough. Since Riddle had spread this rumour about her and particularly since he had pulled that stunt after the detention, his stupid fan-girls had made her life hell. They had cursed Hermione wherever she went, they had insulted and belittled her. Hermione was angry at Riddle because it was his fault she was in this situation. But right now her fury was mostly directed at those stupid girls in front of her. Riddle was an evil person, the Dark Lord, so Hermione had never expected him to behave nice. But those girls, they should now better. They shouldn't hate her due to a stupid rumour; they shouldn't attack her with potentially dangerous curses. And they certainly shouldn't admire a totally devious Slytherin who had no morals. Hermione felt her magic beginning to flow through her body. It was now more like an angry torrent and not the calm flow it normally was. It mirrored her emotions quite well.

"If you ever go near Tom again…" the girl with the short brown hair hissed and pointed her wand threateningly at Hermione.

That was the point where Hermione lost her temper. She swiftly raised her wand and brandished it in a fluid movement.

Abicere!

The girl that had just threatened Hermione was thrown back and collided with the wall behind her. Her two friends stared at their fallen friend in shock and never raised their wands. Hermione, though, was not yet finished. She waved her wand again.

Substringo!

Invisible bonds were winding themselves around one of the girls and she, too, fell defeated to the ground. The last girl, the one who had attacked Hermione at first, looked at her with wide eyes. Hermione raised her wand slowly and pointed it at the girl who tensed at that.

Then Hermione whispered in a eerily calm voice, "Petrificus totalus!"

As Hermione's spell hit her attacker the girl fell back unable to move a muscle. Hermione slowly walked over to the petrified girl. She tried to get her anger back in control. It wasn't often that she lost her temper. As Hermione reached the petrified girl she looked down at her coldly. The girl stared up at her. She could only move her eyelids.

"Next time you use a spell make sure that it really hits its target. Otherwise your target will strike back," Hermione told the girl in an emotionless, cold voice.

Then she turned around and left the girls lying on the cold stone floor. To learn that particular lesson herself had cost Hermione a lot. And back then she hadn't been hit with a harmless Petrificus totalus. So she didn't feel guilty at all for letting the girls lay there on the floor. They would be found sooner or later. Hermione breathed in slowly and stowed her wand away in her holster. Somehow that had been rather satisfying.

"That was pretty merciless." Hermione heard someone say in a deep melodious voice.
She turned the next corner and saw Riddle leaning casually on the wall. He looked at her amused.

"I didn't think you had it in you." He smirked at her, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Hermione decided to just ignore him and continued her way back to the Gryffindor common room. It wasn't long and to Hermione's dismay Riddle fell in step beside her.

"You know, I'm a prefect. I could take points from you for attacking a fellow student," Riddle said while smirking at her.

"So you could," Hermione answered shortly.

"Not very talkative today, are we, DeCerto?" Riddle chuckled at her.

Hermione sighed and then said impatiently, "What do you want?"

"Why so hostile? Is it a crime to talk to a fellow school mate?" Riddle replied while he smiled charmingly at Hermione.

Hermione was annoyed by his mocking attitude. "Considering the aggressive behaviour of the girls I just hexed. Yes, it seems to be a crime to talk with you," she said stiffly.

Riddle laughed at that. "Well, I can't help it that I'm so damn popular. Girls get jealous, you know."

"No, it was you who fed those lies about me to the rumour mill in the first place, Riddle." Hermione huffed at him.

"Aww, but Hermione," Riddle sneered at her. "We both know there is a little bit of truth in every rumour."

"WHAT?" Hermione screeched. She stopped walking and faced Riddle. She was furious at what he was implying.

Riddle had stopped walking too and looked down at her. His eyes were still glinting with amusement while Hermione stared at him angrily. Suddenly he took a step forward and before she could react he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She collided with his chest and he used the moment of her bafflement to wrap his other arm around her waist. Hermione was utterly shocked at his actions. She felt his arms around her waist pulling her to him so that she leaned into his chest. She tried to wriggle herself free but he held her steady. Hermione began to panic.

*Lord Voldemort is hugging you!* her mind screamed at her. She was so scared she didn't even dare to breathe. What did he plan?

She stiffened as she felt his hand gliding up her back. His other arm was still holding her in place. He then took her chin in his hand and forced her to look up at him. Hermione's eyes widened in fear as she locked eyes with him. His face was far too near to her. His grey eyes bored into her brown ones. Hermione was once again amazed by how handsome he really looked. From so close she saw his flawless, pale skin, his well-proportioned face and his dark hair falling softly into his eyes. He looked down at her with his eyebrows slightly raised and a smile tucking at his lips.

"Come on, Hermione. Just admit it," he whispered in a seductive way. "You think that I am irresistible."

Hermione tried to wriggle free from him but again to no avail. She felt her heart beating faster. All she wanted to do now was to run away from him. She couldn't bear it to have him so near her. There
were so many people who had lost their lives because of Riddle. His closeness brought her memories of those people back. Memories that hurt her like physical pain.

"Let go of me!" she snarled at him.

Riddle just chuckled at her distress and then bend his head down so that he could whisper into her ear. "Just tell me who you really are and I will stop the students from hexing you."

Hermione tried to bend her head away from him to get as much distance between them as was possible. But Riddle didn't allow her much freedom.

"I don't know what you want from me," Hermione replied shakily.

"I'm sure you'll change your mind sooner or later, my dear," Riddle again whispered in her ear.

Then he began to trace kisses on the line of her jaw. Hermione shuddered as she felt his lips on her skin. She tried to push him off with her hands on his chest.

"What are you doing? Get off me!" Hermione yelled at him.

She could feel him smirk against her skin. Then he placed one last kiss on her cheek before he broke from her but continued to hold her to him. He smirked down at her as he reached into his robe and produced his wand. Hermione inhaled sharply as she recognized the pale wand of Lord Voldemort. Riddle laughed softly at her apparent fear. He pointed his wand under her chin and forced Hermione to raise her head, baring her throat. Hermione was shaking from fear as he slowly skimmed the tip of his wand along the side of her face. She looked with huge eyes at Riddle and saw the mocking smirk still marring his handsome face while his eyes glinted maliciously down at her.

As the tip of his wand reached her left temple he whispered, "Episkey."

Hermione felt the wound, she had received when the Gryffindor girl had attacked her with the Reducto curse, close. She looked at Riddle, her eyebrows raised in bewilderment. Riddle stared smugly into her eyes before he pulled her abruptly into his chest and whispered coldly in her ear, "You are going to tell me all your secrets, DeCerto."

Then he let her go, turned around and walked confidently away. Hermione stared at his retreating back. Her heart was still racing at a ridiculous speed and her breathing was fast. She felt shaky and sick.

Then she shook herself out of her stupor and quickly walked in the opposite direction that Riddle had just left.

She couldn't believe what had happened. Her original plan had been to stay as far away from Voldemort as possible. But since she had arrived at Hogwarts she had drawn his attention to her and he had threatened and attacked her at more than one occasion. He was definitely suspicious of her now. There was no more denying it. Hermione didn't think that he knew anything specific but he was certainly aware that she was hiding something. If she had only let him hex her at their duel during DADA then he wouldn't be suspicious now. But there was no taking that back. He had seen a glimpse of what she was capable of. Of course he was curious. Hermione massaged absentmindedly her left temple that Riddle had just healed.

How can I get out of this mess?

She could still leave Hogwarts. But she didn't want to use that option unless it was absolutely
necessary. What then? She could pretend to join Riddle. Become one of his followers. Hermione felt a wave of nausea hit her at that thought. No, she could never join him. Pretence or otherwise. She would never take the side of Lord Voldemort.

She just couldn't think of any way to get out of it.

Then, if she was in this mess anyway, why not make it a little bit more bearable? Riddle had played dirty so far. He had used his influence on the students to rile them up against her. In doing that he had separated her from everyone. Driving away any alliances she could have had. So no-one would help her should anything happen to her. Then he had intimidated and threatened her in an attempt to destroy her morale.

If he wanted to play dirty, Hermione thought angrily, then she would pay him back in kind.

As she reached the portrait of the Fat Lady she still felt shaken from Riddle's last attempt to threaten her but she had a plan how to strike back. She did know that it was a risky business to defy Tom Riddle. Then again if anything should go wrong she could always leave Hogwarts. He would never be able to find her as she didn't really exist in this time period.

Hermione stepped through the portrait hole and scanned the common room. As her gaze fell on the group she had been searching for she strolled over to them.

"Oh, hey, Hermione!" Longbottom looked up from his Potions essay.

Lupin was sitting beside him. He too was immersed in an essay. Weasley obviously had given up on his own Potions essay which lay abandoned on the desk. He amused himself with a book. Hermione saw the title of the book: The British Quidditch League, and tried not to roll her eyes.

"Am I disturbing you?" Hermione asked innocently.

"No," Longbottom answered. "I'm in fact glad you're here. Maybe you can convince Lupin that we have still time to finish this stupid essay."

"We've to hand it in by Monday!" Lupin said indignantly as he frowned at Longbottom.

"Well, you know," Hermione said hesitantly. "There is something I need your help with."

Weasley put away his book and raised his eyebrows at her.

"You need our help? Hermione, you are better in school than we all put together. Well, maybe except Lupin. How could we help you?"

"It's nothing school related," Hermione explained. "It's more prank related."

She noticed pleased that she now had both Weasley's and Longbottom's full attention. Smiles were tucking at their faces.

"You wanna pull a prank?" Longbottom smirked at her. "Then you've come to the right people. Prank is my middle name."

"Yeah, we are the kings of pranksters," Weasley confirmed. "You know last year we found this spell to lock doors permanently. No Alohomora nor anything else would help. Cost the teachers more than a month to finally open all the classrooms in the fourth floor again."

Weasley and Longbottom high-fived at that while Lupin rolled his eyes at them. Hermione smiled
and sat down at the sofa beside them.

"So, how can we help you, Hermione?" Longbottom smirked at her.

Hermione pulled her wand and waved it at their surroundings while she said, "Muffliato!"

All background noise turned at once into a quiet buzzing.

"What'd you do?" Lupin asked astonished.

"Just a small spell," Hermione explained. "So no-one can eavesdrop in on us."

"Wicked!" Weasley said.

"You've gotta teach me how to do that," Longbottom pleaded.

"Sure, sure," Hermione said. "But now back to my problem. You of course all know about the rumours concerning me and a certain Mr Riddle that are going around?"

Weasley and Lupin nodded at her darkly while Longbottom looked contrite as he said, "You know I'm sorry about that, Hermione. I shouldn't have believed-"

Hermione cut in, "I'm not angry at you anymore, Marc. That's not it. No, the thing is I found out who started the whole thing."

Longbottom raised his eyebrows, "Who was it? I'm so going to kick his ass."

Hermione smiled at him, "Yes, that's the plan."

"Stop putting us on the rack, Hermione. Who was it?" Weasley whined.

Hermione's smile turned into an evil smirk as she said, "Tom Riddle."

The three of them stared at her with mouths hanging open. Then Longbottom yelled, "I knew it. I always knew it. That little cur."

"Wow, really? Riddle? How'd you know?" Weasley asked Hermione.

"He told me," Hermione replied calmly.

"He just told you?" Lupin asked incredulous.

"Yes, he just told me," Hermione said before she added darkly. "More like, mocked me about it."

"That bastard!" Longbottom said furiously.

"Why'd he do something like that?" Lupin asked her.

"I don't know," Hermione looked at him helplessly. "I think he just doesn't like me or something like that."

"So know you want to pay him back. Yes, Hermione? Please, tell me you wanna pay him back," Longbottom pleaded.

Riddle was on his way back to the Slytherin dungeons. He was very pleased with how things had
turned out. He could still see DeCerto's scared eyes as he had held her. She had been so terrified of him. A subdued DeCerto was much more preferable to an indifferent one. It had been quite annoying how she had ignored him before. It was about time that he showed her what a big mistake it was to defy him. He laughed quietly as he remembered how she had trembled in his arms. Oh, she had been so delightfully frightened. It wouldn't take long now, he thought, and then she would cave in and tell him her every secret. And maybe, if he was generous, he would grant her the honor and would listen to her pitiful secrets. And after that he would punish her for wasting his precious time. She was going to wish back the time were he had held her so closely.

He could still almost feel her warmth were he had held her to his chest. She had been so soft and comfortable in his arms. He blamed the actions that had followed on that pleasant feeling. Because he had never planned on kissing her. Even if it was only on her cheek. But as he had whispered in her ear her scent of lilac had been so seductive that he hadn't been able to hold back. And why should he hold back? It was his right after all to take whatever he wanted. The girls should be grateful if he spent time with them.

With an unpleasant jolt in his stomach he remembered how DeCerto had stiffened as he had kissed her. And how she had tried to bend away from him…

Well, what did it matter, he thought angrily. He would break her soon enough. What did he care what the cheap trollop thought about him?

He arrived at the entrance to the Slytherin common room and hissed at the portrait, "Lepor lepos!"

The portrait accepted the password and admitted him in. He stepped into the common room. The wallpapers had a nice, unobtrusive green colour. In the far corner burned an inviting fire in the fireside. Black leather couches and armchairs were arranged in the room to allow its inhabitants to sit down and relax. Riddle strolled over to a couch where he had previously discarded his school bag. He registered pleased that no-one had dared to touch it in his absence. He sat down and opened his bag as he heard someone greet him,

"Riddle."

He looked up and saw Ledo Avery and Abraxas Malfoy standing before him. They looked at him expectantly obviously waiting for his permission to sit down beside him. He nodded curtly at them and they sat down but still kept a respectful distance to him.

"What do you want?" Riddle asked impatiently.

Malfoy answered in his usual smooth voice, "I got what you asked me to find."

He then took a small parcel out of his elegant and surely expensive bag and handed it over to Riddle. Riddle accepted it without thanking Malfoy.

"Was that all?" he asked instead.

Avery shook his head before he said, "You know Patric Lynns? He is a Ravenclaw seventh year."

Riddle nodded at that absentmindedly. "So, what?"

Avery cleared his throat then said, "Well, he's hitting on the same girl as me…"

Riddle looked at him annoyed. "And what do you want me to do about that?"

Avery cowered a little bit away from Riddle. "Nothing! I just… wanted to ask if it was okay if I
curse him a little bit."

Riddle raised one eyebrow. The rest of his face remained an emotionless mask. "Hm, curse him?"

Avery stiffened and paled slightly as Riddle's scrutinizing gaze fell on him. Riddle let him stir for a little bit more before he said,

"I don't see why not." Avery relaxed at that.

Riddle continued, "But nothing too serious! And don't leave behind any evidence. Dumbledore's too suspicious of us as it is."

Avery nodded at him. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

Riddle shifted his attention back at the parcel Malfoy had given him and waved Malfoy and Avery away with a motion of his hand. Before he opened the parcel he scanned quickly the common room. Nobody seemed to look his way so he opened the parcel and an ancient looking book fell into his lap. He took the book in his hands and touched the brown leather binding lovingly. There was no title on the book but he knew what it was about. This was an old manuscript about magic at its purest form. It had been written long before the Ministry had divided magic into approved and dark. Riddle could almost feel the knowledge pulsing through the thick leather binding. This book would hopefully supply him with more information about the ritual he was interested in. He basically had all the information he needed and Slughorn had more or less confirmed that what he knew was right, but it wouldn't hurt to learn more about it. It was after all a dangerous ritual. If he made a mistake he could lose his life. Of course someone had to lose his life during the process but he would make sure that that someone wasn't himself, Riddle thought while smiling evilly.

He reached for his school bag. He didn't intend to read the book now. That would be too risky as he didn't know if the book had been warded in any way. Which was entirely probable. He had to test that before he attempted to open it. The best place would be the Come and Go Room. There he would be undisturbed.

As he opened his bag his gaze fell on a book inside. He reached for it. It's title was: Magick At Its Most Evile. He smiled down at the book as a nostalgic feeling came over him. He had read about Horcruxes for the first time in that book. It had been totally useless back then because it had just been mentioned shortly in this book without any further explanations. But it had awoken his curiosity and he had then learned more about what Horcruxes were. And soon the creation of a Horcrux had become his hope, a hope to finally overcome that helpless weak boy who was represented by the scar on Riddle's left arm.

And now after nearly two years he had gathered enough information to finally go through with it. He would even take a step further. Further, perhaps, than anybody before him.

"So, you know what to do, yes?" Hermione asked the three boys.

"Yep, don't you worry, Hermione," Weasley replied.

They still sat on the comfortable sofa in one corner of the common room protected by Hermione's Muffliato spell.

"And you're sure it's enough for us to delay Slughorn a little bit?" Longbottom said with a bit disappointment in his voice. "You don't want us to curse Riddle, huh?"
Hermione grinned at him. She knew he would love to hex Riddle as he never seemed to have liked him. But hexing Riddle was a risky business and she wouldn't let anyone try that.

"No, I'll take care of him."

"So, what are you going to do?" Weasley asked as he leaned conspiratorially towards her.

"You'll see," Hermione answered elusively. "I'm just going to make sure that no-one believes those absurd rumours anymore."

After her last statement she waved her wand and canceled the Muffliato spell. The four of them continued to sit in the common room and chatted and played wizard's chess. Hermione really enjoyed it though all the time she had to ignore the pain in her chest that reminded her of two other Gryffindors she should be sitting with now.

It was nearly one in the morning as Longbottom stretched and declared he would go to bed now. Weasley who was lying half asleep sprawled over one sofa joined him. Hermione was also getting off the couch as Lupin caught her arm. She looked back at him and as she saw the determined look on his face sat down again.

"What's wrong, Amarys?" Hermione asked concernedly.

"You know, I can understand that you want revenge for what Riddle did," Lupin began. "But… " he hesitated.

"Yes?" Hermione asked.

"You are new here, Hermione. So you don't know but there are some nasty things going around Riddle and his little group of Slytherins," Lupin elaborated.

"Nasty things?"

"Yes. Nothing certain. But last year there was this incident were students were petrified. It took the staff two month to revive them again. The whole thing resulted in the death of one student. That was really horrible."

"And you think Riddle's behind that?" Hermione asked though she knew the answer to that better than Lupin.

"I don't know," Lupin said quietly. "Dumbledore at least seemed suspicious of him. And there are more stories like that though that was the worst one. Two years ago, for example, there was this girl, Elisabeth Bingle, from Huffelpuff. She was infatuated with Riddle. She was always waiting for him after classes and following him around everywhere. But he never returned that affection. I think he was peeved by her behaviour. And then one day she just disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Hermione asked incredulous. She'd never heard that story about Voldemort's days at Hogwarts.

"The teachers told us she had transferred to Beauxbaton. But I had a feeling there was something strange going on. I don't know, Hermione. Maybe I'm just seeing things. But what I wanted to tell you is: Be careful. Riddle is definitely dangerous."

Hermione looked at Lupin. His face was severe and she could tell that he was honestly worried about her. She felt incredibly thankful for that. It was good to know that at least some people still cared about her. He was right to be worried, Hermione thought. He didn't know how right he was
about Riddle.

"Don't worry, Amarys. I'll be cautious," she tried to reassure Lupin.
I Know Your Name

Hermione used the remainder of the weekend to catch up on her homework and have another library session. As she had decided she would set about the raid on Dumbledore's office after her little revenge on Riddle she didn't try to spy out Dumbledore's daily routine. And so the weekend passed without any occurrences.

The following Monday found Hermione waiting in one of the dungeon's corridors not far from Professor Slughorn's office waiting for the three boys. They had agreed to meet at 7 a.m. Longbottom and Lupin arrived first. They were both carrying their school bags which seemed to be slightly fuller than necessary for the school day.

"Morning," Hermione greeted them. "Do you have everything?"

"Sure!" Longbottom answered with a lopsided grin.

"Where's Richard?" Lupin asked Hermione.

"He'll be here shortly I'm sure," Hermione replied confidently.

And sure enough as she said that Weasley came jogging down the corridor.

"Is Slughorn in the Great Hall?" Hermione asked Weasley as he had reached them.

"Yes, sitting at the teachers table and stuffing his face with bagels," Weasley reported breathlessly.

"Perfect," Hermione said relieved. "Now to the next step. You three go to Slughorn's office and set everything up. It shouldn't take you more than ten minutes. In the mean time I go back to the Great Hall and have an eye on Slughorn."

"Aye aye, sir!" Longbottom saluted in front of her while grinning mischievously.

"And you really know what you are doing, aren't you," Hermione asked them again concerned.

Weasley rolled his eyes and said, "Hermione, we've gone through this at least a hundred times. We know what to do. And if we fail there's still Lupin, huh?" He punched Lupin in the side. "He's a genius, he'll fix everything."

"Okay okay. I know you'll do it," Hermione replied. "And you know how thankful I am that you are helping me, don't you?"

Longbottom laughed at that.

"Aww, Hermione. You've thanked us enough already. And besides we really enjoy this kind of stuff. So don't worry."

"Thanks," Hermione whispered again

"Now I'm really anxious to see what you'll do," Longbottom grinned at her.

"Damn, and I'm going to miss it," Weasley stated. "Stupid Divination!"

Hermione smiled at them. "Good, then let's get going."
With that the four parted ways and Hermione headed back to the Great Hall alone. She was nervous about the whole thing. She was challenging Lord Voldemort after all so a little bit apprehension was in order. And she felt bad about dragging the three Gryffindor boys into this. But she had taken care that nothing would lead back to them. If the whole thing went wrong she would be the only one Riddle would go after. Hell, even if everything went as planned he would still go after her skin.

She could just hope the diversion in professor Slughorn's office would go smoothly. Weasley, Longbottom and Lupin would brew a little potion in his office. The Kapnos potion to be exact. Hermione was glad Lupin had agreed to take part in the whole thing as he was very good at potions. The Kapnos potion was an old potion Hermione had found in her History of Magic book. It had been invented by the old Greeks. They had used it to smoke out enemies. So all the three boys had to do was brew the potion, as it must be used fresh, and then spill it all over Slughorn's office. After some time it would begin to transform into thick, heavy smoke, no spells could get rid off. At that point Weasley would come to the Great Hall to get professor Slughorn. Longbottom, Lupin and herself would go down to the potion's classroom. Professor Slughorn would have to deal with the mess and would be accordingly late for his class giving Hermione time to get back on Riddle.

Hermione arrived at the Great Hall and sat down at the Gryffindor table. She then had her breakfast like she normally had and waited for Weasley to arrive at the Great Hall to get Slughorn. After some time she saw him as he walked towards the teachers table. Hermione smirked. That would give her at least ten to twenty minutes until Slughorn would arrive at potions. Ten minutes were more than enough to get her plan into action. She strolled down to the dungeons. There was no need to hurry because she knew Slughorn would be late and she needed all the other students to be present to witness her little 'confession'. The potions class was just perfect for her plan. She was sitting right beside Riddle but more importantly Rose and Lucia were sitting at a table behind her. They would be able to hear every word. And they were the worst gossip mongers Hermione'd ever met.

Hermione arrived at the door to the potions classroom. She could hear chatter coming from the room. So the students were already there. She made to open the door but before that she got rid of the evil grin on her face and tried to look depressed. Then she entered the classroom. With one look she confirmed that most of the students were there and that Riddle was among them. The chatter had died down somewhat upon her entry. But as the students realized that it was her and not Slughorn who had entered she was met by the now familiar evil glares. She let her head hang and walked slowly over to her place. Riddle was already sitting at the table. One of his arms hung elegantly over the back of his chair and a small curl was tugging on his lips as his gaze fell on her. Hermione sat down on her place. In the corner of her eyes she could see Riddle looking at her. He was obviously enjoying the whole situation.

Not for long! Hermione grinned inwardly. Outwardly she looked frightened at Riddle. She could see his eyes shining with amusement and triumph at her submissive behaviour.

In a very small voice Hermione said hesitantly, "Riddle…?"

He raised an eyebrow at that and looked at her cockily, "Yes, DeCerto?"

Hermione carefully measured the hesitancy in her voice. "I… I wanted to apologize to you."

She could tell he was now really surprised.

Hermione continued, "I know it was wrong of me. I should never have pressed you."

Here Hermione saw Riddle's expression change. His cockiness went and was replaced by suspicion. They both knew she had never in any way put him under pressure.
"I'm sorry I used those spells on you in DADA. And... and that I cornered you in that corridor."

Hermione noted with satisfaction that the chatter around them had died down. So the other students were hearing into this conversation. It was really crucial that they heard everything.

So now she had to get this conversation in the right direction. She said timidly while looking at Riddle, "But I told you why I had to ask you."

Riddle's glare was growing even darker now and he said, "No, you didn't"

Hermione sniffed softly and tried to wipe some non-existent tears from her eyes. "It's okay. I never expected you to listen," she said, seemingly fighting a brave battle against the tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

Hermione took notice of some shuffling behind her and she even thought to hear someone indignantly exclaim 'poor girl'. Now there were really some tears threatening to fall from her eyes – tears of suppressed laughter.

Riddle scowled at her rather darkly. Then asked, "So why did you ask me out?"

He obviously wanted to embarrass her by forcing her to say something stupid like, 'Because you are so handsome.' Hermione had to really work to not laugh out loud as she continued,

"I told you about my friend back home in France. Oh, he was so very important to me." At that she looked down, averting Riddle's eyes. "He even asked me to marry him."

She paused a little bit to let the information sink in. Though to the others it seemed like she tried to regain her composure. Then she looked up at Riddle again. He was still scowling at her. He clearly didn't see were this was going.

So Hermione continued, "And then, you know, I told you, that horrible thing happened. And he... he..." She broke off and sniffed before she choked out, "My friend was killed."

Behind her someone breathed in sharply. But Hermione looked in Riddle's grey eyes. She could feel a tear tickling down her left cheek. Oh, she was good.

"I had to leave my home and I came to England to enroll in Hogwarts." Hermione stopped here. She could nearly feel the curiosity of the other people in the room. And she wasn't going to disappoint them. "I told you about my friend before but what I didn't tell you is that you... that you..." She looked pleadingly at Riddle before she burst out, "You look just like him! Just like that friend. You could be his twin."

Riddle looked shocked at her. But that was an act, wasn't it? So much a lie like her fairy tale story was. He could see right through it but was unable to do anything about that. Hermione could see the fury behind his mask and would have liked to be able to laugh in his face. But she had to control herself.

"I just had to ask you for a date. I know it was stupid. He is dead. But whenever I looked at you I saw him." She wiped off the tears on her cheeks. "And when you rejected me I got angry. Not at you but at me for being so stupid as to run after a dream. I'm sorry I was venting that on you."

Riddle glared at her. But he didn't want to give up yet. So he asked her in a curious sounding voice, "I'm sorry for your loss. But those spells you used in DADA, they were quite dangerous. Did you really use them just to vent your anger?"
He sounded understanding but Hermione could hear the underlying coldness. But it was a fair question. He was good, Hermione had to admit. Though not good enough, she thought smugly because she had an answer to that.

"Those spells. They were dangerous," Hermione spoke now in a quiet voice. "I got carried away. I am so sorry." She wanted him to coax the answer out of her.

Riddle looked at her. She could see something like triumph in his eyes. Bring it on! she thought.

"Why would you attack someone who looks like that dear friend?" he asked in his sweet voice.

"You have to know, my friend wasn't killed by HIM." Hermione broke off. She could hear some whispers behind her and was sure everyone knew whom she was referring to, Grindelwald. "My friend was a good man. But the atmosphere in France is tense at the moment. So much fear, so much uncertainty. And my friend got to know the wrong people and he kept bad company. That's when he changed."

Hermione started to cry again and continued in a soft voice, "He was seduced by the Dark Arts."

She could hear a few gasps behind her.

"I left him then because I couldn't follow him where he was going. The last thing I heard from him was that he had joined HIM. And then he attacked his own family because they wouldn't join his master."

Now this one was important. Hermione had to play this card very cautiously.

"During that attack he... he..." Hermione choked and then whispered. "He killed his own father, Riddle."

Hermione locked eyes with Riddle. He was staring at her. His eyes still the familiar cold grey. But there was something more. Hermione just couldn't place it.

"Can you imagine that? Someone killing his own father? What a despicable crime!"

Hermione knew he would be able to imagine how killing one's own father would feel like. He had done it already. Just a few months ago.

"I had left France already when I heard that Aurors had gotten to him. They had tried to arrest him. But he fought them and he got killed." Hermione's voice was a soft whisper now. But she made sure that it was loud enough for the people sitting around them to catch every word. "During our duel I got so confused. I mixed you two up. You attacked me. But for me it was him attacking me. So I got scared and used spells I should never have used. I hope you can forgive me."

She looked at him expectantly. As did many more people in this room, she was sure. He was sitting in his chair with a straight back and staring at her. He clearly was pondering his options right now. Hermione suppressed a grin from forming on her face. He really didn't have much of a choice. What could he do? Telling the poor girl who had lost her friend that he didn't forgive her? No, that would destroy his perfect reputation he had so worked on. Riddle obviously came to the same conclusion as he smiled at her charmingly,

"Of course I forgive you. I can understand you. You had to go through a lot."

"Thank you," Hermione answered sounding relieved. She flashed him a smile. But they both knew that that smile was more a smirk than anything else, it was as honest as his forgiveness had been.
At that very moment the door to the classroom opened and professor Slughorn stepped in. Hermione nearly chuckled at his perfect timing. He couldn't have arrived at a better moment. Professor Slughorn looked slightly disheveled as he walked over to his desk.

"Sorry for the delay but there was a small mishap I had to solve first," he said. "But let's not waste anymore time." He pulled a pile of parchments out of his bag and then started to hand them out to the students. "I've read through your essays about the Ortus potion," Professor Slughorn declared while he handed one essay to Lupin. "And I am rather delighted that most of you have grasped the understanding of this exquisite potion. Though others should go over the basics again." He frowned down at Longbottom as he handed him his essay back.

As the professor reached Hermione's table he handed one essay to Malfoy without comment. As Riddle received his essay, professor Slughorn smiled down at him fondly.

"Excellent work, as usual, Mr Riddle."

Professor Slughorn handed the next essay to Hermione.

"Ms DeCerto, your essay about the Ortus potion was formidable. Never read something more detailed. It was really enlightening." Professor Slughorn beamed down at her.

To Hermione's amusement she could see from the corner of her eyes Riddle scowl at the professor angrily. Riddle obviously didn't like her being praised. But Hermione wasn't surprised that professor Slughorn had liked her essay. Ever since he had mentioned that they would brew the potion during the year Hermione had read every work available about the Ortus potion, accumulating a lot of information. And it had been worse than she had expected. This potion was indeed able to determine the actual date of birth of the person it was tested on. She was in deep trouble.

During the rest of the lesson professor Slughorn lectured about how the differences of ingredient's quality can affect a potion. Hermione thought it was rather interesting until she noticed that Riddle wasn't taking any notes like he usually did. Instead he was glaring murderously at her. There was even a slight red sheen to his eyes. After Hermione noticed his hostile stares she rather felt frightened and really wished for the lesson to be over soon so she would be able to flee Riddle.

Her plan had unfolded perfectly though. Time would show if the other students believed her and finally stopped their absurd hostility towards her. But it was very probable that they would. The best part was that she had achieved that by forcing Riddle to accept her apology. He himself was responsible now if the other students stopped to attack her. Unfortunately, judging from the death glares Riddle was sending her he too was convinced that she had outsmarted him. Hermione was sure he would retaliate in some way. But her revenge had been sweet. Riddle had used his popularity to discredit her, to rile the other students up against her. He had made sure that every one of her peers hated her. The result had been that they had shunned her and made her life very difficult. Hermione had had no other choice than to get back at him. But how to hit him best? She could have tried to curse him or to ridicule him in another way. But that wouldn't have been satisfying. Most probably, Riddle would have turned such a blatant proceeding against her.

No, Hermione needed something much more subtle. Riddle had put so much effort into creating that lie about her that Hermione had decided to use that very rumour and turn it into something that would play to her favour. Riddle's rumour about her being a crazy stalker had been cleverly constructed. Riddle had created the rumour to show his superiority by locking her into this inescapable maze of lies. So, Hermione had taken his evil rumour and had woven her own lies around it. Thus changing Riddle's very own creation into something that would attack him instead. It had been more than satisfying to do just that and to rub it in his face. As he had accepted her fake-apology his eyes had been burning with hate because Hermione had brought him into this situation,
she had controlled the situation and he was forced to do exactly what she wanted him to do. And of course, for Lord Voldemort the worst thing was to admit defeat.

Hermione brought out of her musing as Professor Slughorn ended the lesson. The students got up gathered up their stuff and left the classroom. As Hermione passed professor Slughorn’s desk he looked up at her and said,

"Ah, Ms DeCerto. Please, if you have a moment."

Hermione looked at the professor and saw that infamous glint in his eyes. She somehow knew what he wanted from her.

"Of course, sir," she answered politely.

Hermione could see Longbottom standing at the door. He was gesturing to her that they would wait for her. Hermione was grateful for that because she really wouldn't appreciate it right now if Riddle caught her alone on her way back to the Gryffindor common room.

"Now, Ms DeCerto, I hope you had time to consider my invitation to the Slug Club." Professor Slughorn said as he beamed fondly at her.

Hermione tried to smile. She didn't really want to join the Slug Club but she knew how persistent the professor could be. And she really didn't need him snooping around her in addition to Riddle.

"Yes, sir. It's a pleasure to join," she lied through her teeth.

"Perfect, perfect." Professor Slughorn smiled. "I'm glad you'd join. And you are perfectly on time, too. Because there's a small party at this week's Friday. I hope you have time?"

Hermione had to fight to maintain the polite smile on her face. "Of course, professor."

"Good," Professor Slughorn said. "We will start at around eight and of course you are allowed to bring an escort. I am sure you have plenty of admirers." He winked at her.

Hermione left the classroom while contemplating how very little professor Slughorn would change during the next fifty years. It was almost frightening. His hair was a little bit fuller and his belly a little less fat but aside from that there was no difference to his older counterpart. In some twisted way it was also reassuring.

Hermione saw Longbottom and Lupin standing in the corridor waiting for her. Longbottom was waving at her while Lupin looked slightly pensive.

She had barely reached them as Longbottom started to talk, "Wow, Hermione, that was some acting you pulled there. I've never seen Riddle look so baffled. The stupid git really didn't know what to say in the end."

Hermione had to smile at that. "You think it will work?"

Longbottom put an arm around her shoulders playfully. "Sure thing! This evening at the latest the whole school'll know and then they'll all stop teasing you!"

*Tease?* Hermione thought amused. She wouldn't have used that exact word to describe what the others had done to her the last weeks but she was glad to hear that her little plot had been convincing.

She scanned Lupin. He was still looking reserved.
"You don't approve?" Hermione asked him.

"I don't know, Hermione," he said hesitantly. "That story was just a little bit too much."

"Yes, about that. Let's talk about it in the common room. I don't want any eavesdroppers hearing in on us," Hermione said.

They walked back to the Gryffindor common room. Hermione was thinking about how much she would tell her friends while Longbottom was talking happily about how he had enjoyed to see Riddle be outsmarted.

As the three sat down on a couch in the common room Hermione waved her wand and whispered, "Muffliato!"

Before any of the boys could say anything Hermione turned to Lupin and said seriously, "I can understand why you didn't like my proceeding. Inventing a sob story so that everyone pities me just to get back at Riddle? It seems paltry."

"Don't be so harsh on yourself. I thought it was brilliant," Longbottom cut in while chuckling.

"Well, the thing is," Hermione continued quietly. "That story wasn't purely fictional."

Hermione saw Lupin's eyes widen in surprise and Longbottom stopped laughing.

"That wasn't…?" Lupin mumbled surprised. "It was true?"

Hermione looked down on her hands and breathed in deeply then said softly, "Part of it, yes."

"Which parts?" Lupin asked quietly as he put a hand on Hermione's arm.

"I had a friend that really looked a little bit like Riddle."

Sorry, Harry! But it's true. Hermione silently apologized to Harry.

"I loved that friend like a brother. He knew a very dark wizard. But Harry, my friend, never joined him like I told Riddle," Hermione told them quietly. "He would never have joined someone so evil. He even tried to stop that dark wizard. And he succeeded," Hermione said with pride in her voice. "Harry was an exceptional wizard."

"Was?" Lupin asked her gently.

Hermione breathed in deeply to get her emotions back under control.

"Yes, was," she said with a soft voice that shook a little before she continued slowly. "That dark wizard was very powerful. And though Harry managed to stop him he couldn't save his own life."

Longbottom and Lupin both stared at her. Hermione looked down on her hands folded in her lap. She hoped Harry would forgive her for using his story so shamelessly. But then again she had used it to get back at Riddle. Probably Harry would have liked it. She smiled sadly at that thought.

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, we never knew."

Hermione looked up. Longbottom and Lupin still sat on the sofa but now looked very put down.
"It's okay," she smiled at them. She didn't want to see sad faces anymore. She had had enough of that to last her a lifetime. "I'm sure wherever Harry is right now he's laughing his head off."

Before she added mischievously, "He wouldn't have liked Riddle either."

During the rest of the day Hermione contently watched her little scheme unfold. As she walked to her next class she noticed that the number of girls glaring darkly at her was decreasing. During lunch there was only one curse flying her way instead of the usual minimum of ten. She was surprised and pleased as a Gryffindor even walked over to the Ravenclaw girl who had sent the curse and told her off indignantly. In short, Hermione could almost see how the story of her performance during Potions was spread through the gossip mill of Hogwarts. She would have enjoyed it even more if it weren't for Riddle's dark glares. As the glares from the other students were lessening Riddle's gaze was getting fiercer and fiercer. During lunch right after the Gryffindor told the Ravenclaw off for sending a curse at Hermione, Riddle caught her gaze. He was looking right at her and his grey eyes were radiating off hatred and a promise for retribution. Hermione could feel a chill darting down her spine and she quickly looked away from Riddle.

So after a long day Hermione was glad to finally find refuge in the sanctuary that was the Gryffindor common room. She sat down beside Weasley, Lupin and Longbottom on a sofa near the fireplace. The fire was crackling merrily and Hermione leaned back on the soft sofa and closed her eyes. She was tired. Actually the whole situation was tiring. She had fought against Voldemort before and she didn't want to repeat that experience. She knew what a cruel enemy he could be. Last time she hadn't been alone. Her friends had fought alongside her but here in the past she was utterly alone. No-one here knew about her predicament and Hermione wasn't going to burden anyone with her knowledge of the future. It was still a mystery to her why she had been sent here, five decades in the past. Why did the Elder Wand have to punish her? And why this specific time?

Hermione sighed deeply.

"Hey, Hermione, you all right?" Hermione heard Longbottom's voice ask her.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at the three boys sitting next to her. Lupin and Weasley were obviously right in the middle of a game of wizard's chess. It looked like Lupin was losing spectacularly. It seemed the ability to do well in chess ran in the Weasley family. Hermione smiled at them though the memory of another Weasley was making her heart hurt.

"Just tired," Hermione replied.

"Well, obviously spinning intrigues is a tiring matter," Weasley said as he looked up from his chess pieces and grinned at Hermione.

"Yes," Hermione grinned right back at him. "But at least it was worth the effort."

"Told you so," Longbottom said happily. "By the end of today everyone'll know about it. And see," Longbottom looked around the common room as if he expected some sneak attack. "No evil curses flying your way anymore."

"What did Slughorn want by the way?" Lupin asked her abruptly.

"Huh?"

"He held you back after potions. Remember?" Lupin elaborated.
"Ah, yes. He asked me about the Slug Club. So I joined," Hermione had to fight to keep the reluctance out of her voice. "And then he invited me to some party at Friday."

"Ah, the 'Slug Club'!" Longbottom said as he leaned back in the sofa and his gaze wandered to-and-fro between Lupin and Hermione. "So, you two brains going together then?"

Lupin broke out into laughter at that point. Hermione was bewildered and raised an eyebrow at him. "What's so funny?"

"It's just, he always wanted to go to one of Slughorn's famous parties," Lupin told her between giggles.

"Yeah, smooth, Marc, smooth," Weasley said as he elbowed Longbottom in the ribs. "Way to go!"

"Ah, so you want me to take you there?" Hermione asked Longbottom innocently though the smirk on her face wasn't as innocent.

"Pretty please?" Longbottom gave her the puppy-dog-eyes.

"I don't know, Longbottom. I have a lot of admirers. I can't just take anyone," Hermione told him and the smirk on her face was widening.

"Yep, you could ask Riddle," Weasley said seriously.

The four of them stared at each other for a moment before they snorted in laughter.

"Yeeees, I should really do that just to see his face," Hermione laughed. "But seriously, Marc, it would be a pleasure if you would accompany me to the party." She turned towards Longbottom and patted his shoulder. It was quite amusing for her to see his face getting red.

Then she got up from the sofa.

"I'm going to bed. I'm really tired," she declared before she took off in direction of the girl's dorm.

"Night, Mione," she heard Weasley's still amused voice calling after her.

Hermione reached the dorm and to her annoyance found Diana, Rose and Lucia sitting on Lucia's horribly pink bed and reading in a fashion magazine.

Hermione walked silently over to her bed as Rose greeted her benignly, "Hermione, are you going to sleep already?"

"Oh, so now it's 'Hermione' again? Hermione thought angrily.

"Yes, I'm tired," she replied politely but offhandedly.

"No, you can't go to sleep!" Lucia said in a whiney voice. "You have to tell us about the boy who looks just like Riddle."

Hermione breathed in deeply to control her temper. Did they expect her to just forget the past weeks in which they hadn't spoken one word with her? ...apart from the occasional insult of course. Hermione turned around and glared at the three girls.

Then she said stiffly, "Considering that this friend of mine is dead I'm sure you understand that I am not inclined to talk about him."
The three girls had at least the decency to look a bit ashamed. Lucia looked down on her hands and mumbled in an embarrassed voice,

"Of course."

Hermione turned around and walked, still fuming, over to her bed. *The nerve of those girls!*

"Hermione?" she heard a tentative voice call for her.

Hermione looked back at the three girls sitting on the bed.

"We were horrible to you," Diana said sincerely, "We're truly sorry."

The other two girls sitting beside Diana were nodding hastily. Diana looked like she really meant what she said. Or maybe it was the fact that Diana was a relation of Harry that made Hermione's anger dissolve.

"It's okay," Hermione said while she looked into Diana's green eyes.

Diana smiled at her shyly and Hermione smiled back at her before she finally retrieved her pyjama from her trunk and left for the bathroom.

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Riddle was on his way to the Slytherin common room. His hands were balled into fists and he had to really work to keep his magic from lashing out at random people, passing by.

_That bitch!_ Who did she think she was? She had made him look like an idiot!

He remembered the conversation he had had right after this nauseating act DeCerto had pulled during potions:

"Oh, Tom." One of those stupid girls really had the nerve to speak to him and call him by that disgusting name. "Did you really know that about DeCerto? The poor girl. Why did you treat her so bad then?"

*Riddle breathed in slowly to get his temper back under control. Fuck, not only had DeCerto managed to redeem herself in the eyes of the other students, no, now those silly girls were after him.*

"We know you don't want to have her for a girlfriend," another of those silly girls threw in. "But maybe you should try to befriend her."

*Riddle had to restrain himself from pulling his wand and cursing the stupid girl. Instead he smiled, and he knew that this time he didn't quite manage to let it look honest.*

"You know, maybe you should apologize to DeCerto."

*Now this one was enough. Riddle's magic was raging inside of him, begging to be released.*

"You were so dismissive towards her. And you didn't listen to her story. I'm sure she had been crying secretly."

*Riddle bit his tongue to stop himself from uttering this really dark curse that needed to be hurled at those stupid girls. DeCerto crying in secret? Riddle knew that whatever DeCerto did in secret it sure as hell wasn't crying.*
"Think about it," another of the girls who were hassling him said in her shrill voice. "DeCerto's fiancé died. I'm sure she just wanted to talk with you about it. And you didn't listen. You were so cold towards her. You need to apologize to her."

Where were all those mentally retarded girls coming from? Riddle had to fight to keep the polite smile on his face and to look a little bit guilty. When in reality he was beyond furious.

Those dumb girls had followed him around for the rest of the day. Some of them pestering him about how he could be so cruel to poor DeCerto, some others were only watching him. Riddle didn't know what they were expecting from him. Maybe they were following him around to not miss it if he was going to apologize to this apparently 'poor' girl.

He had actually considered to really apologize to DeCerto, just to get rid of those silly girls following him around. But in the end he knew he wouldn't be able to stand that triumphant smirk that would surely be on DeCerto's face if he did that. Riddle felt his magic peak again and he had to concentrate to stop the Dark Magic from crackling around him. She had tricked him. DeCerto had really tricked him. He had to admit it, she was good. Her little sob story had convinced all those brainless gits. Now they would stop attacking her and that would take the pressure off DeCerto. The pressure he had put on her. Instead of going after her, now those girls were after his blood. It had been a clever move of her. But he wasn't going to let her get away with it. No, he was going to show her why it was a bad idea to start a fight with him.

He entered the Slytherin common room, passed it without talking with anyone and then entered his dormitory. To his annoyance he found Lestrange and Alba there. They looked up upon his entry and Riddle glared at them.

"Get out!" Riddle hissed dangerously.

Alba got up from his bed and made to leave the room. He had obviously realized the mood Riddle was in. Lestrange wasn't that sharp so he whined,

"Aww, Riddle, we just got here. Let us stay."

Riddle scowled at Lestrange sitting on his bed. And then without saying anything Riddle pulled his wand and pointed it at Lestrange who flinched away.

"Abicere!" said Riddle.

A dark blue light left Riddle's wand and sped towards Lestrange. As the spell collided with Lestrange he was thrown off his bed and collided hard with the floor.

Lestrange lay groaning on the floor and Riddle said again in a low aggressive tone, "Get out!"

Lestrange got quickly up from the floor and hastily left the dorm avoiding Riddle's eyes. As he was finally alone Riddle sank down on his bed.

That damn girl!

The following days passed relatively uneventful. Hermione enjoyed it that the other students stopped their hostile behaviour towards her. It certainly made life easier for her. Though now Riddle's dark glares made up for that. Hermione found that rather unsettling. She knew he was planning something and tried to ignore him as best as she could. So she ended up spending a lot of time in the library. Her long library sessions made Ms Peters chide Hermione again for wasting away her youth with
some old books. Hermione always smiled at her then. She quite liked the kind librarian. And that was why she didn't tell Ms Peters that her youth had ended a long time ago.

Friday, the day of professor Slughorn's dinner party, came much too soon to Hermione's liking. She really didn't want to go. Riddle would be there for sure and Hermione didn't think it would be a good idea to spend any more time with him than she absolutely had to. On top of that she didn't want to socialize with people who had hated her just a few days ago. But unfortunately, Hermione had accepted the potions professor's invitation. So she grudgingly grabbed one of her more formal skirts and a white blouse and tried her best to look like a normal student from the forties which was frustratingly difficult to achieve. She was glad it was professor Slughorn's party and not Legifer's. As Hermione finally left the girls dorm she found Longbottom and Lupin sitting in the common room and waiting for her. She could see Longbottom's face getting red as his eyes scanned her.

"Hello, Hermione. Ready?" Lupin smiled at her.

"Sure. Let's go!" The sooner they arrived there the sooner she would be able to leave again.

As they walked down to Slughorn's office Longbottom said, face still red, "You look nice, Hermione."

_Uh oh, I hope he doesn't think it's a date._ Hermione thought.

She did like Longbottom but not in that way. Hermione didn't think she would ever love anyone again. Not after Ron had been ripped from her. Her heart sank at the thought of Ron. She missed him so terribly. She could still not believe that she would never see him again. The memory of their fight in the Ministry was still as clear as if it had happened yesterday. Whenever Hermione closed her eyes she would see the green curse coming from Bellatrix' wand hitting Ron in the chest and then Ron's grotesquely peaceful face as if he were sleeping.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" she heard Longbottom's worried voice.

Hermione looked at him and smiled. "Yes."

"You don't have to worry about Riddle," Lupin told her sympathetically. "He won't dare do anything to you today."

"Yeah, we won't let him!" Longbottom said confidently.

Hermione couldn't share their optimism but she felt happy that they worried about her. It made her feel better and not so lost and alone anymore. Though she knew that was a treacherous impression. Neither Lupin nor Longbottom knew the truth about Riddle.

Before long they arrived at professor Slughorn's office. It looked just like the last time Hermione had been invited to a Slug Party though that was - or would be - 50 years in the future. The room was large but packed with people. Hermione recognized a few students, members of the Slug Club. Of course most of them were Slytherins, no surprise there. But there were also other guests. Hermione didn't know them but guessed they were either important members of the Ministry of Magic, famous Quidditch players or other celebrities.

"How about we get something to eat?" Lupin asked and pointed to an extravagant looking buffet.

Hermione agreed gladly. She had skipped lunch in favour of another, fruitless, library session and was rather hungry now. But before the three of them could reach the buffet somehow professor Slughorn appeared out of thin air.
He beamed at Hermione and Lupin but seemed to overlook Longbottom somehow. "How nice of you to join our little get-together, Ms DeCerto, Mr Lupin," Slughorn said to the both of them.

"Good evening, sir," Hermione said politely. "Thanks again for inviting me."

Slughorn beamed at her, "Not at all, not at all. One of my most promising students, you are. Wouldn't have wanted to miss you. And of course I wanted to introduce you to someone."

Slughorn then seemed to look for someone before he waved at a man standing a few metres away chatting with a group of people. The rather plump looking man smiled at Slughorn and came over to them.

"Anthony, there you are." Slughorn beamed at the man. He seemed to be in his mid-twenties, with thin brown, greasy hair and a rather prominent nose. "Now, Ms DeCerto, this is Anthony Vickers a very promising attorney of the Ministry's Court and someday he will be Highinquisitor, I'm sure." Here Slughorn winked at Vickers blatantly.

Hermione frowned at Slughorn. Why was he introducing them?

"And this, Anthony, is the young lady I've been talking about. This is Hermione DeCerto," Slughorn said as he turned to Vickers.

Vickers extended a hand towards Hermione and she shook it though it felt rather sweaty. "A pleasure meeting you, Ms DeCerto."

Hermione nodded. She still didn't get what that was about. But then Slughorn brought light in the matter with his next sentence.

"You must now, Ms DeCerto, Anthony has now arrived at the point where a man wants to settle down, have a family…"

That was when Hermione finally understood and her eyebrows shot up. Slughorn, the Dating Doctor? She shot a glance at this Vickers man. He was looking at her with interest in his eyes and Hermione felt a shiver running down her spine. The only way a woman could be successful was by marrying a yuppie like him? The forties were surely full of options for a young, talented woman. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes.

"Er… that is… er… fascinating," Hermione couldn't stop her voice getting higher at the end of the sentence so that it sounded more like a question than a polite statement.

"Say, Hermione," Lupin broke in on this absurd conversation. "Didn't you promise Diana to be right back? I think she is waiting for you."

Hermione turned to Lupin and frowned perplexed. What was he going on about? She never promised Diana anything. Then she saw Lupin wink at her inconspicuously.

"Oh, yes. Of course!" Hermione said, then turned to Slughorn and Vickers and continued exasperatingly. "I am so sorry but I have to go, someone is waiting for me."

"Not at all, Ms DeCerto. Don't let your friend waiting," Slughorn beamed at her then continued to Vickers. "See? What a reliable young lady."

Hermione quickly hurried away from the potions professor and his match-making intents.

"Thanks for saving me," she whispered to Lupin as they headed for the buffet table.
Lupin grinned at her and said, obviously more amused with the whole matter than Hermione was, "For a moment there, I was debating whether you wanted my help or not…"

Hermione prodded him in his side but smiled back at him.

"Really, that old pimp!" Longbottom looked back with a sour look on his face.

Hermione had to laugh at the whole event. Her laughter seemed to be contagious as her two friends were starting to laugh too. Then they finally managed to get some food so they sat down at a free table with loaded plates. After the Slughorn fiasco nothing bad happened and Hermione was glad to just enjoy a cheerful evening with her friends.

Some time later Lupin excused himself as he had obviously seen Stella Lovegood walking by. Hermione nearly fainted as she heard the name. Was that girl somehow related to Luna?

"He's a crush on her," Longbottom informed her as she looked after Lupin's retreating back.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. A Lupin and a Lovegood? Well, why not? She imagined Remus Lupin going out with Luna Lovegood and had to giggle at the idea.

Later that evening Hermione stood a little bit away from the other people and watched them chat. Longbottom had just gone to get them something to drink. Hermione hoped Slughorn and his bachelor friend wouldn't find her.

Suddenly somebody whispered in her ear, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Hermione spun around and found Riddle standing right beside her smirking down at her with his strangely emotionless face. She scolded herself for not being more vigilant. The one person she had wanted to avoid was standing right beside her.

"It's nice," she answered and her voice was just as emotionless as Riddle's face. Then she added before she could stop herself, "Aside from the company." And looked pointedly at Riddle.

He raised one eyebrow, his empty smile not dropping from his face though Hermione could tell that she had managed to make him angry again. She had a talent for that it seemed.

"Careful, DeCerto, you don't want to appear ill-mannered, do you?" Riddle hissed at her.

Hermione took a step away from him. "What do you want, Riddle?" she asked him and was surprised that her voice didn't shake because he was scaring her again.

"Why, I just wanted to congratulate you," Riddle said nonchalantly though there was a certain amount of coldness in his voice. "For being such an exceptionally good liar."

"Not at all, Riddle," she replied. "We both know that that crown belongs to you."

Suddenly Riddle stepped forwards and quick as a lightening clutched her right wrist. Hermione gasped as she felt his hand closing around her wrist and she looked up at him with wide and frightened eyes. He wasn't going to do something here, was he? Not when the room was full of people, potential witnesses? Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she felt Riddle radiating off this raw, aggressive magic. He stared down at her and his face was still an expressionless mask apart from his eyes. There was a dark and murderous glint in his grey eyes. Hermione shuddered as she saw the cruel coldness.
Then Riddle leaned forwards and whispered viciously in Hermione's ear, "Don't get complacent. You shouldn't think that I'm going to let you get away with your impudence."

Hermione stiffened as she felt his hot breath, which accompanied his icy cold words, on her skin. Her instincts were screaming to run away as fast as possible. But she knew from experience that running from him wasn't going to help her situation. So she gathered all her remaining courage, stood on tiptoes to reach his ear and laid her hand lightly on his arm then she whispered to him,

"Don't worry. I won't get complacent. Because I know who you are, Voldemort."

Hermione could feel him tense as she uttered the last word and his grip on her right wrist was becoming painfully tight. He stepped away and stared down at her. Hermione could see shock and a glint of upcoming suspicion in his eyes before he controlled his emotions again and glared at her furiously.

Hermione was sure that he was either going to slap her now or worse curse her. But she was saved from finding out which one as Longbottom appeared beside her. He was glancing at her worriedly and then his eyes narrowed as his gaze wandered to Riddle.

"Is everything alright?" he asked Hermione but continued to glare at Riddle.

Hermione felt Riddle releasing her wrist. His face was blank again as he looked somewhat bored at Longbottom.

"Of course. I was just talking with DeCerto here," Riddle said in an indifferent voice.

"Sure," Longbottom said sarcastically while he still eyed Riddle angrily. Then he turned to Hermione and said in a kinder voice, "Let's go, shall we?"

Hermione just nodded at him. She was rather glad for the opportunity to leave Riddle.

"Really, that bastard!" Longbottom huffed after they had walked away from Riddle. "Who does he think he is?" Then he turned to Hermione and looked at her concernedly. "He didn't do anything, did he?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, it's okay." Then she chuckled and said, "I'm actually surprised he didn't curse me on the spot. Thanks for saving me by the way."

"Anytime," Longbottom said, smiling down at her.

"But now to something much more interesting," Hermione said in an amused tone. "So, what's going on between Amarys and Stella Lovegood?"

Longbottom laughed out loud. "Stella and Amarys. That's a looong story. And we are all still waiting for the happy ending."

Hermione was lying in her soft bed in the dormitory. In the end it had been rather late until she had left the party. And she was surprised that it had even been fun.

Well, parts of it.

The part where Riddle had cornered her hadn't been that much fun. Hermione turned around in her bed in search for a more comfortable position.
Why did she tell him?

She had called him by his name, his chosen name. Voldemort. Now he was not only enraged by her outsmarting him with her little stunt during potions. No, he could be certain now that she knew things about him she wasn't supposed to know. That was safe to assume. She wasn't supposed to know that name. Hermione didn't think that at this point in time very many people knew his name. Most likely only his junior Death Eaters. Telling him had certainly been a bad move. But she couldn't change that now, could she? Hermione stifled a yawn. She would deal with the Tom Riddle problem tomorrow. Now she was just too tired to think straight.

Hermione ran. Down the wet path. Through puddles of mud and over roots breaking through the flattened earth of the path. They were after her. She could hear them chasing her. Somewhere behind her in the dark. She knew she would never be able to outrun them. But every metre she ran meant more safety for Harry and Ron.

Hermione hadn't been able to sleep tonight. So she had left the tent. But as she had walked a little bit away from their tent suddenly she had heard voices. She had crept closer, silently, cautiously, her wand drawn in her hand. And then she had seen them, Death Eaters. They had been searching the surroundings. Hermione's heart had nearly stopped. They had been dangerously close to the tent already. Hermione hadn't had much of a choice then. She needed to lure them away from her friends. So she had attacked them and that was why she was running right now. Away from the tent and her sleeping friends.

A curse shot by her. So close that she could feel its power burning on the skin of her cheek. It was no use to run anymore. She had to fight now. There were four Death Eaters so her chances of winning were not high. As Hermione passed the next tree she flung herself behind its trunk and didn't hesitate to fire curses at her pursuers. Those men were hunting her and her friends. They wouldn't hesitate to kill. So Hermione couldn't afford hesitation either. She hurled curses at them, dark curses, evil curses. This was war. It wasn't about fighting Dark Magic, it was about fighting Lord Voldemort. If Hermione had to taint herself by using dark spells then that was a sacrifice she would have to make.

She could see one of the Death Eaters crumble to the ground as he was hit by her curse. She shot another curse at the next Death Eater and her aim was true again. An incoming spell tore open her right arm and blood started to flow down her arm, her hand and dropped to the ground but Hermione wasn't noticing it. She fired another curse and the next Death Eater fell.

Before she could cast a curse at the last Death Eater he vanished into thin air just to reappear right before her. Hermione's breath stopped as she saw the smirk underneath the white mask. Then the Death Eater grasped her right wrist brutally and Hermione lost hold of her wand. Her eyes widened in fear as she stared into the empty eyes behind the mask. The man laughed cruelly before he leaned forward and whispered coldly in her ear,

"You will regret this, bitch!"

Then he hit her hard in the face so that Hermione was hurled to the ground before his feet. Black dots were dancing before her eyes but her mind was still focused and she felt the cold hate creeping up inside her. She wasn't going to allow this man to kill her. If she did, the man would then fulfill his true mission, to find Harry Potter. Hermione searched with her hand blindly on the ground. Then she felt the smooth surface of her wand. Her eyes shot up at the man standing before her. She wasn't going to allow him to find Harry and Ron, she thought and in her eyes burned a ferocious fire…
The next day Hermione woke early, at least for a Saturday. Her room mates were still lying in their beds, fast asleep. Hermione got up and left the Gryffindor common room half an hour later, fully dressed and prepared for yet another day in this foreign decade. As she arrived at the Great Hall she sat down at a relatively empty Gryffindor table. There were just some first and second years sitting at their places and eating their cereals. It was quite a relief that she was no longer the target of all the curses and hexes those Riddle-fans had hurled at her.

Hermione slumped down on a seat at Gryffindor table and poured herself a coffee while she scanned the other house tables. Ravenclaw’s was crowded, as expected, whereas Hufflepuff’s was just as empty as her own house’s table. Then Hermione risked a glance at the Slytherin table. She was relieved as she didn't see Riddle there, though she saw Malfoy sitting at the table looking rather tired. Malfoy stared right back at her and Hermione quickly averted her eyes. She wasn't in the mood for a staring contest. So she was rather glad as she saw Malfoy leave the Great Hall a short time later. She leisurely ate her breakfast and then left the Great Hall in direction for the library.

The castle was empty as most of the students were still lying in their beds. Hermione walked down a long corridor as suddenly the door she just passed opened and a pair of hands grabbed her and pulled her inside. Hermione gasped as she felt the strong hands grabbing her upper arms before she was hurled against the wall. She led out a hiss of pain as her back hit the wall hard. Then she looked up with wide eyes and found herself staring into a pair of icy cold grey eyes.

Riddle tightened his grip on her arms as he pushed her brutally against the stone wall. Hermione squirmed and tried to get away from him. But he was way stronger than her and had no problem holding her firmly in place.

"Let me go!" she shrieked.

"Who are you really?" Riddle said his voice a hiss, icy cold and demanding.

"W…What do you mean?" Hermione answered shakily.

Riddle pushed her into the wall again. "You know exactly what I mean!" his eyes were boring into her again. They had a red tinge around them. "How do you know that name?" his voice now a deadly command.

Hermione swallowed.

What now? The situation was completely out of her control. He was too strong and she couldn't get at her wand. She was scared. His grip was now so tight it was hurting her. But she mustn't tell him. He must never find out who she was. And where or rather when she was from.

"Answer me!" Riddle yelled at her.

She looked fearfully at his face. His look was murderous. His eyes were glowing red. They bored into her and she could again see this unbound hate in them. Suddenly she could feel something tugging at her mind, tearing at her thoughts and trying to gain entry to her inner most secrets.

Legilimency!

He was trying to rip the answers from her if she wasn't willing to give them freely! No, he wasn't allowed to see them. If he ever found out who she was - about what Ron, Harry and she had done -
he would find a way to stop them. A way to save himself and destroy the peaceful future Hermione had fought for. The future her friends had died for. She raised her Occlumency shields. She knew they were strong maybe he wouldn't be able to break them. But would he stop, now that he knew something was not right with her? He would never give up. If he didn't get his answers now, he would...

Hermione hesitated. Do what? Threaten my friends? Murder my family? Kill my love? There's nothing left he can take from me.

She could feel a new resolution flowing through her. She raised her head and gazed into his red eyes. The panic was completely gone from her as she stared at him. She was determined now. He was not going to win this. She owed that to Ron, Harry and all her friends who had died.

And then she used a spell she had never used before. One that didn't need a wand to be performed. One that was made to steal information but could be used to hurt too.

Legilimens!

She could feel her Occlumency shields change. They had been a steady and solid barrier before but now they moved. She could move them. And she did. She rammed them against Riddle's mind. Faintly she could hear Riddle take in a surprised breath of air. But she had to concentrate on other things right now. There was a wall around Riddle's mind. It protected his mind and held her out. Those were his Occlumency shields. She tested them, she pushed against them. Then she attacked them with all the force she had. Riddle let go of her arms and stepped away from her. Hermione still stared at him unmoving. His Occlumency shields shook under her attacks violently. But they still held her of. She did not stop her onslaught though. She summoned all her power.

Then she sensed it again, that foreign magic in her that she had felt the first time during Transfiguration. It was still entwined tightly with her own magic. But this time Hermione didn't just look at it. She tried to use it. And that foreign magic seemed to cooperate with her. So she used the combined magic and struck Riddle's shields heavily. His shields crumbled and then disappeared. Hermione had now access to all his thoughts and memories. But she didn't want to look at them. Riddle's mind was evil and she didn't want to get infected by his darkness. There were other things she could do though. She didn't look at his mind but she ripped and struck at it. Riddle fell to his knees while clutching his head. He moaned in pain.

Hermione retreated then and left his mind.

She noticed that she still stood leaning against the stone wall where he had pressed her. She hadn't moved a bit. But Riddle had. He had moved a few steps away from her and was now trying to get on his feet. He looked at her. Hermione could see shock, hate and anger on his face. But there was something more. His eyes were back to grey. The glowing red was gone. And there was another emotion in them. An emotion she had never related with Voldemort.

He was afraid.

"Stay away from me, Riddle," Hermione whispered. Her voice void of all emotion. Then she turned and ran away from him.

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Just like Hermione had told him, Riddle did stay away from her. If they accidentally met in one of the many corridors in the castle, Riddle would ignore her. He didn't even look her way. When they were having a class together, he didn't acknowledge her presence in any way, even if she was sitting
right beside him. It was the same when they were eating in the Great Hall. Riddle never looked over to the Gryffindor table. In short, he was completely and thoroughly ignoring Hermione.

It didn't put her mind at ease, on the contrary his impassive behaviour was making her nervous. She knew Riddle as she knew Voldemort and he was a lot of things but certainly not a person who gave up easily. The only reason for his aloofness would be that he was planning something. Hermione tried to evade him whenever possible. But at the same time she knew that if he really wanted to get to her she wouldn't be able to stop him. The only way to really get out of his reach was to leave Hogwarts altogether but for Hermione leaving Hogwarts was not an option at the moment. She needed to get her hands on the Elder Wand and the best way to achieve that was by staying close to Dumbledore.

So weeks went by and very soon the castle was covered with a thick layer of snow. Hermione usually loved the cold weather but under the circumstances she couldn't quite enjoy it. So it was a cold Friday morning as Hermione entered the Transfiguration classroom and sat down on her seat next to Longbottom, Lupin and Weasley. She looked at the three boys beside her. Weasley seemed to be half-asleep, Lupin was re-checking his essay and Longbottom had apparently fallen in a state of panic while he glanced over Lupin's shoulder at his essay.

"Why's your essay this long?" Longbottom asked the other boy in a rather high pitched voice. "I thought we were supposed to write two foot."

Lupin didn't even look up as he answered in his composed voice, "We were. But I got carried away 'cause it was so interesting."

Here Longbottom stared at his friend incredulous before he said slowly, "Let me get this straight. You wrote twice as much as we had to because 'it was so interesting'?" The blond shook his head and continued, "You are crazy, you know that?"

Then Longbottom turned to Hermione and said, "He's crazy, isn't he, Hermione?"

Hermione grinned at him then she reached into her bag and produced her own essay and said, turned to Longbottom, "I don't know, Marc. I actually wrote about five feet but I still think I left so much out."

Hermione could see a small smile on Lupin's face as he continued to read his essay and Longbottom stared at her for some time, then again shook his head and mumbled something like, "Crazy super-brains." before he tried to smooth his crumpled two-feet-essay on the table.

Hermione smiled serenely as she arranged her parchment, quill and ink-well on her table. She was grateful that she had found such nice people here in the past. Without Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom the whole thing would have been even worse. Of course it still wasn't exactly a joyous experience, Hermione thought as she remembered who was occupying the seat right behind her. She could almost feel Riddle's stares boring into the back of her head. It made her nervous. Even more so as she was firmly convinced that he was planning something. Something evil to get back at him after his Legilimency attempt had backfired on him. Hermione looked up as she heard someone enter the classroom. Professor Dumbledore walked up to the teacher's desk. His blindingly-orange robes were clashing horribly with his auburn hair. Hermione grinned at her transfiguration teacher's eccentric taste of clothing.

"Good morning, class," Professor Dumbledore greeted them. He beamed at the students and continued, "I hope you found it as entertaining to write the essay about the transfiguration of magical objects as I undoubtedly will find reading them."
Then Dumbledore waved his wand and the essays flew from the tables of the students and piled up on the teacher's desk.

"Now, let's begin with our lesson," he said. "What do you know about devices to store magic in?"

Hermione frowned at the question. She didn't know the answer. She had never heard that it was even possible to store magic somewhere.

"No-one?" Dumbledore asked in a friendly manner. He obviously hadn't expected them to know. Though Hermione was sure that Riddle might know about it. But he never answered any questions Dumbledore asked them.

"Then let me enlighten you," Professor Dumbledore continued as he produced a small, black-velvet pouch out of his pocket. He pulled a small grey pebble from the pouch. "This is just a normal stone. A stone you could find at the shore of any lake." Professor Dumbledore elaborated as he saw the curious faces of his students.

Then he waved his wand over the pebble in his hand. Hermione could see a glow engulfing the stone shortly before it died down again and the stone looked like it had before. Hermione wondered what the spell had done to the stone. Dumbledore, seemingly satisfied with his wandwork, put his wand away and handed the small pebble to Weasley.

"Please, Mr Weasley, tell your class mates what you can feel." Dumbledore said as Weasley accepted the stone from him.

Weasley frowned at the stone in his hand and then he raised his eyebrows in wonder.

"It's radiating magic!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, exactly, Mr Weasley," Professor Dumbledore beamed at him fondly.

"What happened to the stone, sir?" A Slytherin girl, Susan Yaxley, asked curiously.

Dumbledore smiled at her before he began to explain, "I have changed the nature of the stone. Before I used the spell, the stone was a lifeless object without an ounce of magic inside. What I did is I transferred a small portion of my magic inside the stone. Not much, just the equivalent amount of magic used to produce a simple spell, like the Levitation charm for example. In doing such, I transfigured the stone into a magical object."

Hermione saw Weasley staring at the stone in his hand in wonder as professor Dumbledore continued.

"Now, can you think of a use such a transfiguration could have?"

"You could store up magic and use it as a back up?" one of the students said.

Dumbledore beamed and said, "Yes, that certainly would work. You could store magic inside an object and use it later to boost your magic in times of need. But there is another use for this transfiguration. Can you think of any object you know that might be created by transferring magic into it?"

Dumbledore waited here and after a while Lupin slowly raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr Lupin?" Dumbledore encouraged him.
"Um… the Sorting Hat?" Lupin asked slowly.

"Yes, very good. Five points to Gryffindor." Dumbledore smiled kindly at his student. "Yes, the Sorting Hat is a very good example for an object that was created by transferring magic. It was, as you all know, created by one of Hogwarts' founders. Godric Gryffindor made the Sorting Hat all those years ago by transferring his magic into an old hat. Of course he used more advanced spells to create the Sorting Hat than I did on the stone right now but the basics are the same. It is the exact same spell that underlies every magical object you know. And although it takes much more to create something like the Sorting Hat, the fundamental idea to store magic inside an object remains the same."

Dumbledore lifted up the black pouch in his hand and said, "I want each of you to take a stone and try to transfer some of your magic into it. The incantation is 'Confero'."

Hermione waited for her turn to take one of the pebbles out of the pouch. She looked at the inconspicuous stone lying on the palm of her hand. It was indeed, like Dumbledore had told them, a totally ordinary stone. Nothing special and certainly not magical. As Hermione looked at the stone she mused about what Dumbledore had just told them.

*Every magical object is constructed in the same way! Objects like the Sorting Hat and …the Elder Wand?*

Hermione breathed in deeply and closed her fist around the small stone in her hand. But what did it help her to know how the wand was created? Hermione thought frustrated. What she needed to know was how it could be used to bring her back where she belonged. But to know how the wand was created might be the key to the understanding of how it worked.

*Transferring magic…*

To create a magical object one had to transfer magic into the object. That's what Dumbledore just told them. Didn't she know about a strange and foreign magic that had inexplicably appeared out of no-where? Hermione opened her fist again and stared contemplatively at the pebble. That alien magic inside of her had appeared the first time as she had tried to transfigure that black lizard during class. Before that incident she had never felt anything remotely similar to this strange magic that seemed to be interwoven with her own magic.

The second time she had sensed this magic was the day Riddle had threatened her again and had tried to use Legilimency on her. Back then Hermione had even used the magic. Without the help of the strange magic she would never have been able to destroy Riddle's Occlumency shields.

So what exactly was that new magic? Where did it come from?

So far Hermione had more or less ignored the occurrence of the alien magic. It certainly *had* been strange but she hadn't put any energy in finding out what exactly had caused this magic to appear. There had been more pressing matters to take care of, finding a way home, getting the Elder Wand or not getting killed by Riddle for example. But maybe that strange magic was more important than she had thought.

She had never experienced something like that magic before… *Before what?*

It then hit Hermione and she knew where the magic had come from. It was like she had known it all along. It was easy, really.

The new magic had never appeared before she had travelled back through time – before she had
destroyed the Elder Wand! As she had snapped that wand in two a flow of magic had started to pour out of the wand and inside of her. Hermione had thought the Elder Wand's magic had left her again. As she had woken up on that meadow near the village of Steepleton more than fifty years in the past she hadn't sensed any remains of the Elder Wand's magic. So she had just assumed the magic had been gone altogether.

But what if the Elder Wand's magic had never left her again? What if it was still inside of her, somewhere?

"Hey, Mione? What's wrong?"

Hermione looked up and found Weasley staring at her questioningly. He was holding one of the pebbles in his left hand and his wand in the other.

"Don't you wanna try?"

Hermione looked at the stone in her own hand then said to Weasley, "Sure, I was just thinking about something."

Weasley grinned at her and said, "Yeah, yeah, I know that. Happens to me always during History class. Wonder why?"

Hermione smiled and then focused her attention back at the task at hand. She put the stone down on the table and then brandished her wand while she muttered,

"Confero!"

Instantly she felt something pulling at her magic. She had to concentrate but then she was able to influence the direction in which her magic flowed. She readjusted the direction so that it now flowed towards the small pebble on her desk. Then she tried to change the amount of magic she aimed at the pebble. But just as she put more of her magic into it the flow flickered and then died down.

Hermione frowned at the pebble in front of her and then tried again. She managed to direct the flow of her magic at the pebble but as she tried to put more magic into it the flow broke again. It seemed transferring magic wasn't as easy as it had seemed when professor Dumbledore had demonstrated it. Hermione looked up from her table and scanned the classroom. She wanted to see how the other students progressed. Weasley was waving his wand furiously at his pebble as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead but it seemed his efforts were futile. Longbottom who was sitting right beside Weasley seemed to have given up completely and now amused himself by watching Weasley's fruitless attempts. Judging by the frustration on Lupin's face he wasn't any better than Weasley.

It must be really hard then, Hermione thought. If not even Lupin can manage the spell.

Hermione let her gaze wander over the classroom but she didn't spot any student who did better than her or Lupin. But maybe there was one who could do it after all, Hermione thought. She gathered up all her Gryffindor courage and threw a glance at Riddle who sat behind her.

Riddle sat at his table and looked down at the stone in front of him as he held his white wand elegantly in one hand. Hermione could see a frown appear between his eyebrows. Then he waved his wand over the stone but he didn't mutter the incantation. Hermione was surprised that he tried it nonverbal. She could see Riddle narrow his eyes in concentration as he stared at the stone. After some time he ended the spell. Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise as she saw the same bright glow they had seen on Dumbledore's stone engulfing now Riddle's stone. Riddle had obviously
managed to transfer some of his magic into the stone. Hermione was impressed. Though she really shouldn't be surprised. No-one had ever doubted that Riddle was an exceptional wizard.

Hermione then noticed that Riddle was staring at something behind her. His eyes were glinting with cold anger and loathing but she was surprised to also see defiance in them. Trying to not attract his attention Hermione followed Riddle's gaze and found Dumbledore. The transfiguration teacher was standing at the other end of the classroom and was looking at Riddle. Hermione was sure he had seen Riddle accomplish the task he had set for his students. But Dumbledore didn't award him any points or acknowledged Riddle's success in any way. Then after what must have been nothing more than a few seconds Dumbledore looked away and turned to a student to help him.

Hermione risked another glance at Riddle. He was looking pensively at the small stone in front of him then he waved his wand over the stone. The small pebble started to melt like ice in the sun. After some time there was nothing left.

Hermione turned away from Riddle. That had been really strange, she decided. Not the hate she had seen on Riddle's face and not his reaction at being ignored by Dumbledore. No, Hermione was taken aback by Dumbledore's behaviour. She hadn't seen hate or anger in Dumbledore's expression as he had looked at Riddle but he still had ignored him. Hermione had never seen Dumbledore do anything like that before and certainly not to a student. But then again at this point in time Dumbledore already knew what Riddle had done. He knew, though he couldn't prove it, that it was Riddle who had killed Moaning Myrtle.

Dumbledore's cold behaviour still disturbed Hermione. It was just so out of character for him to be anything but condoning and kind.

Later that day, Hermione was standing at the top most point of the Astronomy tower. Classes were over for today and she had climbed the Astronomy tower and was now standing on the platform outside. She leaned against the balustrade and looked over Scotland's rough beauty. Her gaze wandered over the lake glistening from the last sunrays of the day, over the snow covered tree tops of the Forbidden Forest and beyond Hogwarts' boundaries to the rugged mountains at the horizon. Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh cold air. A blanket of snow had fallen over the land. The peaceful scenery was somehow calming on Hermione's troubled mind.

Everything was so uncertain. Where would she go from here? Back to the future and to a wartorn land, where she belonged but where nothing waited for her? Or would she stay here, in the past? Living in a foreign world and watching the future unfold again? Unable to help?

Hermione sighed. She opened her eyes again and looked at the white landscape in front of her. Then she turned around. She hadn't come here to indulge in depressing thoughts. She didn't know whether she could manage to travel forwards in time. She didn't even know if such a thing was possible at all. But she would try. She needed to be successful lest she caused a ripple effect that would tear the future apart.

The Elder Wand seemed to be the best chance to get home.

Hermione then concentrated on her magic. She summoned the steady flow of power that always pulsed through her. It had always been there ever since she could remember. Though in her childhood she hadn't quite known that it was magic. But she had always known that it was a good thing. She tried to evoke all of her magic. She felt it inside of her, that familiar force. But now she needed to find the part of that force that was not so familiar. The part that was new and didn't quite belong to her. Hermione explored her magic in search of traces of the Elder Magic.
Beads of sweat were building on her forehead as she tried to find those strands of foreign magic. Quickly she felt exhausted as she had to concentrate very hard. Just as she was going to give up she found something. There it was, deeply embedded in her own magic, were strands of a different kind of magic. It was the same power she had felt during this transfiguration lesson and as Riddle had attacked her with Legilimency. Hermione tried to grasp this power, she tried to draw upon it or to influence it in any way. But this power seemed not be willing to cooperate. It slithered away from her grasp whenever she came near it. But the longer she tried, the more familiar the power felt. Hermione wasn't able to use that new magic but now she could see what it was. She had felt that force before. She hadn't been able to recognize it until now because the first time she had felt it, it had overflown her body in a much larger quantity. But now that she looked closely there was this unmistakable similarity. This foreign magic, interwoven with her own, was indeed the Elder Wand's Magic that still resided in her body.

Another evening wasted, Hermione thought as she left the hiding place behind the suit of armor. She had spent a few hours sitting there on the floor, facing the door to Dumbledore's office. It was rather frustrating. Dumbledore's daily routine was unpredictable. Sometimes he stayed in his office, working on Merlin knew what, until the early hours of morning. Sometimes he left his office at the early evening just to return hours later. He was unpredictable. Hermione needed time to slip into the office and search it. That would be after she had disabled the wards protecting Dumbledore's office. She couldn't have it that the professor caught her red handed when she was going through his things.

The main problem of this venture was that it was Dumbledore she was dealing with. He had a vast knowledge of magic. So if Hermione broke into his office and in the process brought down his warding spells she had to be extremely cautious. He could have all installed some spells in his office Hermione had never heard off. In triggering them she could consecutively get whole thing was rather risky. But it was a risk she had to take. At this point Dumbledore's office was her only chance to get her hands on something useful about the Deathly Hallows. And if she was caught...

Well, she would go over that bridge when she had to.

But she couldn't give up this venture. Not now that she had found out about the Elder Magic, still inside her. It had become most essential to learn more about the Elder Wand. She needed to learn how the wand worked. Or more specifically, how it was constructed. Each magical object was created by transferring magic. That was what Dumbledore had told them during transfiguration. The magic now inside of Hermione was exactly the magic that had served to create the Elder Wand.

But for today, Hermione thought as she stifled a yawn, she would leave the observing business and get some sleep. So she walked back to her dormitory, of course always careful not to alert any teachers or patrolling prefects to her presence. It was after curfew after all. Hermione felt quite exhausted tonight. This sneaking around in the castle at night was really bothersome. She couldn't comprehend how Harry and Ron had seemed to enjoy it during their days at Hogwarts. Harry had even sneaked out of the castle into Hogsmeade during his third year. Hermione had to smile faintly at that memory. She herself had never approved of them wandering the castle at night.

And now, look at me.

Harry and Ron would be surely proud of her now. Though the circumstances in which she was forced to break school rules were much more severe than they had been back in her time period. Hermione rounded another corner. She just had to walk down this corridor and in the next one was the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. She really looked forward to have a reunion with her soft pillow.
As Hermione walked down the dark corridor she suddenly felt a strong source of magic heading directly at her. She turned around quickly and raised a shield. She could just see the eerie purple light of the curse illuminate the corridor before it smashed into her shield. She could feel the force of the curse as it was absorbed by her shield. That hadn't been a harmless curse.

She saw a figure standing in the corridor but it was too dark to make out who it was. Hermione raised her wand at that figure ready to defend her again if need be. Then she felt a curse surging towards her. Again it came from behind her. There were two of them! Attacking her from two different sides. Hermione summoned her magic and raised the Scutulatus shield which incased her whole body. While raising the shield she stepped towards the wall of the corridor so that she stood with her back to the wall. The curse collided with her shield. Hermione could feel the shield drawing at her magic to stop the curse.

They were attacking her heavily, firing serious curses at her. Hermione could see the second attacker standing down the corridor in the opposite direction from the first one. Hermione was trapped in between.

Who were those people?

*No, not now! Concentrate!*

Hermione aimed her wand at the first attacker. She canceled her shield to be able to attack. Then she swished her wand in a fluid movement and a deep red curse left the tip of her wand. It sped towards the dark figure in the corridor.

Hermione could see her opponent raise a shield. It shone bright-blue in the dark corridor. She recognized it as a simple Protego. That was not nearly enough to stop her curse. And she was right. Her curse didn't even lose momentum as it shattered the Protego shield and then crashed into her opponent's chest who was propelled backwards and landed hard on the floor. Hermione didn't have time to concentrate further on this opponent as she felt another incoming curse. The second assailant had cast another curse. She sprang out of its way.

The curse rushed by her missing her by mere inches. As it passed she could feel it emanate vast quantities of strong magic. It hit the floor a few meters away fizzling dangerously. They were certainly not playing around.

Hermione just faced the second attacker as she heard steps behind her. She turned her head slightly and stiffened. There were more people creeping up on her. She was outnumbered. There were now at least five opponents. In the bare corridor she couldn't take cover anywhere. Hermione had barely time to raise a shield before she was attacked by a barrage of curses.

The curses hit her shield now heavily. The Scutulatus shield was a powerful spell but it wouldn't hold them up forever. She could feel the shield losing force with each spell that hit. How was it possible that she was attacked inside of Hogwarts? Didn't no-one hear the fight? Obviously not since no-one came running for her.

Suddenly Hermione saw a bright golden curse sped towards her. She didn't recognize it but she could feel it was very potent. The magic crackled in the air as the unknown curse rushed towards her. It crashed into her shield and Hermione had no chance of maintaining her protection. The golden curse was far too strong. It broke her shield down effortlessly before it hit her. It felt like she was hit by a car as she was hurled backwards. She hit the floor hard and skidded a few metres before she came to a halt. Black dots danced before her eyes. Her whole body was numb and aching at the same time. She only remotely felt her wand leaving her hand as the Disarming spell hit her. Then she heard steps. They were echoing in the now deathly quiet corridor.
Hermione wasn't surprised. Somehow she had known it since the first spell had been cast. Her suspicion had become certainty as she had seen the force behind the golden curse.

Tom Riddle was smiling down at her nonchalantly.

"Nice of you to join us," he said in his smooth voice.

Hermione stared up at him. That was bad. Really bad. She was unarmed, hurt and Lord Voldemort was out to get his revenge.

"I hope I didn't hurt you there," he said in mock-concern before he raised his wand at her.

The last thing Hermione saw was the red light of the Stunner before blackness engulfed her.

"Enervate!"

Hermione groaned in pain as her senses were coming back to her. She opened her eyes. She was staring at the black sky above her. Stars were twinkling down at her. Hermione was hurting. Her chest hurt where the golden curse had hit her and her back where she had landed painfully on the ground after she had been hit. The worst was the sharp throbbing pain coming from her left wrist. It was a familiar pain and she was sure the wrist was broken. Hermione rolled to her side and tried slowly to sit up. She felt shaky and cold.

"Back among the living?" Hermione heard a deep voice ask. It was followed by several snickers.

She blinked and tried to focus her eyes again. She then looked up at Riddle. He was standing a few paces away from her and was smirking down at her. In the corner of her eyes she could see that she was surrounded. There was a flicker of blond hair. Malfoy? And there beside Riddle stood Avery. How very nice. The old crowd united again.

There were more of them. Hermione thought she recognized Alphard Black among them. A Slytherin seventh year. And there, was that Lestrange? She could see at least five of them. And Riddle of course. He was standing there in the middle of his followers, radiating an air of authority as he looked down at her triumphantly.

Hermione felt her heart beating ridiculously fast. She was surrounded by her enemies. She was unarmed and outnumbered. There was no doubt in her mind what Riddle planned. She had defied him and now he was here to get his revenge.

"Now, DeCerto. You didn't really think you could challenge me and then just walk away, did you?" Riddle asked her lightly.

Though his tone was conversational Hermione felt a chill darting down her spine as he spoke. She looked up at his face. He showed no emotions besides the evil smirk that tucked at the corners of his mouth. And his eyes? They were deathly cold and his gaze was hard as steel as it bore into her.

"You know," he continued in his eerily composed voice. "You have been getting on my nerves for quite some time now."

Riddle walked towards her and began to circle her like a predator stalking its prey. Hermione tried to steady her breathing. But it was no use.
She could hear the soft sounds of his steps, then he said, "I have been lenient towards you. But not anymore."

Riddle stopped circling her and stood right in front of her. He extended a hand and Hermione twitched as she felt him touching her face. He caressed her cheek gently. She looked up at him with huge eyes, feeling like a deer trapped in the headlights of a car. Riddle looked down at her, smiling his cruel smile. He clearly enjoyed her fear.

Then he tucked a wisp of her hair behind her ear as he said, "You dared to mock me. I am not willing to tolerate that sort of behaviour."

Then he raised his wand. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as Riddle pointed his wand at her. He whispered in a soft almost gentle voice,

"Crucio!"

Pure pain hit her. It was not the first time she had been put under the Cruciatrus curse. But there was no getting used to that kind of pain. It ripped at her body, at her every nerve. There was no way to block the pain out. It was all-consuming. Her mind was not longer able to think coherently. There was only the agony. She fell down on the ground. Her body twitched uncontrollably. It felt like she was burned alive. It felt like a thousand knives slashing at her, peeling the flesh from her very bones.

Then, it stopped.

She lay on the ground, tremors shook her body. Her breath was uneasy and cold sweat was running down her face.

Someone chuckled in her ear, "That is what awaits those who defy me."

Voldemort! Hermione's pain clouded mind apprehended. He was crouching down beside her, scoffing at her. Was he going to kill her now? What was it to him? One life more or less? He was a murderer anyway! Cold, calculating, merciless. She trembled in fear. Hot tears were running down her cheeks. She was so afraid of him, of what he could do.

"Now, you tell me what I want to know! You tell me where you come from and what you are trying to do here! And you tell me where you got your information about me!" She heard him say in a commanding voice that wouldn't tolerate disobedience.

There he was again. Wanting to know about her past, about his future. She must never give away her secrets. She would doom the future to a terrible fate... but he was going to torture her. He was going to kill her if she didn't tell him.

Death. Hermione didn't want to die. But...

was it really so horrifying? She would meet them all again. Her friends. Her family. Harry. Ron! No! She was not going to tell Voldemort. She was not going to betray her friends. If she had to die then she would!

Hermione propped herself up on a shaky arm and managed to get into a sitting position. Her body ached everywhere. She felt sick and looked up at Voldemort. He was still crouched before her, smirking down at her evilly.

"No," Hermione whispered in a hoarse but firm voice.

Hermione heard surprised whispers and shuffling coming from his followers who still stood in a
circle around her and Voldemort. The smirk on Voldemort's face dropped replaced by a murderous glare in his eyes. Hermione looked into his eyes and she could see her own death in them. She was so scared that it became difficult to breathe. But even so, she was not going to divulge anything. She had chosen her path and she was prepared to follow it wherever it took her.

"'No'? You are not going to tell me?" Voldemort said in a quiet voice. "Perhaps you need a little bit more persuasion?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as she was again hit by the Torture curse.

Riddle looked down at the girl lying at his feet. She was twitching and squirming in pain. He knew her screams would be tearing the silence of the night right now if he hadn't cast a Silencing spell on her right before he had cast the Cruciatus. He couldn't risk someone hearing her. They were a good distance away from the castle, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, but one could never be too cautious.

Riddle felt the power of the curse burn through his wand. He felt the power he had over the girl. And it felt good! DeCerto had long enough contradicted him. Tonight she would pay for her insolence. He had to admit though she hadn't been easy to capture. Riddle had been disappointed with his followers. They weren't even able to overcome this girl. No, he himself had had to cast the final curse that had brought her down.

*But no matter now,* he thought as he looked down at the suffering girl. He would deal with his followers later. Now it was DeCerto's time to pay. He was going to break her and force her to submit to him. Tonight he would finally crush that offensive fire in her eyes.

Even if he had liked that fire a little bit…

Riddle readjusted the grip on his wand. The power of the curse was still washing through his body. It was a nice, exhilarating feeling. This good feeling he had was counterbalancing the pain his curse was inflicting on the other end.

He knew he would have to maintain the curse a while longer. He had been astounded how DeCerto had stood the first go. She had been feeling the pain, of course. She had even cried. But as she had looked up at him after he had cancelled the curse, her eyes had still burned with unbroken resistance. He had never met someone like her. No one had ever withstood his curse. Not his followers or this Bingle girl he had tortured two years ago. She had succumbed after a few seconds under his curse. He had then ordered her to leave Hogwarts and never come back. She had obeyed.

But DeCerto was something else. She wasn't so easy to break.

She was still lying on the ground writhing in pain. Riddle saw blood trickling down from her mouth. Maybe she had bitten her tongue? He cancelled the spell. It had been long enough.

Hermione felt the pain leaving her. All that remained was this dull ache all over her body. Her breathing was uneasy and laboured. Her head spun and she was sick. There was the metallic taste of blood in her mouth.

"Now, my dear. Did you have a change of mind?" Hermione heard Voldemort's calm voice ask pitilessly.

*A change of mind?* No, never. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe in deeply to soften the nauseous feeling and to stop the tremors that shook her body.

"Not very talkative anymore, are you?" Voldemort mocked in his smooth voice.
There was no way out of this, was there? Hermione wondered. Her mind was strangely calm. There was no chance for her to escape him. Well, it had been a miracle that she had survived back in the Ministry of Magic. Maybe those last months here at the Hogwarts of the past had been nothing more than a procrastination of the inevitable. Was it meant this way all along? That she should die at his hands? It wasn't so bad after all. They had fulfilled their mission. Voldemort was defeated. At least in the future.

She suddenly felt strong arms grabbing her roughly under her shoulder, hoisting her up. A wave of nausea hit her again as she was forced to stand up. One of Voldemort's followers had grabbed her and was holding her up.

Hermione looked up. Voldemort was standing a few steps away from her. He must have ordered his follower to pick her up. He was standing there his wand in his hand, sneering at her and looking as handsome as ever. Hermione felt disgusted by him. His mere presence made her sick.

"DeCerto, I would advise you to answer my questions now. Unless you want another go with my favourite curse?" Voldemort smiled vilely at her.

'Another go'? Hermione didn't think she could bear the pain again. But she wasn't going to beg him. Voldemort was a disgusting creature.

"Flight from death?" Hermione chuckled softly, though it sounded more like a cough. "Fitting name for you. Fleeing from the inevitable. You know? That's not going to work."

Hermione could see anger distorting Voldemort's beautiful face. She knew to gibe him now wasn't the best thing to do. But at this point in time it was the only thing she could do.

She looked pityingly at him and shook her head sadly as she said, "So brilliant and at the same time so stupid."

She could almost see the fury taking hold of him. He was really angry now. Hermione could see him moving his wand. Maybe he was going to end it now quicker. She would certainly prefer the Killing curse to being tortured into insanity. But before Voldemort could react to her impertinence his follower, who was still holding her up, moved. He obviously felt as insulted by her badmouthing his master as if she had insulted himself. He had pulled his wand and was now holding it under her chin forcing her to raise her head.

"How dare you say that?" he hissed aggressively in her ear.

Hermione reacted in an instant without thinking about it but trusting in her instincts and experiences. She grabbed the wrist holding the wand at her chin and bent it down while she cast a silent curse, Tergus!

Immediately an impenetrable mist was flowing out of the tip of the wand obscuring everything from sight. Before her captor could react Hermione cast another curse.

Percutio!

That curse sent a painful jolt through her attacker's body and at the same time Hermione turned his wrist painfully in the wrong direction until the hand let go of the wand. She took the wand and stepped away from her captor. That manoeuvre hadn't cost her more than a few seconds but she still had to act quickly now. Her deception wouldn't hold them up for long.

She could hear Voldemort's voice ordering his followers, "Get her! Don't let her escape!"
Luckily they didn't dare fire any curses in case they hit an ally. She could hear Voldemort whisper under his breath. He was trying to break the mist she had created. She had only seconds until he would succeed or one of his followers managed to grab her.

Hermione pointed the wand at herself and muttered softly, "Speculum."

A ghostly copy of herself detached itself from her body. The mirror image stood before her copying her every move. It looked just like her although it was a little bit blurry and transparent. The mist around her was clearing up. Voldemort had managed to break her spell. Hermione pointed the wand again at herself and felt the unpleasant though welcome feeling of eggs rippling down her body as she became invisible. Then she took off, away from Voldemort and his cruel followers. She noticed satisfied that her mirror image was running away too. It was running in the exact opposite direction from her, mimicking her every move. She had chosen to run away from the castle although she would be safe there. But now her ghostly image was running towards the castle. Hopefully that would convince her attackers that the image was really her and they would follow it.

Hermione didn't turn around to check whether her diversion was successful. She just ran as fast as she could. Knowing that if they caught her she was lost. She only slowed down a little bit as she reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Her breathing was now laboured and she could still feel the echoes of the pain the torture curse had inflicted on her. It almost made the sharp pain in her wrist drop in the background… almost. She hid behind a large tree and risked a glance back.

There a good distance away she could see her mirror image. It was still copying everything she did. It now had stopped running and leaned to one side. There a little bit away from the image she could see Voldemort and his followers. They were coming after the image firing curses at it. Hermione had to cancel the image now otherwise Voldemort would realize what it was and he would know where she was hiding right now.

Hermione flexed the unfamiliar wand in her hand, thus cancelling the Mirror spell. She nearly laughed out loud as she saw Riddle stop surprised as he saw her copy dissolve into thin air.

She didn't stay to watch more. She took off again to get as much distance between Riddle and herself as she could. Hermione run down at the edge of the forest. She always stayed in the cover of the large trees but she didn't run deep into the forest. She needed a way back into the castle. Riddle and his lackeys were sure to search the grounds now and she really didn't want to fall into their hands again. The first thing they would do now was to watch the entrances to the school. So going back to the castle wouldn't be the best idea right now.

Hermione had to end the spell that made her invisible. It was using up too much of her magic. She just wondered how she could get into the castle unseen as she saw the Quidditch pitch some distance away. She left the cover of the trees and run towards the pitch. She had a reckless idea in her mind worthy of Harry or Ron. Before she reached the pitch she made a turn and ran down to the locker rooms. The locker rooms were situated in a small building at the edge of the Quidditch pitch. That was where the school team players changed before they went to practice or to a match. As Hermione arrived at the building she ignored the doors leading to the actual locker rooms but continued to a door on the far end of the building. That was where the equipment was stored. She reached the door and tried the handle. It was locked.

Hermione brandished the stolen wand and said, "Alohomora!"

There came a faint click from the lock. The door was now open. Hermione entered the dark room. It smelled of sweat and leather. She didn't dare to light her wand in case Riddle or his lackeys would see. So she had to search around in the dark. There were old bludgers lying on a shelf. They seemed to be broken and needed some repairing. On another shelf were a few rather torn Quidditch robes. In
the far corner of the room Hermione saw a locker. She went over and opened it. It was full of brooms. Those were the old school brooms and exactly what she had been searching for. Hermione grabbed one relatively intact looking broom. She wasn't exactly a friend of brooms - in fact she was a little bit afraid of heights - but this broom was a godsend and her ticket back into Hogwarts.

She left the equipment room again. Outside she mounted the broom and took off the ground. Wind was whistling by her ears as she ascended into the nightly sky. Quickly she had reached the height of the goal hoops on the Quidditch pitch and she was rising further. The wind up here was stronger than down on the ground and ripped at her, making her broom shake. Hermione tightened her grip on the broom handle and tried to suppress her fear. She really didn't like brooms.

When she was as far up as she dared to go she began to head for the castle. She could see the castle of Hogwarts a distance away. From up here it looked even more magnificent than it already did from the ground. A few windows were still lit and they twinkled invitingly like beacons in the night. She flew over the grounds of Hogwarts with a speed Harry would have laughed at but it was as fast as she dared to go. She passed the spot where Hagrid's hut would be but it was empty. She wondered briefly were Hagrid was right now. Riddle had already made sure that he was expelled.

As she neared Hogwarts she could see movement on the ground. Down there were Riddle's followers. They were still searching for her. Sure enough they were watching the entrance into Hogwarts. She could see a dark figure lurking right beside the entrance door. Hermione shook her head and passed the dark figures on the ground quickly. She flew over the Great Hall and noticed that the enchantments of the hall showing the sky from the inside were not working on the outside. She couldn't look into the hall.

She flew over the main building of the Great Hall and headed for one of the high towers. Her destination was a richly decorated window on the north side of the tower. She knew that window very well as it belonged to the Gryffindor girls dormitory. As she reached the window she hovered before it and cast an Alohomora at it. The click told her that her spell had worked so she stepped shakily on the window sill.

*Just don’t look down!*

She opened the window quietly, hoping that her dorm mates were all asleep. Then she hopped down from the window sill into her dormitory. Inside she let out a relieved breath of air. She had made it! As she had lain down there at the edge of the Forbidden Forest threatened by her enemies she had believed she would never see this dormitory again. It had been a stroke of good luck that she had been able to steal the wand. She felt a pang of regret as she thought about her own wand. It was now most likely in the robe pocket of Riddle and she would never see it again. It had been her second wand but she had been quite fond of it. Hermione went over to her bed and fell down on it not bothering to change into her pyjamas.

_Hermione watched helplessly as the little girl was again hit by the Crucio curse. But the girl's piercing screams were drowned by the sounds of the battle between the Death Eaters and the Order and Aurors that raged around them. Hermione tried to rob over to the girl but she knew even if she managed she was in no position to help the girl. Hermione's leg was shattered. The Death Eater who now tortured the little girl had cursed Hermione as she had been protecting the girl. Now her leg was broken on several places and it was impossible to move. As Hermione tried to get nearer to the girl the unbearable pain was even intensifying. But Hermione knew that her pain was nothing compared to the agony the small girl was in right now. She looked at the screaming girl in horror and silent tears were running down her cheeks. Her gaze wandered from the poor girl to her torturer. The Death Eater was standing over the girl and pointed his wand at her to maintain the evil curse. Hermione noticed that he wasn't wearing the usual Death Eater mask. She could see his face._
But that fact was making the whole situation even more terrible. For the man wasn't looking like an evil demon or a homicidal murderer. He was looking normal, nothing out of the ordinary. If she had met him walking down Diagon Alley he wouldn't have stood out in any way. A perfectly normal man doing abhorrent things to a child who could have been his daughter. Driven by a cruel ideology where that innocent girl was subhuman just because she was unable to do magic. Hermione was appalled by this blatant contrast between his appearance and his disgusting behaviour.

She forced to watch as the Death Eater continued to hurt the girl, to torture her in the worst way possible. Hermione felt sickened by herself as she couldn't do anything. Anything to help her, to lessen her pain. To stop the screams.

Finally after a long time, an eternity, Hermione saw the girl die. Just like that. It wasn't dignified in any way, it was cruel and it was disgusting to watch as the small child did her last struggling breath. Then she lay still, unmoved by the Cruciantus curse that still hit her. Hermione looked at the girl's face, there was still the plead etched in her now hollow features, her rosy lips were slowly turning white. And as Hermione looked at the girl she knew that yet another part of herself had died. It was going to accompany the girl and it was never coming back to Hermione.

Then Hermione was hit by a piercing pain in her leg. She looked up. The Death Eater was pointing his wand at her now.

"Don't worry, girl. I haven't forgotten you!" he teased cruelly.

Hermione saw that he held her own wand in his other hand. He must have found it where it had fallen on the ground. Hermione watched as the man held her wand in front and whispered sadistically,

"Incendio!"

Hermione's wand burned.

"And now, for helping those animals." The Death Eater kicked the dead girl with his boot. "you are going to pay."

Hermione cast a last glance at the poor girl, then she looked back at the Death Eater. Hate was burning up in her. He was going to pay. She focused at the wand in his hand and then extended one arm towards the wand while she muttered,

"Exorior!"

And to the horror of the Death Eater and to Hermione's surprise his wand shot out of his hand and towards Hermione…
Once Upon A Time Master Peverell Wrote A Book

Hermione woke pretty early the next morning. The other girls were still asleep in their beds. Hermione rolled to one side and groaned in pain. Her whole body felt sore and aching like she had run a marathon race yesterday. She knew those were the after effects of the Cruciatius curse and she shuddered involuntarily as she remembered the agony the curse had inflicted.

But she had been extremely lucky yesterday. Her escape had been nothing but pure coincidence. Hermione was convinced that if this boy, she didn't know his name, hadn't threatened her with his wand thus giving her the chance to steal it from him Riddle would surely have killed her in the end. At this point in time he had already killed his own father, his grandparents and Moaning Myrtle. What was one more dead girl to him? No, she had been really lucky to be able to flee him.

She should be grateful that it was teenage Tom Riddle she had faced yesterday because she doubted that she would have been able to escape the Lord Voldemort from her time period.

Her situation here at Hogwarts was getting more and more precarious. Riddle now obviously thought her an enemy. Until yesterday he had never really physically attacked her. He had threatened and intimidated her, yes. He had even used his popularity with the other students to ostracize her. But so far he had never cursed her or really hurt her. Yesterday though, he had used one of the worst curses in existence on her.

Hermione again rolled over in her bed trying to find a more comfortable position.

Originally she had come here to Hogwarts to find a way back into her time period and not to make an enemy out of Tom Riddle. He was suspicious of her now. And knowing Riddle he wouldn't stop trying to get the information out of her until he succeeded. Hermione could see the predicament she was in. She needed to stay at Hogwarts because Dumbledore was here and he would have the Elder Wand sooner or later. But at the same time she really shouldn't stay at Hogwarts because Voldemort was after her now.

What to do?

Hermione sighed deeply and sat up. Her whole body was achy and she just wanted to lie down again and sleep for the next week or so. Instead she stood up and limped over to the bathroom. Maybe a hot shower would do her some good.

Hermione undressed and stood under the shower. She turned the taps and nice hot water washed down on her.

She let the hot water fall on her for some time and tried not to think about her problems. After the hot shower Hermione turned to her injuries. She couldn't do anything about the after effects of the torture curse but she could at least tend to her extremely painful left wrist.

After some twenty minutes she stepped fully dressed and with a tight bandage around her wrist out of the bathroom.

"Oh, g'morning, Hermione.", Rose yawned at her. She was just getting out of her bed. "You are up early today."

"Yes, couldn't sleep anymore." Hermione replied politely though there was a certain degree of coldness in her voice. She hadn't forgotten how they had treated her those weeks ago.
Hermione saw the other girls in the room getting slowly out of their beds too.

"I think I'm going down to breakfast." She declared to no-one in particular as she walked over to the door.

"'k, see you." Lucia mumbled in reply.

Hermione left the Gryffindor common room and headed for the Great Hall. As she walked she pulled the wand she had stolen yesterday and examined it. The wand was bigger in diameter compared to her wand but in length they were fairly similar. The wood was beige, maybe birch. And the core…?

Hermione sent a flush of her magic through the wand. It worked, but it did feel strange. There was some kind of resistance inside the wand. It wasn't enough to stop her from using it but it was making using it an unpleasant experience. This wand was by no means a compensation for her lost wand. Hermione silently cursed Riddle.

She had to use this new wand for now but she dearly wished for her old wand being back in her hands. Not only was it a thousand times better than this wand but it was also the last tangible link she had with her own time period.

Hermione sighed and, reluctantly, put the new wand in her wand holster on her right arm.

Hermione then reached the doors leading into the Great Hall. She hesitated to enter the Hall. She knew Riddle would most likely be there and she didn't want to see him right now. In fact, she never wanted to see him ever again. But trying to avoid Riddle was a futile venture.

Hermione ran a hand through her frizzy hair.

If she now started to avoid him or if she showed him how unsettled she truly was by him he would only attack her harder. She had to appear strong regardless of how frightened she was by him.

Hermione steeled herself and then she reached out for the large oak doors leading into the Great Hall.

She entered the Great Hall. The bright blue sky was visible through the bewitched ceiling and dove the Hall in an inviting light.

But Hermione knew the inviting atmosphere of the Hall was as treacherous as the blue December sky outside.

Hermione went over to the Gryffindor table. She had just spotted Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin sitting at the table and eating their breakfast. Longbottom was waving at her beckoning her over. As Hermione scanned him he looked up from the newspaper and his eyes quickly found hers. His facial expression did not change but Hermione shuddered as she saw the hate and fury in his eyes. And all of it was directed at her.

Riddle sat nonchalantly at the table, holding a cup in one hand and the newest copy of the Daily Prophet in his other. Just as Hermione scanned him he looked up from the newspaper and his eyes quickly found hers. His facial expression did not change but Hermione shuddered as she saw the hate and fury in his eyes. And all of it was directed at her.

She even thought she saw his hand twitching towards his wand. Hermione breathed in deeply and then she did something impetuous: She smiled at him sweetly.

As she did that she could see his grey eyes narrow and his gaze was becoming even colder.
Then Hermione waved at him in a friendly manner. He was now clenching his jaw and Hermione
was sure the only thing holding him back from cursing her were the other people in the Great Hall.
Hermione then broke eye contact with him and continued her way to the Gryffindor table.

She knew by spiting him she was most likely digging her own grave. On the other hand, she didn't
think her situation could be any worse, so why not enjoying it a little bit?

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How could she have escaped? He had had her cornered, she had been unarmed and yet she had
gotten away.

Riddle clenched his hand around the black wand, her wand. He was sitting on one of the leather
sofas in the Slytherin common room and was in a bad mood. His magic was crackling around him
aggressively which kept the other students a good distance away from him. They knew better than to
talk to him when he was this angry.

His gaze wandered back to the wand in his hand. It felt strangely comfortable. Riddle's own magic
flowed pleasantly through the black wand. The Wand's surface was smooth and polished and the
wand was obviously well cared for.

The obtainment of the wand had been the only thing that had been successful yesterday, Riddle
frustratingly had to admit. His plan had been to capture her and then to force her to finally submit to
him. Of course Riddle had known that DeCerto was an opponent he shouldn't underestimate so he
had expected more resistance than he normally did. But her resistance hadn't faltered even as he had
hit her with the Crucius curse. That curse wasn't called 'unforgivable' for nothing. It was, unlike the
Imperius curse, unblockable and the pain it inflicted was so intense it could drive people into
insanity. That curse was supposed to break people, to make them suffer and to force them to give
away even their best guarded of secrets.

But DeCerto had endured the pain. She hadn't begged, she hadn't pleaded with him and she certainly
hadn't submitted to him. She had accepted the pain. Riddle remembered how she had looked at him
after he had hit her the second time with the curse. There had been pain in her eyes and fear but also
resolution and unbroken resistance. And there had also been…

Riddle looked at the wand with clenched teeth.

Disgust?

He breathed in deeply.

He hadn't achieved anything yesterday. DeCerto hadn't broken down and she hadn't divulged
anything. She was still antagonizing him.

At first DeCerto had been nothing more than a pain in the side but now she had developed into a real
problem. She seemed to know a lot about him. Things she shouldn't know. Where did she learn that
name? Voldemort.

Every time DeCerto looked at him he had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew about him, about
what he had done and about what had happened to him. But how could she? She had been here in
England for only a couple of months. So how could she have managed to learn so much about him?
Was he just imagining things? But no, there had been this incident during potions class. DeCerto had
told this stupid story about her friend who, surprise there, looked just like Riddle himself. Riddle, of
course, knew she had made the story up to get back at him and to redeem herself in the eyes of the
other students but there was more to it.
Said friend in her story had murdered his own father. Was that a coincidence? Or more? How much did she know?

Riddle rolled her wand absentmindedly in the palm of his hand while his magic still flowed undisturbed through the black wood.

The most shocking thing though was the fact that DeCerto had managed to break down his mental shields. Riddle knew he wasn't a master in Occlumency, at least not yet, but he wasn't an amateur either. And yet, DeCerto had penetrated his shields. She had had access to his thoughts and although she hadn't used that access back then the whole situation still was intolerable. She could decide at any moment that she did want to read his mind after all. Riddle couldn't stand it that she had the upper hand in this matter. That was the reason he had ambushed her, but that hadn't worked out either.

Riddle threw a last irritated glance at the black wand before he put it in his pocket and then got up from the sofa.

Ten minutes later he arrived at the Great Hall and sat down at his usual place at the Slytherin table. A glimpse at the Gryffindor table told him that DeCerto hadn't yet arrived at the hall. Riddle poured himself a cup of coffee and began to flip through a copy of the Daily Prophet. After some time of reading he suddenly had the unpleasant feeling of someone staring at him. He looked up from the paper and it wasn't long until his eyes found DeCerto who was indeed staring at him. His eyes narrowed involuntarily as he stared right back at her. She didn't seem to be frightened by him which infuriated him to no end. Damn, he had hit her with one of the most evil curses and she was standing there, looking at him as if nothing had happened. Riddle could feel his magic starting to boil up in him again. But he couldn't allow it to crackle around him here in the Great Hall. And still DeCerto was looking at him, slightly bored even. He wanted nothing more than to just curse her. His hand itched to pull his wand.

Suddenly DeCerto smiled at him. Not a triumphant smirk proclaiming her victory, no, it was a sickeningly sweet and friendly smile. Riddle would have preferred the evil smirk. His blood was boiling now and he was barely able to hold his magic back.

To top it off, DeCerto even waved at him in a companionable manner. And Riddle knew the only reason she had for doing this was to aggravate him – and it was working.

DeCerto was mocking him! And there was no way to pay her back. Riddle clenched his hands into fists.

Then DeCerto looked away from him, as if he wasn't worth losing more time over, and she jauntily continued her way to her house table.

Riddle was left behind, seething with anger.

"You look awful!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows at Weasley and sat down beside him at Gryffindor table.

"Why, thank you." Hermione said sardonically. "Now, I feel better!"

She reached for a jug with tea but avoided to look at the pile of fried potatoes standing right in front of her. She still felt somewhat nauseous and didn't think she could stomach anything at the moment.

"What happened?" Lupin asked her while he ate a huge sandwich with bacon. "Had a bad night?"
Hermione sighed and began to stir her tea with a spoon.

"You could say that." She muttered tiredly.

"Really, Hermione!" Longbottom said who had up until now wolfed down his plate full of sausages and potatoes. "You should brighten up. Tomorrow's the start of the break. No more homework for the next three weeks!"

"Mhm." Hermione replied rather unenthusiastically.

But Longbottom was right. The Christmas break would start tomorrow. That left Hermione only today to break into Dumbledore's office and finally search it, as last week she had signed herself in for leaving Hogwarts over the break. And now she was pretty glad about that decision. She knew Riddle would stay at Hogwarts over the break. Of course, where else could he go? Hermione wasn't very keen on spending any more time with Riddle than was absolutely necessary. And after yesterday night she didn't even want to be in the same room with him. But spending three weeks with him inside a relatively deserted castle? That would be suicidal, if anything.

"You didn't tell us what you're planning for the break, Mione!" Weasely's voice brought her out of her musings.

"Yeah, 'My'nee, yu neffer told us." Longbottom managed to say with what seemed to be half his breakfast in his mouth.

"Oh, yes." Hermione said slowly. "I'm going to visit some friends."

Truth was, Hermione wasn't really sure what to do during the break. She just knew she didn't want to stay at Hogwarts. Because of Riddle and because she just needed some distance from the castle and its inhabitants. Living in this wrong time period and always having to playact was slowly getting to Hermione.

Aside from the plan to search Dumbledore's office Hermione felt like being in a dead end. She had no clue as to how to get back in her time. And then there was the magic of the Elder Wand, still inside her. Hermione needed to investigate that magic some more. Three weeks alone would surely help her with that.

She just needed some time to get some order into her thoughts. And without the pressure of having to act normally around her peers and professors and of course without having to worry about Riddle's sinister plans, she was sure she would get an idea of how to leave this time period for good.

"You know someone from England?" Lupin asked her.

"Yes." Hermione felt bad about it but she just needed to lie to her friends in that matter. "Some friends of my parents. I'll stay with them over the holidays."

Hermione had observed Dumbledore's daily routine now for quite some time. And the only thing she could say for sure was that he was one chaotic, unorganized, old man. Sometimes he stayed in his office until well after midnight. What he did during those hours Hermione didn't know. Probably studying some obscure spell or other. On other days he retired really early. On one of those days Hermione had nearly been caught. She had seen him leave at around nine and had then waited for another two hours to make sure that he was really gone. Then she had decided to try to enter his office. Just as she stepped out of her hiding place Dumbledore came hurrying along the corridor and entered his office. He only hadn't seen her because he was so preoccupied and deep in thoughts at the moment. Hermione thought that maybe he had had an idea and needed to research it. Hermione
herself had the best ideas when she was trying to get to sleep. But though she could understand his behaviour it was at the moment frustrating.

Hermione wanted to search his office today. Maybe the whole thing was a waste of time anyway and Dumbledore didn't have any information on the Deathly Hallows. Hermione didn't want to waste more time on it than was really necessary.

So that was the reason Hermione now stood in the hallway right by Dumbledore's office. She had decided to go inside today whatever happened. And if she had to wait till four in the morning, she would break into his office.

Hermione leaned against the cold stone wall and tried to stifle a yawn. Her feet hurt and she was beginning to get tired now. She checked her watch: 8:34 p.m. Well, there seemed to lie a long night before her. After another five minutes she slid down the wall and sat down on the floor her legs bend so that she could lay down her arms on her knees.

She was situated right beside a huge suite of armour so that Dumbledore wouldn't be able to see her when he left his office.

*IF he left his office,* Hermione groaned inwardly.

Hermione was brought out of her boredom as she heard steps coming towards her. Her head shot up and she slowly bend forwards to see past the suit of armour. Someone was coming down the corridor but it was to dimly lit to recognize the person. *Maybe just another student,* Hermione thought.

As this person was just another few metres away from her she could recognize him. It was Riddle. Hermione's heart began to beat faster.

Just as he would have passed her he slowed down. Hermione felt cold sweat running down her forehead. But to her immense relief Riddle didn't turn towards her but faced the old, wooden door that led to Dumbledore's office. Hermione couldn't see his face but his straight back told her that he was tense. What did he need from Dumbledore? Hermione knew that they were far from being friends. So why was Riddle here?

Riddle took another step towards the door but didn't knock. Hermione wondered what he was waiting for as a crazy idea hit her. Whatever they had to discuss maybe it was worth overhearing. Hermione reached in her pocket and produced an old quill. She held it in her hand as she summoned her magic and thought, *Mutatio arachne!*

Contently she watched as her quill transformed into a small black spider. As the transformation was complete she cast the next spell. That one was a bit more complicated. She directed her magic through her wand as she touched her ears and both of her closed eyes before she pointed her wand at the tiny spider in her hand and thought, *Esto Oculus! Esto Auricula!*

Those spells didn't take her longer than a few seconds. After that she let the spider down and it hurried towards where Riddle was standing. He was still facing the door. Hermione heard him take in a sharp breath of air before he raised his hand to knock at the door.

"Come in!" Dumbledore's voice came from inside.

Riddle opened the door and stepped into the office. Hermione watched pleased how her spider
managed to get inside too before the door was closed again.

As the door was firmly closed Hermione pointed her wand at the door and whispered,

"Infit!"

That spell activated the other spells she had cast onto the spider. Hermione closed her eyes and was now able to see and hear the things inside Dumbledore's office through her spider. Those spells had come in handy in more than one occasion. Ron had called it her Spy Spells, Hermione remembered fondly.

Through her spider Hermione noticed amused that Dumbledore's office was still a mess. All the tiny silver instruments were still scattered all over the place. Although from her point of view as a spider they weren't so tiny anymore. She directed the spider towards an ancient looking cabinet and let it climb up the surface a little bit. Now from this point she had a perfect view of the office.

She could see Dumbledore sitting behind his desk. Spread out in front of him were some opened books and slips of parchment that were scribbled all over. But currently Dumbledore wasn't paying his research materials any attention. He looked at the young man who stood before his desk.

"Please sit down, Tom" Dumbledore said as he gestured to a chair facing his desk. Riddle wordlessly sat down on the chair. His back was straight and he faced his teacher with a blank face.

"You know why you are here?" Dumbledore asked him. Hermione noticed that his voice was cold and the twinkle in his eyes was missing.

"Yes, sir." Riddle replied in an emotionless voice. "You are punishing me for things I've never done."

"We both know that you are guilty, Tom." Dumbledore fixed his eyes on Riddle who didn't even stir as this penetrating gaze hit him.

"You have no proof!" Riddle said and for the first time anger was showing through the emotionless mask on his face.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair still looking piercingly at Riddle.

"Don't make it harder than it already is, Tom. Hand me over your wand and then you can go."

Riddle's eyes widened at that and he hissed,

"You can't make me go back there! It's not even the summer break."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and then stated in a cold voice that Hermione had never before heard from the professor,

"We've been through this. You can either surrender your wand now and leave Hogwarts for the break or I will make sure that you get expelled. It is your decision, Tom."

Riddle's mouth was a thin line now and a scowl appeared between his eyebrows. His grey eyes burned with a murderous hate as they were fixed on Dumbledore. Dumbledore on the other hand still looked at him expectantly, seemingly unaffected by the fury Riddle was showing.

Abruptly Riddle got up from his chair. He looked down on Dumbledore with a fierce scowl on his face. There was a moment were neither of them moved. Riddle was still staring at Dumbledore
furiously while Dumbledore remained unaffected and was merely looking at Riddle curiously.

After a while Riddle slowly reached into his robes and pulled out his wand. The knuckles on his hand were turning white as he clasped his wand. Then ever so slowly he put his wand down at Dumbledore's desk. During the whole process Dumbledore kept staring at Riddle. As the wand finally lay on the desk Riddle stepped a few paces away still staring at his white wand lying on the desk.

"After the break you can come to my office and I will return your wand to you." Dumbledore told him dryly.

Riddle's gaze wandered back to the face of the older wizard his grey eyes radiating cold anger. Without another word he turned around and reached the door in a few paces before he left the office.

Hermione had to make an effort to ignore her magically extended vision and concentrated on her own two eyes. She could just see how Riddle stormed down the corridor he had come from. Then she skipped back into her spider-vision. Dumbledore was still sitting at his table. He now held Riddle's wand in hands and looked down at it sadly. After a while he stood up, went to one of his cupboards and put the wand in a drawer. He locked the drawer with a spell Hermione didn't recognize. After the wand was stowed away Dumbledore returned to his desk and resumed to read in his books.

Hermione decided to leave the office now. She directed her spider under the cupboard it had been sitting on. Then with a conscious effort she returned her senses back to her own body. She opened her eyes and saw the dark corridor again instead of Dumbledore's office. Then Hermione pointed her wand at the office door and thought, *Finite!*

With that she cancelled the spells on the spider. And now an old, battered and innocent-looking quill lay under the cupboard in Dumbledore's office.

Hermione leaned her back against the stone wall.

*What was that all about?*

Dumbledore just took Riddle's wand from him. And what did Riddle say? 'You can't make me go back there!'

With 'there' he obviously referred to his orphanage. Hermione was bewildered. She had thought that Riddle only went back to that orphanage during the summer break. At least that was what Harry had told her. She knew that Riddle really hated the orphanage.

*Of course he would,* Hermione rolled her eyes. It was a muggle orphanage after all. And if there was a muggle-hater out there it had to be Riddle. He must so detest it to be forced to live with the lowly muggles.

*That evil git!*

But it seemed to be some sort of punishment that Riddle had to return to the orphanage this Christmas break. Riddle had abandoned his wand to Dumbledore and he was going back to his hated orphanage. That meant that Dumbledore had something against Riddle in his hand. Otherwise Riddle would have never followed Dumbledore's orders.

*What could that 'something' be?* Hermione wondered.

And hadn't Dumbledore threatened Riddle with expulsion? But why did Dumbledore wait. If he had
some evidence for Riddle's crimes he should expel Riddle immediately. Riddle was an evil bastard. He didn't deserve to be a student at Hogwarts. Hermione wondered why Dumbledore hesitated. Was his evidence not compromising enough to get Riddle expelled? Or was Dumbledore hoping that he could somehow save Riddle? Show him the light, so to speak? If so, he was sorely mistaken, Hermione thought. Riddle was beyond any help.

After three hours Hermione still sat on the same spot in the corridor and still thinking about the scene she had witnessed in Dumbledore's office. She pondered possible explanations for Dumbledore's behaviour and different scenarios as to why and how Dumbledore had forced Riddle to give into his punishment. As the time passed by her scenarios were becoming more and more unlikely. She was finally released from her unproductive brooding as Dumbledore left his office.

After he had left Hermione waited for another hour then she put her plan into action. She stood up from her spot and went over to the office door. Then she pointed her wand in each direction down the corridor while she muttered,

"Incipio!"

Thus activating the wards she had previously cast. They would alarm her if someone came down the corridor. That would give her enough time to leave the office should Dumbledore return. It was still a risk though. Dumbledore was an exceptional wizard. Chances were that he would notice Hermione's wards. She was actually surprised that he hadn't noticed her enchanted spider.

So she had to hurry and finish the job here. Hermione pointed her wand at the office door. She summoned her magic and channeled it through her wand at the door. Her magic hit Dumbledore's wards as if they were a physical barrier. She probed them and was relieved to still find just the simple warding spells she had noticed earlier. Dumbledore obviously didn't expect someone to break into his office. Hermione was once again reminded of his trusting nature. But that didn't stop her to enforce the flow of magic from her into his wards, intending to break them. After some time she could feel the satisfying change in the flow of her magic. The wards were down.

Hermione reached for the handle and opened the door to Dumbledore's office. She stepped in and closed the door behind her. The calming atmosphere of his office hit her once again. But this time she had no business feeling reassured inside here. She was a thief after all, Hermione had to remind herself.

Hermione lit her wand with a silent *Lumos!* and crept over to Dumbledore's desk. The books were still scattered all over the table. Hermione lifted one and read its cover, _The Creation of magical Artifacts and their inherent Magic._ She reached for other books, _Magical Power in Inanimate Objects, Ways of Transmitting Magic._

Hermione's bookworm heart craved to read the books but she had other things to do right now. With regret she put the book back on the table and returned to searching the office. She went over to the big book shelf that covered two walls of the office. It would take hours to search through all of those by hand. Hermione didn't approve of searching through books by magic. It was just not thorough enough but this time she had not enough time. So she thought of the subject she wanted to find information about.

_Deathly Hallows, Elder Wand!_

She concentrated very hard on it and then raised her wand, pointed it at the shelf and whispered, "Invenio!"
After a while a few books soared towards Hermione. Her heart sank as she counted only three. She caught them and looked at their titles. Disappointment hit her as she recognized all the titles. Those were books she had already read. Copies of them were available in the library. They were useless to her.

With a wave of her wand the books flew back to their place on the shelf. Hermione turned away from the shelf and faced the office again. Where would Dumbledore hide things inside here? Hermione went through all the drawers and cupboards she could find but it was useless. She didn’t find anything interesting beside some nasty tea kettle that tried to bite her fingers off.

Well, it was a long shot to begin with, Hermione thought frustrated as she sat down on Dumbledore's chair behind his desk. There was no place in the office she hadn't searched. Well, aside from the drawer Dumbledore had put Riddle's wand in. Hermione hadn't been able to break that ward. If Dumbledore had hit something else by magic Hermione was pretty sure she would have noticed it. She rubbed the bridge of her nose tiredly as her gaze fell on the wastebasket on the floor. A yellow piece of parchment had caught her eyes or more accurately the name on said parchment, Flamel.

Hermione retrieved the parchment from the wastebasket and then smoothed it down on the table.

Albus,

This is sensational! Phenomenal! I cannot believe I am holding this manuscript in my hands. How were you able to find it? This is truly unbelievable. I am so grateful that you give me the opportunity to study this piece of magical history. I know how long you have been searching for something like this. And now imagine I even mocked your tenacity.

I am sure this will bring us a few steps further in our study. The Peverell brothers were true masters in their art.

We have to meet very soon. There is so much to discuss already and I have only read the first two chapters.

We can meet in my new residence here in London. I have a formidable laboratory here. It is in Foxham Rd number eight. Come by whenever you like.

With warm regards, Nicolas Flamel

As Hermione read the letter one word caught her attention, Peverell. The Peverell brothers were the supposed creators of the Deathly Hallows. Hermione could feel her heart skip a few beats as she processed what the letter was implying. There was a manuscript written by the brothers themselves? She needed to read this book. Desperately. She was bound to find something inside that book that would help her with her predicament. Maybe this was her ticket out of here. She would be finally able to leave this period of time behind and head back to her own time. Hermione's hand shook as she waved her wand over the letter from Flamel. An exact copy of it appeared out of thin air. She clutched the conjured letter and put the original back in the wastebasket. She wanted to leave the office in the same condition as she had entered it.

She left the office with the letter put securely away in one of her robe pockets and closed the door. After that she erected Dumbledore's warding spells again. He would never notice that someone broke into his office tonight.

Hermione woke the next day and for the first time since an eternity she didn't feel completely lost. This letter Flamel wrote to Dumbledore was a ray of hope for her. Finally, she could see light at the
end of the tunnel. Her return to her own time period seemed now not so impossible anymore. She just needed to get the book and then she was bound to find some information inside Peverell's manuscript that would bring her back home.

Hermione hopped out of her bed and grabbed some clothes from her trunk. She didn't need to wear her uniform today as it was the start of the Christmas break. Hogwarts' express would leave at eleven o'clock and Hermione intended to mount it. In the letter Flamel had informed Dumbledore where he lived. So, all Hermione had to do now, was to go to Flamel's flat in London and steal the manuscript.

Hermione left the dormitory and walked down the stairs that led to the common room. She intended to have a quick breakfast and then return to the dorm and pack her things. As she walked through the common room a nervous looking first or second year approached her.

"Excuse me." The small girl piped sheepishly.

"Yes, dear?" Hermione asked kindly.

"The headmaster wishes to speak to you." The girl said in a hurried voice.

Hermione's heart sank as she heard that. They didn't know about her breaking into Dumbledore's office, did they?

"The password to the headmaster's office is 'Infigo!'" The girl said and then added in a small voice, "And... and professor Legifer wants to see you, too."

Hermione tried not to break down into a panic attack but smiled kindly down at the small girl.

"Thank you, dear."

The girl nodded, seemingly relieved that she had managed to deliver the message. Hermione, on the other hand, was not relieved in the least bit as she left the common room and headed for the headmaster's office.

They couldn't know anything, she tried to assure herself. She hadn't left behind any traces in Dumbledore's office.

"Infigo!" Hermione whispered as she reached the stone gargoyles guarding the headmaster's office.

The stone gargoyles pounced out of her way thus exposing the stairs that lead to the office. Hermione had a sinking feeling in her stomach as she climbed the stairs. Arriving at the top she knocked reluctantly at the dark, wooden door leading into Dippet's office.

"Come in!" She heard the voice of the headmaster.

Hermione opened the door and stepped into the office. It still looked like the last time she had been inside here. The room was tidy, nothing out of place. The glass cabinet with the golden trophy cups and medals stood imposingly at one wall of the office. The large, intimidating desk made of dark wood stood in the middle of the office, dominating the atmosphere of the room. Behind the desk, Dippet sat in a comfortable looking chair. His grey hair was trimmed into a short, accurate haircut and he wore an embroidered, grey waistcoat under his black wizard's robe. Currently he was reading through some papers lying on his desk.

"You wanted to speak with me, headmaster?" Hermione asked politely.
Dippet looked up from his paper. His stern gaze wandered over Hermione. Hermione was a little relieved as she noticed that he furrowed his brow, obviously trying to remember who she was or why she was here. That couldn't be about her breaking into Dumbledore's office then.

"Ah, of course, Ms DeCerto." Dippet said after a while in his pompous voice.

"Normally your head of house should be speaking to you now. But unfortunately professor Dumbledore had to suddenly leave Hogwarts and will not return until the end of the holidays."

Hermione felt like a bothersome task the headmaster wanted to get over with as fast as possible.

"Yes, headmaster." She said.

Dippet then reached for a neatly arranged stack of paper and took one sheet.

He scanned it and then looked back at Hermione,

"You are planning to leave Hogwarts for the holiday, Ms DeCerto. I was under the impression that you don't have family here in England, where do you intend to stay?"

Dippet seemed to be not really interested in her plans for the holidays. It was obviously just a bothersome obligation he had to fulfill as she was currently a student at Hogwarts and her head of house was not present to do the task for Dippet.

"I do have some relatives here in England, headmaster. I will be staying with them for the holidays." Hermione said.

Dippet glanced at her again and nodded curtly. He seemed to really not be overly interested in Hermione's life as he didn't ask any more questions.

"Very well, Ms DeCerto, I wish you a pleasant holiday then." Dippet said distractedly as he was reading through a new stack of papers again.

Hermione took that as a sign to be dismissed and said,

"A pleasant holiday to you too, headmaster."

Dippet didn't look up from his paper or announced in any way that he had heard her. So, Hermione left his office again. She was rather relieved that this hadn't been about her nightly activity yesterday. But it would have made things a lot easier if she had known before that Dumbledore wouldn't be at Hogwarts during the break, Hermione thought as she passed the stone Gargoyles. Then she wouldn't have gone through all the waiting and observing of his office.

Hermione walked down the corridor. She had still one other appointment to attend. Five minutes later she stood before professor Legifer's office and knocked reluctantly.

"Yes?" Hermione heard the loathsome voice answer.

As Hermione entered she found Legifer sitting behind her desk and staring coldly at Hermione.

"I shouldn't be surprised, should I?" Legifer said in a reprimanding way before Hermione had the chance to even open her mouth.

Legifer's cold gaze wandered from Hermione to the clock hanging on the wall.

"Your continued tardiness is spectacular."
Hermione raised her eyebrows. But she didn't point out that Legifer hadn't said anything about when Hermione should see her.

Legifer leaned back in her seat and her stern eyes scanned Hermione again. Then she said in her sharp voice,

"Now, Ms DeCerto, your inability to follow my lessons is quite alarming."

Hermione had to work to swallow the insult that begged to be screamed at the professor.

"I am not going to tolerate any of my students to fail my subject no matter how ungifted they might be." Here Legifer glanced at Hermione pointedly.

"So, I want you to work through this during the holidays."

Legifer pushed a thick book that had been lying on her neat desk over to Hermione. Hermione took the book and read it's cover: *Etiquettes for the Young Housewitch.*

Hermione's fingers trembled from suppressed rage as she stared down at the heavy book.

"I expect a written summary after the break." Legifer stated in a sharp voice.

Hermione's gaze wandered from the book to the professor sitting at the table.

"Yes, professor." Hermione said in a pressed voice.

"You may go then." Legifer dismissed Hermione.

Hermione fled the office. Her magic had started to whirl inside of her furiously and she feared she wouldn't be able to control it any longer should she stay in the office.

With the ridiculous book pinned under her arm Hermione walked back to the Gryffindor common room.

*That stupid hag!*

Now, Hermione had to skip breakfast thanks to that evil witch. She still needed to pack her things and the Hogwarts express would leave at eleven o'clock sharp.

*One of these days I'll snap and then I'll curse that silly excuse for a witch!*

Hermione stood, trunk in her hand, at the platform at Hogsmeade station and looked at the Hogwarts express. It looked just like it always had. The big, steaming locomotive, the many wagons with the compartments inside and of course the chaos on the platform. All the students with their trunks and pets and what not. They were chatting and laughing and were happy to go home for the holidays.

The train, Hogsmeade and the students, everything was just like Hermione remembered from her six years at Hogwarts. It was nice having the chance to relive this part of her childhood. But deep down Hermione knew, she didn't belong anymore. She was standing here with her trunk in her hand and she was just pretending. She was no student anymore, she was not one of them.

"Hey, Hermione." A voice beside her said. "Something wrong?"

Hermione turned. Beside her stood Longbottom, Lupin and Weasley. Lupin who had just spoken looked at her somewhat worried.
"No, no." Hermione said and tried to smile reassuringly at them. "I'm all right."

Longbottom furrowed his brow in thought, then suddenly brightened up and said,

"But of course. You've never seen the Hogwarts express, have you?"

Hermione was just going to object as she remembered that he was right. Hermione Granger had seen the express the first time as she had been eleven and nervously awaited the journey to the magical castle. But Hermione DeCerto had never used the express as she was a transfer student from France.

"It's really fun." Longbottom continued enthusiastically. "We'll get a compartment and then we can laze around a little. You know, to train for the next three weeks!" He smirked mischievously.

Hermione smiled at him and the other two boys.

"Yeah, let's do that."

She tightened her grip on her trunk and followed the three boys to the train. Lazing around was just the thing she needed to do right now. At least for the ride to London.

Then, she had work to do. Hermione planned to get herself a room at the Leaky Cauldron again. After that she would have to search for Flamel's flat where, hopefully, she would find a certain book she desperately needed.

But for now, she would enjoy the time with her friends. Just like she always had when driving home with the Hogwarts express.
Riddle slammed the lid of his trunk close and resisted the urge to kick it. He balled his hands into fists as he furiously stared down at his innocent looking trunk.

Why did he have to go back there?

It was the Christmas break after all. Normally Dumbledore only forced him to go back during the Summer break, which was bad enough. But the Christmas break? Oh, how he hated that old fool.

One day he's going to pay! Riddle thought furiously and sat down on his bed in the Slytherin dormitory. He still glared angrily at the trunk standing in front of him. It hadn't cost him much time to pack his things, because admittedly there wasn't much he wanted to take along. His gaze wandered from the trunk to the shelf of books that stood right beside his bed. He had so wanted to read that book he had found just last week in the Restricted Section of the library but he couldn't risk taking the book with him. Riddle could feel his magic bubbling up inside of him angrily. He breathed in to calm himself down.

Someday, Dumbledore would regret his actions, dearly! Riddle would make sure of that.

He looked away from the books and his gaze soon fell on the black wand lying on the side table. That was the very wand he had taken from DeCerto. And now every fibre of his being screamed at him to take the wand along. It was tempting. Very! But Riddle knew he had to restrain himself. He wasn't allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts. Normally Riddle wouldn't give a damn about any rule. But this one he couldn't risk breaking. Especially now that he could still feel those remnants of Dumbledore's magic tingling on his skin. The ward had been so crudely and blatantly done that Riddle was sure Dumbledore did that on purpose. The familiar cold fury took hold of Riddle again. Dumbledore wanted Riddle to know that he had put a ward on him. Was that a warning? Or a derision?

Riddle cast a last, longing look at the black wand lying on the table before he got up from his bed, took the handle of his trunk and reluctantly left the dormitory, without having touched the wand at all.

It was here. Hermione was sure. She could feel the wards surrounding the area. That had to be the place where Flamel's flat was. The houses in this neighbourhood were worn down and Hermione wondered why Flamel lived here. But then again. Britain was currently engaged in a war with Germany. All London looked worn down.

Hermione entered the house number eight. This apartment building was obviously radiating magic. She opened the front door with a quick, silent Alohomora and stepped into the dark corridor. Then Hermione began to search the house for any traces of magic. In the second floor she could feel a huge source of magic. She confirmed that there were no muggles watching her before she pulled out her wand. After that she prodded the aura of magic with the tip of her wand. Then she closed her eyes and allowed her magic to flow from her body, through her wand, into the wards of Flamel's flat. She let her magic wrap itself around the wards to identify the spells. There were some Muggle repelling wards, several intruder spells which would attack anyone who stepped into the flat and a ward to alarm Flamel if anyone tried to disable the other wards. The spells were powerful and cleverly constructed. Hermione had to work for nearly ten minutes on them before she was able to open the door to Flame's flat.
As Hermione stepped inside his flat she was surprised. It was really spacious. A lot larger than it looked from the outside. Flamel had obviously used some magic to enlarge the flat. She walked through the well furnished rooms. Flamel obviously had style. As she stepped into the impressive library she instantly felt the force of a magical ward. That had to be the place where the Peverell book was hidden. She quickly identified a simple cupboard as the source of the magic. Hermione sighed as she detected the ward. That was going to need some time. It was a particularly complex warding spell. In some ways similar to the wards protecting Hogwarts though luckily not nearly as strong. Hermione sat cross-legged down in front of the cupboard and began to work.

Beads of sweat were building on her forehead as she worked her way through Flamel's protective spells. In the end she needed a good part of an hour until finally the door of the cupboard sprang open and revealed its precious content. An old book was lying innocently in the cupboard. It was not very thick and bound in brown leather which looked rather withered and tattered. In spite of its inconspicuous look Hermione's hands shook as she reached for the book. The book lay lightly in her trembling hands. There was no title on the cover so she opened it. The pages were filled with a fine handwriting. It was faded on some places but all in all good to read. Hermione went back to the first page which was blank apart from one sentence written in the same smooth hand,

I, Ignotus Peverell, devote this work to my two brethren Evander and Oleander.

Hermione's breath caught as she read the names. Peverell! This was it! She had made it. This was the manuscript written by Peverell himself.

Crash!

Hermione was brought abruptly out of her glee as she heard something shatter in the living room. The noise was followed by some cursing. She put the Peverell manuscript in her cloak pocket and got up. Then she sneaked over to the door leading from the library to the living room. As she walked she flicked her wrist and her wand was in her hand. Someone was in the flat. Maybe Flamel had come home? Hermione didn't know but she couldn't afford to be seen. Especially not by Flamel. He would tell Dumbledore and if Dumbledore knew she stolen the manuscript he would eventually find out the whole truth about her. She couldn't have that.

Hermione hid behind the door frame. She could sense someone was in the other room. She had no idea how good Flamel was in duelling but she guessed he was a master. After all he worked together with Dumbledore.

"Damn! Did you find anything?"

Hermione heard a male voice ask.

"Nothing," A cold voice answered. "I'll take this room. Go to the next!"

What was going on? That was surely not Flamel. What did those men do here? Hermione suddenly heard steps coming towards her. One of them was going to enter the library. Adrenalin was rushing through Hermione's veins. She needed to get out of her. Hermione stood behind the door as a person clad in a black cloak entered the library and passed her. She didn't recognize his face but she noticed that the man had his wand ready in his hand. Who were those people?

Now there was one man in the library and at least another in the living room. She was trapped. It was only a matter of time until they would notice her presence. Hermione needed to act now. She still had the element of surprise on her side. Hermione raised her wand and aimed it at the man with the black cloak.
Red light shot from her wand and collided with the back of the man. He fell forward, unconscious. Unfortunately, as he fell down, he smashed into the small side table. With a loud crash the table burst.

"What was that?" Came a voice from the other room.

"Dunno," someone answered.

_There are more?_ Hermione leaned forward to have a peak into the other room.

"Hey! Pierce! What ya doin?" someone called from the living room.

Hermione could see him now. This other man was too clad in a black cloak. He walked towards the door Hermione was hiding behind. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. He must have seen the other man lying unconscious in the remains of the side table. Hermione tried to calm her breathing. She needed to focus now. There were still at least two opponents in the flat. In the mean time the man had pulled his wand and was now hiding behind the green sofa.

"Someone's here. Pierce is down!" he called to his ally.

Hermione could see movement in the hallway leading to the front door. Then she could hear another voice ordering, "Someone's inside. Keep your heads down, boys!"

_Oh god, how many are there?_

Then that same voice yelled, "Flamel! Is that you? You are surrounded! You cannot escape. You know what we want. Surrender the book and we won't harm you."

_What book?_ Hermione's hand went automatically to her pocket were she felt the hard outline of the Peverell book. Were those people after this book?

"We know you have it, Flamel!" the voice yelled again. "Just turn it over to us."

Hermione gulped. She recalled the lay-out of the flat. The living room was in the centre. One enemy was in the living room hiding behind the sofa. From the living room one door led to the library where she currently was. Another door on the right side from where she stood lead to the kitchen. The door on the left led to the bedroom. She had no idea if there were any enemies. The last door opposite from the library led to the hallway and out of the flat. The supposed leader of her attackers was in that hallway with an unknown number of enemies. Hermione needed to get out of the flat. But the front door was not a good option. Suddenly she saw a green light heading towards her. It flashed by her and hit one of the bookshelves behind her with a loud bang. The books and the wood of the shelf turned black and smoked where the curse had hit them.

_The Killing curse?_

"Go, go, go!" the voice from the hallway ordered.

Now a barrage of curses was heading in her direction. They hit the wall, the door frame and the bookshelves behind her. Based on the number of the curses there had to be at least three or four more opponents. That made five or six in total. Too many to take them lightly.

Then Hermione saw that the man behind the green sofa was moving. He was using the covering fire of his companions to sneak towards her. Spells were still hitting heavily on the door frame behind
which she was hiding. Hermione had to move now or the enemy would trap her inside the library. She crouched down ready to sprint forwards. Then she pointed her wand inside the living room. She couldn't aim as the incoming spells were still hitting hard on her hiding place but that didn't matter.

_Bombarda!_

Hermione felt the spell leave her wand and shortly afterwards there was an explosion in the other room as her spell hit. Hermione used the confusion her spell had created and sprang into action. She plunged herself into the living room and used her momentum to slid forwards on the polished parquet on her side simultaneously aiming her wand up at the black cloaked man who had tried to sneak up on her. She could see his eyes widen in surprise as she cast her curse.

"Adstringo!"

Ropes flew from her wand and wound themselves around the man. They nearly choked him as they bound him so tightly that he fell down on the floor unable to move. The other men in the hallway started to fire again. Curses flew towards Hermione and she had to raise a shield.

_Sub sisto!_

The thick yellow shield appeared before her and absorbed the incoming spells changing its colour with every spell it took. Hermione sprang back on her feet and sprinted towards the kitchen door. Her shield was good but it wouldn’t hold the spells off forever. A bright blue spell hit her shield and it began to flicker. The next spell that hit destroyed her shield. Hermione tried to dodge the spell but her left arm was hit. She felt a sting in her wrist but ignored it for now. She hurled herself through the kitchen door.

"Get her! She's in the kitchen!"

Hermione scanned the room. There was a window. She heard the men in the flat move. She quickly pointed her wand at the kitchen door and said, "Obfírmo!"

The kitchen door closed and locked itself. That would gain her a few seconds. Hermione scurried to the window and flung it open. She was in the second floor. What was that? Three, four metres down? It should be possible. Hermione climbed on the window-sill as the door behind her burst open. She looked behind and saw two men entering the kitchen with a third one behind them.

"Freeze!" one of them ordered.

They pointed their wands at Hermione threateningly. Hermione yelled the first curse that came to her mind, "Caligo!"

Fog spread into the kitchen obscuring everything. A curse flew out of the fog and crashed into the window beside her head shattering the glass so that the shards cut her face. Hermione didn't hesitate and sprang out of the window. As she fell down she heard the counter curse for her Fog curse behind her,

"Solismico!"

As she landed down on the street a sharp pain shot from her ankle. She ignored the pain and sprang to her feet again. She was in a small backstreet. A curse was then hitting the pave-stone a few feet from her sending pieces of stone flying everywhere. She aimed her wand at the window above her and yelled,

"Reducto!"
As it hit she heard a satisfying yell of pain.

Another one down!

But she didn't stay to see more. She ran down the backstreet. A thud behind her told her that one of her pursuers had also jumped from the window. Hermione turned into the next back alley just as another curse hit the wall behind her. As she rounded the corner she crashed into someone so that they both fell down.

"Ow! What the hell are you doing?"

Hermione's head shot up as she recognized the voice.

"Riddle?" she asked faintly.

Sure enough she was staring at none other than Tom Riddle. He was glaring down at her with his icy grey eyes and a frown appeared between his eyebrows. He was wearing a ragged grey shirt and worn out black trousers and was currently getting back on his feet.

"DeCerto? What are you doing here?" he asked in his smooth deep voice.

Hermione heard someone approaching behind her. Her attacker had finally caught up again. Hermione grabbed Riddle's wrist and pelted forwards pulling him with her.

"No time for small talk. Run!" she yelled behind her.

Riddle seemed to be too surprised by her sudden action to buck against being pulled away though he said in a confused voice, "What are you-"

A curse hit the wall of the house beside them missing Riddle by inches. Hermione tugged him behind the next corner. There Riddle stopped and Hermione was forced to stop too. She turned around to him.

"What is going on?" Riddle yelled angrily at her.

"We don't have time for this!" Hermione screamed back. That man was still hunting her. They couldn't afford standing here and arguing.

"Get your wand out!" she ordered him as she scanned their surroundings.

This backstreet was just as deserted as the others. The houses were standing so narrow that the alley was at most two metres wide. No hiding places in sight. She looked back at Riddle expectantly. What was he waiting for? Wasn't he supposed to be the next Dark Lord? Surely he could stop that man with a small flick of his wand. But he wasn't even pulling his wand. He was staring down at her. His face was a blank mask again.

Then he spoke in a soft and controlled voice, "I don't have my wand with me."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. Of course how could she have forgotten? Dumbledore! He took Riddle's wand back at Hogwarts. With shock she realized, He is unarmed!

In the corner of her eyes Hermione saw a bright light flying towards them. She had barely time to raise a shield as the curse hit. It crashed into her shield with such a force that she was hurled backwards. Shortly she was airborne before she hit the ground hard. Her head collided painfully with the pave stones. She lay on her back and stared up to the sky. Her head pounded and her whole back
hurt badly. She rolled over to her side and coughed. Her whole body ached.

"What are you doing here, filthy Muggle?" Hermione heard a male voice yell aggressively.

She opened her eyes and tried to focus. She saw a few metres away her attacker clad in a black cloak threatening Riddle with his wand. With a jolt Hermione realized how utterly defenceless Riddle was right now. She tried to get back on her feet but as she sat up a wave of nausea hit her. Her head still pounded painfully.

"Useless scum!" She heard the man hiss at Riddle.

Then to her horror she saw a yellow beam leave the man's wand and collide with Riddle's chest. Riddle was hurled against the stone wall and slid down the wall. He came to a rest sprawled down on the floor. He held his chest and was looking up at the man furiously.

Hermione had to do something. She tried again to get up to her feet and this time she used the wall as a support. She managed to stand shakily on her feet. Then she heard loud steps and voices coming from the street behind Riddle and the man. The other men from Flamel's flat had found them too. She had to get out of here or they would get her. She stiffened with fear as she heard the man who pointed his wand at Riddle utter his next curse,

"Avada-"

Hermione reacted in an instant. That curse had cost too many lives already. The Death Eaters, they used that curse so mercilessly. Hermione wasn't going to let them take another life. An uncontrollable fury took hold of her. And Hermione used that hate to fuel her magic. She thrust the magic through her wand and formed it into a curse.

*Saevio!*

The powerful curse left her wand and it crackled with magic as it soared towards the man in the black cloak. The man looked up and his face warped into a mask of fear. He had just time to raise a shield. But the curse shattered the shield effortlessly before it crashed into the man's chest. White hot flashes of electric blue lightning struck his body. He screamed in pain as the flashes burned his skin and ripped through his body. Then the power of the curse intensified. The man's eyes rolled up in his head and he fell over. His body hit the street with a soft thud.

Hermione saw Riddle stare incredulously at the man and then his gaze wandered towards Hermione. Hermione was brought out of her stupor as three men in dark cloaks rounded the corner ready to attack. She had to hurry or they would finish them off. She ran towards Riddle, fell down beside him and grabbed him around the chest. She closed her eyes and concentrated hard on the destination. She welcomed the dark pressure of the apparition with relief.

They reappeared a few miles away in the Apparition area of Diagon Alley. Hermione was still embracing Riddle who was still sprawled out on the floor. There were now people around them. Witches and wizards who were visiting Diagon Alley. Hermione looked up and saw an old witch glaring down at her. She was wearing ancient looking velvet witch's robes and fixed Hermione with a disapproving stare. Her eyes travelled from Hermione's face to Riddle and then to Hermione's arms which were still wrapped tightly around his chest. The old witch shook her head and tsked at Hermione before she turned and walked away.

Hermione now noticed that the other people were too staring down at them. Some with the same scandalized look on their faces that the old witch had shown while others grinned down at Riddle and Hermione. Hermione felt blood shooting into her face and she quickly let go of Riddle. She was
getting up on her feet again and mumbled something like,

"Apparition accident…"

Riddle too had gotten up and was now standing beside her. Hermione saw that he threw her one of his notorious death glares. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him out of the apparition area. She could feel that her head was still bright red.

"Where are you dragging me now to?" Hermione heard Riddle ask her irritably.

She looked back at him. He was glaring at her angrily and seemed to be inches away from losing his temper. She was tempted to just leave him here and head back to her cozy room in the Leaky Cauldron. She needed a rest now. Her ankle hurt. Maybe she had sprained it during her jump out of the window. Her head and back hurt too. Actually her whole body was aching. But she couldn't leave Riddle here. During that fight he had been hit by a curse. Maybe he was hurt now. And that would be completely Hermione's fault. Aside from that she had apparated him here without asking him, so it was her responsibility to bring him back to wherever he wanted.

"Let's just sit down for a while. Okay?" she said.

She had seen a pub not far away. It looked a little bit shady and was situated not far from the entrance to Knockturn Alley but Hermione didn't mind that right now. As Riddle wasn't objecting Hermione entered the pub. It was rather dark inside. There were a few dark figures sitting at the tables or the bar nursing their drinks. Hermione headed for a table at the far end of the pub. She was relieved to be able to sit down. Her ankle was hurting quite badly. Riddle took the chair opposite from her. He narrowed his eyes at her.

Oh boy, now he's going to interrogate me, Hermione sighed inwardly.

"So, what the fuck was that right now?" Riddle hissed at her.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked innocently. She was in the mood to rile him up some more. He didn't have his wand after all, did he?

"Why were those men after you, DeCerto?" Riddle said, his voice icy cold and dangerous.

"I don't know. Maybe wanted to mug me?" she answered him in a controlled voice while she produced a hanky from her pocket to clean the blood and muck off her face with.

She saw a flash of red in Riddle's eyes. Then he ordered her aggressively, "Don't lie to me!"

"And how do you know I'm lying? Because you are such a good Legilimens?" Sarcasm was seeping from Hermione's voice as she reminded him of what had happened the last time he had tried to legilimise her.

Riddle glared at her. From the way his jaw was clenched he seemed to try not to lose what little there still was of his self-control. Hermione was really glad he didn't have his wand right now.

"First you drag me into this fight where I was nearly killed and then you have the impudence to insult me afterwards?" Riddle said through clenched teeth in a quite but sharp voice.

He was right, Hermione had to admit. If she was in his stead, she would be angry too. That man had nearly used the Killing curse on Riddle. She felt suddenly very guilty and looked down on her hands.
"I'm sorry," she told Riddle in a small voice. "I didn't mean to endanger you."

Hermione looked up at him again. He seemed to be a little taken aback by her apology. Obviously he hadn't expected her to be repentant. Hermione saw a man coming over to their table. As he reached them he asked in a heavy voice,

"Wha' can I bring ya?"

"Firewhiskey!" Hermione answered instantly. She needed something strong right about now.
"Two?" she asked Riddle who just nodded shortly. "Make that two Firewhiskey, then," Hermione told the waiter.

"So, are you telling me why that man was after you?" Riddle asked after the waiter had left their table.

"Well, let's just say we had a little misunderstanding," Hermione told him.

"Yeah, sure!" Now it was Riddle's turn to be sarcastic. "A little misunderstanding. So that's why he tried to murder you, huh?"

"Why's that so important? He didn't manage to kill either of us. It's water under the bridge."
Hermione didn't want to talk about it. She didn't need Riddle to know about Flamel's flat and the book of Peverell.

"Why's it so important? For God's sake, DeCerto! Maybe it's normal for you to have people try to kill you. For me it's not an everyday occurrence," Riddle said exasperatedly.

"Well, if you had your wand on you, it wouldn't have come to that," Hermione answered defensively.

To her surprise Riddle didn't jump in her face after that statement. There was an unfathomable expression on his face. If it had been anyone else, Hermione would have said he looked forlorn but as it was Riddle she really didn't know. The expression lasted only for seconds before it was replaced by his usual emotionless mask.

"Why, you seemed to have everything under control," he said as Hermione found herself once again caught in his gaze.

A triumphant smirk was tucking at the corners of his mouth before he said, "You nearly killed that man, didn't you?"

"Don't be so condescending!" Hermione hissed at him. "At least I didn't use an Unforgivable."

Their conversation was interrupted as the waiter brought them their Firewhiskey. Hermione took her glass angrily and gulped down its contents.

"Easy, easy," Riddle said amused as he sipped at his glass.

"And what business did you have anyway straying around those backstreets?" Hermione asked him angrily.

"Whoa, why's it suddenly me being in the dock?" Riddle asked her lightly. "I didn't cast that curse at the man. You know that was Dark Magic, don't you? I should go straight to the Aurors and turn you in."
"Pff, Dark Magic," Hermione said. "You hypocrite! What was the last spell you used on me again? Oh yes, the Cruciatius Curse. I'm sure the Aurors will be very interested in that too."

"You know, DeCerto? You are quite amusing."

Hermione glared at him sitting leisurely in his chair and sipping his firewhiskey. He was enjoying this conversation a little too much for her liking. Hermione didn't want to talk with him anymore. He was getting on her nerves. And as he didn't appear to be injured it was about time she brought him back to his orphanage.

"Okay, if you are quite finished with insulting me, then let's go," she told him as she put a few coins down on the table to pay for the Firewhiskey before she stood up. A sharp pain shot through her ankle as she put her weight on it but she ignored it. Riddle was looking at her with raised eyebrows but didn't get up from his chair.

"Where to?" he asked.

"As this whole fiasco was my fault I'll apparate you back to your orphanage."

Riddle narrowed his eyes at her. "How do you know where I live!"

"Oh sorry. Is that another one of your many secrets?" she asked in mock-concern though she was rather upset that she had again let something slip.

"I can walk back on my own," Riddle said coldly as he got up from his chair.

"And what if those dubious men are still in the vicinity? They have seen your face. How are you going to fight them without a wand?" There was now a little bit of genuine concern in her voice. "No, I'll accompany you back."

"Oh, where is that concern about my safety suddenly coming from?" Riddle asked darkly as they left the pub.

"Certainly not because you are such an amiable person," Hermione muttered.

Riddle walked over to the Apparition area. Despite his words he seemed to take Hermione's offer to apparate him back. Hermione followed him, limping slightly.

"So, where do you want me to apparate to?" Hermione asked Riddle impatiently as she had reached him.

"Do you know the main street just a few streets down from where we disapparated from?" Riddle asked her.

"Yes, and I know just the secluded place where to apparate to. Hold on!" Hermione said holding out her arm. Riddle took it and grabbed it tightly.

Hermione concentrated on her destination. She knew where she had to apparate to. She could have even apparated right beside Riddle's orphanage. She knew where that was as she had once visited his old orphanage back in her time period in the hope to find a horcrux. But Riddle would surely get suspicious if Hermione let show how much she actually knew about him so she decided to apparate into an alley a few minutes away from his orphanage. They left Diagon Alley and stepped into the unpleasant feeling of pressure to reappear a few miles away in a small alleyway. Riddle instantly took off down the alley. Hermione rolled her eyes. What did she expect? Surely not a 'thank you' from Lord Voldemort. She limped behind him cursing Riddle and her painful ankle. Quickly they
reached the main road. There were some people on the sidewalk and even a few cars drove by. They walked for some time, Riddle in front and Hermione following him, until he stopped and turned around.

"Why are you still following me?" he asked angrily.

"Well, I said I'll bring you back, didn't I"

"You did apparate me here. So, why don't you bugger off now?"

"I'm just making sure that you reach your destination, okay?" Hermione was getting angry herself now. Why did he have to be so unpleasant?

Riddle didn't say anything else he just turned and continued to walk down the street. Hermione didn't really know why she was following him. Whoever those men in Flamel's flat had been she was quite sure that they were gone by now. Even if not, she would be more than surprised if they would attack in the middle of a street full of muggles.

So why was she following Riddle? Hermione somehow found herself wanting to see where he lived. She had never seen the orphanage. In her time period it didn't exist anymore. Was she on a perverted sight-seeing-tour?

Fortunately she couldn't dwell on these disturbing thoughts any longer as they had reached the orphanage. They stood before a pair of iron gates. Hermione could see the orphanage. It was a rather grim looking square building. Riddle opened the front gate and stepped through. Hermione followed him into a bare front yard. They passed the yard and headed for the front door of the building. Riddle reached the door.

Then he turned around to Hermione and hissed angrily, "What? Do you expect me to invite you to tea?"

Hermione was surprised by his aggressiveness. "Okay okay, I'm leave-

She was interrupted as the front door was abruptly flung open. A brawny man stood in the door way. He was glaring angrily down at them. Hermione saw Riddle tense.

"Tom!" the man yelled at Riddle. "Where have you been?"

Riddle didn't have time to answer the question as the man reached out for him, grabbed his collar and pulled Riddle brutally inside. Hermione was perplexed by the man's behaviour. He hadn't even acknowledged her presence. She didn't know what she was supposed to do now. Wasn't Riddle allowed to leave the orphanage? Maybe that man dragged him now to the patron of the orphanage. What was her name again? Harry had told her once. Colls? No, Cole. Mrs Cole.

Hermione could still hear the man yelling at Riddle. She stepped through the door inside the building and followed his voice. She passed a hallway and entered something like an entrance hall. Riddle and the man stood in that room. The man was still clutching Riddle by the collar.

"I ordered you to clean the dining hall, didn't I?" the man yelled into Riddle's face.

"Yes, sir. I'm-" Riddle tried to say in an almost subdued voice.

"But you just ran off, didn't you, Tom?" the man yelled furiously.

"I did-"
"Do you think you are special? Do you think you can do whatever you want?" the man continued to yell at Riddle and started to shake him by his collar.

"No, I-"

"Damn right. Because you are nothing special, Tom," the man spat at Riddle. "And if I tell you to do something, then you obey! Is that clear?"

Riddle didn't answer to that which seemed to enrage the man even further. He shook Riddle again brutally by his collar.

"Is that clear?" he asked Riddle again in a sharp voice.

Riddle still didn't answer and the man seemed to lose the little self-control he still possessed. He raised his hand and then slapped Riddle hard in the face. Hermione gasped as she saw the man hitting Riddle. As the man raised his hand again, Hermione stepped forward and yelled,

"Stop!"

The man did stop and he looked surprised over to Hermione. He seemed to realize just now that she was there. He narrowed his eyes at her and asked,

"Who are you?"

"Luisa Donohue," Hermione lied, silently apologizing to Luisa the waitress of the Leaky Cauldron for borrowing her name.

"And what are you doing here, Ms Donohue?" the man asked her dangerously.

"I…I…" Hermione stammered. She needed to lie now. The man was staring at her angrily. Hermione cast a look at Riddle. He was gazing back at her, seemingly surprised. She could see an angry red mark beginning to take shape on his left cheek. Hermione breathed in deeply and directed her gaze back to the man. She smiled at him politely before she said,

"I am sorry to intrude here like this, Mr…?"

"Carter. Peter Carter. I am the patron of this institution," the man, Carter, spat at her.

Hermione was surprised. Harry had told her that Riddle's orphanage was led by a Mrs Cole. She didn't let her surprise show on her face though but continued to smile at Carter.

"It is my fault that Tom neglected his duties. Please, don't punish him."

"Why would it be your fault, Miss?" Carter asked suspiciously. Though the rage was by now gone from his voice, Hermione noticed relieved.

"You see, Mr Carter. My father was just released today from the hospital. He fought on the frontline against those Nazis but he got wounded and was sent back home."

A sob story was just what she needed, Hermione decided.

"So I went to the hospital today to pick up my father. He still can't walk without help, you know? I was walking my father back to our home as we passed your orphanage. And Tom here saw us. I was really struggling then. My father is a tall man so I had problems supporting him properly. Tom offered to help me. I accepted his offer. It was very decent of him to help us. I hope Tom doesn't get problems now when all he did was helping me."
After that spectacular lie Hermione looked at Carter expectantly. He now had very little room to react. She knew she was laying it on a little thick but it seemed to work. Carter had calmed visibly down. She didn't know if he really believed her. He did know Riddle after all. And in the story Hermione had just made up Riddle was quite out of character.

Carter cleared his throat before he spoke, "If that is what happened then I can hardly punish him." He turned to Riddle. "Tom, go to your room!"

Riddle seemed to be perplexed by this sudden dismissal or he was surprised that Hermione had helped him. She didn't know. He was not easy to figure out after all. He glanced at Hermione with his penetrating grey eyes before he turned and headed to the staircase behind them.

Hermione looked back at Carter and said, "I hope I didn't cause you any inconveniences, Mr Carter."

Carter cleared his throat before he replied, "No, not at all."

Now that Hermione had the time she eyed Carter a little bit more closely. He was a tall, brawny man with short brown hair and a moustache. His face seemed to be constantly purple like he was enraged about something. Hermione could see a large silver cross on a chain lying on his chest.

"Let me bring you to the door," Carter offered.

Hermione followed Carter as he led the way.

"I apologize again for intruding like this, Mr Carter. That is not how I normally behave," Hermione said politely. "And let me congratulate you for having raised such a helpful young man like Tom."

She lied through her teeth.

Hermione wanted to engage Carter into a conversation. She was curious as to what had happened to Mrs Cole.

"Well, I'm glad Tom slowly shows some manners," Carter said. "He is a rather difficult boy."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. Should he be telling her this?

"In what way is he difficult?" Hermione asked and she tried to not let her curiosity seep into her voice.

"You see, Ms Donohue, I am a religious man." Carter looked at her.

Hermione didn't see were this was going so she just nodded.

Carter continued, "I took the direction of this orphanage out of the goodness of my heart."

Yeah! Hermione thought and nearly rolled her eyes. You are quite the saint!

"And I try to raise those poor children in the way of God. But Tom…" Carter looked somehow disgusted as he continued. "Tom is twisted, unnatural. He needs a strong hand to show him the right path, God's path."

Hermione was scandalised. 'A strong hand'? And he had just hit Riddle…

That vile man! Hermione thought angrily as she looked at Carter. No-one had the right to hurt their wards no matter how psychopathic the ward concerned might be.

"I try my very best to show Tom the true path. But I have my doubts he will be able to leave his
warped ways and the depravity he always shows." Hermione heard Carter continue. "He needs to be watched closely and punished strictly otherwise he will be lost."

Hermione tried to keep her anger inside. That man was just horrible. Sure Riddle was evil. But Hermione doubted this Carter person really knew that. No, she assumed that when Carter talked about the 'warped ways' of Riddle he was referring to the fact that Riddle was a wizard. Hermione didn't think that Carter knew Riddle was a wizard but he obviously guessed that there was something not right with Riddle. Hermione hated to think what Carter meant with Riddle had to be 'punished strictly'.

"Was Tom always like this?" Hermione asked and had to really work to keep her anger out of her voice.

"Yes, I think so," Carter answered. "I wasn't here when Tom grew up here. But I heard horrible stories about his behaviour." Carter shook his head.

"Oh? Since when do you watch over this orphanage, Mr Carter?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"That must be nearly four years now," Carter said.

By now they had reached the front door and Hermione was rather glad when she was finally able to walk away from the depressing looking building. That orphanage was really awful, especially Carter. He was a right stuck-up bigot. Hermione could now understand why Riddle hated it so much to have to return there. She had qualms as she walked down the street and away from the orphanage. She really didn't want to leave Riddle in the custody of Carter.

But then again, it was Riddle. What did she care? Even if he was beaten by Carter didn't Voldemort deserve something like this?

In spite of these thoughts Hermione felt uneasy as she entered a back alley from which she planned to apparate to Diagon Alley.

Back in her room in the Leaky Cauldron Hermione put up a few privacy spell, warning charms and the like to prevent anyone from coming near her room. Then she sat down on her bed and with trembling hands pulled the book of Peverell out of her cloak pocket. The thin book lay innocently in her hand. The brown leather cover still looked old and battered. Hermione breathed in deeply and opened the cover. A lot of her hopes lay in the little book in her hands. If the book proved to be a dead end Hermione might remain stranded in the wrong time period for the rest of her life. The parchment of the book was yellowed, the scripture handwritten and faded at some places. Hermione closed her eyes and prayed that her hopes wouldn't be shattered, then she opened her eyes again and began to read:

With the help of my brothers I, Igontus Peverell, have delved deeper into the power, residing in all things, than anybody before. Together we travelled realms hitherto unknown and left behind the boundaries narrow minded people have erected to conceal their own deficiency. In short, my brothers and I have worked with the pristine power that is called Magic.

This all-embracing power is vastly different from the so called magic self pronounced masters teach their disciples. They have the impertinence to proclaim their knowledge of wizardry when they know nothing about the ways of Magic. They instruct their students in fatuous wand swinging and the foolish parroting of incantations when true Magic is so much more.
For so long Wizards have curtailed Magic and bereft it its former beauty. Thus, all that now remains is a mutilated shadow of what once was a glorious force. Magic is a natural force that flows through everything, it is ubiquitous and eternally changing. To wedge it into unyielding spells and wand movements is a crime beyond imagining. So my brothers and I renounced the old, fusty ways which have done nothing but cage up this beautiful force. They might call us traitors or felons but we will never falter from the true path.

Hermione stopped reading. Those words Peverell had written sounded horribly familiar. ‘Magic is eternally changing…’ That was almost the exact same wording Snape had used all those years ago to so lovingly describe the Dark Arts. The Dark Arts are eternal and ever changing.’ Hermione looked back at the book in her hands. Who was Peverell really? An unrivalled master in his field of knowledge or just a gifted Dark Wizard? Hermione sighed. Either way, she was dependent on his knowledge. Dark Artefact or not, she needed to understand the way the Elder Wand worked.

For the next days Hermione nearly never left her room. She only went down to the bar of the Leaky Cauldron to get herself something to eat. The rest of the time she studied the book of Peverell. Igontus Peverell and his two brothers were without a doubt geniuses but Peverell's way of describing magic was reminding Hermione more and more of Dark Magic.

Hermione wasn't proud of it but unfortunately she knew a little bit about the Dark Arts. She had resisted for a long time to learn dark spells but at some point in time she had decided to use any spell if it would save the life of a friend. She knew it was wrong to use the Dark Arts. The more she had learnt about Dark Magic the more she had come to see how devious and twisted it really was. But back then she had been ready to use any means possible to stop Lord Voldemort. If that meant she had to use his own weapons against him, then she would do it. At first she had studied the Dark Arts not with the intention to use them but to understand what she was facing, later as the war had been dragged on she had decided to use them in battle. It had been a horrible decision and the first one she had made without Harry and Ron but it had been necessary.

At some passages, Peverell's view on magic was frighteningly similar to those Dark Art works she had read, though he never really used the term 'Dark Art' directly. Hermione hadn't managed to read much but she could already tell that the concepts Peverell described were extremely sophisticated and complex. She had a hard time understanding them so she couldn't be completely sure whether they were dark or not. And she was by far no expert in that matter. She did know which spells and curses were dark but she didn't know where to draw the line. Peverell's book didn't seem to deal with charms or spells as such, it dealt with the nature of magic. And how could the nature of magic itself be dark? Additionally, Peverell's manuscript was very old. Back then the Dark Arts might not have existed at all.

Whichever way, Hermione had to read the manuscript as it was her only chance to find a way home.
The Aftermath Of War

Hermione woke up from her sleep by a loud explosion. She shot out of her bed while she grabbed her wand from under her pillow before she was really awake. She looked around her room but saw no attackers. Was that noise just now only in her dream? A yawn broke free as she looked down on her wrist watch. Three in the morning?

*Too early to worry about any nightmares,* she thought grumpily.

She just lay down again as another explosion could be heard. She got up quickly and walked over to the only window in the room. Those explosions were coming from somewhere outside. Hermione drew the curtains away. She now had a view of Diagon Alley and beyond that she could see London. Hermione gasped horrified as her gaze fell on the city. The nightly sky was lit up with a forbiddingly red and orange sheen. Columns of thick, black smoke were rising here and there from the buildings of the city. Up in the sky, against the shine of the burning city underneath, Hermione could see rows and rows of aircrafts. There were so many of them that the frightening sound of their air-screws could be heard like thunder over the mayhem down in the city. Those monsters in the air opened their metal bellies to release their murderous cargo. Bomb after bomb dropped down on the city. Each crashed into the defenceless buildings with a horrible explosion.

Hermione's stomach knotted in a mixture of fear and disgust as she witnessed the German air raid attacking London. Tears were running down her eyes unnoticed. She had heard and read about the Second World War but to see it and experience it herself was so dreadful that she felt nauseous. All those innocent people out there, men, women and children, were dying. Hermione's hands curled into fists as she watched helplessly how the bombs rained down on the city. She knew that she was safe here in Diagon Alley. Strong wards were protecting this wizarding settlement. But what about the people out there in this inferno?

"Riddle!" Hermione whispered shocked.

He was out there in this burning city, unprotected by any wards. *And,* Hermione remembered with a jab in her chest, *without his wand.* What if the orphanage was hit? He wouldn't be able to save himself without his wand. That would be difficult even with a wand. Hermione continued to watch the direful scene unfolding in front of her unable to help or to do anything. The German bombers continued to drop their abhorrent cargo for an eternity. As they finally broke off and flew away they left behind a destroyed and broken city. Long after the bombers had left the fires continued to burn and lit the sky threateningly.

Hermione fell into an uneasy sleep in the early morning hours. She lay curled into a ball on the floor in front of the small window. She woke up from a nightmare ridden sleep just a few hours after she had fallen asleep. She stumbled up and again looked out of the window. It was no longer dark outside and the rays of the morning sun broke through the clouds on the sky. Hermione could still see black smoke rising from the city. Some of the fires were still smoldering. Hermione couldn't believe what she had witnessed this night. To her the Second World War was a part of history. Something so far away that it had transformed into dry facts and dates out of a book. But now it crashed down around her as hard reality where people were affected and lost their lives.

With a sigh she turned away from the window and the view it showed. *War! What a stupid idea.* And yet it seemed to follow mankind. She herself was no stranger to it. She had fought in the war against Voldemort and she had seen its ugly face. Regardless of the side you were fighting on there was no way to get out of the war and still remain clean and innocent.
Hermione walked over to her wardrobe and pulled out some clothes. She got washed and dressed before she left her room and headed down to get something to eat. Although it was quite early Hermione saw a few customers already sitting at the tables and eating their breakfast. She walked over to a free table and sat down. After a few moments Luisa the waitress and maid of the Leaky Cauldron came over to her table.

"Good morning." She smiled down at Hermione kindly. "What can I get you?"

"Oh, just a few slices of toast and a coffee, please," Hermione replied tiredly.

"Right away. You look like you need the coffee. Couldn't sleep, eh? What with all that racket the Muggles were making it's no wonder." Luisa shook her head. "Poor things. I'm just glad we are safe here in Diagon Alley."

"Yes," Hermione said. "How often does something like that happen?"

Luisa looked down at her sadly. "Too often if you ask me. I just hope they can solve whatever they are fighting over soon."

Hermione nodded. But she knew that this war would continue for nearly the next two years. Luisa went to get Hermione's order and Hermione was left to her own thoughts. She didn't want to admit it, not even before herself, but she was a little bit worried about Riddle. He had been out there last night. Maybe he had been hurt. Maybe his orphanage had been hit by one of those bombs. Hermione knew his orphanage didn't exist anymore at her time period. But she didn't know when it had been destroyed. She was fiddling a strand of her hair nervously as Luisa brought her her breakfast. She put the plate and cup down in front of Hermione smiled at her before she left again. Hermione began to eat but her thoughts were elsewhere. Riddle was alive in her time period. So it wasn't possible that he had died last night in that air raid, Hermione reasoned.

But maybe he is hurt! a voice inside of her threw in.

Yeah? So what? another side of her answered angrily. He was the enemy! What did she care whether he was hurt or not? He would deserve something like that anyway.

Hermione's thoughts wandered back to the day she had last seen him. He had been hit by a curse back then. She remembered how she had defended him and grabbed him to apparate away. It had reminded her of the war she had been fighting in. They had never left someone behind. That same feeling of protectiveness had overcome her again and had taken her to save Riddle.

She drank the last bit of her coffee before she put down the cup, sighed and stood up from her table. It wouldn't hurt if she just checked on him briefly. To satisfy her curiosity. Most likely he would be all right anyway.

Hermione left the Leakey Cauldron and walked over to the Apparition area of Diagon Alley. As she walked she transfigured her witch's outer robes into something less conspicuous in the Muggle world. When she reached the apparition spot she turned on her heel and dived once again in the unpleasant feeling of pressure. She reappeared at the other end of London in a secluded alleyway. After she made sure that no muggle had seen her unusual way of travelling she stepped out of the small alley. Then she walked down the street in direction of Riddle's orphanage. As she so strolled down the lane she was instantly hit by the atmosphere of despair that dominated Muggle London. This area of London seemed to have been spared by most of the bombs. But the people she saw still looked rather shaken as they hurried along the streets. After a few minutes of walking Hermione came upon a terrible sight. There on the right side of the street she was walking along was a huge crater where once had been a house. The adjoining houses were destroyed too. But their remaining
structures could at least still be recognized as houses. Hermione hurried along the street hoping that the building she was searching for didn't share their fate.

She felt immensely relieved as she stood before the dreary, grey building that was Riddle's orphanage. It seemed to be undazzled by the German bombs. There had been no need to be afraid after all. She was just turning around to head back to Diagon Alley as she remembered Mr Carter the patron of the orphanage and how he had treated Riddle. Now that she was here anyway she could at least check on Riddle to make sure he was okay.

But how to do that? She didn't want to walk in there and speak with that despicable man again. Then how about she cast a few Muggle repellent charms and Notice-Me-Not charms on herself? With them she could walk in calmly and no-one would even notice her. Beside Riddle of course. He was a wizard so he would be able to look underneath the charms.

Yes, that sounded definitely like a plan, Hermione thought.

She walked over to a secluded area right beside the outer wall of the orphanage before she pulled out her wand and cast the necessary spells on herself. After that charm work she went back over to the entrance gate and opened it. As she walked to the entrance of the orphanage building she had to remind herself that she couldn't use any magic from now on. Riddle was still underage and thus not allowed to use any magic during holidays. Every magic used in the vicinity of his orphanage would be blamed on him.

Hermione's wand was safely stowed away in her wand holster as she stepped through the entrance door. Fortunately the hallway was empty so Hermione continued her way undisturbed. She reached the next door and opened it. She now stood in the entrance hall. Though 'hall' was not the right word to describe it. Maybe chamber was a better way to call it. It was small and the grey, once white, wallpapers made it rather depressing. In front of Hermione was a double glass door which obviously let to the dining facility. On her left side were a few doors and on her right were some stairs leading up. Hermione decided to first search for Riddle upstairs. The design of the building suggested that the rooms for the orphans were on the second floor. Hermione climbed the stairs. And she had been right. The rooms of the orphans were here. Hermione faced a corridor which had on either side many doors. Children were running down the corridor skipping from room to room and playing in their rooms. Hermione noticed how they all wore a similar grey tunic. She remembered that Riddle had worn it too. Maybe that was some kind of uniform here. Though a rather ugly one at that, Hermione decided. She walked slowly down the corridor. She had to watch out that none of the children accidently ran into her as she was invisible to them. The children themselves looked well cared for and seemed to be relatively happy. But Hermione wasn't surprised that some of them looked rather thin. They were living in wartime after all. Luckily most of the doors she passed were open. She just had to peer inside to confirm that it wasn't Riddle's room. And the few that were closed were quickly opened. But as she reached the end of the corridor she hadn't found Riddle. She looked out of the window that was at the end of the corridor. She had an overview of the back yard of the orphanage. The yard was fenced by a huge concrete wall. Some of the orphans were playing down there. But Hermione couldn't see Riddle there either.

Where was he?

Hermione walked back the way she had come from and down the stairs. She ended up in the entrance hall. A quick look into the dining facility confirmed that Riddle wasn't there either. She just wondered where she should search next as one of the doors next to her opened. Mr Carter stepped out followed by one of the staff girls. She seemed to be very young Hermione noticed astounded. Barely older than some of her charges.
"I told you Emma. New toys are too expensive." Hermione heard Mr Carter lecture the girl. "It's getting more and more difficult now to find any donator."

"Yes, Mr Carter," the girl answered timidly.

"Now off you go, Emma. I'm sure there are still things you have to do," Mr Carter said.

With that the girl hurried away.

"Now now, Peter." Hermione heard a woman from inside the room say. "You work my girls too hard."

Mr Carter turned around and said while smirking at the person inside the room. "But, Michelle, you know me. I would never do such a thing."

As he said that a woman stepped out of the room. She was in her late forties and was rather plump, with brown hair strained with white.

"Whatever you say, Peter," she said amused.

Mr Carter laughed at that disgustingly. Hermione felt her dislike of him rise again. And as she looked at the sharp features of the woman she felt that she didn't like her either.

"What about little Simon?" the plump woman asked lazily. "Is he still making problems?"

"Oh, no," Mr Carter answered. "Those little pests just need a strong hand is all. They are just being normal kids." He seemed to consider something before he continued, "Not like that Tom."

Here Hermione's head shot up and she was paying utmost attention again.

"That boy is an obnoxious little bastard."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at that insult.

"Yes yes. He's a really creepy boy," the plump woman said with a disgusted face. "Something's not right with him."

"Yes," Mr Carter said firmly. "It seems that boy has deviated far from God's path."

The plump woman crossed herself at his statement.

"Since I started working here I have tried to put him back on the right path," Mr Carter stated with a hard voice. "But he always seems to go back to his warped ways, regardless of how often I give him the strap."

Hermione didn't want to believe her ears anymore. That sick bastard! And someone like him was to watch over children?

"Yes, right you are," the plump woman agreed with Carter. "By the way for how long is he to stay in the cellar?"

Carter shrugged at that. "For at least a day more."

Hermione stared at the two, unbelieving. What was wrong with those people? She stopped hearing in to their offensive conversation and turned around to eye the staircase instead. Cellar?
One of the stairs was leading upstairs where the orphans' rooms where. Another was leading downstairs. Hermione hadn't paid that one any attention before. She went over to the stairs and took the one leading down. After a while she reached the dark and dirty basement. The walls were bare concrete and cobwebs were hanging from the ceiling. There were puddles of foul water on the ground. Hermione took a tentative step down the passage. Her eyes needed a while before they were adapted to the twilight down here. She took a few more steps into the littered passage. After some time stumbling in the dark she came upon a solid looking door. She went over to that door and tried the handle. It was locked. Hermione looked around. That door seemed to be the only one down here. So it was very likely that Riddle was behind that door, Hermione reasoned. She searched inside her pockets for something to pick the lock. She came up with a paperclip.

*That should do the trick.*

To know how to pick a lock the Muggle way had proven immensely useful during the war. Hermione had once learned it from Fred and George. She bent up the paperclip and stuck it into the lock. She wasn't as good in lock picking as Fred and George had been but good enough so that after a few minutes the lock finally sprang open.

Hermione opened the door slowly. The room inside seemed to be a little bit brighter than the passage due to the small grated window high on one of the walls. Unfortunately its window glass was broken, letting in the cold December air. Hermione stepped inside. It was a rather small chamber. And it was just as dirty as the passage way had been. Mildew was growing on the grey walls and the floor was damp and dirty. But Hermione didn't pay that any attention. Her eyes were focused on the fallen form lying in the middle of the room. She rushed over to the heap on the floor. Hermione recognized Riddle curled up into a ball and lying on the grimy floor of the room. She fell down beside him. She saw that his eyes were closed and his face was warped into a mask of pain. There were bruises and old blood all over his face, contrasting sharply with his pale skin. To Hermione's horror she could see that the back of his shirt was soaked in blood too.

"Riddle?" she said softly as she touched his arm gently.

Riddle jerked away from her touch.

"It's me, DeCerto," Hermione said in a soothing voice.

Riddle slowly opened his eyes and looked at her blankly. Hermione shuddered as she saw the pain in his beautiful grey eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Well, what do you think? Enjoying my day in this inviting environment of course," she gently joked with him as she wiped a few strands of his dark hair out of his face. "Come, get up," Hermione ordered as she gently pulled at his arm.

Riddle winced in pain as he tried to sit up. With Hermione's help he managed to get into a sitting position. She noticed that he held his right arm protectively to his chest and his back seemed to be extremely stiff. That and the bruises on his face told her everything she needed to know. She was sure that evil man, Carter, had beaten Riddle. Hermione had to support Riddle so he wouldn't tip over. She had her right arm wrapped around his shoulders. He was trembling slightly either from the pain or the cold, Hermione didn't know.

"We have to get you out of here," she whispered softly to him. "Do you think you can walk?"

Riddle turned his head and looked at her questioningly. Hermione saw that his eyes were still
clouded by pain. She nearly winced as she looked at the dark purple bruises that marred his handsome face.

"Why are you here?" he asked her again with his hoarse voice.

Hermione smiled at him reassuringly before she answered seriously, "To get you out of here."

He didn't move and continued to stare at her suspiciously as if he assumed she had an ulterior motive.

"Now enough questions," Hermione told him in her no-nonsense-voice that she had so often used when Harry or Ron had yet again planned one of their stupid and rash adventures. "I need you to get up, Riddle. I can't carry you, you know?"

Hermione then arranged one of her arms under his left shoulder and tried to heave him up. He softly groaned in pain as she tried to hoist him up. In the end she managed to get him to stand up. He staggered a lot and Hermione had to support him quite a bit so that he didn't fall over. She took his left and seemingly uninjured arm and put it around her shoulders so he could lean on her. Then she wrapped her right arm around his waist to steady him.

"Now we get up the stairs," she told him. "And then we get the hell out of here, okay?"

Riddle didn't answer so Hermione took his lack of objection as a 'yes' and guided him out of the disgusting room. He followed her but he obviously had difficulties with walking. Hermione could hear his laboured breathing and he leaned heavily on her. From time to time she could hear him moan in pain. As they reached the foot of the staircase Hermione was exhausted but she wasn't going to give in to that. She adjusted her grip on Riddle so that she held him more safely and then she helped him climb up the stairs. With her left hand she clasped the banister to prevent herself from losing balance and to pull them both up. As they had nearly reached the next floor Hermione stopped and sat Riddle down on one of the steps. She gently cupped one of his cheeks in her hand to get his attention and then she told him softly,

"I'm going to check if the coast is clear. I'll be back in a moment."

Riddle looked at her with his grey, unfathomable eyes and then he nodded curtly. Hermione smiled at him shortly before she got up again and sneaked up the last steps. She reached the entrance hall and confirmed that Riddle couldn't be seen from this point of view. She then hushed over to the dining facility to make sure that no-one was inside right now. After that she left the entrance hall in direction of the hallway that lead outside. The hallway, too, was empty. She passed it and opened the front door. The cold December air hit her as she stepped out of the orphanage building. She scanned the front yard. No-one here, either. She reentered the building again and walked through the hallway. She would have to just risk it now. Hopefully they wouldn't be seen leaving.

And if someone tries to stop us, I'm going to hex them! Hermione thought fiercely. Underage magic or not, I'm not letting Riddle stay here.

Hermione reached the entrance hall again and hurried over to the staircase. She breathed out relieved as she saw Riddle still sitting on the step where she had left him. Hermione could see that the back of his shirt was indeed covered in blood. She hurried the steps down and stooped down in front of him. He had his head leaned against the wall but he opened his eyes as he had heard her coming. He seemed to be thoroughly exhausted. Hermione hoped she could get him out of here.

"Let's go," she said as she grabbed his arm again.

With some effort she managed to get him up again and they staggered up the last steps to the
entrance hall. Riddle now leaned on her even more heavily than before. Hermione needed to leave here fast. They stumbled through the entrance hall and the hallway until they reached the front door. Hermione opened it and together they stepped out. It was now just the front yard that separated them from a safe apparition point. Hermione led Riddle in direction of the exit and they had nearly reached the metal gate as Hermione heard a shout. She turned her head and saw a man standing in the doorway they had just left. She stopped breathing as she recognized Carter. He was waving his arm angrily at them. Hermione could hear him shout enraged,

"Stop!" Before he began to run towards them.

Hermione sprang into action again. She tightened her grip on Riddle and ignored his painful moans of protest as she hauled him forwards forcefully.

"You are not getting away, you ungrateful little bastard!" Carter yelled behind them.

Hermione noticed that his yells were now frighteningly near them. But it was only one more step and they reached the metal gate. Hermione flung it open. As they stepped over the threshold Hermione risked a quick glance back. Carter had nearly caught up with them. He was only a few metres back. She could see his red furious face snarling at them, or rather Riddle as she was still invisible to his eyes. Hermione had to be quick now. She held Riddle tightly and pulled him over to the right. They reached the cover of the concrete wall that fenced the whole area of the orphanage. Carter wasn't able to see them now. Hermione scanned the street for any passersby. She was immensely relieved as she didn't see anyone in the close vicinity. Then she redoubled her hold on Riddle so that he groaned in pain but she couldn't help that now. She heard Carter's footsteps as he had nearly reached the metal gate. Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on her destination before she span on the spot and disapparated with Riddle just a second before Carter passed the gate. He had expected to see Riddle hurrying along the street and was utterly perplexed that he could see neither hide nor hair of him.

In the meantime a few miles away Hermione and Riddle appeared in a dark alley way just a few steps away from the Leaky Cauldron. Riddle staggered and would have surely fallen if Hermione hadn't supported him.

"Nearly there, nearly there, Riddle," she whispered soothingly to him.

Then she put off her coat and flexed her right wrist so that her wand landed in her hand. She was relieved to feel the smooth surface of the wood in her hand. She waved her wand at the coat and transfigured it into a black cloak which she wrapped around Riddle. She didn't want to be questioned by the other guests in the Leaky Cauldron as to why Riddle was in such a state.

After that she supported him again and they walked over to the Leaky Cauldron and entered the bar. The bar was now rather crowded with people who were on a trip to Diagon Alley. She maneuvered Riddle over to the stairs leading to the guestrooms without rising suspicion and with some effort managed to bring him up to her room. Standing before the door and steadying Riddle she rummaged through her pockets to find her room key. After a while she produced it from one of the pockets and opened the door. As she entered her room she let out a relieved breath of air. They had made it!

She walked Riddle over to her bed where she sat him down. Then she crouched down in front of him and looked up into his face. His breathing was still laboured and Hermione wondered if he had broken some of his ribs. His face was even paler than normal and he looked down at her guardedly.

Hermione smiled at him and said kindly, "You are safe now. That's my room in the Leaky Cauldron." She gestured at their surroundings. She looked back into his eyes and then said, "You are hurt, Riddle. I need to see to your injuries. Is that okay?"
At that Riddle cringed away from her a little bit and held his right arm firmer to his body.

"I'm not going to do anything bad. I just want to heal those injuries," Hermione soothed him. "I'm quite good at that," she added with a wink.

Then she got up and walked over to her school trunk that stood in one corner of the room. She opened the lid and rummaged through her belongings. After a while she came across what she was searching for. She pulled out a wooden box which she had dubbed her 'first aid kit'. She opened the lid and sorted through her stock.

*Skelegrow? Probably.*

*Bruise ointment? Definitely.*

*Disinfect? Yes.*

*Potion to close cuts? Obviously.*

*Painrelief potion? Of course.*

With the bottles and pots she returned to Riddle. He was still sitting on the bed stiffly and had obviously watched her.

"Now, let me see your arm," Hermione ordered.

Riddle narrowed his eyes at her before he said tentatively, "Why are you doing this, DeCerto? Why are you helping me?"

Hermione sighed at his stubbornness. Unfortunately, she didn't even know herself why she was helping him. He was Lord Voldemort after all. But now that she had started to help him she couldn't just stop halfway through it, could she?

"Oh, come on. We don't *all* have some hidden agenda like you Slytherins always seem to have. You are hurt, I want to help you. Is that so hard to believe?"

Riddle continued to stare at her warily while Hermione glanced at him with her eyebrows raised. After a while Riddle ever so slowly extended his injured arm towards her. She smiled at him and said,

"Now was that so difficult?"

Riddle didn't dignify that with an answer so Hermione sat down beside him on the bed and took his arm gingerly in her hands. Then she took out her wand. She could see Riddle tense at that but he didn't jerk away his arm. Hermione took that as a good sign and muttered an incantation while she waved her wand over his arm. Instantly the part of his shirt surrounding his forearm vanished. Hermione could now see the damage of his arm. His forearm was swollen and dark bruises marred the skin. But that wasn't the worst, Hermione assumed. She probed his arm and found her assumption confirmed. Riddle moaned softly in pain as she examined his arm. She looked up at him.

"It's broken," she informed him. "I need to relocate the bones. That's going to hurt a bit."

She took her wand in her hand again and cast a Numbing charm on his arm though she knew it wouldn't help very much. Then she summoned her magic to cast the more complex spell which would relocate the bones. She remembered the last time she had used that particular spell. That had been shortly after her time travelling trip. She had had her arm broken too. Though it had been her
Hermione glanced up at Riddle. "Ready?"

He nodded at her so Hermione channeled her magic through her wand and into his arm. Riddle hissed in pain as the bones in his arm arranged themselves anew. After that spell Hermione waved her wand again and conjured bandages out of thin air. With another wave of her wand the bandages wound themselves tightly around Riddle's arm.

"Okay, that's it. Now drink this," Hermione told him as she handed him a small vial.

He took it with his left hand but didn't drink it. Hermione rolled her eyes at his distrusting behaviour.

"It's Skelegrow. That will help mend the broken bone."

He glanced at her assessing and then downed the potion. Hermione sighed. He was not being an easy patient. She took the empty vial back from him and then instructed,

"Now, get your shirt off."

He raised an eyebrow at her and Hermione sighted again frustrated.

"Your back is hurt, Riddle. I need to see to that, too."

He still refused to move so Hermione told him, "Don't be silly. Nothing I haven't seen before."

She didn't quite know what she was referring to. Seeing a half naked man or the wounds on his back. Because quite honestly she really had seen both of it before.

*Fortunately not always connected with one another.* She thought with a smirk.

Riddle reluctantly removed his shirt. Hermione had to help him a little bit as he couldn't quite use his right hand. She noticed there was an old but huge and ugly scar on his left arm, beginning on his forearm and reaching up to his upper arm. Hermione briefly wondered where he got that but she had more pressing matters now.

She told Riddle to lie down on the bed. Riddle hesitated again but Hermione didn't take it this time and shoved him so that he was lying down on his front. As she examined his back a fury at Carter rose inside of her. The skin of Riddle's back and his sides was full of dark bruises. But that wasn't the worst. There were many deep gashes all over his back. They stood angrily out on his pale skin. Not one spot of skin was untouched. Several of the gashes were rather recent whereas others seemed to be older and were caked over with dark blood. Some of the gashes were still bleeding though, adding to the old blood that already was everywhere on his back. Hermione took her wand and removed as much of the dried blood as she could without reopening the gashes again. After that she applied several of the potions, she had prepared, to the wounds. Riddle endured the whole procedure without saying anything. He just sometimes twitched or moaned softly in pain. Hermione tried to work quickly as not to prolong his pain. After she had attended to the wounds she conjured another bandage. This one covered his back. Hermione looked at his bandaged back. She knew she would have to repeat attending to his wounds to prevent an inflammation and to ensure that they would heal properly but for now she was finished.

She stroked softly over his head as she told him, "I'm finished you can get up again."

Hermione retrieved his shirt she had discarded on the floor. She cast a quick Scorgify on it to get rid of all the blood. She turned around to Riddle and handed him the shirt. He accepted it and started to
pull it on. Hermione frowned as she again noticed the bruises on his face. She sat down on the bed beside him and picked up the pot with the bruise ointment. As Riddle was finished with putting on his shirt Hermione took his chin in one of her hands and bent his face towards her. He looked at her with wide eyes. She had to smile at that. Then she took a little bit of the ointment out of the pot and applied it to the dark bruises on his face. After that she looked contently at his face as she said,

"Try to not rub it off. It needs time to take an effect." After considering him for a while longer she added, "How about I get you something to eat? You look starved."

Without waiting for a response she got up and walked over to the door. Before she left the room she turned back to him and said, "And don't go wandering off alone."

She left before he had time to retort to that. Hermione walked down to the bar of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Oh, hello," Luisa greeted her. "I haven't seen you come back. What can I do for you?"

"Could you get me a few sandwiches?" Hermione asked. "Oh, and do you have another free room? For a friend of me."

"Another room? Let's see…” Luisa studied the room reservations. "Ah, the guest in the room next to yours is leaving today. Your friend could take that one."

"Perfect," Hermione smiled at her.

"Good. And now I'll get you your sandwiches," Luisa replied happily.

After some time Hermione returned to her room with a plate of sandwiches in one hand and two bottles of butterbeer in her other. As she entered her room she saw that Riddle had fallen asleep on her bed. Hermione walked quietly over to him and put the plate and the bottles on her nightstand. She didn't want to disturb him. He had looked extremely tired and exhausted as she had left him. He surely needed some rest. She took her blanket and put it over him cautiously as not to wake him. Hermione looked down on his sleeping face.

He looks so innocent when he is asleep. Hermione shook her head. 'Voldemort' and 'innocent' were two words that should never be associated with each other.

Her gaze fell on the grey tunic from the orphanage he was still wearing. Even after her Scorgify it still looked dirty and ragged. Hermione felt sick just from looking at it. That orphanage was abhorrent. She couldn't believe that Riddle was forced to return there every summer. And Dumbledore? Did he know what was happening at the orphanage? No, that wasn't possible, Hermione thought. Though he did have a dislike for Riddle. That was apparent during Transfiguration classes. But Dumbledore would surely never go so far as to punish Riddle by sending him back to this abusive man.

You are talking about the man who sent Harry back to the Dursleys every summer! And he even liked Harry, a voice in her head threw in unwanted.

Well, there was a reason to that, Hermione answered angrily.

She left her room again and headed for Diagon Alley. She needed some time for herself now and a breath of fresh air to clear her head. She still had trouble to process what had happened today. First that air raid over London and then that disgusting orphanage. And how the hell did she end up saving Lord Voldemort? Hermione was deep in thought as she left the Leaky Cauldron and stepped out on Diagon Alley. It was rather crowded.
Well, it is nearly Christmas, isn't it?

Those people were probably doing their Christmas shopping. With a sharp stab in her stomach Hermione noticed that this was going to be the first time she would spend Christmas utterly alone. Last year hadn't been that fun either with a war raging around her and her parents dead but at least she'd had Ron and Harry. What would they say if they saw her now?

*Maybe they would be disgusted by me,* Hermione thought sadly.

How could she have gone and helped Riddle? Of all people? He was evil! Lord Voldemort definitely deserved to be beaten up. He actually deserved a lot worse. Why did she have to check on him in the first place? She had known that he wouldn't be injured during this air raid otherwise Voldemort wouldn't have existed in her time. So *why* did she have to go to the orphanage? Whatever had happened to her initial plan of not getting involved with him? That had worked really well. Since coming to Hogwarts it had gradually gotten worse. And now Tom Riddle was lying asleep in her room.

But she could never have left him behind in that sad excuse for an orphanage. Carter, he had really hurt Riddle.

*So what?* an angry voice in her head huffed. *That man murdered your parents!*

Images of her burnt home resurfaced from her memory. Images of the burnt…

Hermione sat down on a bench. She was feeling sick. Her parents hadn't been the only ones she had lost to Voldemort. So many of her friends were dead. No-one of them had deserved to die. And those who didn't die were not the same anymore. Like Mrs Weasley! Hermione remembered how she had been before the war had started. Mrs Weasley had been kindhearted, protective and always friendly. Then during the war so many members of her family had died that it had left Mrs Weasley behind as a broken and hopeless woman. An empty shell compared to her former self.

Hot tears were running down Hermione's cheeks. She wiped them away angrily.

*Stop that now!* she told herself. What would all those people think of Hermione now? How dare she help the enemy? Their murderer?

But Hermione had seen so much pain and sorrow. She didn't want to take any more of it. Not if it was in her power to stop it. And Riddle had been in pain. So much was clear. Maybe he didn't deserve her help but as Hermione had seen him lying there in this dirty chamber, hurt, she hadn't been able to stop herself. She had had to help him.

*I can't change that now.*

Hermione knew she would never be able to take him back to the orphanage. Not now that she knew how he was treated there. She somehow felt responsible for Riddle.

*Just perfect!*

She sighed frustrated and got up from her bench. She didn't want to deal with her guilty conscience right now so she walked over to the small apothecary. She needed to buy more healing potions as hers were nearly used up.

Hermione left the apothecary with a few bags in her hands. She then headed back for the Leaky Cauldron. As she strolled down Diagon Alley she walked by a shop that was apparently some predecessor of Madam Malkin's. Hermione stopped to look inside the shop window. After a little bit
of hesitation she entered the shop. She had decided to buy some clothes for Riddle as she really
didn't want him to wear that disgusting grey shirt anymore.

So it was a while later than she had planned that Hermione arrived back at the Leaky Cauldron. She
nodded towards Luisa as she passed the bar and headed for the staircase leading to her room. She
entered the room without knocking. It was her room after all, she thought stubbornly. As she entered
she saw Riddle was awake. He was sitting on her bed and was now eyeing her guardedly. He
looked a little bit better. At least he didn't seem to be so exhausted anymore, Hermione noted
contently. His face was still bruised though. It would need a few days for the bruise ointment to
change that.

"Hey, Riddle," Hermione greeted him friendly.

He didn't return her greeting but continued to stare at her blankly. Hermione discarded her shopping
bags on the floor, walked over to him and sat down on the bed next to him as there were no other
seats in the room. Her gaze fell on the untouched sandwiches on the plate sitting on the bedside table.
Hermione was sure Riddle must be starved but he hadn't touched the food. She didn't think he did
that out of politeness. No, he obviously didn't trust her. With a sigh she leaned forward and took the
plate.

"You know, I didn't poison those," she said as she put down the plate with the sandwiches on the
bed between them.

Hermione hadn't eaten herself since breakfast. Now it was evening already. So she took one
sandwich and began to eat. Riddle still refused to eat. He was staring at her with this unnerving blank
face.

*He really has a difficult character, hasn't he?* Hermione thought as she grabbed another of the
sandwiches and held it out to him. He just looked at it with his grey eyes.

"Come on. I know you are hungry. Just take it. It's really good," Hermione gently tried to coax him
into taking it.

His gaze travelled from the sandwich in Hermione's extended hand to her face and locked on her
eyes. His face was still an emotionless mask but she could see the distrust in his eyes. She looked at
him reassuringly.

"It's okay," she told him. Then grinning mischievously she continued. "Did you forget? I'm a
Gryffindor. And unlike you Slytherins, Gryffindors don't spike food with poison. If we want to kill
someone we just do it." She winked at him. "With an open and honest curse."

Hermione wasn't sure but she thought she saw the corners of his mouth curl upwards a little bit. Then
he reached out and accepted the sandwich from her. She smiled at him and continued her own
sandwich. They finished the meal in silence though Hermione didn't take more than her first
sandwich. She decided that Riddle needed the food more than she did. As he was finished Hermione
vanished the plate with a flick of her wand.

Then she said, "I nearly forgot! Here this is for you." She produced a key out of her pocket and held
it out to Riddle.

He frowned at her and eyed the key with narrowed eyes. "What is that?"

Hermione had to smile. "Why, Riddle, I thought you were supposed to be so smart." She grinned
and then added, "It's a key."
He glanced at her. "I can see that. Why are you giving it to me?"

"It's the key to the room next doors. You didn't expect me to let you sleep in my bed, did you?"
Hermione smiled.

Riddle seemed to be confused as his gaze darted from the key in Hermione's hand to her face and back again. Then he asked in a soft voice, "I... I'm staying here?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. What did he think? That she would take him back to the orphanage? "Of course you are staying here. I'm not letting you return to that foul place!"

He looked at her and again had that unfathomable expression on his face. Slowly he reached for the key and Hermione gave it to him.

"Okay, now come on," Hermione said in a cheerful voice as she got up from the bed. "I'm going to show you your room."

She held a hand out for Riddle. He looked at her and Hermione could still see the distrust in his grey eyes. She sighed, leaned forward and took his arm. She could feel him tense at the contact.

"Get up," she ordered him gently. "I want you to go into your room and lie down. You really need a good night's sleep."

Hermione didn't know how long Riddle had been locked up in that room in the cellar of the orphanage but she guessed it must have been at least some days. She didn't think he would have been able to sleep at all during that time. So he needed rest now. And the wounds on his back and his arm would heal better if he wasn't totally exhausted. Surprisingly Riddle followed her orders and got up from the bed. Hermione guessed that maybe he was too tired to oppose her.

She had to support him a little bit as they were walking to the door. On the way Hermione picked up the bags from Diagon Alley she had previously discarded on the floor. Then they left her room and walked slowly over to Riddle's new room. Riddle was leaning on her. He was still not able to walk unsupported. Hermione could not believe how he was forced to return to that orphanage every break. It was awful.

As they reached the door Hermione took the key from him and unlocked the door. They entered the room. It resembled her own room. There was a bed at one side and a closet on the other. Left from the entrance door was another door leading to the bathroom. Hermione walked Riddle over to the bed. Her eyes fell on the table positioned right under the small window.

Hermione smiled as she said, "Look. You even have a chair. That's more than I can say about my room."

She sat Riddle down on the bed. He groaned softly in pain as his back was bent. Hermione put the bags she had been carrying down on the floor.

"What are those?" she heard Riddle ask.

Hermione smiled at him brightly. "Glad that you ask," she said as she produced the clothes she had bought in Diagon Alley out of one of the bags. She laid them carefully over the back of the chair. "You can wear them tomorrow."

Riddle looked puzzled at the clothes. "You bought me clothes?"

He seemed to be quite surprised. Hermione didn't know whether he was surprised that someone
would buy him anything or whether he was surprised that it was her who had bought him something.

"It might surprise you, Riddle, but rags are not necessarily en vogue." Hermione grinned at him as she tugged at his grey shirt teasingly.

She then reached for the second bag. Inside were the healing potions she had bought at the apothecary. She produced a large vial containing a bluish, transparent fluid out of the bag.

"That's some Sleeping Draught," she told Riddle. "I want you to take it before you go to sleep. Your body can heal better that way. And this-' Hermione took a second, smaller vial out of the bag."-is a Painrelief Potion. You should also take it before you sleep."

She put down the vials on the bedside table and then eyed Riddle concerned. "If there's anything you should need. You know where my room is so just come over. Okay?"

He looked at her blankly and didn't reply anything so Hermione assumed it was time for her to go back to her own room. She had just turned around to walk away as she felt a hand clasping her wrist. She looked back at Riddle questioningly.

"I don't get you. We have been nothing but enemies since you came to Hogwarts. And now, you help me. Why?"

Hermione turned around again and grinned at him as she said, "Come on, we haven't been that bad, have we?"

"I put you under the Cruciatuus curse." Riddle said bluntly.

"Yeah, you did," she replied seriously before she continued. "We can discuss my motivations tomorrow. You've been through a lot. You need to rest now."

Hermione left Riddle and returned to her own room. She closed the door behind her and walked over to her trunk. She opened it and waved her wand so that the secret compartment was revealed. From there she produced the Peverell book. With the book in hand she went over to her bed and lay down propping her head up on the oversized pillow.

It was after the fifth time reading the same paragraph that she had to admit she couldn't concentrate on the book. Her thoughts were always flying back to the events of the day and to the young man in the room next doors.

For the last two years her sole purpose of living had been to defeat and eventually kill Voldemort. Every waking hour Harry, Ron and herself had worked on finally accomplishing that mission. That had been her world, to survive and to fight. During those two years one by one her friends and allies had lost their lives to that mission until only she had been left. But they had succeeded. In the end Voldemort had been beaten. Hermione had lost everything on the way but at least she had known that her friends and her family would be proud of her. After that, Fate had played her cruel game and had sent Hermione back in time. Back to face her enemy again. He was just as frightening and cruel as ever he had been. But there was more. Lord Voldemort had been this bizarre and abstract image of all that is evil and cruel in the world. He had been more of a demon than an actual human being. The Tom Riddle Hermione had come to know here in the past was still evil, still a murderer but he was not inhuman. And Hermione had no idea how to handle that new Riddle. With Voldemort it had been easy. He was the epitome of evil so Hermione had hated him. Riddle was evil too but he was also vulnerable and he was suffering. People had hurt him, people like Carter and even Dumbledore. Hermione had seen his weak side and she had decided to help him. And that decision was driving Hermione crazy now. It had obviously been the right thing to get him out of the orphanage where he
had been abused. At least it would obviously have been the right thing to do if it
wasn't him suffering.

*Doesn't he just deserve something like this?* Hermione thought hesitantly. For all the things he did?
Or would do?

The answer was, yes, he *did* deserve to suffer. But still she had saved him. And if she was honest she
would do it again.

So, helping Riddle, Voldemort, was the right thing to do? What would her friends say to that?
Wouldn't they just call her a traitor? But her friends couldn't say anything anymore because they
were dead. Voldemort had murdered them.

Hermione rubbed her forehead. She could feel an upcoming headache. This moral dilemma was
awful. But her decision had been made since she had entered the orphanage today. Now he was
here. And she had this misplaced feeling of responsibility towards him. It was all too grotesque. She
may have a guilty conscience now but there was no turning back anymore. She had made her
decision and she would carry it out. Tom Riddle would stay with her for the remainder of the
Christmas break.

Hermione sighed deeply.

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}
The next day Hermione got up rather late as she couldn't get to sleep the night before. She rummaged through her trunk and found a skirt and a blouse. After all those months in the forties she still wasn't used to the clothing. So she rather missed her favourite jeans.

At least I'm still boycotting the hairstyles of the forties, Hermione thought as she brushed her hair, making it even bushier than it already was. In the end she tamed it with a ponytail. After she had washed up she left her room and walked over to Riddle's room. She wondered how he was feeling today. Yesterday he had been in a really bad condition.

Hermione knocked at the door, then waited. As no-one answered she knocked again and cried, "Hey, Riddle! You up? Open the door!"

After a while she heard him approaching the door and open it. Hermione's gaze wandered instantly to his face. He was still rather pale and the bruises on his face looked horrible but he seemed to be more relaxed than yesterday. Hermione smiled at him.

"How do you feel today?"

He looked at her with his emotionless mask in place and said, "Better."

"Now, that's good, isn't it?" Hermione answered cheerfully. "How about breakfast? Do you want to come down with me to get something to eat?"

"Yes," Riddle replied quietly.

"Okay! Follow me then. I'll lead the way." Hermione winked at him before she headed down to the bar.

Riddle followed her and she noticed relieved that he was now able to walk unsupported, though not very fast. As they reached the first floor Hermione entered the bar and walked over to a table and sat down. Riddle sat down opposite her. His gaze was wandering around the room. Hermione noticed that he was wearing the clothes she had bought him yesterday, black pants and a dark green jumper. As she had been in the store she had been tempted to buy him a bright Gryffindor-red jumper but green obviously suited him better after all.

"Good morning, what can I bring you?" Hermione was brought out of her musings as she heard Luisa's voice.

The waitress of the Leaky Cauldron was standing at their table with her notepad in hand.

"Good morning, could you bring us some breakfast? And coffee would be good," Hermione answered.

"Of course." Luisa wrote something down on her notepad before she eyed Riddle. "You must be the friend Hermione had been talking about?" She frowned as she looked at the bruises on Riddle's face. "Whatever happened to you, deary?" Luisa asked Riddle concerned.

Hermione could see Riddle's face shutting down before he scowled at Luisa. Hermione had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. If he wasn't playing the role of the charming student, he was rather unpleasant. But again, should she really be surprised?
"Well, he wasn't willing to keep me company here so I had to persuade him somehow," Hermione told Luisa in a serious tone before a grin broke out on her face and she had to laugh.

Luisa smiled and shook her head at her. "Okay, okay. I'll just bring you your breakfast then."

As Luisa had left, Riddle stared at Hermione with his penetrating grey eyes. His face was again giving nothing away though Hermione could tell that he was contemplating something. He didn't say anything but continued to fix her with his stare. After some time Hermione had had enough so she asked irritably,

"What's wrong? What are you looking at?"

He didn't answer at first but frowned at her. Then he said slowly, "Friend?"

Hermione was confused. "What? Did you lose the ability to talk in complete sentences?"

"You told that woman I was your friend?"

Oh, so that was it? Hermione understood now. Of course, Lord Voldemort was confused by the concept of friendship again.

"Well, I had to tell her something as I was getting you a room here. What was I supposed to say? That the room was for a fellow-student-who-apparently-hates-me? I just thought that would be too long."

Riddle broke eye contact with her. "Who said that I hate you?" he asked softly.

Hermione grinned at him. "That was just a guess on my part. Though the last curse you put on me was a dead giveaway."

"If you think I hate you then why did you help me yesterday, DeCerto?" Riddle asked forcefully.

Hermione raised her eyebrows by his sudden change of demeanor. But she answered his question truthfully. "Because you needed my help, Riddle."

He looked at her again. Hermione was surprised by the whirlwind of emotions she could see in his grey eyes. He seemed to be genuinely confused. Hermione reached out for him and laid her hand on his left forearm. She could feel him tense at the contact so she smiled at him kindly.

"Don't worry about it too much. You are here now that's all that counts. And you are not returning to the orphanage."

"I can't stay," Riddle whispered. Hermione saw a look of despair on his face before he controlled that.

"Why can't you stay here?" Hermione asked him gently.

Riddle looked down at his hands as he answered softly, "I have to stay at the orphanage or he is going to expel me."

"Who? Dumbledore?" Hermione asked him gingerly.

Riddle nodded his head.

"Look, I don't know what is going on between you and Dumbledore. But I'm sure he wouldn't send you to the orphanage if he knew how you are treated there," Hermione told him suavely.
Riddle didn't comment on that but continued to stare at his hands so Hermione continued, "If it makes you feel better, I'm not telling Dumbledore that you are here. And if he ever finds out, you can blame the whole thing on me, okay?"

Riddle looked hesitantly up at her and Hermione smiled at him reassuringly. She let go of his arm as Luisa arrived with their breakfast. They ate in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

After they had finished Hermione leaned back in her chair and eyed Riddle. His face was a few shades paler than usual and he still looked tired and somewhat ill. He would need some time until he would be his old obnoxious self again. Hermione felt the sudden urge to storm to the orphanage and curse Carter. That vile man would certainly deserve it. But being a nice witch and no Death Eater Hermione resisted that urge. She refocused her attention back to Riddle and said,

"So, what do you want to do today?"

Riddle raised one eyebrow and gazed questioningly at her.

"Well, it's the holidays so we should do something fun," Hermione elaborated.

Riddle frowned at her and asked in his smooth voice, "'Something fun'?"

Hermione had to laugh at his puzzled expression before she said, still giggling, "Well, it should be something reasonable. We can't go around tormenting people like you normally so enjoy."

Riddle scowled at her.

"Aw, come on, Riddle. You know it's true." Hermione giggled at him. Then she continued in a more conciliatory voice, "We could just walk down Diagon Alley. I think you need a few things anyway since you left everything behind at the orphanage. And I would like to go to Flourish and Geare, the bookshop. How does that sound?"

Riddle looked down at his hands as he answered, "Okay."

Hermione smiled at him kindly. She was glad he had agreed to accompany her. She wanted to cheer him up a little bit...though on second thought wanting to cheer up the Dark Lord was a rather disturbing plan.

Hermione got up and told Riddle, "Wait here. I'll be back in a moment."

She didn't wait for him to respond but walked directly to the staircase that led up to the guest rooms. She went to her room and searched for her wallet which she tucked in her pocket after she had found it along with a potion vial. Then she put on her black cloak and her scarf. It was December after all and really cold outside. After that she picked up the cloak that belonged to her school uniform. Yesterday she hadn't thought about buying Riddle a cloak. But he needed one now or he would catch a cold on top of everything. So Hermione charmed her school cloak and it became larger and would fit Riddle. She still had to buy him a real cloak though. The charms on her cloak wouldn't hold forever. She returned with the cloak lying over her arm to the bar of the Leaky Cauldron. Riddle was still sitting at the table where she had left him. As she approached the table he looked up at her, his face showing no emotion but Hermione smiled at him anyway. She was somehow getting used to his coldness. She could sometimes even see the emotions underneath his blank mask.

"Okay. Let's go," she said as she handed him the black cloak.

Riddle took the cloak and eyed it pensively for a while before he looked back at Hermione, narrowed his eyes and said slowly as if trying each word on for size,
"Thank you."

Hermione nearly had a heart attack as Lord Voldemort thanked her, a Muggleborn. But she managed to cover it up very well and just smiled at him.

"You're welcome."

Riddle stood up from the table. As he put the cloak on he felt a sharp pain coming from his back. He nearly hissed in pain but managed to suppress it. The cloak fitted him very well though and he could sense the charms DeCerto had obviously used to change it. It must have been one of her own cloaks that she had charmed so it would fit him. He was surprised that she had put so much effort in it. Another thing he had to add to the long list of things he didn't understand about her.

DeCerto was standing beside him and waited for him. As he was finished with putting on the cloak she handed him a vial.

"Here, drink this," she told him in her soft voice.

Riddle was again surprised that her order didn't aggravate him. DeCerto seemed to have the unusual gift of ordering people around without it sounding like a command.

"It's a pain relief potion," she informed him as she smiled up at him. "It should help your back. And don't worry we won't be gone for long. But I think a little exercise will help the healing process."

Riddle took the vial from her. He hesitated only for a second before downing the potion. If she had wanted to poison him she had had enough time to do so by now. After drinking the potion he could instantly feel the sharp pain in his back lessen until it was only a numb throbbing.

"Good," DeCerto smiled at him as she took the now empty vial back from him. "Now, let's go!"

Before Riddle had a chance to protest she had grabbed his arm and led him out of the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley. Riddle had tensed involuntarily as the girl touched him. She was not easy to figure out and made him slightly nervous. He really hated not to know things. DeCerto had a lot of secrets. Normally he was good at getting information out of people. But she seemed to create new secrets before he was even able to solve the old ones. As they stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron the cold December air pierced Riddle's skin. He took a deep breath of fresh air and felt slightly better.

When was the last time he had been outside? He couldn't remember. How long had he been locked up in the cellar this time?

The last few days were one big blur to him. There was only the coldness of his prison in the cellar and the unbearable hunger, thirst… and the pain. He could still hear the clicking of the lock. Each time before Carter had visited him, Riddle had heard him unlocking the metal door first. This sound had told him that there was more pain to come. He shuddered as he remembered that pain and the powerlessness. Riddle could feel a hand squeezing his arm gently. He glanced down beside him. DeCerto was looking at him with huge and worried eyes. Why was she worried?

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

Riddle just nodded as he was too perplexed to answer. Why was she even caring?

"Okay," she beamed at him again.

After that she dragged him down Diagon Alley. There were several other people walking down the
alley and doing their shopping. After a while DeCerto had obviously reached her destination as she was pulling him into a shop. Inside she quickly grabbed some items which were most likely intended for him.

"You know, I don't have money," Riddle said as he saw DeCerto adding an expensive but warm looking scarf to the already huge pile of things she held in her arms.

Riddle heard her muffled voice from behind the pile of things, "Don't you worry about that."

Then she walked over to the counter to pay for the things. After a while DeCerto returned to him with a huge bag clutched in one hand with the other hand she grabbed Riddle's wrist and led him out of the shop. Riddle couldn't understand her. Why was she doing all this for him? What was she gaining by helping him? People who helped others normally wanted something in return. But what could DeCerto want from him? Usually girls were doing him favours because they fancied him, because they thought he was handsome and desirable. But DeCerto had never fancied him. At times she had even seemed to be disgusted by him. Then again a few people in Slytherin thought he was an evil bastard but they still sucked up to him because he could give them power. Though DeCerto didn't seem to be after power. She wasn't the type to do something like that. So what was it then? Why was DeCerto so nice to him?

Maybe it's Dumbledore? Riddle thought.

DeCerto was on good terms with Dumbledore. Maybe Dumbledore was using her to get Riddle to leave the orphanage. That would provide Dumbledore with an excuse to finally expel him from Hogwarts. Something Riddle knew the professor would love to do.

Riddle could feel a burning hate erupt from inside him as he thought about the transfiguration teacher. Since that incident those years back, Dumbledore had an advantage over Riddle. And he had used that advantage ever since. Dumbledore had no right to do that. He had no proof against Riddle.

That damn tosser!

But Riddle couldn't risk a direct confrontation with Dumbledore. At least not yet. He was too powerful and way too influential right now. The threat of Grindelwald was hanging over the wizarding world. Many believed that only Dumbledore was able to finally stop him. So who would oppose their saviour in favour of a poor, insignificant orphan?

So was this all an elaborate plan from Dumbledore? But the next question was, would DeCerto participate in such a manipulative scheme? Riddle glanced down at the witch. She was walking beside him still clutching his wrist absentmindedly while she goggled at the shop windows. If all this was just an act then she was a damn good actress. Riddle felt a strange stab in his stomach at the thought that she was just pretending. Suddenly there was a pull at his arm. He again looked down at DeCerto. She had stopped before a shop window and as she was still holding onto him had successfully stopped him too.

"I never knew this store," Riddle heard her softly mumble to herself. Then she turned to him and continued louder, "Let's go inside, okay?"

Riddle's gaze wandered from her enthusiastic face to the shop she was staring at. It was Anderson's Bookshop. Riddle glanced back at DeCerto. She was this delighted at the prospect to go into a bookshop? She was really an odd girl. He had expected some fancy clothes store. DeCerto was still staring at him obviously waiting for an answer. Riddle really wouldn't mind going into the bookshop. He himself rather liked to rake through old books. But he never had the money to actually buy
anything so he had always preferred it to go through Hogwarts' Library.

He shrugged his shoulders and DeCerto seemed to take that as a 'yes' because she instantly entered the store. Riddle followed behind her and had barely the time to see her vanishing behind one of the huge bookshelves. He strolled at a more dignified pace through the shop. He passed a section with books about transfiguration, shuddered and went on. The next section seemed to show books about animagi. Riddle shook his head. He couldn't quite see the use in being able to transform into something like a rabbit. He passed a few other rather uninteresting sections of books until something caught his eyes. It was a shelf hidden in the back of the shop. Riddle stopped before it and read some titles.

The Dark Arts and How to Control Them

Maledictions Most Potent

Darkest of Bewitchments

He raised an eyebrow. This wasn't Knockturn Alley, was it? He reached for an old looking tome. Some of these books were really fascinating. He had never stumbled across them in Hogwarts' Library. And that was saying something. Hogwarts' Library was one of the largest in whole of Britain. Needless to say that Riddle had read almost all the books in the Restricted Section. Gullible Slughorn had always been very willing to give Riddle permission to enter the Restricted Section.

He read through the books for some time, enthralled by the knowledge they offered until he heard a chuckle behind him. He spun around and found DeCerto standing behind him. She was eyeing him smugly.

"I knew I would find you here," she said and grinned at him.

Riddle saw a huge pile of books in her hands. She obviously hadn't been idle while he had read through the books here.

"Did you find anything?" the girl asked while she eyed the book in his hand.

It was the ancient looking tome he had first looked at. That book was fascinating and full of curses even Riddle had never heard about. DeCerto took the book from his hands.

"Maledictions Most Potent?" she asked as she eyed the cover. "Is it any good?"

Riddle nodded.

"Okay." DeCerto added the book to the already large pile in her hand. Then she looked back at him. "Do you want anything else?"

Riddle raised his eyebrows at her and couldn't quite manage to ban all the incredulity from his voice as he said, "You are going to buy that for me?"

"Sure," she said casually. "Now, come on, let's go. It's getting late."

Hermione eyed Riddle. He looked rather pale again. She thought it would be best to head back to the Leaky Cauldron so he could get some rest. Fortunately she had been able to buy everything she had planned to get. This bookstore here was rather nice too. In her time period this shop didn't exist anymore. Hermione had been surprised as she had passed the shop. A new - or rather old - bookstore in Diagon Alley? She had had to go inside. It had been worth it, Hermione thought as she contently looked at the pile of books in her hand. Even if the shop seemed to be a little bit shady. The section
of books about the Dark Arts she was standing in proved that. She could just hope that the book she had taken from Riddle wasn't too dark. But maybe that book could prevent him from getting bored. A bored Lord Voldemort couldn't be a good thing, she decided as she headed for the counter of the shop.

A few minutes later she stepped out on Diagon Alley again the books safely stowed away in a bag. She charmed the bag so it would be lighter before she headed down the alley in direction of the Leaky Cauldron. Riddle followed behind her. Hermione saw that he walked a lot slower than before and he winced every few steps.

His back must be hurting him again.

The effect of the painrelief potion seemed to be tailing off. Those wounds on his back were rather deep. It was bound to hurt. But Hermione couldn't give him more of the Painrelief potion as it was a strong potion. Maybe she would give him another vial in the evening. She waited for Riddle to catch up with her. As he reached her Hermione took his arm so she was able to support him a little bit. She could see Riddle raise an eyebrow as she clasped his arm but he didn't say anything.

"Back to the Leaky Cauldron, huh?" Hermione said as she beamed up at him.

They headed down the alley and then entered the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione was quite glad when they reached the bar as Riddle was again leaning on her heavily. Hermione waved at Luisa who attended to the guests sitting at the tables. Then she continued towards the staircase and they quickly reached the second floor where the guest rooms were situated.

Before Riddle could open his door Hermione told him, "I have to see to your wounds and change your bandages. Come on." She gestured for him to go into her room.

Riddle hesitated and Hermione again had to grab him by his arm and pull him into her room.

"I'm fine," Riddle said defensively.

Hermione looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Really?" she said unbelievingly. "Then why did I nearly have to carry you back here?"

Riddle just looked at her sullenly and didn't move any further into her room. Hermione sighed at his stubbornness. Then she took his hand in hers a bit gentler than before. She couldn't force him to cooperate so now she would try to coax him gently.

"I need to look after those wounds, Riddle. You don't want them to catch an inflammation, do you?" she told him softly. "It's not going to take long, okay?"

She pressed his hand reassuringly and then pulled him gently over to her bed where she sat him down. Hermione went to her trunk and retrieved the box with her healing potions. With the box in hand she sat down on the bed beside Riddle. Then she took his right arm in her hands and pulled up the sleeve of his pullover. The white bandage she had conjured up yesterday was still wrapped around his forearm. With a wave of her wand it vanished into thin air. The skin underneath was still swollen and bruised horribly. Hermione examined his arm gingerly. As far as she could tell the broken bone seemed to be mended.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked Riddle.

After a short pause he answered quietly, "Not so much."

Hermione nodded and grabbed the bruise ointment out of her potions kit. She applied a little bit of
the ointment onto the bruised spots on his skin. Then she waved her wand and conjured another bandage which wrapped itself tightly around Riddle's forearm.

Hermione looked up at him and told him, "I think the bones are mended. But you should still wear the bandage for some time to support the bone."

Hermione put the pot with the bruise ointment back in the wooden box, then turned to Riddle again. "Now let me see your back."

Riddle who had examined his newly bandaged arm obeyed her only reluctantly. After he had taken off the green jumper and the black shirt underneath Hermione made him lie down on his front on the bed. The bandage on his back was still in place but Hermione could see that on a few spots blood had seeped through, turning it red. She waved her wand and the bandage vanished just like the bandage on his arm did before. His back looked still terrible. The whole area was full of green and purple bruises and the many gashes looked raw and painful. Hermione felt hot anger bubbling up inside her. She just wanted to storm into the orphanage, get Carter and hurt him just as much as he had hurt Riddle. How could a monster like him be allowed to do something like this?

Hermione grabbed her wand tightly and began to clean his wounds cautiously. After she had removed as much of the dried blood as she could without reopening the gashes she applied the healing potions on his sore back. During the whole process Riddle's body was very tense and Hermione knew that it was hurting him. But she needed to tend to his injuries. After she was finished she again conjured up a bandage and put it on his back.

"Okay, I'm finished," she told Riddle softly.

Riddle sat up on the bed and winced when his back was bend. Hermione handed him his shirt and the jumper. As he put his clothes back on Hermione told him,

"It looks better but it'll need some time to heal."

She went over to the bag full of books and rummaged through it. "How about you lie down a little bit and rest? I'll bring you something to eat later," she said as she searched through the books in the bag.

Finally Hermione found what she was searching for. She retrieved the old, leather-bound book that she had bought for Riddle. Then she handed the book to Riddle who now stood by the door.

"Here," Hermione beamed at him. "You can read a bit if you get bored but try to lie down, okay?"

As she said this Riddle's gaze wandered from the book in his hand to Hermione's face. His face was an emotionless mask again though she was sure he wanted to say something. But he didn't. He just nodded curtly and then left her room.

Hermione shook her head at his odd behaviour. Sometimes she really didn't know how to deal with him. It was difficult to always have to guess what he was thinking or feeling. That impenetrable mask he was wearing was hard to break through. Right now for example, she hadn't known whether he had tried to thank her for getting him the book or if he had wanted to kill her for meddling in his things. Why did he have to be so guarded with his emotions?

_Maybe that is a Slytherin thing_, she reasoned

But that wasn't it, was it? Hermione remembered her sixth year. That was when Harry had had those extra classes with Dumbledore. At that time Dumbledore had told him about Voldemort's past. Harry had always discussed it with Ron and her afterwards. Even as a child Voldemort seemed to have
been secretive and strange. Then again, if she had grown up in that disgusting orphanage, she would have been secretive, too. It must have been doubly difficult for him in contrast to the other children. He was a wizard, so strange things were bound to happen around him and no-one, including himself, would know why.

During Hermione's childhood there had been a few strange incidents too. When she had been in primary school a few of the other kids had always teased her. One day on her way home those kids had pushed and insulted her. Hermione had felt so powerless and angry. That was when a burst of magic had left her and attacked the other children. It had made all things fly out of their satchels and fall down on them as a rain shower of books, paper and pens. The kids had been freaked out and had run home crying. Hermione had to smile at the memory. Her bursts of accidental magic had mostly been funny.

But for Riddle it must have been bad. He was an exceptional wizard, Hermione had to grudgingly admit it. So his bursts of magic must have been a lot more powerful than hers. And the forties weren't exactly famous for their acceptance of strange people who differ from the norm. So maybe that was the reason for his guarded behaviour? His upbringing must have been a difficult time for him. And then he had been offered the wonderful chance to enter a magical world just to be sorted into a house where his heritage was frowned upon. To hide his emotions must have been the only way for him to survive. 

That. Or he is just a nutcase.

Hermione retrieved the Peverell book from her trunk. She planned to read a little more in it. That book could very well be the only way home she had. She sat down on her bed leaning against the wall with a pillow behind her back and then opened the book. By now she had read a few chapters in the book. But so far neither the Elder Wand nor any other Hallow had been mentioned. In the first chapters Peverell described the nature of magic, or what he conceived as the nature of magic. It was incredibly difficult to follow his train of thought. It was abstract, his ideas impressive and his knowledge of magic so deep Hermione didn't know anyone who could rival him. Even Dumbledore worked together with Flamel to understand the book so what chance did she have to understand Peverell's theories?

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sat opposite of her.

"I'm glad you have a table in your room," she informed him happily. "Otherwise I would have been forced to eat on my bed and spill sauce everywhere."

"Or you could have simply conjured up a table," he suggested politely but Hermione could see a smile tugging at his lips.

"What? And miss your company?" She stared at him in mock surprise. "I don't like eating alone," she continued. "I guess I'm so being used to eat in the Great Hall with all the other students that it feels weird to eat alone."

When they were finished Hermione waved her wand and the plates vanished into thin air. Then she leaned back in her chair and scanned Riddle. Why did he have to return to the orphanage every break? She just didn't get it. It had something to do with Dumbledore of that she was sure. It was him who had confiscated Riddle's wand. And he had sent or more like forced Riddle back to the orphanage. But why did he do it?

After a while of considering him Hermione had plucked up enough courage to ask him, "Where's your wand, Riddle?"

Riddle's head shot up and he eyed her suspiciously. "What?"

"Your wand," Hermione repeated. "Where is it?"

"Why?" he asked slowly.

"You obviously don't have it with you. So where is it?"

"Why do you need to know?" he asked her with narrowed eyes.

"I don't need to know," Hermione said. "I'm just curious."

Riddle stared at her for some time. His grey eyes seemed to scrutinize her. Just as Hermione was sure he wasn't going to tell her he said in a controlled voice,

"It's at Hogwarts."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. Silently asking him for an explanation. He sighed softly and looked away from her before he quietly said,

"Dumbledore took it."

Now they were getting to the core of the problem, Hermione thought. "Why did he do that?"

Riddle looked back at her. His eyes were icy cold and his face a blank. He wasn't going to tell her, Hermione realized disappointed.

"I don't see that being any of your concern," Riddle said coldly.

"Okay, okay!" she said resigned. "I'm not forcing you to tell me."

She looked back into his eyes. Then she said cautiously, "But it was also him who sent you to the orphanage."

Riddle didn't say anything but continued to look at her blankly. Hermione just couldn't understand it.
Dumbledore sent one of his students back into a war zone? Unarmed? Why would he do that? Granted it was Riddle but it still was a vile thing to do. Hermione had to think back to the air raid she had witnessed. It had been so frightening even for her when she had been safe at Diagon Alley.

"It's just..." Hermione looked down at her hands. "It's dangerous... you could have died."

She looked back up at him and was surprised to notice that the coldness had left his eyes.

"Yesterday night, this air raid on London..." Hermione whispered. "I could see everything. If you had been..." She hesitated but then continued, "That's why I came to the orphanage. To check on you."

She shuddered at the thought of what might have been if she hadn't. He would still be lying in that awful chamber in the cellar. Maybe even more hurt than he already was. Hermione was staring at his right forearm. She could see a part of the white bandage which still protected his newly mended bones.

"And I'm glad I did," she whispered.

Later that day Hermione was lying on her bed with the manuscript of Peverell in her hands. The more she read in the book the more she came to realize how exceptional it really was. This text was centuries of years old and yet it was unrivaled by anything she had ever read. Hermione knew that at least some parts of the magic described in the book were dark but Peverell's theories were still amazing and incredible. They scraped at the very nature of magic, playing with it and in the end Peverell managed to create something completely new. His ways of understanding magic were unlike anything she had ever heard of. But the book was as amazing as it was complex. Peverell's theories were hard to understand. He was delving so deep into the structure of magic, Hermione had troubles following him. She needed ridiculous amounts of time to read even one page of the book. She somehow knew the book was way over her head but that was unacceptable. Not only because it wounded her pride to not be able to understand a book but she just needed to understand Peverell's inventions. She needed to know how the Elder Wand worked. Without that knowledge she would be stranded here in the wrong time forever. And that was something she just couldn't risk. Her sheer presence here could have fatal consequences. She might unknowingly change a tiny detail of the past which could develop into a dramatic alteration of the future. Hermione was not going to change the future her friends had created. They had died to ensure this future so she was, as the sole survivor, responsible to maintain that peace. As Hermione read in the book she sometimes found private notes of Peverell embedded in his theoretical explanations. It was something like a diary.

To understand the nature of Magic is my most important wish but as I have engaged myself with every aspect of Magic there is one field of knowledge that impresses me in particular. So I have taken it upon myself to study the fine art of creating magical objects. It is one of the most difficult branches of Magic and it is the most rewarding. This extraordinary art deals with the creation of things that contain and emanate Magic.

The beauty of this art is undeniable. It starts with a mundane object, which can be everything, from an old wooden bucket to a sword made of the finest iron, and changes this object into something exceptional. The objects get filled with Magic and thus become a part of the Magic itself.

I have studied every work that deals with the creation of magical objects. I have spoken to masters of this art and learned from their skill. But as I delved into this alluring art I quickly encountered its limits and its unacceptable boundaries. I was surprised and most shocked at how rudimentary this magical art truly is. For all that its worth, for all the breakthroughs that have been achieved in this
branch of magic, so far it still is in its infancy and very much uncouth. But I intent to change that.

The first obstacle I stumbled upon was the gratuitous difficulty and intricacy with which the magicians confer their power into the object. This first step to create a magical object is also the most important one. The Magic, transmitted from the magician into the object, is the footing for every following manipulation of the Magic and thus the object. If the Magic is weak or impure the magical object itself will be faulty.

So I had to first improve this basic part of the creation of the magical object. Thus I invented a new spell that can easily transfer Magic into an object. Its incantation is 'Confero' and it is a truly powerful spell. It allows me to channel my Magic directly into the object and then I can anchor the transferred Magic inside of it. With this new spell I will be able to create truly amazing things.

Hermione stared at the words Ignotus Peverell had written all those centuries ago then she slowly closed the book. For today she just couldn't read anymore. Her head had started to hurt a while ago and she felt dizzy. As she checked her wristwatch she was surprised to see that she had been reading nonstop for the last five hours. No wonder she had a headache now. It was useless to try to force the knowledge in her head. So, a break was in order.

She stood up from her bed and hid the manuscript of Peverell in her trunk using the usual wards to protect the book. Then she went in the bathroom, opened the tab and splashed some water in her face. As she looked up again she saw her reflection in the mirror. Her face was pale and there were dark rings under her eyes.

You look terrible, she told her reflection.

The whole situation was putting a strain on her. She should be surprised that she hadn't broken down yet. In addition to her time travel problem there was Riddle. It was just strange. He was Lord Voldemort after all. How was she supposed to deal with him? He was evil… and yet sometimes he was not! It just didn't fit together. And she was caught in the middle of it. But now that she had made her decision, she had to go through with it. Regardless of how confusing it was, it seemed that Tom Riddle needed her, at least for now. For the time being she would just ignore how absurd that sounded. Hermione left the bathroom and retrieved her cloak from her trunk. What she needed now was a bit of fresh air.

She wrapped her black cloak tightly around her as she stepped out of the Leakey Cauldron. The sky above was grey and the December air was biting at her exposed skin. But the coldness was somehow soothing and helped clearing her thoughts. Hermione started down Diagon Alley. There were a few late shoppers on the street hurrying along the shopping mile with bags clutched in their hands. Hermione just strolled down the alley, not minding the offers in the shop windows. Her hands were buried deep in her pockets and she regretted not having brought her gloves. A small witch with red hair walked past her. She was wearing a ridiculous long, knitted green and yellow scarf and was laden with shopping bags. Hermione tried to ignore the familiar jab in her stomach as she was reminded of Molly Weasely. She quickened her step and resisted the urge to look back at the red-haired woman. It seemed the ghosts of her past weren't going to ever let her go.

Hermione rounded the next corner. She now had nearly reached the bookshop she had visited with Riddle earlier that day. She continued to walk down the lane as her eyes darted to a person sitting on one of the benches. It was odd as the weather was actually too cold to be sitting around outdoors. As Hermione neared the person she was surprised to see that it was Riddle sitting on the bench. Why was he here? She had thought he was in his room at the Leakey Cauldron, sleeping. He was hurt and certainly wasn't supposed to be walking around alone. But here he was, sitting on the bench with a vacant look on his face.
Hermione walked over to him and sat down beside him. She saw Riddle tense as he noticed someone sitting beside him. He turned his head and for a moment she thought she could see a small smile on his face as he recognized her. But then his face transformed into the familiar blank mask and Hermione was sure she had imagined things.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him gently.

He considered her for a while with his unfathomable grey eyes then he said in his smooth voice, "I needed a breath of fresh air."

"Hmmm…" Hermione leaned back on the backrest of the bench. "Me too. It helps clearing the thoughts."

Riddle didn't reply so she glanced at him. He was again staring blankly at the street in front of him. Hermione noticed that his face was again very pale. He really shouldn't be sitting out here in the cold.

"You never really answered my question," Riddle abruptly said.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What question?"

"Why you helped me."

Riddle turned towards her and scanned her with his grey eyes. They were still as impenetrable as always but as he stared at her Hermione could, for a second, see a glimpse of the emotions underneath. She was surprised to see mistrust in his eyes. Riddle was guarded around her and he clearly didn't trust her. Hermione felt strangely sad at that.

"At Hogwarts we were enemies. I don't see what you could gain by helping me. Yet you did help me. Why?" Riddle asked quietly.

Hermione moved closer to him on the bench and smiled up at him as she said, "I really don't know myself." She shrugged her shoulders. "I just did. And I'm not regretting it."

She was surprised to realize that it was true. She did not regret having gone to his orphanage to check on him. And she didn't regret having rescued him from that disgusting chamber in the cellar. She was actually glad she did do those things.

Hermione looked at him. His gaze had softened a bit but there was still distrust in it, so Hermione told him, "I wanted to help you, so you don't owe me anything. Okay?"

Riddle continued to look at her, seemingly gauging whether she was telling the truth or not, and after a while he nodded curtly. Hermione was glad that he slowly started to believe her. Then a cold breeze hit her and she was freezing again. She looked at Riddle and noticed that he was shivering slightly. Hermione reached out and took his hand into hers, it was icy cold. Riddle had tensed at the contact and now looked at her.

"It's freezing cold," Hermione said softly. "For how long have you been sitting here?"

Riddle didn't answer but continued to look at her somewhat surprised.

"We should go back to the Leakey Cauldron," Hermione said now more firmly. "If you want to sit around and brood, you can do that just as fine inside where it's warm."

She got up from the bench without waiting for a reply and tried to pull him up. Surprisingly enough,
he complied.

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Riddle walked over to the small window. From here he could look down on Diagon Alley. He could see people hurrying along the street, their cloaks wrapped around them tightly.

Riddle still felt sick and his back was hurting fiercely. He hated it to be in such a weak state. He wasn't even able to use his magic as his wand was in Hogwarts, stowed away inside Dumbledore's office. A barely controllable rage was burning up in him as he thought of Dumbledore. Riddle's hands were clutching the window sill so tightly his knuckles were turning white. Why did Dumbledore have to send him back this break? Normally it was only the summer break Riddle had to worry about. He remembered how shocked he had been as Dumbledore had sent for him back at Hogwarts. Dumbledore never wanted to see him, which was just fine by Riddle. And he normally only sent for Riddle shortly before the summer break to take Riddle's wand. So it had been an unpleasant surprise for Riddle as Dumbledore had taken his wand and had forced him to return to the orphanage this Christmas.

How he hated that place! Every time he had to return there it was like being pulled back into the time before he knew about magic, before he knew that he was not an abomination. Back then he had always lived with the fear of being dumped into an asylum. Mrs Cole had been suspicious of him and had threatened him with the asylum on more than one occasion. But even back then Riddle had somehow known that he was not insane, that he just had a talent the others couldn't understand. He had hated them for not understanding, for shunning him. It had been his last resort, the hate. What else did he have?

Then one day as Riddle had returned from Hogwarts Mrs Cole was gone and was replaced by that man. It was always a horrible experience having to return every summer to that depressing place but Carter had made it even worse. Mrs Cole had never liked Riddle but at least she had never tried to change him either, maybe out of fear or laziness. But Carter was different…

Riddle closed his eyes as he remembered the helplessness. There was no way to stop Carter. If Riddle did, he would risk expulsion from Hogwarts which meant he would have to abandon his wand. To him that would be a worse fate than death. So he had to endure the pain each time he had to return to the orphanage. He was reminded of that pain by his achingly throbbing back.

Riddle breathed in deeply, but it didn't calm him. On the contrary he felt like suffocating. He opened his eyes and turned from the window. The room seemed suddenly so small… like that chamber…

Riddle felt sick again. He couldn't stand it anymore to be inside, he felt locked up. He nearly ran from the room, grabbing only his cloak on the way out. He didn't stop until he stood outside on Diagon Alley. It was cold and the wind was blowing icily but the wide sky above was somehow reassuring. Riddle took a few deep breaths of air. The feeling of having to suffocate was slowly leaving him again. He took off down Diagon Alley. He needed to walk a bit.

He had walked some distance down the alley as his back was beginning to hurt quite badly again. It hadn't exactly helped the matter that he had nearly run out of the Leaky Cauldron. A few steps away Riddle saw a bench. Maybe a short break and then he would walk back to the Cauldron. So he sat down on the bench, carefully avoiding to lean with his back on the backrest.

As he sat there in the middle of Diagon Alley, he was feeling very frustrated. The whole situation was just intolerable. It was ridiculous that he could be forced to return to the orphanage every year. He didn't want to bear that any longer. But it wasn't in his power to change that. That was the core of all his problems. He wasn't yet powerful enough.
But maybe he didn't have to worry about that any longer. DeCerto had told him that she wouldn't allow him to return to the orphanage. Riddle furrowed his brow at that thought. Where did that come from? Since when did he rely on others? Since when did he need the help of others? He couldn't even trust DeCerto. Honestly, he didn't know anything about her. He was annoyed by the hope he felt as he thought about her.

Suddenly he felt someone sitting down beside him on the bench. Riddle turned his head and was surprised to see DeCerto sitting beside him and staring at him concerned. Somehow Riddle felt relieved to see her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him in her soft voice.

Riddle looked at her for a while deciding if he should answer. But her question hadn't sounded demanding, just concerned. So he answered,

"I needed a breath of fresh air."

"Hmmm…" The witch smiled absentmindedly as she sat back on the bench. "Me too. It helps clearing the thoughts."

Riddle was again wondering why the hell she had helped him in the first place. He wouldn't be able to stand it if this really was all an elaborate scheme of Dumbledore to finally get rid of him and throw him out of Hogwarts and out of the wizarding world.

"You never really answered my question," Riddle said quietly.

"What question?" DeCerto asked, seemingly confused.

"Why you helped me."

He looked at her, searching her features. If she was going to lie to him he needed to notice.

"At Hogwarts we were enemies. I don't see what you could gain by helping me. And yet you did help me. Why?" Riddle needed to know.

DeCerto suddenly slid closer to him on the bench and then she smiled one of her sincere smiles. "I really don't know myself," she said, confusing him even more. "I just did. And I'm not regretting it."

But how could he believe her? How could he be sure that she wasn't planning something?

"I wanted to help you, so you don't owe me anything. Okay?" DeCerto said suddenly while she looked at him seriously.

If she was really working with Dumbledore then there would be no need any more to maintain this charade. He had left the orphanage thus giving Dumbledore a chance to throw him out of school. But so far nothing had happened. Maybe DeCerto was saying the truth?

He was brought out of his musing as he felt a warm hand clutching his own. Riddle looked at the girl again.

"It's freezing cold," she said, a frown appearing between her brows. "For how long have you been sitting here?"

Why did she care?

"We should go back to the Leakey Cauldron," DeCerto ordered now. "If you want to sit around and
brood, you can do that just as fine inside where it's warm."

Somehow Riddle didn't mind to be ordered around on this occasion so he allowed her to pull him with her, back to the Leakey Cauldron.
A Lonely Christmas

The next day Hermione woke to an annoying sound coming from her window. She turned around in her bed to try to catch some more sleep but the scraping sound didn't stop. In the end she grudgingly got up from her bed and went over to the window and pulled the curtains. On the window sill lay at least two inches of snow and fat fluffy snowflakes were falling down on Diagon Alley. Three owls sat on the window sill pecking with their beaks onto the glass, demanding to be let in.

Hermione frowned at the three owls. Who would send her something? She really didn't know that many people here in the forties. She opened the window to permit the birds in. The owls flew gracefully into the room and settled down on the bed. Hermione saw that each of the owls was carrying a parcel. It was then that it hit her. Today was Christmas.

How could I have forgotten?

As soon as the owls had dumped their parcels on the bed they took off again, hooted friendly as they passed her and flew out of the window. Hermione eyed the three parcels on the bed as she absentmindedly closed the window again. She sat down on the bed and took one of the parcels in her hand. There was a card attached to the parcel.

Dear Hermione,

I wish you a very merry Christmas. I hope you are enjoying the holidays. Today my whole family is here to visit us. It's going to be really straining, let me tell you that, as I have a huge family.

So, wherever you are (why didn't you tell us?) I hope you have a nice time,

Bye bye, Richard

Hermione smiled down at the card Richard Weasley had sent her. Then she opened the parcel. Out fell a huge package of chocolate frogs. Hermione hadn't known that they were on sale as early as the forties. They were wrapped a little differently though. Aside from the chocolate Wealsey had given her a huge, warm looking, bright red scarf. It was perfect. She grabbed another parcel. This was from Lupin Hermione noticed as she read his Christmas greetings. Lupin had, of course, sent her a book.

Common Mistakes of Potion Brewing and How to Avoid Them

The last parcel was from Longbottom. It was the smallest of the three and as Hermione opened it out fell a silver necklace. She took it in her hand and admired its beauty. There were tiny blue stones wrought into the silver. She loved it. Hermione put her presents on her bedside table and eyed them pensively. How nice it was of the three boys to send her something. They had only known her for a few months and considered her a friend already. To her surprise Hermione felt tears running down her cheeks. She brought her hand up to her face and then looked bewildered at the tears that now hung to her fingers.

Why did she cry? Wasn't it nice of them to give her something for Christmas? They were her friends, weren't they?

Yes, they are, Hermione thought. But...

They were friends but they knew so little of her. They didn't know the true Hermione. She had told them naught but lies. They were nice people and they were nothing like her. They hadn't had to live through what she had. She had seen so many things. Awful things. Those things had changed her.
She liked Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin but at the same time she knew she could never reach them. Not anymore. It was like they lived in a totally different world. They lived happily with their families. Their only problems were the upcoming NEWTs next year or maybe that their crush didn't notice them.

She on the other hand, she had fought in a war. She had seen people die. People she loved. They had been ripped from her in the cruelest of ways. And she had killed in return. It didn't matter that she had done it to save her friends and herself. She had taken life. Had looked them in the eyes as it had seeped out of them. She had used curses that never should be used. Sometimes it felt like she had sold her soul. What had Dumbledore called it? For the Greater Good? Yes, that was what she had done. She had fought fire with fire. And in the end her side had won but she had lost everything.

The worst thing was that as time had passed she had gotten used to the way of war and had become callous. Even today she didn't regret having killed those people. Of course she felt bad because of it and she knew it was a despicable thing to take life but she would do it again if it could save her friends. What frightened her most was that she knew she could.

But her friends were dead! All of them! There was no-one left. Only her. Hermione closed her eyes, desperately trying to not think about them. But she couldn't stop the pictures showing up in her head.

Luna was dying in Hermione's arms. She was screaming in pain as blood ran from her eyes, ears and her mouth.

Neville fought for his life. The curse that had hit him had destroyed his chest leaving behind a horrible and fatal wound.

Ginny had been hit by a devious curse during a fight. They had been able to apparate her away to safety. But the curse was unstoppable. Ginny died after two weeks of terrible pain. It broke Harry.

Hermione's parents had been burnt to death trapped in their own house.

So many… so many of her friends had died. There surely was no way back for her to normal life? She somehow knew she would never recover from what had happened to her. Hermione pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around. There was no way for her to stop the images that run through her head. And she knew where it would end.

Ron was hit by Bellatrix' curse. Hermione saw it in slow motion, like through a blurry veil as the green curse hit her boyfriend in the chest.

And Harry…

Her last friend. There had been no-one else left. He was so strong and brave. He had managed it in the end and had stopped the evil. But cruel Fate played her dirty game again. She forced Hermione to kill the last of her friends herself.

There was an abrupt knock on the door of her room. Hermione's head jerked up. She had been so lost in her memories she had totally forgotten where she was. There was another knock.

Hermione stretched her legs so that she sat normally on her bed and then said, "Come in."

Riddle opened the door and stepped into her room. Hermione raised her eyebrows. He had never before come to her room without her having to drag him in. But now he stood there, handsome as ever, his grey eyes scrutinizing her. He was seemingly at ease.

Hermione looked at him and asked, "Is something wrong?"
"No." Riddle eyed her with his unfathomable gaze. Then he added, "You are late."

Hermione checked her watch. He was right. It was after ten already. She had planned to get up at nine. She had told him yesterday that she would get him at around half past nine and then they would go down for breakfast. Hermione looked back up at him.

"Yes, I'm sorry." She tried to smile but couldn't manage it. "I got presents," she informed him unnecessarily.

Riddle's gaze wandered from her face to the small pile of presents on her bedside table. He walked over to the pile and eyed it as he said quietly,

"And that is causing you to look so down?"

He turned around and looked at her sitting on the bed. He was standing just a few steps away from her and his grey eyes were boring into her brown ones. Hermione had to look away from him. She could feel fresh tears burning in her eyes. After a while he sat down on the bed beside her. But she was still not looking at him, instead she was staring down at her hands in her lap and tried to suppress the tears she felt building up inside her.

"What is wrong, DeCerto?" Riddle asked her in his smooth voice.

"Nothing," Hermione whispered and her voice shook slightly.

She closed her eyes to try to regain her composure. But everything she could see were her dead friends lying before her.

"There is something wrong," Riddle said gently. "What happened?"

Hermione saw Ron lying before her, his face looking like he was asleep. But she knew he was dead. Then she saw Harry's face. His skin grey and his eyes now empty and lifeless.

Hermione couldn't help it anymore. She felt hot tears running down her cheeks. Then she whispered in a barely audible voice,

"I miss them."

There was a pause in which Hermione tried to wipe away the tears. But it was no use as they were replaced by new ones.

"Longbottom?" Riddle asked in a somewhat cold tone.

Hermione looked up at him and frowned in confusion. He looked at her with his blank face. Then Hermione could see his gaze darting to the pile of presents on the table and she understood.

"No, not them," she whispered.

How nice… how nice it would be to miss friends she could actually see again. No, she would never see her friends again. They were dead. More tears were running down her cheeks. Hermione still looked at Riddle. He would see her tears but she didn't care anymore. Riddle stared at her. His face was still covered by the emotionless mask he always seemed to carry.

"Your friends from before you came to Hogwarts?" he asked slowly. "From France?"

… from the future.
"Yes," Hermione said softly. "I miss them. I miss them so much."

She raised her hands to her face and tried to wipe away the tears that were now falling rapidly down on her pants. Then she felt a warm hand touching her shoulder gently.

"Maybe you will see them again," she heard Riddle say.

Hermione sobbed. She would never see her friends again. Even if she somehow managed to get back in the right time period no-one was waiting there for her. She was alone. She turned towards Riddle who still clutched her shoulder. Hermione could see him looking down at her. Was there concern in his eyes?

"After the war is over you could return to France," Riddle suggested softly.

Hermione sobbed again and then, without thinking, without considering how odd it was, she wrapped her arms around Riddle and pressed her face into his chest. She couldn't stop to cry as she clung to him.

"They are dead," she managed to say between her sobs. "They are all dead."

Hermione cried and cried as she clung desperately to Riddle. She needed to hold someone. She couldn't bear it to be so alone anymore.

Then she could feel his arms embracing her. Hermione sobbed even harder as she felt his arms reassuringly around her. She couldn't hold it back anymore. All the sorrow and pain that had built up inside of her was flowing out of her. All the while Riddle was holding her.

Riddle woke up and yawned tiredly as he reached for his watch he had dumped on the bedside table yesterday. Past nine already. He rolled over in the bed and sat up. He sat there for some time trying to finally wake up. He was really no morning person.

After he was as awake as he would get he stood up and crept to the bathroom dumping his shirt on the floor on the way. It was a bliss not having to share his room, he thought as he stepped into the bathroom. No annoying room mates who would enrage him with their stupidity. It was really awful having to share his dormitory in Hogwarts with those stuck-up idiots. But next year that would stop anyway, he thought as an arrogant smirk formed on his face. Dippet would surely make him Headboy. Who else was there to be worth considering? Then Riddle would move into the Heads quarters and have a room for himself.

He really hated it not having things of his own. As far as he could think back he had never owned anything. In the orphanage everything had been 'community property.' The toys, the books, everything had belonged to all the orphans. Mrs Cole had always tried to make them see the good in sharing things and wanted them to be grateful for the little they got. Because all had been donations from some rich wanker or other who would get a warm feeling from donating a few pounds to the poor orphans.

Riddle hated to share things. He really couldn't understand why he should feel grateful for being so damn poor that he couldn't even afford a book of his own. The only things he had really owned back then were the things he had stolen from the other orphans. Until Dumbledore took them from him of course.

His old hate for the transfiguration teacher rose up in him again. He had forced Riddle back then to return all the things to their former owners. He even had had to apologize for stealing them. Well,
Dumbledore had seemed to hate him from the start. A mutual feeling. Then Riddle had left the filthy orphanage for Hogwarts. Only to be stuck into a dormitory full of rich, spoiled brats who had everything they could ever wish for. And he was stranded with his second hand books and the hand-me-down robes.

Riddle left the bathroom again and got dressed. He looked in the mirror and stared at the clothes DeCerto had gotten him. No-one before had ever bought him anything. Of course some of the Slytherins had given him some presents but only because they wanted something from him. But DeCerto, it seemed, didn't expect anything from him. She had bought the things for him and hadn't asked for anything in return. She had even bought him a book just because he had liked it. It was strange and new for him. He had never had someone buying things for him just because he liked them.

Riddle walked over to the bedside table and retrieved his watch. He raised his eyebrows as he saw that it was after ten o'clock already. He hadn't realized how long he had needed to get ready. His back was hurting and he couldn't move normally that was why he needed more time than normal. Riddle wondered where DeCerto was. She should have had fetched him by now. She had told him yesterday that she would get him at half past nine. Maybe she had overslept? As Riddle was hungry by now he decided to go down alone and have some breakfast. So he stepped out of his room, locked the door and took off down the corridor to the stairs. As he was halfway down the corridor he hesitated and looked back.

It was really weird that DeCerto was this late. Maybe there was something wrong? He sighed and turned around. As he was walking back he wondered why he was even caring. But somehow it seemed that he did. As he stood before the door to her room he took a deep breath and then knocked.

"Come in," he could hear DeCerto say.

Riddle opened the door and stepped into DeCerto's room. He saw that she was sitting on her bed and he nearly fell over as he saw what she was wearing. Those were surely the shortest pants he had ever seen a woman wear. They not even covered half her thigh. The shirt she was wearing was hardly any better. Was she sleeping in those things? He had never seen any woman wearing something as tight and short. Even for a nightgown it was short. And he had seen a few women in their nightgowns.

Why had she answered the door when she was wearing something like this? He narrowed his eyes at the thought that someone else could have seen her in those clothes. He didn't like that idea.

"Is something wrong?" DeCerto asked him, abruptly bringing him out of his musings.

"No," Riddle answered. "You are late."

She checked her watch and seemed to be surprised that it was this late already. So she had overslept, Riddle thought. But as DeCerto was looking back up at him he realized something was off. Her eyes were puffy and red. She seemed to have been crying.

Who made her cry? Riddle thought angrily. Then he was surprised that he was angry at all.

"Yes, I'm sorry," DeCerto said in a flat voice. Somehow her normal cheeriness was missing. "I got presents," she continued but without any enthusiasm in her voice.

Riddle looked at the pile of parcels on her bedside table. Ah, yes, he had totally forgotten. Today was Christmas, wasn't it? He walked over to the table and looked at the presents. There was a book
and some chocolate but what caught his gaze was the silver necklace that lay on velvet in a box.

Who had sent her jewelry? A man?

He scanned the card that was still applied to the box. Longbottom… of course, he thought furiously.

That prat was always all over DeCerto. They even went together to the Slug Club. They weren't a couple, were they? Riddle balled his hands into fists. Then he remembered how DeCerto seemed to have been crying.

"And that is causing you to look so down?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound indifferent.

He faced the girl again and looked at her. He searched her features and then looked into her eyes. He wasn't going to tolerate it if she flirted with Longbottom, of all people. DeCerto looked away from him. What was wrong with her? Normally she never backed out from a staring match between the two of them. It seemed she wasn't going to answer his question so he walked over to the bed and sat down beside her. But she was still ignoring him.

"What is wrong?" Riddle asked her.

"Nothing," DeCerto answered softly.

Did she expect him to just buy that?

"There is something wrong." Riddle tried to sound understanding. "What happened?"

Riddle could see tears starting to run down her cheeks. He felt a stab in his stomach as he saw her cry.

Then she said in a soft voice so that he nearly couldn't understand her, "I miss them."

So that was it, wasn't it? Riddle felt anger building up in him. She was missing her stupid little boyfriend? He never thought DeCerto would be so shallow.

"Longbottom?" he asked.

At his question DeCerto looked up at him. Riddle could see confusion in her eyes. What was she confused about? Longbottom had sent her his Christmas present - Riddle looked at the lousy necklace on the table - and now she missed him so much she was crying.

"No, not them," she whispered.

"Not them?" Riddle was confused. She wasn't crying because of Longbottom? She had been surprised as he had mentioned the name. She hadn't even been thinking about that tosser. Somehow Riddle felt immensely relieved by that.

But then why was she crying? He looked at her. She was staring at him and tears were streaming down her cheeks. What had made her so sad. Who did she miss? It couldn't be someone from Hogwarts he reasoned. Those three Gryffindor idiots were her only friends there but she apparently didn't miss them. So who else could it be?

"Your friends from before you came to Hogwarts?" he asked slowly. "From France?"

"Yes," DeCerto said with a shaky voice. "I miss them. I miss them so much."

More tears were running down her cheeks and she tried to wipe them away. She seemed to be so
hopeless. He had never seen DeCerto like this. He had seen her cry before. But this was different. She radiated so much despair and sorrow and the burning glint in her eyes that characterized her was totally missing. Riddle couldn't stand seeing her like this. He raised a hand and put it on her shoulder hesitantly. He wasn't good at comforting people.

"Maybe you can see them again," he tried to cheer her up.

But that made everything even worse as DeCerto started to sob now. She then looked at him. Riddle could see the desperation and sorrow in her eyes. There was nothing left of her cheerful self.

"After the war is over you could return to France," Riddle told her, not really meaning what he said. He somehow didn't want her to return to France. He wouldn't allow her to leave.

DeCerto started to sob again. Then suddenly she threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around him. Riddle tensed as she clung to him. She pressed her face into his chest and cried. He didn't know what to do. He had never expected DeCerto, of all people, to hug him.

But then she whispered in a muffled and teary voice, "They are dead. They are all dead."

Riddle was shocked by this. He had known that she had had to flee France because of the war there. But he hadn't known that the war had been so dangerously near to DeCerto that her friends had died in it. He didn't want to think that it could have been her who had died.

He put his arms around her and pulled her closer to him. No-one, aside from himself perhaps, was allowed to hurt her. The girl clung to him and he could feel her trembling as she continued to cry into his chest.

Hermione couldn't stop to cry as she clung to Riddle. All the memories, her awful memories she had so worked to repress, were flooding her mind. During the war she had seen so many horrible things. Things no-one should ever have to witness. She had lived through them but she had never had the time to deal with those memories. She had always been fighting. There never had been the time to stop and deal with all the sorrow and pain she had had to endure. So instead of coping with those things she had suppressed them, deep down in her mind where she hoped she would never find them again. But now they broke free of their hiding-place and invaded her thoughts once again. It felt like she would never be able to stop those tears running from her eyes. There had happened so many atrocities even if she would cry a lifetime it wouldn't be enough. Hermione clutched the fabric of Riddle's jumper tighter in her hands and she buried her face in his chest. She felt so lost and alone. It didn't matter whose arms it were that were wrapped around her as long as someone held her and drove away the painful loneliness.

Hermione didn't know how long she cried into Riddle's chest but eventually the stream of tears lessened and then her sobs died completely down. She felt better now. Her memories were still there and they would never leave her ever again but for now they appeared a little bit more bearable and less painful. She let go of Riddle and slid a bit away from him on the bed. Then she looked up at him. His grey eyes were watching her intensely. When Hermione had before been unsure, there now was definitely concern in his eyes. It wasn't reflected on his face but she could see it radiating from his eyes. She had never seen that expression on him. It seemed to enhance his already handsome features even more. Hermione knew that she shouldn't have cried in front of him. He was Lord Voldemort. Wasn't he the source of her problems? But it didn't feel wrong to her. It had even felt good. She had liked it how he had held her. She had needed it. Hermione wiped the remaining tears from her face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice was rough from all the crying. "I shouldn't have dumped all my problems on you."
"It's okay," Riddle said in a soft tone, his eyes never leaving her.

"It is just… today is Christmas and I was never alone on Christmas," Hermione said softly.

"I am here," Riddle said quietly.

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, you are here."

Then she leaned forward and hugged him while she whispered in his ear, "Thank you."

DeCerto let go of Riddle but the strangely electrifying feeling her touch had evoked on his skin was lingering. Riddle was almost annoyed that she could evoke such a reaction in him but at the same time he liked it as this strange feeling wasn't necessarily a bad feeling. He watched as DeCerto wiped the tears off her face. She seemed to still be a bit shaky but it didn't look like she would start to cry again. Riddle wondered what had happened to her. It had sounded almost like everyone she knew was dead. How did that happen? Sure Grindelwald was active in France but not to this extent, it was not yet an open war. So, it wasn't very likely that everyone DeCerto had known had been killed unless she and her friends had been dangerously close to or involved in the fighting. Riddle was sure that there was more to it than DeCerto was telling. Something was amiss.

He had never seen DeCerto like this before. She had broken down completely. Though Riddle would never admit it in front of her he knew she was a strong person. So whatever had happened to her it must have been severe and it had hurt her incredibly.

Riddle saw DeCerto slipping a hand under her pillow and producing her wand and her wand holster from underneath it. He raised his eyebrows surprised. He didn't know that many people who slept with their wand under their pillow… It was actually just him. DeCerto was rather paranoid, wasn't she? Or, Riddle thought angrily, someone or something had forced her to act so defensively. He watched as she expertly donned the holster to her right forearm and then stowed her wand safely away in it. Then she turned to him again.

"It's gotten rather late," she said in her pleasant voice. "Give me ten minutes and then I'll come down to the bar."

Riddle nodded and got up from her bed. As he left the room he threw a last glance at her. And although her eyes were still puffy and red and her face was rather pale she somehow looked nice. Riddle had never before noticed how pretty she was. Though that impression might be caused by the forbidden short clothes she was wearing right now, he reasoned.

Hermione sat on the bed and watched the door through which Riddle had just left the room. What had come over her? She had hugged him. Really hugged him. On her own volition. Granted, she had been in a rather hysterical mood but he was still Voldemort. She should be grateful that he hadn't attacked her on the spot. But the really crazy thing was that he had seemed to be genuinely concerned about her. Hermione knew how good an actor Riddle was. But he wasn't that good. So, since when did Lord Voldemort care about other people?

Hermione shook her head in frustration. This Tom Riddle wasn't at all like the Lord Voldemort from her time. There sure had been many occasions where Riddle had acted like his future counterpart, when he had tortured her with the Cruciatas Curse for example, but there was so much more to Riddle. More emotion, more compassion, more… humaneness.

Hermione found that rather disturbing. She was used to hating him but right now she had even enjoyed how he had held her. It had been nice and comfortable. What was wrong with her? First she went and saved him and then she liked hugging him? Hermione sighed deeply and then got up from
the bed. She couldn't sit here forever debating whether her sanity had finally left her or not. So she strolled over to the bathroom and washed up quickly. Then she rummaged through her trunk to find some clothes. *Oh, how I miss wearing pants!* Hermione thought as she pulled a dark blue skirt out of the trunk.

True to her word, she walked ten minutes later into the bar of the Leaky Cauldron her eyes scanning the room for Riddle. She found him sitting at one of the tables with a cup of coffee in front of him. Hermione walked over to him. Riddle looked up at her as he heard her approaching. His gaze was as hard and impenetrable as ever but she couldn't help but notice that there was a certain softness creeping into his gaze as his eyes fell on her.

"Feeling better?" Riddle asked in his smooth voice as Hermione sat down.

Hermione glanced at him and then said in a small voice, "Yes."

"So, what do you want to do today?" Riddle asked innocently as he looked at her with his grey eyes.

Hermione raised her eyebrows questioningly at him.

"Well, it's Christmas, so we should do something fun," Riddle said as a smirk appeared on his face.

A small smile tucked at Hermione's mouth as she remembered those words. She had used them the day before to cheer Riddle up. Was he trying to cheer *her* up now? Hermione would never have thought that Tom Riddle would do something like that. But here he was, sitting opposite her and smirking at her while he really tried to be nice to her. And there was still this unexpected concern shining in his eyes.

"Let's go someplace outside Diagon Alley," Hermione said in a soft voice. "I've seen enough of Diagon Alley but I haven't of London."

That was actually only partly true, Hermione thought. Because she knew London quite well, the future London that is. The London of the forties she really hadn't seen much so far.

"You are lucky then," Riddle said as the smirk on his face widened. "Because I know my way around London."

And so it came that Hermione Granger got a tour around London from none other than Tom Riddle. The city was vastly different from the London in her time. Of course the war had left its ugly traces on the city, but there were other things too. Beautiful places Hermione had never known existed. London from the future was a huge and fast city. Here in the past though everything seemed slower and not so hurried, the traffic on the streets, the people walking on the sidewalks.

Riddle really was very familiar with London. He knew were they had the best view on the famous sites of London but he also knew the hidden beauties of the city like the nice little park they used to take a break and sat on one of the benches. It was amazing that Riddle never lost his way as they strolled through that disorienting maze of back alleys. Hermione had never expected it but she had to admit that the day really was quite fun.

Currently they were sitting in a small café with view on the Thames. Hermione had decided that they should take a break. Riddle was still hurt and she didn't want him to overexert himself. She nursed a cup of hot chocolate as she watched the boats chugging down the Thames. It was so…

*peaceful?*

Hermione couldn't remember the last time she had felt this safe and at ease. The last two years of her
life had been a constant battle. She had always been fighting her enemies and if she hadn't been fighting, she had been on the alert, expecting the next attack or trained her fighting skills. She had witnessed so many horrible things, so much misery, that she would have felt guilty by feeling anything but cold determination. There never had been a time where she could have relaxed or forgotten about the war raging around her. Harry, Ron and herself had always been fighting while following hints to the next Horcrux. They had been prepared for battle at all times. Since the last two years Hermione had never let her guard down. That would have been too dangerous. But sitting here in this cozy little café and drinking a cup of hot chocolate, Hermione couldn't help but feel relaxed and safe even. She didn't have to expect any attacks, anyone trying to curse her and hurt her. She breathed in and leaned comfortably back in her chair. The strangest part of this situation was that she was feeling this content while in the presence of Tom Riddle.

Hermione cast a glance at Riddle. He was sitting opposite her, staring pensively at the river flowing slowly by. She wondered what he was thinking about. As she scanned him she noted satisfied that the bruises on his face had faded a great deal since she had found him in the orphanage. Hermione shuddered as she remembered how she had found him and how hurt he had been. But soon, his wounds would be healed and nothing would stay behind from those injuries – at least nothing visible. Hermione dreaded to know how long it had been going on like this. The first time she had met Carter she had coaxed some information out of him. He had told her that he had been the patron of the orphanage for four years already. Hermione hoped that Riddle didn't have to endure this abuse since the last four years. Four years ago he still had been a child. And no child should have to go through something like this. Hermione wanted to know why he had to return to the orphanage. Why had Dumbledore taken his wand and why had he forced Riddle to return to that sad excuse of an orphanage? Did Dumbledore know about what he was condemning Riddle to? But Hermione wasn't going to ask Riddle again. He obviously didn't want to talk about it. So, she would wait until he felt like talking.

As she was looking at him, buried in thoughts, suddenly grey eyes flashed at her and blinked. Once again Hermione was surprised by this impossible grey colour. Riddle's eyes were the lightest shade of grey she had ever seen, around the pupils they were speckled dark blue. It was a shame, really, that one day they would turn this angry crimson colour.

She saw Riddle furrowing his brow and looking at her in confusion. He had obviously caught her studying his face but Hermione didn't look away from him. She smiled faintly and then said in a soft voice,

"You know, you can be really nice if you want to be."

Hermione watched amused as his eyebrows shot upwards in surprise. Then he controlled his features again before he said in his smooth voice, "Where is that suddenly coming from?"

Hermione now positively beamed at him and then said, still amused, "Well, I got so used to us cursing each other, it is a nice change of pace, don't you think?"

Riddle shrugged at her and still had his blank mask in place.

"If you miss it," Hermione said in a teasing voice. "I could always hurl a curse at you."

Riddle leaned back in his chair and eyed her. Then he took Hermione by surprise with his next question, "Say, why do you live alone in a hotel during the holidays?"

"W…what do you mean?" Hermione asked with a suspiciously shaky voice.

She, of course, couldn't tell Riddle the truth about her stay at the Leaky Cauldron. What could she
tell him? You know, I use this hotel as a base camp for my thieving trips here in London. So, I stole this book the other day. Hopefully it can help me travel forward in time fifty years. Either Riddle would think she was insane or, even worse, he would believe her and try to get the book himself.

"Well, why aren't you staying with your family?" Riddle asked while he continued to stare at her piercingly.

The truth was definitely not an option here and Hermione didn't want to talk about her family anyway, so she decided to revert to lightly mocking him again.

"Whatever are you thinking? If I had spent time with them, I would have missed your most pleasing company," she said in a saccharine voice while she smiled at Riddle disarmingly.

Riddle looked at her blankly for some time, then one of his trade-mark smirks began to form on his face. "You are a mystery, DeCerto."

The smirk plastered on his face even widened. Hermione had to smile at that. She had almost missed his patronizing smirk during the last few days.

"What?" she asked equally amused.

"You are not easy to figure out. Not easy at all," Riddle said. His eyes were glinting with excitement telling her that he would try everything to crack her secrets.

"Pff, don't be silly," Hermione smirked at him in return. "I am plain and simple. No secrets, no hidden evil master plans."

"I'm sure." Sarcasm was oozing from his voice before he continued in a more contemplative tone, "Sometimes I wonder why you haven't been sorted into Slytherin."

"What makes you say that?" she asked earnestly confused.

The Heir of Slytherin thought her worthy to be part of the House of Snake? If someone had told her a few months ago she would have laughed her head off.

"For example that stunt you pulled on me that day Slughorn was late for potions?" He glanced at her. "And I had so worked on ruining your reputation," he added with an infamous smirk on his lips.

Hermione laughed. "Yeah, I have to say so myself: that was brilliant."

"Very inventive story, by the way," Riddle said offhandedly. "My supposed twin being your friend in France."

Hermione sobered up instantly at the thought of Harry. She watched Riddle pensively before she said quietly, "That part was actually true."

Riddle's eyes widened. "You didn't make that up?" he asked incredulously.

Hermione smiled sadly at him, "He was my best friend. And you do look a little bit like him."

She had no idea why she was telling him this. But since Harry and Ron had died she hadn't had the chance to talk about them. She missed them incredibly. Her gaze wandered from Riddle's face to his jet-black hair.

"You even have the same hair colour," she said. "But yours is way tidier. His was always a mess." Hermione then smiled mischievously and leaned forwards. "More like this," she said as she ran her
hand through his silky hair destroying his perfect hairstyle.

He looked baffled at her, his impenetrable blank mask lay abandoned and his hair was standing at odd angles. Hermione couldn't help herself she broke out into giggles.

"What happened to him?" Riddle asked. He tried to smooth down his hair and to regain his composure.

The smile on Hermione's face instantly dropped. Riddle seemed to notice as he stared at her somewhat curiously.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. As she opened them again she said softly, "He got killed."

"I suppose it weren't Aurors like you said in your story?" Riddle asked in such a gentle voice Hermione would have thought he wasn't capable of.

"No, it was a dark wizard," she said.

Riddle studied DeCerto's face. There was this sad and painful look in her eyes again as she stared out of the window, not seeing anything. He again wondered what had happened to her.

"When did that happen?" he asked DeCerto gingerly.

Her hazel eyes shot back at him. The sorrow was still present but now Riddle could also see this guarded look on her face. She seemed to ponder if she should tell him.

After a while she said in a soft voice, "That happened a week before I came to Hogwarts."

Riddle raised one eyebrow. That was unexpected. It was only two and a half months ago?

"Is that why you fled from France?" he asked her.

DeCerto sighed tiredly before she said in her soft voice, "More or less."

Riddle looked into her hazel eyes and he could see that she wasn't going to give him more information. Whatever had happened to her, she obviously didn't want to tell him. Here was yet another secret the witch was hiding from him, Riddle thought frustrated. Though he sensed that this could very well be the most important one.

He had never seen DeCerto break down like she just had in her room. Sure at times Riddle himself had managed to make her lose her cool or to intimidate and frighten her but not to the extent she had shown as he had found her in her room. She had been so despaired, so…

…vulnerable?

It didn't fit together. DeCerto was an exceptionally powerful witch. She had even endured Riddle's Cruciatus Curse and afterwards had had the strength left to mock him. So what had happened to her that could cause her to break down? Had she been closer to the war then she had told?

Riddle glanced at her. She was still sitting opposite him and was looking out of the window. The light from the window illuminated her eyes and they now glowed in a pretty caramel colour. Riddle had never noticed how pretty her eyes were. At that thought he quickly looked away from her eyes. His gaze wandered over her bushy hair. He remembered how he had seen DeCerto the first time and how he had hated her hair back then. Now, he couldn't understand why. Sure it was rather bushy
and seemingly untamable but that only made it all the more exiting. He wondered how it would feel like to run his hand through her hair. It looked so soft.

"What do you think? Should we head back?" Riddle was abruptly brought out of his musings by DeCerto’s soft voice.

He looked at her face again, trying to ignore the fact that her eyes still shone so invitingly in the light coming from the window.

"Y… yes," Riddle said.

He watched DeCerto raise her eyebrows at his stammered answer.

The last week of the old year passed rather quickly. It was still strange for Hermione to have Riddle around. For so long he had been her enemy and now he was living next doors. Stranger even, it didn't bother her anymore that he was so close by. Even the ridiculous feeling of responsibility for him didn't leave her.

The whole situation remained confusing for Hermione. In the future together with Harry and Ron she had been fighting against Lord Voldemort. He was their enemy. If she was honest, he had been her enemy since she had entered the wizarding world at the age of eleven. Back then the wizarding world had been a place full of wonders and adventures, an exciting place where great secrets and thrilling knowledge lurked behind every corner. But even back then the threat of Lord Voldemort had already hung over everything like a dark cloud. As Hermione grew up this threat had become more and more real and concrete. Voldemort was this evil, dark man who ruined everything.

Accordingly, as Hermione had arrived in the past Tom Riddle had, in her thoughts, still been this evil and frightening person. Lord Voldemort and Tom Riddle were one and the same. But somehow during the process, that had changed. After she had found him in the orphanage her view of him had changed. She had seen a new side of him, a side where he was not the frightening and evil adversary, when he was not cold and unfeeling. She had seen glimpses of the person underneath his cold façade. Sometimes he was quite nice. He had comforted her at Christmas when she had been so down. He had been there and he had held her. Hermione would have never said it out loud, but as Riddle had held her she had felt surprisingly safe and protected.

Hermione walked over to the apparition area of Diagon Alley. Riddle followed behind her. The area was rather crowded. It seemed a lot of people intended to do last minute shopping before the holidays. It was New Year's Eve after all. Hermione had to work to find a free apparition spot. As she finally had a little bit free space she held out her hand at Riddle.

Riddle frowned at her outstretched hand and said, "Do we really have to?"

Hermione smiled up at him, "Don't be such a spoilsport. It's New Year's Eve, we have to do something."

And it's your Birthday, Hermione added in her thoughts.

Riddle sighed before he took Hermione's hand in his. She smiled up at him before she turned on the spot and they plunged into the feeling of pressure from the apparition. A few miles away they appeared in one of the small back alleys of London. Riddle frowned and turned towards Hermione.
"That is not where we wanted to end up, is it?" he asked her curiously.

"No, I'm sorry," Hermione said as she rummaged through the pockets in her cloak. "I just remembered I forgot something at the Leaky Cauldron." Hermione looked at Riddle apologetically and then continued, "I'm going to fetch it. Wait here, I won't be long!"

Hermione turned on the spot and reappeared back at Diagon Alley. She quickly walked to the Leaky Cauldron, through the bar and up the stairs. How could she have forgotten the most important thing? She had planned to take Riddle out of London. They had spent enough time in the crowded area of Diagon Alley. She needed a change of air. That was why she had retrieved her old beaded bag from her Gringotts bank vault yesterday. Of course she had extracted all the potentially compromising material from inside the bag, like the books that were a few decades too new to belong to the forties. But she had left the tent inside the bag. She had lived most of the last two years in that tent and somehow missed it. Though she was a little bit afraid to enter the tent again as when she had left it the last time Harry and Ron had still been with her.

But it would be nice to camp outside, far away from the noise of the city, Hermione had decided. That was why she now retrieved the beaded bag from her trunk, annoyed with her own forgetfulness, and put it in her cloak pocket. Then she walked back to the apparition area where she disapparated and reappeared in the small back alley where she had left Riddle behind. It couldn't have been more than five minutes since she had left him there, ten at the most, but as Hermione looked around she couldn't spot Riddle anywhere. Where was he?

Maybe he got bored, Hermione reasoned. So she walked down the alley and quickly reached a main road. People were walking down the sidewalks and a few cars drove by. Hermione looked out for Riddle but again to no avail. That was odd. Where could he be? Hermione was starting to get worried. She hadn't been gone for long so where could he have wandered off to? She walked down the road but she couldn't spot Riddle anywhere. After some time she decided to use a bit of magic to find him. So she stepped into the concealed corner of a house and pulled her wand. She laid it on her palm and whispered,

"Point me."

The wand in her hand rotated like the needle of a compass searching for North until it stopped and pointed in one direction. But unlike a compass her wand wasn't pointing at North it was showing her the direction in which she would find Riddle. Hermione tried to memorize that direction, then she put her wand away and walked in the direction the wand had indicated.

She followed that way for some time, checking at intervals with her wand that she was still walking in the right direction. After a while the streets and houses were getting awfully familiar. It wasn't long until Hermione stood before the dreary grey building that was Riddle's orphanage.

What had happened?
Friendship Between Enemies?

"I'm going to fetch it. Wait here, I won't be long," DeCerto said before she turned on the spot and disapparated.

Riddle breathed out frustrated. He knew why she had left him here. If she had taken him back to Diagon Alley, he would have stayed there for sure. She wouldn't have been able to persuade him again to leave the Leaky Cauldron. He really didn't want to celebrate New Year's Eve. He hated it!

New Year's Eve, that had been the day he had been born and the day his mother had died. He really couldn't see why he should celebrate that. From that day forth he had been forced to live in that vile orphanage. Left alone by his mother who had died and abandoned by his father who disowned him.

Riddle sighed and looked at his watch. DeCerto was gone for some time already. Riddle was bored so he took off down the alley. Soon he reached a main road intersecting with the smaller back alley he was on. The street was somehow familiar to Riddle but he wasn't surprised by that. Since he could remember, he had been roaming the streets of London. He would have done anything to escape the orphanage even if it was just for a few hours. He leaned against the wall of a house and watched the scene of the street. DeCerto would turn up eventually in the backstreet he had just left so he didn't want to wander too far away. After he stood there for some time, leaning on the wall, a shabby grey car stopped in front of him. Riddle's eyes widened in shock and his blood turned cold as he recognized the man who got out of the car.

"Tom!" Carter snarled at him sharply.

Before Riddle could react Carter had reached him and grabbed him by his upper arm tightly. Then he wrenched Riddle over to the car, opened the passenger door and hurled him inside. He closed the door in Riddle's face and locked it even. Riddle could only watch with wide eyes as Carter rounded the car and then got into the driver's seat. He started the engine and they drove off.

"You are in big trouble," Carter hissed at Riddle threateningly.

Riddle balled his hands into fists. He could feel the nails digging into his skin. Carter's threat hung in the air until the car stopped in front of the hateful square building. Then Carter got out of the car, opened the passenger door and once again grabbed Riddle by his arm before he brutally pulled him out of the car. He dragged Riddle all the way to the front door of the orphanage. As they reached the door Carter opened it and threw Riddle brutally inside. Riddle lost his balance and moaned in pain as he fell on his shoulder. Carter stepped into the hallway and walked over to where Riddle was lying.

"Get up, you useless piece of scum!" he snarled as he grabbed Riddle by his collar and pulled him up violently.

Riddle winced as Carter again clutched him by his now bruised upper arm and hauled him through the hallway, into the entrance hall and towards the stairs leading down to the cellar.

"No," Riddle whispered.

Carter ignored Riddle's protests and redoubled his hold on him as he pulled Riddle down the stairs. They had nearly reached the basement as Carter shoved so violently that Riddle lost his balance and fell down the last steps. He collided hard with the concrete floor. As he tried to get up again he could feel blood flowing from his knees and the palms of his hands. Carter grabbed him again and dragged him over to the rusted metal door. Riddle was thrown into the small chamber behind the door. He
had so hoped to never see this prison cell again. Before he could get up again he heard Carter enter the room and closing the door behind him.

"Did you think you could get away unpunished?" Carter asked in a cold voice.

Riddle sat up and faced Carter who stood by the door.

"You disobeyed me, you ran away. This time you've gone too far," Carter took a threatening step towards Riddle. "I'll have to punish you hard so you never do that again."

Carter walked over to Riddle and looked down on his sitting form. Riddle flinched away from him.

"Get your shirt off!" Carter ordered in a voice that left no room for disregard.

Riddle looked up at Carter and he knew what the man was going to do to him. Riddle didn't think he was able to bear the pain again. He had thought he would never see Carter ever again. Suddenly the man lashed out at him and hit him so hard in the face that Riddle was plunged sideways.

"I said get your shirt off, you worthless bastard!" Carter yelled at Riddle furiously.

Riddle got hastily up into a sitting position. He could feel blood trickling from the corner of his mouth as he started to take his shirt off with trembling fingers. He removed his shirt and then put it down on the floor. He now kneeled before Carter, stripped to the waist.

"I've dealt with your abnormality for long enough. I will teach you once and for all never to disrespect me again."

Carter stared down at him with pitiless eyes as he slowly removed his belt. Riddle watched as Carter wrapped one end of the belt around his right hand and then he closed his eyes as the hateful man walked around him and stopped behind him. Riddle clenched his teeth and braced himself for the first strike.

He heard Carter move behind him. The hard leather of the belt struck his back mercilessly and Riddle took in a sharp breath of air as the belt cut into his skin. The next blows followed rapidly. Each blow was inflicting a sharp pain. Soon Riddle felt the skin rupture and warm blood was flowing down his back. The pain was getting unbearable. But still the blows were falling down on him. He couldn't hold back anymore and as the next blow cruelly hit him, he gasped in pain. But still Carter didn't stop. He continued to hit Riddle relentlessly. The blows were pelting down on Riddle, each more agonizing than the one before. Then Riddle lost his balance as he doubled over in pain and fell down on the grimy floor where he curled up into a ball. His back was on fire, it hurt so much that he was feeling slightly lightheaded. He did only notice that Carter had walked over to him as the man kicked him brutally in the side. Then he grabbed a handful of Riddle's dark hair and hauled him up.

Riddle moaned in pain as Carter snarled at him evilly, "I'm not finished yet, freak!"

Then he let go of Riddle's hair and readjusted his grip on the belt. Riddle tried to remain in a sitting position. He knew if he fell down again, it would only make the man hit him even harder. The next blow on his back stung unbearably and Riddle bit on his lip to stop himself from screaming out. He couldn't take anymore but he knew Carter wouldn't stop until he was totally broken.

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Hermione looked in shock at the wand lying on her palm and then at the building it was pointing to. There was no mistake, Riddle was inside the orphanage. But why? How did that happen? She had
left him only for a few minutes. The images of her last visit to the orphanage rushed through her head. She saw Riddle lying on the floor in that disgustingly grimy chamber in the cellar of the orphanage. He had been badly hurt. Hermione shuddered as she remembered the deep gashes on his back. She clasped her wand tightly as she looked up at the grey building in front of her. She wasn't going to let that happen again. Carter wasn't allowed to hurt Riddle.

With that determination in mind Hermione hastened through the front yard of the orphanage and towards the door. She didn't even think to put up any Disillusionment charms this time. Luckily the front door wasn't locked so Hermione entered the orphanage building without any problems. The hallway seemed to still be as dirty as before. But she wasn't paying much attention as she darted through the hallway and into the entrance hall. She noticed absentmindedly clatter of cutlery and children's voices coming from the dining hall nearby. Hermione didn't stop though but immediately took off towards the staircase. She had no doubts that if Riddle had been forced back to the orphanage, she would find him in the cellar and not in the dining hall having dinner.

Hermione hoped that she was wrong as she rushed down the stairs. She quickly arrived in the dimly lit passage way of the cellar. From there it was only a few steps until she reached the ominous metal door behind which she had last time found Riddle. She was so unsettled now that she didn't notice how her magic reacted to her state of mind and it lashed out at the door as she reached it. The door was flung open by the force of her magic and Hermione stepped quickly inside the chamber. She stared with wide eyes at the scene in front of her. There was Riddle, kneeling on the floor while blood was flowing down his abused back.

She was too late!

Hermione's gaze wandered from Riddle on the floor to the man standing behind him. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Carter and the bloodstained belt in his hand. There was surprise written on his face as he in turn stared at Hermione. She could feel her apprehension turn into cold fury as her eyes lingered on Carter. As her magic had before been a whirlwind raving inside of her, it now changed along with her emotions. Its intensity and ferocity did not diminish it even intensified but now it was an icy cold power with purpose and direction.

"Get away from him!" Hermione hissed at Carter with barely suppressed rage as she took a step further into the room.

Her magic was still building up but she was too enraged to notice. She didn't even notice as her wrath awoke the Elder Magic inside of her. It clashed with her own magic and then connected with it, joining the storm inside of her.

"I knew it!" Carter said his tone hard and thick with triumph. He had in the mean time found his voice back, along with his cockiness. "I knew you were with him." Carter gestured at Riddle with the belt in his hand.

Hermione's mouth formed now a thin line as she eyed Carter hatefully.

"I saw at once that you are no good," he spat at Hermione furiously. "What are you, his whore?"

Outwardly Hermione's appearance didn't change but inside of her her magic was running wild.

"No decent person mingles with dirt like him," Carter continued enraged.

"I said, get away from him!" Hermione said slowly, cold hate was seeping through her voice but she still sounded eerily calm.
"You can't order me around, little missy!" Carter yelled at her. "It seems you need to be punished just like Tom!"

Carter then tightened his grip on the belt and started to walk over to where Hermione was. As he passed Riddle he turned towards him and kicked him hard in the side, so that he was flung to the floor. Riddle moaned softly in pain as Carter yelled at him,

"Don't think I'm finished with you!"

That was when Hermione finally released the magic that had been building up inside her. It flowed out of her and quickly engulfed the whole room. Hermione only incidentally noticed how changed her own magic felt. The magic was somehow stronger and there was a raw energy behind it. She could even sense warding spells spanning around the room like spider's webs. Last time she had been here she hadn't been able to sense them. Those were probably the spells from the Ministry against the underage use of magic. Hermione just pushed them away and was surprised by the force of her magic.

In the meantime Carter had reached her and grabbed her wrist brutally. Hermione's eyes snapped to his face then she hissed at him coldly, "You are never going to touch him again!"

Carter smiled at her evilly. "And who will stop me? You?"

As an answer Hermione directed her magic towards Carter. She watched satisfied as his eyes widened in shock and his hands darted to his throat while he gasped for air.

"If you ever lay a hand on him again-" Hermione extended a hand towards Carter's throat as if to strangle him but she never touched him. "-there will be hell to pay."

Carter stared at her. Hermione was satisfied by the shock and fear she could see in his eyes. He still desperately gasped for a breath she didn't allow him to take. Then she let her magic wrap itself completely around his form as she moved a step away from him. Carter was eerily lifted into the air so that his toes only just skimmed the floor. His arms now hung limply at his sides and he looked like a puppet, hold by an invisible string. He stared in horror at the young woman standing in front of him.

"And don't be mistaken," Hermione hissed at him in a low voice. "I will hear about it if you hurt him again."

Then her magic lashed out at Carter so that he was plunged backwards where he collided hard with the wall. He groaned at the impact and then slid down the wall until he lay sprawled on the floor, unconscious. Hermione's eyes wandered from the still form of the disgusting man to Riddle who was hunched on the floor. He stared at Hermione. She could see pain in his grey eyes. They continued to stare at each other, neither speaking a word. Then suddenly Hermione could feel hot tears running down her cheeks. She sniffed and then ran towards him. She dropped down beside him, wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly while she sobbed,

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

She felt his arms wrapping around her waist tentatively. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. She just wanted to get him away from here, as far as possible. So she summoned her magic once again, concentrated on her destination and then plunged into the dark pressure of apparition. If she had stopped to think she would have remembered that it was impossible to apparate inside of Diagon Alley as it was protected by many warding spells. But she didn't and so it would take her a while to realize what she had just done as she apparated through the heavy wards of Diagon Alley. They
reappeared directly in her room at the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione released Riddle only to grab her healing potions that lay in her trunk. Then she hugged him again and they apparated away. Just to reappear miles and miles away on a secluded mountainous area. Hermione pulled the old beaded bag out from her pocket, opened it and pointed her wand at it.

"Accio tent," she whispered.

After a few seconds the tent flew out of the opening of the bag. Hermione just waved her wand at it and it began to unfold itself. It didn't take long and the tent stood on the snowy ground. She glanced at Riddle while she still clung to him with one arm wrapped around him. Riddle stared at the small greyish tent in front of them and then his eyes wandered to the snowy mountains surrounding them.

"Where are we?" he asked and there was genuine surprise in his normally indifferent voice.

"The Highlands of Scotland," Hermione smiled up at him shyly. "We should go inside. It's cold," she added as Riddle was not wearing a shirt.

Hermione helped Riddle up and together they entered the tent. He stopped abruptly and a frown appeared between his eyebrows as he saw the interior of the tent.

"That's a magical tent?" he asked her softly.

"Yes," Hermione answered while she led him to one of the beds.

Riddle sank down on the bed and she sat beside him. She eyed him concerned. There were bruises beginning to take shape on his arm and face. The worst was his back though. Blood was flowing freely from the gashes in his skin. But she was relieved that there were not as many wounds on his back as the first time she had found him in the orphanage. She had been able to prevent worse this time. But still, it was her fault that he was hurt now.

Hermione looked down on her hands and whispered softly, "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone in that backstreet."

Riddle looked in astonishment at the witch sitting beside him. She was staring down on her hands seemingly not daring to meet his gaze. Did she think she was responsible that Carter had found him? Why was she feeling guilty about the whole thing? Why did she care? But she did, Riddle realized surprised as he looked at her face on which guilt and worry were written, clear as daylight. Riddle never before had anyone standing up for him… or protecting him. No-one had ever cared enough about him to do what DeCerto had just done for him.

"It's not your fault," Riddle told her.

She looked uncertainly, timidly even, up at him. Her huge brown eyes were scanning his face fearfully.

"You are not angry with me?" she then asked hesitantly. "It's my fault you ended up in that backstreet. So it's my fault that he… he…"

Riddle was startled as he saw fresh tears running down her cheeks. Somehow he didn't like seeing her cry. So he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her over to him.

"No, I'm not angry with you," he tried to calm her in a soothing voice.

DeCerto looked up at him. There was still uncertainty in her eyes as she bit her lip nervously. But then she nodded and even tried to smile at him.
"Okay," she said relieved.

Then she got up from the bed. There was an odd feeling of loss as she ended the embrace. Riddle watched as she walked over to the table. She had discarded her cloak on one of the chairs standing around the table. The wooden box she had been carrying was now standing on the table. DeCerto took the box and then sat down on the bed beside him again.

She smiled up at him and then said softly, "Let me tend to your injuries."

The sharp pain on Riddle's back had gotten worse and he could still feel blood flowing from the wounds that surely were on his back. Riddle clenched his fists. Oh, how he hated Carter and the power that man had over him. He so wished that he was in a position to fight back, to take revenge for all the pain and humiliation he had had to endure. An all-consuming hate rose up in Riddle as he thought of how he was forced to submit to that hateful man. That disgusting Muggle. Any toe out of line during the break, any use of magic, would automatically lead to his expulsion from Hogwarts and he would lose his wand. Dumbledore would surely see to that, with pleasure.

Riddle narrowed his eyes as his thoughts wandered to Dumbledore. The hate that had been building up in him intensified and turned into a barely controllable rage. Just one more year and then he would turn seventeen and no-one would be able to force him to do anything anymore. After he would leave Hogwarts he would finally have the chance to get his revenge. On Carter, on Dumbledore, on everyone who had dared to displease him. He would see to it that they regretted to have ever crossed his path. A sinister smile played around his mouth as he imagined how exactly he would make them regret.

He was brought out of his train of thought as he felt a weight shifting on the bed beside him. He looked down at DeCerto and was surprised to find her staring at him fearfully while she clutched the wooden box in her lap so tightly that the knuckles on her hands turned white. It was then that Riddle noticed that his magic was crackling around him violently, mirroring his murderous emotions. Normally he would have been delighted by the dark force behind his magic but her frightened eyes were enough to make him withdraw his magic.

"That wasn't directed at you." Riddle turned to her and tried to banish all the hate he had been feeling from his voice. "Sometimes my magic just goes wild."

Hermione released the breath she had been holding in and unwound her fingers from the potions box she had been holding in a murder grip. That had been scary, this aura Riddle had suddenly emanated. That had been Voldemort, the Voldemort from her time period. She would recognize that kind of dark and aggressive magic anywhere. Hermione tried to even her breathing again. Just now, as she had felt his magic, she had been brought back to the day she had been fighting against him in the Ministry. A day she would like to forget and to bury along with her memories. Hermione flinched and took in a sharp breath of air as she felt a warm hand on her right forearm.

"DeCerto?"

She heard Riddle ask softly, the insecurity in his voice contrasting sharply with the dark magic he had just been radiating. Hermione looked at his face. There were no traces left of the hate he had been transporting through his magic before. His eyes were scanning her and Hermione was relieved to find no red tinge in his grey eyes. It was Tom Riddle sitting beside her and not Lord Voldemort.

She smiled reassuringly at him and then gestured at his back, "Let me see to that, okay?"

Hermione treated his injuries and was relieved that they were not as bad as the first time she had had to do that. There were some rather deep cuts but not as many as before. So she cleaned the wounds,
used some potions on them and then bandaged his back. As she was finished she retrieved the beaded bag from her cloak pocket and accioed a jumper from inside the bag which she handed to Riddle. He took the jumper and put it on. Then he eyed the beaded bag in Hermione's hand curiously.

"What is that?" he asked her in his soft voice.

Hermione looked from his face to the small bag in her hand and a smirk was beginning to take shape on her face before she said in a conceited voice that would have made even Malfoy proud, "That, my dear Mr Riddle, is one of my more brilliant creations."

She laughed at his baffled face but then handed him the bag and said in an amused tone, "It's very much a bottomless pit. Really handy if you ask me."

Riddle examined the bag in his hand and then looked up at her. "What did you use? The Amplifico Spell?"

"No, it was the Infinitio Charm," Hermione smiled at him.

Riddle raised one eyebrow and looked back at the bag in his hand, slightly impressed now, "True infinity then… that is a very advanced charm."

Hermione sat down next to him and said, "Yeah. But don't be overly impressed. I needed three tries and two bags until I finally had it right."

Then Hermione looked at her wristwatch. She was surprised that it was nine o'clock already. No wonder she was so hungry.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked Riddle. "Because I'm starving."

She took the bag from his hands and opened it. "Accio wicker basket!"

Out of the bag flew a large basket. Hermione had asked Luisa back at the Leaky Cauldron to pack some food for her. She carried the basket over to the table and at the same time waved her wand at the kitchen. Plates, cutlery and cups flew out from the cupboards in the kitchen and placed themselves on the table. Then Hermione opened the lid of the basket and produced the food from it. She had to smile as she found a bottle of wine. Luisa really was a very thoughtful person. After the events at the orphanage Hermione had almost forgotten that it was New Year's Eve today.

"You are well-prepared," Hermione heard a voice. She looked up and found Riddle standing behind her and eyeing the set table.

"Yeah, well, I had planned to come here all along," she said quietly as she looked down on her hands.

They sat down at the table and started on the meal. Soon Hermione noticed that Riddle's gaze was flying towards the entry of the tent every other minute.

"What's wrong?" she asked him concerned.

He glanced at her before he said, "I'm still underage and not allowed to use magic at... home. You just used magic..."

Now Hermione understood. She had used some magic back at the orphanage. Riddle didn't know that she had pushed the warding spells of the Ministry away, thus disabling them. And now he was
afraid he would be blamed for underage use of magic.

"Don't worry," Hermione tried to soothe him. "They won't notice that I used magic back at the orphanage. I worked around the warding spells of the Ministry."

Riddle raised his eyebrow at that and asked somewhat suspiciously, "You deactivated the Ministry spells?"

Hermione felt uneasy. Now that she thought about it, it really was supposed to be impossible to work around the wards. But she had obviously used the Elder Magic again to do just that. She couldn't tell Riddle, of course. So she said offhandedly, "Yes, I did. No big deal!"

Surprisingly enough Riddle accepted that and didn't persist on the matter. Maybe he was too relieved to want to discuss it any longer.

After a while Riddle said contemplatively, "Where'd you get that tent?"

Hermione considered him for a while and then said, "Brought it from home."

Riddle nodded at that. "I thought so. It's rather nice," he said as he looked around the one-room-apartment.

Hermione smiled. A lot of memories were stored in this old magical tent. Good ones and bad ones. She had lived in this tent together with Harry and Ron ever since they had left Hogwarts after their sixth year. Always on the run, always in search for the next Horcrux. But Hermione still connected the tent with the feeling of safety and warmth.

"I would hope so. I have lived here for nearly two years," she said absentmindedly as she wallowed in her memories.

A curious voice answered her, "You have lived here for two years? Why?"

Hermione's head shot up and she looked at Riddle with shocked eyes. Why'd she tell him? Her cover story was that she came from a small village in France. She was a Pureblood living with her family in that village, how would straying around and living in a tent for two years fit into that story?

"Stupid! Stupid!"

Hermione saw that glint in Riddle's eyes. The glint he always had when he was onto something.

"Why did you need to live in a tent for that long a time?"

"Uhm..." She grabbed the teapot standing before her and poured some tea in her cup with trembling hands. "Tea?" she asked Riddle, completely ignoring his question.

"Smooth, Hermione, smooth! Now he definitely knows I'm hiding something!" She inwardly shook her head at her poor acting skills.

"DeCerto?" Riddle asked in a half-amused, half-pressing tone.

Hermione glanced up at him tentatively. Still there, that glint in his eyes. "What I meant to say was I lived two weeks in here."

Riddle frowned at her before he simply stated, "No, that is not what you meant to say."

Hermione sighed at his persistence. He wasn't going to let her out of this one so easily.
"Look, we all have our secrets. But I will tell you why I lived here for so long if you are telling me why Dumbledore took your wand away from you."

Riddle now scowled at her and Hermione beamed back at him as she said, "Whenever you are ready."

After they were finished with eating Hermione waved her wand and transfigured one of the beds into a soft leather couch. Another wave of her wand and a crackling fire appeared in the fireplace. Then she retrieved the bottle of wine from the basket and sat down on the couch. Riddle had watched her actions and raised an eyebrow.

"What's happening now?" he said in his deep voice.

Hermione eyed him amused, "Now, my friend, we are waiting for the New Year."

It was only when Hermione saw Riddle's eyes widen in surprise that she noticed what she had said. Friend…

Was that it? Their relationship? They were no enemies, at least not anymore… or not yet? Hermione didn't know. So were they friends now? Could she… was she allowed to befriend Lord Voldemort? No! But he was not Voldemort, not entirely. She had caught glimpses of his other side. When he was kind and compassionate and protective – when he was likeable. She had always tried to deny it before herself. Had insisted that she hated him, that he was the enemy. He had destroyed everything that was important to her so why should she like him?

Hermione looked at his face. It was so different from the face she had come to hate, the face with the pitiless crimson eyes. She knew he was still there, Lord Voldemort, an inseparable part of Tom Riddle. But if she hated him so much, why did she go and save him? Twice? How did she explain the fury she had felt as she had seen Carter abusing him? If she hated him, she should have cheered Carter on. She wouldn't be sitting here treating his wounds. No, Hermione had to admit it, she did like Riddle.

She breathed in deeply. That insight was rather hard to admit. She noticed that Riddle was still eyeing her. There was disbelief in his grey eyes. Hermione smiled at him and patted on the spot beside her on the sofa.

"What are you waiting for?"

Riddle stood up from the chair he had been sitting on and then walked slowly over to her. As he reached the sofa he hesitated to sit down beside her, seemingly unsure of what to expect next. So Hermione reached out for him, grabbed his hand and pulled him down to her. Riddle sat rather stiffly beside her.

"It's still so early," Hermione complained. Then informed him while smiling, "I've always hated waiting for midnight."

She looked at Riddle beside her and was confused as she saw him looking uncharacteristically nervous. Then she noticed that she was still holding his hand and released it quickly.

"Do you want some of the wine?" she asked him and couldn't help but feel a heat wave hitting her face.

Riddle nodded and so Hermione poured two glasses from the bottle of wine and handed him one. Then she leaned back on the sofa and sipped from her own glass.
"I don't exactly know whether I like New Year's Eve or not," she told him pensively. "It is nice celebrating a new year but it somehow feels like a goodbye too."

"I don't like New Year's Eve," Riddle said softly.

Hermione glanced at him. So he didn't like his birthday?

"Why not?"

Riddle just shrugged as a response.

"Then what do you normally do on New Year's Eve?" Hermione asked him.

"Normally I would spend it at Hogwarts," Riddle said as he looked down on the glass in his hands.

"Alone, as everyone else would be at their homes," Hermione continued his sentence.

Riddle just shrugged again, still staring at the glass in his hands.

"Hmm… then you can hardly say that you don't like New Year's Eve. I mean, if you've never really celebrated it before."

Riddle looked up from the glass in his hand and eyed Hermione. "Then how do you celebrate the new year?"

Hermione considered him over her glass of wine before she decided to answer this rather private question.

"I remember New Year's Eve three years ago. My parents took me to a cottage in Switzerland. You can't imagine the snow we had there." Hermione smiled at the memory. A memory from better days, when her parents had still been alive. "But my father had apparated down to the village anyway and bought some of the local foods and this really silly board game. We played it the whole time until midnight. Though we never really worked out the rules."

Hermione laughed softly. That had happened during her sixth year. Before her parents had died and along with them the innocent and happy Hermione.

"Then why are you not with your parents now?" Riddle frowned at her.

"Mmmh… They died," Hermione said softly. She didn't like it very much to talk about her parents. But somehow she didn't mind talking with Riddle about her parents.

"What happened?" he asked her in a surprisingly gentle tone.

"They died two years ago. War victims," Hermione sighed. "That's a long time ago, so much happened, so much changed, but I still miss them incredibly."

She looked up at Riddle. His face was a blank again, giving nothing away but she noticed this strange flicker in his eyes. She wasn't entirely sure but could it be concern?

"It's not easy without them," she whispered.

"Probably not," Riddle said quietly.

"What happened to your parents?" Hermione asked him softly.
She knew what had happened to them. But what she didn't know was how Riddle felt about it. Before she had come here to the past she had thought that Voldemort didn't care one bit about what had become of his parents. But now, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Riddle hesitated but then began to tell her in a low voice, "My mother died giving birth to me. That's why I grew up in an orphanage."

"What's with your father?" Hermione asked him tentatively.

Riddle looked away from her before he said softly, "He disowned me. He never wanted me."

"So he is still alive?"

Riddle looked down on his hands. "No. But I met him once before he died."

"How was he?" Hermione asked him. She clasped his hand reassuringly. At first Riddle stiffened as he felt Hermione's hand on his but then he seemed to relax.

"I hadn't expected much in the first place. He… despised me. Told me I was not good enough to carry his name…"

"I'm sorry," Hermione told him as she squeezed his hand gently.

"Don't be. It's in the past."

"Yeah, but sometimes it's not easy to get over the past," Hermione said, smiling sadly at the double meaning of that sentence. She pressed his hand again before she smiled up at him and said, "Now, let's do something less depressing."

Then she picked up the beaded bag, opened it and frowned at it. "Hmmm… I think it should be there… somewhere… hopefully."

She flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. Riddle watched curiously as she pointed her wand at the bag and murmured, "Accio Ron's cards."

After some time a battered looking pack of cards flew out of the bag. Hermione caught it and looked triumphantly at Riddle, "Ha! I knew it was still there."

Riddle arched one eyebrow gracefully and said, "And now we're… doing what exactly?"

Hermione grinned impishly, "Why, playing poker, of course."

Riddle smirked at her, "Did you just dare to challenge me?"

Hermione smirked right back at him and waved her wand over the pack of cards. The cards instantly began to fly from the pack like they were dealt out by an invisible hand. They had good fun playing the cards, though Hermione quickly realized that she was no match for Riddle. But she wasn't in the least bit surprised, after all he had the perfect poker face even without playing cards. Hermione just refilled their glasses as her gaze fell on the old clock hanging on the wall opposite them. It was nearly twelve. She hadn't noticed how the time had flown by.

"Ah, we nearly missed the New Year!" she said excitedly while she grabbed Riddle's arm and juggled it.

He looked in amusement at her flushed face and then at the clock. Hermione ignored his light taunt and continued to squeeze his arm while she watched the points of the old clock. And then the hands
of the clock both pointed to twelve.

A new, old, year had begun!

It was somehow strange to celebrate the start of a year that lay more than 50 years in the past but Hermione enjoyed it anyway. Then she turned to Riddle and hugged him. That seemed to become a more and more common gesture…

"Happy 1944, Riddle!" Hermione said before she kissed him on the cheek.

After she released him she noticed amused that there was a strange blush on his otherwise so pale cheeks.

Then Riddle looked at her and said softly, "I think it's all right if you call me 'Tom'."

Hermione was baffled at that but she was also elated. So she beamed at him and said, "You sure? Because 'Hermione' is an awfully long name."

Riddle smiled one of his rare true smiles that seemed to enhance his beauty even further and nodded.

They remained sitting comfortably on the transfigured sofa staring into the roaring fire in the fireside. Then Riddle reached for his glass of wine standing on the table and as he leaned forward the sleeve of his pullover slid up a little bit so that Hermione noticed that strange scar on his forearm again. She had seen it before as she had looked after his injuries. It was an ugly and rather huge scar. Hermione remembered that it started at the inside of his left forearm and run up almost all the length of his arm until it ended midway at his upper arm. The scar was old it seemed but the cut must have been rather deep to leave behind something like this. Hermione wondered how he had gotten that scar.

After Riddle had put his glass back down on the table she leaned towards him and she touched the beginning of the scar gently as she said, "How did you get that?"

Hermione noticed how Riddle had tensed as he had felt her finger on his scar and he had jerked his arm away. Now he tried to pull down the sleeve of his pullover to hide the scar again as he said, "It's… it's nothing."

She furrowed her brow but said, trying to sound lightly, "Come on, something must have caused it. What did you do? Fought off some dragon? Or maybe a hippogriff?"

Riddle glanced at her shortly but then looked away again. Hermione was surprised as he answered her nonetheless in a low voice, "That happened during the summer break."

Her eyes widened as he said that. Her gaze darted back to the place where the scar was now hidden under the fabric of his jumper. If he had received the scar during a summer break, that meant that he had been at the orphanage as it had happened.

"What happened?" Hermione asked him gingerly.

Riddle looked back at her. The blank mask was back in place but she wasn't fooled. She'd had some practice by now to read his facial expressions and she knew that he was by far not as indifferent as he would like to appear. Hermione moved closer to him on the sofa and gently took his hand in hers. She felt him again tense at the contact but this time he didn't flinch away from her. She guessed that something bad must have happened during that summer break. But she didn't want to force him to tell her. If he wasn't ready to tell her, then she didn't need to know. So they sat, Hermione still holding his hand, on the sofa and stared into the flames of the fire crackling inside the fireplace.
After some time Riddle unexpectedly spoke again, "I got it after I returned to London after my second year at Hogwarts." His eyes darted to her face shortly before he looked back at the fire and continued in his low voice, "Mrs Cole, the matron of the orphanage, had already been replaced by Carter. But she didn't go before telling Carter some horror stories about me."

Then Riddle added bitterly, "That woman has always hated me, you know. She thought I was some dangerous psycho as strange things kept happening around me."

"Because you are a wizard?" Hermione asked him gently.

"Yes," Riddle said firmly as he looked at her with his unfathomable eyes. "And she didn't hesitate to tell Carter how disturbed I apparently am."

"What did he do?" Hermione asked, not sure she really wanted to know the answer.

"At first nothing. He just had a close eye on me," Riddle told her, his voice was strangely free of every emotion. "Then halfway through the holidays I was summoned to his office. As I entered I saw this book lying on his desk. It was mine… from Hogwarts' library."

Hermione stared at him, then asked in an anxious voice, "It was about magic?"

Riddle nodded before he continued in his emotionless tone, "I hid it in my room. I never expected anyone to find it. Carter must have searched my room."

He broke off there and again stared into the fire. Then after some time he abruptly turned to Hermione again, "He was furious. Said it was blasphemy, the book, and burned it. Then he dragged me down there."

She was sure he was talking about the chamber in the cellar she had found him in. She pressed his hand reassuringly.

"You know, Mrs Cole never liked me but at least she never beat me either," Riddle said, his tone free of emotion. Then he raised his left arm and rolled back the sleeve of his jumper a little bit, exposing the scar underneath. "Before Carter left he stepped on my hand and cut my arm open with a knife."

Hermione shuddered as her gaze traced the horrible scar on his arm. Then she was startled as Riddle laughed mirthlessly. "He told me, that the next time he found something like the book he was going to kill me."

Hermione stared at his face incredulously. He looked at the scar unmoved as his finger skimmed over the marred skin.

"By the time he left I was hurt pretty badly. I don't know how long I was locked up in that room but the wound got infected and I was very ill. I think it was my magic that somehow saved me and kept me alive. Because otherwise I would surely have died."

Riddle ended his story in the same indifferent voice he had started it with.

Hermione was shocked. She had known that it was hard for him to grow up in that orphanage but this was just terrible. She snuggled against him and then whispered in a shaking voice, "I'm sorry."

Riddle looked down at her with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I never knew how hard it was for you," Hermione said softly.
"No one does," Riddle answered, obviously bewildered by her compassion. "And no-one cares."

Hermione was sad that there was no bitterness in his voice. He seemed to have resigned himself to that fact. She breathed in deeply and leaned her head against his shoulder as she closed her eyes.

"I care."

Tom didn't answer to that but he allowed her to stay snuggled against him.

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More Than Friends

The next morning Tom woke up with a severe kink in his neck. He was still lying on the sofa, he and DeCerto…

No, Hermione.

…had occupied the night before.

A quick glance at his wristwatch told him that it was half past ten already. He yawned, trying to dispel his tiredness. As he got up from the sofa he noticed the quilt covering him. That must have been Hermione, he thought surprised. As his gaze wandered through the room he noticed that she wasn't anywhere to be seen. Tom wondered where she could have gone as he walked over to the bathroom. He washed up while trying to ignore the dull pain in his back. As he looked at his reflection in the mirror his gaze wandered to his left forearm and the scar.

With dread he remembered the conversation he had had with Hermione yesterday. He now blamed it on the wine that he had told her so much about himself. Why did he have to tell her? He never told people things about himself. But Hermione seemed to now know a lot of his secrets. And she had seen him in a weak and pitiful state. Yet, she still stayed with him and didn't use his weakness against him. A thing he surely would have done if their roles would have been reversed, he had to admit.

But here she was, helping him even after all the things he had said and done to her. Hermione remained to be an enigma.

Tom left the bathroom again and sat down at the kitchen table. That summer break he had told her about was one of the worst times he ever had to endure. It was the first summer break he had had to leave Hogwarts without his wand. Dumbledore had taken his wand back then, like he did every summer break after. He had threatened Tom with expulsion should he ever use magic during the break ever again or if he heard about any misbehaviour. Tom would never under any circumstances risk that. If he were to be expelled, even today, he would have to abandon his wand for good and as he didn't have any magical relatives he would have to leave the magical world and return into the muggle world and to the orphanage.

It was ludicrous really, that Dumbledore had this much power over him. Tom hated and feared Dumbledore at the same time because of that power Dumbledore held over him. But one day, he thought furiously, he would revenge himself upon that man. After his seventh year Tom would be free. Free to do whatever he wanted. A dark smirk formed on his face at that thought. He would make sure that Dumbledore and Carter and everyone who had ever mistreated him would regret their actions dearly. But before that he would make sure to never get into a situation like during that summer break again.

He remembered how he had arrived back at the orphanage and for the first time had met Carter. From the start Carter had seemed to despise him but Tom hadn't been concerned. He had learned to never expect anything different from those Muggles. But then Carter had found the book and had punished Tom. He still shuddered as he remembered that day. He had been so powerless. So defenceless without his magic. After Carter had been finished with him he had left Tom lying in that dirty chamber. Tom remembered the agony he had been in and how sick he had felt as he had remained locked into the room for days. He had felt his consciousness slip in and out as the minutes had ticked painfully slowly by. Always when he had been in a more lucid state of mind he had been afraid that the next time he lost his consciousness he would never wake up again. Tom knew that it had been just a lucky chance that he hadn't died back then, lying alone in the chamber. He could remember the darkness lurking for him, wanting to devour him. Never in his life had he been so
scared, scared by this void claiming him. Even to this day Tom was still terrified by the void. Every
time he had to return to the orphanage, every time Carter tugged him down into that chamber, Tom
was afraid. He would do anything to get rid of that fear.

Tom looked up as he heard someone enter through the front door. Hermione walked into the
apartment. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold outside and she was wearing her heavy winter
cloak. Tom noticed that she was carrying a bag in her hand.

"Good morning, Tom," Hermione smiled at him widely as she spotted him sitting at the kitchen
table.

Oh, how he hated that name. But somehow it sounded so nice coming out of her mouth.

"Not an early bird, are you?" Hermione said teasingly as she took off her cloak. "I went to that little
village not far from here," she continued, seemingly in a rather chatty mood. "It's really small. But I
managed to find some bread." Here she pulled some buns out of the bag she had been carrying. "The
landscape here is amazing though. The mountains are impressive. And it snowed during the night
some more. It's just beautiful. We have to go out later. You really shouldn't miss it."

Tom couldn't understand how someone could be so enthusiastic and talkative so early in the morning
but it was somehow nice to listen to Hermione's pleasant voice.

Hermione eyed Tom concerned as she placed the bread on the table. He had looked so depressed as
she had entered the tent. So, she tried to distract him from his dark thoughts and went on chatting
with him, or rather to him as he wasn't being very responsive.

"I like the winter more than summer anyway," Hermione said as she walked over to the kitchenette.
"Can't stand the heat."

She boiled water for the tea and then levitated the tea pot over to the table with a wave of her wand.
After that she took two plates out of the cupboard, returned to the table and sat down facing Tom.

"How did you sleep?" she asked him as she reached for one of the buns.

Tom just shrugged at that and then poured himself some of the tea. Hermione frowned at him. He
really seemed to be moody today. Not that he was a very cheerful person to begin with but it was
even worse today. She wondered if he still thought about their conversation from yesterday. She
herself had been shocked by the things he had told her.

She remembered how Harry had told her and Ron about Voldemort's past, about the orphanage he
had grown up in and about his days at school. But as Harry had told her about the orphanage it
hadn't sounded that bad. Well, it never was a good thing having to grow up in an orphanage but it
hadn't sounded like Voldemort had been mistreated in any way. Then again Harry had only seen bits
and pieces of Voldemort's life. Memories Dumbledore had managed to preserve. Those memories
were just fragments of Voldemort's life though. Did that mean that Dumbledore never knew about
Carter? Otherwise Harry would have seen him in one of those memories. Or had Dumbledore simply
withheld that particular information?

Hermione glanced at Tom. He was sipping at his cup of tea and still looked rather dejected.

She had now seen more than just glimpses of his life. And she didn't like what she had learned
yesterday. She had feared it but now she knew it for certain. Carter had mistreated Tom since that
vile man had shown up at the orphanage and had taken over Mrs Cole's job. Hermione knew that
Tom had never been an angel. She remembered the stories Harry had told her about Tom's days at
the orphanage. Tom had obviously bullied the other children, had threatened and stolen from them and he had used his magic to scare them. Hermione could understand that Mrs Cole hadn't exactly been a fan of Tom.

Then Carter had shown up and had obviously heard stories about Tom. Carter's opinion of Tom had been biased before he had even met him. So he had been expecting Tom to misbehave. Then Carter had punished him in an unacceptably way. Tom's behaviour didn't justify what Carter had done to him. She felt sick as she remembered that huge scar on Tom's arm. Whatever he had done, however bad he had behaved, Carter had never had the right to hurt him like that and certainly not because of a book Tom had brought from Hogwarts. Carter had hurt Tom and left him half-dead in that chamber in the cellar. Hermione now hated that man even more. Tom had nearly died back then. Hermione didn't want to think about how scared he must have been. Sure he was Lord Voldemort and Lord Voldemort was supposed to be evil to the core but as Carter had hurt him Tom had only been twelve years old. He had still been nothing more than a child. However disturbed or evil Tom might have already been as a child, he still remained to be that, a child. Back then he had been seriously hurt and he had been alone. Hermione was sure that he had been terrified.

But now that Hermione knew about that episode of Tom's life, a few things seemed a lot clearer to her. Back in her time period she had always wondered why Lord Voldemort had been so obsessed with the idea of immortality. Or more precisely, why had he already been obsessed with immortality when he had only been a teenager. She knew that he had created his first Horcrux, the diary, sometime during his later years at Hogwarts. Why would a sixteen year old search for ways to gain immortality? Hermione had always understood that Lord Voldemort would want to be immortal. He was an evil, dark wizard after all and many people wanted him dead. But why should a teenage Tom Riddle need immortality?

Now, she could see why. Tom had been so badly hurt when he had been twelve years old, that he had nearly died. He had been confronted with the concept of his own death much too early. Hermione herself had been in a few situations where her life had been endangered. Those experiences had been scary, they had been terrible. She knew that those experiences had changed herself immensely. But in contrast to Tom, she had been grown-up as those things had happened to her. She didn't want to imagine how bad it must have been for a child to experience things like that.

Hermione looked at Tom again. He was still holding his cup and had a blank but dark look on his face. She didn't want to see him so depressed anymore.

"So, did you make any resolutions for the year?" she asked him, trying to sound cheerful.

Tom looked up at her and a confused frown appeared on his face.

"I always make some stupid resolution," Hermione continued. "But they never work out."

"What is your resolution for this year?" Tom asked her, not really paying attention.

A smile formed on Hermione's face as she looked at him mischievously. Then she said in a conceited and mocking voice, "Well, I'll try to let you answer some questions in class for a change, so you don't look so bad any longer."

Tom arched one eyebrow indignantly and Hermione couldn't hold back anymore, she broke out into giggles. But she noted satisfied that he didn't look so depressed anymore. Instead he frowned at her.

Now he narrowed his eyes and then said slowly, "It's time we get back to Hogwarts. You've gotten way too cocky."
Hermione beamed at him. He might be scowling at her right now but she wasn't fooled. She could see the amusement shining in his eyes.

"Well, Tom, you seem to be very confident." Hermione continued in her conceited voice as she looked at him with raised eyebrows. "You really think you can beat me in any class?"

"I've been top of my year since I started at Hogwarts," Tom said while a haughty smirk tugged at his lips.

"Yeah, that's because I wasn't there when you started at Hogwarts," Hermione shot back.

"For someone who came two months late for the school year, you seem very confident," Tom said teasingly as he reached for one of the buns lying on the table.

"That's only going to make your defeat all the more bitter," she taunted right back.

"It seems we have to wait for the end of the year to finally crush your delusional ideas, Hermione," Tom said nonchalantly.

She could still see this delightful glint of amusement in his eyes. That was loads better than the depressive look he had sported before. She put her elbows on the table and propped her head up on her hands while she smiled at Tom. He glanced at her hesitantly as she didn't respond to his taunt. He arched one eyebrow questioningly.

After some time he asked, "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," Hermione said, still smiling. Then she added, "You just called me 'Hermione' for the first time."

Her smile even widened as she saw a slight blush on his face. She would never have dreamed of seeing Tom Riddle with such an adorable blush on his face.

"What do you plan to do after graduation?" Hermione surprised herself with that question.

Didn't she already know what he planned to do?

Tom stared at her confused. "I… I don't know yet," he said after some time in a quiet tone. "Searching for a job, I guess."

"What job?" Hermione asked him with raised eyebrows.

"That doesn't matter. As long as it gets paid well," Tom said slowly, but then added as he saw Hermione's questioning look. "I need to pay back some of the student loan I get from Hogwarts."

"Oh." Hermione hadn't known that he would have to pay back some of the money he got for buying the school books and everything else. "And after that?"

"I'm not sure," Tom said. Then he had a pensive look on his face while a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

His eyes wandered back to Hermione and he stared at her as if he was deciding if he should tell her or not. After some time he began in a soft tone, "You know, I've never really left England. It's only ever been London or Hogwarts." Tom paused shortly as if to contemplate something but as he continued there was this glint of excitement appearing in his eyes, "There is so much knowledge out there that's never being taught at Hogwarts. I've heard of this group of wizards in Albania for
example. They have a very different grasp of magic than what we have. There's this spell they've
developed. It enables you to fly, without the help of any magical item, like broomsticks. And it's said
that those wizards know how to travel through dreams."

Hermione watched with joy as she saw Tom's face brighten up and his eyes seemed to glow with
exaltation. He seemed so different now. She had never seen him this enthusiastic or happy even.

"I want to go there," he said as he smiled at Hermione. "I want to find that knowledge. What we
learn at Hogwarts is not nearly enough."

Hermione looked at Tom and found herself captivated by this exciting glint in his eyes. And where
did that strange fluttery feeling in her stomach come from?

"You are doing it again." Hermione was brought out of her train of thought as she heard Tom's
voice.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

"You are staring at me," he said. "Are my plans so stupid that you don't know what to say
anymore?"

Hermione smiled at him, "No, they are wonderful."

"What are your plans for the future then, Hermione?" Tom asked her.

Instantly, Hermione's smile dropped from her face and her eyes widened a little as she stared at Tom.
Her plans for the future? For her own future? Honestly, she didn't have any. Or did 'staying alive
until you complete your mission' count as a plan for the future? Probably not.

Hermione remembered that before she had left Hogwarts and had entered the battlefield, as she still
had been this innocent girl, she had had dreams and plans for the future. Lots of them. Some of them
silly or unrealistic like working with SPEW. Others had been more down to earth, like trying to
become a healer or working as a researcher at the Ministry of Magic. But then, the war had caught
up with her and her dreams had somehow died. There hadn't been room for dreams any longer.
Dreams were dangerous, especially if you didn't know whether you would survive the next month or
not. Since the last two years, Hermione hadn't dared to dream anymore. What could she dream about
anyway? There was nothing. Nothing she wished for, nothing she needed. She had had all the things
she would ever need but then they had been ripped from her. Her family, her friends, her love…

Hermione looked up and found herself staring into a pair of grey eyes which unexpectedly shone
with…

…concern?

Tom eyed Hermione and regretted having posed the question. As he had asked her about her plans
after graduation her formerly so cheerful face had suddenly shut down completely. She had even
looked a little scared. And now that Hermione glanced up at him, Tom was shocked by the sorrow
and desolation screaming at him through her hazel eyes. He had seen this horrible look on her face
once before, at Christmas as he had found her in her room at the Leaky Cauldron. Back then she had
had the same expression on her face. Now her eyes and her every movement were radiating off this
despair, grief and hopelessness again.

Hermione was very good at hiding this pain but Tom now realized that it seemed to be a part of her.
He found himself again wondering what had happened to her that had caused this sorrow which
seemed to be so deeply engrained in her very being. To his own surprise he felt a familiar fury
building up in him and taking hold of his mind. He desperately wanted to know what had caused Hermione's pain and then he would make sure that whoever did that to her would regret having hurt her very much. No-one was allowed to hurt her – if he didn't permit it.

Then Hermione broke eye contact with him and the plea in her eyes remained unspoken. She stared down at her hands, seemingly completely lost in thoughts, or in her memories? Tom continued to watch her. He had feared she would cry again like she had back at Christmas. But she didn't. Suddenly her brown eyes flashed back at him and she said in a soft but otherwise firm voice,

"I don't have any plans."

Then she averted her eyes again and seemed to get lost in her own thoughts again. "I don't have a future I could make plans for," she whispered in a hollow tone and Tom doubted she had noticed that she had spoken those words out loud.

Then Hermione breathed in and as she looked back at him Tom could see that the pain was gone from her eyes, hidden somewhere inside of her where he couldn't see it any longer. But he knew it was still there.

Hermione was surprised by the softness she could see on Tom's face as she looked up at him again. There was still a certain amount of concern shining through his eyes. She chastised herself for making him worry. She had wanted to cheer him up and not pull him into her own problems.

_I need to get a grip on myself!_ She wouldn't permit herself to drown in self-pity. That was pathetic.

Hermione smiled at Tom and then said, "So, how about going outdoors a little? I still need to show you that beautiful view I had from that hilltop."

Tom arched one eyebrow at her and Hermione had the impression that he wanted to discuss her awkward behaviour some more. But surprisingly he didn't say anything and dropped the topic. She was grateful because she didn't think she could stand the thought of her past any longer and right now she wouldn't have been able to make up a believable lie to cover up the not so peaceful parts of her life.

Tom eyed Hermione. It certainly wasn't very satisfying to not be able to find out what had happened to her. But he knew it wouldn't help his matter if he pressed her right now. And he didn't want her to feel even sadder. He nearly laughed out loud at that thought. Since when did he care about how other people felt? Normally he wouldn't have hesitated to wrench the secret out of Hermione. He wouldn't have cared about how much he would hurt her in the process. No, he would have used any means possible to get her to spill her secrets and he wouldn't have given a damn about how she would feel about it.

He shuddered as he remembered that he had done just that already. And for a completely useless reason, too. He glanced at Hermione and remembered how she had lain at his feet as he had hit her with the Cruciatus curse. He had hurt her, back then. Very much. He watched as Hermione stood up from her chair and started to clean up the table with a wave of her wand. Tom looked at her.

Then he said in a quiet voice, "Hermione… I am sorry."

Hermione stopped waving her wand and she heard how one of the plates crashed down on the floor. What did he just say? She looked down at Tom who still sat at the table. He was staring at her. The blank mask was back in place, she noted frustrated. But she knew that he always wore that face when he wanted to really hide his emotions. Hermione's gaze locked onto his eyes. She was startled by the storm of emotions she could see raging behind his grey eyes.
What had happened? What was he sorry about?

Tom had obviously seen her perplexed expression as he now said in a low voice while he still stared at her, "I'm sorry I used the Cruciatus curse on you."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. She was astonished. She had never thought she would see the day when Tom Riddle apologized for something. She had nearly forgotten that incident. It seemed to be ages ago. Back then Tom hadn't been 'Tom' yet, he had been 'Riddle' or, even worse, 'Voldemort'. Hermione remembered how scared she had been of him. As he had used that evil curse on her she had been scared to death. She had been convinced that he would kill her.

Hermione was still gazing at Tom. There was so much softness in his grey eyes. Hermione wondered how those could be the same eyes that had once radiated this bottomless hate as they had looked at her. She walked towards Tom, rounded the table and stopped right in front of him. He looked up at her, with slightly raised eyebrows. Hermione could see a guarded expression on his face, as if he tried to steel himself for her accusing him now. She bent down and hugged him. He tensed as she wrapped her arms around him.

"It's okay. I forgive you," she whispered in his ear,

Hermione closed her eyes and squeezed Tom even tighter as she felt his arms slowly, almost cautiously, embracing her in return. After a while, she ended the embrace and bent up again. She smiled down at Tom who looked at her in surprise and with a rather charming looking insecurity on his face. He was really very handsome, Hermione thought as she stared down at him.

She could feel her face heating up and she quickly turned away from him. Hermione cleared her throat and then said in an embarrassed sounding voice, "Now, that that's straightened out, how about going outdoors?"

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They walked along a narrow trail. Hermione's winter boots sank with each step into the soft coldness of the snow. She breathed in the cool winter air and then let her gaze wander over the wilderness of the Scottish highlands.

Hermione smiled and said, turned to Tom, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

He was following behind her. The cold winter wind was ruffling up his dark hair. As he looked at her with his blank face, Hermione was almost sure that she could see a small smile tugging at his mouth. They continued to follow the trail for a while but then it started to snow and thick, fat snowflakes were falling down on the already snowy mountains and the two wanderers passing through the nature. Hermione wrapped her rough cloak tighter around herself. It was starting to get colder. But just as she was thinking about apparating back to their tent she spotted a place where the rock was forming a small cave. Underneath the rock was a relatively dry patch which could shelter them from the wind and snow.

"Let's rest for a while," she said to Tom as she pointed to the protected space under the overhanging rock.

He nodded and Hermione set off towards the small cavern in the rock. As she reached the protected place she sat down and leaned with her back against the rocky wall. Tom sat down beside her and Hermione smiled at him.

"Now we only need a little bit of warmth, huh?" she asked as she flicked her wrist and her wand
landed in her hand.

She brandished the wand and whispered, "Ferventer tectum."

No visible spell left her wand but the cold wind instantly stopped and the air around them started to heat up distinctly. In the end it was warm enough for them to take off their winter cloaks. Hermione sighed contently and leaned her head back against the stone wall.

"Ah, that's better," she whispered.

They were sitting for some time in this small, protected cave. Hermione watched the snowflakes falling down, adding to the already thick blanket of snow that covered the ground outside of their shelter.

"Can I ask you something?" Tom suddenly said out of no-where.

Hermione turned her head towards him and eyed him. He was looking at her and again had his impenetrable, blank mask in place.

"Sure," Hermione said slowly.

"Yesterday, when you apparated us away from the orphanage, you apparated directly into the Leaky Cauldron," Tom said in a quiet voice and Hermione instantly tensed because she could see where this was going.

"How did you do that?"

She stared at him with wide eyes. What could she tell him now? He was right. Hermione hadn't thought about it at all but it was supposed to be impossible to apparate inside of Diagon Alley. But she had just done that. Of course she knew how she had managed it. She had obviously used the Elder Magic again to break through the wards. But Tom wasn't supposed to know that. Hermione eyed Tom again. He was still looking at her expectantly.

"It wasn't that hard," Hermione said trying to play down the issue. "No big-"

"-no big deal." Tom said thus ending Hermione's sentence for her. "You've said that before. About the Ministry's wards against the underage use of magic that you have somehow disabled. Which is equally impossible, I might add," Tom said in a calm voice. But Hermione knew that he was now very interested in the matter.

"So how did you apparate through the wards?" he continued. "And please don't tell me that it is no big deal because it is."

Then he looked at her, his eyebrows raised questioningly. Hermione was starting to get very nervous. It was out of the question to answer him truthfully. If she told him about the Elder Magic, she would have to tell him about the Elder Wand and then about her time travel. Then why not mention Lord Voldemort and the war? And if she was at it anyway, why not throw in information about Harry Potter? Hermione sighed tiredly. She couldn't tell Tom, but she didn't want to lie to him either.

"Well, my dear Tom, it just so appears that I am an amazing witch then. And you were witness of my incredible, magic-revolutionizing abilities," Hermione told him in a mock-conceited voice, deciding to revert to humor instead of a real answer.

Tom instantly began to scowl at her. Of course he was now angry with her. But Hermione couldn't
help that now. There was no way she could be honest with him, at least not in this matter. But he would surely get over it, she reasoned with herself. She nervously nestled with a strand of her hair as she glanced at Tom who still looked at her through narrowed eyes. He seemed to be really annoyed by her now. Hermione felt rather guilty because she couldn't tell him the truth.

But as Tom was glaring at her so enraged something struck her. If Tom had looked at her this angered a few weeks ago she would have been very scared by him. She certainly wouldn't have felt guilty for having to lie to him. It seemed, without Hermione having noticed it, their relationship had fundamentally changed. For, if she had dared to speak to him like that a few weeks ago, he wouldn't have been sitting so calmly beside her anymore. He would be attacking her right now, threatening or cursing her.

"Hermione, your evasiveness is slowly getting on my nerves!" Tom finally huffed frustrated.

She looked at his disgruntled face for a second but then she couldn't hold back anymore and started to laugh.

Tom stared at Hermione as she broke out into laughter. His anger at her secretive behaviour was instantly forgotten. He had never seen her laugh this gaily. It was a pleasant and somehow innocent sound. This was a completely new facet of her. The guardedness that normally surrounded her like a wall was completely gone. It felt like he now saw the true Hermione for the first time. He hadn't even known that she could be so free and at ease. Tom was baffled at how beautiful she looked right now. It was like she was radiating off serenity. Then Hermione's laughter eased up though giggles were still shaking her body as she watched Tom, seemingly still very amused. Her hazel eyes were shining with laughter as she beamed at him.

Tom was captivated by this strange girl sitting beside him. Hermione was a mystery. She was a strong and powerful witch and yet sometimes she appeared to be so vulnerable and fragile. She could be a fierce opponent but there was also so much kindness in her actions. Tom stared at her sitting beside him. She still smiled so warmly and her eyes shone excitingly as she looked at him.

Later, Tom wouldn't be able to say why he did what he did next. It seemed that for the first time in his life his otherwise so rational mind was deserting him. He reached out for Hermione and cupped her cheeks in his hands. Her pretty eyes were widening in surprise. Then Tom leaned forward and placed a light kiss on her soft, enticing lips.

Hermione was taken by surprise as she felt his lips on hers. Tom was kissing her tenderly and his hands were holding her face gently. Hermione's head began to swirl and she was suddenly very grateful for those warm hands holding her in place. She closed her eyes and surrendered herself to the bliss of the moment.

Then, too soon, he broke from her. Hermione opened her eyes again and looked up at Tom's face. He was scanning her with his impossible grey eyes. She could see demanding expectation in his eyes and even a certain amount of smugness. But she wasn't so easy to fool, she had learned to look underneath his many masks. He was wearing a mask right now. Hermione locked her eyes with his. And then she could glimpse it. Aside from the self-satisfaction he was certainly feeling right now, there was also something else. And if Hermione wasn't much mistaken, Tom felt a little bit insecure at the moment. Maybe even afraid to be rejected.

Without thinking she reached out for him and placed her hand gently on his shoulder, then she leaned into him. This time it were Tom's eyes that widened as Hermione placed her mouth onto his. But his surprise quickly vanished and he responded to her kiss. She felt him wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer to him. One of Hermione's hands was ruffling through his silky soft, jet-black hair as she deepened the kiss and Tom complied with her.
It felt so good and right. There was this long lost happiness taking a hold of her. It was a very long time ago since last she had felt this happy. Why was she supposed to hate Tom again? She couldn't remember right now. The only thing she was aware of were his lips on her own, kissing her so wonderfully. And his hands holding her so tightly that she was pressed against his chest, the velvety feeling of his hair in her hand, his pleasant scent and the comforting heat his body was radiating. She felt his hand glide up her back and pleasant shivers followed his movements. His hand continued up her back, her neck until he held her head gently while his other arm still pressed her against his body. Hermione's heart beat so fast, her head swirled and there was a familiar fluttery feeling in her stomach.

Then Tom broke the kiss. Hermione breathed out softly before she opened her eyes and looked up at him. He stared down at her, his stormy, grey eyes swirling with emotion. It was a mixture of so many emotions, she couldn't identify them. But what made his face look so otherworldly beautiful now was the contentment Tom was radiating. The same contentment Hermione was feeling right now. Never before had she seen that look on his face.

Slowly a smile was beginning to take shape on his face. At first it was a small curl of his lips, then he was beaming down at her. Hermione couldn't help but smile at him in return. With that smile on his face Tom was looking so incredibly handsome. Hermione couldn't have stopped herself even if she had wanted to. She leaned in to him before she again brushed her lips against his. Then she wrapped her arms around him, snuggled against him and put her head on his chest. All the while she could feel Tom's arms holding her tightly.

They stayed like this for some time. The snow continued to fall around them but they were protected from the coldness by Hermione's spell and the contentment they both felt.

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Her spell, that still protected their little shelter from the snow outside, was slowly fading but Hermione wasn't feeling cold. She was still leaning into Tom, resting her head on his chest. His arms were wrapped around her, protecting her from the cold. Then she could feel him running his fingers gently through her hair.

"I like your hair," Tom muttered in a low voice.

Hermione snuggled even closer to him and sighed contently as Tom's fingers continued to caress her so gently.

"You would be the first one," Hermione whispered into the fabric of his jumper.

She felt Tom bending down to her and placing a light, tingling kiss on her forehead.

"Let's go back, shall we?" Hermione heard Tom's melodious voice whisper in her ear.

She nodded her head only reluctantly. She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay like this forever. Here in this little world which seemed to be so conveniently separated from real life. Her sorrow and grief were for once forgotten. Just the happiness remained.

But her spell had now almost stopped working and the cold winter air was starting to blow icily into the small cavern, invading their little world. Hermione raised her head and looked up at Tom. He was smirking down at her. But her heart skipped a few beats as she saw this new softness shining in his grey eyes. Before she could think about what she was doing she had wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to her. Then she quickly pressed her lips against his. Hermione could feel Tom's arms tighten around her as he pressed her against him and started to nibble at her
lip.

After a while, in which her brain seemed to have momentarily stopped working, Tom released her again. Then he grabbed her hand and pulled her up with him into a standing position. They both stepped out of the cover the little cave provided. Hermione followed behind Tom, very conscious of the warm hand that was clasping her own.

She still felt somehow lightheaded and that fluttery feeling in her stomach didn't leave her either. Hermione knew that feeling very well. But she had been so sure it had left her forever. Since that horrible day in the Ministry of Magic, Hermione had been convinced to never ever feel this way again. But here she was, feeling this incredibly happy while her eyes wandered over the person walking in front of her. Hermione watched Tom's smooth dark hair, his broad shoulders and his pale hand holding her so unexpectedly gentle. She could feel her heart skipping a few beats. There were so many reasons why she shouldn't feel that way, why it was reprehensible. But all doubts she may have had were smothered by this incredible joy she now felt.

They stepped into the magical tent. Hermione felt strangely lost as Tom let finally go of her hand.

"I didn't think I would like our little walk but I have to say it was rather enjoyable," Tom said with a wide smirk on his face as he sat down on the sofa.

Hermione could feel a blush hitting her face and was rather surprised by that. Normally she wasn't easy to embarrass. But it seemed Tom had a huge influence on her.

Well, I am acting strange around him. She thought as she strolled over to Tom sitting on the sofa. Right from the very start, actually.

Hermione sat down beside Tom on the sofa, a distance away from him. She was actually a little unsure of herself. Or of Tom's feelings, for that matter. So she glanced at him. He was sitting there with his arms nonchalantly spread out on the backrest of the sofa and still smirked at her rather smugly. But Hermione tried not to be impressed by this self-satisfaction he displayed. True enough, if she ignored his smirk, she could still see the softness in his grey eyes as they sparkled at her.

Hermione bit down on her lip as her eyes wandered over Tom's form. She had already kissed him and that had been entirely too pleasurable to start having doubts about it now. So she decided to just trust her instincts for the time being. She hesitantly skidded nearer to Tom until she sat right beside him. As if he had waited for that Tom lifted his arm from the backrest, wrapped it around her and pulled her over to him so that Hermione leaned against his chest. She sighed softly and closed her eyes as she leaned into Tom. It was so long ago since someone had held her. Just held her. It was now, at this very moment, that Hermione realized how much she had missed that.

After some time, she voiced something that had been on her mind since Tom had kissed her so gently.

No, since he has stopped cursing me at every opportunity.

So, Hermione whispered in a soft voice, "I thought you didn't like me."

She could feel Tom shift a bit then he wrapped his arm a little tighter around her before he answered in a slightly mocking voice while his fingers caressed her cheek gently,"If I remember correctly, it was you who started this little quarrel between us. So it should be me asking why you seemed to hate me right from the start of our acquaintance."

Hermione's eyes shot open and she looked up at Tom's face. Ready to tell him that it had not been her who had started this 'war' between the two of them.
But instead she blurted out, "I don't hate you, Tom."

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized that it was true. She might have hated Voldemort, with all her being. Tom was Voldemort. But right now there was no hate. It seemed the white-hot hate, that had been her constant companion since at least the last two years, had left her. It was a relief to look into those grey eyes and not feel hate and fear any longer.

But it was bliss as she didn't find that incomparably deeper, all-consuming hate burning behind those beautiful grey eyes either.

Hermione looked in amazement into his soft grey eyes as Tom continued to stare down at her, his smirk finally abandoned. She could see something flicker in his eyes. But it was gone before she had the chance to recognize what it was. Then, unexpectedly, he bent down to her and placed his lips onto hers. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she felt him kissing her again. This time, though, Tom wasn't so gentle anymore as he pressed his lips, almost desperately, against hers. He was less restrained, less hesitant. His arms around her were possessive and demanding. Hermione's arms wrapped around his neck and pulled him even closer as she responded to his kiss just as passionate as he was.

It was different than the first kiss they had shared but it was equally exiting and enjoyable, she thought as she could feel his hands roaming her body while his every touch left behind a burning, tingling sensation on her skin.

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Later that day found Hermione standing in the small bathroom and staring in shock at her reflection in the mirror.

What had happened? What had she done?

Her brain must have momentarily stopped working. That had never happened to her before. She was normally such a rational person. As she looked at her reflection her wide eyes slowly wandered to her mouth.

Why had she allowed him to kiss her? That was wrong in so many ways. Had she forgotten who he was? Did she really have to spell it out?

He was Lord Voldemort! The Dark Lord, for God's sake! The very person that had murdered so many of her friends. The person that had thrown the country into war and by the way had destroyed her life. How could it be that she felt something else than aversion when he was kissing her? Even worse, not only had she allowed him to kiss her, no, she had even initiated one of their kisses.

Really, what was wrong with her?

She had enjoyed it even. How could she? Hermione was inwardly disgusted by herself. At some point she had enjoyed it so much, she had completely forgotten who he was. What he was to become.

But he is so different! a small voice spoke up inside her. That was also true. Hermione had to admit reluctantly. There certainly were some things that separated Tom Riddle from Lord Voldemort. He was definitely more human than his older counterpart. But was that enough?

Hermione skimmed with her fingers over her lips, still staring blankly at her reflexion.

She had told him so today but did she really forgive Tom? Forgive the things he had done to her in
the future? Hermione didn't even know whether it was her place to forgive him. She hadn't died after all. That had been her friends. And countless innocent people along with them.

On the other side, how could she blame Tom for the things Voldemort had done to her? Sure they were one and the same person but Tom was yet innocent of the crimes that had happened to her. Did she do him wrong by accusing him of crimes that hadn't even happened yet?

In the last week she had practically lived with him. She had seen his true self. He wasn't exactly a very kind person but he wasn't cruel either. At least not always. Somehow, she did like him. And there was still this strange protectiveness she felt for him. So many bad things had happened to Tom. Now that she knew about them, she could even understand why he had started to hate people so much.

*But still, he is the Dark Lord!*

Hermione breathed in deeply, trying to calm herself. But it didn't work for there was another alarming thing she had to think about. As Tom had kissed her there had been that feeling. A feeling she had buried and thought lost. Hermione hadn't experienced that feeling very often in her life but whenever it had hit her it had hit hard.

The first time she had felt like this was a long time ago. Hermione smiled fondly as she remembered Simon Hillson, a boy from her neighbourhood. She had really liked him. It had been a silly infatuation of a child. But still that feeling had been the same as he had finally kissed her during the summer before she had gone off to Hogwarts. Then there had been Viktor Krum. Hermione had felt very flattered as Viktor had shown interest in her. He had been older than her after all. Even though their relationship hadn't lasted long Hermione could still remember the happiness as they had spent time together.

And then… then there had been Ron. Hermione had to breathe in deeply as her thoughts wandered to her last boyfriend. Though boyfriend wasn't the right word to describe what Ron had been to her. He had been her companion, friend, lover. He had been her world, her everything. Hermione had loved him very much. She had been so sure that they would marry one day, never to be separated again. But then things had happened. War had struck and Ron had died.

That war had taken so much from her. It had destroyed her. Piece after piece of her just broke. And those images, those horrible images… they never left her alone…

Since the war had started, since so many of her beloved ones had died, it had felt like she herself had stopped living, too. She had still fought on, tried to accomplish their mission, but she felt so hollow inside. It was like being trapped in a nightmare. Like her soul had been sucked from her. Everything had been taken from her, her friends, her family, Ron, just to be replaced by that unbearable grief.

In a way that existence was worse than death and Hermione had often silently wished for death to claim her. Like He had claimed so many of her friends.

Hermione opened the tap and cupped the water in her hands before she plunged her face in the cold water. Then she reached for a towel.

As Tom had kissed her that terrible hollow feeling had somehow stopped tearing at her. He had been able to drive away that aching loneliness that was eating her away. She had been able to forget and to start to feel alive again. Tom had held her, he had comforted her and he had kissed her. If Hermione was honest, she had to admit that she had enjoyed every single minute of it. She couldn't remember when that change in her feelings towards Tom had taken place but it was now undeniable.
As she had arrived back here in the forties and had met Tom for the first time, she had hated him. Hated him with the same ferocity she had hated Lord Voldemort with. Tom hadn't given her much reason to do otherwise. He had been cold, pitiless and cruel. Just like his older counterpart from her time period had been. Now though, that hate was gone. No trace was left of it. It somehow had vanished during the process. A completely different feeling had overwhelmed her as Tom had kissed her.

*But, Hermione though in anguish, he is still Lord Voldemort.*

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Tom was pacing. Many thoughts were running through his head right now.

At first he had been a little unsettled by his sudden impulsiveness. He never acted impulsive, at least not when a girl was involved. Girls didn't normally make him nervous. Usually he just had to use his charm and the girls were willing to do just anything for him. Honestly, it wasn't much of a challenge. So, Tom rather had a lot of experience with the opposite sex. He hadn't just kissed them, no, he had slept with many of them. But all those girls had been dispensable. He had never cared for the girls, the only thing he ever had in mind was his own pleasure. If one girl started to make demands or if she just bored Tom, he had quickly dumped her without a second thought. After all, there were so many girls and they were so easy to get. With his looks and his charm he had never had problems to get a girl into his bed. So, it was safe to say that no girl ever managed to make him nervous in any way.

What was it then that had made him act so impetuous now? That was a question going through Tom's head. But another, perhaps the most important question was what drew him towards the girl he had just kissed so impulsively?

For there was no denying it, he *was* drawn to her. Thinking back he had been drawn to her for quite some time now. Admittedly though, back at Hogwarts that attraction towards her had been fueled more by hate than anything else. He had taken notice of her for the first time shortly after her arrival at Hogwarts when she had just ignored him. That had been novel to him, a girl ignoring him. It had irked him but nothing more. Then after their duel during this DADA class and her consistent defiance he had started to see her as an opponent. Someone he had to fight and to subdue.

Now the incentive had changed but the result remained to be the same. He was drawn to her. It had been that inexplicable attraction that had confused him and had led to him kissing her today. But now, he knew. As he had kissed her and had held her so close he had finally been able to see the cause for his attraction towards her.

Tom stopped his pacing and sat down on the sofa.

It was strange, really, but now that he understood the motivation behind his actions he was surprised that it took him this long to realize it. For whenever Hermione was around him, there was this feeling coming over him. It was strange that this familiar feeling should be directed at her. He hadn't expected something like this to happen. That might be the reason why he had needed this long to recognize the feeling, Tom thought as he looked down at his hands.

On his right hand he still wore that shiny golden ring. The very ring he had once stolen from Morfin Gaunt.

*No, not stolen,* Tom thought as he stared at the gold-ring with the black stone. That ring was rightfully his after all. He had just reclaimed it. He could still remember the feeling of superiority as he had taken the ring from his unconscious uncle. That sottish old bastard hadn't been able to stop
him because he was disgustingly weak. As Tom had paid his uncle a visit in Little Hangleton he actually had had other things on his mind than obtaining that family heirloom. But as he had seen the ring he had known that it belonged to no-one else but him. He had wanted to own it. He had needed to get it. And all of this had been accompanied by this feeling. A well known feeling. For the golden ring was just one example from many as this feeling, this desire, had overwhelmed him.

It was that very same feeling which took a hold of him whenever he looked at Hermione.

Greed.

Just like the ring, she meant something. She was important. That witch was mysterious and she was valuable.

Powerful…

Tom looked down at his hands. He had to admit it, even though it was strange. But this avidly feeling was somehow directed at her now. He wanted to possess her, to own her. She belonged to him. Like the ring, she was rightfully his. No-one else but him was allowed to have something so valuable.

To acquire her, though, would be a lot more difficult than getting the ring. He couldn't just claim her like he had done with the ring. It wouldn't be easy to bend her to his will and to force her to submit to him, she was too strong and stubborn. But she was his now and he wasn't going to relinquish his ownership ever again.

Tom heard the door to the bathroom open and looked up. Hermione walked out of the bathroom and Tom caught his breath as he noticed that she was again wearing this ridiculously short nighty. The pants were not even covering half her thighs and the shirt was, well, sleeveless and tight.

She smiled at him, though rather hesitantly he noticed, and then hopped down on the sofa beside him. She sat on her knees, leaning with her side on the back of the sofa and faced Tom. His gaze wandered over her form, sitting beside him. It was back again, that greedy feeling.

Hermione leaned leisurely on the soft leather sofa she had transfigured from one of the beds yesterday. Briefly she had toyed with the idea of just running away and leaving her disturbing feelings behind. But to her increased annoyance she found herself unable to abandon Tom like that. So now she was still here and felt rather tired after this long and quite eventful day. Hermione's eyes wandered to Tom sitting beside her. He seemed to scan her form, taking very long to do that.

What is he thinking about? Hermione wondered and raised her eyebrows in question.

After a while Tom asked in a quiet voice, "You are not wearing that at Hogwarts, do you?"

Hermione frowned. What? She looked down on herself. She was wearing her favourite pyjama. How happy she had been as she had found it in the beaded bag. That is rather pathetic, come to think of it. But what was Tom's problem with the clothes? Okay, they were for hot summer days… Hmm, maybe they were not as forties compatible as she had thought.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, it's tight and… and short."

Hermione grinned at him and then poked him in the side as she said in a mock-surprised tone, "Mr Riddle, you are rather prim, aren't you?"
"No, I just don't want those Gryffindor idiots seeing you like this," Tom mumbled.

Hermione chuckled at him. "I'm not dancing around the common room in this if that's what you fear."

Then she yawned and stretched her arms. "I'm tired. I think I'm going to sleep."

She stiffened as Tom suddenly leaned towards her. His hand was skimming gently over her shoulder as he brushed his lips against hers. Then he whispered in her ear with his smooth voice,

"Good night, Hermione."

"Good night," she managed to stammer flustered.

She couldn't resist anymore. The warm feeling was back again. The feeling she had told herself was inappropriate. It engulfed her once more and made her forget all her resolutions. So despite the fact that her mind was screaming at her to stop, Hermione leaned towards Tom and placed a light kiss on his lips. Then she got up from the couch rather hastily so that she missed that infamous smirk playing around Tom's mouth. She walked over to her bed and sank down into the soft mattress before she pulled the blanket over herself.

What a day it had been, she thought as she curled up on the bed.

Was it really just two months ago that she had arrived here in the forties? It felt like more. It felt like a different lifetime actually. She had been so lost and alone as she had appeared on that meadow after travelling decades back in time. And now she was again in the middle of nowhere but not lost anymore, not alone. Tom was here with her. Sure she shouldn't forget who he was but it was such a painfully long time ago that she had last felt this secure and... happy even.

Yes, it was grotesque, that she felt secure and protected in the presence of Tom Riddle. Before, his name had only evoked fear and hate in her. But now if she was honest with herself she was glad to have him around. Hermione noticed her thoughts slowing down as sleep was taking over her brain. She was already half-asleep as a last thought ran through her head. How can you be happy when you are betraying your friends?

_Hermione watched helplessly as Ron spun around and his eyes widened in shock as he saw the green curse coming towards him. It was too late he had no time to dodge it. The light hit him square in the chest. Hermione could only watch in horror as he fell backwards and hit the floor where he remained lying. Ron was dead..._

_Something was not right with Harry. He was in pain. And... he was clutching his scar. "I'm sorry. He is too strong. Finish him!" It seemed each word cost Harry tremendous effort to get out. He closed his eyes, his hands again holding his forehead and his whole body trembled. Suddenly the trembling stopped and Harry removed his hands slowly from his face. But as he opened his eyes again they weren't green anymore. They were glowing red. Hermione looked into his eyes. Those red orbs were so full of hate-

"Hermione?"

"Hermione, wake up!"

Hermione's eyes shot open and looked into a pair of worried grey eyes. Her breathing was fast and ragged. She tried to sit up in her bed and noticed that her whole body was shaking. A warm hand was clutching her shoulder gently, supporting her.
"Hermione?" a soft voice asked her.

She looked up and found Tom crouched beside her bed, looking at her worriedly while he still held her shoulder reassuringly. Hermione breathed in deeply and brought a hand to her face. She was surprised to find it wet. Sweat? No, tears! She frowned and then looked back at Tom.

"Nightmare?" he asked her in his soothing voice.

Hermione nodded.

"Are you okay now?" Tom asked her.

"… yes," she breathed in a hoarse voice.

She was still shaky so she lay down again and closed her eyes. Then she felt Tom caressing her cheeks gently, wiping away the tears before he got up, intending to walk back to his own bed. Hermione opened her eyes again and then before he could walk away she clasped his wrist.

"Please… stay," she whispered.

Tom looked at her for a moment, then he sat down on her bed and slipped under the blanket beside her. Hermione quickly huddled against him and she could feel his arms pulling her towards him. She closed her eyes and breathed in his pleasant scent while she listened to the relaxing sound of his breathing. The trembling that still shook her body was slowly wearing off as she felt Tom’s arms comforting around her.
Hermione woke up the next day. For the first time since an eternity she felt rested and relaxed. She didn't open her eyes but wanted to enjoy that content feeling some more. She snuggled deeper into her pillow which was surprisingly hard and warm. Then her still sleep muddled mind was noticing those strong arms wrapped around her gently and holding her comfortably. Hermione opened her eyes slowly. She found herself huddled against Tom's chest while he held her protectively. As she looked up she was quickly caught in the gaze of those beautiful grey orbs. Hermione stiffened. Why was he in her bed?

Okay, she thought panicky, she had kissed him yesterday, which was bad enough on its own, but why had he obviously slept in her bed?

"Good morning, Hermione," Tom said in his deep, melodious voice. Hermione could see amusement glinting in his eyes. She was pretty sure that he had been able to guess her thoughts quite accurately. Though that wasn't exactly difficult at the moment as she couldn't help but still stare at him with wide eyes.

"No more nightmares?" Tom finally asked her while a smirk tucked at his lips.

That was when it occurred to her at last. This night she had had one of her nightmares again. She couldn't remember what it had been about but it must have been bad. Then there had been Tom, Hermione remembered. Had she really asked him to stay with her?

Hermione stared up at him and replied to his question softly, "No."

Tom pulled her closer to him and she could feel him placing a kiss on her forehead as he said, "Good."

She couldn't help but relax as she felt him holding her so gently. She closed her eyes again and rested her head against Tom's chest. It was strange. Normally she would feel totally drained after having one of her nightmares. But this morning she felt good and rested. And it was the first time since she had lost Harry and Ron that she didn't feel alone anymore. How had she managed to go on for months with that ever present loneliness? It was now that she realized how much that loneliness let her suffer. Hermione didn't want to endure that painful loneliness any longer. It was unbearable. One by one her friends and members of her family had died until she was the last one left. Then she had been hurled back in time and she had ended up in a foreign world where she didn't know anyone. She had fought for so long. She had done her part to ensure peace. Wasn't it finally time to just let go?

To stop fighting?

Hermione was tired. Tired of always having to watch her back. Tired of having to wear her wand in a quickly accessible holster. Tired of seeing those terrible pictures each night when she slept. Hermione was tired from living in fear.

She had sacrificed so much. Too much!

Didn't she deserve some happiness? Wasn't it time for her to leave the battleground? She had been there for so long already. Her war, wasn't it over? Was she allowed to put her weapons away and live her life? Would her friends understand if she tried to…
Would they accept if Hermione tried to find some closure?

Suddenly Hermione could feel Tom's fingers skimming over the bare skin of her side while he asked her in a quite tone, "What are those?"

There was an electrifying feeling pleasantly flitting over Hermione's skin where he touched her. She looked down at herself. Her pyjama top had slid up a little exposing her belly and sides. Tom's slender fingers were currently skimming over the web of white scars on Hermione's skin that started at her side but she knew it extended her back upwards until it reached her right shoulder. Those scars where remnants of a very dark spell she had been hit with. Back then she had tried to protect Harry and had nearly lost her life as the curse had sliced open her body. Now Tom traced his fingers along the long and big scar that reached from her belly over to her side. She had received that scar the day she had fought in the Ministry, the day she had been hurled back in time.

"Where did you get those?" Tom again asked her quietly. Hermione saw his gaze darken somewhat as it followed the line of her scar.

"Well, I don't know," she said hesitantly. She, of course, couldn't tell Tom where exactly she got those scars. Then a mischievous glint lit up in her eyes as she said in an innocent voice, "There are so many I forgot. But-" She reached up and exposed her shoulder where she knew a fine, white line was also marring her skin. "I do remember where I got this," Hermione said as she pointed to the scar on her left shoulder.

She watched Tom raising his eyebrows before she continued, looking at him with huge eyes, "You know, there was this evil, devious Slytherin who hurled a very mean curse at poor, innocent me during a duel in DADA."

But if Hermione thought that display would make Tom feel ashamed of himself, then she was sorely mistaken as she could now watch a smirk taking form on his face.

"Did he, now?" he said in a smug voice as he touched the fine scar. "You know, maybe if you hadn't provoked said Slytherin he would never have felt the need to attack you."

"What?" Hermione huffed. "I have never provoked you!"

She narrowed her eyes at him as he chuckled amused.

"I'm surprised though," he said as he scanned the scar. "That it healed so well. The curse slows down and weakens the healing process a great deal."

Hermione still pinned him with a scowl and then said, "I know. It took me weeks to heal it."

"You didn't go to the Hospital Wing?" Tom asked her lightly.

Hermione just shook her head.

"Good, because that would have made it worse. That curse reverses every healing magic that is used on the wound it inflicted."

Hermione's eyes widened. She hadn't known that. It really was a good thing then that she hadn't returned to the Hospital Wing after the first time.
"You knew that and you still accompanied me to the Hospital Wing and didn't say anything as Madame Dulan tried to heal that cut?" Hermione asked him incredulous.

Tom just shrugged at her, "Well, we still hated each other back then."

She stared up at him rather miffed. Tom just chuckled again and then smiled sweetly at her, "Oh, come on, Hermione. That is ages ago. Don't be angry with me."

Hermione sighed. Tom should account himself lucky for being able to smile so charmingly otherwise she would have cursed him now. But as it was, she was again bewitched by his suddenly very innocent looking smile. Tom leaned down to her and kissed her softly. Hermione was caught by surprise. She hadn't yet decided if it was all right for her to kiss him. He was Tom Riddle after all. But as she felt his lips on her own she somehow found herself responding to the kiss.

As Tom ended the kiss Hermione opened her eyes and looked up at him. She wasn't that surprised to find him smirking down at her rather smugly. Strangely though, she wasn't annoyed by his smirk. Instead Hermione leaned over him and watched satisfied how Tom's eyes widened in surprise but then she only reached for his wristwatch which he had discarded on her bedside table some time during the night.

After she checked the watch her eyes flew to Tom, "Did you know how late it is? We need to be at Kings Cross at eleven!"

Tom took the watch from her and checked it while he put it around his wrist. "It's only nine. Enough time to get there," he said lightly.

"Really! …only nine," Hermione mumbled reproachfully as she pushed at Tom to get him out of the bed.

Hermione felt faint as she checked her watch again. It had taken them ages to pack everything, return to the Leaky Cauldron and then, again, pack the things they had left at the hotel. And Tom wasn't any help. On the contrary, he seemed to be rather amused by her panic. Hermione glared at him. They were currently sitting in the tube of London on their way to Kings Cross station. They couldn't apparate there. It was always full of Muggles. So they had to take the underground. As if they weren't late already, Hermione thought annoyed. She didn't want to miss the Hogwarts express. That would draw unnecessary attention towards her. And by the way, in her six years at Hogwarts she had never missed the Hogwarts express.

She checked her watch again.

"You know, we won't be any faster if you do that every minute," Tom's mocking voice told her.

Hermione's eyes flashed at him. Tom was sitting leisurely on the seat beside her and seemed to be completely at ease.

"If you weren't such a late riser, we wouldn't be tardy now," Hermione hissed at him, which, annoyingly, made the smirk on Tom's face even wider.

"I actually woke way before you did," Tom didn't hesitate to inform her in a light voice.

"Then it's still your fault we are late now. You could have woken me up," Hermione answered him, disgruntled by his good mood.
Tom suddenly bent down to her and tugged her hair behind her ear before he purred rather seductively in her ear, "Aw, but Hermione, I couldn't bring myself to wake you. You look so alluring when asleep."

Her heart sped up as she felt Tom so close by again. She could feel his warm breath against her skin and his hand skinned softly over her hair and then down her back. As his hand had reached her waist Hermione felt Tom arranging his arm around her waist so that he could pull her over to him. She was in no condition to continue her ranting as her mind seemed to have stopped working again. What was Tom doing to her? Right now, what she should do would be to spring to her feet and then get as much distance between Tom and herself as possible. But she did no such thing. Instead she closed her eyes and sighed contently as she leaned against Tom. She didn't even notice the scandalized looks the other passengers were casting her way as they saw that young woman behaving so lewdly in the middle of a tube wagon.

After some time Tom asked her in a soft voice, "Say, what did you dream about? Why do you have nightmares?"

Hermione looked up at Tom, who was scanning her with curiosity in his eyes.

"I…" she began in an uncertain voice but then stopped again. What to tell him? Maybe a part of the truth? It wouldn't hurt, Hermione thought as she looked up into Tom's grey eyes. Then she said in a soft but firm voice, "There happened some terrible things in my past, Tom. Really bad things. And sometimes I still dream about them."

Hermione watched as Tom's eyes filled with concern. But there was also something else, something darker, as he looked down at her.

"What happened?" Tom asked her.

But as Hermione didn't answer, Tom continued and now there was a dangerous tint in his voice, "Who hurt you?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around him as she whispered, "It doesn't matter. It's in the past."

In the end, they managed to arrive at Kings Cross station on time, though they had to hurry to get to platform 9 ¾. But as they stepped through the barrier separating the Muggle world from the wizarding world they could see the red Hogwarts' express still standing on the tracks. Hermione was relieved, though the arrogant smile on Tom's face was a little of a put out. The last thing that was missing was him saying something like 'I told you so!'.

So, Hermione was grateful when instead of mocking her Tom took her hand in his and led her through the people standing on the platform, waving at their children and wishing them a nice time at Hogwarts. The students were already in the train, sitting in the compartments and chatting noisily, Hermione noted as she followed Tom to the train.

After he had hoisted her trunk into the train Tom turned to Hermione and said, "I have to go to the prefects' compartment."

"Do you have to stay there the whole journey?" Hermione asked him. In her time period the prefects only had to meet shortly before the train arrived at Hogwarts.

There was a scowl on his face as he replied, "Unfortunately, yes. I really can't remember why I wanted to be a prefect in the first place. It's a pain to listen to those idiots ranting on and on about
Hermione giggled at him and then said in a mock-serious voice, "Well, you could always use Legilimency and entertain yourself with looking into the other prefects' minds."

Tom looked at her pensively before he said, "I actually did that already. But it's not really packed with suspense either."

Hermione drowned him in a very stern look. "Really, Tom, you can't use Legilimency in such an irresponsible way!"

He looked down at her and she could now see one of his infamous smirks tugging at his mouth. Then he bent down to her and leaned with one hand against the wall of the train, trapping Hermione between the wall and his body.

"You really need to learn how to have fun, Hermione," he whispered sensuously into her ear.

Hermione had tensed as he had bent down to her. He was so dangerously close to her again. And she had no idea how to react to him. There actually was just one thing she should do now. But somehow she couldn't find it in herself to push him away.

Hermione turned her head a little and then said in voice that sounded a lot more confident than she actually felt, "And you need to learn how not to misuse your magic."

The only effect her light rebuke had on Tom was that his smirk grew even wider. Then he snaked his arms around her and pulled her against him.

"You know me. I would never do something like that," he whispered wryly in his silky voice before he gently brushed his lips against her own.

He again kissed her. And again she didn't do anything to stop him, Hermione thought frustrated. It seemed as if her body didn't want to obey her anymore and reacted to Tom in a way it really wasn't supposed to. After a while Tom let go of her again and bend up.

"Do you want me to help you carry your trunk to your compartment?" he asked her in his smooth voice.

Hermione stuttered, "No, it's okay. I can manage." Then she breathed in deeply and tried to calm herself down again. "Don't want you to lose your important prefect status because you were late on my account," she said teasingly before she took the handle of her trunk in one hand and pulled it after her in direction of the compartments.

As Hermione walked down the train she noticed that they were already moving. She had to walk down almost the whole length of the train until she finally found her Gryffindor friends sitting in one compartment. Hermione slid open the door and stepped into the compartment. She smiled at its three occupants. Lupin was sitting right beside the window with a book in his hands. Longbottom and Weasley were sitting opposite each other and obviously played some exploding snaps. All three heads shot up as Hermione entered the compartment.

"Hermione!" Longbottom exclaimed while he beamed at her in joy. "We already thought you've missed the train."

"Yeah, why so late, Mione?" Weasley asked.

"Hi," Hermione greeted her friends happily. Somehow she had missed their carefree and easy going
"Yes, I'm glad I managed."

"Come on, sit down!" Longbottom said and patted on the seat beside him. "You've gotta tell us about your holidays."

"Please, Marc," Lupin said in his composed voice. "Let her settle down first." Then he looked at Hermione and smiled. "How was your holiday Hermione? Had fun?"

Hermione smiled at him while she sat down beside Longbottom. "It was quite exciting," she said and leaned back in her chair.

_The Hogwarts express, Hermione thought fondly, Who would have thought I'll ever use it again?_

They arrived at Hogsmeade station late in the evening. The train ride had been quite enjoyable for Hermione. She liked it to have her three Gryffindor friends around again. She had missed them after all. They took her mind off her worries. That was a good thing because Hermione didn't want to think about Tom any longer. She was now back at Hogwarts with plenty of room to keep out of his way. As they were climbing the carriages that would bring them back to Hogwarts Hermione admired again the beauty of the threstrals harnessed in front of the vehicles.

"What ya staring at?" Longbottom asked her.

She forced her gaze away from those amazing creatures and smiled at Longbottom. "Nothing really." Then she took his arm and tugged him into the carriage where Lupin and Weasley were already waiting for them. "Let's go!"

As Hermione sat in the carriage she looked out of the window. Her gaze quickly fell on Tom. He was obviously preoccupied with his prefect duties and was currently trying not to lose one of the first and second years. Hermione furrowed her brow. She hadn't even noticed that she had been searching for him until her eyes had fallen on him.

_The break is over, Hermione told herself. It's time to return to reality again. I still have a mission to complete!_

She felt the carriage move as it began its journey towards the castle. They had just reached the boundaries of Hogwarts grounds as Hermione suddenly felt a prickling tingle all over her body. It wasn't exactly a painful experience but it was certainly not pleasant either. It felt like pins and needles on her skin. It was similar to the feeling of blood rushing back into a limp that had gone numb. Hermione rubbed her arms as she stared out of the carriage window. The feeling of pins and needles on her skin left her slowly.

What was that strange feeling right now?

As Hermione stared out of the window searching for the cause of this sudden strange feeling she noticed that they had now entered Hogwarts grounds. Was there a connection between this feeling and entering Hogwarts? Hermione wondered and let her gaze travel towards the castle. She gasped in surprise as her eyes fell on the castle. It was dark already and the castle proudly stood, illuminated by its windows, still some distance away. But what made Hermione catch her breath now was this bright blue sheen that was encasing the whole castle. The light radiated off the stone walls of the castle and seemed to pulse brighter in regular intervals, like the castle was alive and breathing.

"Something wrong?" Hermione heard Lupin's voice ask.
She turned away from that strange sight in front of her and turned to Lupin.

"Can you see that?" she asked weakly while pointing towards the blue glowing castle.

Lupin frowned his brow as he looked at the castle. Longbottom and Weasley were leaning out of the other window in their carriage and stared at the castle.

"No! What do you mean, Hermione?" she heard Longbottom's muffled voice from beside her.

"Yeah, there's nothing out of the ordinary," Lupin said as his gaze wandered over the castle.

Hermione's eyes shot back at the castle but the blue sheen was still there. Why couldn't the others see it?

She breathed in deeply to calm herself and then said, "It just looked like the Great Hall wasn't yet lit up. I thought the house elves have forgotten that today's start of the next semester."

Longbottom leaned back in his seat and shook his head at Hermione, then he said amused, "Really. Would that have been so bad? You can't wait for school to start again, eh? I wouldn't mind to extent the holidays some more."

She breathed out relieved. It seemed her friends didn't notice that something was wrong. Though Lupin did cast her a curious glance. Hermione's eyes wandered back to the castle. It was still there. That pulsing blue light.

*What in Merlin's name is that?*

The nearer her carriage came to the castle the more Hermione could feel that pulsing, too. It was like a small vibration going through her own magic. And the whole thing had started as the carriage had passed Hogwarts' boundaries, Hermione remembered. Was this some new protection the teachers had put up during the break? But then, why was she the only one who could feel and see this magic? Hermione was sure now, that that blue sheen was magic. The feeling of that force was too familiar not to notice.

But still, why was she the only one who could see it?

Her gaze wandered over the blue illuminated castle. Hogwarts' grounds were protected by strong charms and spells, warding magic, to protect the castle and its inhabitants. The tingling she had sensed while entering Hogwarts' grounds combined with that bluish sheen, where those the warding spells, protecting Hogwarts?

Hermione's thoughts wandered back to the other strange incidents that had taken place around her. The blacklizard she had transfigured into the chalice for example. She had used the Elder Magic to overcome the natural wards of the creature. Then the next time Hermione had used the Elder Magic to destroy Tom's mental wards as she had legilimized him. After that she had used the Elder Magic as she had found Tom and Carter in the orphanage. Back then she had suddenly been able to feel the Ministry's warding spells. And Hermione had even been able to push them away. Her next action had been to grab Tom and apparate with him directly through Diagon Alley's wards.

All those incidents had one thing in common: warding magic. Hermione stared at the blue sheen. Could she now somehow see the wards surrounding Hogwarts?

Was that new power a manifestation of the Elder Magic inside of her? Hermione had already read a good part of Peverell's manuscript. But she had yet to stumble upon something concerning the Elder Wand.
I need to finish that book quickly, she decided as she continued to stare at the castle. Though secretly Hermione feared that she wouldn't be able to understand the theory of the wand even if she stumbled upon it in the book. She balled her hands into fists. That wasn't acceptable. She didn't want to admit that the book was way over her head.

Nicolas Flamel stepped out of the fireplace and into the well organized chaos that was his friend's office.

"Good evening, Albus," Flamel said softly, turned towards the wizard sitting behind the desk.

Dumbledore looked up and Flamel was surprised at how tired and exhausted his friend looked. Even the twinkle in his eyes seemed to have dimmed a little.

"Nicolas," Dumbledore greeted him. "I did not expect you at this late hour."

"I hope I do not disturb you," Flamel said.

Dumbledore got up from his chair and walked over to Flamel. Flamel couldn't help but notice the ridiculously flamboyant robe Dumbledore was wearing. He had never understood why his friend insisted in this absurd style of clothing. But he had to admit this flashy yellow colour was somehow quite entertaining. Especially if you added the tiny, little unicorns that were embroidered here and there on the fabric. Ridiculous, but also entertaining, Flamel thought amused. But then he quickly dropped the smile that had been tugging at his mouth. The reason for his visit was anything but funny.

"Please, sit down," Dumbledore gestured at the two comfortable looking armchairs.

They both sat down. Dumbledore waved his wand and two cups of tea instantly appeared on the side table. Flamel took his cup and nipped at the tea. Peppermint, of course. Dumbledore was a considerate man, he even remembered Flamel's favourite flavour of tea.

"So, what brought you here to this end of the country?" Dumbledore asked as he scanned Flamel through his half-moon spectacles.

"I am afraid it is only bad news that I have to bring, Albus," Flamel replied slowly. He really didn't want to break it to his friend but there was no other option.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at that, "Nothing happened to Perenelle I hope?"

"No, no," Flamel quickly answered. "Perenelle is quite well. She sends you her best wishes."

Flamel skidded uncomfortably in the chair before he continued, "I am very sorry, Albus. Peverell's manuscript. It was stolen."

Flamel could see the shock flickering though Dumbledore's eyes. But in the end he was surprised at how collected his friend's voice sounded as he said,

"How could that happen?"

Flamel stared into his friend's eyes. He knew how long Dumbledore had worked to finally get the Peverell manuscript. It was a shame that someone managed to steal it from Flamel's own hands.

"Someone broke into my flat. You know the spells I have used to ward it with, Albus," Flamel told
his friend. "Whoever broke into it, they knew what they were doing. Then they found the hiding place of the book and managed to break my spells again. I have no idea how they did it. Those were powerful spells I used. But the book is lost now." Flamel ended his story in a grave tone.

He stared into Dumbledore's blue eyes. His friend seemed to be shocked and surprised at that unexpected theft. Just as shocked as Flamel had been as he had discovered the thievery. How did they manage to break those warding spells was still a mystery to Flamel. Only someone with much experience in breaking wards could have done it. Or a very powerful wizard.

"There is more," Flamel continued. "There were traces of a fight in my flat. I called in the Aurors and they confirmed my suspicions."

Flamel watched as Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. There was a pensive expression on his face. Did he know who could have stolen the precious book?

Flamel voiced his question, "Can you think of someone who has the volition and the know-how to be able to steal the book from me?"

Dumbledore's eyes wandered back to Flamel before he answered in his collected voice, "I have some ideas, Nicolas. There are several people to be worth considering. But I cannot be sure. I know some wizards who would have been able and willing to go to such lengths to achieve what they want."

Dumbledore sighed tiredly before he continued in a soft voice, "One of them is very likely. It would fit his character to revert to thievery. Though I hope it was not him. But he is very resourceful and I think he would have been interested in the knowledge Peverell's manuscript could provide him with. I know that he was in London at the time. I shall look into it, Nicolas."

Flamel looked into Dumbledore's face. He wondered who that wizard was his friend was speaking about. As Flamel scanned Dumbledore he again noticed how exhausted his friend seemed to be.

"You look tired, Albus. What did you do the last weeks? I tried to contact you right after I discovered the theft. But you were nowhere to be found."

"Ah, yes. There were some things I had to take care of," Dumbledore answered.

"Gellert?" Flamel asked anxiously.

"Yes," came the swift reply.

"Did you find him?" asked Flamel.

Dumbledore sighed again before he said in a grave voice, "I could have, Nicolas. I think I could have. But he was one step ahead of me. I am afraid I hesitated too long to face him. My fear let me falter where I should not have faltered. Now he is hiding again."

"Don't always blame yourself, Albus. You are not responsible for the whole world. And you are certainly not responsible for Gellert's actions. He has chosen this path himself," Flamel said in a firm voice.

Dumbledore's eyes flashed at Flamel. And Flamel was surprised to see this uncharacteristic uncertainty in those blue eyes.

"You know, Nicolas, I was once just like him. And you also know what that had cost me."

Flamel shook his head slightly before he said in a gentle voice, "You cannot blame yourself for those
things forever, Albus. That is so long ago, and you have changed."

"'Long ago', Nicolas?" Dumbledore sighed. "You, of all people, should know how little time
means."

Hermione leaned back in her seat and listened contently to the noise around her. She had missed
Hogwarts, though being eighteen years old, she wasn't even supposed to still be here. But then again,
she reasoned, she had missed her last year at Hogwarts, so it should be okay for her to stay a little
longer. What she hadn't liked, though, was that ridiculously long speech she had had to endure.
Dippet had seemed to talk and talk for hours. His pompous style was rather tiresome. All of that even
before they had something to eat. Back in her time Dumbledore had always had mercy with them
and hadn't talked for long. Dippet, it seemed, just liked the sound of his own voice. Thank Merlin
that was over though.

"-and then my sister blew up the Christmas tree." Hermione tuned into the conversation between her
three Gryffindor friends. Weasley was obviously telling them about his, rather strange, Christmas.

"You should have seen my mother," Weasley grinned widely. "She was so happy!"

"Wait, wait," Lupin interrupted Weasely. "Your mother was happy that your sister blew up the
Christmas tree?" Lupin eyed Weasley incredulously.

Weasley laughed and said, "Yes, well, my sister's eight, you know, and she never showed any signs
of magic. We just thought she wasn't magic." Weasley shrugged. "But then she had this accidental
magic. And it was really spectacular, too. The tree just blew up like this."

Weasley tried to pantomime a burning Christmas tree, which was unrecognizable, but all the same
very funny. Longbottom was lying on the floor laughing insanely.

"Took my dad nearly a day to repair the damage on the house," Weasley concluded the fiasco. "My
whole family was totally happy about the tree and my sister. Aside from Aunt Henrietta of course."
Weasley added as he saw the questioning look on Hermione’s face, "She's at least a hundred years
old and stone deaf. She didn't notice anything was wrong until her wig caught fire from the burning
remains of the Christmas tree. Wasn't very happy about that, Aunt Henrietta. Told me it was a rather
expensive wig."

Weasley grinned.

"Did you buy a new tree?" Longbottom managed to ask between giggles.

"No, no, my mother insisted that we use the charred remains of the old one. Said, it was a lucky tree
or something like that." Weasley grinned.

As they were finished with eating the four friends got up from the table still giggling childishly. Then
Longbottom put an arm around her shoulder and said mischievously, "Say, Hermione, what sort of
prank do you plan for this semester. That smoke potion was all fun but now we have to do
something even better."

She smiled up at him. It was nice having her friends around her again. They were so refreshingly
carefree.

Yes, she was happy to be back at Hogwarts.
How tedious, Tom thought as he listened to Dippet's unbearably boring speech. Did he try to bore the people to death? If so, then he was on the right way. But Tom's boredom didn't show on his face. He never once abandoned that expression of polite attention. Even though that pompous twit was just laughable. But he was the headmaster after all and thus Tom needed to ensure that Dippet was fond of him. Actually that wasn't too hard. It was so easy to fool all those idiots, Tom thought and he allowed a small smirk to take form on his face. His mask of the hardworking model student was just perfect. Who would be able to see through it? It was almost sad how easy it was to manipulate them all. They were all so dazzled by this front of the charming and brilliant orphan he had created for himself that no-one ever tried to look underneath. How surprised they all would be, Tom thought as his gaze swept over the people sitting in the Great Hall, if they would get to know his true self.

Finally his gaze landed on the Gryffindor table and on the witch sitting there.

Hermione was different. Right from the start she had seemed to be immune against his attempts to charm her. She had never been seduced by his looks and she could always see right through his acting and never fell for it. She knew him quite well. She not only knew this front of the model student he put up for everyone at Hogwarts, no, she had managed to look underneath.

The strange thing was that even though the girl had seen a glimpse of his true self she had still stayed with him. She had even helped him. Tom almost shuddered as he was forced to think back to the orphanage and Carter. That disgusting Muggle! Tom had always wished to show him what true pain was. To be able to curse him. Now, Hermione had done that for him. He still couldn't really understand why she had decided to help him. But somehow it didn't matter anymore. Whatever her motives it was now obvious that she liked him. She might not want to admit it at the moment, but Tom had felt it as he had kissed her. She definitely liked him. Even after all the things he had done to her and all the things she had learned about him. Tom would never have thought that anyone could still like him after they learned about this dark side of him. Honestly, he had never cared about it before either.

His eyes wandered over Hermione's form sitting at her table and laughing gaily. That she seemed to like him would make things a lot easier. It would help her accept that she belonged to him now. Tom knew that she was still very unsure about their relationship. They had been enemies for so long and she was reluctant to forget their dispute. He would have to play his cards very cautiously or he would drive her away from him. But whatever happened, Tom thought as he watched Hermione greedily, that witch was his. There was nothing she could do about that fact.

Tom saw her now getting up from the table, followed by those three Gryffindor gits. His eyes narrowed angrily as he eyed the three boys. They were always around Hermione. He didn't like that at all.

Then a murderous desire to hurt came over him as he watched how Longbottom touched Hermione. He really had the nerve to put his arm around her shoulders. Tom balled his hands into fists. That was another thing he had to teach her. He was the only one she needed.

"Oh Tom. I'm so glad to see you again." Tom heard a female voice whisper to him in what was most likely intended to be a seductive way.

He turned around and found Melanie Nicolls standing behind his chair. Her dark brown hair was braided into a long queue and she now leaned down to him and put a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"I've missed you," she breathed to him.
Tom nearly rolled his eyes at her. What did she want from him? Sure, he had shagged her once, she was rather pretty after all, but after that he had completely lost interest in her. If she continued to mither him like that, he was going to show her that it was a very stupid idea to anger him. He shot a glance back to where Hermione was but couldn’t spot her any longer. Great, thanks to Nicolls he had lost track of Hermione. Tom's eyes wandered back to the girl in question. She was still looking at him expectantly. He narrowed his eyes in anger then he got up from his seat before he told Nicolls in a cold tone,

"If you excuse me, I have to take care of something."

He could see a disappointed glint in her brown eyes before he left and headed for the exit. There really was something he had to deal with. There was something he had to retrieve. His feelings were conflicting though. He really didn't want to go to the transfiguration teacher's office but he wanted to have his wand back. So, there wasn't much of a choice there. Yet another reason why he hated that old wizard so much. The old fool put him always in situations where Tom was forced to do something he didn't want to do at all.

His steps led him though the castle's many corridors until he stood before an old, wooden door. Tom knocked reluctantly. He really didn't want to be here. It always made him feel weak and inferior. A feeling he despised and had sworn to destroy. But today he needed to bear it once more.

"Enter." Tom heard the hateful voice coming from inside the office.

Reluctantly he opened the door and stepped into the transfiguration teacher's office. Tom's gaze swept over the interior. He had to stop himself from wrinkling his nose at the messiness in the office. All those valuable objects were scattered over the whole place. Objects Tom would kill to have. Like that small silver device that looked like an old muggle sundial. But Tom knew it was actually a magic amplifier. It enabled it's user to intensify his magic for a short moment.

"Good evening, Tom," Dumbledore's voice brought him out of his musings and back to the situation at hand. "I have awaited you," Dumbledore continued in his infuriatingly condescending tone.

Tom tried not to scowl in hate at his teacher who now gestured at the chair standing in front of his desk. A silent invitation for Tom to sit down. More of an order actually. Tom could feel this burning hatred bubbling up in him again. He slowly walked over to the chair and then sat down.

"How was your holiday, Tom?" Dumbledore asked him in a kind voice.

Tom couldn't hear scorn in Dumbledore's words but he was convinced it was there.

"Fine, thank you, sir," Tom replied in a tight voice.

Then Dumbledore asked him while he looked at him expectantly, "Is there anything you need to tell me?"

Anger flooded Tom's mind as he in turn stared at the professor. What was he going on about?

"No, sir," he finally answered in a cold but calm voice.

Dumbledore's eyes were scanning Tom now intensely. Tom nearly shuddered as this penetrating gaze hit him. But he didn't. He didn't want to show any weakness in front of Dumbledore. Instead he put up his strongest Occlumency shields. There was no way to know if Dumbledore would try to legilimize him or not. Tom couldn't afford to reveal his secrets. He wasn't going to give anything away, he thought as he gazed back into those blue eyes. Tom was very tense, his eyes narrowed and his mouth was forming a thin line as he stared icily back at his teacher.
After a while Dumbledore sighed softly. Tom was surprised to see a tired, almost sad, look on his face. Then the professor got up from his chair and walked over to one of the drawers in the shelf standing behind the desk. Tom nearly shook his head at those stupid, yellow robes Dumbledore was wearing. Really, what was wrong with that man? Dumbledore waved his wand over the drawer before he opened it and produced a wand out of it. Tom's eyes widened and his hands balled into fists as he recognized his pale yew wand. Dumbledore sat down at his desk. Tom nearly growled as he had to watch his wand in the hands of that stupid, old coot.

"I hope you understand why you can't be allowed to have your wand over the holidays," Dumbledore spoke and again there seemed to be an incomprehensible sadness tinting his voice.

"This arrangement is safer," the professor said in a grave voice.

"It's safer for the people around you and in the end it is safer for yourself," Dumbledore finally ended his little speech.

No, it was certainly not safer for him without his wand, Tom thought furiously. Instead he answered, "Yes, sir." He was barely able to keep his voice from shaking with hate.

Dumbledore sighed again, which started to anger Tom even more, then he offered the yew wand to Tom. He leaned forward and slowly extended a hand to accept his wand. Tom's hand clasped around the smooth wood. But Dumbledore didn't immediately let go of it. Instead he said in a severe tone,

"Be careful in what ways you use your magic, Tom. For it can come back to haunt you."

Tom's eyes flashed angrily back at Dumbledore. He shortly saw surprise on the professor's face as the man stared at his eyes. Maybe Tom's hate had shown in his eyes? He didn't know. Then Dumbledore finally let go of the wand. Tom quickly took it, put it away in his pocket and stood from the chair before he left the office as fast as possible without actually running.

Tom closed the door behind him. He walked a distance away from transfiguration teacher's office until he allowed himself to breathe out relieved. All the while he was very conscious of the small weight now in his robe pocket. He reached into the pocket and produced his wand out of it.

What a glorious feeling! The smooth, cool wood. His magic was flowing pleasantly through the wand. And the wand hummed with his magic, begging him to use it. It was a relieving feeling, to be able to do that again. Without his wand, without his magic actually, Tom had felt incomplete, vulnerable and weak. It was disgusting, really, that weakness. But now, he thought as his hand clasped the pale wood of his wand, his freedom was back.

A frighteningly dark and sinister smile tugged at his handsome face.

Now, his power was back.

Later that day found Hermione curled up on one of the soft sofas in the Gryffindor common room with a book in her hands. Lupin was sitting at a table nearby playing a game of wizard's chess with Diana. Hermione wondered what Tom was doing right now. Since they had separated in the Hogwarts express she hadn't been able to talk with him again. She was more than a little annoyed.
with herself as she found herself missing him somehow.

_Really, get a grip, Granger!_ she chastised herself. _You are back at Hogwarts, he doesn't need you anymore!_

It was true, wasn't it? The only reason Tom had stayed with her during the break was that he didn't have much of an alternative. It was better if they didn't spend any more time together anyway, Hermione decided. She knew that she had interpreted that inappropriate feeling, she had had as he had kissed her, quite correct. There was no use in denying it before herself. It seemed she had developed an affection towards Tom that exceeded the boundaries of friendship. It was a silly infatuation. For even friendship between them was…

Hermione hesitated to think 'wrong'. But that was what it was after all.

She ran a hand through her hair and stared back at her book, not seeing the words. It had felt so good, having Tom around. As he had been with her she had for the first time since an eternity felt relaxed and safe.

_Protected._

Since that damn war had engulfed her she hadn't been able to feel safe. Too much had happened around her. She had constantly felt strained. In the end she had shut her feelings down. That had been the only way to survive all the horrible things she had seen. But whatever she had done there had always been that grief and loneliness underlying everything. That terrible grief became her companion but at least its constant presence had enabled her to let it drop in the background. After some time she had managed to get used to that, too. It had always been with her though. It had been with her during the war and then it had still accompanied her as she had stumbled through the past.

Now, Hermione thought frustrated, Tom had taken that grief and loneliness from her temporarily. For a short, glorious time she had been freed of her sorrow. It was unjust. Now that she had been reminded of an existence without her ever-present grief it hit her even harder as it came back to haunt her once again.

The grief and the loneliness.

She wanted to feel free again. It was wrong and selfish, she knew that. But now that she knew how life felt without her ghosts haunting her, she wanted to experience that liberating feeling again.

She wanted Tom to drive them away once more.

Her train of thought was interrupted as a group of girls started to giggle annoyingly. Hermione looked up from her book and her gaze fell on a group of third or fourth year girls that was sitting on a sofa beside the entrance to the common room. They were indeed giggling foolishly and each of them had a blush on their face.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as her gaze fell on the cause of their stupid behaviour. Tom had just entered the common room. He stood right by the door and scanned the room with his impossibly grey eyes, obviously searching for her. His gaze quickly fell on her and he smirked attractively, then he walked over to her. Hermione couldn't help but notice how the noise in the room died somewhat down as the students recognized Tom.

"I'll never understand how you can stand these disturbing red and gold colours," Tom said teasingly as he sat down beside Hermione on the sofa.

"Well, we can't all be sneaky little snakes and live down in the dungeons," Hermione retorted lightly
though she felt rather shocked to have Tom sitting beside her again.

Tom just chuckled and continued to scan the Gryffindor common room curiously. He completely ignored the inquisitive stares the other Gryffindors were throwing at him and Hermione.

"How did you get in here anyway?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "You don't know the password."

Tom looked at her again and an evil smirk was tugging at the corners of his mouth as he answered in a silky voice, "Aww, but I'm a prefect, of course I have all the passwords."

"No, that's not true. Prefects are not privy to the passwords of the other houses," Hermione said.

"You are too smart for your own good, Hermione." Was the only answer she got from him. Tom leaned leisurely back on the sofa, seemingly very pleased with himself, and the smirk on his face was growing even wider.

She sighed.

"So, why are you here?" she asked him resigned.

Tom was suddenly serious again as he said, "I wanted to give you something." Then he looked around the common room and noticed the other students watching them bluntly. "Let's go someplace more private."

Tom got up from the sofa and offered Hermione his hand. She took it and allowed Tom to pull her from the sofa. Then he took off towards the exit from the common room dragging Hermione behind him. She saw the frown on Lupin's face as his eyes followed her and Tom. She released a relieved breath of air as she finally left the common room and the prying eyes of its inhabitants. She really didn't like to be in the spotlight like that. Tom on the other hand didn't seem to care at all. They were now walking down the dark and deserted corridor. He still held her hand.

"How did your prefect meeting go?" Hermione asked him in an uncharacteristically timid voice as she had suddenly noticed that while they might have escaped her curious house mates she was now pretty much alone with Tom.

"Oh, nothing particularly interesting," Tom answered. "Just the normal things. Like who's going to go when on patrol and who's responsible for the first years. Rather boring."

After a few more steps Tom said in a now soft voice, "And I went to Dumbledore's office."

Hermione's gaze shot back at him. His hand was grabbing her firmer and Hermione could see insecurity on his face.

"Did you get your wand back?" she asked gently.

Tom nodded at that.

Hermione squeezed his hand reassuringly and said, "That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered and then added after some time. "I just hate going there."

They wandered down the corridor until they came upon a door. Hermione recognized it. It was the door leading to the Arithmancy class room.

"That's good enough," Tom said, the insecurity had disappeared from his voice again.
Hermione involuntarily stiffened as she then watched him pulling his wand. Her eyes wandered over the pale wood of his wand. Voldemort’s wand.

Tom hadn't noticed her display of unease and waved his wand at the door. Hermione could hear a soft clicking noise coming from the door's lock. He opened the door and grabbed her hand again before he pulled her inside. Then he waved his wand and the candles standing on some of the tables lit up. Hermione couldn't help but feel a little troubled as she saw Tom with a wand in his hand. During the break he didn't have his wand. That fact had somehow made things a lot easier, she now realized.

"So, why did you bring me here?" Hermione asked him and was surprised by how strong her own voice sounded. Because she didn't feel very strong right now.

Tom who leaned nonchalantly against one of the tables now eyed her intently. Even in the semi darkness of the class room Hermione could see a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. Then he slowly walked over to her and stopped standing right in front of her. Hermione couldn't help but notice this predatory air in his movements. She looked up at him. The smirk still played around his mouth and there was a strange glint in his eyes as they scanned her.

He reached out for her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her over to him. Hermione felt herself relax against his chest. She knew she shouldn't but she did enjoy it how he held her. Her actions now collided with her previous anxiety but the feeling of his arm around her was somehow reassuring.

"Why, Hermione," he whispered in a silky voice. "I can only think of one reason why I should bring an innocent young lady to a place like this."

Yes, Tom with his wand was definitely more dangerous than he was without the wand, Hermione thought. And a lot more demanding.

Then she whispered, "Whatever makes you think I'm innocent, Mr Riddle?"

She looked up into his grey eyes. They were sparkling at her and she was relieved to see amusement shining through.

"Oh my, you are right," Tom said, his eyes wide in mock-surprise as he clutched her by her shoulders and held her at arm's length. "Must have mixed you up with one of the other girls."

Hermione poked him in the side. "Stop that or I'm going to hex you."

Tom chuckled softly but then let go of her and she was surprised that his blank mask was once again in place.

"That's what I wanted to talk with you about."

Hermione raised her eyebrows confused. "What? My wandwork?"

Tom eyed her seriously before he said in an emotionless tone, "No, your wand."

Her confusion disappeared as she watched how Tom produced a wand from his robe pocket. Hermione instantly recognized the black wand. It was hers. The one she had brought from the future. Tom offered the wand to Hermione and she tentatively reached out for it. As her hand closed around the smooth wood she could feel her magic flow freely through the wand. It was a pleasant feeling. Hermione hadn't known until now how much she had missed her old wand. She smiled down at the black wand in her hand and was overjoyed with their reunion. As she looked back at Tom she found
him staring at her still with his cold mask in place.

Hermione smiled at him and said, "Thank you, Tom."

Tom raised one eyebrow at her. "You are not angry with me?"

"Why should I be?" Hermione asked.

He broke eye contact with her before he said in a soft voice, "I... I stole that wand from you. And then I..." He looked back at her and whispered, "I put you under the Cruciatus curse."

"Oh, that." Hermione smiled up at him. "Don't worry about it. I told you, I'm not angry. At least not anymore. Let's just forget about it, okay?"

She again admired the wand in her hand.

"By the way it wasn't the first time I was hit with the Cruciatus," she said absentmindedly.

Hermione saw Tom tense as she said that. Then he snarled in a dangerous voice, "What? Who did that to you?"

Hermione looked up at him. There was an angry scowl on his face.

"Relax," she said. "It's in the past." Or rather, the future.

"Did it happen while you were in France?" Tom asked and there was still a certain amount of anger in his voice.

"Yeah," Hermione said softly.

"Why? How did it happen?" he asked her short-tempered.

She looked back up at him. There was anger flashing in his eyes making them glow a bit crimson in the dim light of the room.

"Don't worry, Tom. It's over now," she said in a soothing voice.

He narrowed his eyes at her before he said in a commanding tone, "What have you done in France? Tell me!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. He seemed to certainly be angry now, as she could almost feel his dark magic in the air. But in spite of the fact that he now glared at her so enraged a small smirk of her own stole on her face.

"I thought we had a deal," she told him calmly. As Tom now furrowed his brow confused, Hermione continued in a light voice, "Don't you remember? As you've asked me why I had to live in a tent for so long I promised to tell you. That story includes what I did in France. But I'm not going to tell you anything unless you reveal why Dumbledore took your wand over the break."

Tom scowled at her for a while. Then he said in a soft voice, "I could force you to tell me."

Despite the threatening tinge in his voice Hermione smiled up at him and said, "I seriously doubt that."

His scowl grew even darker. But Hermione didn't react to his frightening behaviour and continued to smile at him. After a while Tom sighed frustrated.
"Your impudence is intolerable."

Hermione's smile grew even wider. "Yes, that's me."

Then she flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. Well, it wasn't exactly her wand. It was the wand she had stolen from one of Tom's followers. She had never really gotten used to that wand and was now very glad to have her own wand back. Hermione looked lovingly at her black wand before she stowed it away in her wand holster. Then her gaze darted back to the other wand.

"What am I supposed to do with that now?" she asked Tom as she lifted the wand up.

He just shrugged with his shoulders and said indifferently, "I don't care. Throw it away?"

"Doesn't it belong to one of your fellow Slytherins?"

"I'm certainly not going to run after Alba to return his wand. And besides if I remember correctly, he tried to curse you with that wand." Tom said, completely ignoring the fact that it had been his order that had almost made Alba curse her.

"Now, enough of this," he said, took the wand from Hermione and muttered an incantation under his breath.

Her eyes widened as the wand in Tom's hand caught fire and combusted with a bright green flame until nothing remained of it. She was a little bit shocked by his actions. But as she had never liked that wand, she didn't care too much.

Tom stepped closer to her and again wrapped an arm around her shoulders. That embrace of his, Hermione thought, had a very possessive streak about it. But she didn't linger on that thought because right now she could feel Tom's fingers gently skimming over her cheek. As his fingers reached her chin he took a hold of it and lifted it up. Then he gently kissed her. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she felt his lips on her own and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her voices of protest were strangely silenced as she felt Tom deepening the kiss.

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Later Hermione slid back into the Gryffindor common room and was rather relieved to find it abandoned. She climbed the stairs leading to her dormitory. As she opened the door she found it already dark. Her roommates seemed to be asleep already. So Hermione tiptoed to the bathroom and after that to her bed. But before she lay down she retrieved Peverell's manuscript from her trunk. She stretched out on her bed with the book on her chest but she didn't open it. There were so many thoughts swirling through her head.

What was that thing between her and Tom? Hadn't she decided that it would be better to stay away from him? But then he only had to show up in her common room and she immediately threw that decision out of the window. Again and again she allowed him to hold her, to embrace her or even to kiss her.

That has to stop!

She couldn't kiss him. She really shouldn't. What would her friends say if they could see her right now? Hermione shuddered as she imagined their disappointed faces looking at her. She knew she had to stop seeing Tom. But as she had this thought she could feel her heart clench.

She sighed tiredly and rolled over to her side. She didn't want to think about Tom and their weird relationship any more. So she decided to look into one of her other problems.
Actually the most important of your problems! an enraged voice hissed at her angrily.

That blue sheen, she had seen around Hogwarts castle, had certainly been alarming. She desperately needed to find out more about the Elder Wand. It seemed to slowly change her own magic. That was more than worrying. She needed a way back into her own time period and not any more trouble with that wicked magic. It had already wreaked enough havoc.

So she read a few more pages in Peverell's manuscript. Unfortunately it was still as hard to understand as always. She even had the impression that the book was becoming more and more complex as she read on. Whatever Peverell had been, evil dark wizard or crazy scholar, no-one could deny that he had been a genius. His theories were fascinating but beyond anything else they were highly sophisticated and nearly impossible to comprehend. After some time she again stumbled over one of Peverell's personal notes. Again it was of questionable nature.

Now that I have grasped the concept behind the art of creating magical objects I wanted to put my new knowledge into use. The first magical object I created by using my new spells was a rather crude attempt. But even though it had immense deficiencies it still was vastly superior to any other magical object I have ever seen before.

As base I used a looking-glass made of the finest silver and trimmed with gold. After I had successfully stored a considerable amount of my Magic inside of the object I started to bend this Magic to my will. I molded it and formed it into a beautiful curse.

And as I was finished I had managed to change the nature of the looking-glass completely. It would still show the reflexion of whoever dared to use it but my Magic would change the mirror image. For the reflexion would be now of such an ineffably beauty and bring pure joy to just watch it that anyone who beheld his image in the looking-glass would from now on be unable to ever look away again. The poor soul will be ensnared by his own vanity so deeply that he will waste away in front of my creation. Fully able to understand the trap he had fallen into but unable to escape it.
Hermione woke up the next morning in her Gryffindor four poster and at first felt a little disoriented. Over the break she had gotten used to her little room at the Leaky Cauldron. But the chatter going on around her was enough to tell her where exactly she was. She opened the curtains of her four-poster and stood up.

"Morning," Rose said in her shrill voice.

"Mornin'," Hermione mumbled while she ran a hand through her already ruffled hair.

"Ah, you're up," came Lucia's voice.

Hermione looked up and nearly groaned as she saw all her dorm mates assembled and now eyeing her expectantly. What did they want now? Lucia prodded her playfully in the side while she said,

"We've seen you yesterday in the common room." Here she added something that most likely was supposed to be a dramatic pause, before she whispered, "With Tom Riddle."

"Why did you meet him?" Viola asked in her usual priggish voice.

It was almost funny, Hermione decided, as she saw the other girls sharing excited glances with each other. Honestly get yourselves lives!

"Did he ask you out?" Lucia said excitedly in her shrill voice while she now tugged at Hermione's shirt.

"What makes you think that?" Hermione frowned at her.

She couldn't quite picture Tom ever doing anything like that. It wouldn't match his character to ask a girl out politely with flowers in his hands. Most likely he would just grab the girl he was interested in, push her into some dark corner and start to kiss her. Just like he did with her at every opportunity, she mused as her thoughts wandered to last night as Tom had kissed her in the Arithmancy class room.

Damn, you shouldn't allow him to do that! a furious voice screamed at her enraged.

"He came to see you in the common room and then you left together," Rose now nearly screamed in excitement.

"Yeah, Hermione," Lucia said while she started to jump up and down. "He likes you! Tom Riddle likes you!"

"Oh, that's so exiting," Rose managed to say between her giggles.

Hermione now stared at them with wide eyes. Sure those girls were in general rather shallow and more interested in the gossips going around in this castle than in anything else. But what they now said made Hermione feel a little faint. Since they had kissed the first time during the break she had felt panicky about her feelings towards Tom which were inappropriate and just dangerous to begin with. But what did Tom actually feel towards her? His behaviour towards her had totally changed. That was undeniable. But what was the motivation behind this change? Hermione watched how Lucia now slumped down on her ridiculously pink bed and stared with misty-eyes at her.
"Oh, think about it. Tom Riddle! You are such a lucky girl," she said dreamily. "I would give anything to just hold his hand. He's so cute and a real gentleman."

Hermione furrowed her brow. Okay, Tom was quite handsome but the perfect gentleman? Clearly, Lucia had never seen the true Tom Riddle, Hermione thought amused.

"But I thought you didn't like him," Diana said turned to Hermione.

"Yeah, I didn't," Hermione said pensively. More like hated him from the very bottom of my heart.

"And now he is trying to win you over?" Lucia screeched delighted. "That's so romantic."

Hermione had to work to stop herself from rolling her eyes in exasperation. "If you say so," she said in a low voice.

"You've gotta tell us everything that happened yesterday," Rose piped up.

Hermione stared at her for a second, then said, glad to have found an excuse, "It's rather late. We don't want to be late for class."

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Lucia whined.

"No no, Hermione is right," Diana said in her stern voice. "We can't be late for class. So hurry up, everyone."

Hermione was very grateful for Diana's rule-abiding attitude as it gave her now an excuse to leave the gossip-girls behind. So, she stepped into the bathroom and locked the door. As she left it again sometime later she was unpleasantly surprised to find her four roommates waiting for her eagerly. It seemed they wanted to pester her with more questions on their way to the Great Hall for breakfast. Of course she had been right. The girls besieged her with questions, commentaries about Tom's handsome appearance, about how they thought he was such a perfect boyfriend. All the while their ranting was accompanied by bursts of silly giggles. As they finally reached the Great Hall Hermione was seriously considering to curse them. It would certainly be a satisfactory feeling.

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Tom was sitting at the Slytherin table with the Daily Prophet in his hands. Currently he was studying an article attentively. At first sight there had been nothing especially interesting at that article. But it had somehow caught Tom's eye so he had stopped to read it properly.

**Housebreaking in the middle of London**

*On December the 18th a burglary occurred in a flat in Islington. The victim of this break-in that took place at mid-afternoon was Sir Nicolas Flamel. Mr Flamel called the Aurors at once as he entered his flat. Auror Grimes was among the firsts on-site. He stated that Mr Flamel 'was very lucky to not be at home at the time the break-in took place' as the Aurors found traces of a fight in the apartment. According to Auror Grimes the burglars obviously got tangled with each other, most likely over the divide of the stolen goods. Mr Flamel stated that the only thing stolen was a priceless book he kept in his private library.*

*Sir Nicolas Flamel is the most renown Alchemist of our time. He is the inventor of the Reservopotion, which to a certain degree allows to stop time around an inanimate object, and is the supposed owner of a Philosopher's Stone. (For more information see pg. 6 to 8)*

Tom put the newspaper down and frowned. That was odd. The eighteenth of December that had
been at the beginning of the Christmas break. Tom could remember that day very well. He had managed to slip away from the loathsome orphanage and had been roaming the streets of London. Which wasn't very pleasurable in winter time but still better than to stay at the orphanage. On that occasion he had met Hermione for the first time during the break. He could recall how she had suddenly run into him. At that point in time Tom had still been very annoyed by her pure presence and had been accordingly quite irritated to have to meet her. But before he could have said anything to her they had suddenly been attacked by a black-cloaked man who had obviously been chasing Hermione. In the end she had managed to apparate them away to Diagon Alley but the street where he had met Hermione was in Islington. Was that just a strange coincidence or was Hermione somehow involved with this break-in the Prophet was reporting about? Back then he had asked her about the men in black cloaks but she had avoided the issue.

*Like she always does!* Tom thought frustrated.

Hermione was incredibly elusive when it came to him questioning her. He had never met someone who was so closed up. Normally he could always get people to reveal their secrets sooner or later. He was very convincing after all, Tom thought conceitedly. But the small smirk quickly dropped from his face as his thoughts wandered back to Hermione. Why would she break into some flat? No, it couldn't have been her, Tom reasoned.

*But then again, it's Hermione. Maybe it really was her.*

His gaze skimmed again over the article. Why had these men in the black cloaks been after Hermione? Had she really broken into Flame's flat? Tom's hands balled into fists. He hated it not to know about the things going on in her life. It was not only this issue about the men in the black cloaks that irked Tom. No, there were a lot of things Hermione kept stubbornly quiet about. What had she done in France? Why did she seem to know so much about Tom? How had she managed to apparate through Diagon Alley's wards? Why was she able to do all this incredibly advanced magic? There were so many secrets swirling around her and she was not in the least bit responsive to his normal tactics of getting information out of people.

This state of affairs was just intolerable.

The witch belonged to him and he was not going to accept it if she kept him in the dark about her life. But he couldn't start to interrogate her now. Not when she still didn't trust him completely. No, the first step would be to make sure that she accepted the ownership he had over her. Before he could try to break her secrets he had to make sure that Hermione submitted to him and didn't run away from him.

Tom's gaze wandered over the Great Hall until it landed on the entrance. Sure enough he found Hermione standing by the door. There were a few other Gryffindor girls around her, giggling inanely. Hermione looked like she was going to curse them any minute now, Tom noticed amused. His eyes wandered over her body. Suddenly he felt the urge to walk over to her and to hold her. He wanted to make sure that everybody knew that she was his and that they kept their hands off her. But he couldn't do that, not yet. He needed to be patient. But in the end, he knew, Hermione would submit to him. Her eyes had found his and Tom smirked at her, knowing that she couldn't resist him for long.

As Hermione entered the Great Hall her gaze went automatically to the Slytherin table, searching for Tom. She quickly found him sitting leisurely at his usual seat and he seemed to be scanning her right now. Then Hermione watched as one of his haughty smirks formed on his face.

*The perfect gentleman, indeed,* she thought wryly.
But as her eyes travelled over his form, Hermione had to agree with Lucia. Tom really was very handsome, but 'cute' was definitely the wrong word to describe him for there seemed to always be a certain darkness swirling around him. Then she again looked away from Tom and continued her way to the Gryffindor table. Hermione saw Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom already sitting at Gryffindor table. So, she strolled over to them and sat down beside Lupin.

"Good morning, Hermione," Lupin greeted her with his calm voice.

"Morning, Mione," Weasely smiled at her.

"Sit down! Sit down!" Longbottom grinned at her. "Slept well?"

"Yeah," Hermione answered and sat down beside her three friends.

She reached for the coffee pot in front of her. She needed some caffeine today, she decided.

"So, ready for the next semester?" Weasely asked her.

But before she could reply something Longbottom threw in, "Mate, you know her. She'll be okay." Then he said in a grave tone while looking sadly at Weasely and shaking his head, "It's us I'm worried about." He sighed dramatically before he continued, though he couldn't quite hide the grin on his face anymore, "I've heard Legifer's taking in guys now as well."

Weasely threw his arms up in the air exaggeratedly and exclaimed, "Oh, no! Please, spare us! We are doomed!"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at them while they now started to giggle uncontrollably. "You know," she said slowly. "If that really happened, you wouldn't be laughing anymore."

The two Gryffindors stopped laughing. Then they looked at her with grave faces. But that new seriousness lasted just for about a few seconds before they started to break down in laughter again. As Hermione stared at them a small smile began to play around her mouth. They were silly and childish. Somehow it was rather nice having those carefree people around. It certainly distracted her from her problems.

"Enough with this nonsense," Lupin said sternly as he got up from the table. "In case you haven't noticed, it's time for class."

"Aww, Amarys!" Longbottom said in a whiny voice. "You are such a spoilsport."

Still laughing they got up from the Gryffindor table and set out for the Charms classroom. Hermione followed Longbottom and Weasley as she felt a hand on her forearm. She turned her head and found Lupin frowning at her. He fell in step beside her letting the other two boys walking a little distance ahead before he asked in a soft tone,

"Hermione, why did you meet Riddle yesterday?"

Her eyes widened a little as she continued to stare at Lupin. But of course, she thought panic-stricken, Lupin had seen her yesterday in the common room together with Tom. What could she tell him? Right now she didn't want to discuss her and Tom's relationship. Especially as she didn't even know herself what exactly it was that was happening between them.

"Oh that," Hermione said, carefully keeping her voice in control so it sounded unconcerned. "He just wanted to return something I had lost." Not exactly a lie.
Lupin narrowed his eyes before he said, concern tingling his voice, "He doesn't threaten you, does he? I mean, he's bound to be angry after you pulled that stunt on him before the break."

"No, no," Hermione quickly tried to reassure Lupin. "Nothing like that."

She had completely forgotten about that rumour incident all those weeks ago and how she had gotten back at Tom for it. In the mean time so much had changed. The dynamics of her relationship with Tom were completely different now. Though if that was a good development, Hermione was still unsure about.

"You sure?" Lupin asked and there was still a certain amount of concern in his soft voice. "You can tell me if he's harassing you."

"No, really. Don't worry." Hermione smiled nervously at him.

"Okay," Lupin finally said though he didn't look convinced. "But if he does something you tell Richard, Marc or me right away. I told you, Riddle is dangerous. You shouldn't take him lightly."

Hermione nodded at him.

Suddenly Longbottom called back at them, "Hey, what ya waiting for? I thought we were late for class."

They walked the rest of the way to the Charms classroom together. Longbottom and Weasley continued to fool around. Sometimes Hermione joined them, sometimes she just had to shake her head and smile at their jokes. As they entered the Charms classroom the three boys strolled to their seats in the back row. It was then that Hermione suddenly remembered who her seat neighbour was. And sure enough Tom was already sitting elegantly in his seat right under the window. One of his arms dangled casually over the back rest of his chair and he now eyed her rather arrogantly, a small smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. Hermione was once again struck by how handsome he really looked. It was no wonder the whole female population of the castle fancied him. Lupin was right after all, Hermione thought, Tom was definitely dangerous. But not in the way Lupin had meant it.

She breathed in deeply and grabbed her school bag a little tighter. Then she slowly walked over to Tom. She sat down on the seat beside him. He still smirked at her rather conceitedly while his grey eyes sparkled softly.

"Good morning," he whispered in his melodious voice.

Hermione glanced at him before she replied softly, "Morning, Tom."

She remembered her first Charms class in the forties. Back then she had been rather scared as she had been forced to sit beside Tom. If she recalled correctly Tom had been equally peeved by her presence. But now, he seemed to be rather pleased with the seating arrangement if that strangely possessive glint he cast her way was anything to go by.

Tom eyed the witch sitting beside him. She appeared to be a little nervous, he noted amused. A smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth because it seemed that he was the cause of her nervousness. He liked it to have such a huge influence on her. Tom knew that Hermione was still very unsure about the relationship between them. He didn't know why but since she had arrived here at Hogwarts all those months ago she had seemed to hate him. She had fought against him at every opportunity. Even now she was trying to convince herself that she still didn't like him. It was somehow amusing, Tom thought as his eyes wandered over her, how she was trying to resist him. Because that was just
futile. She would submit to him.

Before the Christmas break he, himself, had despised her and accordingly had treated her that way. A mistake he intended to right because now he had finally realized the worth of her. He was surprised that it had taken him so long to see her for what she was. A very powerful and gifted witch. Strange in her ways but definitely valuable. Not at all like the other people around him. To him other people had never been important. So he had always used them without having scruples. He had manipulated and seduced them into doing things he wanted them to do. If they hadn't obeyed, he had never hesitated to use force to coerce them. But Hermione, he found, was more than one of those pieces on his chessboard. Much more.

His eyes wandered back to her face and his smirk even grew wider as he saw that small blush. She had obviously noticed how he had scanned her. That was good, that impact he had on her. He remembered the first few weeks after she had arrived at Hogwarts. Back then he had never managed to get a reaction out of her. He had been severely annoyed by that lack of reaction. But now, he noticed satisfied, she was responding to him. She might still be trying to deny that she was drawn to him, but now that he was determined to win her over she didn't stand a chance to resist him. Who could, really? Whenever he had set his mind on something he always won in the end, Tom thought haughtily. Now as he had decided that she belonged to him there was not much she could do about it. Because that greedy and possessive feeling hadn't left him again. Whenever he looked at her it came over him.

Hermione noticed that Tom was still scanning her shamelessly. She was annoyed that she felt her face heat up a little bit. Why was he able to unsettle her like this? She looked away from him. How did he manage to confuse her so? This attraction she felt towards him was wrong. There was no other way to describe it. She knew too well who he was. During the Christmas break she might have discovered that he was not entirely evil but that didn't mean he was a good person now. There was actually just one thing she should do now and that would be to stay away from him.

Hermione looked up as she heard professor Merrythought enter the class room. Professor Merrythought wasn't a very tall woman but even so she wasn't easy to overlook. That woman constantly radiated off a contagious joice which made Hermione like her even more. Now the old lady stood in front of her class and beamed at them.

"A very good morning to you," she said in her friendly voice. "I hope you all had a nice holiday and are prepared to learn some more charms."

The professor put her old, leather bag down before she leaned against her desk and faced the glass.

"Now that the new semester has begun let us start with something different," the professor said while she still smiled at them. "Who knows the Infucatus charm?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. It somehow shocked her but she had never heard about that charm. How could that be? Maybe she should have read the text book in advance? Her gaze fell on her charms book with the red binding in front of her. Really, how could she have slacked like this? Hermione wondered frantically. That wasn't at all like her. After the lesson she should really go to the-

Hermione halted her mental ranting and a small smile started to form on her mouth. 'To the library,' she ended her thought. There was now a nostalgic touch in the smile playing around her mouth. Yes, 'to the library' had once been her cure for everything, back in the old days – when she had still attended Hogwarts. Right now, just for a second, she had somehow forgotten that she was in the past and she had reverted back to the know-it-all bookworm she once had been.
...to the innocent and happy girl she had been. How strange.

Her eyes wandered to Tom sitting beside her. She wasn't in the least bit surprised to see his hand in the air. She inwardly rolled her eyes, of course he knew the answer to professor Merrythought's question. Tom was an even worse know-it-all than she had ever been.

"Yes, Mr Riddle?" the charms professor smiled encouragingly at him.

"The Infucatus charm can alter the colour of whatever object it's directed at according to the wishes of the caster," Tom stated in his smooth voice.

"That is completely right, Mr Riddle." Professor Merrythough beamed at Tom. "And do you know the incantation for the charm, too?"

Hermione watched with discomfort as Tom pulled his wand. To see him with a wand still made her a little uneasy. Now he started to wave the wand in an elegant movement. She stiffened as she realized that he directed the charm in her direction.

"Infus," Tom whispered in a light tone.

Hermione didn't feel anything change. The professor, though, seemed to be impressed by whatever Tom had done as she now said in her kind voice, "Excellent, Mr Riddle. Take ten points for Slytherin."

Hermione could see a few of the Slytherins in the class smirk at her, so she looked down at her robes. Should she really be surprised? The red and gold rims of her black school robe and her Gryffindor emblem had changed. They were now Slytherin green and silver. Hermione looked back at Tom. He wasn't paying her any attention anymore but was listening intently to professor Merrythought who now explained the magic behind the colour change charm.

Hermione leaned a little over to Tom and whispered irritated, "Now, can you change it back?"

A smirk formed on his face but he still didn't look at her. "I like it that way. It suits you."

Hermione continued to glare at him which annoyingly only made Tom chuckle softly. Of course she would be able to change the colour back herself. But the spell she would use to do that would be a little bit too advanced not to draw the attention of everyone towards her. In addition to that she wanted to know the actual counter charm to the Infucatus charm.

After a while Tom turned towards her and whispered under his breath, "Confuto."

Sure enough, her robes changed back into the familiar red and gold colours. Hermione shook her head slightly before she turned away from Tom ignoring the mocking smirk he threw her way and tried to follow the lesson again. She had her quill in her hand and scribbled everything down the professor told them. It was quite interesting because she herself had never delved into those kind of charms. Since she had left Hogwarts the only charms she had taken the time to learn were all offensive or defensive ones and could be used during a fight. So she had never learned something as innocent as the professor was now teaching. It was somehow nice to be remembered that magic was not all about fighting and battles, that there still existed that innocent part of magic.

As Hermione was so preoccupied with writing down the professor's explanations she suddenly felt someone touching her hair. She looked up and found that Tom was running his fingers gently through her hair. He was sitting elegantly in his chair and seemed to listen intently to everything the professor said while from time to time he wrote something down in his neat and elaborate handwriting. His other hand, though, was stroking lightly over her hair, now and then playing with a
strand of it teasingly. Hermione was very irritated by his actions and wasn't able to follow the lesson at all anymore. That tingling feeling in her stomach was back, too. The feeling she had told herself didn't exist, must not exist.

So, Hermione spent the rest of the lesson trying to convince herself that she didn't enjoy the feeling of those fingers running through her hair so gently. As professor Merrythought finally ended the lesson Hermione was very relieved. For the first time since she had felt him touching her hair she cast a glance at Tom. He had now stopped stroking his fingers through her hair but had started to pack away his parchment and quill calmly. Her gaze wandered to his face. Tom wasn't looking her way but Hermione could find a conceited smirk curling up his lips.

*That little...*

He seemed to know perfectly well, the impact he had on her. But somehow Hermione couldn't find it in herself to be angry with him. Maybe she should be really concerned about that lack of anger? She ran a hand frustrated through her hair before she grabbed her own things and stuffed them into her bag. As she got up she let out a surprised gasp as she nearly collided with Longbottom's chest. She hadn't noticed that he had walked over to her. She looked up at his face and found a furious scowl furrowing his brow. He wasn't glaring this enraged at her, though, instead it seemed to be directed at Tom. Next, Hermione could feel a hand clasping around her wrist before Longbottom pulled her over to him and away from Tom.

"What do you think you are doing here?" Longbottom asked Tom angrily, his voice shook with suppressed rage.

Hermione looked back at Tom. He was scanning Longbottom with his grey eyes, giving nothing away. Though she could see a dangerous glint in his eyes as they wandered over Longbottom's hand which still held her wrist. Now Tom got slowly up from his chair before he leaned against the table and twirled his wand nonchalantly through his fingers.

Then he said in an eerily calm almost bored voice, "What does it look like I'm doing? I was just trying to follow the professor's lesson." His eyes wandered to Longbottom's face before he added in an arrogant tone while a condescending smile played around his mouth, "Of course that is a new concept to you."

Hermione felt chills darting down her spine as she heard the coldness in Tom's voice. He was leaning elegantly against the table, seemingly completely at ease, but right now he was radiating off nothing but this detached coldness. It was frightening, that hard glint in his eyes. Hermione had forgotten how scary Tom could be. During the Christmas break he had never spoken to her in that threatening tone he was now using.

"You keep your dirty fingers away from Hermione!" Longbottom blustered at Tom enraged.

Tom pushed away from the table and now faced Longbottom for the first time during this argument. He had stopped twirling his wand through his fingers but now held it properly. The blank mask was back on his face though he allowed a certain degree of cold hate to shine through as he scanned Longbottom with his steel hard eyes.

"Careful, Longbottom," Tom said in a soft, composed voice. "You shouldn't insult the wrong people."

The threat behind his words was clear. Hermione stared at Tom with wide eyes. Right now, he was very intimidating. She had really forgotten that he could be this way, too.
"And you should stay away from Hermione!" Longbottom now nearly yelled at Tom. Hermione was silently glad that they were by now alone in the charms class room.

"You can't threaten her, understood?" Longbottom continued in his angry voice.

Hermione watched a cruel smirk taking form on Tom's face.

"You would be surprised by what I can actually do," he sneered at Longbottom in cold amusement.

Then tom took off in direction of the door. As he passed Hermione he skimmed his fingers gently over her shoulder. She could still see that arrogant smile on his face but there was also the softness back in his eyes as they flashed at her shortly. She watched Tom stalking confidently out of the class room.

"That conceited prick!" Hermione heard Longbottom huff.

He was glaring angrily in the direction Tom had just disappeared to. Longbottom's face was still an angry shade of purple. But the anger soon left his face as he now looked down at her. Concern was shining in his eyes as he scanned her.

"He didn't do anything to you, did he?" he asked in a worried tone.

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. Then she answered in a soothing voice, "No, don't worry. I'm alright."

Though actually, Tom did do something to her. She just wasn't sure yet whether it was a good or bad thing.

"Okay," Longbottom said as he still scanned her concerned. "But you'll tell me if he tries anything." Longbottom's eyes wandered back to the door Tom had just left through. "He's an evil bastard," he said angrily.

Hermione wanted to answer, 'Well, he's the Dark Lord, what can you expect?', just to see Longbottom's face. But in the end she remained silent. Longbottom continued to glare at the door for a few seconds before he finally turned towards Hermione again and said, in a now friendlier tone,

"Let's go or we'll be late for lunch."

Tom exited the Charms class room. As he walked down the corridor he breathed in deeply, trying to get his temper back under control. His magic was still raging inside of him furiously, begging him to be released. That insolent son of a bitch had dared to touch Hermione again! Tom's hands balled into fists as he remembered how Longbottom had grabbed her wrist. It had cost him a lot of self-control to not curse that bastard into oblivion. Oh, the sweet pleasure it would have been to hurl his dark curses at Longbottom. But Tom couldn't do that. Not in the middle of a class room. And certainly not in front of Hermione. It was incomprehensible and irksome but she seemed to consider that Gryffindor idiot to be one of her friends. Tom couldn't walk around and curse her so-called friends. At least not yet when Hermione still felt insecure about her relationship with him. To now openly use violence against her friends would certainly not help him to bind her to him. So he had left the Charms class room lest he did something he would regret later. He had known it right from the start, that it would be difficult to gain Hermione. He couldn't force her to submit to him. That hadn't worked before the Christmas break as he had tortured her with the Cruciatus curse. Now it wouldn't work either. Strangely Tom didn't really want to hurt her anyway. Not if there were still other options to gain her.
"I tell you, he's threatened her," Hermione could hear Longbottom hiss at Weasely.

Currently she was sitting in her History of Magic class and tried to not fall asleep. Professor Binns was again being his old boring self. He was going on about one Goblin war or other. His monotonous speech was lulling Hermione to sleep. Somehow she had always attributed his unbearably boring lessons to the fact that Binns was a ghost, unable to understand the concept of suspense any longer. But here in the past he was very alive and still boredom incarnate. So, as not to fall asleep in the middle of a class Hermione had decided to listen into what her friends had to discuss. Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom were sitting at a table behind her in the last row. Since Longbottom had had this dispute with Tom after charms he had been quite angry. Now, he had a heated discussion with Weasely who sat beside him.

"I'm sure you just misunderstood him, Marc," Weasely whispered back to Longbottom.

"No, I didn't," Longbottom huffed, rather loudly. But Binns seemed not to mind as he was still talking about this Goblin war. Then Longbottom continued a little quieter, "You've seen what he did during Charms. How do you explain that?"

"I don't know." Weasely's voice was now a little unsure. "But he just touched her hair. What's so threatening about that?"

"He was running his dirty fingers through her hair like he's owning her," Longbottom hissed furiously. "He's planning something evil."

"Oh, not again your theory that Riddle is evil," Weasely sighed in exasperation.

A small smile curled up Hermione's lips as she heard that.

"That's no theory!" Longbottom replied heatedly.

"And what proof do you have?" Weasley asked in a low voice.

"Why do I need a proof when it's plain to see that he is one snaky bastard!" Longbottom said, his voice shook from suppressed rage. "And he's after Hermione now."

The smile dropped from Hermione's face as she heard Longbottom say that.

_He is right_, she thought. Tom was really after her. Maybe not to attack her, like Longbottom assumed, but still Tom wanted something from her. What it was he wanted, Hermione was still unsure about. During the Christmas break his behaviour towards her had started to change. The last Charms class spoke volumes.

What did he want?

But more importantly how should she react to him? Her current behaviour was just wrong and completely out of place. Longbottom was right after all, Tom _was_ evil. She had witnessed firsthand what he was capable of. He might yet be innocent of the crimes Voldemort would one day commit but Voldemort's tendency to evilness was already present in Tom. Hermione knew that but why was she still unable to stay away from him? Why did she want him to hold her again, even now?

She sighed softly.

Maybe the only solution to her problem was now lying in her dormitory, safely stowed away in a
secret compartment in her trunk. With the help of Peverell's manuscript she would hopefully be able to leave this time period behind. Leave Tom behind…

She felt an unwelcome twinge in her stomach as she formulated that thought.

She had now lived so long in this time period. Mostly this decade was quite annoying but still her life here at Hogwarts was peaceful. Something she hadn't experienced for the past two years. What would her life look like after she had returned into her right time? Back to a wartorn land? The war was over now but the country still lay in ruins. She would need to built herself a new existence. And she would have to do that alone.

Hermione stared at the teacher standing in front of the class but she didn't really see him.

There was nothing waiting for her in her time period. Still she had to return. Her place was there and not here in the forties. It was dangerous playing with the time line. She had already changed too many things. No, she had to get a grip on herself. She had fought through so many things already and this was just another one. Another mission to complete. There was no room for doubts. She needed to be strong once again.

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to get her emotions back under control. Tom, he had shaken her determination by showing her a life without her sorrow. It was making this whole thing even more difficult. Was this nightmare she had been thrown into never going to end?

Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder. Hermione opened her eyes and looked up. Longbottom was standing beside her table and looked down at her concerned.

"Are you alright?" he asked her in a gentle voice.

Hermione frowned and then looked around the class room. It seemed that Binns had ended the class already. She hadn't noticed at all. Her eyes wandered back to Longbottom. Then she smiled weakly up at him.

"Yes," she answered his question.

She allowed him to take her by her arm and to help her up. Together they left the class room. Weasely and Lupin had waited for them outside. Hermione couldn't help but notice that silent conversation taking place between her friends. They seemed to be concerned about her. But she couldn't find it in herself to ease their concern right now. She wouldn't be able to find the right words for the lies she would have to make up to do that.

Hermione was still feeling rather depressed as she sat in the Great Hall having dinner. She wasn't feeling hungry at all. Her friends were trying to cheer her up but it didn't really work. It just made her feel guilty as she had to watch how they exchanged concerned looks. They probably thought that she was this down because Tom had 'threatened' her during Charms. At least she could see Longbottom throwing nasty glares in direction of the Slytherin table.

Hermione's own gaze wandered to the Slytherin table. Her eyes quickly landed on Tom. He was sitting there and was right now looking back at her with his incredibly grey eyes. Strangely Hermione felt a little better, knowing that he was somehow watching over her. She cast him a small smile before she got up from the table.

"Where are you going, Mione?" Weasely asked her while he stuffed what seemed to be an entire dumpling into his mouth.

She tried to smile down at her friends. "Back to the common room. I'm not really hungry."
Then she took off in direction of the doors. As she left she could just hear a few words of a new discussion between her friends.

"What's wrong with her?" She heard Weasely ask in a worried voice.

"Didn't I tell you already? It's Riddle!" Longbottom answered enraged.

Hermione left the hearing range and walked over to the exit and left the Great Hall quickly. Then she took off in direction to the Gryffindor common room. The corridor was deserted as everyone was still having dinner in the Great Hall. Her dark thoughts were still swirling around her head as she suddenly heard someone following her. She turned around and was surprised to see Tom strolling down the corridor. Somehow Hermione felt relieved to see him. She was feeling so lost right now and didn't want to be alone any longer.

"Why did you leave so early?" Tom asked her softly.

He stood in front of her and looked down at her. Hermione could see something like concern behind his eyes but she was not really sure. His expressions were not easy to read after all.

"Didn't feel like eating," she said in a small voice while she glanced up at him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked her in his smooth voice.

Hermione smiled up at him sadly. What could she tell him?

No, I'm not all right because my whole life is a heap of shards and I'm just broken.

But she didn't say anything instead she stepped closer to Tom. Then she wrapped her arms around his waist and clung to him tightly. She closed her eyes and buried her face into his chest as she could feel his arms reassuringly around her. It felt so good, his embrace. She felt so protected in his arms, as if her problems could never reach her here.

After a while Tom kissed her on the forehead then he took hold of her chin and bent gently it up. Hermione found him smiling down at her.

"Feeling better?" he asked her in his melodious voice.

Hermione smiled up at him as she nodded slightly. Tom's grey eyes sparkled down at her, satisfied with her response. Then he took her hand in his and led her down the corridor in direction to her common room. They walked through the castle's many corridors in comfortable silence and Hermione was incredibly glad to have Tom holding her hand now. It made her feel not so alone anymore.

As they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady Tom turned around towards her and looked down at her. Hermione was again surprised to find concern in his eyes as he smiled at her. For such a long time she had only associated negative emotions with him. To now have him looking at her with something other than hate and contempt was still new for her. But it was somehow wonderful.

She smiled hesitantly up at him. Even though she liked those new feelings she could discover on his face she couldn't help but still feel insecure around him. There was so much unclear between them. Tom extended one hand towards her and gently cupped one of her cheeks. Hermione felt an exciting burning tingle on her skin where his hand touched her as she looked up at him.

"You know, you can tell me if something is troubling you," Tom then said in a soft voice.
Hermione looked at him with huge eyes. There were so many things that were troubling her, she wouldn't know where to begin. But there was no way she could tell Tom about them. It would be nice to talk with someone about her many problems but she knew she had to solve them alone.

Tom looked down at her with that concern still shining in his grey eyes. Then he bent down to her and brushed his lips gently against her own. Hermione still had to fight against that fluttery feeling in her stomach caused by that brief contact as Tom had bent up again and turned towards the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Velvet ant," he whispered the password to the common room.

"Right you are, my dear boy," the Fat Lady announced contently as her eyes wandered over Tom's form, seemingly enjoying what she saw.

Then the portrait sprung open thus revealing the way into the Gryffindor common room. Tom turned around to Hermione again and she saw that the provoking smirk was now back on his face as his eyes wandered over her body.

"If you have nightmares again you can always come and sleep in my bed," he whispered in his silky voice into her ear after he had stepped closer to her again.

Then he placed a gentle kiss on her cheek and threw a last smirk her way before he turned around and walked confidently away. A smile stole on Hermione's face as she watched his retreating back, then she stepped through the portrait hole and entered the Gryffindor common room.

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Tom was on his way to the Slytherin common room, deep in thought. He had instantly recognized that expression on Hermione's face as she had looked at him in the Great Hall. There had been so much sorrow in her eyes, so much despair. The first time he had seen that look on her had been at Christmas as she had broken down in his arms. What had happened to her?

This was yet another secret Hermione had from him. Though this one seemed to be really important. Something had hurt her, broken her. Tom was determined to find out what had happened to her. Maybe he should have stayed with her now? But Hermione was still a little insecure in his presence. He knew that and he needed to change that. But it wouldn't help his case if he forced himself upon her. So he had left her alone for now.

He turned into another corridor and an evil smirk formed on his face as he saw that group of Gryffindors walking down the same corridor towards him. Weren't those Hermione's redundant friends? Tom's cold eyes wandered over Longbottom's form. He remembered how he had grabbed Hermione by her wrist and how he had wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Tom wouldn't tolerate such behaviour. No-one, aside from himself, was allowed to touch her. He could feel his magic awakening and it began to rage furiously inside of him.

Longbottom was pathetic. A weak wizard. Just an inapt fool, really. Why did Hermione insist on being friends with such an idiot? Tom's smirk grew wider as he saw Longbottom scowl at him darkly. He was accompanied by those other Gryffindors Hermione deemed to be her friends. The red haired one was obviously a Weasley. The other one was Amarys Lupin. That one seemed to be a little brighter than his two sidekicks. But not really a threat to Tom. Then again, who was a threat to him? Tom smiled conceitedly.

He then raised an eyebrow at Longbottom who had stopped walking and now stared at Tom provocingly. What did that git think he was doing? Tom thought amused. It certainly wasn't a very
good idea to defy him. Since that old coot had taken his wand from him before the break Tom hadn't been able to use his more darker curses. His hand itched to pull his wand and hurl some of those curses at Longbottom. But he knew he couldn't just curse him. Hermione would surely hear about it. But after Tom had seen Longbottom touch her he had decided to stop playing his front of the polite model student around those Gryffindor boys. He needed to show Longbottom his place. He couldn't do that while still maintaining his mask of innocence. Right now Hermione wasn't around, so why the hell not spite those idiots a little? Tom eyed the three Gryffindors mockingly.

"Look at that, three Gryffindors. What an honour," he smiled at them disarmingly but there was cruel sarcasm dripping from the words.

It was amusing to watch Longbottom narrow his eyes at him. That git was so easy to spite. Almost too simple actually, Tom thought as he watched the angry purple colour taking shape on Longottom's face.

"See?" Longbottom now hissed at the Weasley boy. "I told you he is an evil asshole." Then he turned towards Tom and yelled at him in anger, "I won't repeat myself, you stay away from Hermione."

Tom chuckled at that pitiful attempt of at threat. Then he said in a bored voice, "You know, I don't think I'm going to do that."

How easy it was to rile that idiot up. Just a few lies and threats and Longbottom would surely try to curse Tom. A perfect excuse for Tom to attack in return. After all, he had to defend himself, hadn't he?

"I'm not intending to let her get away with her insolent behaviour towards me," Tom told them in a light tone.

As expected Longbottom's furious glare became even darker. Tom noticed that even the two other Gryffindors now stared at him enraged and a little surprised too. Well, it was always a shock for them if the people around him suddenly saw his true nature, Tom thought as he enjoyed this expression of honest indignation on their faces.

"Leave Hermione alone!" Longbottom yelled furiously. "I won't allow you to hurt her!"

Tom sneered at him darkly, "Like you are able to stop me. If I want to hurt her then you can't do anything about it."

He watched in cold amusement how Longbottom seemed to lose the little self control he still possessed. Even if he had wanted to, Tom couldn't have stopped that look of disdain he now cast at Longbottom. The two other Gryffindors still stared at him in surprise and shock.

"There's something seriously wrong with you, Riddle!" Longbottom now yelled at him rather furiously. "Hermione didn't do anything to you. Keep away from her!"

Tom sneered at him in a derogatory way. "You should accept the facts, Longbottom." He hissed the name with so much contempt that it sounded more like an insult. "If I decide to punish her for her cheek, then there is nothing you or your little friends can do about that. You really can't compete with me."

Tom had expected Longbottom to draw his wand and try to curse him but suddenly that idiotic boy just lunged at him. He grabbed Tom by his collar and rammed him violently against the corridor wall. Tom nearly gasped in pain as his back collided hard with the stone wall. Those gashes on his
back still weren't healed completely. And now they stung again sharply. Tom could even feel blood starting to trickle down his skin. That pain combined with someone grabbing him by his collar and choking him made him lose his self-restraint. It reminded him too much of how Carter treated him.

"You are not going anywhere near Hermione!" Longbottom yelled at him furiously.

But Tom didn't reply anything to him he just pulled his wand and brandished it in the familiar pattern.

"Lacesso," Tom hissed.

The dark curse left his wand and impacted with Longbottom's chest. He instantly let go of Tom's collar as he was hurled back and collided hard with the floor. Tom stepped away from the wall he had been pushed into. He was really angry now. No-one was allowed to attack him like that. He brandished his wand and again sent the lacesso curse at Longbottom who by now tried to get back on his feet. The curse crashed into him and sent him flying against the opposite wall. Tom wasn't really surprised to be able to hit this stupid git two times in a row with the same curse. He was just deciding which curse to use next as he saw in the corner of his eyes a red spell being hurled at him. It didn't take much to identify this basic spell. The stupefy spell, of course. Tom rolled his eyes as he waved his wand lazily. The red spell changed its course and crashed harmlessly into the corridor wall beside Tom.

A cruel smile curled up his lips as he let his gaze sweep over the scene in front of him. Weasley helped a still shaken Longbottom to stand up while Lupin aimed his wand at Tom. It had obviously been him who had hurled the stunner at Tom. All three Gryffindors had a ridiculously angry expression on their faces. As if they could hurt him in any way, Tom thought haughtily. And now that Longbottom was standing again he and Weasely, too, raised their wands and aimed it at Tom.

Longbottom looked shaken but he still yelled at Tom enraged, "You sick bastard!"

Which only made Tom laugh out loud. That seemed to anger Longbottom even more as he now waved his wand.

"Reducto!" Longbottom shouted, followed by Weasley's "Petrificus totalus!" Lupin on the other hand cast a nonverbal spell but it took no genius to recognize the spell as a simple binding spell. The three spells rushed towards Tom.

At least they can aim, he thought amused and snickered darkly.

Then he waved his own wand in a small movement. Instantly a glowing dark-red orb appeared in front of him. It wasn't very big just the size of one of those crystal balls used to scry. The glowing red orb hovered in front of Tom. Sure enough the three curses the Gryffindors had hurled his way were gravitated towards the red orb. They impacted with the surface of the orb and merged with it. The red glow intensified and Tom noticed amused the looks of shock on the faces of his opponents.

How very pathetic, Tom thought arrogantly as he now sent his magic through his wand and towards the red orb. The orb obeyed him and rushed towards the Gryffindors. As the red orb was near enough Tom flicked his wand which made the orb stop before it blew up in a rather beautiful red colour. All three of them were thrown away by the force behind Tom's spell. They collided hard with the wall behind them. Before they could catch their breath again Tom waved his wand to disarm his opponents. He watched with satisfaction how the three wands flew from their owners and landed with a loud clacking noise some distance away in the corridor. All three Gryffindors were now completely unable to continue the fight. And Tom had only used one simple curse to do that. Really, how pathetic was that?
He took a confident step towards them and still watched the scene in front of him amused. The Gryffindors tried to get back up while they glared at him furiously. Tom just grinned at them.

"Don't think this is the end of it, freak," Longbottom now snarled at him.

The grin on Tom's face dropped. This dipshit never learned, did he? First he had the audacity to touch Hermione and now he kept insulting Tom? That was just intolerable, he thought. He could feel his magic swirl around him angrily as he waved his wand.

_Noceo!_ he cast a nonverbal spell at Longbottom.

Bright green strands of magic left his wand and flew towards Longbottom. Tom watched with satisfaction how those green veins of magic trailed themselves around Longbottom's body. As Tom's magic touched his body Longbottom fell down on his knees and began to scream. A cruel smile formed on Tom's face as he now saw the other boy bending over in pain. Tom pointed his wand at the Gryffindor to maintain the dark curse. The smile still tugged at the corners of his mouth as he observed how Weasely crouched down beside his friend and tried to help him getting rid of those green veins. _What a wasteful effort_, Tom thought as he could still feel his magic rushing angrily through his wand and towards Longbottom. The spell he had just cast was very dark magic so he doubted any of those Gryffindors knew the actual counter curse to his attack. Tom smiled evily down at the Gryffindor who still squirmed in pain. But after a while Longbottom's painful screams started to bore Tom and he had enough of standing around in this corridor. He still had more important things to do. So he ended the curse before he confidently stowed his wand away in his pocket. The green veins of magic around Longbottom's body flickered and then died. The Gryffindor stopped screaming in pain and his two friends held him now so that he didn't fall over.

"Do you even have an idea what spell you just used?" Tom's eyes wandered to Lupin who had asked the question in a shocked tone.

He raised one eyebrow, slightly impressed. That Lupin boy really knew a bit. The noceo spell was a very dark spell and not widely known. But that honest outrage in Lupin's voice was just absurd.

Tom smiled at the boy viciously as he said in a snide tone, "Believe me that was nothing compared to my more painful curses." His smile grew wider as he added arrogantly, "Do you want me to show you?"

Tom sniggered as he saw that indignation in Lupin's eyes. Then he cast a last malicious smirk at the three Gryffindor boys before he turned around and walked calmly away.

_That certainly was entertaining._

Tom left the Gryffindors behind and stalked confidently in direction of the dungeons. After this display of his power those Gryffindor boys would surely stop getting in between him and his plans to gain Hermione. And if not, Tom thought as a frightening smile formed on his face, he had no problem with explaining them again what a bad idea it was to anger him.

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Hermione lay curled up on her Gryffindor bed. She had the curtains drawn and enjoyed the silence in the dormitory. The other girls were still down in the Great Hall and, thankfully, Hermione didn't have to endure their chatter. Right now she felt surprisingly calm and no dark thoughts ripped at her mind anymore. Since History of Magic she had felt extremely down. Her situation here in the past had seemed so hopeless. But since Tom had embraced her so comfortingly that hopelessness had somehow left her.
One of her hands skimmed subconsciously over her cheek where Tom had kissed her while her other hand held Peverell's manuscript in place so she could read in it. Peverell's words were still hard to understand. And he still hadn't mentioned the Elder Wand in any way. After a while Hermione came across one of his personal notes again. It was somehow odd and she didn't know what to make of it.

Those ridiculous idiots! Such absurd ignorance I am confronted with. It is like throwing pearls before swine! There are not enough insults to do justice to the foolery of those people.

After I had created that masterpiece, my perfect looking-glass, I travelled to the city of Chester to show it to my fellow magicians as I wanted to share my brilliance with them. Chester is known throughout the country for its knowledge and achievements in the magical art so I was convinced the magical folk there would recognize my creation for what it was, a magical object in perfection.

But they did not! They were blinded by the rigidity of their own less-gifted comprehension of the magical arts. So they badmouthed the noble name of Peverell and even called my creation evil and fiendish. Could they not see the beauty behind my curse? I was scandalized by their stupidity and stubbornness as I had expected those so-called scholars to be more open minded. But they insisted that my way of Magic is of foul nature and a perverted venture leading right into hell itself. They even wanted me to forswear. How ridiculous! I will never do such a thing. I left that disgusting city and its narrow minded inhabitants behind. I will never return into their community. My way of Magic, of freeing it from its century old restrictions, is the only true way. So I decided to break with the other magical folk and turn my back on them.

Now that I no longer have to follow the oath I had sworn to the magical community, I am finally free. I will work unyieldingly to shake of the yoke that has for far too long hemmed that wonderful force, called Magic.

Tom stole out of the Slytherin common room. It was already after curfew but there was still one thing he had to take care of today. Slowly it was getting an inconvenience, those meetings with his knights, Tom thought as he walked down the dark passageways. He wondered really if it was worth the effort anymore. But those idiots were still useful to him. For it to stay this way Tom needed to maintain the influence he had on them. Though influence wasn't the right word…

More like total control, he thought as a sinister smile played around his mouth.

He quickly reached the fourth floor and found his knights already waiting for him before the entrance to the Come and Go room, as they should be. Tom walked over to them and noticed with satisfaction how they made room for him, even inclined their heads slightly to show their respect.

"Open the room," Tom ordered Avery.

Avery instantly obeyed and began to walk to and fro in front of the entrance to the Come and Go room. He knew what the room was expected to look like. After he had passed the entrance for the third time a wooden door appeared where moments before had only been bare stone wall. Then Avery stepped forward and opened the door so that Tom could walk inside. Tom stepped inside and let his gaze sweep over the room. It was a rather large room. The floor was tiled with black, shiny flagstones and the walls were carved out of rough stone. On either side of the room were huge, richly decorated windows which let the last rays of the dying sun fall into the room, diving it into a blood red light. From the ceiling hung oil lambs, burning with a flickering flame.

Tom strolled over to the only seat in the room standing right under one of the windows. He sat comfortably down on the wooden chair, though it actually looked more like a throne. It was made of
dark wood and fine figures were carved out of it. The armrests resembled two curling snakes on which Tom now leaned one arm. His gaze wandered over the group of his followers. They had gathered in front of him in a deferential distance and were looking at him with admiration and, Tom noted amused, a good amount of fear.

"My knights," Tom said while he eyed the Slytherins in front of him. "It's already too long since we had our last meeting." Then he added in a cold voice while letting his eyes wander threateningly over his followers, "I hope you stayed true to our ideals in the meantime."

A cold smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he heard the fearfully muttered affirmations from his knights.

"Good," Tom said. "Malfoy, step forward. I have a job for you."

Malfoy left the group and approached Tom slowly then he stopped, still a distance away from Tom. Tom reached for the inner pocket of his robe to produce the folded copy of today's Daily Prophet out of it. Then he held the paper out for Malfoy to take. The fair haired boy accepted it from him and then looked at Tom expectantly.

"There was something stolen from a certain Nicolas Flamel," Tom told him lightly. "I want you to find out as much as you can about that theft, especially what exactly it was that was stolen."

"Of course," Malfoy said in his smooth voice.

Tom gestured for him to step back again. Malfoy inclined his head elegantly before he joined the other Slytherins again. Tom wasn't sure whether Hermione really was involved with that burglary of Flamel's flat but he intended to find out. Malfoy had, through his family, excellent contacts not only into the political world but also into the Auror division.

Tom looked back at the group of boys standing in front of him and a cruel smile formed on his face. "Now let us begin with our little meeting."
Next morning Hermione woke up and found Peverell's manuscript lying on her chest. She must have fallen asleep while reading it last night. She lifted the book up and scowled at its leather cover. That book proved to be really bothersome. Hermione had never read such a complex book. It was frustrating. To top it off Peverell had the annoying habit to jump abruptly from one topic to the next without any explanation. It was almost impossible to follow him. Hermione had to admit that at times she didn't manage to understand what he was writing about. She could just hope that when, or rather if, he started to write about the Elder Wand she would be able to at least grasp the concept.

She sighed, rolled over and stood up from her bed. Then she stowed to book away in its secret compartment in her trunk. Her dorm mates seemed to still be asleep. Hermione noticed relieved. Somehow they were slowly getting on her nerves. Their shallow chatter was rather hard to endure. The only exception was maybe Diana Potter. She was not as annoying as the other girls.

A while later Hermione climbed down the stairs to the common room. A small smile appeared on her face as her eyes wandered over the common room. It was one of the few things that hadn't changed due to her time travel. The wallpapers were still Gryffindor red, the sofas still invitingly soft. Just like she remembered it to be from her time in Hogwarts. It was nice to find something like home in this strange land she was stranded in.

As her gaze wandered over the room it finally fell on the three boys sitting on one of the sofas at the far end of the room. Hermione furrowed her brow. It was very seldom for Longbottom or Weasley to be up so early. Lupin, she could understand, he was quite often up even before Hermione. But Longbottom or Weasley? And today she had gotten up even earlier than normal. Hermione walked over to them. As she approached them the frown on her face grew even deeper. She could see that Longbottom had rolled up the sleeve of his shirt, and there was an ugly red mark on his arm. It looked as if something had wound itself around his arm and had left behind a mark on his skin that looked like a burn. Lupin was right now imbuing some potion on a cloth.

"Ouch, watch it!" Longbottom winced as Lupin began to dab his arm with the cloth.

"Don't be such a wimp, Marc," Lupin said in his calm voice while he continued to treat the other boy's wounds.

Hermione had by now reached their sofa and looked down at the angry red gashes on Longbottom's arm.

"What happened?" she asked him concerned.

The heads of all three boys shot up and they stared at her. Obviously they hadn't noticed her walking over to them. Hermione's gaze wandered over Longbottom's exposed arm. Those wounds looked rather painful and they seemed to continue beyond the part of skin that she could see right now.

"What happened to your arm?" Hermione asked again.

The boys still stared at her, not saying anything. Hermione frowned at them. Why were they suddenly so odd?

Finally Longbottom said in a nervous tone, "Hermione, where did you appear from so suddenly?"

"I didn't appear. I just walked over to you," she replied before she continued in a strict voice. "Now, what happened to you?"
Longbottom seemed to squirm in his seat under her scrutinizing gaze. Hermione was really curious now. Then Lupin cleared his throat and she looked over to him expectantly.

"It's nothing serious," he told her in his calm voice. Though Hermione noticed that he seemed to hide something. Then he continued, "Really, you don't have to worry."

"'Nothing serious'..." Hermione repeated slowly as she again scanned Longbottom's injured arm. Then her eyes flashed back at Lupin. "It doesn't look so harmless to me."

This time Lupin didn't answer but avoided her eyes. It looked like her three friends didn't want to tell her. It almost seemed as if they kept silent because they didn't want to frighten her with whatever it was that had happened to Longbottom. That plan certainly didn't work as she was now very alarmed by their silence. She sat down on the table in front of the sofa and scanned her friends. All three of them didn't meet her gaze.

"You can tell me," Hermione said in a gentle voice, trying to coax them into telling her. "I can deal with whatever it is."

Longbottom looked now at her rather concerned then he said in a soft voice, "Look, you would only feel frightened if we told you."

She cast him a small smile. "Whatever it is, Marc, I really can deal with it." She leaned a little closer to him and then said, "Just tell me."

Longbottom looked at her and after a while he seemed to cave in. Then he said in a low voice, "It was Riddle."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock then they darted to the painful looking wounds on his arm. "To-Riddle did that?"

She looked up at Longbottom. He eyed her concerned. Hermione jerked as she felt a hand on her arm.

"You don't need to worry," Lupin said in a soothing tone. "He won't get to you."

She stared at Lupin. "Why would he? It was Marc he attacked, not me," she asked confused. "Why did he do that?"

"That lousy bastard threatened you during Charms," Longbottom suddenly said furiously. "So I told him to stay away from you. Then he attacked me."

Hermione looked at Longbottom's now angry face. She was quite shocked that Tom had attacked him. Though why was she so surprised? He was Voldemort after all. Did he really need a reason to be evil?

"Hermione you need to be very careful now." Lupin's voice told her seriously. "Riddle is really ruthless. He's told us he would be after you now."

Hermione stared at Lupin.

"He did not," she said incredulously.

"You really don't have to worry." Longbottom tried to reassure. "Whatever happens we won't let him get to you."
Hermione eyed the three boys in front of her. They seemed to be really concerned about her. Whatever Tom had told them it seemed to have shaken them quite a bit.

"You don't need to protect me," she told them in a firm voice. "I can defend myself."

She didn't want them to feel responsible for her. They were normally so cheerful people and Hermione didn't want to pull them into her world full of problems.

"Hermione," Lupin now said in a grave voice. "We know that you can look after yourself. But Riddle is incredibly powerful. And he doesn't hesitate to use Dark Magic. He even used the Noceo curse on Marc."

Hermione's eyes widened as she stared at Lupin. She knew that spell well. It was a very dark curse and its sole purpose was to inflict pain on its victim. Similar to the Cruciatius curse. The Noceo curse left painful traces on the person it had been cast on. Hermione suddenly felt anger burning up in her. Why did Tom always need to do things like this? How could he sometimes be so gentle but then hurl the most evil of curses at people? Hermione's hands balled into tight fists as she stared enraged at Longbottom's arm. She could feel herself losing her temper now and her magic awakened and began to angrily pulse through her. So Hermione abruptly got up from her place on the table. Then she turned around and stalked over to the exit from the common room. She stepped through the entrance hole and ignored her friends calling after her. If she was going to explode then she would make sure that it would hit the right one.

Her magic was raging inside of her as she walked the corridors of the castle and climbed down the stairs, ignoring the other students she met, until she arrived in the dungeons. Actually she had no idea where exactly the entrance to the Slytherin common room was. But she was pretty sure to run across Tom somewhere here. At least that was the direction the Slytherins always came from on their way to the Great Hall. Her magic was still flowing angrily through her as she stalked down the corridors.

How could Tom have hit Longbottom with such a dark curse? What was it that drove him to always do such cruel things?

She had by now met a few Slytherins on their way to the Great Hall, needless to say that all of them had either glared evilly or hissed offensive things at that Gryffindor girl that dared to enter snake territory. But Hermione wasn't in the least bit concerned by their behaviour she was still too angry to pay them any heed. As she rounded the next corner she finally found what she had been searching for. Her gaze fell on a group of Slytherins. Her eyes narrowed angrily as she recognized Tom. There he was, walking down the corridor calmly as if nothing had happened. Of course, Hermione thought enraged, he was surrounded by his henchmen. There were Avery, Lestrange, Malfoy, Black and the last one must be Alba. Why did those Slytherins always need to look so evil and dark, she wondered briefly as her eyes travelled over the group before her.

Really what is the Sorting Hat thinking? Hermione wondered enraged. 'Let's sort all the evil people in one house, so they don't bother the normal ones'?

By now Tom had obviously seen her standing in the corridor as he now raised an eyebrow questioningly at her. Hermione nearly shook her head. As if he didn't know perfectly well why she would be here. Tom stopped in front of her and looked down at her with his unfathomable, grey eyes. His stupid followers had stopped too and now glared at her threateningly. But Hermione was way too enraged to notice their hostile glares. She looked up at Tom and fixed him with her angry stare, which only made him frown at her.

"You!" Hermione hissed at him furiously while she jabbed her index finger into his chest. "What have you done?"
She could hear outraged and angry whispers coming from his followers as they saw her speaking to their leader in that way. They seemed to be quite annoyed by her impertinence. But Hermione was still too angry to care about their aggressive behaviour.

"What do you mean?" Tom answered her in his calm and smooth voice.

"Don't play dumb, Tom!" she snarled at him, seething with anger.

In the corners of her eyes Hermione could see his followers shuffling and stepping closer to her. But she wasn't fazed by their behaviour. If they wanted to curse her, she was ready for them. She just had to flex her wrist to get her wand. Right now she was furious enough to hex them all into oblivion. Tom wasn't answering her but continued to look at her in polite expectation. His behaviour irritated her to no end.

She finally snapped and yelled at him furiously, "You cursed Marc yesterday!"

As he heard the name a dangerous glint seeped into Tom's grey eyes. "Longbottom?" he asked softly but there was now a deathly cold touch in his voice.

"Yes, Marc Longbottom!" Hermione hissed at him enraged. "Do you always have to hurt people? What's wrong with you?"

There was now a murderous glimmer in his icy cold eyes as he said, still in that eerily calm voice, "He just got what he deserved."

Hermione drowned him in a withering look before she snapped at him snidely, "You are really just an evil bully, aren't you?"

Tom glowered at her darkly but before he could retort anything Hermione heard another voice hissing threateningly at her, "Shut up!"

Hermione pulled her wand as she turned around in one swift movement. She found one of the other Slytherins glaring at her fiercely while he pointed his wand at her. Hermione recognized him. He was Primus Lestrange, a tall, burly boy with a brutal look on his face.

"I'm going to teach you never to speak to your superiors like that, little slut!" Lestrange spat at her while there was a murderous look on his face.

"Pff, superior," Hermione scoffed at him. "Don't make me laugh!"

Her statement was followed by angry hisses and threatening glares from the other Slytherins. Hermione fell into her dueling stance as she saw the other boys following Lestrange's example and pulling their wands, too.

"You are going to regret your insolence!" Lestrange now snarled at her darkly.

Then he waved his wand furiously but Hermione was prepared. She just started to brandish her own wand as she heard a commanding voice from behind her,

"Stop."

Lestrange really stopped his attack and even lowered his wand though the murderous look didn't leave his face as he fixed Hermione with a glare. She turned her head slightly to have a look at Tom who had just ordered Lestrange to abandon his attack. Tom's hard gaze was gliding over the group of boys standing in front of him. They seemed to squirm uncomfortably as his cold eyes scanned
Finally Tom said in a soft voice that nevertheless carried the air of authority, "Leave now."

"Please, Riddle, let us have her," Lestrange started to plead with Tom.

"Yeah." Now it was Avery who spoke. His eyes travelled over Hermione's body in an offending way. "We'll show her never to speak to you like that."

Hermione really didn't like Avery. There always was this disturbing glint in his eyes when his gaze fell on her. And right now he was glaring at her darkly while he still held his wand in his hand. Actually Hermione didn't know how strong Tom's followers were. So far she had never really fought against them. Aside from that time as they had attacked her in the corridor before they had dragged her to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. But back then Tom had been fighting on their side. Hermione was very confident in her own magic but currently she was facing five opponents which never was a good position. On top of that her opponents were something like Death Eaters and she didn't have good experiences with fighting them. Her grip on her wand tightened and she subconsciously stepped a little away from the Slytherins in front of her and towards Tom.

"I said leave," Tom hissed at them. The fearsome tone in his voice made chills darting down her spine. "I'm not going to repeat myself again."

Hermione watched as the group of Slytherins now reluctantly stowed their wands away again and then started to walk away. Of course not without throwing threatening glares her way. She didn't lower her wand until she could watch them rounding the next corner. Then she released a relieved breath of air. She knew they were not nearly as dangerous as the Death Eaters she had had to fight in her time period but they still made her feel uncomfortable.

"So, what were you just accusing me of?" She then heard Tom's unemotional and cold voice coming from behind her.

She turned around and all her worries about future Death Eaters left her and were replaced by anger as she faced Tom again. He was looking down at her while his face was again covered by this blank mask.

Hermione scowled at him and then said in a sharp voice, "You attacked Marc."

"And you just assume that I started it?" Tom hissed at her as he took a step towards her.

"I don't care who started it, Tom. But I don't see you limping around because you have been cursed," Hermione shot at him angrily.

"Like those idiots could ever curse me," Tom sneered cockily.

"You can't just walk around and hurl dark curses at everyone you don't like," Hermione said exasperated.

Tom narrowed his eyes at her before he said with a cold tint in his voice, "Why not?"

That made Hermione run a hand frustrated through her hair. "It just doesn't work like this. Okay?" she snapped at him angrily, irritated by his lack of understanding.

Hermione nearly shuddered as Tom's gaze now wandered over her. There was a deathly cold glint in his eyes.
"It works fine for me," Tom said in a strangely calm voice though she could hear the underlying coldness seeping through his tone.

Hermione breathed in deeply. Her eyes were locked with his and she was appalled with what she saw in them. It was like a dark abyss had suddenly appeared in his beautiful grey eyes. Staring at this darkness made her feel uncomfortable. Even afraid, because she knew that darkness well. It had haunted her. Tormented her. And in the end, it had broken her.

How could she have ever believed that Voldemort had a good side?

So Hermione didn't reply anything to Tom. She just turned around and walked away. She didn't want to deal with him right now. In fact she didn't want to ever face this darkness ever again. She stomped down the dark corridors of the dungeons, annoyed by the gloomy atmosphere down here. Right now she just wanted to leave this depressing place behind. She had wasted enough time of her life in dark places. She had already walked some distance and was just beginning to climb the stairs to the first floor intending to go to the Great Hall as Tom caught up with her. Hermione ignored him completely as he fell in step with her.

They had nearly reached the first floor as Tom finally spoke again. His voice was still filled with that detached coldness. "We were in the middle of a conversation and you just walked away."

Hermione cast a sideway glance at him. He was scanning her and the anger still shone in his eyes. "Well, you should be grateful that I walked away," Hermione said snidely. "And didn't curse you. Like you would have done."

Hermione was now quite angry. Angry with Tom for hexing her friends and angry with herself for trusting Tom to actually not do evil things. Whatever had she thought? That he was not an evil Dark Lord? By now they had reached the first floor and Hermione took off towards the Great Hall. Irritatingly, Tom was still following her.

"I don't understand why you are so angry," Tom now said short-tempered. "It's not like I used any dangerous curses."

Hermione stopped walking and her head shot at him. "'Over-reacting'? she asked in disbelief. "The Noceo curse, Tom? You know what that is, don't you?" She didn't give him the time to reply but answered her own question, "Dark Magic."

Tom looked at her, furrowing his brow, then he said lightly, "Pff. Don't you think you are over-reacting a bit?"

Right now they stood before the entrance door to the Great Hall. Hermione could already hear the chatter going on in the hall as the students had their breakfast. But she didn't pay any attention to that instead she gaped at Tom.

"'Over-reacting'?" she asked outraged. "It's called Dark Magic for a reason," she finally snapped at him.

Then she turned away from him, pushed the double door open and stomped into the Great Hall. But she only managed to take a few steps until she felt Tom grasping her arm.

"Wait," said Tom while he pulled at her so that she had to turn around to him.

"What?" Hermione blustered at him. "Do you want to curse me now?"
She glared angrily up at him. Strangely though, the fury in his eyes seemed to leave quickly until there was nothing of the anger left on his face. Then Tom started to say in a quiet voice,

"I would never."

"Let her go!" another voice cut across Tom.

Hermione turned her head and nearly groaned as she saw Longbottom walking up to them. Sure enough there was an angry scowl on his face as he eyed Tom. She could even see that Longbottom's right hand had wandered to his robe pocket undoubtedly ready to pull his wand. Lupin and Weasley were hot on his heels. Tom turned to them but Hermione noticed that he didn't let go of her. He still clasped her arm tightly. Of course - Hermione rolled her eyes - the mask of blankness was back on Tom's face.

"Longbottom," Tom said swiftly. His tone was controlled but icy cold. "How nice of you to join us." His last statement was accompanied by a good amount of sarcasm.

Hermione watched how Longbottom's face now turned dark purple from fury as his eyes were fixed on Tom.

"I told you to leave her alone," he finally spat at Tom rabidly.

Hermione nearly jumped as she heard Tom beside her chuckle eerily.

"Oh yes. I forgot," Tom whispered and there was cruel amusement in his voice. "Please, remind me. Was that before or after you grovelled before me in the dirt?"

Hermione stared at Tom with wide eyes. She couldn't believe what he had just said. It wasn't only his mocking words alone. No, this cold malice underlying his tone had reminded her suddenly of who he really was. Tom's tone, his posture, the expression on his face, everything reminded Hermione of him. Lord Voldemort.

The memory of her last encounter with him in the Ministry of Magic was still burned into her mind. She remembered too well that cruel magic swirling around the Dark Lord. It had felt like his hate had manifested itself in form of his aggressive magic. Back then she had been unable to detect any emotion in him aside from hate and wrath. He had appeared to be a being made solely up from that bottomless hate. Even his words had been like poison dripping from his mouth. Only meant to hurt and to destroy.

*Cruel. Merciless. Evil.*

Hermione's breathing had quickened as her memories of Lord Voldemort crashed down on her again. Now she tried to wriggle away from Tom's hand. She didn't want him to touch her, not if he was like this. Like him. She couldn't bear to have him near her now.

Tom's eyes had left the three Gryffindors in front of him as he felt her struggling against his hold on her. His grey eyes scanned her and it almost looked like there was concern shining through his unreadable expression. But it couldn't be. Hermione was convinced that she had imagined things and continued to try to disentangle herself from him.

"Let go!" she said, now panic-stricken.

Tom released her. She quickly took a step away from him and stared with huge eyes up at him. She could feel her heart beating ridiculously fast. Right now, he had been Voldemort. And she had been...
They still stared at each other. The emotionless mask was covering Tom's feelings once again. Hermione was too panicky to concentrate and try to look underneath his mask. She was scared of what she might find there. She then stiffened as she could feel an arm around her shoulder, holding her gently. She turned her head and found Longbottom by her side. He glowered furiously at Tom, then Longbottom led her away from him. Surprisingly Tom didn't stop them.

Tom just didn't get why she was this enraged about that little curse he had used. Okay, it was Dark Magic but it wasn't a curse that could really inflict harm. Now Hermione just turned around and walked into the Great Hall. Ignoring him again. Tom was frustrated and annoyed by her behaviour. So he followed her into the hall and then grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Wait," he said before he twirled her around so she was forced to face him again.

She glared angrily up at him and Tom was feeling equally angry now. This whole thing was starting to threaten his plans of gaining her. He just couldn't have her running away from him. If he needed to force her to accept him he was prepared to do that.

"What?" she now hissed at him. "Do you want to curse me now?"

Merlin, no! That was the last thing he wanted to do, Tom thought as he stared down at her flushed face. Did she really think he would do something like that? He had only cursed her stupid little friends because they had gotten on his nerves. But they meant nothing to him. Completely unlike Hermione. The fury that had been boiling up in him left him quickly as he looked at her angry face. She really seemed to think he would curse her.

He needed to put that right so he opened his mouth and started to say, "I would never-"

He couldn't finish his sentence as he was interrupted by someone else. "Let her go!" an angry voice yelled at him. Tom's eyes left Hermione and quickly fell on Longbottom. And his anger was back again. Though now it was directed at the Gryffindor boy. Did he always have to stick his nose into things that didn't concern him? Tom could feel his magic rising again. It flowed through him angrily, wanting to be released. His fury peaked as he now watched how Longbottom's hand twitched, obviously getting ready to draw his wand. Tom would really like to attack that dork now. His magic was furiously begging him to do it. But he needed to restrain himself. So Tom breathed in deeply before he sneered at the Gryffindor wryly,

"Longbottom. How nice of you to join us."

Predictably that fool seemed to immediately lose all his self control again.

"I told you to leave her alone," Longbottom finally hissed at Tom.

He had needed a long time to come up with that witty a reply, hadn't he? Tom thought snidely. He chuckled softly at the other boy's stupidity.

"Oh yes. I forgot," Tom scoffed in a low voice. "Please, remind me. Was that before or after you grovelled before me in the dirt?"

It was almost sad how easy it was to rile that fool up. Tom watched in amusement how Longbottom
gaped at him indignantly. His two friends behind him looked equally scandalized. They obviously couldn't believe how he could have said something like that. Well, at least his reply had been a little more artful than Longbottom's empty threat. An evil grin took form on his face as Tom scanned the three Gryffindors in front of him haughtily.

Suddenly Tom felt Hermione moving beside him. His gaze wandered from the Gryffindor boys towards her. Tom was confused as he saw that she was trying to get away from him. He was still holding her upper arm tightly but Hermione now fought against his hold on her. She looked up at him and Tom's eyes widened a little in shock as he saw panic in her hazel eyes. She seemed to be scared. Why was she suddenly this frightened? Surely not of him?

"Let go!" Hermione now said and Tom could really hear fear tingling her voice.

He quickly released her and she hastily took a step away from him, seemingly wanting to get distance between the two of them. Tom was concerned now as his eyes wandered over her form. What had scared her so?

After she had stepped away from him she looked up at him again. Then Tom could see it in her eyes. This strange flicker he had seen before in them. Sorrow and grief were again screaming at him through her eyes. This time, though, it was different. Because this time there was also fear in her eyes and that fear seemed to be directed at him. She looked at him with her huge, frightened eyes and it almost seemed as if she wasn't really seeing him but someone else. It appeared that whoever that someone was, Hermione was afraid of him. Tom wanted to step closer to her and to hold her.

But before he could do anything Longbottom had walked over to her and he now put an arm around her shoulders. Tom clenched his fists as he saw him touching Hermione again. He wanted nothing more than to curse that Gryffindor boy. But he didn't do it as he now saw how Hermione's gaze wandered from him to Longbottom. That horrible expression left her face as she looked at Longbottom. She didn't seem to be scared by him. So why had she been so afraid of Tom? He didn't stop the Gryffindor boy as he led Hermione away from him. He just didn't know what to make of the events. He definitely needed to talk with Hermione. But that wasn't a very good idea right now. In the worst case it would drive her even farther away from him. So Tom suppressed the urge to grab the girl and drag her away from the Great Hall. Instead he walked over to his own table.

Hermione just followed Longbottom. She was shaken after this display of coldness from Tom. She felt weak and sick from her memories ripping at her again. She was still rather shocked as they finally reached the Gryffindor table and sat down. Hermione quickly let her gaze sweep over the table. Had someone noticed that dispute right now? A few of the Gryffindors looked at her curiously but not all of them. Obviously no-one had noticed how serious that conflict had really been.

"Hermione, what were you thinking? Running of like that." Hermione's eyes wandered back at Lupin who had just spoken.

"Yeah, and right after we told you that Riddle is after you, too," Longbottom said with concern in his voice as he ran a hand through his blond hair making it look even more wind-swept.

"Uhm… no… I mean… you really don't have to worry about me," Hermione stuttered weakly.

"Really?" Longbottom asked in disbelief. "And what was that right now? Riddle cornered you."

"No, he didn't." Hermione really didn't want them to worry about her. "We were just talking."

"Didn't look like talking. He grabbed you. And I'm sure he was just about to curse you," Longbottom said in a strangely serious tone. "You are lucky you were in the Great Hall as it
"Yes, he won't do anything in public," Lupin told her in his calm voice, though right now even his calmness seemed to be shaken a little. "He's not stupid."

"I'm just glad he didn't catch you alone in one of the corridors," Longbottom said quietly as he stared at her in concern. "I don't want to think what he could have done to you."

Hermione broke eye contact with him and looked down at her hands. She was feeling a bit guilty now. Her friends seemed to be really worried about her. After what Tom had done yesterday she could understand where that concern was coming from. But she was still feeling too shaken by Tom's behaviour herself to try to allay their fears. Though she knew that they didn't need to worry about Tom cursing her. It should rather be her being frightened by how easily Tom had lured her into believing that he was harmless.

"Okay, come on now."

Hermione was brought out of her thoughts and looked up at Longbottom. He had gotten up from his seat and was now extending a hand towards her. She furrowed her brow at him.

"Where to?" she asked him confused.

"I'll walk you to your class room," Longbottom answered as if that was the obvious thing to do now.

Hermione continued to look at him confused. Her next class was Arithmancy now. Neither of her friends attended that class. So Longbottom had no reason to accompany her.

"Why would you?" she asked rather stupidly. "You don't have Arithmancy."

Longbottom just shook his head at her in exasperation. "I won't let you walk around alone if that evil jerk is after your blood."

"Yeah, Hermione," Weasley said, seemingly trying to calm her down. "We won't let Riddle get anywhere near you."

Lupin, who sat beside him, nodded while there was a grave but determined expression on his face. Hermione didn't know how to react. It was a nice thing to know how very much her friends liked her and how they were concerned about her well-being. But she couldn't have them trailing her every step. She still had things to do she really didn't want them to see. Like finding out what that disturbing, blue sheen wrapped around Hogwarts castle was and how it was linked with the Elder Magic. But it seemed for now she had to accept her friends' smothering concern. So she took Longbottom's hand and let him pull her up from her seat. Then she grabbed her school bag and followed him out of the Great Hall and towards her class room.

Tom watched Hermione's progress through the Great Hall with narrowed eyes. His magic screamed angrily in protest as he saw Longbottom's hand holding Hermione's. It was unbearable having to watch how that idiotic Gryffindor grabbed his possession. The worst was that Tom knew that at the moment he was unable to do anything about that. His hands balled into fists as he saw Hermione leave the Great Hall together with Longbottom. Tom had to fight the urge to go after them and show that idiot boy how lucky he had been yesterday just to be hit by the Noceo curse. There were some curses Tom needed to show Longbottom. He really didn't want Hermione to associate with that Gryffindor boy any longer. And he certainly didn't want her to be alone with him. Tom really needed to teach Hermione to stay away from Longbottom. But at the same time he knew it would only harm his matter if he used violence to achieve that. Hermione would definitely not take it. But how could
he get rid of Longbottom without having her hate him again?

*If she doesn't already hate me,* he thought in frustration.

He nearly cringed as he remembered that look on her face just now as he had held her arm. Before that she had been really angry with him. He shouldn't be surprised by that. He had to admit it, it had been a huge mistake that he cursed her stupid friends. What had he expected? That she would never find out about it? Or that she would forgive him? No, it had been imprudent and just rash having attacked her friends. Of course she wouldn't just consent with his actions. Hermione was after all very protective and on top of that hot-tempered too. That was partly the reason why he was so interested in her in the first place but it made dealing with her all the more difficult. He should never have cursed Longbottom. At least not at this point in time where every tiny little detail could sway Hermione's opinion of him in the wrong direction.

Tom leaned frustrated back in his chair. He breathed in sharply as his back hit the chair. Some of the gashes on his back had broken open as Longbottom had hurled him against the wall yesterday and now they hurt again rather badly. All the more reason why he wanted to murder Longbottom right now.

It was that stupid boy's fault that Tom had lost his composure yesterday. Tom never lost his composure. He had learned too well after his first year what could happen if he lost his self-control. He had never planned to curse the three Gryffindors in that corridor. Yes, he *had* wanted the jibe them a little bit but he had never planned to really curse them. He had known that Hermione would never approve of such behaviour. But he had just lost control and that had now gotten him into this mess. If he ever wanted Hermione to trust him, he needed to get a grip on himself.

Tom was brought out of his dark thoughts as he noticed someone standing beside him. He turned his head and nearly groaned as he found Avery standing beside his seat, looking rather nervous and obviously trying to catch Tom's attention.

"Yes?" Tom asked impatiently.

He didn't want to deal with this idiot now. Avery made his already bad temper even worse. So Tom glared at him angrily which made the other boy flinch away a little from Tom.

"We… we just wanted to ask you when the next meeting is taking place," Avery said in a slightly shaky voice. "You never told us yesterday."

Tom narrowed his eyes at him. Then he abruptly got up from his seat thus making Avery shy away from him even more. As he passed Avery Tom hissed at him in a cold voice, "Then it seems you have to wait until I do tell you, doesn't it?"

With that said Tom left the Great Hall without looking back. His magic still boiled angrily inside of him and he was frustrated that he was unable to vent his anger on the one who was responsible for his foul mood.

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Hermione sat in her Arithmancy class with her quill in hand and an empty piece of parchment in front of her. Somehow she just couldn't concentrate on the lesson. She stared at the professor, standing in front of the class, but she didn't really hear what he was lecturing about. At least she didn't need to worry about the professor addressing her unexpectedly because he had never, in the whole school year, asked her anything. Even if she had raised her hand he had never picked her. She was the only girl in Arithmancy so Hermione assumed that this was another forties thing. Obviously
people thought it impossible for a woman to know how to do math. She had stopped to try to get professor Gauß' attention very early in the school year and had contented herself with taking down his explanations. This being ignored and belittled had always frustrated her but today she was glad to be left alone. Because there were a few things running through her head right now.

Her fingers played nervously with her quill, threatening to break it. But she was too distracted by her thoughts to notice how she ruined her writing utensil.

Hermione was more than annoyed with herself. She had told herself again and again to stay away from Tom. But she had just ignored that resolution. It had only been a matter of time until something bad would happen. Her thoughts wandered back to those painful-looking burn marks she had seen on Longbottom's arm. Immediately her anger rose again. How could Tom have done something like this? But somehow she should be glad about it, because now she had finally realized how dangerous he really was. If that curse he had used on Longbottom wasn't enough to convince her, she only had to think back to how he had just now behaved in the Great Hall. It still made her shudder as she remembered how Tom had insulted Longbottom. He had scoffed and laughed at the other boy, obviously enjoying his discomfort. But this cold amusement he had shown wasn't even the worst. No, what really had unsettled Hermione were the things Tom had hid underneath that condescending mask. She had seen a glimpse of his hate and malice that seemed to always burn inside of him. What had scared her so, was the fact that this hate was all too familiar to her. The Dark Lord had radiated the same deathly cold hate. The only difference was that Lord Voldemort just hadn't gone through the trouble of hiding his hate any longer. Hermione knew that whatever this hate touched, would be destroyed. She desperately tried to forget this abysmal hate. To be confronted with it once again had been just terrible. It had been unexpected. Because during the break, Tom had never been like that. He hadn't been frightening or intimidating in any way.

Yes, and you know why, don't you? an angry voice scoffed at her which made her sigh softly. Yes, she did know why Tom had started to appear so harmless: During the break he didn't have his wand.

He had appeared so nice not because he actually was nice but because he didn't have the opportunity to do his evil deeds. But now his magic was back, his power was back, and the first thing he did was attacking her friends. Totally unprovoked surely. Hermione knew that Tom was magically a lot stronger than Longbottom. So how could Longbottom have forced Tom to use those spells? No, the most likely scenario was that Tom had attacked him just because he didn't like Longbottom and wanted him to suffer.

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. As she opened them again her gaze wandered down to the now ruined quill in her hand. She put the broken quill down on the table but didn't reach for her bag to get her spare one. She wasn't intending to follow the lesson anyway, so why bother?

As the lesson was finally over Hermione had come to a conclusion. There really wasn't much of a choice. She needed to stay away from Tom, ignore her traitorous feelings and find a way back home. She knew what she was giving up by evading Tom. He was the only one who could make her feel whole again, not broken anymore. But it wouldn't be the first time that she had had to sacrifice something to complete a mission.

Professor Gauß ended the lesson and Hermione stuffed her unused parchment and the broken quill into her bag then she got up from her place and left the Arithmancy class room. As she stepped into the corridor she found Lupin leaning against the wall and obviously waiting for her. Her friends seemed to take that bodyguard business rather seriously. She didn't know whether she should be annoyed by that or relieved. But hopefully it would help her staying away from Tom.

"How was the lesson?" Lupin asked her as she had reached him.
She shrugged her shoulders and said, "Rather boring."

Lupin beamed at her and then said, "Well, what do you expect. It's Arithmancy after all."

Hermione couldn't help but smirk. It didn't happen often that Lupin was talking that snidely about any lesson.

"No fan of numbers and equations then?" she asked him in a mocking tone.

Lupin grinned down at her and said, "Not really." Then he asked, "So, what's your next class?"

"Free period."

"What did you plan to do?"

Hermione had to make something up now. She couldn't very well tell him what she had really planned. The truth was definitely not a good idea here. She actually wanted to go and have a look at that strange blue sheen that surrounded Hogwarts. Or she might read a new chapter in Peverell's manuscript. She really needed a way to travel forward in time. It would be funny to see Lupin's face if she was to tell him about her plans but that wasn't worth it to be locked away in St. Mungo's wing for mental illnesses.

So Hermione said, "I wanted to go to the library. You know, start on that essay for professor Merrythought."

"Perfect," Lupin said while he pushed away from the wall. "I wanted to go to the library too."

Hermione nearly groaned. She had hoped that Lupin would just bring her to the library and then leave her alone. Giving her the opportunity to do her own stuff. But it seemed she had no such luck. So she had no other choice but to follow Lupin down to the library. Who would have thought that she would ever be pissed by having to go to the library? Hermione wondered shortly. But she had no time to dwell on that thought as they had finally reached the entrance to the library.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters, the librarian, greeted her kindly. Then her gaze wandered to Lupin beside her. "And Mr Lupin, too. I was wondering when I would see you two again. And it's already the second day after the break. However did you manage to stay away from the books for so long?" she asked with friendly taunt in her voice.

Hermione beamed at her.

"Hurry along then." Ms Peters smiled fondly at them. "But be warned it's rather crowded today. Professor Kettleburn is sick today so his classes had to be cancelled."

"Yes, thank you," Hermione said.

Then she entered the library. It seemed Ms Peters had been right. There were a lot of students sitting at the tables, doing their homework. Hermione sighed. It seemed to be hopeless to find themselves a free space.

They had to walk nearly all the length of the library to finally find a free table. Hermione went over to the table but before she reached it she stopped dead in her tracks. Her gaze had wandered to the neighbouring table and she had spotted Tom sitting there. Right now he was looking up from the book he had been reading in and his eyes quickly found hers and locked with them. Hermione breathed in sharply as she was once again caught in those beautiful grey eyes.
Lupin beside her had spotted Tom, too, and was now leaning down to Hermione and whispered in her ear, "We can just leave. You can write that essay in the common room."

Hermione still stared with wide eyes at Tom. Why was it so difficult to just evade him? How was she going to ignore him when her heart started to beat so fast whenever she met him?

"No… it's okay," she answered Lupin in a soft tone. "Let's stay."

"You sure?" Lupin asked and there was concern tinting his voice.

She just nodded and continued her way towards the table. She sat down, opened her bag and pulled a piece of parchment and her undamaged spare quill out of it. She was annoyed how nervous she felt just because Tom was sitting not far away. If she wanted to forget him, she really needed to get a grip on herself. She risked another glance at Tom and found him still staring at her. His face was a blank. But Hermione couldn't help but notice how his eyes sparkled softly as he looked at her. She quickly averted her eyes and bit her lip. She mustn't let herself being seduced by him again. This whole thing was ridiculous anyway. She couldn't run around losing her nerves because of a stupid crush. She had a lot of other, more pressing problems. Her thoughts involuntarily wandered back to the last day of the holidays. They had kissed then. For the first time since an eternity that horrible loneliness had left her and she had felt safe and even protected in his arms. It was so very tempting, that comfort Tom was offering her. But it was an illusion, wasn't it?

Hermione ran a shaky hand through her hair. She knew that he was still staring at her, probably with that strangely concerned look in his soft grey eyes. But Hermione knew that the nice persona he now always played in her presence wasn't his true self. His true self had attacked Longbottom so cruelly yesterday with no reason at all other than that Tom didn't like him. Hermione tried to block all thoughts of Tom out of her mind. She didn't want to think about her problems any longer so she concentrated on the essay she had to finish for Charms.

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Tom stared at Hermione sitting at the opposite table and frustration washed over him. Right now she was writing something down, probably working on some essay or other. She had done that for the last hour. Without ever looking in his direction. It seemed as if she was purposefully ignoring him. Maybe he should just approach her now? But that Gryffindor boy, Lupin, was still sitting beside her. Tom needed to talk with her alone. Without one of her friends being around and influencing her.

Oh, if he could just cast a curse at that annoying boy. Then Tom would grab Hermione and force her to stay with him, where she belonged. But unfortunately he couldn't do that. Cursing her bothersome friends had led to her ignoring him in the first place.

Tom felt his magic raging inside of him furiously as he had to watch how close that Lupin boy sat to Hermione. She was still writing her essay and still ignoring Tom. If she insisted on ignoring him, he would need to change his strategy. Problem was that even if he decided to proceed more forcefully in the future that didn't guarantee his success. He knew that he couldn't force her to do anything. At least it would be very difficult to do so. She was a very powerful witch after all. To subdue her Tom would need to use curses he really didn't want to use on her. No, that was only the last resort. He would only revert back to that if all else failed. But Hermione really was difficult to handle. Since she had arrived at Hogwarts Tom had never seen her being submissive to a male in any way. Otherwise he could have used that to somehow direct her back on the right way. Her independence was rather bothersome at this moment in time.

He watched how Hermione rolled up the parchment on which she had been writing. It seemed she wanted to leave the library now. As she and Lupin got up from the table Tom decided to approach
her. He didn't want to wait any longer. So he stood up and walked over to her. Hermione had obviously noticed him as she now stared at him with wide eyes. Regrettably the Gryffindor had also spotted him as he was now glaring at Tom rather darkly. Tom noted angrily how he even stepped a little in front of Hermione as if he tried to protect her. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Lupin. Hermione surely didn't need that weak wizard to protect her. Tom would do that for her.

"We told you to leave her alone," Lupin said in a tight voice.

Tom's blood was boiling and he had to work to prevent his magic from swirling around him angrily. But he contained himself, detached his gaze from Lupin and looked over to Hermione. She was still staring at him and looked rather nervous.

"I want to talk with you," Tom said.

She averted her eyes before she whispered in a soft tone, "I wouldn't know why."

Then she allowed Lupin to grab her arm and lead her away. Tom didn't follow them. It seemed his problem was even worse than he had anticipated.

It was late in the evening as Hermione wandered around the grounds of Hogwarts. She owed it to her invisibility spell that she could do that alone. After she had left the library together with Lupin they had gone down to have lunch. At that opportunity Lupin had told her two other friends how Tom had tried to get to her. After that they hadn't left her alone for a second. They had escorted her to her next class, had waited for her after class and had then brought her back to the common room. They were being a little paranoid. Hermione had gotten irritated by their over-protectiveness very fast. It was nice of them to be so concerned about her but that was just too much. So Hermione had pretended to go to bed early. Though she had just entered her dorm long enough to cast an invisibility spell on herself. Then she had cautiously left the Gryffindor common room. Luckily her friends hadn't noticed anything. So right now, Hermione was strolling around Hogwarts' grounds. She wasn't far from the lake now, with a perfect sight on the castle. The bluish sheen was still pulsing around the castle. It wasn't as prominent as it had been against the nightly sky as she had arrived back at Hogwarts but still it was unmistakably there. Hermione still didn't know why she was suddenly able to see it. She needed to find out more about it. Was this blue sheen really the warding magic spun around Hogwarts?

Hermione stopped her walking and stood on a small hill covered with snow while facing the castle. She breathed in deeply, closed her eyes and summoned all her magic. Instantly she could feel that steady flow of power running through her. She concentrated very hard now and tried to let her magic unfurl. It spread from her and made contact with all the things around her. The snow on the ground, the group of trees standing not far away, the water of the lake. Just everything that was around her. It was very straining to let her magic wander so far away from her and beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Her eyes were still closed as she now willed her magic to concentrate on that pulsing vibration coming from the castle. It wasn't long and she could feel it again. It was a steady pulse that seemed to originate from the castle. Now that she was looking so close Hermione realized that everything around her seemed to be pervaded by that pulse. Everything her magic now touched sung in the same rhythm. With shock she noticed that even her own magic hummed in unison with that pulse from the castle. She examined her own magic closer. But the more she looked the clearer it became. If that blue sheen really was warding magic then that ward seemed to suffuse her own magic completely. As Hermione was so deeply looking into her own magic she came upon the Elder Magic again. It was still there. Interwoven with her own Magic. Still she couldn't really get a hold of it. But something she did notice. Though everything around her including herself
seemed to hum with that pulse coming from Hogwarts the Elder Magic seemed to be completely unaffected.

Hermione then opened her eyes again and her magic quickly flowed back to her. That had certainly been interesting. Whatever that bluish sheen was it seemed that not only was it the Elder Magic that enabled her to see it but the magic itself seemed to be immune against that steady pulse. Was the Elder Magic really able to withstand the century old magic of Hogwarts? True, Hermione had known that the Elder Wand was very powerful but this was impressing. She had always thought that wands didn't hold magic of their own. That they were just mediators between the wizard's magic and the spell.

Maybe she should just try to get more control over the Elder Magic? It had helped her in some situations. Like that time as Tom had tried to legilimise her. So it seemed to be possible to use that magic. Until now she had never really consciously tried to use the Elder Magic but maybe all it needed was just training. Maybe she should just do that. It was better than to just depend on a book she might be unable to understand anyway.

Hermione let her gaze sweep over the blue sheen. Then she took off and started her way back to the castle. It had gotten late and she began to feel cold so she hurried back to the entrance with her cold hands buried deep in her pockets. She was hit by comfortable warmth as she entered the castle and walked through the entrance hall. Her steps echoed loudly on the stone tiles of the deserted corridors. It seemed the rest of the population of the castle was already back in their common rooms. That was where Hermione was headed right now. She was really looking forward to lie down on her soft and warm bed. So she climbed the moving stair cases and then stepped into the next corridor, just to find Tom walking down that very same corridor towards her. His grey eyes quickly found her and Hermione thought she saw a small smile on his face as he recognized her. But she wasn't sure, the corridor was rather dark after all.

Why did she always have to meet Tom in dark, secluded corridors anyway? Hermione wondered frustrated.

She felt her heart beating faster and she frantically searched for a way out of this. She had decided to evade him but it wasn't exactly very easy to do that if she always ran into him wherever she went. She breathed in deeply to calm herself down and then proceeded her way down the corridor. She would just go down the corridor, pass Tom, ignore him and then leave. How difficult could that be?

So she averted her eyes from him and hurried down the corridor. But just as she had just passed him and had walked a few steps away, she heard his voice,

"Hermione?"

She stopped and then slowly turned around to him. He was standing there, looking at her with his grey eyes.

"Yes?" Hermione asked with a calmness in her voice she really didn't feel.

He took a step towards her and now stood just a metre away from her.

"Why are you ignoring me?" he asked in his smooth voice, though she could her a demanding tinge in his tone.

He was now frowning down at her obviously expecting an explanation for her behaviour. Hermione felt angry again. Why did she have to justify her actions? She hadn't done anything wrong. That had been him.
"I'm sure you know perfectly well why I don't want to talk with you right now!" she snapped angrily.

His gaze became darker and he was now glaring down at her rather furiously. But Hermione wasn't intimidated by him as she was way too enraged herself.

"No, I don't know why," he hissed at her coldly. Then he continued rather short-tempered, "Okay, I had a little encounter with your friends. But why are you still talking with them while ignoring me?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows indignant at him. Why would she stop talking with her friends? Tom had been the one who had attacked them so deviously. They had certainly done nothing wrong.

"You attacked them," she huffed at him while hitting him with a withering look. "And you threw the Noceo curse on Marc."

A dark look crossed Tom's face and there appeared a dangerous red tinge in his eyes.

"So, I'm not allowed to curse Longbottom but it's perfectly fine if he grabs me and starts to choke me, is it?" he snarled at her annoyed.

Hermione's gaze shot at his face and she continued to look at him with huge eyes. What did Longbottom do? She hadn't known that. The burning fury in her instantly died down, just to be replaced by that oddly out-of-place protective feeling. The feeling of responsibility towards Tom seemed to flare up in her again.

Then she said softly in a concerned tone, "He really did that?"

"Yes," Tom hissed at her in anger.

Hermione scanned him alarmed.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" she then asked him.

"W…what?" Tom seemed to be so perplexed by her sudden concern that he even abandoned the threatening tone in his voice.

Hermione's eyes still wandered worriedly over his form until they locked with his grey eyes.

"Are you hurt?" she repeated her question in a gentle tone.

Tom looked away from her before he said in a soft voice, "No."

"Good." Hermione sighed relieved as she stepped nearer to him and took his hand in hers.

She did know that Tom was more than capable to defend himself against Longbottom. She knew that even if all three of her friends attacked him, Tom wouldn't have any problems to overwhelm them. So it was rather irrational of her to be so worried about him. But the events during the Christmas break were still fresh in her mind. And she didn't want anyone hurting Tom again.

Her previously made resolutions were forgotten as she held his hand and smiled softly up at him.

"But that still doesn't give you the right to curse Marc like that," she chastised him gently.
Now Tom narrowed his eyes at her and then said in a tight voice, "Why must you keep calling him Marc?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. He was being very difficult today.

"Because that's his name."

There was now a vicious glint in Tom's eyes again as he hissed, "I don't like him."

Hermione sighed loudly. "I can accept that. But could you, please, try not to hex my friends in the future?"

Tom looked at her and suddenly an offensive smirk was slowly forming on his face. Then he snaked an arm around her and pulled her over to him before he purred in her ear, "I can't promise anything."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. But she still allowed him to hold her and then she even leaned against him comfortably as she felt him placing a kiss on her forehead. Why did she keep doing that? She thought, and still, her arms slowly wrapped around Tom and held to him tightly.

Hermione noticed Tom wincing in pain as she embraced him so tightly. She quickly released him and then looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked alarmed.

"Nothing," Tom answered swiftly but he avoided to look her in the eyes.

"Tom?" Hermione said in a stern voice.

His grey eyes slowly wandered back to her before he said, "I'm fine."

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him. But he didn't react to her silent request to tell the truth. So Hermione stepped nearer to him again and then put one hand gently on his arm.

"Is your back hurting?"

Tom didn't reply anything so Hermione just grasped his arm and then she started to walk away, gently pulling him with her. As they came upon a door leading into a class room Hermione stopped and opened the door. The class room was dark and seemingly unused. Hermione pulled Tom into the class room and then closed the door behind them. She even waved her wand at the door and locked it magically. Then she waved it again and a brightly shining orb left the tip of her wand, flew up to the ceiling and illuminated the class room. She turned around to Tom. He still stood where she had left him right by the door. Hermione walked over to him again and took his hand in hers. Tom's eyes shot at her as he felt her touching him. She smiled up at him

"Come here," she said softly while she pulled him over to one of the many seats in the room. "Sit down." She gestured at the chair.

Surprisingly Tom obeyed her. He sat down and then looked at her with his blank face. Hermione sighed. It really wasn't easy to assess his emotions.

"Let me have a look at your back," Hermione told him gingerly.

Tom's unfathomable eyes wandered back to her face then he said in a soft voice, "I can look after it myself."

"Don't be silly," Hermione chastised him mildly. "And now take your shirt off."
He continued to fix her with his gaze but she just stared expectantly back at him. After a while he broke eye contact and started to undo his tie. Hermione breathed out, relieved that he was complying with her. Then she waved her wand and summoned her potion box from her dorm. Instantly the wooden box appeared out of thin air and now stood on the table right beside Hermione. She opened the lid and went through her stock. It seemed everything she needed was there. She then turned around to Tom. He had by now removed his black outer robes and the green sleeveless pullover and was right now taking off his white shirt. As he slid the shirt off Hermione couldn't help but notice how very nice Tom looked without his clothes. But she had other things to take care of right now, Hermione scolded herself. So she went over to him and had a look at his back. A bandage still covered his back though it wasn't the one she had conjured up. Hermione waved her wand and the bandage disappeared. The bruises that had been on his back had disappeared by now she noticed relieved. But the cuts were still very prominent on his pale skin. Hermione was angry with herself for not better taking care of Tom. It was only four days ago as Carter had done this to him. Of course the wounds were not healed yet. It even seemed that some of the gashes had recently broken open and were now slightly bleeding again. Maybe Tom got hurt as he fought with her Gryffindor friends. He had told her that Longbottom had grabbed him.

Hermione used her wand to clean the wounds then she applied a few of her potions on Tom's back. They would support and quicken the healing process. As she was finished with treating the wounds she again brandished her wand and a new bandage now covered his back. Then she put her hands on his shoulders and leaned forwards so she could speak into his ear from behind.

"I'm sorry," she whispered softly into his ear. "I should have looked after you sooner."

She felt Tom stiffen as she whispered those words to him. Then after a while he said in a low, colourless voice, "I thought you hate me again."

A small smile stole on Hermione's face and she said in a mock-serious tone, "Of course I do."

Then she leaned even closer to him and placed a light kiss on his cheek before she straightened up again. Tom tilted his head a little so that he was able to look at her. His face was still an impenetrable mask but Hermione was able to see that soft sparkle in his grey eyes. She liked that softness radiating of his eyes when he looked at her. It made her feel so comfortable, somehow unburdened. And it made him look a lot less scary. Not at all like that angry Tom she had seen this morning in the Great Hall as he had insulted Longbottom. Back then he had been so much like Voldemort it had thrown Hermione into her horrible memories.

"You still are a mystery," Tom finally said in his smooth voice, still looking at her.

Hermione smiled down at him, "And it's going to stay like that."

Finally that evil smirk slowly took form on his face telling her that he was surely going to crack her secrets.

"Now enough with this," Hermione said. Then she turned away from him and began to stow the potion bottles back into the box. "Get your clothes on. We don't want to stay here forever."

As she was rummaging through her potion box she suddenly could feel Tom standing behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

"You sure?" he purred into her ear.

His chest was now pressed against her back and Hermione had to breathe in deeply to get herself under control again. But it got even worse as she remembered that right now he wasn't wearing any
"So? Now that I have my clothes off anyway," Tom whispered in his alluring voice as he kissed the skin of her neck softly. "Want to stay a little longer?"

Hermione closed her eyes. It was such a nice feeling having Tom embrace her again. She could feel the heat of his body against her. It was just very luring, this nearness. It again made her forget the loneliness that otherwise always gnawed at her. Actually she did want Tom to embrace her like this. To be so near her. But she couldn't, no, she wouldn't allow him to do that. Today, Tom had reminded her of who he really was and she couldn't just ignore that side of his personality again. Back in the Great Hall as he had insulted Longbottom this morning, she had been scared of Tom. The coldness and malice behind his words had cut into her very being. And for a short moment it had felt as if she had been thrown back into that world of war and fear. It was scary to know that the only person who could make her forget her painful memories was also the one responsible for the things that had let to her getting those memories. This whole thing left her confused and even a little bit afraid.

Obviously Tom had noticed how she had stiffened as he had embraced her and he now turned her around in his arms. Hermione looked up at him with huge eyes. Right now, she just felt incredibly insecure. How was she supposed to deal with a situation like this?

Tom looked down at her with his impossibly grey eyes. Then he put two fingers under her chin and tilted her head up a little bit before he bent down to her and kissed her. Hermione closed her eyes as she felt Tom's lips on her own. This time his kiss wasn't demanding though. It was soft and even caring. It felt more like a promise than anything else. It was telling her that she didn't need to be afraid of him.

But is that really true?

Despite her thoughts Hermione wrapped her arms slowly around his neck and then hesitantly started to respond to his kiss. As he could feel her kissing him in return Tom put his arms tightly around her and pressed her against him. Hermione's thoughts were strangely calmed as he was kissing her so tenderly. Then Tom released her again and Hermione leaned her head against him. As she felt his arms wrapped around her so protectively the comfortable feeling of not being alone engulfed her completely.

After a while Tom untangled his arms from her and smirked down at her before he turned around and started to put his clothes back on. He dressed again in his white shirt and the sleeveless pullover then reached for his tie and hung it loosely around his neck. He put his black outer robe over his arm and then stepped to Hermione again and took her hand in his. She looked up at him hesitantly. The insecurity was still there. She just didn't know what to make of her strange feelings towards Tom.

The smirk on his face had vanished and he smiled down at her softly. He looked so changed now. There was nothing left of the fearsome darkness she had seen in him this morning in the Great Hall.

Tom then walked over to the door of the class room and Hermione followed him. As he reached the door he pulled his wand and ended the locking spells Hermione had put up before. Strangely Hermione noted how it didn't disturb her so much anymore to see Tom with his wand. Her gaze wandered over the pale wood of his wand but she wasn't feeling panicky by that sight any more.

The lock of the door clicked and Tom reached for the handle before he opened the door. As they stepped out of the class room Hermione saw a group of girls walking down the same corridor Tom and herself had just entered. It was a group of three girls and as they walked towards them Hermione finally recognized them. Those were her dorm mates, Rose, Lucia and Violet. Right now they were
chatting and laughing rather loudly so they only noticed Tom and Hermione as they had nearly reached them.

Tom was just closing the door of the class room again as Hermione could see how the girls now stared at the pair of them rather blatantly. She watched how the girls' eyes wandered over her and Tom's hands holding each other before their gazes went over to Tom, obviously taking in his appearance. He still held his outer robes over his arm, his tie hung loosely around his neck and the top buttons of his white shirt were open. Hermione could almost see the conclusions the girls seemed to draw from Tom's appearance combined with them coming out of a deserted class room. Sure enough the girls then started to giggle inanely. Rose and Lucia had even the nerve to wink at her suggestively. All Hermione wanted to do now was banging her head against the next wall. They were never going to let her live this one down. She was surely in for one of their agonizing gossip sessions when she would arrive back in her dorm later. Hermione knew that this was just too good a gossip matter for them to keep quiet about it and not tell the whole school. She really needed to prevent that.

At least those girls had enough decency left in them to not stop and point at her. Hermione was rather glad to see the back of them as the continued their way down the corridor, predictably beginning to chatter excitedly as they were a distance away.

After the girls rounded the next corner and their chatter slowly died down Tom looked at Hermione and she nearly groaned as she saw that conceited smirk on his face. Then that smirk transformed into one of his annoyingly charming grins.

"Now that they are going to spread this rumour anyway how about giving them some real reason to do so?" Tom said in a suspiciously innocent voice while he gestured back at the class room door.

Hermione just rolled her eyes frustrated at him which made him chuckle in amusement.
Hermione woke the next morning in her Gryffindor four-poster and felt surprisingly well rested. She had come to savor ever night without one of her horrible nightmares. Though lately it seemed she had been spared more often than not. When was the last time she actually had one of her nightmares? Hermione wondered as she rolled on her side and closed her eyes again, trying to relish that feeling of comfortable calmness. It certainly was frightening to every night have to relive those terrible things that had happened to her. So whatever it was that had driven away her nightmares, she was surely not going to complain. But Hermione couldn't concentrate any longer on her sleeping habits as she now realized the chatter that was going on in the dorm. It hadn't penetrated her still sleep muddled mind but now that she was more awake she could hear that talking. And Hermione nearly groaned. The curtains of her four-poster were drawn but that didn't stop the voices of her dorm mates to reach her. Yesterday Hermione had been quite lucky because she had managed to slip back into the dorm without meeting them. But now it seemed there was no evading them any longer. She really didn't want to face them, not after what had happened yesterday. Her gossipy dorm mates had met her in one of the corridors as Hermione had been accompanied by Tom. She didn't want to think about what those girls made of that. Surely they had already spun some really for fetched stories about her and her supposed relationship with Tom.

It's not as 'supposed' as you would like it to be!

That angry part of her again screamed at her as she remembered how Tom had kissed her in that class room, just mere hours after she had decided to never see him again. What was it that made it so impossible for her to stay away from him? Hermione felt terribly guilty for letting him get so near her. She didn't want to imagine what her friends would do if they could see her. But they were so far away now. They had left her behind. Hermione sighed deeply before she sat up in her bed. She couldn't very well stay in bed for the rest of the day, trying to solve the chaotic state her feelings were in. So she reached for the curtains of her four-poster and drew them open. Just to immediately be greeted by the excited stares of her dorm mates. Hermione felt a headache coming up as she blinked back at them frustrated.

"Finally!" Rose screeched. "You are up!"

"We were just about to wake you," Lucia agreed.

She was standing beside her blindingly pink bed and nearly jumped up and down with excitement. Hermione was tempted to just draw her covers shut, lie back in her bed again and pretend this whole thing had never happened. But the nosiness radiating from her dorm mates was telling her that it would be impossible to hide from them.

Rose slumped down beside Hermione on the bed before she said in a shrill tone, "You've gotta tell us everything." Then she poked Hermione in the side before she continued in a self important voice, "What did you do with Tom Riddle yesterday?"

All girls were now starting to giggle even Diana who now sat down beside Viola on Lucia's pink bed so that they were now both facing Hermione. Hermione on the other hand didn't feel like laughing at all. However had she gotten into this mess?

"I never believed that Riddle was really after you," Viola said in her usual condescending tone. "But now that I've seen it with my own eyes..."

"Tell us, tell us!" Lucia seemed to burst with excitement now. "What did he do? Did he snog you?"
Rose giggled inanely, "I'm sure he did much more."

Hermione stared at her. How was she going to get out of this one?

"Now look, I really don't wanna talk about it," Hermione said stiffly.

What a lame thing to come up with, she huffed at herself. Those chatty girls would surely accept that. Hermione inwardly rolled her eyes.

"No, no," Rose said sternly. "You are going to tell us."

"Yeah, no secrets," Lucia threw in. "We are friends after all."

Hermione frowned at her. They surely were not friends. Just because they slept in the same room didn't mean that they were suddenly friends.

"He reminds you of your fiancé, doesn't he?" Diana asked her now in a soft tone.

Hermione's eyes shot at her. Once she was again mesmerized by those amazingly green eyes which looked so frighteningly similar to Harry's. But now Hermione furrowed her brow. What was Diana talking about? She needed a moment to remember that sob story she had made up before the break to get back at Tom for spreading that stupid rumour of her liking him.

Ironic, isn't it? a voice inside of her scoffed meanly. Not really, Hermione thought before she stood up from the bed. She finally had enough of this stupid chatter. She really didn't want to talk with the girls any longer.

"Where are you going?" Rose nagged in her whiney tone.

"It's late," Hermione said in a tightly controlled voice. "Marc, Richard and Amarys are surely already waiting for me down in the common room."

"Aww, Hermione," Lucia complained. "You can't always spend all your time with those boys."

Then she grinned at Hermione before she said in a taunting voice, "Tom surely won't like that."

"Yeah," Rose threw in. "He might get jealous."

Hermione didn't say anything. Her patience was slowly running out. So she continued her way to the bath room.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod!" Lucia yelled almost hysterically. "Yesterday during breakfast we've seen you with Riddle and Marc. They were already fighting over you, weren't they?"

Hermione stared back at them. Those girls just didn't know when to stop, did they? Maybe she should just obliviate them and get it over with. It was tempting at the moment. Sometimes it would be nice to be a dark witch.

"Marc Longbottom likes you too," Rose then whined. "That's so unfair, two hot guys liking you."

Hermione stared at her. Longbottom liking her, too? That was…

… probably true. Considering his behaviour lately. Hermione inwardly rolled her eyes. Then she closed the door to the bathroom shut.

Sometime later Hermione walked down to the common room. Regrettably she was still accompanied by her dorm mates. And they were still trying to get more information out of her. As she arrived in
the common room she was rather surprised to really find her three Gryffindor friends sitting on one of the sofas and obviously waiting for her. It was rather late already because Hermione had been deliberately slow in the bathroom, hoping her dorm mates would leave without her. No such luck there but why were Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin still waiting for her?

"Morning, Mione," Weasley beamed at her. "Slept well?"

"Quite." Hermione smiled at him. Then she continued, addressing all three boys, "Why are you still waiting for me? It's already late."

"Pff, I told you, didn't I?" Longbottom replied. "We are not going to let you walk around alone. It's not safe."

A voice coming from behind Hermione asked suspiciously, "Really? Why's it not safe?"

Hermione turned around and found her dorm mates still standing behind her and hearing in to the conversation.

"Not that it concerns you-" Longbottom said, turned to Rose who had posed the question. "-but Riddle's after Hermione so we need to protect her."

That statement only provoked a new fit of giggles coming from the girls. Hermione stood there in the middle of the common room and really wished to just be somewhere else. Preferably somewhere without silly girls blabbing about other people's lives.

After some time Lucia had calmed down enough and patted Hermione's shoulder in a friendly manner. "Two admirers, eh? Quite popular, aren't you?"

Hermione didn't answer anything and was very glad that the four girls then resumed their way to the Great Hall and left them alone.

"What's up with them?" Longbottom stared after the girls and ran a hand through his blond hair in confusion.

"I have no idea." Hermione said in a quiet voice, readjusted her bag and started to walk to the exit of the common room.

"Wait!" Longbottom shouted and hurried after her.

He, Weasley and Lupin followed her all the way to the Great Hall. Hermione knew that they were just worried about her but slowly this being always monitored got on her nerves. But sadly, there was no way to stop them as they were being extremely persistent on this bodyguard business. Well, she could tell them that they needn't protect her from Tom because he was no longer trying to kill her.

Are you really sure about that? that nasty voice echoed through her mind again.

Hermione sighed softly which only seemed to trigger a new barrage of concerned looks from her three friends then she passed the entrance to the Great Hall. As she walked over to her house table she couldn't help but notice how many of the other students seemed to observe her. Some of them secretly whilst others stared at her rather blatantly.

That was fast, she thought as she quickly walked through the hall. It seemed the rumour about her and Tom had already spread quite nicely. Though it was a mystery to her when exactly her dear dorm mates had had the time to start that rumour. Hermione tried to ignore the stares and, in some
cases, glares, walked calmly over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Then she reached for the coffee pot standing right in front of her and poured herself a nice cup of black coffee. All the while she was well aware of all those pairs of eyes being fixed on her.

Well, she reasoned, *it can hardly be as bad as the time they all thought I was a crazy stalker.*

At least, this time, Tom wasn't going to fuel the rumour mill even further. Hermione's gaze slowly wandered over to Tom. He was sitting at the Slytherin table, looking as handsome as ever, and right now he smirked at her rather conceitedly.

*Or it's going to be worse,* Hermione thought frustrated and sipped at her coffee.

"What's wrong with them?" She heard Longbottom's confused voice.

"I have no idea," came Weasley's answer.

Hermione glanced at them shortly. They were sitting right beside her while Lupin had taken the seat opposite her. The boys had obviously noticed the other students staring at her nosily and the bewildered expressions on her friends' faces told her that the rumour had after all not reached everybody.

Then an angry sounding voice huffed at them, "You really don't know?"

Hermione looked up and nearly groaned out loud as her eyes fell on the girl who had just spoken. She didn't know the girl's name but she could remember her face and the faces of the two girls sitting beside her. They were the very girls who had met her and Tom after that stupid detention with professor McGray. Back then Tom had pulled that infamous act which had led to the student body hating her even more. And a while later those very same girls had tried to curse her. Hermione's eyes narrowed at the girl with the blonde locks. She was the one who had fired the Reducto curse at Hermione. Right now all three girls were glaring back at her darkly. Hermione wondered briefly why they were so persistent on hating her but soon found that she didn't really care. This whole affair was just ridiculous.

"Know what?" Lupin asked in his calm and collected voice.

The girl with the short, brown hair threw a nasty look Hermione's way before she sneered at Lupin, "That your little friend here is a cheap whore."

"Watch what you are saying!" Longbottom blustered at the girl enraged.

"Why? It's the truth," the girl with the blond hair spat at him. Then her blue eyes wandered from Longbottom to Hermione before she said in a depreciating way, "You are just a dirty slut, aren't you?"

Hermione had no idea how to answer to something like that. All of it was just so stupid. She really had nothing against those girls but still they seemed to hate her.

"Stop insulting her!" a new voice cut across the girl.

Hermione frowned and turned her head slightly to see who had just now defended her. As her eyes swepted over the table in search of her defender she wasn't really surprised to find every Gryffindor following this dispute rather curiously. It seemed that it had been Lucia who had spoken just now. *That was* a surprise. Hermione hadn't expected her dorm mates to ever come to her aid. Though the next sentence Lucia spoke ruined that positive impression again.
"You are just jealous." Lucia looked at the other Gryffindor girl triumphantly. "Why don't you accept it? It's Hermione, Riddle likes. And not you."

"Excuse me?" Longbottom now stared at Lucia indignantl. "What exactly is Riddle doing?"

Hermione would have liked to curse Lucia as the girl threw her an apologetic look before she told Longbottom in a pitying tone, "I'm sorry, Marc, but it seems Riddle likes Hermione."

"Yes," Rose threw in and she seemed to enjoy the whole thing very much, judging from the glint in her eyes. "Riddle's in love with her," she ended her unnecessary speech while giggles shook her.

"He's not!" The blonde girl snubbed at her angrily.

"Yeah, are you insane?" Longbottom stared at Rose furiously.

That was the point at which Hermione had had enough. This relationship between Tom and her was already quite confusing. She really didn't need it to be discussed in the open. She threw a glance at the Slytherin table. Of course Tom seemed to be very interested in the things going on at the Gryffindor table. There was a smirk curling up his mouth as he looked at her in amusement. Hermione just rolled her eyes at him, then she got up from her seat and started to walk over to the exit of the hall. She hadn't managed to walk very far as Longbottom fell in step beside her. In the corner of her eyes she could see Lupin and Weasley following behind him.

"Really, what's wrong with them? Are they stupid?" Hermione heard Longbottom's enraged voice. "It's plain to see what's going on."

Her eyes darted back to him. Was that really so plain to see? She was a little panicky to find Longbottom staring down at her and looking quite enraged.

But then he said, "It's Riddle again. He's done it before. He's trying to ruin your reputation."

"Yeah, you are right, Marc," Weasley threw in. "He tried that before the break, too."

"Hmm, I don't know," Lupin demurred. "It doesn't sound plausible. Why would he do it again? It didn't work the first time. Why try again?"

Longbottom glared at Lupin and shook his head before he said, "He's evil. That's why." Then he continued in an offending tone. "And he's stupid."

"No, he's not stupid!" Hermione hissed at him with more force than necessary.

What was wrong with her? Why did she need to defend Tom now? Her eyes slowly wandered back to Longbottom. Right now he was staring down at her and there was confusion shining in his blue eyes.

She was quite glad as Lupin said, "You are right. He's not stupid." He now frowned at her. "And that's why he's so dangerous."

Longbottom's gaze left her and he looked at Lupin before he said slowly, "That only means that we have to protect Hermione even better now. That evil bastard is planning something."

Hermione nearly groaned as she heard him say that. Would she never get her freedom back?

She had been right. The protectiveness of her friends got even worse after hearing that rumour about her and Tom. After breakfast they had walked with her down to the Care of Magical Creatures class.
Obviously professor Kettleburn was well enough to teach again, though he had lost what seemed to be a few fingers of his right hand. His class had taken place outside on the grounds of Hogwarts. Hermione had gotten rather peeved by her friends' behaviour during class. They had always stayed close to her as if they expected an attack any second. What did they think could happen to her during class. Even if Tom still tried to hurt her, he would certainly not do it during any class. Accordingly Hermione had been rather glad as professor Kettleburn had ended his class and they had walked back to the castle.

So right now Hermione was sitting in the Ancient Runes class room and listened to professor Nota. But she couldn't quite concentrate on the professor's explanations as she was again rather annoyed. Lupin was sitting right beside her but he wasn't the one who now annoyed her so. No, it was more that whispered conversation going on at the table behind her. It was a group of Ravenclaw girls who sat at that table and to Hermione's increasing displeasure they had only one discussion topic.

"So they found them in a class room?" one of the girls whispered to her friends.

"Yes," another girl answered. "And obviously they had been snogging."

Hermione grabbed her textbook tighter as she felt her magic flowing through her angrily. It seemed that over the time the rumour had somehow gotten worse. But it was the next statement that really made her angry.

"No, no," an excited voice whispered. "I heard it from Susan. You know the Hufflepuff. According to her, Riddle and DeCerto were found in a broom cupboard. And-" Here the Ravenclaw girl added a dramatic pause before she whispered, "-they were doing it."

After that Hermione could hear muffled giggles coming from behind her. She felt anger bubbling up in her. Couldn't those girls see that she was sitting right in front of them? They were not exactly being quiet with their conversation. If they so enjoyed it to gossip about other people, they should at least have the decency to make sure the person concerned wouldn't hear them. Her right hand itched to pull her wand and curse those stupid girls.

Hermione was still trying to stop her magic from lashing out at those girls as professor Nota finally ended the lesson some time later. Hermione took her quill, parchment and the Ancient Runes textbook and stuffed it angrily into her bag. Then she got up from her table and started to walk over to the door.

"Look, Hermione." She heard Lupin say in a soothing tone. "Don't listen to what they say. They are just being stupid."

Hermione turned around to him. He was still stowing his things away in his bag. She just wanted to tell him how very right he was as professor Nota addressed him, "Mr Lupin, could you please stay behind?"

"Of course, professor," Lupin said politely.

Then his eyes wandered back at Hermione and she could see concern in them.

"You don't need to worry," she told him. "I can look after myself."

"Okay," Lupin said but she could see doubt on his face.

Hermione threw him a reassuring smile before she turned around and left the class room. As she strolled down the corridor, trying to ignore the curious stares of the other students, she decided to not go back to the common room. She wanted to be alone now. She didn't want to admit it but somehow
that new rumour about her was getting to her more than she would like. It wasn't so much the fact that she was again the target of Hogwarts' gossip mill. No, the problem was that this time she didn't know whether the gossip was partly true or not. What was there going on between Tom and her?

Hermione decided to use this unexpected opportunity to be alone. It was quite bothersome that her friends still thought that she needed protection twenty-four-seven. She knew that they were really trying to help her but slowly it annoyed her. Right now she just wanted to be left alone so she had time to think things through. Especially her relationship with Tom. That the whole school seemed to be talking about it didn't make it easier for Hermione. She was very unsure of herself and her feelings. Sure she did like Tom. That much was clear and there was no use in denying it any longer. She liked him very much actually. But there was still a part of her which constantly yelled at her to stop seeing Tom. Maybe it was her conscience, Hermione didn't know. But it never ceased to remind her who Tom really was. It was undeniable after all. He was Lord Voldemort. His behaviour towards Longbottom was the best proof of that. But another thing was also undeniable. Hermione felt better whenever Tom was around. It was a long time ago that she had abandoned all hope to ever feel free again. Free of her sorrow and free of those horrible images that haunted her so mercilessly. Of course, the things she had experienced during the war were still troubling her. Most probably she would never be able to completely forget them but now that Tom was around they were no longer so unbearable. They were definitely less painful and even started to sometimes drop in the background. That was more than she could ever have wished for.

Hermione rounded a corner and now walked down another deserted corridor. Her steps echoed loudly as she walked on the stone floor. Right now she didn't exactly know where she was headed to. She needed some solitude. At first she had thought about heading to the Room of Requirement but then she had remembered that Tom knew about it, too. Most likely he used it for his little Death Eater meetings. The last thing Hermione wanted to do was to burst in one of those meetings. So she had ended up wandering rather aimlessly through Hogwarts' many corridors.

Still, she needed to come to a conclusion for her problem. Should she stay away from Tom or not? It was definitely dangerous staying close to him. Not only because he was the Dark Lord in the making but he was also very sharp and he loved it to solve secrets. Hermione had a lot of secrets she didn't want solved. Then there was Tom himself. Hermione didn't exactly know what Tom was feeling. Did he like her? Or did he stay close to uncover her secrets? Was he just playing with her? If she was honest with herself, she knew what she had to do. Her first decision had been the right one. She needed to stay away from Tom. It would be sheer folly to not avoid him. There were so many reasons why to stay away from him. She still was in the past right now. It already was a risk to even speak with the people here.

Hermione was brought out of her musings and her head shot up as she heard an oily voice, "DeCerto, what a nice sight for my sore eyes."

She was more than startled as she saw a group of Slytherins standing not far from her down the corridor. How could she have not noticed?

"Just the one we have been searching for. What a nice coincidence. Don't you think, Avery?" one of them said in a mocking voice.

Hermione recognized him, it was Lestrange. Right now he was smirking at her darkly. Avery stood right beside him and he, too, was smirking at Hermione. Though there also was an appreciative glint in his dark eyes as they wandered slowly over her form. Behind Lestrange and Avery Hermione could see a third boy. That was Black. And leaning against the wall beside his friends was Alba, the one Hermione had once stolen his wand from. Hermione had a sinking feeling in her stomach. Surely they didn't just want to chat with her.
"Yes, a very nice coincidence," Avery drawled in his arrogant voice.

Hermione started to scan her surroundings but she never let those Slytherins out of her field of vision. The corridor was completely deserted. Currently they were in a relatively unused part of the castle. Hermione nearly cursed out loud at her own stupidity. Why did she have to wander into this part of the castle? She had been so deep in thought, she had completely let her guard down. If something like that had happened during the war, she would have been dead by now. But no use crying over spilt milk.

*Focus!* she reprimanded herself.

A few metres down the corridor, Hermione remembered to have seen a door. Maybe that led into an old, unused class room. That could be helpful later. But maybe she was able to prevent a fight with them. Hermione glared at the four boys standing in front of her before she said in a strong and firm voice,

"And why have you been searching for me?"

Avery now started to walk towards her and Hermione instantly fell into her dueling stance.

"There is something we have to straighten out, little girl," he sneered. And Hermione could make out the threat behind his words.

"And what, pray tell, would that be?" she asked him cheekily.

Hermione could feel her right hand twitch in anticipation. She was ready for battle now.

"You know exactly what, you cunt!" Lestrange now yelled aggressively at her.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as they wandered from Avery to Lestrange.

"Please, do enlighten me," she replied in a soft and mocking tone.

"You have dared to offend our leader, slut. Did you think you would get away with that?" Lestrange hissed at her threateningly.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. She was confused. Their leader? That was Tom, surely. What did Lestrange mean with she had offended Tom? What was he going on about? Hermione stared at him confused until it finally occurred to her. Yesterday morning as she had argued with Tom his followers had been present. But she hadn't really insulted Tom. She had behaved in her normal way around Tom.

…okay, I was rather angry and snubbed at him…

Suddenly a thought flashed through her mind. Had Tom sent his followers after her? To put her in her place? There was a sinking feeling in her stomach as she had that thought.

"Does he know you are here right now?" Hermione glared at Lestrange angrily.

The small flicker of insecurity on his face was enough to tell her that Tom, in fact, didn't know about his followers' antics. She felt strangely relieved to know that.

"So, he doesn't know," Hermione stated in a firm voice. "Maybe you should get his consent first before you try to threaten me. Not that you are a threat to me in the first place." She smiled at the boys in front of her innocently.
Lestrange snarled at her and pulled his wand. The other boys followed suit. Hermione just flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand.

"I'll show you your place, filthy bitch," Lestrange growled at her darkly.

Then he waved his wand and a blue curse left its tip. The curse rushed towards Hermione but she didn't raise her wand to fend it off. That simple curse was just beneath her so she sidestepped it. The curse crashed into the floor behind her.

"You've got to have more than that to beat me!" she taunted Lestrange.

Which, admittedly, wasn't her best idea as now the other Slytherins joined the fight while a very potent curse left Lestrange's wand.

"I'll teach you to never talk back to our leader again!" Lestrange spat at her while he whirled his wand.

Hermione could glimpse a smug smile on his face as his curse sped towards her. The magic behind the spell crackled aggressively. And the other three boys now started to throw curses at her too. And those were powerful ones as well.

_Well well, whoever taught them such dark curses?_ Hermione wondered wryly.

But now was not the time for sarcasm. She raised her wand and brandished it swiftly in a complicated pattern.

_Aberrare!_

Hermione watched satisfied as the curses rushing towards her suddenly turned off their course and crashed into the wall beside her. But the Slytherins, it seemed, weren't so easy to impress as they now sent another barrage of curses her way. Hermione ducked and threw herself towards the wall. She could feel the power behind the curses as they soared threateningly over her head. She was now crouched down with her back against the cold stone wall which wasn't a very good position to fight back. She needed to move now. To somehow take cover. A magical shield wasn't the best option as she wouldn't be able to attack while being covered by the shield. Hermione then remembered the door she had seen before. It was just a few metres behind her.

"Not so cheeky anymore, are you?" Lestrange sneered at her in a mocking voice. "You'll apologize to our leader on bended knees in no time."

Yeah, sure! Hermione nearly rolled her eyes but then she just waved her wand and thought, _Tergus!_

Immediately the corridor was filled by an impenetrable mist. Hermione used the confusion her spell had created and dashed back the corridor in direction from which she had come. Her spell wouldn't last long she knew. So she just dashed back to the wooden door she had noticed earlier. She wasn't fast enough. The mist she had just created began to clear up again. Then she could hear the Slytherins back in the corridor cast new spells. Hermione flung open the old wooden door and took cover behind the opened door. Seconds later the spells hit the wood of the door heavily. Hermione could feel the door shake with each impact. That door might look rather solid but now that those curses crashed into it it didn't seem to be a reliable cover at all. Just as Hermione started to crawl into the class room an especially potent curse hit the door. It crashed through and hit the floor, leaving behind a smoking hole in the now charred wood of the door. Hermione looked down at herself and found a deep cut in her left thigh. The blindingly bright curse had obviously grazed her. There was a rather large slash in her skin which now started to bleed heavily. She could see the blood flowing...
down her leg until it was soaked up by her stocking. It didn't hurt, though. Hermione knew there was too much adrenalin running through her body right now, damping the pain. But that cut was bound to hurt later.

*Stupid Slytherins!* Hermione thought angrily. *And stupid, paper-thin door!*

"So what, little slut? Want to kneel down already?" Hermione heard Lestrange yell triumphantly. "I wouldn't mind if you'll kneel down in front of me." His statement was followed by dirty laughter.

That was enough! Up until now Hermione hadn't unsheathed her more dangerous curses. She didn't want to really fight against students. But they were asking for it! She clasped her wand a little tighter and stood up from her crouching position. The door was still shielding her from the curses the Slytherins hurled her way. But she could hear them moving in the corridor. They obviously tried to get closer to her.

*Good!*

Hermione stepped a little away from the door, raised her wand and swiped it furiously at the door.

*Subverto!*

Her wand didn't touch the wood but the door suddenly burst and splinters of wood flew everywhere. Hermione used the same motion with which she had destroyed the door and performed her next spell. The flying splinters lost their momentum so that the pieces of wood now hung in the air like a cloud, unmoving. It looked like the exploding door had somehow frozen in time. Hermione's view of the corridor behind was now free so she glanced at the group of Slytherins. They had split up and were trying to attack but they were not really working together. Hermione could see Lestrange nearby. He now began to move his wand again. But Hermione didn't wait to see which curse he would hurl at her. She moved her own wand swiftly in the familiar pattern.

*Exuro!*

The splinters of wood burst into flames. Hermione now thrust her magic into those burning pieces of wood which were still suspended in midair until she could practically feel each of those pieces through her magic. Then she whirled her wand forward and the burning wood obeyed her. The pieces soared through the air, getting faster and faster, flying towards her attackers. Hermione watched as Lestrange and Avery each put up a blue shield in front of them. But she knew, it would be useless. Her fiery projectiles were protected by her own magic. Neither Avery nor Lestrange would be able to fend them off. Sure enough the splinters breached the shields before they impacted. Hermione smiled satisfied as she saw her burning weapons explode with her magic upon contact. Lestrange was hurled backwards as one of the pieces hit his chest. He crashed on the floor and slid a few metres. Avery, Hermione noticed amused, wasn't any better. Splinters had hit his leg and shoulder. Black and Alba hadn't put up a shield but tried to dodge the splinters. That was useless because there were just too many. So, they were also hit. It was rather entertaining to see those brawny boys being beaten by her magic.

But Hermione didn't want to linger and wallow in her success. Her nice, little curse had caused enough damage but it wasn't anything too dangerous. So the four Slytherin boys were already getting up again. And she certainly didn't want to still be around when they started to attack again. The furious look on Lestrange's face was funny enough she didn't need to see more. So Hermione smiled at Lestrange mockingly which seemed to enrage him further. Then she turned around and ran away. Down the corridor and away from that little battlefield.

She had run down four corridors until the first signs of pain coming from her left thigh hit her.
Hermione was forced to slow down a little. The cut was still bleeding. The blood flowed down her leg making the injury look more dramatic than it actually was. As Hermione turned around the next corner she finally recognized where she was. If she remembered correctly there was a toilet if she turned left into the next corridor. And she was right. Hermione opened the door and stepped into the girls' toilet. Fortunately it was empty. She quickly waved her wand at the door, locking it so that she wouldn't be disturbed by anyone.

Hermione leaned against one of the many sinks that lined one wall and looked down at her leg. The cut was still bleeding heavily. She bent down a little to examine the cut closer. It was a rather deep but clean cut. It didn't appear to have injured anything vital. So Hermione waved her wand over the cut and whispered,

"Curatio!"

She watched as the blood crusted over thus making the wound look a few days old instead of a few minutes. Hermione waved her wand over the leg and the blood which had flown down her leg disappeared. At least now it didn't look anymore like someone had tried to saw her leg off. After another wave of her wand white bandages appeared out of nowhere and wound themselves around her thigh. Hermione gasped softly as the bandages wrapped tightly around her leg. It hurt.

 Damn Slytherins! Hermione cursed silently before she slowly limbed over to the exit.

She stepped cautiously out into the corridor. But those Slytherin boys seemed to be nowhere around, she realized relieved. As she walked down the corridor her leg began to throb painfully. What to do now? Maybe she should head back to the common room and then lie down a little in her dorm.

Yeah, because your stupid room mates'll leave you alone and won't pester you with their nosy chatter. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes. Then just the common room? But that wasn't such a promising option either. Her friends might be there and Hermione didn't want to be confronted with their concern about her right now. That would only make her feel guilty. She still had her school bag with her, so why not go to the library and do some homework? Maybe no-one would pester her there and at the very least no sneaky Slytherins would attack her… hopefully.

So it was just a short time later that Hermione entered Hogwarts' library.

"Hello, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters, the librarian, greeted Hermione while she smiled at her. "Back already?"

Hermione grinned at the librarian.

"Be careful or you'll waste away here with those old books," Ms Peters chided her lightly.

"That won't happen," Hermione promised while still grinning.

Though a little more wasting away and a little less getting attacked by overeager wannabe Death Eaters would be fine by her, Hermione thought as she walked into the library. She saw that most of the tables were already occupied by students doing their homework. There were still a few free seats but Hermione wanted a table of her own because she had noticed that right now some of the students were again staring at her. Especially that group of fourth year Ravenclaws, sitting right beside the section with books on ancient runes, eyed her rather blatantly. Hermione decided that she needed to be alone now. So she walked quite a distance until she found an unoccupied table. Luckily it was so far away from the books needed for homework that she was pleasantly undisturbed by the other students.
Hermione sank down on one of the chairs and sighed relieved. That cut in her leg had started to hurt nastily. She slid up her skirt a little bit to have a look at her thigh. The white bandage, she had conjured up previously, was still wound tightly around her leg. But there was a slight red stain where the cut was situated. Well, whatever, Hermione thought as she pulled her skirt down again, she'd had worse already. At least it wasn't a cursed wound. Maybe she would look after it later. She shrugged her shoulders, reached for her bag and rummaged through it until she found her Herbology book. Professor Sato had asked them in class yesterday to write a two foot long essay about the different uses of Devil's Claw. Hermione wanted to finish that essay right away. She opened the book and searched for the chapter about Devil's Claw. Somehow she wondered why she even bothered with homework. She didn't really have to work so hard for school. After all, she had no intention to stay here for long. The only reason she was here was to get the Elder Wand from Dumbledore, wasn't it? An image of Tom suddenly flashed through her mind. Now, that was uncalled for, Hermione thought.

The Elder Wand, remember? That's why you are here!

Hermione sighed and started to read the chapter in the Herbology book anyway. It seemed she wasn't completely able to abandon her bookworm-ish way. After some time, she had already managed to write at least three foot, she felt someone sitting down on the chair beside her. She stopped her writing and looked up to find Tom sitting beside her. He was lounging elegantly in the chair and was right now skimming his fingers lightly over the cover of one of her books.

"What are you doing?" he asked in his deep voice while his grey eyes wandered over her parchment. Hermione sighed. "Well, what does it look like I'm doing?" she said and looked back down at her parchment. "Homework."

"I've searched for you for quite some time," Tom said in a calm tone. Though there was a demanding tinge in his voice as he continued, "Where have you been the whole day?"

Hermione stiffened as she felt his fingers now skimming over her forearm. His touch again evoked that strange feeling in her. The feeling she shouldn't have. Not directed at Tom after all. But Hermione couldn't help but enjoy that tingling sensation his fingers left behind on her skin.

"And why should I tell you what I've been doing today?" Hermione asked him in a surprisingly firm voice.

'Surprising' because she wasn't feeling nearly as unaffected as her voice sounded like. She heard Tom chuckle softly before he leaned down to her and purred rather seductively in her ear, "Because I don't want you to stroll too far away from me."

Hermione's eyes widened as she then felt him placing a light kiss on her cheek. After he had bent up again she cast a glance in his direction. Tom was eyeing her amused and there was again this self-satisfied smirk playing around his mouth. As his eyes were scanning her attentively Hermione was surprised by this unexpected softness shining in them. But there was something else. There was this strangely possessive glint radiating off Tom's eyes as they wandered over her form. Well, there was no getting finished with her homework now. So Hermione rolled up the slip of parchment on which she had been writing her essay for professor Sato.

"So, why did you search for me?" Hermione asked Tom while she stuffed her things back in her bag.
Tom leaned casually back in his chair and watched her stowing her things away.

"No real reason," he answered in an amused tone and Hermione didn't have to look at him to know that he was smirking at her right now.

She was getting irritated by him. Why was he always around her? Hadn't she decided that she should stay away from him? Yes, she should stay away from him! But just as she had formulated that thought she realized that she didn't want him to go away… to leave her alone. So many people had left her already. Hermione looked at Tom. He was smirking arrogantly down at her. Again she wasn't angered by his offending smirk.

*You have to stay away from him, Granger!* she screamed at herself as she again felt that traitorously feeling glowing up in her.

She grabbed her school bag and stood up. Tom followed suit, the smirk never left his face, though. Hermione tried to ignore him and started to walk away. As she put her weight on her left leg a blazingly sharp pain shot up from her thigh. Hermione gasped in pain and grabbed Tom's arm to steady herself. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the pain to ease up again. How stupid. She had totally forgotten the cut she had received earlier as the Slytherins had attacked her. It had been rather deep so she should take it easy until it healed some more. Hermione felt an arm being wrapped around her waist, steadying her. She allowed herself to lean against the body behind her.

"What's wrong?" Tom's voice asked worriedly

He helped her to sit down on the chair again. Hermione opened her eyes and smiled at Tom shakily. He was crouched down in front of her. His gaze wandered over her body seemingly searching for the cause of her pain. His eyes quickly fell on her left leg. The white bandage she had conjured up was only partly covered by her skirt. Tom's eyes narrowed dangerously as he spotted the bandage. He extended a hand towards her skirt, not hesitant at all, and then pulled the skirt up a little bit, exposing the bandage underneath. There was now a rather large red spot where the cut was under the bandage.

"How did that happen?" Tom demanded to know as he looked up at her again, his voice was cold and commanding.

Hermione raised her eyebrows as he fixed her with his piercing gaze.

"It's nothing serious," she said in a soft voice, took the fabric of her skirt from his hand and pulled it down, again hiding the bandage. Then she tried to get up from the chair but Tom put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her from rising.

"How did you get hurt?" he again ordered her to tell him.

Hermione locked her eyes with him. There was a great deal of anger glinting behind his eyes.

"Let's say I had a little encounter with your dear followers," she told him in a soft but firm voice.

His eyes widened a little in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Hermione sighed and leaned against the backrest of the chair. Obviously she wasn't getting away so easily.

"Well, your stupid followers don't seem to like me that much." She offered him as explanation. "And they certainly didn't like it how I've talked to you yesterday morning either. So, they tried to get back to me for that."
There was now an eerily crimson touch to Tom's eyes as he said in a tightly controlled voice, "What did they do?"

By now Hermione was a little unsettled by this fearsome expression on his face. But she answered him nonetheless, "They attacked me in one of the corridors."

Tom's dark magic started to crackle around him murderously and those eyes which still stared up at Hermione were now almost completely red.

"They attacked you?" he said in an eerily calm tone.

Hermione felt a chill darting down her spine as she gazed into those crimson eyes. That was certainly intimidating, that glare of his. She breathed in deeply to calm herself down. Then she got up from the chair and this time she didn't let Tom stop her. She took her bag and started to limp away, ignoring the sharp pain in her leg. Tom who had stood up, too, followed after her.

"Where are you going?" he asked her in a still cold tone.

Hermione flashed a glance at him. Still there, those scary red eyes.

"To the common room," she replied in a firm voice as she continued to walk away.

Tom took a hold of her upper arm thus successfully stopping her. Her eyes flew up at his face. He glared down at her and Hermione was unable to recognize any emotion in his eyes. The red colour made that impossible.

"I don't think so," he hissed at her in a commanding voice.

Her eyebrows shot up and she continued to stare at him with wide eyes. She felt like being petrified as she stood there caught in his gaze. Tom took her bag from her shoulder and readjusted his grasp on her arm before he started to walk away, half carrying her with him. Hermione was very alarmed by the curious stares the other students threw her way as she was being dragged through the library.

They left the library shortly afterwards. And she somehow still found herself following the dominant wizard beside her through the corridors, not really knowing why she didn't resist him. His hand was grasping her upper arm tightly but somehow he supported her so that she didn't have to put too much weight on her left leg as she walked. After a while Hermione glanced at Tom's face. She was rather relieved to find his eyes now being that beautiful shade of grey again.

"Where are we going?" she asked him.

Tom's eyes flashed at her shortly before he answered curtly, "Where you should have gone immediately after you were hit by that curse. The Hospital Wing."

"It's not that serious," Hermione said automatically.

Tom stopped, looked at her and frowned. Now that his eyes were back to grey Hermione was able to see some of his emotions. Tom seemed to still be angry but there was also concern now shining through his eyes.

After a while of staring at her he stated in an unemotional tone, "There is blood flowing down your leg."

Then he tightened his grip on her and resumed his way to the Hospital Wing. As she followed him Hermione looked down on herself. And he was right. There certainly was blood trickling down her
leg. It was nothing compared to earlier but there were again traces of blood on her skin. The cut must have reopened again, Hermione assumed. After a while they finally arrived at the door leading into the Hospital Wing. Hermione really didn't want to be here. She still thought that the cut wasn't serious enough to warrant a trip to the Hospital Wing. But it was too late now as Tom just knocked at the door. A moment later Madame Dulan opened the door. Her eyes quickly wandered to Hermione's leg and she exclaimed in a worried voice,

"Oh no, what happened, dear?"

Then she stepped aside and permitted them in. Tom led Hermione to one of the beds. She sat down on the soft mattress. In the mean time Madame Dulan had hurried over to them and now eyed Hermione concerned.

"Oh my dear, you are an unlucky girl, aren't you?" she said while she shook her head sadly. "First your shoulder and now your leg. Unfortunately Healer Perry is not here right now," the brunette woman told Hermione. "But I'll do my best to help you."

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion until she remembered that ancient looking healer she had met the last time she had been in the hospital wing. That had been shortly after her duel with Tom.

Madam Dulan eyed Tom, standing right beside Hermione and looking uncharacteristically upset. Then she said, "Now, young man, if you excuse us. I need to look after your girlfriend."

Hermione nearly choked as she heard that.

"Girlfriend?" That woman seemed to jump to conclusions, didn't she? Hermione could feel her face heat up and it got even worse as Tom smirked down at her before he said to Madam Dulan in a polite voice,

"Of course, Madame."

Hermione then watched Madame Dulan drawing the drapes shut around the bed. Why was she making such an effort, drawing those drapes shut anyway? Hermione wondered. Why the fuss? It was just her leg that was wounded. Nothing Tom hadn't seen already. Her thoughts jumped back to the last day of the break, as Tom had slept in her bed. Hermione was very annoyed as the blush on her face was back.

"Did you conjure that up yourself?" Hermione was brought out of her musing by Madam Dulan's voice.

She looked down at herself and found Madam Dulan gesturing at the white bandage still wrapped around her now exposed thigh. Though in the mean time a huge part of the bandage had gotten red.

"Yeah," Hermione replied.

Madam Dulan nodded then she pulled her wand and waved it over Hermione's thigh. The bandage vanished and revealed the cut underneath. Madam Dulan examined the cut with narrowed eyes.

"How did that happen, my dear?" she asked Hermione in a kind voice.

"Er… a stray curse?" Hermione muttered.

The brunette woman sighed, shook her head and then started to wave her wand over the wound. Hermione felt a tingling warmth in her leg. After that Madam Dulan took a small potion vial and turned towards Hermione.

"This will help close the wound. But I'm afraid it will hurt a bit."
Hermione nodded. Madam Dulan opened the vial and then poured the red potion cautiously over the cut in Hermione's thigh. It did hurt a little but it was not really bad. As she was finished Madam Dulan waved her wand and a bandage wrapped itself tightly around Hermione's thigh. This bandage was a lot softer and thicker than what Hermione had conjured up herself.

"That's it. You'll be up and about in no time," Madam Dulan exclaimed. "I'm afraid there will be a scar, though." Here Madam Dulan looked at her as if a little scar was the end of the world. "I'm sure your nice boyfriend won't leave you because of it." She smiled encouragingly at Hermione.

Hermione inwardly rolled her eyes.

Yeah, they nearly cut off my leg but the most important thing is that my boyfriend won't mind the scar. The forties remained to be a foreign land to Hermione.

In spite of her thoughts she said politely, "Thank you."

After that Madam Dulan got up and removed the drapes again. Hermione was surprised to find Tom instantly by her side. He scanned her leg with narrowed eyes. Then his gaze wandered from Hermione to Madam Dulan.

As Madam Dulan saw his gaze she told Tom, "You don't have to worry about her. She'll be okay soon." Then she cast a glance Hermione's way before she continued, "There will just be a small scar. But nothing too big."

Hermione stiffened as she saw a red touch appear in his eyes as Tom heard Madam Dulan's last statement. Madam Dulan misinterpreted her reaction and put a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"It really will be just a very small scar," she told Tom as if she tried to convince him not to abandon Hermione.

Somehow this situation was a little funny, Hermione then decided.

Who would have thought that there would come the day when a crazy nurse tries to convince Tom Riddle not to leave me?

"Thank you for tending to her," Hermione heard Tom say in his smooth voice.

Then he again clutched her arm and helped her to stand up. Hermione was glad to be able to leave the Hospital Wing again. Madam Dulan was really a nice woman but Hermione just didn't like having to go there. She allowed Tom to grab her by her arm and to lead her out of the Hospital Wing. That cut in her leg was really nothing serious but now that she walked again she had to admit that it did hurt quite a bit. So Hermione now leaned rather heavily on Tom, trying to put as little weight on the leg as possible. After a while of walking in silence Tom said in a quiet voice,

"Why didn't you tell me right away that they attacked you?"

Hermione's eyes wandered up at him but he wasn't looking in her direction.

"Why should I have told you?" she asked him confused.

Tom turned his head and now looked down at her.

"Because they could have attacked you again."

She frowned at him before she said, "I can look after myself!"
He sighed in frustration and his grip in her arm tightened a little. Then he said in an authoritative tone, "Next time you are hurt or someone assaults you, you tell me. I'll take care of it."

"Do you really think I can't defend myself?" she said in a firm voice.

"That's not a matter of how strong you are," he replied, still in that cold voice. Then his eyes wandered over her left leg. "And by the way it doesn't look like you can defend yourself well."

"That was a stupid accident," Hermione huffed. "Could have happened to anybody."

"That wasn't an accident. That was a dangerous curse," Tom said while he pulled her closer to him. Then he continued in a commanding voice. "In the future you are going to tell me if you are threatened by somebody."

Hermione glanced up at him. He was looking down at her sharply. His grey eyes were boring into hers daring her to contradict him. Why was he suddenly so tenacious about that matter? Why did he seem to be so enraged about her being attacked? Hermione didn't know what to make of that. He was so strange lately. Hermione knew that their relationship had changed over the Christmas break but she didn't know into what it had changed. What did Tom want from her?

As Hermione didn't reply to his statement or order or whatever it was Tom readjusted the grip on her arm and then started to walk again, dragging her with him. Hermione was too confused to do anything more than just follow him through Hogwarts' many corridors. As they walked in silence through the castle Hermione was deep in thoughts. Before the break Tom wouldn't have cared at all if she had been hurt in any way. Even worse, he would have been delighted.

But now…

Now he seemed to be interested in her. The big question remained to be why he was so interested in her activities. She didn't like that sudden interest of his at all because it resulted in him being always around her. And that collided with her resolution of staying away from him. Even now as he had been so commanding and dominating again she still had enjoyed it how he had held her. He was way too near her now. His hand clasped her arm and she leaned on him so closely that she could even smell his pleasant scent. His closeness made her waver in her decision. That was something unacceptable. Hermione hated herself for feeling protected and safe when he was around.

Protected? With Lord Voldemort around? You must be insane! an enraged inner voice screamed at her. Yes, insane, Hermione thought as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. After she had opened her eyes again she cast a quick glance at Tom. He was still walking beside her and held her gently so that she didn't have to put her whole weight on her leg.

What had changed? Hermione wondered again. Tom was still scary sometimes and certainly intimidating but somehow Hermione found that she wasn't afraid of him anymore. That feeling had been replaced by something else.

Something that is wrong!

After they had passed a few more corridors they finally arrived at the entrance to Hermione's common room. She was rather grateful for that because her leg had started to throb painfully. Hermione let go of Tom and turned towards the portrait of the Fat Lady. Before she could utter the password, Tom suddenly grabbed her by her arm again, pulled her over to him and wrapped his arms around her thus pressing her tightly against his chest. Hermione was taken by surprise as she felt his
arms around her. As if they had a life of their own her arms snaked themselves slowly around his waist so that she clung to him. Then she even closed her eyes and leaned against him. It was so liberating, having someone holding her, to know that someone was there for her. Hermione had been so sure that this feeling had died with her friends, with her family in the future.

After a while Tom whispered to her in a tightly controlled voice, "Those idiots are never going to bother you again!"

Hermione stared up at him. He was looking down at her and his grey eyes burned with determination.

"You are not going to kill them, are you?" she asked in a weak attempt to joke.

"Not if they are repentant," Tom replied in a serious voice and Hermione wasn't completely sure if he was joking.

Then Tom bent down to her and placed a soft kiss on her lips. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she felt him kissing her so gently again. She was still befuddled by his sudden actions as she felt him releasing her again. She reopened her eyes and found him now smirking conceitedly while his grey eyes sparkled softly down at her.

Then he turned towards the portrait of the Fat Lady and said in his smooth voice, "Plover."

The Fat Lady had obviously been observing the scene rather nosily and seemed to now be disappointed that it ended so abruptly. But the portrait still sprung forward and admitted Hermione in.

"Where did you learn the password?" Hermione asked Tom as she drowned him in an irritated look.

He didn't answer instead he just smiled at her charmingly which made her roll her eyes. Then she turned around and climbed through the entrance.

"See you tomorrow," she heard Tom's amused voice calling after her.

After he had accompanied Hermione back to her common room Tom stalked back to his own common room. Now that Hermione wasn't around anymore he allowed his magic to crackle around him furiously. How could they have dared to attack her? Tom's hands balled into tight fists as he remembered that bandage on Hermione's thigh. Those useless gits had really dared to act without his orders. Hermione was his. And Tom didn't like it very much when others stained his things. That was something he never tolerated.

He walked down the last metres to the entrance to the Slytherin common room and tried to rein in his magic. It was still dancing around him so delightfully angry.

"Anguis," Tom hissed the password to the Slytherin common room.

A stone door appeared on the bare wall and slid open, permitting him in. Tom entered the common room. His gaze quickly fell on a group of Slytherins sitting on their usual couch at the other end of the room. Tom started to walk over to them as he felt a hand on his arm. He slowly looked down beside him and his eyes narrowed in anger as he found Melanie Nicolls. Right now she was looking at him expectantly before she said in her pesky, shrill voice,

"Tom, where have you been? I've been waiting for you the whole day."

Tom had to consciously work to stop his magic from lashing out at her. Though he wondered briefly why he put an effort in it anyway. That girl really started to get on his nerves. Just because he had
shagged her didn't mean she could bug him all the time.

"I don't have time right now," Tom answered her in a cold tone and pulled his arm free of her unwanted grasp.

He ignored the disappointed expression on Nicolls' face and continued his way towards the group of boys. His magic flared up threateningly as his gaze wandered over his followers. They were sitting there on the sofa, fooling around and laughing stupidly.

*Not for long.* Tom thought as a familiar coldness took hold of his mind. They noticed him walking over to them very quickly which wasn't really surprising as Tom didn't bother to completely reign in his furious magic. It now danced around him ferociously and glowed so delightfully with his anger. As he had finally reached the boys sitting on the sofa he let his gaze slowly wander over them. They had by now stopped their stupid babbling and were looking at him with a mixture of fear and reverence. But, Tom thought coldly, they were not as afraid yet as they should be.

"Follow me!" Tom hissed at them before he turned around and walked towards the exit of the common room again.

He didn't look back to make sure that they were really following him. They knew too well what would happen if they dared to disobey him. So Tom led them through the many corridors of Hogwarts without once turning back to them or speaking one word to them. But still they followed him. After some time they reached that familiar passageway. It looked so inconspicuous but nevertheless hid the entrance to one of Hogwarts' many secrets. This time Tom didn't order one of his followers to open the Come-and-Go room like he normally did. Instead he himself walked three times by that familiar patch of bare wall until a door appeared. He stepped over to the door, opened it and faced the room behind. It was a very long, dimly lit chamber. Imposing stone pillars rose high up to the ceiling which was hidden in darkness. A green sheen seemed to lit the chamber somehow. Tom's mouth curled up a little as he stepped into the Chamber of Secrets. He swiftly moved further into the chamber's darkness, still not turning around to make sure the other boys were still following him. He could hear their hesitant footsteps echoing from the cold walls. Tom passed a few stone pillars on his way into the heart of the chamber. Snakes carved out of stone wound themselves around the pillars and reminded every intruder angrily of whom that room belonged to. Tom could almost feel the presence of the basilisk as he strode down the chamber. He had to remind himself that this was just a replication made up solely from his memory. The real chamber still lay deep down in the underground of Hogwarts. Thanks to Dumbledore, it was now unreachable to Tom. A burning fury boiled up in him at the thought of the transfiguration teacher and the air around Tom started to bristle irately with his magic again.

Then he passed the last columns and stepped in front of the statue of Salazar Slytherin. Tom let his gaze sweep over the stony figure of his ancestor before he turned around and faced his followers. They were standing just a few metres behind Tom and were huddled together as if afraid the chamber itself would attack them. Which wouldn't be so farfetched if this hadn't just been an imitation of Slytherin's chamber.

Tom breathed in deeply. It felt good being back here even if it was just a mere copy. It had taken him the good amount of four years to find the entrance to the chamber. It was a great loss that no-one would be able to see the chamber ever again now that Tom could no longer risk to enter it. Maybe he should take steps to ensure that Slytherin's noble work would somehow be continued. But now was not the time to dwell on those thoughts. His eyes flashed back at his followers and the white hot rage took hold of his mind again. They needed to be punished for disobeying him and for attacking his possession. So Tom gestured for them to come nearer and they were quickly forming a semi-circle around him. His cold gaze wandered slowly over the boys standing in front of him. Each of them
squirmed uncomfortably, Tom noted satisfied. They seemed to be very afraid of Tom and they had every reason to be. He tried to restrain his magic from lashing out at those idiotic boys, at least for now. In his mind's eye he could still see the bloodstained bandage on Hermione's leg and how she had gasped in pain as she had tried to walk on that leg. That witch belonged to no-one but him. He was not going to allow anyone other than himself to hurt her. But his foolish followers had dared to do just that and their stupidity had left behind a mark on Hermione's body.

They are going to pay. Dark, icy cold thoughts swam through his mind, ensnaring him and demanding to take revenge. A murderous determination took hold of him and he knew he wasn't going to resist that deathly urge, he didn't want to resist.

"My dear followers," Tom began lightly and the tone of his voice was not transporting any of the wrath he was feeling. "Just now, word of your doings today has reached me."

His eyes glided over the Slytherins standing in front of him. His wrath burned unrelentingly inside of him as he saw a touch of pride in the eyes of some of his followers. Did they expect to be praised?

"So I decided to come here," Tom continued in his quiet voice which echoed eerily from the stone walls of the chamber. "To give you the chance to tell me about it without nosy people to hear in on us."

Yes, that was one reason he had come here. The other was that from inside this chamber no-one would hear their screams. Tom now started to pace in front of his followers, staring at each of them in turn. But none of them answered his request. Had they finally sensed the danger they were in? Tom stopped in front of Black who shrank back from him a little.

"You don't want to keep things from me, do you?" Tom asked and for the first time he allowed a little of his fury to seep into his words.

Black averted his eyes before he hastily stammered, "No, of course not."

Tom continued to fix him with his stare a little longer before he turned away from Black and now stepped in front of Avery.

"What did you do today?" Tom asked him. His voice was hard and he would not tolerate any lies.

He saw Avery flinch away from him. But then that fool seemed to muster up the little courage he had and answered Tom, "We just punished that insolent girl."

"You punished DeCerto?" Tom slowly asked in a deathly calm voice.

Hate was now rushing through him so forcefully that he was almost unable to maintain his calm appearance. His magic was ripping at him, demanding to be set free.

"I didn't order you but still you felt the need to punish her," he stated in that same emotionless voice.

Panic was now in Avery's eyes as he stared back at Tom. Then he rushed on in a shaky voice, "That slut insulted you. We were just trying to teach her some manners."

Finally Tom wasn't able to hold back any longer he raised his wand, pointed it at Avery and whispered, "Crucio."

Instantly the chamber rang with Avery's painful screams. He crumbled down, bashing and twitching with pain. Tom observed with cold detachment how Avery suffered. His anger cooled down a little as he saw that expression of pure pain on Avery's face. The other boys still stood on their spots, not
doing anything. They didn't try to help Avery or to stop Tom. They were just standing there and hoping that they would not share Avery's fate.

After a while Tom ended the curse and the screams, echoing from the walls, stopped. Avery still lay on the ground and he was now breathing laboured. Tom just smiled down at him evilly but his wrath wasn't yet satisfied. It still burned inside of him. He turned his back towards Avery's fallen form and his cold grey eyes wandered up the statue of Slytherin until they landed on this ancient face carved out of the stone. Then he said in a quiet voice,

"I can't remember giving you the order to *defend my honour*." 

Tom detached his eyes from his ancestor's face and turned around to his followers again. He could almost smell their fear in the air as he hit them with his deathly cold gaze.

"Say," he continued, still in that completely controlled voice. "did you assume that I was too weak to do so myself?"

He took a step towards the boys who still stood in that semi-circle before him. Now he allowed his magic to leave him and to crackle around him furiously. He smiled sadistically as he watched his followers shuffle nervously as his magic hit them.

Then he said in a dangerous, low voice, "Do you think I need your help to put that girl in her place?"

His dark glare wandered over his followers and Tom enjoyed the fear he could see in their eyes. After a while it seemed Alba couldn't take this pressure any longer. He stepped out of the circle and then stammered in a fearful voice,

"Of course not. Please, we just wanted to be of use to you."

Tom faced the boy standing in front of him and saw him shaking in fear. He raised his wand and allowed his furious magic to flow through the wand and formed it into a curse.

*Sagitta!*

His magic left the wand and now took the form of many small, glowing arrows rushing towards Alba. As the arrows hit him Alba screamed in agony and fell down on his knees. Though there were no wounds where the arrows had hit him Tom knew that he had done some serious damage. This spell was not designed to hurt the body but to attack the magic itself. Alba's magic was now mauled and would need some time to mend.

"Do you really think I need your assistance?" Tom asked and the cold hate left behind from the previously used curse still rippled through his magic.

"I do not need assistance!" he hissed in a sharp tone, emphasizing each word while he again twirled his wand.

Alba was hurled to the ground and Tom relished those painful whimpers coming from Alba's fallen form. But then he abruptly turned to Malfoy who stood right beside Alba. He was very disappointed with Malfoy. Normally he was reliable and never dared to contradict Tom in any way.

"Malfoy, tell me. Did you participate in this?" Tom asked him commanding voice.

"I did not." Malfoy whispered his scared sounding reply.

Tom's eyes wandered over his form. So he was not one of those who hurt Hermione? But still,
Malfoy seemed to be unable to meet his gaze, Tom noticed.

"But you knew about it. And didn't tell me?" he asked in a low voice.

Malfoy's eyes shot at him shortly and Tom could see his guilt. So he just raised his wand and sent another torture curse at Malfoy. Just like Avery he fell to the ground and screamed in pain.

Tom had just ended the curse and Malfoy's screams still echoed from the chamber's walls as he said in a threatening voice, "Whose idea was it? I advise you to confess now. Believe me, I have methods of finding out myself. And you do not want me to force the truth from you."

His statement was met by an angst filled silence. Then a panicky voice tore the silence, "Lestrange! It was Lestrange."

Tom turned to Avery whose voice had just now given away the traitor. Avery had managed to get on his shaky legs again and now he looked at Tom, pure panic on his face. Tom stared into his frightened eyes and didn't hesitate to use Legilimens on the other boy. His mental assault breached Avery's unprotected mind. Tom cut though his vulnerable memories which made Avery hiss in pain. But it seemed he was telling the truth. Tom retreated again from the other's mind and Avery crumpled to the ground, holding his head. Tom didn't pay him any heed as he now stepped over to Lestrange. So, this was the one responsible for Hermione's wound? Tom's eyes narrowed as they scanned Lestrange. He had led the others to attacking her and hurting her?

An icy coldness wrapped itself around Tom's mind, suffusing him completely until there was nothing left than the murderous drive to cause pain. His magic sang in contentment with his malign thoughts, espousing and supporting them. There was no way to stop now, Tom needed to assuage that powerful need to hurt and to destroy.

"So it was you?" Tom whispered in a low voice. He was not able to hide his wrath any longer. It dripped from every word that left his mouth.

He watched without even a trace of pity how Lestrange flinched away from him and then stuttered shakily in a voice filled by nothing but fear, "Please, I was just trying to serve you. I would never flout your orders."

The other's display of submissiveness did nothing to calm down that piercing coldness which now was the only thing driving Tom's thoughts. There was no room for anything else but this burning hate.

Tom brandished his wand while he thought, *Ensis!*

A blindingly bright curse left the tip of his wand and soared towards Lestrange. It grazed Lestrange's leg before it smashed violently into to stone floor behind him. Lestrange screamed in pain and his hands flew to the now heavily bleeding wound in his leg. The sight of the blood didn't satisfy Tom's wrath in any way. He waved his wand again and Lestrange was instantly thrown to the floor. The power of the curse sent him skidding until he came to a halt a few metres away. A blood red stain followed the way he had been skidded over the floor. Tom walked over to Lestrange until he again stood right in front of him. Lestrange groaned in pain and Tom delighted in the agony, visible on the other's face.

"Forgive me," Lestrange whimpered. "I didn't mean to displease you."

Tom didn't reply. He just waved his wand again and let his magic wind itself around Lestrange. Then Tom ordered his magic to lift him up. Lestrange yelled in pain as he was brutally yanked up.
Tom just laughed coldly at the other boy's agony who now hung in mid-air with his feet not touching the ground. With a small movement of his wand Tom forced Lestrange's arms to extend from his sides so that it looked as if he had been crucified. Then Tom's magic wound around Lestrange's right arm until it reached his hand.

The very hand he had used to hold his wand as he had attacked Hermione, Tom thought with a disturbing coldness.

He took a step toward Lestrange so that he now stood not even a metre away from him. His eyes bored into Lestrange's frightened ones as he said in a eerily calm voice, "You are never going to disobey me again."

While he hissed those words at Lestrange Tom's magic wrapped itself around Lestrange's index finger and bend it slowly upwards in the wrong direction. An abhorrent glimmer of amusement appeared in Tom's eyes as he felt through his magic how the finger was bent beyond the point that was anatomically possible. But he still didn't stop and Lestrange howled in pain. Then the bone of the finger dislocated from the joint. Lestrange's painful screams peaked and filled the chamber but Tom continued. His magic wandered to the next finger and began to likewise bend it in the wrong direction.

"Please, stop!" Lestrange managed to cry out. "I beg you!"

Tom cocked his head to the side and looked at Lestrange with that detached smile still on his face.

"There is no use begging me."

Lestrange's screams peaked again as the second finger, too, was broken from its joint. Tom sniggered as he now saw tears running down the other boy's face.

"Have mercy! I won't do it again! I won't do it again!" Lestrange whimpered.

Tom laughed a high pitched laugh then he said, "Of course you won't. And I will make sure that you really understand."

While he said that his magic wrapped around the next finger of Lestrange's hand and started to bend it up, too. Lestrange screamed in pain. His pitiful tears didn't stop Tom until he had broken every single one of the fingers on Lestrange's right hand. Then Tom pulled his magic abruptly back and Lestrange fell hard to the floor where he remained lying. He still cried in pain. Tom turned away from him and looked with unpitying eyes at his other followers who still stood where he had left them.

"Now listen to me closely because I won't repeat myself." His gaze wandered to Lestrange who still lay on the floor whimpering in pain then he looked back at his other followers. "You will stay away from Hermione DeCerto. She is mine."

Tom stared at each of them in turn, daring them to not accept his orders. But none of them did. They were too frightened by him, Tom noted satisfied.

Then he leaned over Lestrange who still snivelled on the ground and said in a disturbingly normal voice, "It seems you injured yourself during a Quidditch practice. How clumsy." Lestrange's pain clouded eyes looked up at him, understanding his hint to keep silent about Tom's involvement in his injuries.

Then Tom continued in a helpful sounding tone, "Maybe you should go to the hospital wing?"
Tom's laughter echoed from the cold walls of the Chamber of Secrets as he slid his wand back into his robe pocket and let his gaze wander over his followers. All of them looked terrified at him which made Tom laugh even harder. Then he just turned around and walked confidently towards the exit of the chamber.
Hermione sat in the class room and was very annoyed. Today was Friday. Since she had been thrown into this foreign time period she had come to hate Fridays. And the reason for that new aversion against Fridays was just now stalking into the class room.

"Good morning, class." Legifer's sharp voice rang through the room.

"Good morning, professor." The whole class chanted back though Hermione wasn't joining in.

She had decided to just ignore the whole thing a long time ago. This class was ridiculous. It wasn't worth the energy to get aggravated over it. But that resolution didn't stop Hermione to get quite irritated as her gaze wandered over the hateful professor. Why did that woman always need to look so perfect? Everything from her spotless, shiny shoes and her impeccable clothing to her immaculate hairdo was just perfect. Why did she seem to think it was necessary to waste time with trying to achieve this useless perfection? Hermione would have been able to accept that need for the impossible but that woman expected the same perfection from her students. And judging from the sour look Legifer now cast her way the witch didn't seem to think that Hermione was doing very well. She didn't react to Legifer's evil glare but just continued to look back at her blankly. After a while Legifer shook her head irritated before she said in her stern voice,

"After this long break we now have a lot of things to catch up with."

Hermione's gaze unlatched from the hateful professor and wandered over to one of the windows. There really was no reason to pay attention to the class. So Hermione entertained herself with staring out of the window and let her thoughts wander. Soon they were once again circling around a certain Slytherin with black hair. Hermione knew all too well that she was in a predicament here. Her continued interaction with Tom was just wrong. This whole thing was very dangerous.

This morning during breakfast she had seen that bandage on Lestrange's arm. Hermione was pretty sure that it was Tom's doing. He had obviously punished his followers for having attacked her yesterday. He himself had told her that he would make sure they never hurt her again. Obviously he had kept that promise. Hermione was still surprised that he had felt the need to somehow protect her. She had never expected Tom Riddle to actually protect her. That was just something so absurd that she had never even thought about it. So she had been taken by surprise yesterday as she had seen the anger on Tom's face after he had discovered her injury. Her bewilderment had even grown as he had then brought her to the Hospital Wing and had seemed to be rather concerned about her. The whole thing had resulted in him taking action to prevent something like that from happening again. The frightened looks his followers had cast Tom's way where enough to tell her that he had been quite convincing yesterday. While it was nice to know that he was willing to take care of her it was also very frightening.

Hermione run a shaky hand through her frizzy hair thus ruffling it up even more. Legifer's stern gaze wandered shortly over Hermione's now rather bushy hair. But Hermione never noticed that look of disgust on the professor's face as she was too deeply immersed in her own thoughts.

Tom's behaviour yesterday was scaring Hermione a great deal. It wasn't so much that she was scared by that violence he had obviously used against his followers. Him using violence and cursing people was of course wrong but it was not something new and unexpected coming from Tom. No, what had truly unsettled Hermione was the protective and caring behaviour he showed towards her. Hermione remembered how he had held her cautiously as he had led her to the Hospital Wing. After that he had again kissed her while he had embraced her gently. It was exactly that softness that scared her.
Because the caring behaviour was just completely uncharacteristic for Tom.

Why that drastic change in his behaviour? He was the Dark Lord after all. And the Dark Lord didn't show that sort of concern towards anyone.

Of course he might be pretending to be nice to gain something. But after yesterday Hermione had started to doubt that Tom was just acting again. She knew that he was a good actor and that he was quite proficient in manipulating people but she assumed that he had stopped to act around her. At least those small affectionate gestures he showed towards her seemed to be genuine. Why had he changed so dramatically? He wasn't supposed to change. At least not because of Hermione. She was stranded in the wrong time period and she really wasn't allowed to change anything of the past. Actually she wasn't even allowed to speak with the people here.

Hermione started to fiddle nervously with a strand of her curly hair.

To change the past was incredibly dangerous. What she needed to do was to get a grip on herself and then find a way back to her right time period as fast as possible. But as this idea of accidentally changing the past and thus destroying the future might be frightening there was something that stopped Hermione from just grabbing Peverell's manuscript and fleeing Hogwarts on the spot. It was egoistic and it was despicable. Hermione knew that and she was ashamed of her own feelings. But she had to admit that she kind of liked that new softness in Tom's behaviour. She just liked it how he held her, kissed her and even protected her. It was so nice that after such a long time of being alone and having to fight for herself finally there was someone again taking care of her.

Hermione's gaze wandered from the window back to Legifer who still stood in front of the class and lectured about some offending thing or other. But Hermione wasn't listening to her. She didn't even really see the professor but was just staring vacantly in front of her.

Since that war had started in her time period she had stumbled through darkness. So many horrible atrocities had happened to her and to the people around her. Back then the only thing that had kept her from just giving up and surrendering herself to that darkness had been the presence of her friends. They had never left her. They had protected each other. Hermione knew that without Ron and Harry she would be dead by now. But then…

…they left me. Hermione thought numbly as the sadness tore at her again.

It had been so terrible to be suddenly robbed of their loving protection. She had had to fight on alone. No-one had been taking care of her anymore. Suddenly she had been exposed to all those horrible things and she had been completely unprotected. Hermione had often wondered, while travelling alone through the past, why she fought on. Why did she put an effort in trying to get back in her time? Why not let the darkness take her?

She could just give in and stop to fight. Since they had died Hermione had always longed to see her friends again. Very often that longing had nearly gotten stronger than her will to live on. Why should she keep struggling and try to return to a place where she would again just be alone when it would be so much easier to give up? How could one live without hope?

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in deeply before she opened them again and continued to stare into space. Here in the past she had found something she had thought was lost forever. That comfortable feeling of someone touching her was back. Someone tried to reach her, to save her. How could she throw that away? When she half knew that by doing so she would also throw away her last chance to survive.

"Ms DeCerto?" Hermione was so deep in thought she wasn't paying any attention to the things going
on around her. So at first she didn't hear that sharp voice addressing her, "Ms DeCerto!"

At last the strict voice managed to pierce her thoughts. Hermione raised her head and found professor Legifer standing directly in front of her table. She glared down at Hermione rather evilly.

"Yes?" Hermione asked while looking up at Legifer's narrowed eyes.

She then watched with a morbid fascination how a rather frightening glimmer appeared in Legifer's dark eyes.

"I see you are still as uncouth as you were before the break," Legifer hissed at her fiercely. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Ms DeCerto."

"Why?" Hermione sassed.

She could hear a few muffled giggles coming from behind her but didn't pay them any heed. That sharp frown on Legifer's face intensified alarmingly then she spat at Hermione in a still surprisingly controlled voice,

"For not paying any attention, for not standing up when asked a question and for addressing me in an improper way." Legifer still hit her with a piercing gaze as she continued, cruel sarcasm dripping from her words, "Now, Ms DeCerto, I would be very delighted to hear your opinion on our topic today."

Hermione frowned at the professor. She had, of course, no idea what the hag had tried to teach them today. So she began, "I don't-

"Stand up, Ms DeCerto," Legifer cut across her impatiently.

Hermione exhaled slowly to get her rising temper back under control. As she stood up from her seat she had to suppress a groan of pain as she shifted her weight shortly on her left leg. That cut in her thigh still hurt rather fiercely.

Then Hermione spoke again and she really tried to ban all the cheekiness from her voice, though she didn't completely manage, "I am sorry, professor. I seem to have been distracted shortly."

Hermione nearly rolled her eyes in exasperation as she now saw that triumphant look on the professor's face.

"That's another five points from Gryffindor," Legifer snapped at her.

Hermione decided to not point out that Legifer had already taken points from her for not paying attention. So she remained silent and stared back at the professor blankly. After a moment Legifer cast a last disapproving glare Hermione's way before she turned abruptly around and started to pace in front of the class. Hermione took that as a sign that she was allowed to sit down again. She was rather relieved to be able to sit. The cut in her thigh throbbed painfully whenever she put any weight on the leg.

"Now after this unpleasant occurrence let us continue with our lesson, ladies," Legifer said. "Some of you might be hopeless cases-" Here Legifer threw another nasty glare Hermione's way. "-but I know that the majority of you will one day become good wives. Ms Reeves, what have we been discussing right now?" Legifer asked, turned towards Lucia.

Hermione watched with amusement how Lucia sprang hastily up from her seat as she was being addressed. Then she said in a rather nervous voice, "The rights of women, professor."
"That is correct, Ms Reeves," Legifer said.

Hermione now raised her eyebrows. Now that was really unexpected. For once she was paying attention to what Legifer lectured about.

"As future wives your job will be to keep the house in order and to watch over the children so your husband can come home after a hard day's work and can relax undisturbed in a comfortable environment." Legifer addressed the whole class again. "For doing that you are entitled to receive a little money that you can spend for yourself. Of course the amount of that pocket money is still the decision of your husband as he is the one who earned the money after all."

_How very generous_, Hermione thought and nearly rolled her eyes.

"Now let me give you this advice," Legifer continued. "Don't spend all of this money at once. It is the best to save some of it. You could even get a vault of your own at Gringotts. Of course you would need the consent of your husband before you can open one."

Here Hermione could almost physically feel the indignation taking a hold of her. So women weren't even allowed to have a vault of their own without their husband allowing it? She shortly wondered how she had gotten her own vault at Gringotts. Maybe she was just lucky because there was no husband who could forbid her to have one. Or, Hermione mused, the Goblins just didn't care about that strange wizarding custom.

Hermione didn't know why but she suddenly felt the need to contribute something to this silly class. So she raised her hand and looked at Legifer expectantly. She could see the eyes of the professor narrow slightly as she saw her raised hand but surprisingly Legifer then said,

"Yes, Ms DeCerto?"

Hermione obediently stood up before she said in cynical tone, "As I don't want to become a burden to my future husband and trouble his unequally more intelligent mind with my tiny little woman-problems how about getting myself a job and earn my own money?"

Hermione stared stoically at Legifer and prepared herself for being yelled at. But surprisingly Legifer didn't seem to be angered by her little speech. Obviously Hermione's cynism had been lost on that woman.

"Now, Ms DeCerto, I believe that was the first time you said something constructive in this class." Legifer drawled at Hermione. And Hermione furrowed her brow as she heard that half-praise.

Legifer continued, this time addressing the whole class again, "Ms DeCerto is right. You shouldn't expect your husband to do all the work. If it is possible and doesn't impact negatively on your household chores you should consider working part-time. Of course your main task still remains to keep the house."

_of course_, Hermione thought enraged and wondered if a person could choke on their own sarcasm.

"But never forget to ask your husband before you accept any job. It is after all his decision whether he allows you to work or not." Legifer lectured her class then she proceeded in her strict voice, "As a general rule it is always the best thing to consult your husband about anything concerning financial matters as men are far better in dealing with such things than women."

Hermione just couldn't decide if she should start to cry or to laugh. These so called rights a woman had, according to Legifer, were just ridiculous. Hermione looked around the class room and saw with displeasure how the other girls seemed to listen intently to what Legifer told them. Some of
them even took notes. It was awful having to watch this. All those girls, every girl at Hogwarts really, appeared to be trapped in those role conceptions this decade intended women to fulfill. Hermione could understand that it was difficult to escape that path women were supposed to walk in this time period but for herself, as an outsider, it was just hard to watch the talent of those girls gone to waste. The best example was the DADA class. Girls just didn't participate in the dueling lessons on principle. Hermione was of the opinion that it would be important for them to learn how to defend themselves, especially because they were women. Her only consolation was that she knew that in the future things would be different. Not perfect but still better.

After this little insight Hermione was more than happy to just drown out Legifer's annoying voice again. It seemed to be an eternity until this pointless class was finished. But finally Legifer ended the class and Hermione reached for her bag and got quickly up from her table. She wanted to get out of the class room as fast as her painfully throbbing leg would allow her to leave. Hermione had just reached the door as she heard that sharp voice again.

"Ms DeCerto, please stay behind."

Hermione sighed rather loudly, turned around and slowly walked over to Legifer's desk. As she reached it the other girls had all left the room by now so she was alone with Legifer.

_How fun..._

Hermione tried to reign in her sarcasm and looked at Legifer in polite expectation. She had no idea what that woman could want from her.

Legifer had again fixed her with a cold glare then she said in her clipped voice, "I would have expected you to come to me immediately after the break ended."

Hermione frowned at the woman in front of her. Why would she want to meet Legifer? There really wasn't anything the two of them had to discuss. Legifer continued to stare at Hermione. Obviously she expected Hermione to do something. But Hermione was just lost so she did nothing but stare back at the professor.

Legifer then shook her head disapprovingly before she snapped, "The summary, Ms DeCerto! You still need to give me the summary I wanted you to write over the break."

Hermione's eyes widened a little as she heard that. She had totally forgotten about it. But now she remembered. Before she had gone to London Legifer had wanted to talk with her. Back then she had given Hermione that stupid book and had demanded that she wrote a summary on it. Of course Hermione had never done such a thing. There had been a lot of more important things going on during her break. So she didn't even know where the book was right now. She had certainly not taken it with her to London. Most likely it still lay somewhere in her dorm. Hermione's gaze wandered back to Legifer.

"…er…" Hermione mumbled.

She could then see how Legifer's eyes narrowed in anger, though it didn't look like she was particularly surprised.

"Don't tell me that you did not write that summary, Ms DeCerto," Legifer hissed at her.

"It might have slipped my mind, professor," Hermione answered before she could stop herself.

She could almost feel those waves of hate coming from Legifer as the woman now glared at her rather evilly.
"That is another thirty points from Gryffindor, Ms DeCerto," Legifer huffed at her angrily. "But don't think you can get away so easily."

Hermione had to resist the urge to get her wand as she then watched how Legifer pulled her own wand and waved it in angry movements. Shortly afterwards the huge book appeared out of thin air and landed with a dull thud on Legifer's desk. Obviously Legifer had summoned the book from Hermione's dormitory. Legifer picked it up and held it out for Hermione to take. Seeing no other option, Hermione reached reluctantly for the book.

"As you seem to be unable to work unsupervised you will finish the summary during detention," Legifer snarled at her. "You will come to my office every Friday after dinner, starting next week, until you can present me a satisfying work."

Hermione's mouth was pressed into a thin line and her hands clutched the book so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Did that stupid old crone really think she had nothing better to do than waste her time with writing this foolish summary?

"Yes, professor." Was the only thing Hermione managed to say without yelling obscenities at that evil woman.

Hermione was seething with anger as she watched Legifer leave the class room.

Hermione could hear her voice coming from the corridor, "Mr Weasley, what are you doing loitering around in the corridor?"

Hermione groaned softly. Of course, her friends still insisted in protecting her from Tom's evil machinations. Right now Hermione was really not in the mood to deal with their concern so she quickly dived behind Legifer's desk. From here she couldn't be seen. Just a few moments later she heard someone entering the class room.

"Oh no, must've missed her." She heard Weasley's seemingly upset voice.

Then Hermione heard him leaving the class room again. She assumed that he was now going to try to find her. Somehow she did feel a little guilty as she crawled like a thief out of her hiding place on the floor but she really wanted to be alone now. Hermione stood up from the floor and then straightened her robes. After that she stuffed the offending book into her bag and then left the class room. As she stepped out on the corridor she was quite relieved to find that Weasley really had left already. Hermione checked her watch. It was still some time left until her next class, Transfiguration. As the Household Charms and Spells class room wasn't too far away from the library Hermione decided to go there. The atmosphere of the library had always had a calming effect on her mind. And she really needed to calm down right now.

So it was just a short time later that Hermione entered the library. There were a few students sitting at the tables and working. Though Hermione noticed annoyed that a few of them were now staring at her rather curiously. She could even hear that group of Hufflepuff girls starting to chatter excitedly as she passed them. She couldn't understand everything they said but the words 'Riddle' and 'broom cupboard' were enough to raise her already hot temper even further. Those stupid gossip mongers were slowly getting on her nerves. But right now that heavy book she was carrying in her bag was even more infuriating. Why did she need to read this stupid book? Legifer even forced her to write a summary. Hermione felt her blood boiling furiously. She stomped down a few aisles in search for a little solitude while simultaneously trying not to tear that stupid book apart in a fit of anger.

As she entered the next aisle she spotted Tom sitting at a table standing right under one of the huge windows. She looked around but it seemed no other students were in the vicinity right now.
Hermione hesitated shortly but then she walked over to the table Tom was occupying and slumped down in the seat beside him. There were books and parchment spread out in front of him. Hermione assumed that he was in the middle of doing his homework. Normally she would support that venture but right now she was too enraged to be considerate.

Tom had looked up as he had noticed someone approaching him. Hermione could again see that softness creeping into his gaze as he looked at her over that book he held in his hands. But that softness was not enough to calm her completely down so she stared rather darkly at Tom. He raised one eyebrow questioningly at her but didn't say anything. Hermione glared at him for a moment but then she just couldn't hold back anymore.

"I can't believe that stupid cow gave me detention!" Hermione blustered. "I mean, really, what have I done? That evil hag had it in for me since I met her!"

Tom closed the book he had been reading in and turned to Hermione. She could see he had one eyebrow raised as he eyed her.

"Dare I ask whom you are speaking about so complimentary?" Tom said in his deep voice.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she hissed the hateful name, "Legifer!"

"Hm, Household Charms and Spells. Your favourite class I assume?" Tom said innocently, but Hermione really didn't like the smirk that was forming on his face. "How did you manage to get yourself into detention? I mean, it's only the first week after break."

Hermione continued to glare at Tom darkly. He had now fully turned towards her and looked at her intently, seemingly paying her utmost attention. But Hermione could see the mocking amusement glinting in his grey eyes. She reached for her bag, she had discarded beside the table and pulled the disturbingly huge tome out. Instead of answering Tom she shoved the book in his direction. He raised his eyebrows questioningly but as she didn't answer and continued to glare at the book Tom took the book.

"Etiquettes for the Young Housewitch?" Tom read the cover. Then he glanced back at Hermione. "What about the book?"

Hermione detached her gaze from the stupid book and looked up at Tom.

"That insane fanatic wanted me to read that trash." Hermione gestured to the book. "Imagine that!"

"What a horrible task," Tom said, his voice bordering on sarcasm.

Hermione's eyes narrowed again as she scowled at Tom. "Yes it is," she huffed. "And she even wanted me to write a summary on the book."

"Which you didn't do?" Tom asked lightly as he flipped through the book.

"Of course not," Hermione exclaimed. "I'm not wasting my time with that rubbish! I mean, come on, etiquettes for the housewitch? Like I need something like that!"

Hermione crossed her arms before her chest and made a very unlady-like snort as she stared daggers at the book in Tom's hands.

"Yeah, I really can't see why you would need that," Tom said and now there was definitely sarcasm dripping from his voice.
Hermione's fierce glare wandered from the book to Tom's face. He was still flipping through the book calmly.

"If you like it so much, then how about you read it?" she said with a tightly controlled voice.

Tom sighed and looked back at Hermione. "So when is your detention?"

Hermione looked away from him, still rather enraged. "Obviously every Friday evening until I'm finished with the book and writing the summary," she said angrily.

There was a pause in which neither of them said anything. Then Tom spoke again, this time there was no mock in his quiet voice, "What do you mean every Friday?"

"Like I said. I'm not getting off the hook until I've read every single chapter in that lousy excuse for a book and have written the summary," Hermione repeated the conditions for her detention.

She glanced back at Tom. There was now a frown furrowing his brow.

"Every Friday?" he said darkly. "I should curse that woman."

Hermione leaned back in her chair and said frustrated, "Now we are thinking along the same lines."

She stared angrily at the huge tome, lying on the library table. Why did she have to waste her time with reading this stupid trash? There were a lot of really important things she had to do.

Hermione stiffened as she suddenly heard Tom's silky voice whispering in her ear, "I could really curse her, you know. No-one's ever going to find out it was me."

Hermione slowly turned her head and looked at him with a furrowed brow. He grinned down at her and there was a glint of amusement in his grey eyes but she was not really sure whether he had been joking right now or not.

"I think you already did your part of cursing people yesterday," Hermione said as she eyed him in suspicion.

Tom then leaned back in his chair and smiled at her with a completely innocent expression on his face.

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about," he said in a confused sounding voice.

Hermione wasn't fooled by that display of innocence or there was a glint of self-satisfaction in his grey eyes. And Hermione knew that he was not innocent. This morning she had seen the bandage on Lestrange's arm. His followers had seemed to be even more intimidated by Tom than they normally were. Tough Hermione didn't feel particularly sorry for them she still didn't approve of Tom cursing his followers.

"Don't bother to deny it," she told him while still hitting him with a disapproving glare. "I know you cursed them."

Tom didn't seem to be impressed by her glare in any way as he continued to smile at her. Then the smile on his face slowly transformed into a rather evil smirk.

"They deserved it," he finally said in a vicious tone. Then the smirk left his face and he narrowed his eyes at her. "So, how are you feeling today? Does your leg still hurt?" he asked demandingly.

His grey eyes left her face and wandered to her leg. Hermione raised her eyebrows as she heard that
commanding tone in his voice but decided to answer him anyway.

"It's not that bad. You don't need to worry," she told him in a soft voice.

"'Not bad'?" Tom said unbelievingly.

Then he reached for her skirt and slid it up a little bit to have a look at the bandage underneath. This time there was no red spot on the white bandage. Tom skimed his fingers gently over the white material as he stared down at her leg with an angry frown between his eyebrows. His gaze wandered back to Hermione's face and he locked eyes with her.

"If it starts to hurt again, you are immediately going back to the Hospital Wing," he ordered her.

Hermione stared right back into his eyes and it was again there. This wonderful but at the same time so dangerous concern she could see radiating from those otherwise so cold eyes. Hermione bit her lip as she looked up at this tempting affection which glinted so evidently in Tom's grey eyes. She knew that this inviting glint could very well be the demise of the future her friends and herself had helped to secure but at the same time this softness was like a salvation to her. She tried to resist for she knew what was at risk here but she had felt so lost and just broken since her friends had left her forever. While she was incredibly scared, at the same time the expression in Tom's eyes seemed like a beacon of hope. It protected her from all those horrible memories that otherwise tore at her without mercy.

As Hermione was looking up at his grey eyes she slowly, even hesitantly, skidded nearer to him. The rational part of her mind screamed at her to stop but the other part which was somehow broken, desperate and hurting drove her on. She couldn't stop herself as she leaned towards Tom and then cautiously snaked her arms around him until she clung to him tightly. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his chest as she felt his strong arms reassuringly around her, pulling her even closer to him. Her pain and doubts were forgotten as she embraced Tom so tightly.

Tom was confused as he held Hermione in his arms. She had been fine just a minute before but then she had suddenly looked at him in that strange way again. He had seen a glimpse of that inexplicable despair and grief that seemed to sometimes overwhelm her. Not for the first time he wondered what had caused her pain. She had looked up at him with her hazel eyes and he had seen the unbearable sorrow again. Something had happened to her and it had broken her.

Tom could feel his magic rushing through him furiously as he held Hermione. He needed to find out what it was that had hurt her so. Hermione now belonged to him and he wasn't going to allow anyone to hurt her again. But right now all he could do was to hold her closely as she clung to him almost desperately.

After some time she ended the embrace and looked up at him. The sorrow was still hidden in her eyes but now there was something more. There was dangerous insecurity flitting over her face. He could always see that insecurity when Hermione was around him. Tom knew that she still was unsure about their relationship. It even seemed like there was an internal battle raging inside of Hermione. A part of her wanted to be with him but then there was another part which still detested him. Obviously Hermione hadn't yet decided which part she should listen to. But that was something unacceptable. Because now that he had claimed her he was never going to let her go again.

Tom reached out for her and cupped one of her cheeks in his hand. Then he leaned down and kissed her softly. She hesitated shortly but then he was very pleased as he could feel her responding to him. She might be struggling or trying to resist but he was not going to allow her to leave him again. She was his.

Hermione was shocked again by her own actions. So when Tom released her she got hastily up from
her seat. What had gotten into her? Again?

"I… I have to go…" she stammered as she looked down at Tom.

She quickly averted her eyes from him as she found him smiling at her softly. Then she grabbed her bag with trembling fingers and turned away from Tom, intending to leave as fast as possible. She had only taken a few hurried steps as she heard Tom's gently taunting voice,

"Didn't you forget something?"

Hermione stopped and then slowly turned around to him. He was still sitting elegantly at the table and now a smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as he eyed her in amusement. Her eyes wandered to his hand which held Legifer's book up. The smirk on his handsome face grew even bigger as he waved the book in a small casual movement. Hermione hesitated shortly but then she walked back to him. As she reached him Tom held the book out for her. She extended a hand to accept it. As she took the book her fingers shortly skimmed over Tom's warm hand. The very annoying tingling sensation in her stomach was back again. Her hand clasped the book tightly and she stuffed it angrily into her bag. After that Hermione intended to turn around and leave again but before she could do that she involuntarily gazed down at Tom again. He was still looking at her and his eyes shone so softly. Hermione felt like drowning in them. She should really leave now.

She had just formulated that decision as she found herself somehow bending down to Tom. Her hand suddenly run through his silky dark hair and before what she was doing registered in her mind she had placed a kiss on his lips.

Then she hastily bent up again and felt rather startled by her own rash behaviour and by that pleasant and content feeling in her stomach. She grabbed her school bag tightly and almost ran away. She was too frightened by her own odd feelings so she didn't pay Tom any attention as she fled the library. Otherwise she would have been able to see a rather triumphant smirk on his handsome face as he watched her leave.

"Hermione! There you are!" Hermione heard someone yelling as she hurried down yet another corridor in her venture to bring as much distance between her and the library as possible.

She turned around and found Longbottom, Lupin and Weasley walking towards her. She could see expressions of concern on the boys' faces.

"We have been searching for you," Weasley exclaimed rather breathlessly as he had reached her. "Where have you been? I've waited for you in front of the class room."

"Really?" Hermione said, trying to sound surprised. "I haven't seen you. So I left."

"We told you that you can't walk around alone," Longbottom said in exasperation as he looked down at her.

Hermione couldn't help but feel a little peeved by that concern flashing in his eyes for she knew that this protectiveness was quite unnecessary. That knowledge was reminding her bluntly of how much Tom's behaviour towards her had changed. She was frightened by that change in his actions a great deal. Though right now, she was more frightened by her own behaviour and her wrong feelings. She just couldn't be trusted around Tom, it seemed.

"But he didn't get you, did he?" Hermione was brought out of her musings by Longbottom's worried voice.

She again looked up at him and then asked confused, "Who?"
She watched Longbottom shake his head before he said in a serious tone, "Riddle, of course. You really have to be more careful. He's after you again."

Hermione frowned at him. She was not really sure how to respond to that. Partly it's even true, she thought strangely amused. Though that really was no funny matter, she reprimanded herself.

"Look," she began in a soothing tone, "I really don't think he'll try anything."

But obviously her appeasing words were lost on her friends as they were still looking at her in concern.

"You shouldn't be so careless," Lupin told her in his calm voice.

"Yeah," Longbottom instantly agreed. "That evil git is planning something, believe me. You don't even want to hear the rumours he's made up about you again."

Hermione stared at him. He was right, she really didn't want to hear the rumours. Worst thing, though, was her guilty conscience as she knew that at least some of the rumours were indeed true.

"Don't worry," Lupin told her. He had obviously mistaken that shaken look on her face for fear and now tried to console her.

"Yeah, nothing'll happen to you," Longbottom said. Then he wrapped an arm around her shoulders before he announced happily, "Let's go to transfiguration or we'll be really late and get ourselves thrown into detention."

Hermione smiled. Yes, she really didn't need any more detentions.

"So," Weasley asked her while they walked towards the transfiguration class room. "How was Household by the way?"

Hermione looked at him and there was an expression on her face like she had just bitten into a lemon.

"Ugh, don't ask. I wish I could drop that stupid class."

"Well, you'll never find a husband if you think that way," Longbottom suddenly said in a very accurate imitation of Legifer's voice.

Hermione giggled at him, "Pff, maybe you should marry Legifer."

Longbottom's eyes widened in horror before he said, "Don't joke about things like this, Hermione." Then he grabbed his chest in a melodramatic pose and breathed, "Oh, how I yearn for that woman, you have no idea."

Hermione stared at him for a second before they all simultaneously broke into laughter.

"Yeah, right," she managed to say between her giggles.

It wasn't long until they reached the transfiguration class room. Hermione wasn't angry with her friends anymore. Sure, they were currently unbearably protective of her but they always managed to cheer her up no matter how panicky she might have been.

As Hermione entered the transfiguration class room she couldn't stop her gaze from instantly falling on Tom. He was already sitting at his table. Obviously he hadn't needed as much time to walk to the class room as she had. Maybe because he hadn't fled in panic from the library to then run aimlessly
through Hogwarts' many passage ways. So he already sat elegantly in his seat with one arm dangling casually over the backrest of the chair. He seemed to be totally at ease, radiating off an air of superiority.

But as Hermione looked closer she could see the small differences in his posture. Right now, Tom seemed to be very tense. She didn't have to guess why he was feeling this way. This was the first transfiguration lesson after the break. Hermione knew, Tom just hated Dumbledore. She could even understand why Tom wasn't exactly fond of Dumbledore. It was Dumbledore, after all, who had forced him to go back to that horrible orphanage. And it was also Dumbledore who had taken Tom's wand away. Hermione still thought that if Tom had just told Dumbledore everything about the orphanage, the professor would surely never have sent him there. Tom had still not told Hermione why Dumbledore took his wand in the first place. There must have been a reason behind it.

Hermione walked over to her table in the front row. She smiled hesitantly at Tom whose grey eyes softened a bit as they fell on her. Then she sat down at the table in front of Tom and started to pull her parchment and quill out of her bag. At that moment the class room door opened and Dumbledore entered. He was again wearing one of his flashy robes. Though lime green definitely wasn't his colour, Hermione noticed amused.

"Good day to you, my dear students," he greeted them with his kind voice as he walked over to his desk. "I hope you enjoyed your break and didn't forget all the things we have learned. Though I would understand fully if your brains have used the opportunity to get rid of all that abstract information again." Dumbledore said while his eyes twinkled at them mischievously.

"Can anyone tell me what spell we learned in our last lesson?" Dumbledore asked them.

Out of habit, Hermione's hand shot up.

"Yes, Ms DeCerto?" Dumbledore turned to her.

"We learned about the 'Confero' spell, professor," Hermione answered quickly.

"Right you are, Ms DeCerto," Dumbledore beamed at her. "And can you tell me what that spell is used for?"

Hermione nodded, then said, "It is a spell used to transmit magic."

Hermione knew quite a bit about that particular spell by now. It was after all an invention of Peverell and he had devoted a whole chapter in his manuscript to that spell. Though Hermione had to grudgingly admit that she had at best understood half of what he had written.

"Right again, Ms DeCerto. Take five points for Gryffindor." Dumbledore smiled down at her.

The rest of the lesson Dumbledore tried to explain the theory behind the Confero spell. Hermione quickly noticed that he was just talking about the simpler connections between the spell and the transmitted magic. She already knew this part from the Peverell manuscript. Obviously Dumbledore deemed the more complex parts of the spell's theory as too difficult for his students. Hermione couldn't blame him because she herself hadn't understood everything.

"Now, after this exhausting theory let us try a practical approach to the Confero spell," Dumbledore finally said.

He then turned around and took a small wooden box from where it had stood on his table. The professor handed the box to Lupin while he said, addressing the whole class,
"I want each of you to take one of the knitting needles and then try to transfer a little of your magic into them. Don't be disappointed if it doesn't work right away the Confero spell is not easy to learn."

As Lupin had taken one of the knitting needles out of the box he handed it to Hermione. She took one and then stared at the needle with a frown on her face. The last time she had tried to use the Confero spell it hadn't worked at all. She cast a sideways glance at Lupin. He had already started. But it seemed that he wasn't making any progress if that frustrated look on his face was anything to go by. Hermione sighed softly then she put the knitting needle down on the table. She flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand.

"Confero," she whispered softly as she waved her wand over the needle.

Instantly she could feel her magic flowing towards the needle. Though it was incredibly difficult to maintain the flow as it seemed to flicker unsteadily. In the end her concentration broke and the flow died down again. It really was rather frustrating. Trying to direct her magic in the right direction was like wanting to catch a fish with bare hands. It always seemed to slip away.

But Hermione wanted to at least try it once more. This time, though, she concentrated her magic before she uttered the spell. As she was trying to get her magic completely under control she again noticed that strange pulse which seemed to always surround Hogwarts. She wondered if this pulse was really the ward protecting Hogwarts. Though she was surprised to be able to feel it now because Hermione had never before felt this pulse inside of the castle. But now she could feel that it flowed through everything, including her own magic. It was rather strange having to feel how her own magic was influenced by something she couldn't control.

Hermione continued to concentrate on her magic and it wasn't long before she stumbled over the Elder Magic. Again the Elder Magic seemed to be the only thing which was completely undisturbed by the pulse. Hermione always felt a little uneasy when she felt the Elder Magic inside of her. It was still alien to her. But now she was rather glad that at least one thing seemed to be untouched by this strange pulse. Cautiously Hermione tried to get a grip on the Elder Magic. She reached out for that strange magic inside of her and tried very hard to draw upon its power. But as expected, the Elder Magic was as elusive as ever.

Hermione had just retreated again from the Elder Magic as she could suddenly feel how it stirred inside of her. It moved and jerked and then abruptly it seemed to grow. Hermione couldn't stop it in any way and then the Elder Magic wrapped itself completely around her. It only lasted for seconds, but during that short time Hermione could feel how she was completely unlinked from that steady pulse of Hogwarts' magic. The Elder Magic surrounded her and seemed to protect her from the warding magic. But before Hermione could comprehend what just had happened the Elder Magic collapsed and unwound from her again. It broke down until it was again hidden beneath her own magic.

"Are you alright?" she could hear a worried voice ask her.

Hermione looked beside her and found Lupin frowning at her. He hadn't noticed anything, had he?

"Yes," she said and smiled at him reassuringly.

Longbottom who sat beside her said, "You really shouldn't overexert yourself." Then he leaned to Hermione and whispered in a mischievous tone. "If you ask me, I think that transferring thing is impossible anyway."

Hermione chuckled amused. Though she knew that he was wrong there. Otherwise she wouldn't be in this mess where a strange magic had somehow taken refuge inside of her. Her smile dropped from
her face and she worriedly glanced over to Dumbledore. He hadn't noticed the Elder Magic, had he? But she was relieved to find Dumbledore standing at the other end of the room and currently trying to explain something to a student. Hermione breathed out. She then turned her head around and was more than relieved to find that Tom wasn't looking her way either. He had a rather scary look on his face and seemed to stare darkly at Dumbledore. A knitting needle lay neglected on his table and Tom hadn't even drawn his wand. It didn't seem like he was going to try the Confero spell. Then again he was the only one who had managed to do it even before the break.

It seemed that she had been lucky. Neither Dumbledore nor Tom had noticed her little stunt with the Elder Magic. It would have been difficult having to explain to either of them where she had gotten that strange magic.

Hermione turned around again and put her wand with a trembling hand down on her table. She wasn't going to try the Confero spell again. She didn't want to have the Elder Magic invading her. It had been rather stupid to try to reach the Elder Magic here in the class room anyway, where everyone could see it. Up to now the Elder Magic had never done something like it just had. So Hermione hadn't expected it to wrap around her suddenly.

What had just happened? Hermione wondered frantically. Did the power of that magic somehow grow? Or was it that she had suddenly gained more access to the magic? Either way, Hermione thought as she gazed pensively down at her black wand, she needed to read on in Peverell's manuscript. She decided to start on the next chapter in the book this night.

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It was some time later that day as Hermione and her Gryffindor friends walked down to the Great Hall for dinner. Before the entrance to the Great Hall they saw a crowd of people standing before the notice-board. Normally that was where the next Quidditch match or a Hogsmeade weekend was announced. Judging from that excited whisper something interesting must be published there.

"What are they staring at?" Hermione asked as she was standing on tiptoes and tried to see over Longbottom's shoulder.

Longbottom turned his head as he heard her question. "It's the apparition lessons," he told her while there was an excited glint appearing in his blue eyes. "The sixth years are allowed to take the apparition test."

"That's so wicked!" Weasley exclaimed as he was smiling at her broadly. "We'll learn how to apparate. How brilliant is that?"

Hermione smiled back at the two boys standing in front of her. They were so excited about being able to learn how to apparate. Somehow Hermione liked this innocent enthusiasm she could see radiating of their faces. She remembered that she had been equally excited in her sixth year as she had heard they would learn how to apparate. Hermione had to smile as she remembered how Ron had lost half of his eyebrow as he had taken the test. Of course he had passed with the second attempt. But still that image of him without half his eyebrow was quite funny. Thinking back, those had been jaunty days, Hermione thought wistfully. Though back then she wouldn't have agreed as there had seemed to be drama lurking behind every other corner. And, Hermione's smile disappeared of her face, the dark menace had already been visible on the horizon.

"Why the long face?" Longbottom diverted her thoughts before they could get really depressing. "Do you think it's that difficult? Learning to apparate, I mean."

Hermione looked up at him and had to grin again as she imagined how he would look without his
"You don't need to be afraid of failing," Weasley grinned at her while they resumed their way to the Great Hall, leaving the crowd behind. "You're a know-it-all, just like Lupin. Of course you'll manage."

"Watch it, you," Hermione said in a mock threatening voice. "I'm not a know-it-all."

Longbottom put an arm around her shoulder as he said with an amused glint in his eyes, "He's right, Hermione. You have to accept it. But at least your nerdy power will allow you to learn how to apparate in no time."

Hermione was just going to retort something as she heard a cold voice behind her say, "She's not going to learn anything if you are always all over her."

She turned around and saw that Tom was standing just a few paces away, carrying an air of authority as he fixed Longbottom with a cold glare. That was quite bad, Hermione thought frustrated. She knew that Tom and Longbottom hated each other. In the corner of her eyes she could see how Longbottom had stiffened now and his right hand even twitched a little, obviously wanting to pull his wand. Longbottom was hotheaded and could do some imprudent things when angered.

"I don't think that's any of your concern," Longbottom hissed at Tom enraged.

Hermione's eyes wandered back to Tom and she saw that angry frown on his face. Although Tom appeared to always be able to contain himself she knew that in reality he had quite the hot temper, too. She really didn't want him to get in a fight with her friends again. So she looked up at him pleadingly. Tom's eyes sparkled down at her softly but then his gaze hardened again as it wandered back to Longbottom. Hermione bit her lip as she saw that evil expression on his face.

"Oh, but it is my concern," Tom drawled at Longbottom. "You see, I'm a prefect. I would really hate taking points from DeCerto, here, for wasting the apparition instructor's time."

"What are you trying to say, Riddle?" Longbottom huffed at Tom angrily. "That Hermione is stupid?"

Tom's eyes shortly swept over her and Hermione could see an unexpected mischievous glint in them, then Tom turned to Longbottom and sneered at him derisively, "Well, at least I'm sure DeCerto is not nearly smart enough to learn how to apparate. I even think she would be so foolish and try to apparte through Diagon Alley's impenetrable wards. Then she'll get splinched."

Hermione's mouth twitched traitorously as she tried to suppress a grin. Yes, it was very much impossible to apparate through Diagon Alley's wards. But that hadn't stopped her to grab Tom and apparate with him through those wards during the Christmas break. Back then he had been more than curious to learn how she had managed that.

"Don't be silly, Riddle," Hermione said in a condescending voice. "Everyone knows that it's impossible to apparate through Diagon Alley's wards."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her angrily. But Hermione wasn't fooled by his acting. She could see the amusement in his grey eyes. He seemed to enjoy that little banter.

"Pff, so it would seem," he scoffed at her. "But you don't have much common sense so I wouldn't be surprised if you tried anyway."

"Stop insulting her!" Longbottom huffed at Tom as he stepped protectively in front of Hermione.
Tom raised an eyebrow gracefully at him. Then a rather evil smirk slowly took form on his face.

"You can't protect her forever," Tom told Longbottom in a smug voice.

Tom's gaze darted shortly to Hermione. The softness in his grey eyes was telling her that she didn't need Longbottom to protect her. Then Tom turned around and stalked confidently away.

"That evil git!" Longbottom blustered enraged as he watched Tom walking down the corridor in direction to the Great Hall.

Tom stalked into the Great Hall. He was still quite angry and his magic rushed through him. He slowly walked over to the Slytherin table while trying to reign in his temper again. It had been unbearable, having to watch how Longbottom had wrapped his arm around Hermione. As Tom had seen that, he really had had to work to stop himself from throwing a very dark curse Longbottom's way. That Gryffindor boy wasn't allowed to touch Tom's possession with his dirty fingers. He reached the Slytherin table and now walked over to his seat. As he passed Lestrange who already sat at the table Tom was very pleased to see a look of fear on his face before Lestrange avoided his eyes. His other followers looked at him with the same awe and terror in their eyes. They already know, Tom thought satisfied, what happens to those who mess with me.

Tom quickly needed to finally convince Hermione that she belonged to him, then he wouldn't need to act so cautiously around her so-called friends any longer.

Finally Tom had reached his seat and sat down at the table. Then he let his gaze wander back to the entrance to the Great Hall. He saw how Hermione just walked into the hall. His eyes narrowed dangerously as he saw that she was still accompanied by those Gryffindor idiots. Tom watched Hermione walking to her house table. Everything would have been much easier if she had been sorted into Slytherin. Hogwarts' stupid house system was quite annoying at the moment. But that wouldn't stop him from gaining Hermione, Tom thought haughtily as he watched the witch sitting down at Gryffindor table. He had already made progress with her, hadn't he? Tom thought back to the incident this morning in the library. Hermione had been angry and had needed someone to talk to. And she had come to seek him out. She hadn't gone to her silly friends, no, she had wanted to talk with Tom.

A smug smile appeared on his face as Tom watched Hermione, sitting at the other end of the hall.

The best thing was, that back then Hermione had initiated one of their kisses. She might have been unsure of herself and rather shocked by her own actions but still she had kissed Tom. He knew that he just needed to push her some more and then she would finally cave in.

"Hello, Tom," a silky female voice whispered into his ear.

Tom turned his head and frowned as he found Melanie Nicolls sitting down in the seat beside him. This stupid slut started to really annoy him. Tom slowly regretted to ever have shagged her. Since then she always pestered him with her unbearably boring presence. Maybe he should just curse her. Or better yet, order one of his followers to curse her then he wouldn't lose any more time over her.

"Good evening, Melanie," Tom replied in a polite voice that didn't betray any of his sinister thoughts.

Then he looked away from her again and tried to ignore her. His gaze once more wandered back to Hermione.

"I'm sure you are rather disgusted by those rumours going around, aren't you?" Nicolls' pesky voice again broke his concentration.
Tom slowly looked back at Nicolls and found her staring at the Gryffindor table.

"Oh, look at that silly girl," Nicolls exclaimed with a sour look on her face. "I bet DeCerto made those rumours up herself."

Tom exhaled slowly to try to calm his seething magic down again. It begged him to be released. Preferably in form of a dark curse and in direction to Nicolls.

"Like you would ever spend time with someone like her," Nicolls continued in her snobbish tone.

*I can't believe that I'm spending time with you actually,* Tom thought enraged as he stared down at Nicolls.

Then Nicolls suddenly put a hand on his arm before she leaned over to him and whispered into his ear, "How about we do something to prove to them that you are not spending time with that disgusting Gryffindor?"

Tom could feel his fury intensify as he could almost hear that 'But with me.' which Nicolls hadn't said out loud. But they both knew what she had just suggested. Nicolls then leaned back again but she still clung to his arm. Tom wanted nothing more than to shake off her unwanted clasp.

"I don't know," Tom said and then he could barely ban the scoff from his voice. "You surely are the most beautiful girl in Hogwarts." Tom nearly laughed out loud as he could see that vain look on Nicolls face. Then he continued. "But DeCerto is kind of pretty, too, isn't she?"

For a second Nicolls stared at him scandalized. But then, to Tom's displeasure, she started to giggle inanely.

"You nearly had me there," Nicolls simpered into his ear as she clung even tighter to Tom's arm.

Now Tom was definitely irritated by Nicolls' behaviour. He just wished that he would be alone with her. Then he could do something to her that she surely didn't have in mind as she tried to seduce him.

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Hermione was still very pleased that the encounter between Tom and her friends hadn't resulted into something more sinister. So she was happy as she entered the Great Hall and then walked over to her table. She noticed the curious stares the other students threw her way but she wasn't paying them any attention. If they wanted to believe in stupid rumours, then she wouldn't be able to do anything against that anyway. So Hermione sat down at the table beside her friends and began to eat. After some time her thoughts went back to the transfiguration class. That occurrence had been more than troubling. Why had the Elder Magic suddenly behaved so abnormal?

*Well, is there anything 'normal' about that damn magic?* a voice asked sarcastically.

Hermione sighed. That magic was truly unpredictable. The only positive thing was that the Elder Magic had only started to behave so strangely after she had tried to get a grip on it. That meant that she had at least a little influence on it. Which was a good thing. She couldn't have that magic running wild inside of her. She really needed to finish Peverell's manuscript. Though Hermione slowly started to doubt that it would be any help to her. It was incredibly hard to understand and Peverell hadn't even mentioned the Elder Wand yet.

She tried to suppress her worries and let her gaze wander over the Great Hall.
Soon all thoughts of the Elder Magic were forgotten and her eyes narrowed in anger as she stared at the Slytherin table. Tom was sitting at his usual place at the table but he wasn't the cause of her anger. Her gaze wandered from Tom to the girl sitting beside him. The girl had dark brown, shiny long hair and a flawless porcelain skin. Hermione had to admit, the girl was pretty. As she was watching that brown haired girl Hermione's mouth formed a thin line and she tried to rein in her fury.

Right now, the girl was chatting with Tom animatedly. Hermione watched as Tom replied something which made the girl simper sillily. Then her gaze turned into a dark scowl as she saw that the girl leaned into Tom and put her hand on his arm. Hermione's hand balled tightly around her fork as that stupid witch whispered something into Tom's ear.

What did that witch have to tell Tom? And why did she have to touch him to do that?

"Hermione?" she heard a voice beside her ask.

Hermione turned around and found Weasley staring at her expectantly.

"Huh?" Hermione mumbled distractedly as her eyes wanted to wander back to the Slytherin table.

"So, are you coming along?" Longbottom who sat beside Weasley asked her now.

"Where to?" Hermione still wasn't really paying attention.

_Who is that stupid girl?_

"To the Quidditch match of course," Longbottom exclaimed.

Hermione now looked back at her friends sitting beside her. There was a Quidditch game? She hadn't known and felt accordingly a little guilty. Longbottom and Weasley were, after all, members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

She smiled at them. "Against whom are you playing?"

"Aww, Hermione!" Weasley exclaimed as he ruffled his hair frustrated. "We've been talking about this for the last what? Days?"

Hermione chuckled at him. Really, what was that with boys and Quidditch?

"I'm sorry," she told them, but couldn't keep all of her amusement from her voice. "I am paying attention now." She propped her head up on her arms and stared at them intently. "Just tell me, which team are you playing?"

Lupin, who sat right beside her, chuckled softly. Hermione knew he wasn't a great Quidditch fan either.

Longbottom cast a warning look at Lupin before he said, turned at Hermione, "We are playing Slytherin, Hermione."

She raised her eyebrows. _Of course, they are playing Slytherin_. She inwardly rolled her eyes.

"So, you've gotta come and cheer us on," Longbottom continued and hit her with his puppy-dog-eyes.

Hermione giggled, "Sure sure, I'll come."

"If you didn't know we were playing Slytherin, why did you just glare at their table?" Weasley
suddenly asked her.

"Pff, like you need a reason to glare at those gits," Longbottom announced as his eyes wandered over the Slytherin table. "We are so going to smash them!"

Hermione giggled again and then she, too, looked at the Slytherin table. Her smile, though, quickly died on her face as she saw that this girl was still all over Tom. Telling him something and still whispering in his ear by doing so.

Who was that?

"It's just a pity that Lestrange's not playing." She then heard Weasley complain.

She detached her gaze from that annoying Slytherin girl and looked back at Weasley.

"He's not playing?" she asked innocently. "Why not?"

She knew perfectly well why Lestrange wouldn't play. She had seen his bandaged arm. And she knew who exactly was responsible for that. But she somehow wanted to hear the excuse Tom had come up with.

Weasley now looked at her before he said in a disgruntled voice, "He's obviously gotten injured during practice, that idiot."

"Why do you want him to play anyway?" Hermione asked. "Is he a terrible player?"

"No no, he's actually quite good." Weasley leaned back in his chair. "But he's a beater just like me and I seriously wanna get back at him for hurling a bludger at Marc in the last match."

"Yeah," Longbottom growled angrily. "It's his fault I broke my arm."

"Well, actually his and Avery's," Lupin threw in rather helpfully.

"You are right." Longbottom's face brightened up again. Then he turned to Weasley and said rather maliciously. "You can hurl a bludger at Avery."

"Can do," Weasley laughed.

Hermione smiled at them but it wasn't long before her eyes wandered back to the Slytherin table. And Tom. She was quite furious to see that he had gotten up from his seat and that this dark-haired girl clung to him by grasping his arm with both her hands. Hermione watched with growing displeasure how the two of them walked together out of the Great Hall.

Where are they going?

After dinner Hermione walked to her dormitory. Her thoughts still circled around that brown-haired Slytherin girl. She even managed to block out the inane chatter of her dorm mates who accompanied her to the common room. She had had to promise Longbottom that she wouldn't wander off alone again otherwise he wouldn't have let her walk back alone with the girls. They just passed a corridor as Hermione saw a group of Slytherin girls walking by. She spotted that brown haired girl among them. Hermione was rather relieved that this time that girl didn't cling to Tom.

"Who is that?" Hermione asked Rose, who walked right beside her.

"Who?" Rose said in her squeaking voice.
"The girl with the long brown hair."

"Ah, you mean Nicolls," Lucia threw in.

Hermione turned towards Lucia and raised her eyebrows in question.


"I see," Hermione said in a low voice while she fixed this Nicolls girl with a dark glare.

"Why do you want to know?" Rose now asked nosily.

"Just curious," Hermione replied curtly. Then she hesitated but in the end her curiosity got the better of her, "I've seen her talking with Tom."

Hermione furrowed her brow as the other two girls were suddenly staring at her rather oddly. Then Rose opened her mouth and exclaimed excitedly, "Ah, you call him 'Tom' already?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her before she said in a tight voice, "Well, it's his name after all."

"Are you jealous?" Lucia now asked in a teasing voice.

Hermione started to get really annoyed by them again and regretted to ever having started this conversation.

"No, I'm not," she snapped at Lucia. "Now what about Nicolls?"

"Of course, you don't know," Rose now said. "It happened last year before you came to Hogwarts. You see Melanie Nicolls was Riddle's girlfriend."

"Yeah, but they broke up," Lucia threw in. "She's tried to get him back ever since."

Hermione's eyes narrowed at Nicolls.

"Girlfriend?" she asked in a low and dangerous voice.

Fortunately the girls didn't notice that darkness in her tone.

"Yes, well, look at her," Rose said in whiney tone. "She looks just perfect. Beautiful. Every guy in this school wants to have her for a girlfriend."

"Yeah, and every girl wants to have Riddle as a boyfriend," Lucia said longingly. "Of course those two would end up together."

Hermione's gaze wandered back to Nicolls. She had to admit it, that girl really looked just beautiful. She wasn't very tall, had a slim figure, pretty hair and fine features.

Tom's girlfriend?

"But they broke up, did they?" Hermione asked in a quiet voice that didn't betray how very interested she now was.

"Yep, like I said. Riddle ditched her," Rose told her in a silly, self-important voice. "Nicolls wants him back. That's no secret."

"So are you jealous, Hermione?" Lucia again asked and stared expectantly at Hermione.
"Why would I be jealous?" Hermione huffed while she still glared at Nicolls.

Then she looked away from that annoying girl and marched back to the Gryffindor common room. Her dorm mates followed her and didn't stop to pester her with their unneeded comments. As they had reached their dormitory Hermione finally had had enough of their idle talk. She stalked into the bathroom, washed up and changed into her pyjamas before she returned into the dorm.

With a final and rather angry sounding, "Good night!" she slumped into her bed and drew the covers shut, thus stopping every attempt of her dorm mates to involve her into any further conversation.

For a while she lay in her bed, angrily stared up at the Gryffindor red drapes of her four-poster and tried to block out the chatter still coming from the other girls.

Then her thoughts jumped back to the events in the Great Hall. She could still see it before her mind's eye. How that Nicolls girl had clutched Tom. How she had whispered in his ear with that seductive look on her face. Tom hadn't done anything as that snotty girl had clung to him tightly. Hermione felt anger washing over her and her magic flowed through her furiously. Why hadn't he just cursed her? Had he liked it how Nicolls had clasped him?

It hadn't escaped Hermione's attention that at least Nicolls had looked up at Tom with a disgustingly love struck expression on her face. She had been his girlfriend last year, Hermione remembered while she seethed with anger. But surely Tom didn't want her back, did he? she wondered uneasily. Nicolls was quite pretty after all.

Hermione rolled over in her bed and tried to lie on her left side. But a sharp pain coming from her left leg reminded her of the cut she had received yesterday. A soft groan of pain escaped her mouth before she cautiously rolled over on her right side to avoid putting any weight on her hurt leg.

The pain had shortly distracted her from her enraged thoughts so that now Hermione could warily examine her boiling emotions. She still was rather furious. But that was utterly incomprehensible. Why was she so enraged by this incident in the first place? If Tom wanted to talk with Nicolls or have her clinging to his arm, that was no business of Hermione. Tom could do whatever he wanted after all.

But then she remembered how he always looked at her with that softness shining in his grey eyes. She found that she didn't want him to look at Nicolls in that way. Hermione closed her eyes tightly as she remembered how Tom had embraced her so gently in the library this morning. Then he had kissed her. She rubbed one hand angrily over her face before she opened her eyes again.

Tom's caring behaviour towards her, the concern she could sometimes see in his eyes, that meant so much to her. But did it mean anything to Tom?

Hermione breathed deeply and tried to get her agitated emotions back under control. Wasn't it good if Tom turned his attention away from her? It was dangerous, after all, this closeness between the two of them. Despite her thoughts Hermione still felt angry as she imagined how Nicolls was right now in the same common room with Tom.

…maybe even lying in his arms, she then thought almost fearfully.

This was ridiculous. She tried to calm herself down. Then she reached for the small book she had pulled from her trunk previously. She had hidden it under her pyjamas so her dorm mates wouldn't notice. But now she looked down at the leather-bound old book. Then she opened it with a sigh. As she began to read in the book she did it more to divert her thoughts from wandering back to Tom than because she was interested in its content. After a while of reading Peverell's hard to comprehend
In the last weeks of the dying year my two brothers decided to pay me a visit in my humble home. I had not met with them for nearly three years. Thus we celebrated our reunion with all the enjoyments my land was able to provide. The next day I took pleasure in showing my brothers through my laboratories. They had already known about my obsession with the creation of magical objects. But so far they never took a deeper interest in that magical branch themselves, thinking it was not prestigious enough.

As their eyes fell on my creations they instantly understood the power that stands behind them. The house of Peverell has always borne strong wizards so my brothers are great sorcerers, just like I am, and know to recognize a brilliant invention when they see one.

Deeply impressed by my achievements they swore to delve into the act of creating magical objects themselves. I was rather pleased by their discernment and delighted that they wanted to follow my lead because I knew that I would always be superior to them.

It was that knowledge that made me agree with the challenge my brother, Oleander, suggested. We would meet again in exactly one year and one day and each of us was to bring a magical object made by himself. Then we would compare our work in regard to power and craft and award the best out of the three.

I was very confident to win this challenge.
Quidditch And Decisions

Ouch!

Hermione looked in anger down at her leg. It hurt. Consequently she was in a bad mood. Or that was what she tried to talk herself into believing. Aside from her leg there really was no other reason why she should feel so enraged, was there?

She reached for her wand which she had discarded previously on the rim of the wash basin. Then she waved the wand at her leg. The bandage around her left thigh disappeared instantly. The cut was still clearly visible on her skin and dark blood had caked over it. It didn't look too bad, considering that she had received it only two days ago. Obviously Madam Dulan's potions had been effective. With a flick of her wand a new bandage wound around her leg. It wasn't long now and she would be as good as new.

Hermione left the bathroom and stepped into her dorm. Her dorm mates were still here, she noticed. They were getting ready to head down to the Great Hall and after that to the Quidditch pitch as today was the day of the 'important' mach of Gryffindor versus Slytherin. The school rivalry between those two houses was just as strong as it had been in her time period. So this match promised to be a very intense one. Hermione couldn't really share the enthusiasm her dorm mates showed. She watched how Lucia was just producing her red and gold scarf from her trunk and Diana seemed to charm a bright red badge so that it read the letters: 'Lions always win!'. Hermione rolled her eyes. She did like her own house but somehow the school spirit had left her since she had been forced to leave Hogwarts to go to war.

"There you are, Hermione!" Lucia exclaimed as she saw Hermione standing by the bathroom door. "We've been waiting for you."

How very nice of you! Hermione thought while she felt annoyance building up in her.

Lucia then walked over to her and wrapped an arm around her in a friendly gesture. Hermione couldn't appreciate it at the moment.

"It must be so hard for you," she said in a sombre voice, though there was amusement glinting in her eyes.

Hermione furrowed her brow, then asked confused, "What are you talking about?"

She turned her head away from Lucia as she heard Rose giggle stupidly.

"Well, which side are you going to cheer on?" Rose asked in a slightly teasing voice, while she still managed to giggle annoyingly. "Marc plays for Gryffindor. But then Riddle is a Slytherin."

"Slytherin. Cheer for Slytherin," Viola advised in her usual gruff tone while she picked up her black school cloak which lay on her bed. "Riddle's not going to like it if you cheer Marc on."

Hermione frowned at her dorm mates. Then Lucia released her again, before she said in a ridiculously serious tone, "We'll support you with trying to get Riddle."

"Gee, thanks," Hermione replied with sarcasm seeping from her words.

Those girls were really starting to annoy her this morning. They were making it sound like she wanted Tom to like her.
Well, you do like him. Wouldn't it be nice if he-

An inner voice started to lecture her but Hermione angrily blocked it out as she marched over to the door. Despite her unfriendly demeanour her dorm mates followed her and were quite adamant to keep chatting about Tom. Hermione clenched her jaw and tried to just drown their voices out. Though now that she wasn't listening to the girls her thoughts were free to wander to wherever they liked. Her level of annoyance rose a few notches as they jumped back to dinner yesterday. She could still see that Slytherin girl clinging to Tom and whispering in his ear. Nicolls, his former girlfriend!

Why did that girl have to be all over Tom?

Hermione stomped through the common room and over to the portrait hole. She pushed against the portrait with more force than necessary which caused the Fat Lady to shriek rather shrilly. Hermione ignored her calling after her in anger but continued her way to the Great Hall. Her room mates were still hot on her heels. Hermione would have really enjoyed to curse them now. Especially because they now laughed knowingly at Hermione's rash behaviour. Hermione managed to suppress the urge to hex them but her enraged thoughts wandered back to Tom – and Nicolls.

It had been a shock, Hermione had to admit, having to see how near that Slytherin girl was to Tom. She had talked to him, clutched his arm and whispered sweet words in his ear. Hermione didn't really know if those words had been sweet but at the moment she was quite convinced of it. It infuriated her to no end. Why was she enraged by the whole thing? What did she care? she wondered confused. But her blood still boiled angrily while her magic flowed through her furiously whenever she thought about Nicolls. Obviously she did care! Why though, her mind wasn't yet ready to admit.

Since she had arrived here at the Hogwarts of the past she had often heard stories about Tom. He was quite the popular one with the female students. There were Tom fan-girls all over the place. What had she expected? That he would suddenly stop seeing girls? Why would he do that? Hermione mused while she walked down the moving stair cases.

More important though was another question. Why did she want Tom to stop seeing other girls? In the back of her mind she knew perfectly well why she wanted Nicolls to stay away from Tom but she still couldn't be honest with herself.

Though she knew, part of her problem was that somehow she had stopped hating Tom. Then this not-hate had slowly developed into something like affection. It had been a slow change in her feelings but since the Christmas break Hermione had started to like Tom. The whole thing was very hard to accept. After all she knew too well who he really was. But in her thoughts, in her mind, Tom Riddle had stopped to be Lord Voldemort long ago. He was just Tom now. She wasn't afraid of him in any way. She even enjoyed it to talk with him. She liked it when he embraced her and kissed her. Still the guilt was ever present. How could she enjoy being with Tom? If her friends still lived and could see her they would be disgusted. Not to speak of the possible temporal catastrophe she could cause by her sheer selfishness. But the guilt still didn't manage to change her feelings. It certainly hadn't stopped her from kissing Tom. Now Nicolls had popped out of nowhere, inconveniently forcing Hermione to a confession she was very reluctant to make. But she couldn't push it around the hindmost corners of her mind any longer. She liked Tom. Very much actually. Maybe now was the time to finally be honest with herself, Hermione thought not just a little panicky. Wasn't it pointless to deny it? The feelings seizing her whenever he was around, her rather rash actions in the library yesterday, wasn't that proof enough? This was no longer a stupid little crush. No, Hermione knew the signs.

Obviously she had fallen for Tom.

Just how deep is the question, Hermione thought wryly.
Still, the fact remained to be that she wanted Tom to be with her and only with her. It was wrong in so many ways but still she liked him.

Hermione sighed deeply which invoked a new barrage of interpretations of her behaviour coming from her dorm mates. She ignored it. Finally she was able to accept her stupid amorous feelings but then there was Nicolls again flashing through her thoughts. Now that her feelings were straightened out Hermione started to wonder about Tom. Maybe he was just playing with her, Hermione thought anxiously as she now walked the passage way which led to the Great Hall. As that thought run through her head she suddenly felt her stomach clench painfully.

Why would he start liking her anyway? She wasn't pretty like Nicolls and she didn't behave like a normal girl of this time period at all. She was neither docile nor liked to play the damsel in distress. Even if she put that aside, truth be told, Hermione wouldn't understand how anyone could like her. She was broken. She knew it all too well. That war had cut through her very being. Left behind was something maimed and sullied. Who would want to love that?

Hermione run a hand through her bushy hair which caused Rose to reprimand her, telling her that she would never be able to seduce Tom if she looked like a wire brush.

If only it were so easy. No, her hair was her last problem at the moment. Hermione knew that she was quite good at veiling that broken soul inside of her. She was pretty sure that no-one in this time period knew of the sorrow ripping at her. That was, apart from Tom, of course. He had seen glimpses of it. Hermione wasn't able to maintain her act when he was around. He was the only one seeing her pain and he was the only one able to soothe it.

But now that she had sorted out her confused feelings and was worried about Tom's feelings towards her how should she proceed from here?

Maybe she should just ignore the whole thing? Feelings did go away after some time, didn't they?

In the mean time they had reached the entrance to the Great Hall. Hermione more than reluctantly entered. Right now she wanted to be alone, to think things through. As she walked into the hall she noted that it was rather crowded for a Saturday morning. Of course there was only one explanation for that. Sure enough she could see the members of both houses, Gryffindor and Slytherin, throwing each other nasty glares. Some of them even hissed insults to the rival house. A small smile crept in Hermione's face. Some things never changed, did they? She even had a little pity on the two other houses whose tables were crammed in between.

As Hermione then walked over to her own house table her eyes glided involuntarily to the Slytherins. Very quickly they landed on Tom. He was sitting on his usual place and right now he looked back at her. Hermione had to breathe in shakily as she saw that soft smile on his face as he scanned her.

What did she want from him?

Then her eyes left him and searched the seats next to him for any sign of Nicolls. Her heart dropped as she found the girl sitting not next to Tom but right opposite from him. Hermione narrowed her eyes in anger as she scanned Nicolls. She was sitting there with her shiny hair and looked beautiful. So Tom liked girls like her? Otherwise she wouldn't have been his girlfriend. Hermione balled her hands into fists then her eyes wandered back to Tom. He was still looking at her innocently.

Was he playing with Hermione?

She averted her eyes from him. She didn't know what to do with her boiling emotions. Since her
friends had died one after the other she hadn't been able to feel anything anymore. Now she was hit with all those emotions and didn't know how to deal with them.

Hermione continued her way over to her table. She quickly spotted her friends sitting at the table. Longbottom and Weasley were involved into a heated discussion with the other Gryffindors it seemed. Hermione saw Lupin sitting nearby obviously not listening very attentively. Hermione didn't have to guess what the others had to discuss. Obviously something Quidditch related. She walked over to Lupin and sat down beside him.

"Morning," she said.

Lupin looked up and smiled as he recognized her. "Good morning." Then he leaned over to her and said, "I'm glad that finally there is another sane person around."

Hermione grinned at him. "Quidditch?" she asked while gesturing towards the other Gryffindors.

Lupin just sighed in response.

"-yeah, and then we'll just DRUB THEM!" Hermione heard Longbottom announce which was followed by cheers coming from the other Gryffindors.

"Oh, hey, Hermione," Longbottom had spotted her sitting a little away from the others. A big grin grew on his face. "You'll see the best match ever," he promised her enthusiastically.

"I'm sure," Hermione answered amused.

Tom suppressed a yawn. He was tired. Why did he have to get up so early on a Saturday? He let his gaze wander over his house's table. Everyone seemed to be so enthusiastic about this stupid Quidditch match. Tom snorted inwardly at them all, including the rather loud Gryffindors at the other table. He would have preferred it to not get up this early just to watch some idiots risking their lives while flying around on those sticks. But he was a prefect after all. How would it have looked if popular Tom Riddle wouldn't show up to support his house? Oh, the things he did for his reputation.

His mood didn't brighten as he now saw Melanie Nicolls sitting down on the seat right opposite from him and throwing him rather flirtatious looks. Was that girl trying to anger him? But his attention was quickly diverted from Nicolls as Tom saw Hermione entering the Great Hall. She was accompanied by a few other Gryffindor girls. Tom felt himself calming down a little as he saw her. Though that avidly feeling was back again as his eyes wandered over her body. Obviously it was getting worse. He needed to find a way to gain her quickly. She was his after all and it was high time that she admitted to that fact.

Hermione then let her gaze sweep over the hall and Tom was very pleased that her eyes quickly fell on him. He smiled at her. But she quickly averted her eyes from him without having returned the smile. Tom furrowed his brow as she seemed to now scan the Slytherin table for something. She appeared to be nervous. Was there something wrong with her?

After a while Hermione's eyes suddenly shot back at him. All Tom could do was to stop his eyebrows from rising in surprise. Because now Hermione glowered at him rather fiercely. She seemed to be mad at him. For the life of him, Tom couldn't say why. Had he done something wrong?

Well, he had jinxed that first year right after he had gotten up and stumbled into the common room this morning. But that little pest had been just too loud too early in the morning. By the way, it was impossible Hermione could have heard about that. Still, she glared at him enraged. Tom wanted to
walk over to her and ask her what was wrong. He was quite annoyed with the fact that he couldn't do that. By the look on Hermione's face, though, that might not have been the best of ideas anyway.

Abruptly Hermione turned away from him and stalked over to her table. Tom stared after her. What had gotten her so enraged? It wasn't still this incident with his followers, was it? Though now that Tom looked closer he could see that she was limping slightly. He could feel anger boiling up in him hotly. Hermione seemed to still be in pain because those wankers had attacked her. He should have punished them harsher. Especially if Hermione was now angry with him because of their antics. But they had attacked her the day before yesterday and back then she hadn't seemed to be mad at him. Why would she have changed her mind now? Tom frowned at Hermione now sitting at the Gryffindor table and talking with that Lupin boy. Or maybe was it something else that angered her so?

"Good luck!" Hermione called after them as Longbottom, Weasley and the rest of the Quidditch team rose from the table.

They needed to leave before the others because they still had to change into their Quidditch robes.

"We don't need luck," Longbottom called back to her while there was a big grin plastered all over his face.

Hermione smiled at him and waved.

"Don't encourage him," aid Lupin, who still sat beside her, amused.

Hermione giggled but then turned her attention back to the scrambled egg on her plate. She finished her breakfast without a rush unlike the other Gryffindors who seemed to be too excited about the upcoming match to eat at a reasonable speed. After she was finished with breakfast the Great Hall was nearly empty. Hermione shot a glance in direction of the Slytherin table. With an unpleasant jolt in her stomach she realized that Tom had already left the Great Hall. Nicolls was missing too. Hermione couldn't help but feel unsettled by that fact. They didn't go together down to the pitch, did they? she wondered anxiously as a picture of Nicolls clutching Tom's arm affectionately flashed through her mind.

"Coming?" Hermione was brought out of her worrying as she heard Lupin's voice.

He had already gotten up from the table and now waited for her. Hermione smiled at him and then got up from her seat. The two of them exited the Great Hall and took off in direction of the Quidditch pitch. As they walked through the Entrance Hall Hermione could see Dumbledore just about leaving the castle.

"Professor," Hermione addressed him politely as they reached him. "Good morning."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled down at her kindly as he recognized her. Hermione noticed that he wore a travelling cloak. It was fluffy light-blue but still, a travelling cloak.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto." Dumbledore beamed down at her. He added as his gaze wandered from her to Lupin who stood beside her, "And Mr Lupin. A good morning to you too. Wonderful weather for Quidditch, isn't it?"

"I suppose so, sir," Lupin said, not very enthusiastically.

Hermione didn't manage to suppress a giggle and even Dumbledore chuckled softly.
"Are you going to watch the match, sir?" Hermione then asked him.

Dumbledore's eyes left Lupin and wandered back to her. Hermione nearly raised her eyebrows in surprise as she saw that the so familiar twinkle in his eyes seemed to be somewhat dimmed.

"Unfortunately not, Ms DeCerto," Dumbledore answered and his tone seemed to be more sombre than just a second before. "I have to take care of an issue that occurred quite recently. There are some things I have to sort out in London this weekend."

Then the twinkle was suddenly back in his eyes and he smiled fondly down at Hermione, "But that shouldn't keep you from enjoying a wonderful day with your friends. And of course," The head of Gryffindor house added mischievously. "let's hope that the right house wins the match."

Hermione smiled at him. Then Dumbledore bid them good-bye and left the Entrance Hall.

"He's a weird one," Lupin said after a while, though he said it in a friendly tone.

"Quite." Hermione smiled at him. "Wonder what he's got to do in London."

"No idea." Lupin shrugged his shoulders. "Let's go down to the pitch. Marc's going to kill us if we miss the kick off."

As they finally reached the Quidditch pitch Hermione wanted to just turn around again and walk straight back to the quiet of the castle. The stands around the pitch were full of jeering students. Big banners with the crests of the two adversarial houses were put up. Hermione sighed and let Lupin lead her to the pandemonium that was the Gryffindor part of the stands. So they climbed the stairs up to the stands and Hermione instantly ducked behind Lupin as she saw her dorm mates not far away.

"Let's try to avoid my dear roommates, shall we?" Hermione whispered to an amused Lupin.

"Why, I never knew you don't like to indulge in gossip," Lupin said in a mock surprised tone.

Hermione just rolled her eyes and tugged him towards a corner far away from the girls. And they were just in time as she could now see the two Quidditch teams walking unto the pitch.

"And here are our two teams!" Hermione could hear a magically enhanced voice ringing through the stadium. "Slytherin and Gryffindor!"

She craned her neck and could see a Hufflepuff boy standing by something that looked like an old microphone.

"You might have heard about the change in the Slytherin team," the commentator continued. "Lestrange is not playing today. He got injured during practice. His replacement is Stephen Wilkins. Let's see if he is as good as Lestrange."

His last statement was followed by cheers from the Slytherin ranks and boooing from the Gryffindors. Hermione just shook her head and looked down at the pitch again. The two teams had by now assembled in the middle and the team captains did the compulsory handshake. Hermione was quite put out as she saw that Avery was the Slytherin team captain. Trust those Slytherins to elect the meanest one of them to be their captain. Hermione could see Mr Cooper, the flight instructor, reaching for his whistle. She didn't know Mr Cooper at all as she always tried to avoid being near any broom. She really hated flying, except for the good, old-fashioned way of just boarding a plane. Mr Cooper seemed to act as the referee for this match. Now he whistled loudly thus starting the match. The teams kicked off the ground and immediately soared through the air. Hermione was feeling dizzy just from looking at them.
"And Longbottom has the Quaffle. Is he going to score?" the commentator's voice yelled excited. "Yeeees! Longbottom scores. 10:0 for Gryffindor."

The stands erupted into loud cheers. Hermione for once cheered along with them.

"That's Hopton passing to Miller passing to Longbottom aaand-"

Hermione could see Avery flying directly towards Longbottom who now had the Quaffle. Avery didn't stop his flight and crashed into Longbottom.

"Ow, that was foul play by Avery!"

Obviously Mr Cooper hadn't seen this foul as Slytherin didn't get a penalty. Now a Slytherin player had the Quaffle. They passed it quickly between each other until they reached the Gryffindor goal hoops. Avery took the Quaffle and hurled it at one hoop.

"And goal for Slytherin. 10:10! They are even."

Pff, do they even know how to play fair? Slimy Slytherins, Hermione wondered silently. Then she remembered another one of those slimy Slytherins and her eyes wandered over to the stands covered in green and silver. It took her a while but finally she did find Tom standing among his house mates. He was wearing his black cloak, had his hands buried in his pockets and seemed to follow the play. Though the bored expression on his face told Hermione that he wasn't very interested in it. A small smile crept on her face as she watched Tom. She wondered shortly if he knew how to fly a broom. She couldn't quite picture him riding one. At least he obviously was no Quidditch fan, Hermione thought amused as she saw how he checked his watch. She was actually surprised that he even went to the match. It was quite early after all and a Saturday. Hermione knew what a late riser he was. But probably his presence here was part of his policy of playing the perfect student.

"Hermione?" she heard Lupin's voice beside her and looked away from Tom.

"Yes?"

There was now a girl standing beside Lupin. She wore the dark blue colours of Ravenclaw house. The girl was rather small, even smaller than Hermione. She had a round, friendly face and bronze-coloured skin that didn't quite match her dirty blonde hair.

"That's Stella," Lupin said and Hermione was quite surprised to hear that his normally so calm voice wasn't calm anymore.

So that is Stella Lovegood? Hermione wondered amused as she saw that nervous expression on Lupin's face.

Then she beamed at Stella and said, "Nice to meet you. I'm Hermione."

"Oh, Hermione DeCerto. I've heard a lot about you already," Stella said in an enthusiastic voice.

"Hopefully only good things?" Hermione said.

Stella eyed her in a strange way then she smiled brightly and said, "No, not really. Some of my friends say that you are crazy. And a stalker."

"Oh…er… really?" Hermione stammered.

That was rather awkward, Hermione decided. Though Stella didn't seem to share her opinion. She
still looked at Hermione with curiosity though not in an offending way. She even smiled at Hermione amiably.

"Yes," Stella now said happily. "Are you really a stalker?"

"Um… no?" Hermione was quite confused and didn't know how to deal with Stella's openness.

"Oh, you are not?" Stella asked in a dreamy voice. "What a pity. I would have loved to hear all about your stalking techniques."

"Er… well…" Hermione was seeking for help so she looked at Lupin.

But he was in no condition to save anyone. Hermione could see a deep blush on his face as he stared with glassy eyes at Stella. Thankfully Hermione was saved from this rather odd conversation as she heard the commentator cry,

"20:10 for Gryffindor!"

The stands erupted in applause and a conversation wasn't anymore possible. Hermione cast a quick glance at Stella. She was now whispering something in Lupin's ear, though Hermione doubted that he would be able to understand anything she said. He seemed to be too distracted by her staying so near him. Hermione couldn't help but grin at them. What a strange pair they made. Stella seemed to be as odd as Luna Lovegood had ever been. Likeable, surely, but still odd.

Hermione looked back at the pitch and tried to follow the impossibly fast players zooming around on their brooms. She thought she had seen a blur of blonde. Maybe it had been Longbottom but she wasn't sure. Gryffindor was scoring again. They seemed to be quite good today, Hermione mused. But she was really no expert in Quidditch. Slytherin wasn't giving them anything. In the end the score went up to 70:50 for Gryffindor. Hermione was happy that Longbottom managed to score a few quite impressing goals.

Standing there and cheering for her house's team made Hermione feel a little nostalgic. It had been such a long time ago since she had seen her last Quidditch match. The last match she had seen, that had been in her sixth year in Hogwarts. The match Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor. It had decided the House championship. Of course Gryffindor had won. Hermione grinned. Though back then Harry hadn't played because he had been in detention. Suddenly Hermione could feel her heart sink at the thought of Harry so she quickly steered her thoughts away from such dangerous waters. She didn't want to sink into her memories today.

"90:70 for Gryffindor!" the Hufflepuff commentator yelled loudly through the whole stadium.

Hermione concentrated on the match again. The Gryffindor Chasers were passing the Quaffle between each other while the Slytherins tried to win it back. Hermione breathed in sharply as she saw one of the Slytherin Beaters hurl a Bludger directly at Longbottom. Luckily Weasley was fast enough he flew into the trajectory of the Bludger and hurled it right at one of the Slytherin Chasers.

"100:70 for Gryffindor!" the commentator cried loudly.

Hermione grinned happily. She cast a sideways glance at Lupin and found him still standing beside Stella. He had a deep blush on his face while he seemed to listen to something Stella told him. It was rather funny to see him losing his cool, Hermione thought. Normally Lupin was always so calm and unperturbed.

Now that she thought about self-controlled people her eyes involuntarily wandered back to the Slytherin stands. She quickly found Tom still standing at the same spot. Hermione nearly lost control
of her magic as she spotted Nicolls standing right beside him. Hermione balled her hands into tight fists and she had to stop herself from pulling her wand and hurling a curse in the girl's direction. Why did that witch have to stand so near to Tom? Hermione thought furiously as she saw how Nicolls' shoulder was brushing against Tom's arm. And there was again this disgustingly lovestruck expression on Nicolls' face. She wasn't even paying attention to the game in front of her but just looked stupidly at Tom. Why did she have to come to the game if she didn't want to see it? Hermione narrowed her eyes at the witch. She was seething. Right now she wanted nothing more than to run over there to the Slytherin stands and throw a nasty curse at Nicolls. But she wouldn't do it. What did she care anyway? So, Tom liked to have Nicolls near him.

Whatever! Hermione breathed in deeply and tried to control her raging feelings again. Though it didn't really work.

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Tom was bored out of his mind. Why did he have to get up at an impossibly early hour just to stand around in the cold? He buried his hands deep into the pockets of his cloak. This was just a big fat waste of his time. He should use this time to do something productive. Like finding out why Hermione seemed to suddenly be so angry with him. He still couldn't understand what had happened this morning to make her look at him with so much fury radiating from her eyes. He didn't like that look at all.

"90:70 for Gryffindor!" He heard Panshaw, the Hufflepuff commentator, yell enthusiastically. Merlin, how long was that stupid match going to last? Tom was getting more and more irritated by the minute. Then he was brought out of his rather dark thoughts as he heard a voice coming from beside him,

"Hello, Tom."

Tom turned around and found Nicolls standing beside him and beaming up at him.

"Melanie," he acknowledged her in a curt tone.

"Do you think we are going to win?" Nicolls tried to make conversation while Tom was just annoyed by her pure presence.

He shrugged his shoulders and tried to ignore her.

"If you were in the team we'd surely win, Tom," Nicolls smiled flirtatiously up at him.

Obviously the witch had never seen him on a broom. Tom made a non-committal sound that could have meant anything.

"Why are you not on the team?" Nicolls asked, being quite persistent on the matter. "Some of your friends are in the team, too."

As Tom heard that his mouth twitched traitorously and he had to suppress a rather evil cackle. Those fools being his friends? How absurd! He didn't need any friends. And certainly not such buggers.

Tom turned towards Nicolls and was surprised himself that he managed to ban this evil smirk from his face as he said, "But Melanie, all those training sessions would collide with my prefect duties. I would really hate to neglect the duties I owe the school."

Nicolls looked up at him with admiration gleaming in her eyes, "Aww, Tom, you are always so
responsible."

Then Tom was rather glad that this waste of a conversation was interrupted by the commentator's voice, "100:70 for Gryffindor!"

Thankfully Nicolls was distracted from Tom and now watched the players on the pitch. Tom looked down at her with narrowed eyes. Maybe he should just push her down the stands? No-one would notice, right?

He sighed softly. Then he unfixed his eyes from Nicolls and tried to find Hermione. He quickly found her standing amongst the other Gryffindors. But unlike her house mates Hermione wasn't following the match. Right now she was looking over to the Slytherin stands, Tom noticed surprised. With unease he saw that there was again this dark look on her face. Like she was really enraged by something. Tom had learned by now that she could have quite the violent temper when angered. He couldn't have her being angry with him again that would jeopardize his plans of obtaining her.

But the fierce scowl was still on her face as she glowered darkly in his direction. It was then that Tom realized that she wasn't staring at him this enraged. He tried to follow her gaze and ended up looking at Melanie Nicolls who still stood right beside him. He furrowed his brow in confusion. Why was Hermione glaring like this at Nicolls? The two of them didn't even know each other. Hermione had no reason to look like she would curse Nicolls any second now. That was strange.

Tom thought back to breakfast. Back then Hermione had seemed to be angry as well. But she had only glared at him so darkly until after she had let her gaze wander over the Slytherin table. Tom remembered that Nicolls had sat right opposite him this morning. Why would Hermione be angered by Nicolls' presence? Tom wondered. Was it Nicolls that angered her or something else?

Then very slowly a rather cocky smirk appeared on his face as he finally understood Hermione's motive. So Hermione didn't like it when Nicolls was near him, did she? Maybe Nicolls wasn't as useless as he first had thought…

Hermione unfixed her eyes from Nicolls again. That was stupid.

*Get a grip, Granger!* she reprimanded herself. Okay, she did like Tom and didn't want any girl to get near him. But that was just silly. Her traitorous feelings were wrong. And dangerous, if anything. But still…

Hermione forced herself to not look back at the Slytherin stands but at the match in front of her. Though that didn't help to dissipate her foul mood as she now saw that Slytherin was in possession of the Quaffle. The Slytherin Chasers where passing the ball between each other until it ended up in Avery's hands. He rushed towards the hoops. Not even Weasley's try with the Bludger could stop Avery as he now hurled the Quaffle at Gryffindor's goal hoop. And he scored.

"100:80 for Gryffindor. But Slytherin is catching up!" the commentator cried.

Now Hermione could see Longbottom catching the Quaffle from one of his team mates. Then he darted forward in direction of Slytherin's goal hoops. He had nearly reached the hoop as Hermione saw Avery rushing towards him. He obviously intended to foul Longbottom again. Hermione clenched her teeth as Avery got nearer and nearer to Longbottom.

Then out of nothing a Bludger appeared. It hit Avery with a loud crash. He held his arm with a pained expression on his face as he tailspinned down to the ground. In the mean time Longbottom had reached the hoops, he hurled the Quaffle and…
"110:80 for Gryffindor!"

Longbottom soared towards Weasley who had hurled the Bludger at Avery. The two of them high-five as the whole stadium, sans the Slytherins, broke into applause. Hermione cheered along with the others.

Then her gaze involuntarily wandered back to the Slytherin stands and to Tom. As she finally found him the smile on her face died instantly down and her eyes widened in horror. The scene in front of her seemed to be frozen in time, drowning out even all this cheering and yelling coming from the Gryffindors. Hermione could see how Nicolls stood on tiptoes as she leaned into Tom and clutched his arm with both her hands. She had her eyes closed as she kissed Tom on his cheek. There was a smirk on Tom's face. Did he like that?

Hermione was shaken by that display and only remotely heard the commentator's ecstatic cry, "Dave Howe caught the Snitch! Gryffindor wins! 260:80!"

The stadium once again erupted into loud cheers. But Hermione stood frozen to the ground as she stared at Tom and Nicolls. Nicolls now looked up at Tom with dreamy eyes while she still clung to his arm.

"Let's go down," Hermione heard Lupin say but she didn't look away from that disgusting scene in the Slytherin stands.

"Okay," Hermione replied in a hollow voice. "Just go ahead. I'll be there in a sec."

Lupin frowned at her in concern but then he was distracted by Stella who now tugged at him. The two of them walked down to the pitch where the Gryffindor team was celebrating their victory. Hermione remained standing where she was, still staring at Tom and Nicolls. By now her magic rushed through her angrily. So, that Slytherin witch liked to kiss Tom, did she? Hermione thought enraged as she balled her hands into tight fists. Her blood was boiling as that scene of Nicolls kissing Tom kept replaying in her head. She breathed in deeply to regain some of her lost calm. But it was completely hopeless. She was furious.

Her magic was raging inside of her as she now saw how Nicolls beamed up at Tom in adoration. Then the two of them were leaving the stands together. Hermione's mouth formed a thin line.

She was not going to let that continue! With that decision made she left the stands. She was going to follow Tom. So Hermione ignored her house mates who had assembled in the middle of the Quidditch pitch and were celebrating their team but she tried to find Tom among the Slytherins. She needed some time to find them again in the mass of students surging back to the castle. By the time she spotted them again, the Gryffindors had already left the pitch. Undoubtedly to celebrate their victory in the common room. The Slytherins quickly walked back to the castle, too. But it seemed Tom and Nicolls weren't in such a rush. The two of them were deliberately lagging behind. Hermione narrowed her eyes. What did they plan to do if they wanted to be undisturbed?

Sometime later Hermione was walking back to the castle. Thought actually it was more like sneaking back to the castle because she was still tailing Tom and this Nicolls girl. That display during the Quidditch match had just been enough. Hermione was furious and determined. She wasn't going to allow that disgusting girl anywhere near Tom any longer. She watched with narrowed eyes how Nicolls took Tom's arm and clung to him. Why didn't Tom curse her now to kingdom come? Normally he wasn't this hesitant.

Hermione now heard the girl giggle inanely. And she still snuggled against Tom. Hermione's hands balled into fists. She looked around and noticed that she was quite alone with the pair right now. The
other students had already gone back to the castle.

"Do you really want to go back to the castle?" Hermione's eyes shot back at Nicolls as she asked Tom that in a rather seductive tone, promising him something Hermione didn't like at all.

Now that was just enough. Who did that girl think she was? Hermione fumed as she abandoned her cover. She walked faster and quickly reached Tom and Nicolls, neatly cutting off their path. They both had to stop. Hermione saw Tom raising an eyebrow questioningly at her. But she didn't care as she was too preoccupied with glaring at Nicolls right now.

"Get your hands off him!" Hermione growled at Nicolls.

A scandalized look crept on Nicolls pretty face, while a rather conceited smirk appeared on Tom's face.

"Excuse me?" Nicolls said in a sharp voice.

"I want you to leave him alone," Hermione said in a low voice as she still fixed Nicolls with a dark scowl.

At that Nicolls sniggered condescendingly and she still held to Tom's arm, Hermione noticed enraged.

"Did you hear that, Tom?" Nicolls said in her snobbish voice. "That ugly Gryffindor really dares to order me around."

Hermione's eyes wandered slowly over Nicolls' form until they landed on her hands which still clutched Tom's arm. Hermione's right hand itched to pull her wand and just curse this arrogant witch.

"I'm not going to repeat myself," Hermione said slowly as her eyes shot back at Nicolls' face. Her voice was now a hiss. "Let go of him!"

"Who do you think you are?" Nicolls asked and there was a disgusted expression on her face as she scanned Hermione. "You're nothing but a stupid fan-girl. Do you really think Tom would ever waste his time with you?" Scorn now dripped from Nicolls' voice.

Hermione's lips were pressed to a thin line. She noticed that Nicolls now clung to Tom even tighter. There was still this self-satisfied smirk on Tom's face as he watched the dispute between the two girls. Hermione's gaze shot back at Nicolls as she heard that dumb girl sniggering again.

"Don't tell me you really think you have a chance with Tom!" Nicolls said in a mock-pitying voice as she shook her head sadly at Hermione. Then she continued and there was now open contempt in her tone, "How delusional are you? When was the last time you looked in a mirror, ugly hag?"

Hermione had to restrain herself from drawing her wand and cursing that girl. A tiny part of her feared that Nicolls was right but mostly she was just furious right now.

"What did you think, little bint?" Nicolls scoffed at her. "That you create a few nasty rumours about yourself and Tom and he'll suddenly fall for you?" Nicolls now laughed at her conceitedly. "Face it, Tom doesn't want you!"

White-hot fury now ripped at Hermione. Even her hands trembled from the suppressed anger. She could feel her magic turning into an angry whirlwind as she watched how Nicolls now looked seductively up at Tom and skimmed with her fingers softly over his arm as she said in a velvety voice,
"Let's go back, Tom. I'm sure we can do something much more entertaining than listening to this stupid slut."

That was when Hermione finally snapped. She flexed her wrist, her wand left its holster and landed in her hand. Then she raised her hand and pointed her wand directly at Nicolls. Nicolls' eyes widened in shock as she was suddenly threatened by Hermione's wand. But she didn't pull her own wand. Neither did Tom, Hermione noticed satisfied. Hermione glared at Nicolls furiously before she said in an eerily calm voice that didn't quite match with that dangerous expression on her face,

"Discidium."

As she muttered that spell Hermione brought her wand down in a straight line. Instantly a glistening grey shield erupted from the tip of her wand, it followed the wand movement and thus cleanly separated Nicolls from Tom. Hermione watched satisfied how Nicolls was pushed away by the spell so that she stumbled and nearly lost her balance. Tom on the other hand wasn't pushed away he remained standing where he was.

"Are you insane?" Nicolls managed to yell at Hermione after she had regained her balance.

Hermione smiled at her sweetly before she waved her wand again. A deep orange curse left her wand, sped towards Nicolls and collided with her chest. It was a very satisfying feeling for Hermione as she got to watch how the orange curse wrapped itself completely around Nicolls' form. Then it merged with her body thus tinting her skin bright orange upon contact. Shortly Nicolls didn't realize what had happened. But then she looked down at her hands and arms and as she saw that orange colour she started to scream. Hermione was rather peeved by that shrill tone in Nicolls' voice so she walked towards Tom who watched in amusement how Nicolls tried to wipe the colour away. Which was totally useless, Hermione knew. As she reached Tom she grabbed his hand and then pulled him away. Tom didn't hesitate to abandon Nicolls and followed after Hermione.

Hermione stalked angrily away from Nicolls who still screeched in her pesky voice. That stupid witch didn't even know the counter curse to that basic spell. Hermione rolled her eyes at the witch's incompetence. After a while Nicolls' voice became quieter and quieter until it died completely down. Thankfully they were now out of hearing range. But Hermione's hand still clasped Tom as she dragged him after her.

"What was that right now?" Hermione heard Tom's voice ask her innocently.

"Nothing!" Hermione snapped, still enraged.

"Didn't look like nothing." Came Tom's amused reply.

Hermione's eyes narrowed and her fingers clasped tighter around his hand. She didn't reply anything but continued to drag him after her.

"Why are you so angry?" Tom asked her, still in this innocent sounding tone. But he didn't manage to ban all the amusement from his voice. "Your house won the match. Shouldn't you be celebrating right now?"

"Why have you been with Nicolls?" Hermione finally hissed at him, still enraged. "Why do you always talk with her?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Tom said in an apparently honest tone. "I wasn't aware that I'm forbidden to talk to Melanie."

Hermione's eyes flashed back at him. She could see amusement and a certain amount of triumph
flashing behind his grey eyes. She turned her head away from him again as she mumbled darkly, 

"Pff, Melanie."

She never let go of Tom's hand as she pulled him back to the castle. Tom didn't say anything but he followed Hermione up the steps to the front door. They walked through the Entrance Hall as Hermione finally stopped and turned around to face Tom again. He, too, had stopped and now watched her attentively. Hermione narrowed her eyes angrily at him before she snapped,

"She was your girlfriend, wasn't she?"

Tom raised an eyebrow elegantly while his lips curled into a small smile.

"Who told you that?" he asked in a self-satisfied voice.

Hermione snorted at that, "Did you forget, Tom? This castle is just one big rumour mill." After a while she added in an irritated tone, "So, do you want her back?"

She heard Tom chuckle which made her fierce scowl even darker. Tom locked eyes with her and she noticed that the condescending smirk had left his face now. Then he took a step towards her before he said in a serious voice,

"Don't be silly. Nicolls means nothing to me."

Her anger dissipated instantly as she heard him say that. The dark scowl left her face and she looked up at him with huge eyes. Did he mean that?

"R…really?" Hermione asked him in a soft and shaky voice.

A small smirk tugged at his mouth as he looked down at her. His grey eyes sparkled invitingly and Hermione was again baffled by how handsome he looked.

"Yes," Tom said in a firm voice.

Then he clutched Hermione's upper arm and pulled her over to him before he said in a commanding voice, "Enough with this nonsense, Hermione."

Without waiting for a reply he started to walk again. Hermione was forced to follow him as he still held her tightly by her arm. But right now she didn't mind that he was being so dominant again. She was just incredibly relieved at the moment. A small smile crept on her face as she looked up at Tom who walked in front of her while he still clutched her upper arm. Somehow Hermione didn't mind that he was grabbing her almost painfully tight or that he dragged her behind him so roughly.

She was in a state of bliss so she didn't realize where Tom dragged her to. They were just walking down a corridor passing a painting that showed the scenery of a forest and a huge castle in the background. They had passed the picture as Tom suddenly turned around, took hold of her other arm and pushed her into a small alcove right beside the painting. Hermione gasped in surprise as she felt herself being pushed against the stone wall. Then Tom's lips were over her own as he kissed her rather demandingly. His body was pressed tightly against hers, trapping her effectively between the stone wall and himself. There was again this tingling feeling coming over her as Hermione's eyes fluttered shut. She couldn't stop herself to respond to his kiss. Then she could feel Tom deepen the kiss and his hands began to roam her body.

That was when Hermione started to hear her doubts again. This was feeling so good, but it was wrong, wasn't it?
She put her hands on his chest and pushed slightly. Tom instantly ended the kiss and took a step back from her. Hermione looked up at him and found his grey eyes scanning her, there was a frown between his eyebrows. She breathed in deeply before she said in a soft voice while staring into his beautiful, grey eyes,

"Tom, what is that, going on between us?"

A smirk appeared on his face, then he said in a conceited tone, "I thought that was obvious?"

Hermione felt a blush hitting her face. "No, it's not," she whispered hesitantly.

The haughty smirk didn't leave Tom's face as he answered her, "You are my girlfriend now."

Hermione stared at him in bafflement with wide eyes. "And… and… I don't have a say in this matter?" she stuttered weakly.

Tom bent down to her and then whispered with his silky voice in her ear, "No."

"You can't just decide that by yourself," Hermione said, now in a firmer voice as she again pushed him away.

"So you don't want to be my girlfriend then?" Tom asked her in a provoking tone.

"What?… I…" Hermione flustered and she looked away from him before she whispered. "I never said that."

"What is your problem, then?" Tom asked her amused.

"It's that…"

Then she looked back up at Tom. He was looking down at her and this inviting softness shone in his eyes.

"Do you even like me?" she finally asked him in a soft voice.

And again that conceited smirk was back on his face. "Otherwise I wouldn't consider you to be my girlfriend," he drawled at her.

Hermione averted her eyes again. "Didn't you already have a few girlfriends before?"

"I never had a girlfriend." Came Tom's swift reply.

Hermione's eyes shot back at him. Why did he lie so blatantly now?

"That's not true. I'm not stupid. Didn't I just tell you? I heard stories about you," Hermione contradicted him.

Tom arched one eyebrow elegantly as he eyed her. Then he said in a serious voice, "It is true. I won't deny that I've had some experiences with women. But I never considered any of those girls to be my girlfriend. Not one of them."

Hermione stared at him, momentarily speechless while the mocking smirk returned on Tom's face.

"Now let's end this pointless discussion," he again took a step towards her, put his hands on her waist and bent down to her.
"You are my girlfriend now," he whispered to her in a commanding tone before he brushed his lips gently against hers.

Hermione could feel his lips softly touching her own. But aside from that light contact Tom didn't do anything else. It seemed as if he was waiting for something, Hermione realized.

Contradicting thoughts started to suddenly run through her head. She liked that feeling of his lips on her own. But that wasn't just any guy she was kissing right now. It was Tom Riddle. She was playing with fire here. He would one day become the darkest wizard who ever grazed the earth. The one whose hate should destroy everything. His unbound hate would burn down a whole country.

But as Hermione could feel his lips touching her so gently her thoughts and doubts suddenly just stopped running through her head. The only thing she was aware of right now was Tom. His lips on hers, his hands holding her by her waist, his pleasant scent. He was everywhere. Her heart beat so fast now and the tingling feeling in her stomach was back. Tom still didn't do anything to deepen the kiss. He was obviously waiting for her to make her decision.

Hermione's hands trembled as they slowly slid up Tom's back. She pressed herself tighter against him and started to respond to his kiss. Tom snaked one arm fully around her waist, pulling her even closer to him. His other hand now held her cheek gently as he started to deepen the kiss.

Hermione was breathing heavily as Tom released her again some time later. There was a conceited smirk curling up the corners of his mouth as he looked down at her, taking in her state. Hermione raised her head and looked up into his grey eyes. They seemed to be glowing in the semidarkness. She could feel her face heating up as Tom's gaze wandered over her body possessively. Then he put his hand lightly on her shoulder and bent down so he could whisper in her ear.

"Next time, you listen to what I say right away and just obey me."

Hermione couldn't stop the smile taking form on her face. She wrapped her arms tightly around Tom and buried her face into his chest before she mumbled,

"I really doubt that's ever gonna happen."

She felt Tom's arms reassuringly around her.

"Well, you've still time to learn." Came Tom's dry reply.

Tom ended the embrace and flashed her one of his charming grins before he took her hand in his and led her out to the corridor again. They rounded another corner then Tom stopped before a perfectly ordinary classroom door.

"Why did we come here?" Hermione asked in bewilderment.

"You'll see."

Tom pulled his wand from his pocket and tapped it against the classroom door. Then he opened the door and Hermione could see the dark classroom behind it. After that Tom closed the door again and then tapped it twice with his wand. Suddenly a red sheen engulfed the door for a few seconds until it died down again. As Tom opened the door again Hermione was surprised that it no longer led into a classroom. Tom stepped into the new room and Hermione followed behind him. The former classroom looked now like a smaller version of the Gryffindor common room, though without the red and gold colour. On one wall was a fireplace with an invitingly crackling fire, on the other stood a large leather sofa. On the wall farthest away from the door was a beautifully decorated window.
"What's this?" Hermione asked as she took in this new room.

"I really don't know," Tom answered as he again wrapped one arm around her waist. "I found it by pure coincidence. The only down side is that it's only useable if no-one occupies the classroom. That means it's only safe to come here after classes are finished."

Hermione followed Tom to the couch. They sat down and he instantly pulled her over to him. She relaxed against his side, slowly slid an arm around him and clung to him tightly. She closed her eyes as she felt Tom caressing her cheek gently.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist me for long," he said after a while in a slightly taunting voice.

Hermione smiled but didn't open her eyes as she said, "Ah, and what makes you think that it's not the other way around?"

Tom chuckled softly then she could feel his hand on her cheek wandering to her chin until he raised her head a little. Hermione opened her eyes and found him smirking down at her.

"You are quite defiant for my girlfriend," Tom whispered.

Before she had a chance to reply he bent down to her and pressed his lips against her own. The fluttery feeling was back in her stomach as she could feel him deepening the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and huddled even closer to him.

So many doubts, so many reasons to stop. But somehow they suddenly didn't matter anymore as Hermione could feel Tom kissing her so tenderly. Yet his arms around her were so demanding, even possessive as he pulled her even closer to him. Hermione was overwhelmed by her own feelings as she kissed him in return. It was so exciting and wonderful and everything she needed right now. She wrapped her arms tighter around him. After such a long time finally Hermione was feeling just happy again.

She didn't know for how long they stayed in that cozy little room. It felt like seconds but it could have been hours. During all the time the happiness never left her again. Tom now held her so close to him that it seemed like he never wanted to let go again. Hermione would have just been happy if he didn't. Her head rested on his chest and she breathed in his pleasant scent. Then she could feel Tom placing a soft kiss on her forehead before he whispered to her,

"I'll never let you go again."

Hermione snuggled closer to him and said, "And I don't want you to leave me alone."

Tom run his fingers gently through her hair then he said, "Let me bring you back to your common room."

Hermione nodded at him, the happy smile still on her face. Tom unwrapped his arms from her and she looked up at him. His grey eyes sparkled down at her softly and his fingers caressed her cheek before he gently tucked a strand of her curly hair behind her ear. He bent down to her and softly brushed his lips against her own. Then he took her hand in his and cautiously pulled her with him as he stood up from the couch. Together they left the room which turned back into the dark and silent classroom as they exited.

They walked the corridors to the entrance of the Gryffindor common room in comfortable silence. Hermione for one was content and just happy as she felt Tom's warm hand holding her own. Too quickly to her taste, they had reached the painting of the Fat Lady. Tom eyed the portrait of the now sleeping Fat Lady with distaste.
"It's a pity you are in Gryffindor," he said in a low voice. "You should be in Slytherin."

Hermione giggled at that. Then she grabbed his hand tighter and looked up in his eyes before she said in a serious voice, "Yes, you are right. But I've a better idea. We'll talk with Dippet. I'm sure he would transfer you to Gryffindor. You would fit in well with us."

Tom looked down at her in disgust and Hermione couldn't hold back anymore. She broke down into laughter and clutched his arm to steady herself.

"I now see why you are in Gryffindor." She could hear Tom's quiet voice tell her. "You need a lot of stupid bravery to say something like that into my face."

She glanced up at him. He was glaring down at her darkly but Hermione wasn't unsettled by his scowl. She could see the amusement shining in his grey eyes so she grinned up at him. At that Tom sighed and then pulled her into his chest.

"I really need to teach you to abandon your insolence."

Hermione closed her eyes and just enjoyed the feeling of his arms around her. It was so nice to have him embracing her so protectively. After a while Tom released her again. Then he took her chin in his hand and raised it a little before he placed a light kiss on her lips. After he bent up again he turned towards the portrait of the Fat Lady and tapped softly at the frame of the canvas. The Fat Lady slowly opened her eyes and yawned tiredly. But before she could do more than to leer at Tom, he whispered,

"Coati."

Hermione furrowed her brow and turned to Tom. "Why do you always know the password?"

But Tom just smiled his evil smile at her and said, "Because I'm a devious Slytherin."

Then he turned around and walked away. Hermione shook her head at his retreating back before her eyes wandered back to the Fat Lady.

"Rather late aren't you?" the Fat Lady eyed her disapprovingly. "The others are all inside already."

Then the portrait sprung forward and admitted Hermione in. She was greeted by her celebrating house mates. The happy atmosphere in the Gryffindor common room mirrored her own mood quite accurately.
Remorse

Hermione was angry. It was more than anger.

Her magic rushed through her. It boiled inside of her, fiercely asking her to take revenge.

It was more than anger. It was hate.

Hermione waved her wand and instantly a blue shield appeared in front of her. The incoming curse was neutralized and harmlessly disappeared into nothingness. Hermione paid the whole thing no heed but continued to chase after the Death Eaters. They had been innocent, the children! They had nothing to do with this whole disgusting war. Yet these perverted freaks had murdered them.

No, they had been slaughtered!

"Hermione, stop, come back!" She could hear Harry's voice calling after her.

She didn't stop. The hate would have never allowed it. She dashed around the next corner of a house, still following behind after the Death Eaters. As the war protracted it was impossible to say which side was predominant. But it was undeniable that the Death Eaters gained in leverage. They were getting bolder and bolder. This time they had attacked an Auror and member of the Order of the Phoenix. Kingsley Shacklebold had been a powerful wizard. He had fought valorously. But he had been unable to stop them all. Hermione could still see the images before her mind's eye. She could see Shacklebold lying in a pool of blood in the hallway of his own house. A curse had hit him and wounded him fatally. He had bled to death. Maybe he had lived long enough to hear the screams of his family as the Death Eaters had murdered them as well. Hermione could accept that the Death Eaters had tried to kill Shacklebold. She might not like it, but she was able to understand it. Shacklebold had been a part of the enemy the Death Eaters tried to beat. He had been a combatant. But his two sons were not. They had been so young that they still didn't even have a wand. That had not stopped the Death Eaters to kill them. Hermione still felt sick as she remembered the broken bodies of the two young boys.

The hate again took hold of her as she run after the Death Eaters. They had finished their mission and now intended to leave the scene of the crime. Shortly they would reach the anti-apparition wards which stretched around Shacklebold's house and its surrounding. Hermione rushed down the next street as she heard the soft pops of Apparition in front of her.

They were NOT allowed to get away so easily. Hermione raised her wand and sent a curse at the Death Eaters. A painful scream told her that she had at least stopped one of them to flee. As she neared the spot they had apparated from she could see a dark figure lying on the wet asphalted street. Currently the figure tried to get up again. Hermione narrowed her eyes and waved her wand again. A curse left her wand and hurled the Death Eater violently against the red Ford Escord, parking on the lay by. There was a bump in the mud guard wing and the Death Eater now lay huddled on the street and moaned in pain. Hermione's fury though wasn't satisfied at all. She raised her wand again to cast the next spell.

"No, please," the Death Eater then pleaded with her. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

Hermione didn't say anything. Her magic still rushed through her furiously. A curse was now at the brink of her wand's tip. Her hand clasped tightly around the smooth wood of her black wand. There was no begging her now. This creature needed to be punished. Hermione needed to take revenge. Her magic was so enraged that it left her body and crackled around her dangerously. She saw the
Death Eater shying away from her. But there was no pity in her as white-hot fury was ripping at her.

The creature would be punished. That was the last thought which rushed through her mind before Hermione waved her wand and allowed her magic to take the revenge she so graved for. She whirled the wand and again cast the same curse she had used before. This time, though, there was a lot more power behind the spell. Hermione watched unemotionally how her curse crashed into the chest of the creature. The body was flung against the car and she could hear a sickening cracking noise. The body crumbled down on the ground where it remained lying. Hermione stood not two metres away. The hand holding her wand fell numbly back to her side.

The hate was suddenly gone. The rage had completely died down. Hermione stared at the body which was still lying on the wet street. Unmoving and lifeless. The unstoppable fury and the blind need for revenge had left her as well. Hermione felt hollow and sick.

Hesitantly she walked over to the body. Then she crouched down beside it. The white mask looked up at her. A death mask now. With a shaking hand Hermione reached for the mask. Slowly she removed it. She gasped as she stared down at the face. It was covered with tears. Fear and pain were still etched in the features.

Hermione knew that face. She knew the person she had just now murdered in cold blood. She had gone with her to school for six years. Had even shared a few classes with her.

Hermione gasped as she woke from her nightmare. Her breathing was quickened and she was drenched in cold sweat. She could feel her heart hammering away at a ridiculous speed. Slowly and shakily she sat up in her bed. Her head hurt piercingly thus making her feel slightly sick. As she opened the curtains of her four-poster bed she found the dorm still wrapped in a peaceful silence. Hermione was glad that she hadn't managed to wake her dorm mates up. Right now, though, she couldn't bear this peaceful atmosphere of the sixth year girls' dormitory. She needed to get out.

Still feeling shaky Hermione got up from her bed and quickly slipped into her shoes before she took the black robe from her uniform and wrapped it around herself. Then she cautiously made her way to the door leading out of the dorm. The images of her previous dream still flickered through her head as Hermione exited the Gryffindor common room and walked the dark corridors and passage ways of the castle. She didn't care where she was heading to nor was she concerned about being caught out of bed after hours.

So she was a little surprised to find that her feet had led her to the highest point of Hogwarts castle and she now stood before the door leading out to the platform of the Astronomy tower. Hermione reached for the handle of the door. Maybe that was exactly what she needed. A breath of fresh air. She stepped out on the platform. She shuddered and wrapped her black Gryffindor robe tighter around herself as she was hit by the icy cold Scottish air. Though the thin cloth offered no protection against the piercing cold. The small platform was covered in a layer of snow. Hermione walked over to the balustrade, leaving behind footprints in the snow. She shuddered as she clasped the cold stone of the balustrade. It was still January after all and the coldness now tore at her exposed skin but Hermione didn't care as she let her gaze wander over the darkness in front of her. The sky was dark blue and the stars seemed to be obscured by thick winter clouds. The only sources of light were the opened door behind her and the pale moon above her which was surrounded by a milky white halo, heralding more snowfall for the next day. Hogwarts grounds and the Forbidden Forest were only visible as a black mass lying at the foot of Hogwarts castle.

Hermione breathed in deeply. She still felt sick and shaken from the nightmare. Why did she have to dream about her past? Why now of all times?
For the first time since an eternity, really, she had been happy. Just happy while no hidden grief or sorrow had stained her contentment. Why did her ghosts chose to come back now?

It was in the back of her mind that she knew why that particular memory had chosen to haunt her tonight. Pansy Parkinson was not the first life she had taken. But it had been an act born from revenge, not self-defense or anything else. She had lost control and had then cursed Parkinson. With her there had died something important inside of Hermione as well. Something innocent and pure. The darkness had again claimed another part of her.

Hermione's fingers clasped tightly around the stone of the balustrade.

It had been today that she had lost control again. Luckily the consequences of her lack of control today hadn't been as irrevocable as the death of Parkinson. But still, what she had done had been wrong. It was something inexcusable. Sure Melanie Nicolls wasn't exactly a likable person but that still didn't justify Hermione's actions. She had raised her wand against Nicolls, a teenage girl who was in no way able to defend herself against Hermione's magic. How could she have lost control like this? She hadn't always been like that, had she? So ungoverned and sometimes even cruel. One thing, though, was undeniable; she was no longer that innocent and nice girl that had once attended Hogwarts to learn magic together with her friends. That girl would never have cursed Nicolls so vindictively.

Hermione's eyes wandered from the blackness that was the Forbidden Forest up to the pale moon. It felt like that innocent and pure side of her was now just as unreachable to her as the moon high up in the sky.

When was it that the innocent girl had decided to disappear? As Hermione had been confronted with war? Obviously that had caused her to change. She had been touched by darkness and it had left behind traces on her. She had seen and done so many horrible things. Then she had been unexpectedly hurled back in time. But still that darkness had followed her.

She was again confronted by the cause of her sorrow and grief. But the teenage Lord Voldemort wasn't what she had expected him to be. During the Christmas break she had for the first time seen glimpses of Tom's humanity. He wasn't yet that emotionless monster she had had to fight in her time period. He wasn't exactly innocent either but still there was a part of him that was not evil and merciless. Hermione knew that during the course of the next five decades he would lose that part of him. She had always thought that his striving for immortality had ultimately led to him losing that essential part. But what if it was something else?

Hermione wrapped her arms tightly around herself as she continued to stare at the barely illuminated landscape in front of her.

Despite all her efforts she knew that she had already changed things here in the past, she had influenced the people here. Professor McGonagall had warned her in third year, hadn't she? No-one was allowed to change the past.

Hermione felt her breathing quicken as she involuntarily had to follow her thoughts to a result she didn't want to see. A question popped up in her mind that queried all her previous efforts.

Is it even possible to change the past?

Before that war had flared up in her time period and before she had fought in that very same war, she had already been here in the past. Had done the things she now did, had talked and interacted with the people here. She had already brought her darkness to the past.
What if I am to blame? Hermione asked herself numbly, not really wanting to comprehend the significance of that question.

What if she was the reason for all the misery? It was at least possible. It was a question of cause and action. What had happened first? Her stay here in the past or the events in her time period?

What if it had been her presence here that had caused the creation of Lord Voldemort? Had it been her who had destroyed that last spark of humanity in Tom because of that darkness residing inside of her?

Her hands on the balustrade started to tremble. Hermione felt sick and her eyes were opened wide as all her horrible memories flooded her mind. All the people who suffered so cruelly. All the lives that had been lost during the war. Hermione felt like drowning as those terrible images rushed through her head mercilessly.

Tears threatened to fall from her eyes but she suppressed them. There was no use in crying over a thing so horrible that no amount of tears could remedy this evil. What if everything is my fault?

Tom was walking down a dark corridor. It was rather quiet tonight despite the fact that this oh so important Quidditch game had taken place. Tom really hated having to do his prefect duties. He could do better things with his time than patrolling the corridors, searching for rule breakers. But then again being a prefect had its advantages, too. And they compensated for the dull duties he sometimes had to fulfill.

As annoying as this chore was it didn't do anything to smother the good mood he was in. Today had been rather successful after all, hadn't it? Well, it had only been a matter of time until he would finally convince Hermione to become his.

A sinister smirk appeared on his face as he remembered how Hermione had pulled her wand to curse Nicolls. Hermione had been so angry, so furious and ruthless.

Beautiful.

Tom had always known that there was something dark inside of her. It had been a pleasure to bring that darkness forth. Though he had to admit that he had been a little surprised at how well his plan had worked. But Hermione could be quite ardent sometimes. She always tried to contain herself but Tom knew that she had a fiery temper. She had again proved that by hexing Nicolls.

And, the smirk on Tom's face grew even wider, later, too, as we made out. Oh yes, it had been a successful day, Tom thought self-satisfied. Because finally, Hermione had submitted to him. Of course, Tom had always known that in the end she would, but still it hadn't been easy to convince her.

He checked his watch as he turned around the next corner. Past one in the morning already. Maybe he should call it a day and head back to the Slytherin common room. Just as Tom formulated this thought he passed the staircase leading up to the Astronomy tower and a cold draft hit him. Either someone had forgotten to close the door leading on the platform or this night wasn't as quiet as he had first assumed. Tom shortly toyed with the idea of just ignoring the whole thing but then he began to climb the stairs after all. Sometimes catching rule breakers could be very beneficial to him. After all, blackmail material was rather hard to come by, Tom thought and a small smirk stole on his face.

He quickly reached the topmost point of the tower and could see that the door indeed stood wide
open. A figure was standing at the far end of the platform. Tom stepped out onto the platform and immediately a cold wind ripped at him. He scowled at that person standing here in the cold. Whoever it was, that person was going to get thrown into detention for having made Tom going through so much trouble. As he neared the person he could see a mass of tousled curly hair.

"Hermione?" he asked in confusion.

As Tom walked nearer to the person he recognized her. It was indeed Hermione but she wasn't answering him. Tom frowned at her. What was she doing out here? As he reached her he noticed that she wasn't wearing any cloak but only her thin school robe despite the piercing cold wind. Underneath her robe she seemed to be dressed in that ridiculously short nighty Tom had seen during the Christmas break. What was she doing, wearing something like that and wandering the castle? It was still winter, hadn't she noticed?

Hermione still didn't acknowledge his presence in any way. She was clasping the balustrade of the platform tightly and stared vacantly in front of her. It seemed that something was wrong with her. Tom reached out for her and laid a hand gingerly on top of one of hers. It was icy-cold.

"What are you doing here?" Tom asked her gently.

She didn't immediately answer him but as she did she whispered her reply in a strangely dead tone, "… just thinking."

"Hermione, it's ice-cold and really late," Tom now said in a rather stern voice.

He reached for his wand and cast a warming charm on her. His actions seemed to have finally woken her from her odd state as Hermione now turned her head and looked at him. Tom's eyes widened in shock as he stared into Hermione's hazel ones. He could see it again, the sorrow and desperation. It seemed to flow in waves from her and Tom wondered how he could have missed it before.

"What's wrong?" he asked her and was surprised by that worry in his own voice.

Hermione just continued to look at him. Tom had the unpleasant feeling that she wasn't really seeing him but somebody else. After a while she averted her eyes and again looked indifferently at Hogwarts' grounds.

"Why do you think something is wrong?" she then asked in a colourless tone.

Tom remembered the last time he had seen her so forlorn and even hurt. That had been during the night before they had headed back to Hogwarts after the break. She had had a nightmare then. Tom had no idea what she had dreamed about but it must have been bad. Why was she again in this condition?

So Tom ignored her previous question and instead asked her gently, "Did you have a nightmare again?"

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders and continued to stare at the Forbidden Forest in front of her. Tom took another step towards her so that his chest was almost brushing against her shoulder. Hermione still didn't pay him any more attention. She seemed to be lost in her own world. Judging by that pained expression Tom could see in her eyes he hated to think how that world looked like.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked her softly.

Actually he desperately wanted to know what she had dreamed about. What was it that could upset
her so? Anger suddenly flared up in him. He wondered if those dreams she had were actual memories. She had told him once, hadn't she? That there happened some bad things in her life and that this was the reason for her nightmares. Tom had to restrain his magic from crackling around him furiously as he imagined someone daring to hurt her. He would make that person regret his actions very much, he thought enraged.

Tom had to remind himself that Hermione came from a country were currently a war raged. Not only that muggle war but also a wizarding one. From the few things she had already told him it appeared that at least some people she had known had died in the war. So that meant Hermione had been very close to the fightings. Probably she had seen some terrible things as she had fled the country.

Tom looked down at her. But she was still ignoring him and hadn't reacted to his question in any way. He removed his hand which still lay on one of hers. Then he gently skimmed his fingers over the skin of her cheek.

"Something is troubling you," Tom whispered in a soothing tone. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

Slowly Hermione turned her head and she looked up at him. Again that inexplicable grief was screaming at him through her eyes while the rest of her face was completely blank.

"It's nothing," she said in a cold tone.

He could hear her voice shake slightly and he knew that there certainly was something tormenting her.

"Hermione," Tom tried to talk her into confiding in him. "I'm your boyfriend. You can tell me everything."

Tom was a little alarmed as he saw a flitter of regret crossing her face as he said that. He could see her hands holding the balustrade tighten around the stone. Now there was a certain amount of determination on her face as she said in a firm voice,

"You shouldn't be with me, Tom."

Tom stared at her for a moment. That certainly wasn't good.

"Why do you say that?" he asked in a quiet tone.

"I… I'm…" Hermione's voice faltered and she shortly shook her head before she continued in a now stronger voice. "There happened some bad things in my life. They changed me. And I am not who I used to be." Hermione looked away from him before she continued in a soft voice that sounded more like she was talking with herself than with him, "I… I don't know… but I lost something." Then her eyes shot back at him and her tone was again firm as she said, "No-one should waste time with me."

Tom chuckled softly then he said, "Are you seriously telling me that you might be bad company?"

"This is not funny, Tom."

"No, it's not," he said, suddenly serious again. Then he continued in a rather commanding tone, "But I told you. I am not going to let you go again."

She looked up at him and Tom saw hesitation in her eyes before she replied, "You should. There are so many girls who like you, Tom. And they are all better than me."

"Nicolls?" Tom asked softly.
"She really likes you," Hermione whispered her answer.

Slowly Tom regretted his decision of using Nicolls to make Hermione jealous. Obviously he had caused a lot more harm than he had intended.

"And I told you that I'm not interested in her at all."

"You toyed with her?" Hermione asked in a flat tone, though it sounded more like a statement than an actual question.

Tom was really worried now that he could hear accusation in Hermione's voice. Sure he had used Nicolls. But he wouldn't lose any sleep over it. He didn't care about Nicolls. She was unimportant and dispensable. But he couldn't have Hermione change her mind about her decision again.

"I shouldn't have cursed her," Hermione whispered and Tom was surprised to hear so much regret in her voice.

"Why not?" Tom asked her in a light tone. "You are more powerful than she is. Why not use your superiority?"

The instant he said it he knew he had made a mistake. Hermione's hands left the balustrade as she now fully turned to face him. Tom could see fury on her face as she narrowed her eyes angrily at him.

"I shouldn't have expected any more from you," she hissed at him in a snide tone. "You just don't understand."

She was right. Tom really didn't understand why she was so enraged by this whole thing. His confusion must have shown on his face as she now said in a low voice,

"It was wrong to curse her. She didn't deserve it." Then she continued and there was a mixture of repentance and bitterness in her voice, "But I did curse her and just because you provoked me."

Now, this was really bad, Tom thought while Hermione glared at him rather enraged.

"Come on. You don't know Nicolls. She really deserved something like this," he tried to calm her down.

"That's the point!" she snubbed at him rather aggressively. "I do not know her. I didn't have a reason for cursing her and yet I did do just that."

"Hermione, please, it's not like you used any dangerous curse on her. She'll survive," Tom said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice.

"This time," Hermione replied darkly.

Hermione stared at him. Again the images rushed pitilessly through her head. She could again see herself as she raised her wand to curse Parkinson. It had been war back then. Hermione knew that Parkinson wouldn't have shown her any mercy either if she had been in Hermione's place. She realized that it wasn't so much the fact that she had killed Parkinson that disturbed her now. She knew that by killing that Death Eater she had most probably saved a few innocent lives. That was the reason why she had fought in that war in the first place: to prevent more deaths. No, what Hermione really disturbed was that cold detachment with which she had murdered Parkinson. She had even felt a little gratification as her curse had hit Parkinson. That was inexcusable and it made her feel sickened by herself.
Hermione looked up at Tom's grey eyes. She could see that he still didn't understand. He didn't understand what she had done nor how wrong it had been. Couldn't he see the darkness that surrounded her? Or was it the darkness he liked? It was his fault after all. He had hurt her so much and he had forced her to do all those horrible things.

But maybe it had been her who had smothered the last human part of him in the first place. Her who had created Him and her who was responsible for all the pain.

Suddenly she could see Tom's face soften a bit as he stared down at her. Then he put a hand gently on her shoulder before he said in an unexpected fit of honesty, "Okay, maybe I've really used Nicolls. But I did that only because I knew that otherwise you would never admit your feelings, Hermione."

"I know that you've manipulated mem" Hermione said in a tight voice, not in the least bit reassured by his apparent sincerity. "But that still doesn't change the facts. You didn't force me to curse Nicolls. I did that on my own free will."

"I still don't know why you make such a big deal out of it." Tom now raised is voice a little in exasperation.

"Unlike you, there are some of us who still have a conscience!" Hermione blustered and again she could feel her anger rising in her as she glared at Tom.

Right now she didn't know who was more despicable. He because he had manipulated her into becoming his girlfriend or her because she had let him do it.

Tom looked down at her, clearly contemplating how to proceed from here. After a while he again tried to calm her down, "I admit that the circumstances have been a little unfortunate. But I know you and I know that you are feeling something for me."

Hermione stared at him while her furious magic burned through her. She was enraged. Enraged by the truth behind his words. She couldn't contradict him, could she? She did like him after all. That was the reason she was in this mess right now. Her blood was boiling and Hermione was glad to be able to replace her sorrow and pain with wrath. But it had been his last statement that finally let her snap.

Hermione yelled at him with anger seeping through her voice, "You don't know anything about me!"

She swiftly stepped away from him while simultaneously drawing her wand.

"You don't know the things I can do. You don't know about the things I did do!" she hissed at him.

All the anger and frustration that rushed through her was suddenly directed at Tom. She hated him for not understanding, for being so manipulative and for having used her. But above all else she hated herself because she had allowed him to use her and because she knew that she still liked him. He needed to leave but she didn't want him to go.

Hermione lashed her wand in an angry movement in Tom's direction.

_Fragor!_

A bright blue current of energy left the tip of her wand. It crackled with Hermione's angry magic as it rushed towards Tom. Obviously he hadn't expected her to attack and hadn't drawn his own wand. But he still managed to dodge her spell by plunging to the side. The spell missed him and crashed into a stone gargoyle which stood on the balustrade. The blue spell snaked around the stone figure.
and then it seemed to close tightly around it. Cracks appeared in the stone until finally the gargoyle burst with a loud bang. But Hermione paid the destroyed sculpture no heed as her eyes were fixed on Tom. He was crouched on the floor with a foot, one knee and both hands on the ground. Currently he stared at her with an expression of disbelief on his face. But Hermione wasn't losing any time as she had again brandished her wand and the next curse soared through the air.

*Obtero!*

This time Tom wasn't fast enough. He still stared at her perplexedly as the curse hit him. Hermione heard him gasp in pain as the power of the curse flung him to the floor. But that didn't saturate her wrath at all. She felt her magic still rushing through her, singing in unison with her rage. She moved her wand as she directed her magic into the remains of the stone gargoyle. The pieces of stone glowed shortly before they obeyed her command and shot into the air. With a flick of her wand the pieces pelted down on Tom. Before they had the chance to hit him they suddenly turned into dust. Hermione scowled at Tom who now slowly got up again. She could see that he had his wand in his hand.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked in a slightly shaky voice.

He looked at her still with confusion shining in his grey eyes but Hermione could see from his posture that he was more guarded now.

"I don't want to fight with you," Tom said in a soothing tone while he raised his hands in a peace offer.

"I never wanted to fight you either!" Hermione snarled at him venomously. "But that didn't stop you, did it?"

She didn't care anymore that he was yet innocent of the things she accused him of now. Her magic crackled around her, espousing her fury even further. The air seemed to be charged with electricity and the snow that lay on the platform melted around her.

"I never wanted any of this!" she screamed at him and her anger even intensified as she could now feel unwanted tears running down her cheeks.

She breathed in shakily as her horrible memories invaded her mind again. So many. So many people had died. Why couldn't she have accompanied them? Then she wouldn't be here, fighting against the darkness that tried to clasp her. And she wouldn't have brought this darkness with her to contaminate the people here.

Hermione was pulled out of her memories by Tom's voice, "Hermione, please, what happened?"

"Everything!" she screamed at him.

Her stomach clenched as she saw concern on Tom's face as he looked at her. But she didn't need concern right now. She didn't deserve it. The fury boiled up again and Hermione raised her wand. She twirled it swiftly in a practiced movement while she held her left hand, palm up, in front of her.

*Lampas!*

A small fireball appeared over Hermione's outstretched hand. It quickly gained in volume as she directed more force into the spell. Soon the fireball crackled and spit dangerously. The air above the ball of fire flickered with heat. Hermione moved her hand from under the ball up to its side. Then she abruptly closed her hand and balled it into a tight fist. Instantly the fireball began to move. It dashed towards Tom. She watched unemotionally how he took a small step back as he was confronted with
her spell. Then he brandished his wand swiftly and a yellowish shield appeared in front of him. But she still had her hand tightly balled into a fist and her fireball crashed fiercely into the yellow shield. Hermione could see how Tom struggled as the ball of fire continued its onslaught. He frowned in concentration as he tried to maintain his shield. Then he seemed to change his strategy. He whirled his wand again and suddenly Hermione could feel his powerful magic in the air. His magic instantly attacked her spell and Hermione watched how her ball of fire first flickered feebly until it completely died down and there was nothing left of it. The red light of the fire disappeared and the platform on which they stood was once again covered only by moon light. Hermione glowered at Tom. She could still feel her magic rushing through her as a raging current.

"I don't want to hurt you," Tom now said and Hermione was surprised to hear desperation in his tone.

"Too late!" she yelled at him.

There was a look of confusion and even fear crossing his face as he heard that. Hermione didn't care. It was true after all, wasn't it?

Or had it been her who hurt him? She didn't know. Not anymore. The only thing she knew was that she was lost. And alone. More tears run from her eyes and Hermione sobbed, not really knowing what she mourned over. As he saw her crying Tom started to walk over to her. Hermione stiffened as she noticed his movement and she instantly raised her wand again and pointed it at him. He stopped to approach her but looked at her still with that concern shining softly in his grey eyes.

Hermione stared at him. He needed to go. She had to be alone. I don't want to be alone.

Hermione closed her eyes shortly and tried to suppress the tears. Then she breathed in and opened her eyes again. While she felt shaky and sick the hand holding her wand was as steady as rock.

Hermione summoned her magic while she twirled her wand in a circular movement. The air around her swirled towards her always following her wand. It didn't take long and a raging vortex appeared in front of her which seemed to suck in all the air. The swirling tempest was mixed with parts of Hermione's magic as it grew bigger and bigger. It didn't take long and Hermione felt that the power of her curse had increased so much that she was barely able to control it any longer. That was when she stopped to twirl her wand but pointed it towards Tom.

Then she cried her next curse like a prayer, "Dimitto!"

The vortex quivered shortly then Hermione could feel how it broke away from her and rushed towards Tom. She could see his eyes widen in shock as if he hadn't really expected her to attack him with that curse. Then he instantly moved his wand in a complicated pattern while he chanted an incantation under his breath. Hermione couldn't see anything change nor did a shield appear to protect Tom but she could feel the magic in the air subtly change. There now seemed to be a web of Tom's magic as it grew bigger and bigger. It didn't take long and Hermione felt that the power of her curse had increased so much that she was barely able to control it any longer. That was when she stopped to twirl her wand but pointed it towards Tom.

"Hermione, calm down." Her eyes shot back at him as Tom tried to soothe her.

He stood there, a few metres away, while he pointed his wand at her. As he scanned her she could
again see concern flashing through his eyes. More tears run down her face until they dropped on her
robe. Hermione didn't want to cry. There was no reason for her to cry, was there? She felt enraged
by those unbidden tears flowing down her cheeks. She summoned her magic and tried with all the
effort she could muster to cast off Tom's magic which still held her in place. But it was useless.

"I am sorry." Hermione stopped her struggling as she heard Tom's gentle voice.

He was walking towards her. Again Hermione could see the softness in his eyes as he looked at her.

"I shouldn't have manipulated you," he said in a soft-spoken tone.

No! No apologies. Hermione closed her eyes. He couldn't apologize. She wasn't allowed to forgive,
neither him nor herself. Again she tried to call upon her magic though she knew she wouldn't be able
to break Tom's magic. But as she mobilized every bit of her power, the Elder Magic suddenly chose
to show itself again. Hermione nearly gasped out in surprise as the Elder Wand's magic wrapped
itself completely around her. Instantly she could feel how she was unlinked from Tom's magic; she
was able to move again and stumbled a step backwards. Then the Elder Magic broke down again
and disappeared underneath her own magic. Tom had stopped dead in his tracks as he had felt his
magic lose contact of Hermione. Her vision was obscured by the tears but she could see the
astonishment on Tom's face as he stared at her.

Slowly Hermione raised her wand at him. Then she waved it and whispered, "Minuo."

Hermione could see a flicker of recognition in Tom's eyes as he heard the incantation and saw the
azure curse leave her wand. He obviously knew that curse. His hand holding his wand twitched
shortly but then he didn't raise it to cast the counter curse.

The curse still rushed towards him, angrily crackling with magic, while Tom just stood there.
Hermione's eyes widened as she realized that he wasn't going to defend himself. Without thinking
she again waved her wand and her curse deviated from its original trajectory. It rushed through the
air, grazed Tom's right arm and then crashed with a hissing sound into the ground behind him.

Tom still looked at her with a blank face, he hadn't even twitched as the curse had sliced him. But
Hermione could see blood running down his hand and dropping on the ground where it turned the
white snow red.

She took a step backwards and felt her back hitting Hogwarts' outer wall. She leaned against the wall
weakly. She was breathing heavily as she stared at Tom with wide eyes. He didn't say anything as he
stowed his wand away in his pocket then he walked slowly over to her. He didn't pay any heed to
the wand that was still pointed at him. As he reached her he stopped in front of her and looked down.
His face was a blank. Then slowly he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her cautiously
towards him. Hermione didn't stop him as he pressed her tightly against him.

"I won't let you go again," he whispered to her gently, and this time it sounded like a promise.

Hermione closed her eyes as she felt him embracing her. She suddenly felt so tired and weak as she
leaned against him.

Tom could feel blood trickling down his arm as he embraced her tightly. It hurt but it didn't matter.
He was just glad that obviously Hermione didn't want to hurl any curses at him anymore. He still
couldn't understand why she had so suddenly attacked him. Just now she had radiated so much anger
and hate that he was actually surprised that she had stopped her last attack.

What had happened?
The last time he had seen her she had been fine. There had been no trace of that terrible sorrow in her eyes. But then just a few hours later he found her and she seemed to be totally despaired. Tom could feel her trembling slightly in his arms as he pressed her against him. But she wasn't returning the embrace, she was just leaning limply against him.

What was it that had broken her so? Tom asked himself worried. He just hoped that it hadn't been his fault she was in this condition now. But he was quite sure he had at least caused some of the anger Hermione had just now vented on him. He should have never spat her so during that Quidditch match today.

Tom was quite surprised by the worry he experienced right now. Hadn't he already achieved what he had wanted? He had manipulated Hermione and he had intentionally made her jealous to the point where she had cursed Nicolls. Then she had finally submitted to him.

Hermione was his now. Hadn't that been his goal?

But now he was standing here and was very concerned about her well-being.

All he had wanted was to own her. She was a powerful witch, something rare and exceptional. Something that only he deserved to possess. So he had had to get her, no matter what it took him to do so. What did he care how she was feeling about the whole thing?

But then where was that odd concern suddenly coming from? Now she was trembling in his arms and he found himself wanting to console her. He wanted to make her feel better and forget the sorrow which so obviously tore at her.

Why did he care?

Somehow he did, though. He wanted to protect her and to take care of her. He certainly didn't want her to suffer anymore. 

How strange.

As he was pressing her so tightly against him he felt how cold she seemed to be. Tom remembered that she was only wearing her school robe and those scandalously short clothes which didn't cover up anything. He ended the embrace before he took off his black robe and wrapped it around Hermione's small frame. She looked up at him with a blank face, but Tom nearly cringed as he could again see the sadness in her eyes. He cautiously put an arm around her shoulders and then slowly led her to the door. He walked her back to her common room. Hermione just followed him. She didn't say anything but still had that blank look on her face. Tom didn't like that look at all. It was actually quite disconcerting. Hermione wasn't supposed to look so devoid of any emotion. He knew that she normally burst with emotion. What had happened that had managed to destroy that fiery temper of hers?

After a while they reached the Gryffindor common room and Tom whispered the password to that ridiculous portrait which guarded the entrance. Then he stepped into the common room. It was cast in darkness. All students seemed to have gone to bed which wasn't that surprising as it was almost two in the morning. Tom walked over to the stairs which he knew led up to the girls' dormitories. Before he climbed the stairs he drew his wand and cast a spell at the stairs. He didn't fancy to be thrown down the stairs which would turn into a slide the instant any male tried to climb them.

Stupid old-fashioned school founders.

As Tom climbed up the stairs he again cast a worried glance at Hermione. Her face was still devoid
of any emotion as she stared vacantly in front of her. He doubted she was paying any attention to
where he was leading her right now. But he knew she wasn't following him because she trusted him.
It was more that she didn't seem to care about what was happening to her. As Tom finally reached
the sixth years' dorm he cautiously opened the door. He was quite relieved to find the dorm was
dived into darkness, just like the common room had been. The last thing he needed right now was a
bunch of girls interrogating him about what he wanted in the girls' dorms. Tom entered and after a
quick scan he quietly walked over to the only vacant bed in the room. Hermione was still blindly
following him. In the past he would have been delighted by her docility but now it only troubled
him.

As they reached her part of the dormitory Tom cautiously slid his black robe, which was much too
big for Hermione, from her shoulders. Then he removed her own robe and discarded both on the
backrest of the chair standing at the small table beside her bed. Hermione now stood there in nothing
but this strange nighty she insisted in wearing while she looked up at him with huge eyes. She
appeared to be so vulnerable and frail now. Completely unlike that person who had crackled with
magic as she had attacked him with seriously powerful curses on top of the Astronomy tower.

Tom really didn't know what to make of her. He was at a loss. What had happened to her?

Hermione was following Tom through the dark corridors of Hogwarts castle. She didn't know where
he was leading her to nor did she care. Coldness was ripping at her. She could feel Tom's arm
wrapped around her shoulders, but it didn't do anything to drive away that coldness which seemed to
penetrate her so deeply that she doubted it was only related to temperature. She felt slightly sick and
again a piercing pain throbbed behind her temples. But somehow she couldn't find it in her to care.
She was feeling incredibly empty. It felt like all her feelings and emotions were strangely numbed.
There was just nothing. The burning anger had left her and even the hate was gone. It felt as if the
raging fury that had just now angrily dictated her actions had destroyed all other emotions until there
was nothing left. Just emptiness.

Next thing she noticed was Tom gently removing her black uniform robe. She looked up at him.
There was still concern flashing in his startlingly grey eyes. Then he took her hand in his and tugged
her over to a bed. Hermione was mildly surprised as she realized that it was her own bed. They were
in her dorm? Suddenly feeling very tired Hermione sat down on the bed. Tom took the blanket and
wrapped it around her before he sat down on the edge of her bed. He drew the covers of the four-
poster and even cast a Silencing charm on them. Hermione pulled the blanket tighter around her to
finally dispel that coldness. Then she leaned her back against the headboard and drew her knees up.

"What happened to you?" She heard Tom ask.

Though his voice had been gentle Hermione could hear a certain resoluteness seeping through the
words. Her eyes wandered back to him. He was sitting there on her bed and eyed her rather
attentively. What did he want her to tell him? That she was a despicable person? That she had done
horrible things in her past? That she was a murderer?

The irony of it all didn't escape her notice. She was sitting here with the man who would one day
become the uncaring initiator of a war that would take countless lives. But right now, between the
two of them, it was her who had ended more life.

Hermione didn't say anything but just continued to stare at him numbly. As she wasn't replying, Tom
slid closer to her on the bed until he sat cross-legged directly in front of her.

"This can't be just about you cursing Nicolls. There is more," Tom stated in a soft voice while he
glanced at her.

Hermione stared back at him. He was right, after all. This was more than just Nicolls. Much more.

"Just now you accused me of not knowing anything about you," he said in a quiet voice. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I… I can't…" she finally whispered.

"Hermione, what happened before you came to Hogwarts?" he asked her in a soft voice. "Have you somehow been confronted with the war in France?"

Hermione averted her eyes from him. It always came down to this, didn't it? War. She could feel tears threatening to fall from her eyes. This was ridiculous. How could she sit here and start to cry after all the things she had done?

"You already told me about your friends and your family," Tom now said in a pensive tone. "And you told me that they died."

She couldn't hold them back anymore. Traitorous tears trickled down her face.

"But how did they die?" he asked her gently. "Did they fight in the war?"

Hermione still couldn't look at Tom.

"Did you have to fight in the war?" he finally asked her hesitantly.

"No," Hermione said quietly, her voice level. Then she turned her head slowly towards him. He was looking at her with that softness shining in his eyes. He seemed to be relieved by her answer but Hermione wasn't yet finished so she continued in her emotionless tone,

"I didn't have to fight. I chose to."

Tom stared at her for some time. Disbelief was washing over him. He didn't even know why he had asked the question. He had known that something had hurt her. Since he had seen her break down at Christmas, he had known that something had happened to her. And it was somehow connected with the war she had fled from. But this, he hadn't expected.

He looked at her and saw tears flowing from her eyes. This contrasted sharply with the complete lack of emotion on her face.

"Why?" he finally asked.

"Because it was in my power to change things. Because I couldn't forsake my friends," she whispered in that voice which was missing all emotion.

"But…but…" Tom stammered as he stared at her in shock. "You are only seventeen."

Hermione laughed mirthlessly.

"Do you think wars have age restrictions?" Then she continued and the empty smile disappeared from her face, "I didn't want to fight. I really didn't. But there was no other option left." Hermione paused shortly and Tom was again shocked by that hard look on her face, it didn't seem to match her hazel coloured eyes.

"It was okay, though. I had a reason to fight and I had my friends. But then…" More tears flowed
down her cheeks. "…then they died," she whispered in a broken voice. "And I couldn't help them."

Tom stared at her. The sorrow was back in her pretty eyes. But now he knew why she wore that expression on her face. He had always assumed that Hermione had in some way been confronted by the war as it had ultimately led to her fleeing the country. But Tom had never expected her to have taken part in the actual fightings. He didn't want to imagine that she had to fight against those dark wizards.

It did explain a lot though. Hermione was able to do magic that was normally beyond any sixth year. And it did explain why her body was covered in so many scars. Tom balled his hands into tight fists as he remembered the web of white scars on her body.

"I wanted to return life to how it was before the war." Tom heard Hermione's shaky voice continue. "I wanted to stop the evil."

Tom's eyes wandered back to hers and he found her staring at him strangely.

"But we were fighting for so long, that slowly I was forgetting about our cause." New tears trickled down her cheeks as she said in her soft voice, "And so many of my friends died that even hope left me in the end. All that remained was to somehow survive and to fight on."

Tom watched how Hermione raised a hand and tried to wipe the tears away. Then she looked back at him and there was suddenly a pained expression on her face.

"I'm a hypocrite," Hermione whispered in a shaky voice. "I've always thought I fought on the right side, the good side. But am I any better than the dark wizards I tried to stop?" She paused shortly before she continued and now there was bitterness in her voice, "I might be even worse. I proclaim to be good and just, but at the end of the day I am nothing more than a murderer."

Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise at her.

"There was no other way," Hermione said in an almost pleading voice as she saw the surprised expression on his face. "Those people couldn't be stopped by only stunning them."

"I don't blame you," Tom finally assured as he had overcome his initial surprise. "You did what you had to do to survive. I would have done the same."

"Maybe," Hermione said colourlessly.

Then she averted her eyes from him before she said quietly, "And Nicolls? Before the war, I would have never cursed her. But now…"

Suddenly she hissed with disgust in her voice, "I hate the person I have become." She continued in a softer voice, "That person is horrible. I'm afraid of her. But-" She hesitated then her eyes wandered back at him. "For two years I have surrendered myself to that war. I had given up all hope. And now, I think it is too late."

"What is too late?" Tom asked her concerned.

"To come back," Hermione whispered in a shaky voice.

She looked up at Tom, begging him to tell her that it was not too late. Afraid to hear the truth: that she didn't deserve any better than to suffer like this. She could see something flicker in his grey eyes as he stared at her. But she wasn't sure what it had been. Then, suddenly, Tom slid closer to her until he sat directly beside her and leaned with his back against the headboard. Without saying a word he
just wrapped one arm around her before he pulled her over to him. Hermione stiffened as she felt him holding her.

She shouldn't be so near him. He was the reason she had had to go through so much pain.

No, he shouldn't be so near her because she was spreading this darkness which could smother everything that is good.

Hermione was just confused now.

And she was lost in a dark place.

Too late to come back.

"It's okay, Hermione," Tom's gentle voice crooned to her. "Wherever you are, you are not alone. I'm with you."

Hermione drew in a shaky breath as she heard him say that. Then her hands clasped tightly the green fabric of his sleeveless pullover and she leaned against him. Silent sobs shook her body as she wept. She could feel Tom wrapping his other arm around her before he pulled her tighter against him. Hermione buried her face into his chest as tears still run from her eyes.

She felt terrible about the things she had done during the war. The abhorrent pictures that had accompanied her for so long still invaded her mind. She had seen so much misery and pain. She knew that this war had somehow broken her. Something inside of her had died. Since she had left her time period behind and particularly since everyone who could have understood her sorrow had died Hermione had been utterly alone and isolated from everybody else. Life had continued around her but strangely she had been unable to really partake. She only had her mission to fulfill. But wasn't there more to life? More than just fighting and trying to complete a mission?

She didn't want to endure the loneliness anymore.

Her hands clasped the fabric of Tom's pullover tighter. She felt the reassuring heat of his body as she clung to him. Maybe it really was time to step out of her solitude. Perhaps she should accept the contact he so obviously offered her.

Hermione continued to clasp Tom as she sobbed into his chest.

She didn't know how long it took until her sobs died down and her eyes ran dry. But eventually she stopped to cry though she still held tightly to Tom. She felt weak and so incredibly tired. Then after a while she could feel Tom placing a soft kiss on her forehead before he whispered to her,

"It's late. Try to sleep a little bit."

Hermione nodded at him and allowed him to lay her down on the bed. She curled up under the blanket. Finally she could feel warmth spreading through her body and dispelling the penetrating coldness. Then she could feel Tom stroking gently over her head before he got up from the bed. She grabbed his hand and looked up at him. The softness was still in his beautiful grey eyes.

"Can you stay until I fall asleep?" she asked him hesitantly.

Tom smirked down at her.

"Does that mean that you are not leaving me after all?" he asked in a slightly teasing voice, though Hermione could hear the apprehension behind his taunt.
Hermione stared at him for a long time. Thinking about the war that would start in fifty years time and about all the people she had lost to that war. She was pondering about dark wizards, prophecies and the unpredictability of time itself. Time was too large a concept to presume that she could fathom out its whole magnitude.

"Yes," she finally whispered in a soft voice, not knowing if she committed a terrible crime by staying with Tom. But she decided to trust that warm feeling which engulfed her right now.

Hermione smiled softly up at him as she saw a look of relief crossing his features. Then he again sat down on the bed next to her with his back against the headboard. Hermione snuggled closer to him. She was so tired now. But she felt better, somehow lighter. She huddled against Tom, breathing in his pleasant scent and feeling the reassuring heat of his body.

He didn't have to say anything. His presence was enough to comfort her. She felt better knowing that he was there for her.

After a night without any more nightmares Hermione sat well rested in the Great Hall having breakfast. She reached for a pot of coffee and poured herself a nice cup. As she placed the pot back on the table her eyes wandered over to the Slytherin table. Her gaze landed on Nicolls who sat at the table and seemed to be talking with a bunch of other Slytherin girls. Hermione was relieved to see that Nicolls looked normal again. Her curse had done no lasting damage. She still felt bad for having cursed the girl. Hermione unfixed her eyes from Nicolls and then her gaze finally fell on Tom who sat on his usual spot. He was looking right back at her and she could see a small smile playing around his mouth and the now familiar softness glinted in his grey eyes. A smile of her own crept on her face as she scanned him.

As she had woken today Tom had had left her dorm already. In a way Hermione had been disappointed but maybe it had been for the better. Otherwise it would surely have been a field day for her chatty dorm mates if they had found Tom Riddle lying in Hermione’s bed.

Hermione's thoughts wandered back to last night. To the things that had been said and done.

She didn't know whether her decision to stay with Tom had been right. It felt like she was betraying her friends. Betraying her every conviction. There still was the fear that she was somehow tearing the very fabric of time apart alone with her presence here in the past.

Yes, she was very afraid. But still, she had made her decision. There was no knowing if she was changing time with her actions here in the past or if it were her actions here that created the timeline she knew in the first place. It was presumptuous to assume she would be able comprehend the effects her presence had on the past.

It was grotesque considering the circumstances but she had decided to follow an advice Ron had once given her. He had told her to stop over-analyzing things and just trust her feelings.

Hermione still looked at Tom. She knew that there were a lot of feelings involved when it came to Tom Riddle. Not all of them were positive. She couldn't just forget who he was. Too much had happened. The darkness in Tom was already visible, though most of the people couldn't see it. Hermione could. Sometimes she could see it lurking behind his grey eyes, this black abyss. But aside from this frightening darkness there was so much more to him. He was the only one who could make her feel better. Maybe there was darkness inside of him but he was able to pull her out from her own darkness. There was no denying how much she needed him. As she looked at him she could feel it again this warm and tingling feeling.
Hermione breathed in deeply. Her decision was made. She would stay with Tom. Maybe she would regret it later, maybe not. There was no telling what the future would bring.

She had to chuckle softly at that. Somehow everything was twisted.

"Did you even listen to me?" A voice beside her asked in exasperation.

Hermione looked up and found Longbottom frowning at her. He was sitting right beside her. While Lupin and Weasley had taken seats opposite from her. Hermione nearly groaned as she saw the looks of concern on the boys' faces. Yesterday they had been too exhilarated by their victory of the Quidditch match. Though in Lupin's case Hermione assumed his excitement had had more to do with Stella Lovegood. Whatever the reason, their good mood had stopped them from berating her about her sudden absence after the match. A mistake they apparently wanted to make up for.

"You can't just suddenly disappear on your own," Longbottom continued his ranting. "What if he had found you all alone?"

With 'he' Longbottom obviously referred to Tom. Her Gryffindor friends still thought he was harassing her. Hermione knew that it was high time she told them about Tom and her. Particularly now that she had decided to stay with Tom. But she didn't know how to tell them. They really mistrusted Tom. Even hated him, at least in Longbottom's case. She had to admit that their aversion wasn't exactly unfounded.

"Look, you don't have to worry about me so much," Hermione told Longbottom in a soothing tone. "Really, I can look after myself."

Longbottom just sighed and shook his head at her in frustration. Then he turned to Lupin and said, "Whatever did you think, letting her wander off on her own?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows as she saw that look of contriteness on Lupin's face.

"I told you already I'm sorry about it," Lupin said in a small voice.

*Oh Merlin, I really need to tell them,* Hermione thought as she followed the discussion between her friends. *But how?*

"Hermione, you should really be more cautious," Weasley now told her in a surprisingly serious tone. "Riddle's ruthless. And he knows a whole bunch of evil curses."

"Yeah, he's a bastard," Longbottom didn't hesitate to inform her.

*You are a coward!* Hermione screamed at herself in her mind. But the three Gryffindors were the only friends she had in this time period. Hell, they were the only friends she had left in any time period, including her own. She didn't want to lose them. But this procrastinating the truth was surely not making the whole thing any easier.

"Er… listen…” Hermione started to say in a stammered voice.

She was run over by Longbottom as he told the other two boys, "Let's just forget about yesterday. It's water under the bridge. But from now on we have to take better care of Hermione. That evil prick will never get anywhere near her."

Hermione saw the other two boys nod at that and this time she couldn't suppress this frustrated groan from escaping her mouth. Her self-proclaimed guards weren't paying her any attention anyway and didn't hear it. She then just dropped out from their conversation and let them continue to make plans.
on how to best protect her from Tom's evil schemes. All the while that tiny but persistent voice in her head didn't stop to call her a coward.

After a while Hermione was glad to notice that her friends had now stopped talking about her. The conversation had wandered to another topic.

Longbottom was right now retelling the best moves from the match yesterday quite enthusiastically, "I'll never forget the look on Avery's face." He grinned at Weasley rather evilly. "Your Bludger hit him very nicely, don't you think."

"Sure." Weasley laughed.

"Serves him right," Longbottom exclaimed satisfied.

Hermione felt relieved that they had obviously stopped worrying about her, at least for the time being. Though, that didn't mean she could continue to lie to them forever. They really needed to know about Tom.

And you really need to stop being such a coward! the tiny voice informed her.

Finally they were finished with breakfast and Hermione got up from the table while she wondered about how she could escape her friends later. She was still deep in thought as the four of them made their way towards the exit. Suddenly she noticed that her friends had stopped talking so she looked up at them. She was surprised as she saw the smiles dropping from both Weasley's and Longbottom's face. She frowned at them and then followed their gaze. Her eyes quickly landed on Tom walking towards her. He had obviously seen her getting up from her table and wanted to talk to her.

Hermione smiled at him.

As Tom approached her Hermione saw a frown appearing between his eyebrows as his eyes darted from her to the three boys. She looked beside her and found Weasley, Longbottom and Lupin standing at her side and they were all scowling darkly at Tom. That was bad, Hermione thought panicky. She should have told them after all. Tom stopped in front of her and her three bodyguards.

"What do you want?" Longbottom hissed at Tom aggressively.

Tom just arched one eyebrow gracefully and looked at Longbottom bored. Then his gaze wandered from Longbottom to the two other boys until it finally landed on Hermione. Tom was standing there, in front of her, nonchalantly staring at her and his blank mask was once again in place, Hermione noticed somewhat disappointed. Until she saw this mischievous glint in his grey eyes as he looked at her.

"I was just checking whether DeCerto here has survived yesterday's match," Tom said indifferently, turned to Longbottom. "I was rather hoping a Bludger hit her head. She's a pain in my side."

Hermione saw Longbottom's face getting red while his wand hand twitched. Weasley and Lupin both now glared at Tom sinisterly. But before either one of them could yell at Tom, Or curse him!, Hermione said, while trying to sound as cold as Tom,

"I was just thinking along the same lines. It's a pity you are still here, isn't it?" Hermione told Tom.

Hermione could see the amusement behind Tom's mask of fake-anger as he narrowed his eyes at her and said arrogantly, "Really, DeCerto, you should have stayed where you came from. Where was that again? Germany?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows took a step towards Tom and then sneered at him, all the time
desperately trying not to break into laughter, "Not Germany, stupid! It's France!"

"You dare insult me?" Tom hissed at her threateningly as he too took a step towards Hermione.

Hermione was once again impressed by his acting abilities. He was good. She would be scared by him if it wasn't for the amusement she could see glinting in his eyes.

"I think you need to be punished for that!" Tom continued in a low and dangerous voice.

In the corner of her eyes Hermione could see her three Gryffindor friends tense as they heard Tom say that. But before they could react Tom had taken the last step that separated him from Hermione. Then he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her towards him. His other hand found her chin and raised her head so she would look at him. His face was still a blank but Hermione wasn't fooled. She could see the softness in his eyes as he silently asked her for permission. Sooner or later her friends would find out anyway, better to get over with it fast, Hermione thought, not just a little bit nervous.

Then she smiled up at him in agreement.

She closed her eyes as she felt Tom's lips on her own. Her hands wandered up his back and clutched the fabric of his black Slytherin robe as she felt him pulling her even closer to him. All thoughts fled from her mind as he kissed her softly. She only remotely heard the surprised and outraged gasps from her friends. Se didn't notice at all how the noise level of the Great Hall lessened considerably.

Then Tom broke away from her and Hermione sighed as she leaned her head against his chest.

"What… what are you doing?" Hermione heard Longbottom's enraged voice and wondered whom that question was directed at. Tom? Or her?

She looked up at Tom and saw him smirking conceitedly at the three Gryffindors standing behind her.

"Wipe that smirk off your face," Hermione ordered him sternly.

Tom looked down at her and then whispered amused in her ear, "Sorry, it's not deliberate. It's this Slytherin thing, you know."

Hermione rolled her eyes before she said exasperated, "You are still doing it, Tom."

Tom chuckled at her, then he let go of her. Hermione braced herself before she turned around to face her friends. They were standing there, each one of them staring at her in varying degrees of surprise and anger. Hermione clutched Tom's arm with one hand as she scanned her friends. Lupin seemed to be genuinely surprised. He didn't exactly approve of her actions Hermione guessed but at least she could see a little bit of understanding and acceptance in his eyes. Weasley was standing next to him. He, too, was staring at her in bewilderment as he shook his head in disbelief.

Longbottom, though, was a different matter. His face had turned an angry shade of purple and his hands were balled into fists as his gaze wandered from Hermione to Tom and to Hermione's hand clutching Tom. Hermione breathed in deeply to calm herself down. It didn't help. Now she needed to be honest with them.

"Er… " Hermione began in a soft and timid voice. "… you all know Tom. Well, obviously." She laughed nervously then she continued hurriedly, "We… er… we are, kind of, dating."

"Kind of?" Tom asked and raised his eyebrows at her.
Hermione poked him in his side and whispered in a sing-song voice, "You are not being very helpful here, Tom!"

Tom chuckled again and said teasingly, "I never said I would." Then he leaned down to her and kissed her on her cheek.

Which caused Longbottom's already rather red face to darken more. Hermione could see that his right hand still twitched slightly as if he wanted to pull his wand. She felt guilty now. Maybe she should have given him an advance warning or something before she just kissed Tom in front of him. Judging by that murderous look on Longbottom's face, though, she should really talk with her friends now. Lest she risked Longbottom challenging Tom to a duel.

"Tom?" Hermione looked up at him. "I need to speak with them. Could you leave us alone?"

Tom detached his gaze from the three Gryffindor boys in front of him and now looked down at her. Hermione nearly sighed in frustration as she could see that angry frown on his face.

"Why do you need to be alone with them to do that?" he demanded to know.

"Come on. Don't be like this. I need to sort this out with them," Hermione tried to convince him. Then she shoved at him slightly and said, "Don't you have something to do? Like ordering around your dear followers?"

Tom just narrowed his eyes at her but didn't move.

"Please, Tom," Hermione said while trying to fight her frustration. "We can meet later, okay?"

She looked up at him with a pleading expression on her face and Tom still scowled down at her. But after some time he seemed to cave in and said reluctantly,

"All right. But we'll meet afterwards."

Hermione nodded at him and again shoved him gently away. This time Tom obeyed and left them. Though he didn't leave without throwing a nasty glare Longbottom's way.

Hermione looked back at her three friends, at least she hoped they were still her friends. They were standing there and staring at her incredulously. The first to be able to break from his stupor was Longbottom. His face was still purple and an angry frown appeared between his eyebrows as he grabbed Hermione and started to pull her into an empty classroom. Weasley and Lupin followed behind them. While being dragged out of the hall Hermione got a glimpse of the other students still sitting at the Gryffindor table. They were gaping at her and clearly followed the spectacle. Even the other house tables were watching, Hermione noticed frustrated.

Longbottom did only release her wrist as he had pulled her into an empty classroom. Hermione saw Weasley and Lupin enter the classroom. Weasley closed the door behind him and then stared at her again, his face looked uncharacteristically unsmilin.

"What was that right now?" Hermione's attention was brought back to Longbottom as he yelled at her angrily.

"I… I…" Hermione stammered as Longbottom's fierce stare hit her again. Then her voice died away and she began to nervously fiddle with the long sleeves of her black uniform robe.

"Why did you allow Tom Riddle to kiss you?" Longbottom roared at her.
Hermione flinched as he yelled at her. She knew that Longbottom hated Tom. Of course he wouldn’t be exactly understanding.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said timidly as she looked down on her hands. "I should have told you sooner."

"Told me what?" Longbottom asked angrily. "That you are snogging that dirty bastard? And in the Great Hall, too. You are lucky no teacher saw you doing that. Especially Legifer. You would be in detention until your graduation."

*What?* Why would she get detention for kissing somebody? Hermione was bewildered.

"Marc, please," Lupin said in a soothing voice. "Calm down. I'm sure Hermione can explain the whole thing."

Longbottom narrowed his eyes at Lupin and folded his arms before his chest but he stopped yelling. Hermione looked thankfully at Lupin.

"I know that I had my conflicts with Tom-" Hermione was interrupted as Longbottom snorted wryly at that. "But I was wrong about him." She continued in a soft but firm voice. "We've met during the break by chance and he was really nice and-"

"Oh," Longbottom cut in with scorn dripping from his voice. "So, he was nice, was he?"

"Marc, let her finish," Lupin chastised his friend quietly.

Longbottom turned to Lupin and said in a barely controlled tone, "That's just ridiculous. We are talking about *Riddle*here. He's an asshole, you know that."

"He's not!" Hermione said and there was now anger in her voice, too.

"He's EVIL, Hermione!" Longbottom yelled at her.

Hermione opened her mouth to retaliate but…

*Well, he's kind of right.* Hermione had to grudgingly admit as she closed her mouth and stared at Longbottom angrily.

"See? You can't even deny it," Longbottom exclaimed triumphantly.

"He's my boyfriend!" Hermione now yelled furiously at Longbottom. She surprised herself with that conviction in her voice.

Longbottom didn't answer to that but stared at her enraged. Then without saying anything he turned around and stormed angrily from the classroom.

Hermione looked at the door Longbottom had just disappeared through and suddenly all the anger was leaving her. She sighed tiredly and leaned against one of the desks. That hadn't worked well at all. Longbottom seemed to be really angry with her. But what could she do about it? She liked Tom and if Longbottom couldn't accept that she couldn't force him.

After a while Hermione was brought out of her thoughts as a soft voice asked hesitantly, "Is he really your boyfriend?"

Hermione looked up and found Weasley standing a few steps away from her and looking at her questioningly. Lupin was sitting on a desk beside Weasley and he, too, was staring at her
expectantly. She breathed in deeply. It again hit her how strikingly similar this Weasley looked to her Ron. She had to remind herself that he was not Ron before she said in a soft voice,

"Yes, he is."

Weasley continued to look at her contemplatively for some time. Then a small smile crept on his face and he nodded at Hermione. She smiled back at him. Grateful that at least one of her friends could accept her relationship. Lupin who had watched this exchange got up from the table he had been sitting on, walked over to Hermione and leaned beside her against the desk.

"Are you sure about that?" Lupin asked her tentatively.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Riddle's not exactly known for being very faithful to his girlfriends," Lupin said in an awkward voice.

"I trust him," Hermione nearly choked on her own words. They sounded so wrong, but felt so right.

Lupin looked at her and Hermione could see the doubt in his eyes. "How can you be so sure? It's only a few weeks ago that you still hated him."

Yes, he was right. She had hated Tom back then or, to be more precise, she had hated Voldemort. But during the Christmas break so much had changed, her perception of Tom had changed completely. She had looked behind his mask of coldness and she had found a likeable and sometimes even compassionate person. She was sure Tom had found something in her too otherwise he would never have allowed her to come so near him.

Hermione doubted that he was even able to let others behind the many walls he had erected around himself. There were so many of them that he had buried himself underneath them completely. She still couldn't quite understand how she had managed to slip behind his walls. But somehow she had and Hermione knew that the affection Tom had towards her was something very special. He had grown up in an environment where he couldn't allow himself to trust anyone. Something as simple as to trust another human being was for him unbelievably difficult. During the time when most children had loving parents or guardians Tom had had nothing. He had been alone. Back in her time Dumbledore had been right. Voldemort was not able to feel love. Because he had never had the chance to learn how to do that.

Hermione looked at Lupin again and then said in a convinced voice that left no room for argument,

"I am sure and I do trust him."
Hermione, aimlessly, wandered the many corridors of Hogwarts castle. She felt just horrible since her little *confession*. Longbottom had reacted in the worst way Hermione could have imagined.

*Well, at least he didn't curse me... or Tom.* Hermione thought frustrated as she strolled down the corridor. Her steps echoed loudly on the stone floor. Right now she was in a rather secluded part of the castle as she desperately tried to avoid the company of other students. They were sure to either pelt her with questions about Tom or would skip the talking and just hex her.

She sighed loudly and pondered what to do next. She couldn't very well wander the castle's corridors forever. But returning to the Gryffindor common room was certainly not an option either. She strongly assumed that that was where Longbottom had stormed off to so furiously. Lupin and Weasley should be there too and probably tried to console Longbottom after he had received those shocking news. For another matter Hermione didn't want to go to the common room because then she would run the risk to meet her chatty dorm mates. After this display in the Great Hall they would surely try to squeeze as much information out of her as they could. Maybe the best course of action would be to just flee the castle and start a new life far far away from here, Hermione thought wryly. *The Caribbean should be nice at this time of the year.*

Hermione chuckled softly as she rounded a corner and entered a new passage way.

*Or Albania. Maybe the weather is not as mild there but then Tom would come along.*

Hermione was deeply immersed in her escaping plans as she heard a deep voice behind her, "What did your dear friends say?"

She turned around and found Tom leaning against the corridor wall. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes as she saw a smirk plastered all over his face while he scanned her in amusement.

"What are you so happy about?" Hermione asked him somewhat irritated.

Her anger only invoked that smirk on Tom's face to grow even wider.

"Nothing," he said in an annoyingly cheerful tone.

Then he pushed from the wall and walked over to her. The Slytherin-smirk was still tugging at the corners of his mouth as he looked down at her. Then he took her hand in his and started to walk.

Hermione sighed but she followed him.

"I thought we would meet right after you talked with those boys," he said, surprisingly without any accusation in his voice. He seemed to be in a good mood.

Hermione made a non-committal sound that could have meant anything.

"So? What about your friends?" Tom inquired again as he led her through the corridors. His voice was light as if he was pondering the weather. It was annoying.

"What did they say to your shocking relationship?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him warily. "Why do you suddenly care about what my friends say?" she countered with suspicion in her voice.
Tom chuckled in amusement, "I just want to be prepared if your stupid friends decide to assault me."

"They're not stupid," Hermione retorted while she hit him with a withering look.

Tom didn't seem to be concerned by her dark scowl. He just continued to smile at her innocently which caused her level of annoyance to rise a little further. As they entered the next passage way Hermione instantly noticed a group of Ravenclaw girls walking in their direction. They were probably fourth or fifth years. Hermione nearly groaned as she saw the hostile stares some of those girls hit her with. Since she had left the Great Hall she hadn't met other students so she didn't really know what Hogwarts' population thought about her relationship with Tom. But now those Ravenclaw girls gave her an impression of how the other students were reacting to the news. She could see that one or two of the girls were eyeing her and Tom curiously but the rest of them were throwing rather nasty glares Hermione's way. Though she guessed that they would prefer to throw actual curses at her if Tom hadn't been with her right now. Hermione sighed tiredly. That was just the last thing she needed, a bunch of vengeful Tom fan-girls out for her blood. It reminded her of that episode before the break as they all thought she was a crazy stalker who tried to molest Tom.

Thought back then at least her friends had tried to cheer her up. Something they would surely not do again, Hermione realized with a pang of regret. She wasn't really concerned about those misdirected girls. She had already known that a lot of them didn't like her very much but she could live with that. Honestly she had survived worse. A lot worse actually.

No, what really got to her was that look on her friends' faces as she had told them the truth. She just hoped Longbottom would somehow forgive her. She kind of needed him to forgive her because that hurt look on his face had been exactly the expression she had always imagined to be on Harry's or even Ron's face if they could see her now. If Longbottom couldn't forgive her, then her friends from the future would never have accepted her new relationship either. In addition to that she knew it would hurt her if her friends turned away from her. They were always giving her that feeling of normalcy she had lost a long time ago. With them around she could sometimes feel like a normal girl.

As if never been touched by darkness. Hermione shuddered as that thought hit her and she huddled a little closer to Tom while clutching his arm with both her hands. He looked down at her with one eyebrow raised questioningly.

"Didn't go down too well, did it?" he asked her and the slight taunt had by now disappeared from his voice.

"Well, Amarys and Richard were rather understanding," Hermione said softly then she hesitated. "Marc on the other hand…"

"Longbottom?" Tom asked quietly.

Too quiet to be actually true, Hermione thought.

"Yeah, he doesn't like you that much," she said tentatively.

Tom sniggered at that rather darkly then he said, "Really?"

She decided to not comment on that.

It was after a few more corridors that they stood before some well-known, huge wooden doors and Hermione furrowed her brow.

"The Library, Tom?" Hermione asked him somewhat surprised.

He just smirked down at her and stated rather condescendingly, "It's Sunday, dear. Believe me, we
will be pretty much alone in there."

Hermione just shrugged and followed him inside. At the entrance she saw Ms Peters sitting at her usual place. Hermione shortly wondered when, if ever, that woman had a day off.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters exclaimed happily as she spotted Hermione. Then her gaze wandered to Tom standing beside her. "And Mr Riddle. I was wondering when the two worst bookworms of this school would find each other."

"Hello, Ms Peters," Hermione smiled at the librarian.

Then she allowed Tom to drag her into the Library. Hermione was not really surprised that he pulled her in direction of the Restricted Section. Though as they reached the Restricted Section they didn't enter but passed it. Hermione scowled at the Dark Arts books she could see standing in the shelves. She could almost feel the ungodly dark aura they were radiating. Tom seemed to have sensed her displeasure as he now asked,

"Don't like that Section of the Library, do you?"

"No," Hermione replied while she still glared at the Dark Arts books.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Ms DeCerto not liking books. I am utterly shocked," he said dryly.

Hermione unfixed her eyes from the Dark Arts tomes and looked back at him. Then she said in a quiet voice, "Those books are dangerous."

"I find them fascinating," Tom replied as his gaze traveled shortly over the Restricted Section. Hermione wasn't particularly surprised to hear that but she didn't like his enthusiasm at all.

"I think those books are restricted for a reason," she then told him.

Tom frowned at her. "So you think its okay to limit the access to knowledge?" he asked her while his face was once again covered by this emotionless mask.

She pondered him for a moment then she replied, "If that knowledge is dangerous, then yes."

Tom stared back at her before he stated colourlessly, "I think ignorance is a lot more dangerous than knowledge can ever be."

Hermione looked up at him. In a way, he was right. In a way.

Another few steps and they finally left the gloomy atmosphere of the Restricted Section behind. Tom seemed to head for a huge window on the far end of the Library. It was quite hidden here in the back where normally no student set foot on. They had to step around another shelf full of old, dusty tomes to finally reach the window. Hermione had to agree with Tom's earlier statement. It was very unlikely that anyone would disturb them here. Under the window was a huge wooden windowsill. It looked rather inviting, Hermione decided. The weak rays of the winter sun fell softly through the glass of the huge window. Outside she could see the grounds of Hogwarts which were still covered by a thin layer of white snow while the Great Lake lay glistening in the sun, though its water looked ice cold.

Tom pulled his wand and waved it at the windowsill. Some comfortable looking cushions appeared out of thin air. Then he sat down on the sill and pulled Hermione down with him.
"I often come here to read," Tom told her with a sideways glance.

Thus the close proximity to the Restricted Section? Hermione wondered while she looked at him, though she didn't voice her suspicion. Instead she sat down beside him.

"I am quite surprised by you," Tom said in his teasing voice as she had comfortably snuggled against him.

She raised her eyebrows at him questioningly which only caused a smirk to take form on his face.

"I never really thought you would tell your… friends about me," Tom said casually. "I rather had the impression you were ashamed of me." As an afterthought he added in quite the conceited tone, "And let me tell you, that was something new for me. Any normal girl would parade me through the school."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him which caused him to chuckle in amusement.

"I am normal!" she blustered before she nudged him.

She was quite surprised as he winced in pain when she punched his arm lightly. Hermione frowned in confusion until she remembered that she had hit him with a cutting hex on that arm. She felt a stab of guilt in her stomach as she watched him rubbing his arm cautiously. She had really lost it last night on the Astronomy Tower, hadn't she? Those had been quite the dangerous curses she had hurled at Tom. If it wasn't for him being such a powerful wizard, she could have caused some serious damage. Hermione slowly looked from Tom's arm back to his face.

"Tom, I… I don't know what came over me yesterday," she mumbled softly. "It was… I was just so angry, and..." She searched for the right words as she stared up into his grey eyes. "It was just too much," she finally whispered.

"Well, at least my skin is still the same colour," Tom taunted while a small smirk curled up the corners of his mouth.

Hermione averted her eyes from him and looked down at her hands. The guilty feeling even intensified as she was again reminded of how she had cursed Nicolls. Back then she had really lost control because she had known that Nicolls wouldn't be able to defend herself.

"Aww, please, Hermione," Tom then said arrogantly. "Don't tell me that you are still feeling guilty about Nicolls."

She looked up at him again and found him smirking. Then he said in a light tone, "You know, this morning in the common room Nicolls seemed to already have forgotten everything about your attack on her. She felt good enough to try to seduce me again."

Hermione's eyes widened and she stared at him.

"She even asked me if I was alright. And if you had hurt me," Tom said in an innocent and conversational tone while even his smirk had left his face.

There was now a look of shock on Hermione's face.

"Don't worry," Tom continued in his most honest voice. "I lied. I told her you would never hurt me."

"What?" Hermione asked weakly.
She stared at Tom with wide eyes while he just looked back at her. His face was carefully arranged into an expression of innocence while his eyes glinted with sincerity. But after a while he couldn't hold back any longer and broke out laughing.

"Really, you Gryffindors are just too gullible," he finally managed to say while still sniggering at her. "I can now fully understand why they put you in that house."

Hermione glared at him angrily. But that didn't stop him from still laughing at her.

Which caused her to huff at him, "I really hate Slytherins."

"But you've only known us for what? A few months?" He smirked down at her. "I'm sure you'll learn to appreciate our fine humour."

The glare she hit him with grew even darker then she said in a low voice, "I don't think so."

Tom didn't seem to be concerned by her rather hostile scowl. Instead the smirk left his face and he now looked at her with a mock-sad expression on his face.

"Still feeling bad about having cursed me?" he asked her in a solemn voice.

"No," Hermione informed him in a clipped tone. "I can suddenly remember why I cursed you."

Tom chuckled again but then she was surprised as there now appeared a smile on his face. This time it was not a smirk but a genuine smile.

"See? You really don't have to feel guilty," he whispered softly.

He smiled at her reassuringly and there was again this tingling feeling in her stomach as she looked up into his startlingly grey eyes. Tom extended a hand towards her and skimmed with his fingers gently over her cheek. The fluttery sensation in her stomach intensified so Hermione decided to follow that feeling and huddled closer against Tom. Then she slung her arms around his neck before she pulled his head down to her. She closed her eyes as she pressed her lips against his. One of her hands wandered up his back and ruffled through his dark hair, thus completely destroying his perfect hairstyle. But Tom didn't seem to mind, pulled her even closer to him and then deepened the kiss.

Hermione panted slightly as they finally broke apart. She snuggled against him and put her head down on his chest. His arms were still gently wrapped around her. They stayed like this for a while and Hermione couldn't have felt more comfortable.

After some time Tom shifted slightly then he asked her in a soft voice, "How do you feel today?"

Hermione looked up at him and found a little bit of concern shining in his grey eyes. She was surprised as she now noticed that Tom looked a little tired.

"Fine," Hermione answered his question in a small voice.

Tom wrapped his arms tighter around her and pressed her against him.

"Maybe I should always sleep in your bed," he then whispered seductively in her ear. "Don't want you to have any more nightmares," he tried to convince her innocently, though Hermione could feel him smirk against her skin before he kissed her on the cheek.

"In fact, why don't you move into the Slytherin dorm?" he continued in his milky voice.

Hermione glanced up at him. He was smirking down at her but she again noticed the tiredness on his
"Don't be silly. The gloomy atmosphere would surely drive me nuts," she sneered in a good imitation of Tom, though the amused grin on her face gave her away.

Tom chuckled before he said in a patronizing way, "It's not gloomy. It's sophisticated classiness. But of course, you wouldn't understand."

"Sure," she replied amused. But then she narrowed her eyes at him as he tried to suppress a yawn. He seemed to be really tired. "When did you leave my dorm last night?"

"Hm?" he looked down at her through hooded eyes. "Don't know. Late, I think." He smiled at her.

"You didn't need to stay so long," Hermione said softly.

"But what if you had another nightmare?" Tom taunted gently before he sighed melodramatically. "Whatever would you do without me?"

Hermione leaned back against him and enjoyed the comfortable feeling of his arms wrapped around her. It even let her ignore his light mock. After a while she asked, "How did you get up the jinxed stairs to the girls' dorms anyway?"

Tom didn't reply anything.

"Tom?" she asked and then slightly turned her head to look up at him as he still didn't answer.

His eyes were closed and he leaned against the window frame while his arms were still looped around her. Hermione smiled as she scanned him. Obviously he had been more tired than he had admitted. She flexed her wrist and her black wand landed in her hand. Then she waved the wand at the shelf of books standing not far away from their window. Instantly an ancient looking book with gilt edges soared towards her. Hermione caught it and read its title: Magical Flora and Fauna of the West Indies. She didn't want to wake up Tom so she suppressed a chuckle as she read the title. That just fitted too well into her previous, far-fetched escape plans.

She could still feel Tom's arms around her as she opened the book. The content smile never left her face as she started to read.

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"I can't believe she's together with that freak," Longbottom huffed furiously.

"Yeah, I'm surprised myself," Lupin admitted as he looked up from the book he had been reading in.

"Do you think he hexed her?" Longbottom asked while he looked with raised eyebrows at Lupin. "Maybe he confunded her and she doesn't really want to be with him."

Lupin sighed at his friend's hopeful expression. "No. She didn't appear to have been hexed."

Longbottom leaned angrily back against the sofa he was sitting on. Then he continued to glare furiously at nothing in particular and mumbled angrily away to himself.

After a while he lost his temper again and burst out, "She can't be serious. Riddle's a creep. An evil creep. How can she like him? After all the things he did."

A few other Gryffindors threw curious glances Longbottom's way. The three friends were currently
sitting in the Gryffindor common room and Longbottom was still more than angry about finding out about Hermione and Riddle.

"Well, we can't do anything about that," Weasley said softly thus trying to calm his friend down.

He stiffened as Longbottom now glared angrily at him. "She can't have forgotten all the things Riddle did to her before the break," he hissed enraged. "I mean he tried to ruin her reputation. And then that disgusting snake even threatened her."

"Yeah," Weasley conceded. "But she told us that she met Riddle during the break. Maybe he apologized to her."

Longbottom just drowned Weasley in an incredulous look. "Like that git would ever apologize to anyone!" he bellowed irately. "And even if, how can she forgive him?"

"Well, whether he apologized or not, obviously Hermione has forgiven him," Lupin said in a collected voice. "Think about it, Marc, Riddle never tried to curse her or really hurt her. Hermione barely knows him for a few months. She has no reason to hate him."

Longbottom now glowered darkly at Lupin who just continued to look back at him stoically.

Then Longbottom spat at him bitingly, "Never tried to hurt her? You haven't seen what happened during Slughorn's party."

Lupin raised his eyebrows in question at him so Longbottom continued his rant.

"Back then I've only left Hermione for a few minutes but when I found her again Riddle had already cornered her. And he had grabbed her by her wrist!" Longbottom clamoured furiously. "I'm sure he was about to hit her. There was this evil glint in his eyes."

"Are you really sure?" Lupin asked unbelieving as he frowned at Longbottom. "I just don't think Hermione would let anyone treat her that way."

Longbottom threw his arms up in frustration. "You know Riddle! He's an evil bastard!" he exclaimed rabidly. "What can Hermione do against him? She's just too nice."

Then Longbottom continued to badmouth Riddle while he started to question Hermione's soundness of mind. His two best friends tried to calm him down a little. But the blond Gryffindor was just too enraged to listen to them. He was really angry with Hermione.

After some time the three of them saw Hermione enter the common room. Her eyes quickly darted to the three boys sitting on the sofa. She hesitated shortly but before she could walk over to them, Longbottom looked away from her pointedly and crossed his arms before his chest. A sad expression crept on her face as he was ignoring her. Then Hermione turned towards the stairs and continued her way to the dorm. All the while she completely ignored the curious glances the other occupants of the room were throwing her way.

Hermione felt horrible as she made her way to her dorm. Obviously Longbottom was not going to forgive her anytime soon. That angry and even disappointed expression on his face had told her so. As she entered her dorm she instantly retrieved Peverell's manuscript from her trunk, flopped down on her bed and quickly drew the covers shut around her before her dorm mates could storm into the room and start to question her. Then she eyed the book lying in her lap. Was this her only hope? Or something that could spoil her happiness? She wasn't sure anymore what it meant. Her thoughts wandered back to the Library. She had felt so comfortable as she had sat there snuggled against Tom. It was such a nice feeling having him around.
Hermione's fingers skimmed over the old leather binding of the book. After they had left the Library again she had told Tom that she still had some homework to do for History of Magic and that was why she needed to return to her dorm. It had been a lie. Her essay for professor Binns was already lying finished on the table beside her bed. There was no essay she had to write, there was only this thing, Hermione thought as she looked down at the small book in her lap. She felt guilty for having to lie to Tom but she also felt guilty because she had neglected the book for so long. It still was her mission to somehow find a way back in her proper time period, wasn't it? Still, she was loath to continue that book. After she had finally achieved to steal it during the break that book had seemed to be her last chance to find a way home where she belonged. Now it was just an irksome remainder of a duty she still had to fulfill but slowly began to question.

Hermione sighed as she slowly opened the book. Then she reluctantly began to read. Peverell's way of describing magic annoyed her now. It was complicated and just unintelligible. Hermione read for some time until again she came upon one of his personal notes. As she read it she instantly understood the importance of the entry. She would have been excited by it before, now it only scared her.

After I racked my brain for weeks and weeks I finally decided on the object I would create to win the challenge between my brothers and I. I needed it to be powerful and deeply magical. There is really only one thing that is nearly as powerful as a magician himself and that is the wand he uses. So I decided to create an entirely new kind of magical object by combining the venerable craft of wand making and the art of creating magical objects. Now that I have seen the possibilities I know that those two formidable arts belong together. They are so similar and yet so different. They complete each other and seem to be nothing without the other. My brothers will be very astound when we will meet in nearly a year time, because I will surely win our challenge. I have set my mind on creating the perfect magical object, bound to be the most powerful creation ever made.

I will create an unbeatable wand.

With a loud thud Hermione hastily closed the book. Her breathing was quickened as she stared down at the book in her hands. As she read Peverell's last words she realized that subconsciously she had been hoping for some time now that the book was a dead end. She lifted it up with a trembling hand. While she tried to suppress that lump of guilt in her stomach she got up from her bed and hid Peverell's manuscript again in that secret compartment in her trunk.

I'm going to read it later, she promised herself, though she knew damn well that there was no real reason why she didn't continue the book now.

"I can't believe he wants to spend time with that ugly trollop!" Lestrange exclaimed loudly.

"I dunno about the trollop," Avery sniggered darkly. "But she's not that ugly, is she?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," Lestrange hissed at him. "Her hair looks like a pot scraper and she's totally insolent."

"She just needs someone showing her her place," Avery countered. "If you know what I mean," he added while winking in a dirty way.

"DeCerto still is one insufferable Gryffindor," Alba threw in the conversation angrily.

His magic was still damaged due to the fact that Riddle had thrown that dark curse at him after he found out they attacked DeCerto. Alba still held that against DeCerto.
What a bunch of idiots, Malfoy thought as he followed the other boys’ ranting. He really couldn't understand how those fools dared to doubt Riddle's decisions like that. If he ever found out, they were in big trouble. A small smirk appeared on Malfoy's face and he turned back to the book in his hands. He had no intention of participating in that potentially dangerous conversation.

"I'm sure Riddle's just playing around with her," Avery said slowly.

"Of course he is," Lestrange sneered at him. "But surely he can find someone better than her."

Malfoy suppressed an evil snigger as he heard that. Was that stupid prick trying to get himself killed? If Riddle ever found out about this, Lestrange would be in so much trouble.

Currently they were all sitting in the sixth years' dorm. They often did that when they felt the need to discuss things they didn't want the other Slytherins to hear. No-one of the other students would dare to burst into the room they knew Tom Riddle was living in. Today Malfoy had come here to have a bit quiet and finish his book. Unfortunately, his dorm mates as well as Avery who was a seven year had decided to force their annoying presence on him. Malfoy was sitting in one of the armchairs while the other three boys lounged on the sofa right beside him. So it was rather impossible for Malfoy to ignore their conversation.

Right now they were discussing Riddle's newest fling. Malfoy himself had been rather surprised, to say the least, as he had seen Riddle snogging that Gryffindor girl in the middle of the Great Hall. He had not been surprised by the act in itself but more by the girl. DeCerto just didn't seem to be a girl Riddle would like. Lestrange had been right after all. DeCerto was certainly not the prettiest of girls in Hogwarts and she really was incredibly impudent. Then again she had managed to beat those idiotic boys single handedly, Malfoy remembered as his eyes wandered back to the boys sitting on the sofa. Not that he thought those gits were really powerful opponents to begin with. But still, DeCerto seemed to be quite gifted for a witch. Riddle had always been interested in power. DeCerto certainly was intriguing. Malfoy remembered that day before the Christmas break as they had cornered DeCerto and then dragged her to the Forbidden Forest. Back then Riddle had hit her with the Cruciatus curse but the girl had still refused to tell him what he wanted to know. Malfoy knew how it felt to be hit by the Torture curse. He shuddered as he remembered that unbearable pain. He had been a little impressed by DeCerto then. Riddle was very intimidating when he really wanted to extract information from someone. But DeCerto had never caved in. Malfoy had no idea what it was Riddle wanted her to tell him but obviously he had changed his strategy now. He wasn't going to take the information by force but tried to pry it from her. That had to be the reason he had so suddenly started to seduce her. Malfoy had to admit that he was quite impressed by Riddle's ability to charm girls. After all Riddle had hit that Gryffindor girl with the Cruciatus curse. It was a miracle that she now allowed him to kiss her. Obviously Riddle could get away with everything.

"That slag really needs to be put in place," Lestrange continued to badmouth DeCerto.

Avery laughed filthily and a rather evil smirk appeared on his face, "I would really enjoy to be the one to make her scream."

Alba looked at him in disgust, "You're twisted. There's no way I would touch that ugly cunt. You don't even know where she comes from."

"What do you mean?" Lestrange asked.

"I mean did you ever hear of any DeCertos before?" Alba replied in a snobbish tone. "I'm sure she's just a dirty mugglewhore."

"You think she's a Mudblood?" Lestrange asked while a disgusted expression appeared on his face.
"At least we cannot rule out that possibility," Alba drawled.

Malfoy shook his head as he heard the new direction their conversation had taken. Now this was really dangerous. They were insinuating that Riddle spent time with a Mudblood. Malfoy knew that Riddle would do a lot of things if he thought they would help him gain whatever he wanted. He was quite the manipulative bastard after all. But even if he tried to get information from DeCerto, Riddle would never touch her if she were a Mudblood. Riddle hated all Muggleborns and Muggles with a passion. Even Malfoy, who had grown up in a rather prejudiced family, had been surprised by the aversion Riddle held for Muggles. Malfoy assumed that Riddle hated them because he had had to grow up in a filthy Muggle orphanage. Riddle would still curse anyone who brought up this family background of his. Malfoy could understand that he tried to hush up that embarrassing part of his life. Malfoy shuddered as he remembered what Riddle had done to the poor soul who had last tried to ridicule his parentage. He still wondered how Riddle had managed to come out of that one without a stain on his clean slate.

To sum it up, yes, Riddle was a little… touchy when it came to his parentage. Malfoy was pretty sure that Riddle was no Mudblood even if he had to grow up amongst Muggles. He couldn't prove it but he was quite convinced that Riddle was the Heir of Slytherin. Those attacks on Mudbloods last year were just Riddle's style. But if Riddle really was the Heir of Slytherin, then he was also responsible for the death of that girl last year. So Riddle didn't even shy away from murder. Not that Malfoy was really surprised.

Malfoy's eyes slowly wandered over the group of boys sitting on the sofa. They really shouldn't talk like that about DeCerto. Not when Riddle was interested in her.

"I would so like to curse that disgusting girl," Lestrange hissed rather darkly.

*You already tried that, idiot. Didn't work out as you planned, did it?* Malfoy sneered at the other boy in his mind.

"After Riddle loses interest in her we could have our fun with her," Avery proposed in a low voice.

Malfoy doubted he was only talking about cursing the girl. Avery had quite the warped mind. But he didn't really care what Avery wanted to do to DeCerto so Malfoy turned back to his book.

"I really hope you are not talking about Hermione here." Malfoy stiffened as he heard a quiet but all the same icy cold voice. "For your own sakes," the voice added with dark amusement.

Malfoy dared to look up from his book and found Riddle standing by the door of the common room. He could see that Riddle had carefully arranged his features into a mask of boredom but there still was a murderous glimmer shining in his eyes.

"So, my choice doesn't meet your standards?" Riddle asked in a light, almost conversational voice while he strode over to the small sitting area in the dorm.

His gaze swiftly wandered over the three boys sitting on the sofa and as Malfoy saw that disturbing cold glint in Riddle's eyes he was glad that he hadn't participated in the previous conversation. He barely dared to breathe as Riddle had finally reached them and sat down in one of the chairs opposite from him. Luckily Riddle didn't pay Malfoy any attention but faced the other boys.

Malfoy dared to carefully glimpse at Riddle. He sat casually in the chair and looked with mild interest at the three boys. Malfoy wasn't fooled by Riddle's show of nonchalance. There were unmistakably traces of his dark magic in the air. As Riddle's gaze wandered slowly over the boys in front of him there appeared a vicious glint in his steel hard eyes.
"I had hoped you would take my little rebuke at heart," Riddle now said in his strangely light tone which made the hairs on the back of Malfoy's neck stand on end.

"Especially you, Lestrange," Riddle continued and there now was an evil smirk on his face as his hard gaze swept over Lestrange's bandaged hand.

"We would never doubt your choices," Lestrange chocked out in fear.

"Hmmm…" Made Riddle and the lack of emotion on his face was quite frightening.

"She… she's a Gryffindor," Alba finally and very stupidly blurted out what probably everyone of them was thinking.

Malfoy could see a dangerous crimson tinge appear in Riddle's eyes as they flashed at Alba, though he still managed to reign in his obviously angry magic.

"So what?" Riddle hissed.

For once Alba showed a little common sense and remained silent as he stared in fear at Riddle but avoided to meet the other's eyes.

"Do you think I care about what that stupid sorting hat says?" Riddle spat and his authoritative voice was tinted with cold anger now. "Which, by the way, was created by that same Gryffindor you so despise."

He continued to stare at the boys and there was now a deathly cold glint in his eyes. The other Slytherins squirmed uncomfortably in their seats. But no-one dared to say anything as they were suddenly hit by that raw magic Riddle seemed to emanate.

Malfoy inhaled deeply and tried to suppress the upcoming fear. Riddle sat elegantly on the chair as if he had no concern in the world but his hate and malice was flowing from him in form of his vicious magic. Malfoy gulped nervously as his eyes glided inconspicuously over Riddle's form. He wondered how Riddle managed to maintain that front of the perfect and innocent student in the eyes of the staff when he was in fact the most dangerous wizard Malfoy had ever met. And he had met a few of them back in his father's manor, even some of Grindelwald's closest followers. The fact that Riddle's halo never slipped in front of others made him even more intimidating.

Malfoy flinched as Riddle suddenly leaned forwards in his chair.

"I think I was really indulgent with you so far." Riddle's voice was now a whisper but that didn't dim the fearsome tint in it. "Haven't I already told you in a very nice way to stay away from Hermione?"

Malfoy was very disturbed as he could see that Riddle had drawn his wand now and twirled it elegantly through his fingers.

"But you impose on my kindness and insist in troubling her, don't you?" Riddle inquired and by now his voice had completely lost the light touch it had at the beginning of this conversation. It was a hiss with an edge of malice in his tone.

"No, no," Avery whined and there was now panic in his voice. "We would never go against your word!"

"Yes, that is what you say now," Riddle replied and there appeared a dark and sinister smile on his face. "But I think a little reminder is in order? So you don't forget who is in command here."
Malfoy then saw Riddle waving his wand. Even though Riddle did the spell nonverbal Malfoy had recognized the wand movement. It was obviously a Silencing spell which now spanned around the dorm. Riddle didn't want anyone to hear what was going on in the dorm it seemed. Again Malfoy was very glad that he hadn't taken part in the other boys stupid ranting as now the furious dark magic Riddle emanated even intensified.

"Now, I don't want you to scare away any first years with your screaming and begging, would I?" Riddle explained amused as he could see the fear in the eyes of the three boys in front of him. The lack of any emotion in his voice other than this cruel amusement was disturbing.

Riddle slowly got up from his seat and started to calmly pace in front of the other boys. He seemed to be totally at ease and was rather enjoying the whole situation as a sick smirk twisted up his features. All the while Malfoy could feel Riddle's magic crackling around him forcefully, now and then angrily lashing out for the three Slytherins on the sofa. Finally the fear radiating from those three had escalated so far that Malfoy could almost feel it in the air. He nearly jumped as his eyes wandered back to Riddle and he now saw a feral smile curling up the corners of his mouth. Then Riddle raised his wand and pointed it at Alba. Alba stiffened in fear as he saw that pale wand aimed at him.

"Please, I'm sorry," Alba whined panicky. "I would never disobey you."

Riddle just chuckled eerily. The fearsome red gleam in his cold eyes intensified then he hissed in a vicious tone,

"Crucio."

Hermione woke up the next day and it already started horribly. As she crawled out of her four-poster she was greeted by her dorm mates. Lucia and Rose were sitting on Lucia's pink bed while Diana and Violet stood nearby. All of them wore expressions of curiosity on their faces. Hermione really didn't have to guess what exactly they wanted to discuss right now. Yesterday she had slipped back into the common room without talking to anybody. She had even avoided her friends or, more precisely, Longbottom. She knew it was rather cowardly but she somehow was afraid to face Longbottom again. He had been really angry with her as he had found out about her and Tom.

But right now, she had other problems as her four dorm mates still fixed her with their inquisitive stares. Hermione just stared back at them, unwilling to give them any information voluntarily.

After a while of staring at each other Rose asked her with barely suppressed nosiness, "So, slept well without your Prince Charming?"

Yep, they definitely wanted to squeeze more information out of her, Hermione thought frustrated. She looked at Rose with raised eyebrows.

Actually no. I always need a man in my bed to feel well. That was what Hermione wanted to tell them, just to see their faces. It would be hilarious.

Instead Hermione sighed and replied politely, "Yes, thank you."

"Ha, we knew you would become his new girlfriend," Lucia all but squealed in delight. "You are such a lucky girl"

"Yeah!" Rose contributed to the conversation. "You've been here for just a few months. But you managed to get what every girl here wants."
Hermione just frowned at her. She very much doubted that any girl would want to be stuck in this moral dilemma she was in right now.

"You allowed Riddle to kiss you in front of the Great Hall," Viola stated in her gruff tone. "That was rather daring, don't you think?"

Hermione was confused by Viola's comment. Though Longbottom had said something similar yesterday. Why was it such a big thing that Tom had kissed her in public? Hermione wondered while she tried to hold her own against those inquisitive stares she was still hit with.

"You really shouldn't have done that." Hermione's eyes wandered to Diana and she was again mesmerized by those emerald green eyes, Harry's eyes. "If a teacher had seen you, you would have been in trouble," Diana chided in her soft voice while she scanned Hermione concerned.

"Aw, Diana. Don't spoil everything," Rose exclaimed. Then she took one of Lucia's pink pillows and hugged it against her chest while there appeared a glassy look in her eyes. "That was just perfect, how he kissed her. Sooo romantic."

Lucia nodded eagerly while she broke down in giggles. Hermione on the other hand was starting to feel sick. That was just a tad bit too much girls' talk for her to stomach. So she turned away from her dorm mates and opened her trunk. A sick feeling of guilt tore at her as her gaze glided over the part of her trunk where she knew the Peverell manuscript was hidden in. She hadn't continued reading the book yesterday despite the fact that she had had plenty of time to do so. Well, she couldn't read it now, Hermione reasoned with herself. Not with all her dorm mates around and by the way today was Monday. She had to go to the classes. So she just pulled her uniform out of the trunk before she walked over to the bathroom.

Unfortunately Hermione didn't really manage to escape her dorm mates. They insisted in accompanying her down to the Great Hall. All the while they were chattering happily about Hermione and her new relationship. But during the last few months Hermione had grown quite proficient in blocking out their annoying voices. Though that didn't help her to heighten her spirits as now her thoughts wandered back to the book lying in her trunk.

They passed the Gryffindor common room and Hermione wasn't really surprised that she was hit by many curious and a few hostile stares. She could see no way to evade the other students any longer. Now that she walked the crowded corridors of the castle in direction to the Great Hall she realized that Hogwarts buzzed with the newest rumour. Though now that Tom had kissed her in the Great Hall Hermione doubted that it could be classified as a rumour anymore. Whatever her relationship with Tom was, it seemed to be the most favourite gossip topic in the school. Hermione could almost feel the stares following her wherever she went. Some of them were just curious whereas others would be better described as glares. Evil dark glares actually.

As she arrived in the Great Hall and had her breakfast it got even worse. Obviously it wasn't only the Slytherin and Gryffindor students who were interested in her new relationship but the other houses as well. Hermione got a little irritated by the constant stares. She glanced at Tom's direction but couldn't find him at his table. She wondered where he was but then decided to end her breakfast early as she couldn't eat anyway with all those curious eyes around her.

It was a mystery to her why her relationship with Tom had caused such an uproar. Obviously it wasn't only the Slytherin and Gryffindor students who were interested in her new relationship but the other houses as well. Hermione got a little irritated by the constant stares. She glanced at Tom's direction but couldn't find him at his table. She wondered where he was but then decided to end her breakfast early as she couldn't eat anyway with all those curious eyes around her.
"Morning," Lupin greeted her and Hermione couldn't help but notice that concerned glint in his eyes as he looked at her.

"Good morning," she mumbled awkwardly.

Then she glanced at Longbottom. He still sat at the table and ignored her as best as he could, Hermione noted sadly. Obviously Lupin had noticed where she had looked at as the pity in his eyes intensified.

"He's not going to talk to me again, is he?" Hermione asked in a soft voice.

"He's just disappointed, Hermione," Lupin replied.

"I'm sure he'll get over it," Weasley tried to cheer her up while he smiled at her encouragingly. Hermione could see the doubt in his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell us about Riddle before?" Lupin suddenly asked her reproachfully.

Hermione bit her lip as she stared at him then she said in a small voice, "I just wasn't sure about it myself. And… I didn't want you to be angry with me."

Lupin sighed then he said while he eyed Longbottom, "Well, that is exactly what you managed."

Hermione looked down at her feet and whispered, "I'm sorry."

She raised her head as she felt a hand on her shoulder. Lupin looked down at her and she could again see that concern in his eyes.

"No need to apologize," he told her gently. "We're just worried about you. I know most teachers and students think Riddle is a nice guy." He paused shortly as if he tried to find the right words to soften the blow then he said in a grave tone, "But there is something wrong with him. I think you should be really careful around him. Riddle is dangerous."

Hermione stared at him. What could she reply to something like this? That Tom was not dangerous at all? That would have been a lie. And there were already enough lies in her life as it was.

"You don't need to worry," she said and opted to be as truthful as she could be under the circumstances. "Tom's not going to do anything to me."

There was again the doubt on both her friends' faces as they eyed her concerned. They obviously thought that either Tom was using her to gain something or that he was just playing a cruel game with her. Judging from Tom's behaviour up until now Hermione could see where their concern came from.

"We just don't want you to get hurt," Weasley said softly.

Hermione cast him a small smile. "I'll be careful," she insured, trying to assuage their concern.

Later Hermione was on her way to the Potions class room. On her own, she realized with a pang. Longbottom had still not spoken one word with her. Weasley and Lupin had wanted to accompany her to the class room. But Hermione had known that Longbottom would never join them if they were with her. She really didn't want to take away his best friends. The other reason was that both of them would every so often glance at her with a concerned frown on their faces and then sigh. They were apparently thinking she was making the biggest mistake of her life by staying with Tom – which she probably was but she didn't need them to remind her of that. So she had told Weasley and Lupin that
she would walk alone to potions. She slowly regretted that now as she was rather exposed to all those stares following her. So she was glad as she arrived in the dungeons and the Potions class room. She stepped into the room and was again hit with nasty glares.

*Out of the pan and straight into the fire,* she thought dryly as she slowly made her way to her seat.

Most of the other students already sat on their places. Hermione's eyes quickly darted to her Gryffindor friends' table. Lupin looked back at her curiously as if he still tried to understand her decision. At least there was no hate in his gaze. Weasley who sat right beside Lupin looked at her a little compassionately. Hermione cast the both of them a small hesitant smile. As her eyes wandered from them to Longbottom her stomach flopped and the smile on her face quickly died down. Longbottom had his eyes narrowed at her and she could see the suppressed anger in them. He seemed to be enraged by her pure presence. As Hermione stared at him she suddenly heard a hard voice coming from behind her,

"So there you are dirty whore."

Hermione turned around and looked at the group of Slytherin girls sitting at the back of the class room. They all glared at her evilly.

"The nerve of you!" one of the girls spat at her aggressively. Hermione recognized her. It was Susan Yaxley and she had never liked Hermione. "You come from Merlin knows where and have the impudence to steal our men. And don't think we don't know about what you did to Melanie, bitch."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the girl's apparent disgust. She really seemed to hate her. Though it was rather ridiculous what she suggested. It sounded as if she had forced Tom to stay with her.

"You're just jealous, Yaxley." Hermione frowned at Rose who now stared at Yaxley triumphantly. "Because a Gryffindor is now Riddle's girlfriend and not one of you snake-women."

Hermione didn't know if she should cry or laugh now. It was so absurd. Those girls were quite the nuisance. She didn't really care what the girls thought about her so she just turned away from them and continued her way towards her seat. All the while she ignored that heated discussion which had now broken loose between Slytherin and Gryffindor girls.

Hermione could feel her stomach clench as she realized that this time neither of her friends had defended her. Something they normally would have done. She glimpsed in their direction and Hermione's heart sank as she found Longbottom staring out of the window. He seemed to really insist on ignoring her. She felt a little better as she saw that Lupin and Weasley cast her encouraging smiles. But obviously they, too, thought that she had to solve her little popularity problem alone.

Hermione sighed softly as she sat down at her table which wasn't that pleasant an experience as she shared it with Malfoy. He already sat at the table with an empty seat between the both of them. Hermione tried to ignore Malfoy's eerie and calculating glances while she wondered where Tom was. She retrieved her things from her school bag and arranged them on the table. Then she reached for her potions text book and began to read, all the while she tried to ignore the other students and the whispered conversations that were going on around her.

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Tom still sat in the Slytherin common room and he knew he would have to skip breakfast if he wanted to be on time for potions. But still this thing here was more important, he decided as he stared down at the Auror report. The word 'confidential' was written in red letters across the front of the thin folder but Tom ignored it completely and flipped through the pages. Malfoy had handed him the
report this morning. Obviously his contacts into the Auror department had been successful and Malfoy had managed to complete the task Tom had given him last. Not that Malfoy had another option. Tom never accepted failure. Malfoy would have regretted it very much if he had disappointed Tom.

Last week Tom had ordered Malfoy to find out everything he could about that theft which occurred in Nicolas Flamel's flat. Tom had read about the theft in an article in the Daily Prophet. It had caught his eye because there were quite a few odd coincidences that made Tom suspect Hermione had broken into Flamel's flat. Finally, Malfoy could present him some results. It wasn't much but enough.

Tom turned the next page over. There he found a list of the objects that had been stolen from Flame's flat. It wasn't a long list. According to the report the only thing stolen during the theft was a book written by one Ignotus Peverell. Tom's eyes widened as he read that name. He, of course, knew who Peverell was. He was a legend in magical history. One of the greatest wizards ever. A book written by Peverell himself was nothing short of invaluable. Tom wondered longingly what wonders of magic would be stowed inside of the pages of that book.

As exciting as that discovery was Tom continued to skip through the Auror report until his eyes landed on the witnesses' statements. Those people hadn't seen the actual crime but could at least tell the Aurors who had entered the house during the time the theft took place. As Tom scanned the list of the witnesses he frowned. Only Muggles! he thought disgusted but he still read the statements. It seemed that some of the witnesses had seen a bunch of dark cloaked men entering Flamel's flat around the time the theft must have taken place. That information was intriguing. Tom remembered how Hermione had been hunted by men clad in black as he had met her for the first time during the Christmas break. That had been the day Flamel had been robbed. As Tom read on he came upon something that was really interesting. It seemed that one of the witnesses had seen a woman entering the house. He described the woman as young with long curly brown hair.

Tom sat back in the Slytherin sofa while a small smirk appeared on his face.

Finally all the clues and his suspicions came together. He had been right! He'd known it since he had read that article in the Daily Prophet. Here it was, the evidence. The sighting of that strange woman combined with the black cloaked men finally turned his previous assumption into fact. The day the theft had taken place Tom had run into Hermione in the vicinity of Flamel's flat while she had been hunted by men in dark cloaks.

It was Hermione. She broke into Flamel's flat. Judging by the hostile behaviour of the men in black, she had also managed to steal the book written by Peverell. Tom's eyes glided again over the Auror report lying in front of him. The question remained to be why Hermione had stolen the book. That girl was just full of secrets, it seemed. Tom intended to solve them all.

It was some time later that he entered the Potions class room. The Auror report was safely stowed away in the Slytherin dorm but Tom's thoughts still swirled around this new discovery of his. So as he stepped into the class room his eyes instantly darted to Hermione. Right now she sat at their table and was occupied with arranging her potion supplies. Her curly hair was falling into her face as she leaned over the wooden box. Involuntarily a small smile appeared on his face as his eyes wandered over her. Since he knew Hermione she had always been full of secrets. It certainly was a challenge to uncover them all. Tom didn't doubt that in the end he would surely solve them all.

Sadly the Peverell problem was just one of her many secrets, Tom decided as his gaze wandered slowly over her form. She had always been a mystery, bursting with secrets and half-truths. The longer he knew her, though, the more secrets he managed to uncover. She had even willingly given some of them away. It had shocked him quite a bit as she had unveiled that she had had to fight in a
war. Granted she hadn't told him much but she had nevertheless shared a little of her past with him. At the very least now he knew why there sometimes was so much grief and sorrow in Hermione's hazel eyes. He didn't like the reason at all.

His furious magic died down as he again scanned her, still sitting at the table. She hadn't noticed him yet. Somehow Tom was glad that she had told him a little about her past. He knew it meant she finally started to trust him. He was pretty sure that she had told no-one but him about her past. Not even her so-called friends knew about it, he thought a little haughtily as his eyes darted briefly to the three Gryffindor boys.

*She trusts me,* Tom thought satisfied as his gaze wandered back to Hermione. As he looked at her this avidly feeling was back again. He wanted to possess her. The urge to own her was still as demanding as ever. The greed always ripped at him. Now that she was his girlfriend Tom knew the bond between them had solidified. She belonged to him and he was never going to let her go again.

Though now that he looked at her Tom had to admit that aside from the greed there was something else. It was strange and completely alien to him. He had consciously noticed it for the first time as she had broken down the night after the Quidditch match. She had seemed to be so desperate and frightened then. As he had seen her in this vulnerable state Tom had found himself wanting to console her. He had wanted to protect her. Tom had never before felt the need to comfort or protect another person. He had never cared about anybody but himself. Though now, that seemed to have changed slightly. He had yet to decide if that new feeling of his was a good or bad thing.

As he looked at Hermione he suddenly noticed an angry frown between her eyebrows. She seemed to be a little irritated, annoyed even. Tom had an inkling of why she seemed to be a little aggravated. He had noticed all this chatter going on around him after all. But he was quite satisfied that aside from that anger Hermione seemed to be okay. She didn't appear to be tired or exhausted this morning. That meant she obviously didn't have another of her nightmares. Tom was relieved. He didn't want her to have to go through all those horrible dreams.

*Here I go again with wanting to protect her,* he realized somewhat amused.

Though that wasn't going to stop him to try to solve her many secrets. She hadn't told him anything about Peverell's book after all. Whatever Tom felt towards her he wasn't going to tolerate her tendency to have her secrets from him. And if she wasn't willing to tell him, well, then it seemed he had to find out himself, Tom decided as he continued his way towards her.

Hermione tried to sort her potions ingredients so she had something to occupy her with and didn't need to pay attention to the other students in the room. She just rummaged through her dried salamander tails as she felt someone sitting down beside her. She looked up and found Tom smirking down at her.

"Good morning," he purred at her with his smooth voice.

"Mornin'," Hermione replied rather unenthusiastically. Though she was really glad he was here now. At the very least he had stopped that stupid chatter.

Tom arched one eyebrow elegantly before he said with a good amount of sarcasm in his tone, "You are quite the sunshine today, aren't you?"

Hermione ignored that but asked him reproachfully, "Why are you so late?"

Tom didn't comment on her irritated tone but replied, "I had to sign-in for the apparition lessons."
Then he leaned casually back in his chair and eyed Hermione amused before he scoffed, "You know, I completely forgot about it because I had to convince this stubborn Gryffindor girl that I am irresistible."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and glared at him darkly. Then something struck her and she started to giggle. She leaned in to Tom, which caused some of the girls sitting in the class room and Longbottom to stare at her angrily. Then Hermione whispered teasingly in Tom's ear,

"Does that mean the powerful Tom Riddle doesn't know how to apparate?"

Tom frowned down at her which only caused the smirk on Hermione's face to widen. Obviously she had been right.

"What about you then, my dear?" Tom jibed. "You never showed me your apparition licence. Did you even got one before you started to apparate people around against their will?"

"Of cou-" Hermione started dismissively before she stopped herself. Well, she did have a licence though that was dated to the year of 1996. It wouldn't be exactly a good idea to show Tom her licence, would it?

She glanced at Tom. He was still looking in expectation at her with an annoyingly innocent smile on his face.

"I never took the test," Hermione mumbled grudgingly.

Tom just tsked at her in a reprimanding way before he turned away and started to get his things from his school bag.

"As if you never broke any rules," she hissed at him.

Which only made him chuckle infuriatingly as he placed his quill and parchment neatly on the table. Fortunately for Tom, as Hermione now really wanted to hex that smirk off his face, professor Slughorn entered the class room. He smiled widely at his students as he made his way towards his desk.

"Good morning, good morning," he greeted them with his booming voice. "How very nice to see you all again after such a long break."

Hermione watched how he now pulled his wand and swiftly waved it at the blackboard behind him. Instantly white letters appeared. She took in a sharp breath of air and her hands grabbed the edge of the table tightly as she read the instructions for the potion they would brew next. She had totally forgotten about that! Her head began to swirl and her eyes darted nervously towards Tom and then back to the blackboard. But the writing was still there.

"Are you alright?" Hermione stiffened as she heard a gentle voice whisper to her.

"Y..yes," she mumbled softly but avoided it to look at Tom.

Luckily he couldn't question her further as now Slughorn said in his cheerful voice,

"As promised, we will now start to brew the Ortus Potion. It is quite the difficult potion-" Hermione could hear some groans coming from the Gryffindor side of the class room."-but I am sure most of you will succeed."

Here the professor winked at her and Tom. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes at his enthusiasm. For
the first time ever she wanted to fail a class.

The Ortus Potion! How could that have escaped her mind? The stupid thing could very well be her downfall. She remembered how she had researched that potion before the break. It was an age revealing potion, which was in itself not the problem. The real disaster was that the Ortus Potion didn't determine the age of a person but the actual date of birth. That was really bad. Fatal, if anything. For Hermione's birthday was in 1979.

She had no idea what would happen if the potion was run with her blood. Maybe it would really reveal the year she was born in. Then everybody would know that she was in fact from the future. Or the potion would simply not bear any results at all if run with her blood. That would be more than suspicious as Hermione knew that the Ortus Potion was a very reliable potion. It was a catch-22 situation.

"-you know what to do then." Hermione had completely drowned out professor Slughorn's voice as she had gone straight into her panic attack but now she tried to listen to him again. "Today we start simple, with just brewing the foundation of the potion. The instructions are on the board," Slughorn said as he gestured at the black board behind him. "You may begin."

What to do now, what to do now? Hermione thought frantically as she pulled her wand and shakily waved it to ignite the fire under the cauldron. Somehow she must have waved it a tad bit too much as now her text book, lying on the table, caught fire. Tom pulled his own wand and brandished it quickly at the book. The flames instantly died down. Then Hermione could see how he eyed her with suspicion. At least she was convinced that glint in his eyes was suspicion. He could probably see right through her, she thought panicky.

"You sure you are alright?" Tom asked her concerned.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Hermione replied and really hoped she had managed to ban all the panic from her voice.

Tom continued to look at her and now there was a dangerous frown between his eyebrows.

"Normally you don't set your surroundings on fire," he stated slowly. "At least not accidentally."

"Er… well… I'm just a little over-enthusiastic this morning?" Hermione said in a suspiciously shrill tone.

"Hmm." Tom didn't seem to be very convinced and Hermione squirmed as he continued to hit her with his inquisitive stare.

She breathed out relieved as he then turned away from her and started to light the fire himself. She pretended to read the instructions on the blackboard as her thoughts ran wild in her head.

Calm down, Granger! she told herself.

There was no need to panic like this. At least not yet. To brew the Ortus Potion would take a lot of time, probably the best part of the second semester. So there was still time. She just needed to somehow find a way out of this. She quickly glimpsed at Tom who now started to cut the toadstools. She needed to proceed really cautiously if she didn't want him to notice anything. Tom was terribly perceptive.

For the rest of the lesson Hermione tried to come up with something to ruin that stupid potion. Consecutively she couldn't concentrate on brewing the foundation of the potion and was no help at all. Her clumsiness caused Tom to frown at her a lot. Which caused Hermione to be even more
jumpy and that led to quite a few accidents like the one with her text book.

So Hermione was very glad as the lesson finally came to an end. She was even a little impressed that Tom had managed to prevent her from harming anyone with her clumsiness and simultaneously had also succeeded in brewing the foundation despite her questionable help. As Slughorn saw the silvery colour of the potion he praised Tom's work to the skies.

"That is the best work I have ever seen," Slughorn exclaimed happily as he bend over the cauldron full of silvery grey potion.

As he straightened up again he beamed at Tom, Hermione and even Malfoy who also was in their group.

"Twenty points to Slytherin for each of you," Slughorn announced to the two Slytherin boys while he smiled proudly at Tom.

Then his gaze left Tom and Malfoy and he smiled suavely down at Hermione.

"And of course twenty points to Gryffindor. Good work, Ms DeCerto."

Hermione could feel a blush hitting her face as she stared back at the professor. She so not deserved his praise.

It was later that day when classes were over that Tom slowly walked down a corridor. In his hand he clutched a small slip of parchment so tightly that it was completely crumbled now. A third year had delivered it to him as Tom had just left the Slytherin common room to search Hermione who had been rather strange since Potion today.

At first Tom had thought the slip of paper was a letter from Slughorn to invite him to one of his get-togethers. But as Tom had opened the letter he had instantly recognized that fine handwriting. Dumbledore wanted to see him.

Now he walked to the transfiguration professor's office. He had shortly considered to just ignore that summon. But in the end he had to accept that he really didn't have a choice here. What did Dumbledore want from him? Tom's hands balled into tight fists, crumbling the parchment even further. This time he had no idea what the hateful professor could want from him. It was still months until the next break so it couldn't be about him having to go back to London, he reasoned with himself. Whatever it was Dumbledore wanted from him, it couldn't be a good thing. It never was.

As Tom reached the door leading into Dumbledore's office he put the crumbled piece of parchment into his pocket skimming his fingers slightly over his wand as he did so. Then he breathed in deeply before he knocked at the door.

"Enter," Dumbledore answered through the door.

So Tom opened the door and stepped reluctantly into the office of his least favourite teacher. His gaze instantly wandered to the person sitting behind the desk. Dumbledore was wearing one of his ridiculously flamboyant robes and was hitting Tom with one of his glares. Tom looked right back at him. He didn't want to appear shaken by that piercing stare Dumbledore was throwing his way. As he reluctantly walked over to Dumbledore's desk his eyes wandered over the disorder in the office. How could anyone be so messy? Tom felt annoyed at having to obey someone who didn't even have control over his own things. But as it was, Dumbledore still had the upper hand.
"Please, sit down, Tom," Dumbledore said as Tom reached his desk.

Seeing no other option, Tom sat down but remained to be very tense. Dumbledore sat opposite him and looked at him intensely. Tom had no idea what the professor wanted from him but he wasn't going to let that old man play his games with him. So he got rid of all emotions that could have showed on his face and stared coldly back at the professor.

After some time Dumbledore sighed before he said in a soft tone, "I know that you think I hate you, Tom."

Tom couldn't stop his eyebrows from rising up a little as he heard the professor's statement. What was he planning? He really didn't like that grave look on Dumbledore's face.

As Tom neither denied nor agreed with his statement Dumbledore continued, "But that is not true. My behaviour towards you might have appeared as harsh, but I always had only your well-being in mind.

Tom clenched his jaw and had to breathe in slowly to not immediately lose control over his magic. It rushed through him like an angry, burning current which desperately tried to find a way out. He stared into Dumbledore's eyes and was appalled as he saw this fake honesty in them. The hate boiled up in him and he almost trembled from the suppressed force behind his anger. What did Dumbledore plan? Despite his anger Tom knew he had to somehow react to the other wizard's statement. Though he was walking on thin ice here because Tom had no idea where Dumbledore tried to go.

So Tom raised his head slightly and then said in a perfectly controlled voice, "I do know that, professor."

Dumbledore would never buy that, of course, but Tom wasn't going to contradict him. Not when Dumbledore obviously had a scheme after which he was acting now. Tom watched a sad smile taking form on the older wizard's face as his blue eyes still gazed at him so piercingly.

"You have always been a very convincing actor, Tom," Dumbledore told him, still in that unnerving soft voice which was surprisingly not in the least bit accusatory.

What was going on here? Tom wondered in suspicion. Why did Dumbledore suddenly let go of all pretence? They both were acting here. They always did whenever they met. Tom didn't know how to reply to Dumbledore's statement. The professor was acting different today and Tom didn't like that sudden change in his behaviour at all. Surely Dumbledore hadn't summoned him to chat about the tense situation between the two of them. So Tom stared back at Dumbledore and tried to hide his confusion. The last thing he wanted to do was letting show how much Dumbledore unsettled him.

Right now Dumbledore's eyes wandered swiftly over him and Tom saw a strange look of wistfulness in them.

After a while he spoke again, "You are gifted, Tom. You have a talent others would kill to have. Things that appear to be impossible, you can accomplish effortlessly."

As he heard Dumbledore saying that, Tom's mistrust intensified. Dumbledore had never before praised him in any way and Tom doubted the old fool had suddenly found a new affection for him. Tom just couldn't see what the old wizard intended to achieve so he still remained silent.

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and eyed Tom sharply before he continued in that same soft voice, "Such talent is a gift not many of us are lucky enough to receive."

Tom could see a strange expression flitting over the older man's face but before he could identify it it
was gone again and Dumbledore continued, "But that talent is as much a curse as it is a gift. While you can achieve wonderful things with that talent it is simultaneously incredibly dangerous."

Dumbledore's eyes still fixed Tom with that strange stare and Tom was surprised to see sadness crossing his face.

Then Dumbledore continued in a grave voice, "It is so very tempting to think that because you are so powerful, you are superior to the people around you. That conviction is just one step away from beginning to use your power to force others to do what you think is right. That is the danger lurking behind such extraordinary talent."

Tom nearly frowned at the professor. Why was Dumbledore telling him this? Tom again felt anger bubbling up in him. Did that insane old geezer sent for him just to tell him this rubbish? He was just wasting his time here while listening to this pointless rambling.

"I don't know what you are trying to tell me, sir," Tom said in a polite but all the same icy cold voice. His anger intensified as he saw a sad smile taking form on Dumbledore's face.

"Of course not," the old wizard said in a sincere and understanding voice which made Tom want to curse him on the spot. "It is very difficult to understand, especially for someone as young as yourself. Let me try to explain it in a more comprehensible way."

Slowly Tom was getting really angered by Dumbledore's patronizing way. His magic still rushed furiously through him and he wanted nothing more than to just give in to that need and release his magic. But Tom tightly controlled his magic and continued to look at the professor with his fake polite interest.

"Since I have met you the first time, Tom, I have known that you are an incredibly talented wizard," Dumbledore continued while he still hit Tom with his penetrating gaze. "I can remember very vividly our first encounter. You have been so young and you had no idea that something like the wizarding world could exist. I have always enjoyed it to introduce young Muggleborn witches and wizards to the magical world. They are always so very excited and surprised to discover this world full of magic and wonders. Just like you, Tom. You have been very excited as you heard about you being a wizard. But unlike the others you haven't been surprised. You already knew that there was something more to you and your powers."

Tom felt very uneasy as he stared back at Dumbledore. He still managed to hide his discomfort behind his mask of politeness but Tom was now definitely alarmed. The most disturbing thing was this expression of sadness or regret he could see on Dumbledore's face.

"Already you thought you were something special. And you were quite right. You have a natural understanding of magic that cannot be learned from books. That indeed distinguishes you from most wizards. Back then I told you that you were right and that you really were something special. I remember that you were quite happy with that insight." Here Dumbledore stopped shortly and Tom again saw that horrible look of regret crossing the other's face. Then Dumbledore sighed softly before he continued, "But I knew better, Tom. Being special is not something desirable. No, it is a burden. It can misguide us and lead us to doing things that are detestable. I knew of that danger so I decided to help you on your way, to prevent you from going astray and stumble down a path that only leads to grief and sorrow."

Tom felt his temper rising again as he heard those words, spoken in apparent false sincerity. That man really had the audacity to say he wanted to help Tom? His magic started to rip at him again and
furiously demanded to be released. Dumbledore had never helped him! He was the one who always punished Tom and sent him back to that abhorrent orphanage every summer. How was that any help?

Tom's hands were clutching the armrest of his chair tightly as he continued to listen to Dumbledore's voice. Still he could hear that fake kindness in the older wizard's tone, "Since you started at Hogwarts I have watched you very closely because I knew about that dark path you have always been confronted with. With increasing sorrow I have seen how you took your first tentative steps down into the darkness until you truly walked this path. It let to you doing horrible things."

Dumbledore's eyes filled with sadness and even pity as he stared at Tom.

"It started with the incident that occurred after your first year. Back then I had already known how very far ahead your were power wise in contrast to your year mates. But I have to admit I had not expected you to already be able to control such powerful magic like you performed during that summer break. It came as I had feared, you used your power to control and to hurt others. I had been shaken as I discovered your crime for I could already see were that path would one day lead you. But as I found out about the crime you committed I decided to protect you, Tom, and not to surrender you to justice. You were just a child back then, and I was convinced that I could still save you."

Dumbledore looked at him and Tom now felt his mask of fake politeness slowly melting from his face. He wouldn't be able to maintain his act for long now. What did Dumbledore have in mind?

"So I took measures to prevent you from again getting in a situation where you would use your powers in the wrong way. You were still so young and I knew that if I managed to keep you away from the temptation, you would eventually see the wrongness behind that path."

"But just as I had decided to keep a closer watch on you there appeared an unexpected threat that had nothing to do with you. It demanded my attention as the appearance of this threat was partly my fault." A tired tinge appeared in Dumbledore's voice as he said that. "So I could no longer watch you as closely as it would have been necessary. Though my absence didn't stop me from hearing about the crimes you committed. I know a lot of them, more than you presume. They were appalling and unsettled me but they were not so severe that I felt the need to intervene. But then last year you did something that again shook me up."

Dumbledore fixed Tom with that piercing gaze again before he said in a grave tone, "I can't prove it, Tom, but I know that it was you who opened the Chamber of Secrets."

Tom stiffened as he heard those words. Obviously Dumbledore didn't expect him to answer to this accusation as he continued in a severe tone, "As I heard about that new crime you committed I was devastated. For it proved that my previous efforts had been in vain and you were still walking down that path I so desperately tried to protect you from. So as I learned that you opened the Chamber of Secrets I knew I had failed to protect you once again for now a death lay on your conscience."

"Even after that incident I still had hope left. I still thought I could tear you away from that path you have decided to follow. That death was dreadful but everything indicated that it had been an accident. So I hoped that you had just made a terrible mistake and that you had never planned to take a life."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly before he continued, "Now, Tom, I am not so sure anymore. Maybe it was I who made mistakes. I have ignored the facts for far too long. Because now, just a few months later, you again broke the laws."
"What are you talking about, professor?" Tom asked calmly as he fought to maintain his self-control.

Dumbledore hit him with a hard gaze as he answered, "I know that you left your orphanage during the break."

Tom couldn't help but draw in a sharp breath of air. How did he know? He stared with wide eyes at Dumbledore. Tom could feel how he slowly lost his cool. Dumbledore was not allowed to know that he had left the orphanage.

Then Dumbledore continued and his voice was now terribly cold, "We had an agreement, Tom. Yet you broke your word. Again. I have given you plenty of chances but it seems nothing gets through to you. You still just do whatever you like."

"I am quite sure you left the orphanage during the summer break too, but this time I can prove it. I have talked with the patron of the orphanage and Mr Carter confirmed that you haven't been there for more than a few days."

Tom stared at Dumbledore. He still managed his face to look blank, but only just. His emotions underneath were swirling.

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and looked directly into Tom's eyes as he said in his cold tone, "It appears that my efforts were in vain and you are incorrigible. But don't think I have given up on you, Tom. I won't abandon you. I just have to change my strategy slightly."

Then he again leaned back in his chair but his hard gaze still hit Tom. "I know about the temptation that comes from Dark Magic. Those with an exceptional understanding of magic have always been the ones the most easily to yield to that temptation."

"Before, I have tried to show you the wrongness of your path but it is clear that you are not able to withstand the allurement Dark Magic offers. Now, I will take away the temptation."

Tom's breathing was now quickened as he stared back at the older wizard. Dumbledore still looked at him with that strange sadness showing on his face. But it were his next words that made Tom feel like someone had kicked him in the stomach,

"It is very regrettable, but I will speak with headmaster Dippet about your expulsion."

Tom's eyes widened in shock and his head started to swirl. Then Dumbledore continued and Tom felt sick as he heard that pity in his quiet voice,

"You should not see this as a punishment, Tom, but as a chance to begin anew. On this new way you won't run the risk to succumb to those temptations. I know that it will be difficult at first but it is a necessary step. You are strong, I am sure you can manage."

Tom stared in panic at the older man.

"You can't send me back there," he finally hissed at the professor in a sharp tone. By now he was unable to maintain his self-control.

Dumbledore just looked at him sadly then he said in a horribly soothing tone, "It is not the end of the world. You can still lead a fulfilling life. Even without your magic."

Tom felt the panic now taking a hold of him. He couldn't go back. If he really had to go back into the Muggle world, he would be forced to live in the orphanage for the next two years until he was eighteen. It was worse enough to be send back into that hell during the holidays but he wouldn't
stand it to be forced to live there for years. Without any hope. Just the knowledge that there was no way to escape. He would never survive it.

Tom felt his hands starting to tremble slightly.

Memories of his last stay at the orphanage resurfaced again. It had been horrible. He had been locked into that chamber for days, always in fear that Carter would return and hurt him more. No, he could not go back there. Without his magic, he was nothing.

He stared down at his hands laying in his lap. Then he whispered in a soft voice, without looking up at Dumbledore, "Please, don't send me back."

There was a pause but then Dumbledore spoke again and Tom cringed as he heard that finality in his voice, "It is the only way. I will speak with the Headmaster about your expulsion."

Tom slowly raised his head to again look at Dumbledore but he only found conviction and grim determination in the other's eyes. Then Dumbledore said in a hard voice,

"You should go now and pack your things, Tom. Though I am afraid you will have to leave everything behind that can be related to the magical world."

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}}
"Just a bit more," Hermione whispered while beads of sweat were running down her forehead.

Right now she was standing in the middle of a deserted class room. Her eyes were closed in concentration and she tried to draw upon all her magic. She needed to consciously control every ounce of magic inside of her. Only if she had her own magic completely in control, could she find that alien magic which was buried deep inside of her. That was what she was currently searching for: The Elder Magic.

Last transfiguration class, the Elder Magic had suddenly chosen to show itself again. Hermione didn't like it very much that this strange magic seemed to have a mind of its own. Sure, so far the Elder Magic hadn't harmed her in any way, more like helped her, but still Hermione would prefer it if she had some kind of control over the magic.

So now that classes were over for today she had decided to try to make some progress with the Elder Magic. By doing so she had also conveniently overlooked the fact that it may have been the better and more sensible strategy to just read Peverell's manuscript first. His last entry had been about the Elder Wand after all. Maybe now Peverell was going to delve deeper into the magic behind the wand.

Yeah, maybe, Hermione mused hesitantly. Maybe he was going to reveal why she had been sent back in time and how she would be able to return. So, how about she finished the book? Then again Hermione couldn't understand the book anyway and she had decided to read it later. Yes, that was the plan.

You are avoiding the book, aren't you? a tiny but persistent voice disrupted her train of thought reproachfully.

No, that was not it, Hermione thought while she tried to quench the guilt that rose up inside of her. She did plan to read the book. She just hadn't found the time to do so.

Why not now? the same voice demanded to know.

Well, that was because right now she tried to find the ever-elusive Elder Magic. Glad to have found an excuse, Hermione completely ignored the real reason why she hadn't touched Peverell's manuscript since yesterday. The Peverell manuscript was dangerous. What if she read on and then really found a way to use the magic to get herself back in her time period? What was she supposed to do then? Travel again through time just to end up in a place where she didn't want to be?

Hermione balled her hands into tight fists and called back her stray thoughts. She smothered them together with the guilt and again concentrated on her magic. As she summoned her magic she again noticed that familiar pulse of power which suffused the whole of Hogwarts castle and its inhabitants. She strongly suspected that this were indeed the castle's warding spells. They seemed to influence just everything.

With one exception, Hermione thought determined as she finally found the Elder Magic hidden underneath her own magic. She cautiously nudged the strange power. She wanted it to wake up again like it had done during her transfiguration class. But as she touched it, nothing happened. Hermione then put a little more power behind her approach and tried to draw upon the Elder Magic. It remained to be unresponsive and wasn't at all impressed by her attempts to raise it. Nothing worked.
Hermione let out a sight of disappointment. Then she relinquished her hold of the Elder Magic. The moment her hold on the magic lessened she could feel it give a small jerk. She stiffened and held her breath as then the Elder Magic began to move and simultaneously grow. It wasn't long and the magic completely wrapped around her. Like during transfiguration Hermione felt how she was unlinked from the castle's wards.

This time around she wasn't taken by surprise of the magic's behaviour but tried to maintain its current state. It was tricky and cost her a lot of willpower but she managed to keep the Elder Magic wrapped around her. Hermione's breathing was ragged now like she had just run a mile. There was no way she would be able to pull her wand and perform a spell. That was what she originally had wanted to try. But just to keep the Elder Magic from collapsing was incredibly draining. To use a spell now was impossible. It was becoming more and more difficult to maintain the Elder Magic's current state of being wrapped around her. With a gasp Hermione finally couldn't hold the magic back any longer. She released it and instantly the Elder Magic broke down again until it was completely hidden. As the Elder Magic left, Hermione staggered and had to grab the edge of a nearby table to not lose her balance. She felt dizzy and her breathing was still quickened but there now was a triumphant smile on her face. She had made it! It was possible after all to use the Elder Magic and even to some extents control it. The only thing needed was time and training.

She straightened up and breathed in deeply. It certainly would be nice to have something like the Elder Magic at her disposal. To achieve that she would have to practise with the magic. Which would also be a lot safer than reading Peverell's manuscript. She didn't want to admit her reluctance to read on in the book and didn't allow her guilty conscience to indulge in that thought for too long.

By the way she really planned to finish the manuscript. Honestly. …just not today. She was now really tired from her attempt to use the Elder Magic. So Hermione just pulled her wand and waved it at the door of the class room thus removing all the locking and warding spells she had put up before. Then she exited the class room. She had decided to search for Tom now. She hadn't seen him since classes were over.

Sometime later Hermione still walked through the castle. She had already been to the library, the Room of Requirements and had even climbed down into the dungeons. But she couldn't find Tom anywhere. It was strange. He had told her after DADA today that they would meet later but so far she had seen neither hide nor hair of him. Somehow his absence was making her quite uneasy. She knew that there was no reason to be so unsettled just because she couldn't find him immediately. He probably had just forgotten about their date and was now sitting somewhere or other, reading a book or was again ordering his stupid followers around. But still Hermione couldn't help but feel strangely worried as she now rounded a corner and entered another passageway which was illuminated by the sun falling through the many huge windows that flanked one side. She was currently in the first floor but intended to climb the stairs up to the Owlery. She was getting desperate and had no idea where else to look for Tom because it felt like she had already searched everywhere. So Hermione walked though the passageway. Her hurried steps echoed loudly on the stone floor. As she passed one of the windows her gaze wandered to the Great Lake. She was just averting her eyes from the peaceful scenery again as something caught her gaze. She stopped in her tracks and stared out of the window. Someone was sitting at the shore of the Great Lake, right under that huge willow. Though that person was too far away for her to recognize Hermione just knew that it was Tom. She furrowed her brow. What was he doing there? It was still January and thus rather cold outside. As she stared out of the window she had again that feeling that something was not right.

Hermione turned on the spot and walked back in the direction she had been coming from. It wasn't long until she reached the Entrance Hall, opened the door and stepped outside. The cold air hit her at
once and she pulled her uniform robes tighter around herself before she continued her way to the Great Lake. Soon she could see the imposing willow tree that stood at the lake's shore. The person, clad in one of Hogwarts' black uniforms, still sat at the foot of the tall tree, unmoving. The ground was frozen and a thin layer of snow scrunched under her feet as Hermione hurried over to that person sitting under the tree. Finally she was near enough to be able to recognize the person. With a jolt she realized that it really was Tom. He was sitting there with his back propped against the tree trunk and he let his head hang in a very uncharacteristic gesture. By now Hermione was very alarmed for she knew that something was wrong with Tom. She quickly reached him and now stood in front of him and stared down at him. He hadn't shown in any way that he had noticed her presence. But then very slowly Tom raised his head and looked up at her. Hermione was shaken as she could see the hatred burning in his beautiful grey eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked him worried as she frowned down at him.

Hermione stiffened as she could then watch anger seeping into his gaze.

"He can't do that," Tom suddenly hissed in barely suppressed rage. "He has no right to do it."

He continued to stare at her while the anger was now visible all over his handsome face. It was unsettling as Tom normally had his emotions tightly in control. She could even feel traces of his dark magic swirling around him.

As he didn't say any more but just glared at her, Hermione raised her eyebrows questioningly and tried to encourage him to go on, "Tom?"

He broke eye contact with her and turned his head away from her. Hermione frowned at him but then crouched down in front of him. She still got no reaction out of him.

"What happened?" she asked him while scanning his form concerned.

She could see him cringe slightly as he heard her question. But he still didn't answer so Hermione put a hand gently on his shoulder. Whatever happened it must have unsettled him a great deal, she thought worried as she looked at Tom.

After a while he spoke again and this time the rage had left him and his voice was numb as he told her hesitantly without looking her way, "He found out that I've left the orphanage during the break."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she stared at him. She instantly knew whom Tom was speaking about: Dumbledore. A conversation they had had during Christmas break sprang up in her mind. It had been the day after she had found Tom in the orphanage as he had told her that it was Dumbledore who forced him to stay at the orphanage during the break. Tom had also told her that he would get expelled should Dumbledore ever find out that he left the orphanage.

Hermione sat down beside Tom. The ground under the tree was snow free though still wet and rather chilly but she didn't care as she stared at Tom. He avoided her eyes and gazed vacantly in space. His face was a blank and Hermione was unable to tell what he was thinking right now but she could see that his hands trembled slightly. She slid a little closer to him and then asked in an anxious tone,

"What did he say, Tom?"

He didn't answer at once. But then he slowly turned his head and looked at her. His face was a blank but anger burned in his eyes. Hermione's heart clenched as she could see the desperation and even fear behind the anger.

"He… he is going to have me thrown out of school," Tom finally said in a cold tone.
Hermione stared at him in shock. Dumbledore couldn't do that. She knew where Tom would have to go if he was to be thrown out of Hogwarts. Hermione felt sick as she remembered how she had found Tom in the orphanage. He had been so hurt. An image of Carter with a bloodstained belt in his hand flashed through her mind. A fierce resolution now started to overwhelm her. She wasn't going to let that continue! Hermione ignored the complete lack of emotion on his face but reached out for Tom and pulled him towards her before she wrapped her arms around him. There was no way she would allow Tom to be send to that disgusting place, she thought with grim determination. She could feel how Tom slowly slid his arms around her waist before he leaned his head down so that it rested on her shoulder.

"I can't go back," he whispered. His voice was still cold but Hermione could hear it shake slightly.

She ran a hand gently through his dark hair then she said in a soothing but all the same firm voice, "I told you before, didn't I? I am not going to let you return there."

He didn't reply anything but Hermione could feel him embracing her even tighter.

"You are not going to be expelled," she tried to comfort him. "Even if you were expelled, I still wouldn't allow you to return to the orphanage."

She turned her head and then placed a kiss on his cheek before she ended the embrace. She took his hand in hers and held it. Her gaze again wandered over him in concern. He avoided it to look at her and had his eyes downcast. Hermione frowned at him. It was horrible to see him like this. She could feel anger boiling up in her. Tom had suffered in that disgusting orphanage for long enough, there was no way she would allow anyone to chuck him back there. Not even Dumbledore was allowed to do something like that, she thought enraged. What was that man thinking anyway? Didn't he know about Carter? Hermione was disappointed with the old professor and more than furious. No way in hell was she going to let Tom return to that terrible place. Carter would never again raise a hand against Tom.

Hermione had to breathe in deeply to get her burning emotions back under control. This was Dumbledore's doing after all so she needed a calm mind to find a way out of this. With force, at least, she wouldn't be able to achieve anything. Her gaze wandered back to Tom and she unconsciously bit her lip. He still let his head hang down and didn't look at her. Whatever it was Dumbledore used to blackmail Tom with, he was very reluctant to confide in her. Hermione leaned a little forward then she cupped Tom's cheeks in her hands and gently raised his head so that he was forced to look at her again.

"Tom," Hermione began gently, though there was now a certain amount of sternness in her tone. "You need to tell me why Dumbledore can expel you just like that."

Tom lifted his head up a little and now looked at her with his grey eyes. She could still see that unbearable desperation in his eyes but now there was also guardedness. He obviously didn't want to tell her.

"Why can he force you to return to the orphanage every break? Why can he take your wand away from you?" Hermione again asked him, this time her tone was strict. "What does he have on you, Tom?"

Hermione could see how Tom now recoiled from her a little bit. The guardedness in his eyes intensified, then he looked away from her. Whatever it was Dumbledore used to blackmail Tom with, he was very reluctant to confide in her. Hermione leaned a little forward then she cupped Tom's cheeks in her hands and gently raised his head so that he was forced to look at her again.
"I can't help you if you don't trust me," she said in a soft voice while she stared into his eyes.

He still didn't speak. But Hermione needed to know what had happened. She could hardly convince Dumbledore to let Tom stay at Hogwarts if she didn't have all the information she needed.

She released him again and watched him intently before she said, "Whatever it is you did, you can tell me. I won't abandon you."

She frowned as Tom then exhaled slowly. Had he been afraid she would go away if she found out what he had done? Hermione could still see reluctance in his eyes before he again broke eye contact and stared down at his hands. But then he suddenly spoke in a soft voice,

"You have no idea how much it meant to me to learn that I am a wizard." Tom looked up at her. The desperation still burned in his eyes as he continued. "I grew up in that orphanage and I always knew that I was different. But I didn't understand. I didn't know what it was that made me so different. I had this odd power and I could make things happen around me but I didn't know why."

"They told me I was crazy. That I should be locked away." Tom glanced at Hermione. He seemed to hesitate to go on. But then he decided to continue, now with a hard tinge in his tone, "I didn't care what they thought about me. They didn't matter, they couldn't understand. But I didn't want to be chucked away in an asylum either."

"And then… you know… Dumbledore turned up in the orphanage. He was the one who told me that I am a wizard. As he told me that the strange power inside of me was magic, everything seemed to suddenly fall in place. Everything made sense. So I left the orphanage and went to Hogwarts." A small smile crept on Tom's face. "It was bliss being able to leave there but Hogwarts was even better. Finally I didn't have to pretend or hide any longer."

"My first year passed in an instant but then I was sent back to the orphanage. I wasn't allowed to stay over the break." There was a certain amount of bitterness in his voice as he said that. "I didn't want to return. I didn't want to give up my freedom."

"Being back there was as if I had never left. Mrs Cole still hated me. The other children still despised me and over the year they had forgotten what I could do to them." Hermione noticed the coldness that suddenly seeped through his voice. "But I could have lived with it all if just I hadn't been forbidden to use magic."

"I was cut off from everything," Tom hissed, the accusation clear in his tone.

Hermione took his hand in hers. She could understand what he was trying to say. He had obviously been lonely and had felt abandoned. As he felt her hand on his, Tom seemed to calm down a little. He stared at her and Hermione smiled softly to encourage him to go on. It obviously was difficult for him to be open with her right now. She was quite certain that he had never before confided in anyone like he did now. She could hear him sigh softly. Then he averted his eyes from her but still continued his story. Though his voice was now so soft she could barely understand him.

"One day, we were in the yard outside of the orphanage and no-one was watching us, the other children decided to… tease me again. Until then I had always contained myself. But they didn't stop… and I lost control."

Hermione looked at him concerned. Tom still didn't meet her eyes. There now was a feeling of foreboding building up in her. This feeling even intensified with Tom's next statement.

"I had my wand always on me although I knew I couldn't use it."
Hermione tried to suppress the bad feeling and inquired in a hesitant tone, "What did you do?"

Tom looked in her eyes as he said in a tone completely devoid of any emotion, "I drew my wand and then I cursed one of the children."

Hermione furrowed her brow. That was bad. Underage use of magic was forbidden. So Tom using magic like that would have put him in trouble. And he had used magic in front of muggles. That was really bad.

"I see, the Ministry's wards would notice you using magic. But that still doesn't explain why Dumbledore can blackmail you." Hermione frowned at him. That wouldn't explain anything unless…

She looked at him sharply, "What spell did you use?"

Tom stared at her for a while. His face was covered by his blank mask but Hermione could tell that he was pondering whether to tell her. His grey eyes regarded her and even though Hermione stared back at him she was not able to say what he was feeling right now. His eyes were cold, grey wells and made chills darting down her spine. Then after a long time he seemed to have decided whether to tell her the truth or not. He opened his mouth and said in a soft but completely controlled voice,

"Haz Zoubar."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock.

_Haz Zoubar? _She stopped to breathe as she scanned Tom incredulously. He did not use that curse at the age of eleven! Hermione was unfortunate enough to know the curse. It was deep magic and very dark. It was a curse designed to temporarily transform a person's hatred into magical power which would then attack the opponent causing pain and severe injury. It was similar to the Unforgivable Curses which were also based on the emotional state of the caster. They could only be used when the caster really had the intention to harm, possess or even to kill.

There was another similarity to the Unforgivables. For, Hermione knew that the use of that curse was worth a one-way ticket directly to Azkaban. It was just as bad as the Unforgivables though it was not as widely known. Probably due to the fact that the caster needed a fair amount of skill to cast the curse. As Hermione stared at Tom there was a sinking feeling in her stomach. She didn't know what to say next.

As Hermione didn't react to this revelation other than staring at him Tom tried to explain, "I was so angry back then I just lost control."

A frown appeared on Hermione's face. Then she said, and by now the softness had left her voice, "But, Tom, the _Haz Curse_?"

Tom stared at her but didn't say anything while Hermione now glared at him darkly. Why did Tom always need to use Dark Magic on others? She wasn't even going to ask him how he had managed to find a book about such Dark Magic when he had been only eleven.

"What happened then?" she then asked him gruffly. There were the first signs of anger building up in her.

"I botched the spell up," Tom replied, his tone level.

"What?"
"At first it worked like it should have," he told her in his smooth voice, though his eyes had again left her. "But then somehow the curse broke and the magic lashed out at the other child. I was hit myself and blacked out. The next thing I remember is me waking up in St Mungos."

He shortly glanced at Hermione but as he saw that angry frown on her face he quickly averted his eyes again.

"There were a lot of people who wanted to speak with me," he continued with his story, "Aurors, Ministry officials. They interrogated me. I was told that Dark Magic had been used in the premises of the orphanage. They asked me what I knew about the incident. I lied and told them I couldn't remember anything."

"And they believed you?" Hermione asked scandalized.

Tom looked up at her, then said in a hesitant tone, "I'm not sure. But at least they never suspected me. I had been hit myself by the rebounding curse. And I was still a first year back then. They were quite convinced that no first year could ever perform that curse because--"

"-because it is too powerful," Hermione ended the sentence for him in a quiet voice.

"Yes," Tom inclined his head.

"But you were guilty," she stated angrily. By now she could feel her magic rushing through her furiously, mirroring the churned up emotion inside of her. Still, she tried to reign in her rising temper.

Tom didn't reply anything to her last statement so Hermione asked, her voice was sharp and cold, "Why didn't they ask the other children. They could have told them."

Tom could obviously see her upcoming anger but he still answered her with a steady voice, "As the Aurors arrived at the orphanage they found me and the other child unconscious in the yard. As it was a muggle orphanage they instantly obliviated everyone of the other children. That's the standard procedure in such a case."

Hermione's eyes hardened.

"So no-one would be able to tell them that it was you who fired the curse?" she asked indignantly.

"Yes."

"What happened to the child you attacked?" Her voice was clipped.

"He fell in a coma." Tom replied, his tone completely emotionless.

Hermione's mouth formed a thin line as she stared at Tom in anger.

"Did he wake up again?" Her voice was icy-cold now.

"No," he whispered.

Hermione stared at him. She couldn't stop her temper anymore and anger was washing over her as she finally understood the consequences Tom's actions had entailed.

"Did you know that could happen as you cursed him?" she asked him in a low and barely controlled voice.

"I didn't," Tom quickly assured. "I didn't know much of what the curse could do."
"And yet, you used it," came her abrupt reply.

Tom looked at her and she could see the emotions swirling in his eyes. But right now, she didn't really care how he was feeling. She just glared at him angrily and had to fight to not lose her composure. She wasn't going to ask him if he felt guilty for having cursed that innocent child. Somehow she already knew the answer to that question.

"How comes Dumbledore into all of this?" she instead asked him curtly.

"He came to the hospital as he heard what had happened," Tom explained quietly. "Then he wanted to talk to me. I think he used Legilimency on me. I don't know, I didn't know about this kind of magic back then. He didn't hand me over to the authorities, though, as he learned what I had done. He made me promise never to use such a spell again-

Hermione snorted wryly.

"-and he told me that if I wanted to stay at Hogwarts, I would have to follow his rules. So every following summer break he took my wand from me before I had to return to the orphanage."

Tom ended his speech and stared at Hermione. She was glaring at him very darkly. This did explain a lot, she thought, still enraged by what Tom had just told her. The curse he had used was on a par with the three Unforgivables. And Dumbledore knew what Tom had done. If he decided to tell the Aurors, being expelled from Hogwarts would be the least of Tom's problems. Despite the fact that Tom had been a child as he had used the curse, the Aurors would surely start to investigate. Hermione knew that Tom had quite a few skeletons in the cupboard. He could not afford Aurors to look into his life. Back in her time period she had never heard about this incident. She now wondered why Dumbledore hadn't told Harry during sixth year. Hell, she actually wondered why he had hushed up the whole thing. It just was abhorrent.

It wasn't so much the fact that Tom had used such horrible Dark Magic that shocked her now. She had always known what he was capable to do. It wasn't even the fact that he had permanently hurt that child. It was of course horrible what he had done and she was disgusted by the fact that he had destroyed that child's future. What was really getting to her was the idea that Tom already knew how to use that curse at the age of eleven. Hermione herself hadn't even known that something like this curse existed as she had been eleven. Let alone use it.

Her eyes glinted irately as she stared at Tom.

Just what is wrong with him?

She knew all too well that there was something dark and sinister inside of him. But now it looked like that evil side of him had always been there. Apparently it hadn't developed because he had to grow up under dreadful circumstances. No, it had always been a part of him. He had been offered the wonderful chance to leave the orphanage for the wizarding world and what was the first thing he did with his new knowledge? He used it in the worst way possible and hurt others.

Hermione felt her anger slowly bubbling over. She was furious. How could Tom have done something like that? And after this experience one would have thought he would never use Dark Magic again. But no, he was still fascinated by it. She balled her hands into tight fists and tried to reign in her furious magic and not hex Tom on the spot.

"Do you hate me now?" Tom suddenly asked her in a very soft voice.

Hermione's eyes snapped back to him. He was sitting in front of her and again he let his head hang
and avoided to look her in the eyes. She didn't answer him. She was too enraged and would have just yelled at him if she said anything now.

As she didn't reply to his question Tom slowly raised his head. His eyes hesitantly wandered to her own. He looked at her and his face was giving nothing away, aside from his eyes. They were swirling with emotion. His grey eyes were scanning her anxiously, almost fearfully, and there was guardedness in them. It almost looked as if he tried to steel himself against something. It seemed as if he was expecting her to stand up and walk away any moment now. Hermione's fury completely died down as she gazed back at him.

Did he think she would leave him?

Hermione couldn't take that. She didn't want him to be afraid of her leaving him. So she reached out for him and put a hand gently on his arm. He tensed as she touched him.

"What you did was very wrong, Tom. And I'm really angry with you for doing it," Hermione could see how he cringed as she said that. "But, no, I don't hate you," she finished in a firm voice.

Tom looked at her with surprise written all over his face. Hermione frowned. What had he thought? That she would leave him because of this story? She actually knew a whole lot worse things about him. But maybe Tom wasn't used to people liking him despite them having seen his dark side.

"I said I wouldn't abandon you regardless of what you did," Hermione reassured him gently.

Tom seemed to relax a little as he heard that. It shook Hermione that he had really expected her to leave him after this confession. No wonder he had been so reluctant in confiding in her.

He shouldn't have to worry about that, she thought sadly as she scanned the relief on his face.

It was odd that he had believed she would abandon him. Yes, that story was rather horrible. And Hermione had to admit that she was still angry with Tom for having done something like that. He had, after all, destroyed the future of that poor child. There was really no excuse for that. But in comparison to the other things she knew about Tom this incident seemed to drop in the background. It even had been something like an accident that the child was now permanently in a coma.

Her gaze wandered back to Tom. He was still looking at her with his blank face but she could feel how he tightly held to her hand. Why had he been so scared of her leaving him?

Then again, he had no idea how much she actually knew about his crimes. He had never told her that he had murdered his father or Moaning Myrtle. To be fair, Hermione DeCerto could not possibly know about any of the crimes he had committed so far. He had no reason to believe that she could know more. So this story he had just told her was really the worst thing she now knew about him – at least from his point of view.

Hermione felt the anger leaving her completely. This incident was now years and years ago. She shouldn't be angry with him. She pressed his hand reassuringly and smiled faintly at him. She was not going to judge him by this mistake he had made. Obviously others already did that.

There still was another problem at hand, she thought. Then she asked him in a grave tone, "As you talked with Dumbledore today what exactly did he say?"

"I… Just that he is going to expel me," Tom whispered, clearly still taken aback that she hadn't left him by now.

"Yes, but on what reason?" Hermione queried. "He can't use that story about you casting the Haz
Curse. That wouldn't just get you expelled but directly into Azkaban."

"He'll just make something up to get me expelled. And I have to confess to whatever he fabricates against me because otherwise I would be carted off to Azkaban," he replied and there now seeped bitterness in his tone. "That's why he can always order me around like that. If I refuse to obey, he will tell everyone what I have done."

Hermione stared at him for a moment while it hit her how right he was.

"I understand that," she finally said slowly. "But what I don't get is how he can prove what you did. Sure he legilimized you and saw what you've done. But a forced Legilimency confession is no evidence. I don't really think you can be convicted on it. In addition to that, you've been only eleven as it happened."

Tom sniggered mirthlessly before he said, "He is Albus Dumbledore. Who would ever accuse him of lying? If he decides that I am evil, then everyone is going to believe him, regardless of how old I am or was. And he decided a long time ago that I'm a hopeless case. No-one is going to doubt his opinion. He is, after all, the most powerful wizard alive," Tom spat then he continued scornfully. "Or so they all hope. Because if he isn't then who's going to beat Grindelwald?"

Hermione's mouth was pressed in a thin line as she stared at Tom. She realized how serious the situation truly was. Dumbledore seemed to have the upper hand here. He knew what Tom had done during that summer break. He had seen it in Tom's mind. Despite of what she had just said if Dumbledore showed anyone his memory of what he had found in Tom's mind, there was a chance that Tom would get convicted. At the very least it would lead to an investigation which could get Tom into severe trouble.

So ever since Dumbledore had found out about Tom's crime he had used it to threaten and blackmail Tom. That fact infuriated Hermione to no end. She wasn't going to let Dumbledore continue with that. A determined glint appeared in her eyes as she stared at Tom. He was not going to ever return to that orphanage.

She got up from her place on the chilly ground and tried to pull Tom up with her. "Let's go," she ordered him while she tugged at his arm.

Tom frowned up at her, "Where to?"

"I need to talk with Dumbledore," Hermione answered him.

"He's not going to change his mind," he told her in a flat voice.

She continued to pull at him while she said, "We'll see about that. Now, get up."

Tom looked at her skeptically but then he stood up anyway. Hermione took his hand in hers and then started to walk back to the castle while pulling Tom after her. She led him through the castle's corridors while still holding to his hand tightly. Then they finally stood before the two gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office. Hermione hoped that it wasn't too late yet. Things would be a lot more complicated if Dumbledore had already told Dippet about his plans of expelling Tom.

Hermione whispered the password to the headmaster's office, "Infigo."

Obviously Dippet had changed the password over the break as the stone creatures blocking the entrance didn't pounce out of their way. Hermione lost her patience and then just pulled her wand. She didn't have the time to guess the right password. So she waved her wand in an angry movement at the two gargoyles. The power behind her spell was strong enough to wake the stone sculptures
and force them to jump out of the way. She was glad that right now Tom was too upset to question how she managed that. She just pulled him after her as she climbed the stairs to the headmaster's office. When they finally stood before the door leading into the office Hermione could hear voices.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore." Dippet's voice was booming through the door. "Why would Riddle do something like that? Remember, it was him who caught the real culprit."

"Rubeus Hagrid is innocent," Dumbledore's calm voice replied.

"Yes, you've said so before but all the evidence says otherwise," Dippet's voice said. "Why would Riddle, of all people, do something like that? He's a prefect and he will become head boy next year. How will the school look if we have to expel one of our best students?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows as she grasped the topic of their conversation. So Dumbledore planned to use the Chamber of Secrets incident of last year to get Tom expelled. She cast a sideways glance at Tom. His face was again covered by a blank mask. Hermione tightened her hold on his hand before she knocked on the wooden door, leading into the Headmaster's office.

"Come in," came Dippet's voice.

Hermione opened the door and entered the room behind while still pulling Tom with her. Dippet's office was like she remembered it from her previous visits. Still tidy, even to the point of looking sterile and uninviting. Dippet sat behind this imposing desk. He wore a black richly embroidered waistcoat on top of a white shirt. And right now his stern gaze had fallen on her.

Dumbledore stood before the desk and he, too, stared at the new arrivers. He looked like he had just stopped mid-step whilst pacing in front of the intimidating, huge desk. But now he had ceased his pacing and scanned Hermione over his half moon spectacles. He looked mildly surprised at her but then Hermione could see his gaze harden and a dark look crossed his face as his eyes landed on Tom who stood slightly behind her.

"Mr Riddle, just the one we have been talking about," Dippet said in his strict voice.

Hermione noticed how Dippet completely ignored her. She was quite sure that he didn't even know her name, judging from that confused look crossing his face whenever he looked her way.

"We have a little problem here," Dippet addressed Tom while he looked at him sternly. "You, of course, remember the events of last year which unfortunately led to the expulsion of one of our students? I now have to ask you again. Did you have anything to do with opening the Chamber of Secrets?"

Hermione could feel Tom tense. Then his grey eyes darted from Dippet to Dumbledore who now stared at Tom expectantly. His gaze was clearly saying that Tom should admit to this or else he would have to face the consequences.

Before Tom could answer the question Hermione cut across him loudly, "Headmaster, this is exactly why we are here."

Then her eyes wandered to Dumbledore and she said, "I need to speak with you about Tom, sir." Hermione was surprised that her voice didn't shake but sounded even strong.

She could see the professor's eyes wander from her back to Tom. There was again this coldness in his gaze. Somehow it upset Hermione to see that sharp and even calculating glint in his clear blue eyes. The kind twinkle that normally brightened his face was completely missing now.
Then Dumbledore spoke and even his voice was devoid of all the kindness she normally connected with the professor, "I already discussed everything with Tom, Ms DeCerto. There is nothing more to be said."

Hermione bit her lip nervously as she heard Dumbledore's resolute voice. That cold glint in his eyes made her feel very unsure of herself. For the first time she understood how someone could be scared by him. But then Hermione could feel Tom's cold hand grasping her a little tighter. She locked eyes with Dumbledore and met his suspicious gaze squarely.

Then she said in a perfectly calm and firm voice, "You didn't have all the information as you made your decision, sir. Please, let me explain."

Hermione saw the suspicion in his eyes intensify but after a while he said, "Very well, Ms DeCerto. I will listen to what you have to tell me."

"Yes, that is a very good idea," Dippet who had followed the conversation now announced in his pompous voice. "I am sure this whole incident is just a mere misunderstanding."

An almost relieved look crossed his otherwise so stern face as he continued, almost as if talking to himself, "Wouldn't know how to explain that to the school governors. Expelling our best student. No, no. That won't do."

Then the turned to Dumbledore and said, "Please, talk with them, Albus. This needs to be cleared up."

Hermione was now very glad for Dippet's impatience when it came to dealing with students. He tended to shuffle such tasks off on his professors. All the better, Hermione decided. She needed to talk with Dumbledore alone anyway.

So it came that they left the headmaster's office and Hermione followed Dumbledore through the corridors of Hogwarts to his office while pulling a now very reluctant Tom with her. They quickly arrived at his office. Dumbledore admitted them in before he sat down behind his desk and then gestured to the chairs in front of his desk.

"Please, sit down and I will give you the opportunity to explain yourself." Hermione felt disheartened as she could hear a certain harshness in his tone.

Nevertheless she pressed Tom's hand reassuringly then she walked over to Dumbledore and pulled Tom with her. She sat down on the comfortable seat and saw that Tom took place on the chair beside her, though he remained to be very tense. Hermione's eyes wandered back to Dumbledore and she found him looking at her intently.

She breathed in deeply to calm herself down then she said, turned to Dumbledore, "Sir, it was my fault that Tom left his orphanage during the break."

She watched how Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. Though she could tell that he was not surprised but looked more like his suspicion had just been confirmed.

"Ms DeCerto, you don't need to lie for Mr Riddle," Dumbledore finally told her in a severe voice.

"I am not lying," Hermione said in a strong tone.

Dumbledore cast a short disapproving look Tom's way before he said to Hermione, "I know that Tom can be quite persuasive if he needs to be but whatever he told you, you don't have to help him out here. If Tom is in trouble now, then that is alone his doing."
"Sir, I beg to differ," Hermione replied. Her voice was still frighteningly calm. Frightening at least to herself as she knew that she was not nearly as unperturbed as her voice suggested. "It's not Tom's fault he is in trouble now. It is mine. You can't punish him."

Dumbledore sighed tiredly then he turned to Tom and Hermione could again see a hard glint in his eyes as he said in a cold voice, "Tom, I need to speak with Ms DeCerto alone. Could you wait outside, please?"

Hermione frowned at Dumbledore. Why did he send Tom away now? Though, on second thought, she could understand his actions. Dumbledore surely thought that Tom was threatening her and that he was forcing her to lie for him. Of course Dumbledore wanted to speak with her alone. So that Tom couldn't influence her anymore.

"Yes, professor," Tom said in a completely emotionless tone.

Hermione looked at Tom in concern. He was just getting up from the chair. Hermione could see that his face was again covered with that blank mask. Then he turned around to walk to the door. As he did so his eyes shortly shot at her. Hermione looked into his grey eyes and was again hit by the desperation burning in them. He seemed to be really scared. Hermione was shaken by this desperation. She would never let Dumbledore sent him back.

Hermione could hear the soft thud of the office door and knew that it was more than just the wooden door that separated her from Tom now. She had once broken into Dumbledore's office and she knew there were a few wards in the air, protecting the transfiguration teacher's office. Even if he tried, Tom wouldn't be able to hear into this conversation.

Hermione looked expectantly back at Dumbledore.

"I wasn't aware that you are friends with Mr Riddle," Dumbledore said in a quiet voice while he scanned her with his clear blue eyes.

"Oh, but I am," Hermione said cautiously.

She didn't like it very much that she had to be cautious around this younger Dumbledore but she mustn't let her old nostalgic feelings get the better of her. This Dumbledore didn't know her, at least not yet, therefore he had no reason to trust her.

"You think it is your responsibility to protect your friend?" Dumbledore asked sympathetically, even kindly.

"Yes," Hermione said without hesitation. She would always protect her friends. No matter what.

Dumbledore sighed softly and looked at her in a strange, almost sad, way.

"I respect your loyalty towards your friend?" he said gently but then looked as if he prepared himself to break a terrible truth to her. "But you have to know that Mr Riddle is a special case."

"In what way, professor?" Hermione asked though she knew what he was trying to say.

Dumbledore again sighed then he leaned back in his chair.

"Ms DeCerto, I can see that you like him. It honours you that you try to help him." He paused shortly as if to decide how to proceed best. Then he continued in his gentle voice, "But before you do that you should ask yourself if Tom deserves your help."
Hermione was momentarily speechless. She had known that Dumbledore wasn't exactly a fan of Tom but for him to so openly admit it was hard to swallow. She had always known Dumbledore to be a very forgiving man. He liked to give second chances. But obviously he had given up on Tom.

Dumbledore seemed to have spotted that look of surprise on her face and continued in a suave tone, "I said it before, Tom has the ability to charm people very well. I know that my actions might seem a bit harsh to you but they are necessary. There is something very dark and dangerous in him and he is an expert when it comes to shrouding that rather dark part of his character."

Oh, he was right. Hermione knew it even better than he did. There certainly was a terribly dark part of Tom. But couldn't Dumbledore see that abandoning him in that vile orphanage would only fuel the dangerous hate inside of him?

Hermione looked the old wizard squarely in the eyes as she replied in a calm voice, "Even if you are right, sir, you still can't punish Tom for a thing he hasn't done. I made him leave the orphanage. If you need to punish someone, it should be me."

"I see, you insist in protecting Tom," Dumbledore stated sadly. "I do not know how Tom managed to persuade you to help him, Ms DeCerto, but you would change your mind if you knew why he has to stay in the orphanage."

"I know about that incident after his first year, sir," Hermione said quietly.

For the first time during this conversation she could see a genuine look of surprise on the old wizard's face.

"Tom, told you about it?" he asked somewhat incredulous.

"Yes."

"What did he tell you?" Dumbledore inquired suspiciously.

"That he used the Haz Curse on one of the other orphans," she said in a steady voice.

"I had not expected him to confide in you." Dumbledore seemed to be genuinely surprised.

"And yet he did," Hermione proceeded cautiously. She wanted to use that little bit of doubt she could see shining in the other's eyes. "Sir, if you have judged him wrongly in that case, maybe you shouldn't expel him due to another judgement you made of Tom."

Dumbledore looked at her over his half-moon spectacles. He seemed to mull over her last words. While he remained silent Hermione desperately searched for a way out of this. He seemed so completely convinced that Tom needed to be banned from the wizarding world. Somehow, she had to admit, she could even understand him. But still, she wasn't going to let that happen.

"Sir, I know that you protected Tom after you found out what he did. You saved him from the Aurors and did not tell them about his crime." Hermione hit Dumbledore with a perfectly calm gaze, though inwardly she felt terribly unsure of herself. But she had to go on. It was the truth after all, so she asked, "Why did you save Tom in the first place if you now continue to punish him for a thing he did as he was eleven?"

"I am not punishing him. But Tom is too powerful for his own good," Dumbledore said and Hermione was surprised how tired he suddenly looked. "He can't be left alone with that power. He needs rules and restrictions. If there is no-one strictly controlling him, he can go down a very wrong way." Dumbledore pause and seemed to be lost in thought and there was an almost pained
expression on his face. Then he said softly, "That is a horrible experience I don't want Tom to go through."

Hermione looked in confusion at Dumbledore.

There was more. Dumbledore was talking about more than just Tom. She could see a sad and even pained look on the old wizard's face. Hermione knew that look very well. For she could always see it when she looked in a mirror. That expression, it told of loss and pain.

As she saw it now on Dumbledore's face, Hermione finally understood his motivation. She could see why he so insisted in pulling Tom away from that 'wrong way'. He tried to save Tom from the darkness because Dumbledore himself knew from experience what was waiting at the end of that way.

Her thoughts shot back into her past. After Dumbledore had died at the end of Hermione's sixth year Rita Skeeter had published a book about him. Hermione remembered how enraged she had been because it at been Skeeter, of all people, who wrote it. Nevertheless, she had read the book. And she grudgingly had to admit that Skeeter had done a halfway decent job. Harry had been very angry as he had read it, Hermione recalled, for the book illuminated Dumbledore's rather colourful past. Harry hadn't liked it very much that his idol had suddenly been reduced to a normal human being who was able to commit mistakes.

And mistakes he had made. Once Dumbledore had been friends with Grindelwald and he had believed in the same inhuman principles Grindelwald still followed: The absolute supremacy of wizards.

Back in his youth Dumbledore had already been an incredibly talented wizard. Just like Tom now was. There certainly had been a dark belief behind the young Dumbledore's actions. The same darkness that was now visible in Tom. Then, after Dumbledore had graduated from Hogwarts, his mother had died and he had been left alone with the responsibility as head of the family. But that also meant that he hadn't had to answer to anyone anymore. No-one was controlling him anymore. Just like Tom who never had parents who would look after his well-being or give him rules.

Dumbledore's new freedom had led to a tragic incident, Hermione knew. During a dispute between himself and Grindelwald Dumbledore's sister, Ariana, was hit with a curse and died. Hermione could only imagine how guilty Dumbledore must feel about it.

But this story told Hermione one thing, Dumbledore himself had gone down this 'wrong way' he now tried to protect Tom from. He knew where it could lead to. By pulling Tom away from the darkness, was Dumbledore trying to rectify his own mistakes?

Hermione's eyes softened a little as she now stared at the old wizard. She knew he meant well. It was just the wrong way. Dumbledore seemed to be lost in thought, or maybe in his memories but Hermione still asked him gently,

"Could it be, that you are not trying to save Tom here but someone else?"

She could watch the pensive expression instantly leaving his face. She was rather unsettled as she saw a surprised and then suspicious look crossing Dumbledore's face before he again hit her with his hard gaze.

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked her sharply.

"Never mind that," Hermione replied and quickly erected her occlumency shields, just in case.
She decided to change the topic, "Professor, right now a horrible war is covering the whole world. Do you really want to chuck Tom back into the Muggle world where he could fall victim to that war?"

"There is a war raging in the wizarding world as well," Dumbledore threw back and Hermione noticed how cold his tone now was.

"Hogwarts is safe," Hermione interjected cautiously.

"Not for Tom," was Dumbledore's cold answer.

Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line. This was getting her nowhere. Frustration now boiled up in her.

"So you want him to go back to the orphanage where he can be controlled strictly?" Hermione asked him in a firm voice. Then her gaze wandered from Dumbledore to the window in the office. She stared pensively at the scenery outside as her thoughts rushed back to the first encounter she had with Carter.

"Once I had a conversation with Mr Carter, the patron of Tom's orphanage. Do you know what he told me? He told me that Tom needs a 'strong hand' and that he needs to be 'punished strictly'." Hermione couldn't stop the bitterness seeping into her voice.

Her eyes wandered back to Dumbledore and she asked while looking at him unblinking, "Professor, do you really think Carter is the right man for the job?"

The wizard just looked back at her and as he answered his tone was aloof and almost cold, "I know it is not perfect. But sending Tom back to the orphanage is the only way I see right now."

Hermione considered him for some time then she asked, "Have you ever spoken with Carter?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied steadily.

Hermione stared at him for a second. She had actually not expected him to have ever met Carter. How could he have met that bastard and not seen him for what he was? A sadistic swine!

"Then I'm sure you know what sort of a man he is," she finally said in a tightly controlled voice.

"I do know that it is difficult for Tom having to live in an orphanage," Dumbledore replied and Hermione could suddenly see that hard glint leaving his eyes again.

But strangely the new softness in his voice only managed to rise her temper. A frown appeared on her face as he continued, "But if it prevents Tom from becoming something he will one day regret to be, then I am willing to temporarily sacrifice his freedom. It will spare him a lot of grief."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in indignation. Anger was boiling up in her as she saw that sincerity on Dumbledore's face.

"Freedom?" she asked. Her voice was nothing more than a whisper but it shook with her suppressed fury. Then she hissed at him in a clipped voice, "It is more than freedom we are sacrificing here."

Her eyes wandered back to his face and locked with his light blue ones. If the old professor had spoken with Carter, why hadn't he realized how evil Carter was. Why hadn't Dumbledore legilimized Carter to find out what that swine had done to Tom. Or did Dumbledore know but just didn't care? Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line as she continued to coldly scan the professor.
Did he not care at all how Tom was treated? Had he never taken the time to really talk with Carter? Because then Dumbledore would have surely realized what a bigot Carter was.

Hermione lost her calm and snapped at Dumbledore, "As you spoke with Carter didn't you see what a prejudiced swine he is?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at her outburst but then he stated in his collected voice, "I have talked with Mr Carter right after his predecessor, Mrs Cole, left Tom's orphanage. I realized back then that Mr Carter would be stricter than what Tom was used from Mrs Cole and I knew that it would be more difficult for Tom in his care. But the orphanage was still the only way to restrain Tom over the summer break."

"I am able to watch over him and prevent him from doing any harm whilst at school. But during the summer Tom would have the chance to do his misdeeds as I am not at Hogwarts during summer breaks. So I decided to take his wand from him over the break and send him back to the orphanage where he would at least be watched closely."

Hermione stared at Dumbledore with wide eyes. She still seethed but she was finally able to understand his plan. Though that didn't make her like it any more. Tom had hurt that child during the summer break after his first year. So Dumbledore had decided to take his wand from him whenever Tom had to return to the orphanage. He tried to prevent Tom from ever harming anyone again. But he only sent Tom back whenever he himself couldn't watch him. Therefore Tom had to return every summer break. That did also explain why Dumbledore had sent him back during this Christmas break. Hermione knew that the transfiguration professor had left the school during last break. That probably was the reason he had sent Tom back. That did explain Dumbledore's plan but still…

"After your first encounter with Carter did you ever meet him again?" Hermione asked him slowly.

This was important. If Dumbledore had met Carter again, that would mean that Dumbledore could have legitimized him or through some other way found out how Carter had treated Tom.

"Only shortly during this weekend. Before that we had contact through letters," Dumbledore replied calmly.

"Letters?" Hermione exclaimed incredulous. "You never thought it necessary to check how Tom was doing during break?"

"Ms DeCerto, rest assured that I did try everything to look after Tom but there were other things that demanded my attention as well." Dumbledore's tone was now cold as he hit her with a piercing gaze.

Hermione knew whom he was speaking of right now. Grindelwald, of course. His personal nemesis. So Dumbledore had neglected to look after Tom because he had been trying to find ways to stop Grindelwald. It was ironic, Hermione thought, that by trying to destroy one dark wizard Dumbledore had helped create another, even more powerful one.

She shouldn't be so surprised by Dumbledore's neglect though, Hermione thought enraged as she scanned the man. After all he had left Harry in the care of the Dursleys when he had known perfectly well that Harry would suffer there. After he had dumped baby Harry with the Dursleys he had never really checked on him again. At least not for the following ten years. So why would he devote any more attention to Tom when he hadn't even treated the Chosen-One any better?

But this also meant that Dumbledore didn't know. He had no idea what he condemned Tom to by sending him back to Carter.
Hermione now swayed between understanding the old professor's actions and hating him for hurting Tom like that. She could see why Dumbledore had sent Tom back to the orphanage without his wand. But what about Tom? Hermione wondered enraged. Back then he himself had still been a child. Her thoughts jumped back to New Year's Eve and the story Tom had told her then. He had told her how Carter had hurt him so much that Tom had nearly died.

Whatever Dumbledore's plan had been he should never have allowed something like that to happen. If he really felt responsible for Tom, then he shouldn't just concentrate on how to prevent Tom from doing evil things. No, Dumbledore should also assure that no harm came to Tom. Obviously something the professor had not foreseen in this plan of his.

Hermione sighed then she said somewhat irritated, "Professor, I know you try to help Tom. But can't you see this is the wrong way? Do you think you can constrain Tom forever? Even if you take Tom's wand away and force him to live with Muggles, he will still remain to be a wizard. The only thing you will achieve by expelling Tom and sending him back to the orphanage is that his hate will intensify."

Dumbledore still regarded her with his clear blue eyes.

"No, Ms DeCerto. This is his only chance. He cannot stay here. He has proven it again and again that he can not be trusted. Now he did it again. Against his word he left the orphanage. I am quite sure this was not the only crime he committed during the break."

Hermione had the unpleasant impression that Dumbledore was now speaking about the housebreaking of Flame's flat. Yet another thing Tom was innocent of. But she couldn't tell Dumbledore that it had been her.

"Tom has been with me during the whole break, sir," she instead told Dumbledore though she didn't feel as calm as her voice sounded like. "He never had the time to do anything without me noticing. And he didn't even have a wand."

"Hermione, you must trust my judgment in this occasion," Dumbledore finally said suavely and Hermione noticed his sudden use of her first name. "I have known Tom for quite some time now and you can believe me when I say that I tried everything else to save him." Then he added sadly, "Nothing worked. All was in vain. This is the very last chance Tom has to lead a normal life."

A normal life? Hermione thought enraged. What did Dumbledore intend to do if his plan didn't work out the way he wanted it to? Throw Tom into Azkaban?

"You still want to expel him? I really couldn't convince you otherwise?" she asked in a icy cold voice.

Dumbledore just stared at her and the harsh glint in his eyes told her that she indeed hadn't been successful.

"Professor, I know that you don't believe my story but still you have never asked me why I made Tom leave the orphanage in the first place," she said in a very soft voice.

Actually Hermione didn't want to tell Dumbledore how Tom got abused every time he had to return to the orphanage. She was pretty sure that Tom didn't want him to know. But she really thought that the professor should learn the truth. He was responsible for Tom's suffering after all. She breathed in deeply before she looked back at Dumbledore. He still fixed her with this cold stare that missed every bit of warmth she normally connected with him.
"Please, Ms DeCerto, share your story with me," Dumbledore said frostily. "But do not expect me to change my mind."

Hermione looked away from him and again out of the window. By now sleet was falling wetly down on the castle and the surrounding grounds. It looked cold and uninviting. The weather was just as bad as Hermione's mood. She unfixed her eyes from the window and looked back at Dumbledore. He was staring at her with his piercing light-blue eyes. She could see skepticism and even suspicion in them.

Hermione said in a perfectly steady voice, "Did you know that Tom gets beaten at the orphanage?"

Dumbledore's expression didn't change. But Hermione could see a small spark of surprise in his eyes.

"Did he tell you that?" he asked her and Hermione had to suppress a shudder as she heard the coldness in his tone.

"No, I saw it," she replied, her voice was tight and did not transport any of the emotions which now run through her.

There was still disbelief and even suspicion in Dumbledore's eyes. But Hermione went on for she could also spot a little bit of doubt on the professor's face.

Hermione sighed softly before she began, "You have to know, before the break I didn't like Tom very much. It was only a few days into the break that I met him by pure coincidence. I hadn't even known that he lived in London."

Hermione decided to not tell Dumbledore how she had run into Tom right after she had stolen Peverell's manuscript. So she conveniently jumped over that part of her story and continued, "Anyway, I decided to visit him in his orphanage. And do you know where I found him?" she asked Dumbledore, unable to suppress all the accusation from her voice. Before the old wizard could say anything she rushed on and now she didn't even try anymore to ban the anger from her tone,

"Tom was locked up in a room in the cellar. And he was badly hurt because your dear Mr Carter had thought it necessary to flog him."

Hermione knew her fury was now clearly visible on her face as she glared at Dumbledore. He in turn was looking back at her and a deep frown had appeared on his face. But whatever he thought Hermione could still see the mistrust in his eyes. He wasn't believing her.

"If you don't believe me, sir, have a look at my memory," she snapped at him in a flush of anger. Her eyes locked with his and she shoved the picture of how she had found Tom huddled on the floor in that dirty chamber to the forefront of her mind.

"Have a look," she huffed at him. "I know that you can."

There was surprise crossing Dumbledore's face. But then she could feel the tingling sensation of Legilimency tugging at her mind. Hermione lowered her Occlumency shields to admit him in. She shuddered as she felt another presence in her mind. But she needed Dumbledore to see this memory otherwise he wouldn't believe her. If he tried to have a look at her other memories though, Hermione wasn't going to hesitate to push him out of her mind. After a while she could feel him leaving her mind again and immediately she let her shields fall back in place. Dumbledore looked at her and she could see something like regret in his eyes.
"I can now understand why you are trying to help him," he said in a quiet tone. "I am very shocked at how Tom has been treated."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and eyed her pensively. Hermione had no idea what he was thinking right now. But after this revelation she was pretty sure he would not send Tom back to the orphanage. That would be cruel and just wrong.

Dumbledore sighed tiredly and then continued in a severe voice, "It seems I have wronged Tom."

Hermione breathed out relieved. She had known it. She had known that she only had to confide in Dumbledore and then he would help her. He had always helped her. What a great loss it had been for her side as he had been killed at the end of her sixth year, Hermione mused as she scanned the old wizard fondly. She just wished that he had been able to see how strong Harry had become in the end. Dumbledore would have been so proud of him.

Hermione was brought out of her memories as Dumbledore spoke again, "I will see to it that Mr Carter gets replaced."

She blinked in confusion but then said, "You are right. That man shouldn't be allowed to watch over children."

Hermione felt a little guilty. She had always worried about Tom but there were still other children in that orphanage. Only Merlin knew what Carter had done to them.

But then Dumbledore continued, "In the mean time Tom still has to stay at the orphanage. But I will make sure that he doesn't get hurt anymore."

Hermione felt her world crashing down around her as she was gaping at the old wizard with wide eyes. Her head was swirling and her blood turned cold from the shock.

"What?" she exclaimed scandalized. "You surely don't plan to sent Tom still back, do you?"

He hadn't understood the severity, it seemed. Hermione shook her head as she tried to grasp the situation. She had been so sure that Dumbledore wouldn't sent Tom back if he just knew.

"You don't understand," she all but yelled at him, panic and a fair amount of rage got the better of her. "I'm not talking about a small slap on his wrist. Tom gets abused there!"

Dumbledore still looked at her gravely. But Hermione shuddered as she saw determination in his eyes. Then he said, trying to sound soothing, "Do not worry. I will ensure that Tom doesn't get beaten again. But at the moment I am not willing to let him stay here at Hogwarts any longer."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. She opened her mouth to object but Dumbledore continued as he saw her outrage. His voice was mingled with regret and even guilt but it still didn't shook, the determination was ever present on his face.

"Tom's treatment in the orphanage was wrong and despicable, and it of course has to stop, but this does not change the underlying problem. I have tried to help Tom back on the right path for long enough. I cannot do that anymore. He is not willing to change. We have now reached a point where it is not longer possible to help him at the expense of others."

"But… but…" Hermione stammered as she stared at the professor with wide eyes.

"No!" she then really yelled at him.
Her fury was boiling over and she didn't care anymore to maintain her cool. She jumped to her feet and stared at the wizard furiously. She had to stop herself from flicking her wrist and releasing her wand. Even her magic now flowed through her angrily.

"You can't do this! You can't sent him back," Hermione spat at Dumbledore venomously. "Whatever you say to Carter you can't be sure he's not going to hurt Tom again."

Hermione's thoughts shot back to the last time she had seen Carter. That had been down in that disgusting chamber in the cellar. He had been right in the process of belting Tom. She remembered how she had then lost her control and had cursed Carter. What if that terrible man now wanted revenge for that? Dumbledore could not send Tom back into the clutches of that man.

"At this point in time there really is no better solution. I will no longer risk the safety and even lives of the other students just to accommodate Tom," Dumbledore told her calmly. He was not in the least bit impressed by her angry outburst. He hadn't even batted an eye. Hermione was shocked that he was ready to sacrifice Tom's well-being to protect others from his so-called 'evilness'.

"You have to trust me when I say that I will do everything to prevent Tom coming to any harm," he concluded.

'Do everything'? Hermione run a hand through her hair. This wasn't happening right now. It couldn't be happening!

But here he sat, Dumbledore, while he looked at her expectantly. Did he think she would now just consent with his cruel plan? Her blood was boiling in anger at that thought. She was NOT going to do that. She wasn't going to let Dumbledore proceed with his plan to destroy Tom. Wrath and desperation ripped at her fiercely. Even her magic had by now left her body and crackled around her angrily. She glared at the wizard before her. But Dumbledore was just looking at her curiously. He was not in the least bit affected by the pressure of her angry magic that now hung in the air.

Hermione breathed in deeply and then released the breath slowly. She wouldn't achieve anything by trying to curse Dumbledore. She needed her self-control back. Hermione stared into those clear blue eyes and tried to calm down her temper. The fury left her face and it suddenly morphed into a cold, blank mask, giving nothing away. She could even feel her magic stop to rage around her. It had been an angry torrent flowing inside of her rather aimlessly. Now it just wrapped around her mind coldly, helping to clear her thoughts. She still stared at Dumbledore, though her eyes where no longer burning with ire. They were now just gauging him coldly. Then she slowly sat back down on the chair as a plan started to form in her mind.

Hermione closed her eyes shortly. She knew what she was going to do next would most likely sever all ties she had or could have had with this Dumbledore from the past. She actually didn't want him as her enemy, especially not because she still needed to get the Elder Wand from him. But right now, she didn't see any other way out of this. She was not going to let him send Tom back. So she went on with that new plan before she would lose her nerve.

She opened her mouth and she nearly shuddered as she heard that detached coldness in her own voice, "Sir, whatever you have on Tom. I still have a very clear memory of how I found him in the orphanage."

She leaned a little forwards in her chair and stared at him unblinkingingly before she proceeded, "So, if you want him expelled, I'm going to show everyone how he gets treated in that place. That is not going to put you in a very favourable light."

She could almost see the disappointment seeping into his gaze as he now regarded her. Hermione
was irritated as guilt washed over her but what else could she do other than play dirty?

Dumbledore shook his head slightly then he said in a sad but all the same firm voice, "Ms DeCerto, I do not care how the public is assessing me. If I have to lose my face in the eyes of the public to save Tom, so be it."

Hermione was in inner turmoil. But there was nothing of it showing on her blank face as she continued to coldly stare at Dumbledore. She should have known that attacking his reputation wouldn't work. Dumbledore had never attached much importance to how he was seen in public. But there still was one thing she could use. Hermione felt horrible for doing it and she hated herself for blackmailing her old teacher. It was rather sick that this threat was coming from her, a Muggleborn.

"Maybe," Hermione said slowly.

She leaned comfortably back in her chair and forced a cruel smirk on her face. She hated what she was doing here but there was no other way. So, she smirked at him smugly while she inwardly cringed as she saw the regret in his eyes while he scanned her. The evil smile never left her face as she then executed her plan. The voice that now left her mouth sounded foreign to her own ears. It was scary and so full of scorn and malice that it was barely recognizable.

"In the current climate where the hate against Muggles is slowly rising, you don't want the information of a Muggle using physical violence against a wizard-child to make the rounds. Do you, professor?"

There was sadness creeping into Dumbledore's gaze as he looked at her. The twinkle that otherwise made his eyes radiate serenely had by now completely vanished. Hermione had to fight to maintain the cruel mask that still covered her face.

"Would you really go so far?" Dumbledore asked her quietly, the disappointment clear in his tone. "And risk the lives of innocent people?"

No, never! Hermione screamed in thoughts. But her mind was expertly occluded and her face was shut down completely.

So Dumbledore had no way of knowing that she was bluffing as she now replied lightly in an almost bored sounding voice, "It's not me risking anything, sir. It is your decision."

Dumbledore looked at her for a long time but Hermione held his gaze. Though she felt like despicable scum under this scrutinizing gaze of his. She wanted nothing more than to tell him everything. How she wasn't the evil criminal he now assumed her to be. How she had travelled here from a time of war and grief. She wanted him to understand that she wasn't a dark witch trying to free her partner in crime.

But despite her urge to confide in the old wizard Hermione remained silent. Her face was a blank mask only disturbed by the perfidious smirk, still tugging at the corners of her mouth. She was giving nothing away of her inner struggle. Even as Dumbledore's next words hit her very deeply she still didn't let her mask slip.

"It seems I have been wrong about you, Ms DeCerto," Dumbledore said softly but Hermione didn't even cringe as she saw the disappointment in his eyes. Then he acknowledged her victory in a grave voice, "I will comply with your wishes."

Hermione inclined her head slightly though she never broke eye contact with the wizard. Then she slowly got up from her chair. She wanted to quickly leave the office. The disappointment in
Dumbledore's eyes were more than unbearable.

Before she could walk away Dumbledore said in a quiet voice, "I hope you know what you are doing, Ms DeCerto. I hope you know."

Hermione nodded more in acknowledgement than because she wanted to answer in the affirmative. Then she turned away from Dumbledore and walked over to the door leading out of his office. All the while she wondered if the old and innocent Hermione who had so obviously died during the war, would have done the same thing.

_Probably not._

Now she could feel it even more than two days ago as she had stood on top of the Astronomy tower. Things had changed. _She_ had changed. She had become harder, more callous. She was ready to do many things if it helped her purpose. For the first time since arriving in the past she wondered into what house the Sorting Hat would have put her if she hadn't intervened. Would she have again ended up in Gryffindor? The house of the brave and honest?

Hermione raised her hand and reached for the handle of the door leading out of Dumbledore's office. It felt like she was leaving behind more than just the messy but cozy transfiguration teacher's office. Without a backwards glance Hermione opened the door and stepped out on the dark corridor. With a soft thud she closed the door behind her.

She turned and found Tom standing in the corridor. Her eyes softened as they fell on him. He appeared to be at ease but from the slight differences in his stance she could tell how tense he really was. The stony expression on his face gave nothing away from his inner tension. She cast him a small smile before she walked over to him. She stopped directly in front of him and raised her head to look up at him. His face was still showing no emotion at all but Hermione could see his anxiety glinting through those incredibly grey eyes.

She raised her hand and laid her palm gently on his chest. The green fabric of his sleeveless pullover felt rough on her skin. But she could feel the heat of his body through the material as she still stared up at his face. The guilt of having abandoned Dumbledore and with him another part of the old Hermione still ripped at her but it was dimmed as she drowned herself in Tom's eyes.

"He is not going to expel you," she finally whispered to him in a gentle voice.

Through her hand which still lay on his chest she could feel Tom releasing a shaky breath as he heard her words. Then he stepped closer to her and wrapped his arms around her before he pulled her against him, almost desperately. She could feel him burying his face in her curly hair.

"Thank you," she heard him whisper.

A smile stole on her face as she heard his words. It was a surprise to hear Lord Voldemort thanking her. Though it was already the second time he did that.

"You are welcome," Hermione told him in a soft voice.

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She was never going to make it, Tom thought panicky as he stared at the door across from him. He had his hands balled so tightly that the fingernails were cutting into his skin. Hermione would never be able to persuade Dumbledore. That hateful, old man would never let such an opportunity pass. He despised Tom. Why should he suddenly change his mind? That man had always wanted to expel Tom. Now he had the perfect excuse to do just that. Tom somehow regretted that he had left the
orphanage during the break. Maybe he should have just stayed there and endured the pain. He shook his head in frustration. That would have meant two more weeks at the mercy of Carter. Tom ran a trembling hand over his face. Who knew how long he would have had to stay locked up in that chamber if Hermione hadn't found him.

Tom's head shot up as he heard the door being opened. He stared with wide eyes at Hermione as she walked over to him. She looked so serious, Tom thought as he scanned her face. Did that mean she had been unsuccessful?

Tom gulped as she stopped in front of him and gazed up into his eyes. There was sadness glinting in her eyes.

_She couldn't convince him_, Tom realized crestfallen.

No, he couldn't go back to the orphanage. He wouldn't.

Then Hermione opened her mouth and Tom dreaded to hear what she was about to tell him. "He is not going to expel you."

Tension was falling from him as realization hit him. She had really managed to stop Dumbledore? He stared at her in wonder. On impulse he stepped closer to her and wrapped his arms around her before he pulled her tightly against him. He needed to feel her close now. He buried his face in her curly hair and smelled that faint scent of lilac coming from her.

"Thank you." The words had left his mouth before he could have stopped himself.

He then felt Hermione's arms snaking around him while she said, "You are welcome."

Tom was immensely relieved. He had never expected her to convince Dumbledore. She never ceased to amaze him. Though now he was also deeply confused. He had actually expected her to leave him right after he had told her about how he had cursed that boy with the Haz Curse. But she still hadn't left him. She knew what he had done. By using that curse he had condemned that boy to a fate worse than death. Yet here she was, by his side.

Hermione just seemed to accept that dark side of him. She accepted _him_. All his life Tom had never showed his true self to anyone. He had learned early on that he was better of masking that dark part of him.

Thus Hermione… confused him.

"Let's go!" she whispered, neatly bringing him out of his pondering.

Her hazel eyes scanned him softly then she said quietly, "I don't want to stay here any longer."

Tom's eyes shot to the ominous door which led to Dumbledore's office and he nodded. He released Hermione again but still held to her hand tightly as he followed her down the corridor.

"What did you tell him?" he asked her after a while.

She turned her head and raised her eyebrows at him.

"How did you convince him to let me stay?"

"The very same way he tried to force you to go back to the orphanage," Hermione answered him cryptically.
Tom scanned her for a while before he slowly asked, "Blackmail?"

He could see in her expression that she was surprised he had seen the connection so fast.

"Yes," she whispered.

"How?"

There was a sad expression on her face as she whispered, "I'm not very proud of it, let's not talk about Dumbledore anymore."

Tom decided to let the matter drop. At least for now. He was still too amazed that Hermione had actually managed to persuade Dumbledore.

Or blackmail him! he thought contented as he glanced at the witch walking beside him.

He then noticed that the euphoria of being able to stay at Hogwarts was mingled with something else. Now that he eyed Hermione it hit him again, that greedy feeling. Ever since Christmas break it had been his constant companion. That feeling had burned up in him whenever he had looked at her, fiercely demanding to take possession of her. Now he was once again overwhelmed by this avidly feeling as his gaze wandered over her form beside him. A smile crept on his face as he scanned her untamable hair.

He wondered how he could have wasted all this time with fighting her and trying to subdue her before the Christmas break. Now she was so much more than just another opponent he had to defeat. By winning against Dumbledore she had again proven how valuable she truly was. Tom did not intent to ever let her go. With her actions today Hermione had finally admitted that she was his, Tom realized satisfied. She had obviously stopped to fight against it. Tom was glad that he had managed to gain her allegiance in the end and that she had finally abandoned her resistance against him.

He pulled her a little closer to him. She looked up and cast him a small smile.

Tom was quite satisfied with the knowledge that he had finally succeeded with obtaining her. Though he did notice that the greed he felt was now mixed with something else. Something Tom couldn't quite identify. But he didn't fight that odd feeling as it was quite nice. Warm and comfortable.

Tom was immersed in his own thoughts and was surprised at how quickly they had reached the Gryffindor common room. Too quickly, actually. He didn't want to leave Hermione now. The avidly feeling still ripped at him and he didn't want to let her go. As Hermione turned around to whisper the password to that absurd portrait, Tom lost his self-restraint and stopped her by grabbing her wrist. Then he twirled her around so that she tumbled against his chest. She raised her face at him and searched him with confusion in her eyes.

"What-?"

She started to ask but Tom didn't leave her enough time to end her question. He pressed his lips over hers. He could feel her tense in surprise at his sudden actions. But then she began to respond to his kiss. He hugged her tightly against him and didn't leave her much room to move as he continued to kiss her fiercely.

He knew his kiss was demanding, almost bruising. But he couldn't stop himself. It wasn't enough. He needed to feel her now. He wanted to feel her bare skin under his fingers. His hand wandered down her back. As it reached the seam of her blouse it slipped underneath and began to caress the soft skin of her stomach. His other arm still held her pressed tightly against him while he continued to
kiss her passionately. Then his lips left her mouth and wandered down her neck. He could hear her
cry out in surprise as he bit her gently. His hand still run over her warm skin while his mouth
wandered back to her lips to again capture them in another voluptuous and even ferocious kiss.

As he finally released her lips again he needed to gasp for air. He glanced down at her and saw an
odd glint in her hazel eyes as she stared at him. Tom feared that he had gone too far as Hermione
suddenly removed her arms from their position slipped around his waist. She then raised her arms
and cupped his cheeks with both her hands. Tom's eyebrows shot up in surprise as she pulled his
head down, rather forcefully. Her lips crashed on his own and she started to kiss him. He could feel
one of her hands falling down to his shoulder while the other had wandered to the back of his neck.
Then her lips left his mouth and Tom moaned softly in pleasure as she trailed kisses along the line of
his jaw while her hand run demanding and even gruffly through his hair.

By the time she released him again he was breathing heavily. Hermione looked up at him, her brown
eyes were sparkling at him so excitingly. Then she leaned against him and put her head against his
chest. Tom automatically slid his arms around her and held her to him.

But he quickly released her again as he suddenly heard steps coming from the corridor behind him.
Hopefully that wasn't any teacher, he thought as he took a step away from Hermione. If a teacher
had seen them kissing, that would get them both into detention. Though Hermione would be
punished even stricter as she was a girl. Tom turned his head to look at whoever walked towards
them. If it really was a teacher, he would do his best to talk the professor out of punishing them for
PDA.

However, as he recognized the person walking towards them, an evil smirk formed on his face. It
was this idiotic Gryffindor boy, Marc Longbottom. Judging by that angry purple colour of his face
and the glare he sent Tom's way that git had seen how Tom had kissed Hermione. Tom inclined his
head in a mocking gesture of greeting as the Gryffindor boy passed them. He was immensely
satisfied as he saw that glare on Longbottom's face intensify. Tom even had to suppressed the urge to
snicker evilly as disgust seeped into the other's gaze.

The Gryffindor idiot then passed them without saying a word before he hissed the password at the
portrait and entered the common room. After the wanker had left the corridor Tom looked down at
Hermione. She just turned around to him again and Tom raised his eyebrows as he saw a sad
expression on her face. Then she stepped closer to him and leaned against him, clutching the fabric
of his jumper in her hands while she buried her face in his chest. Tom wrapped his arms around her
protectively. It was then that he realized that the stupid Gryffindor boy hadn't just looked at him with
that disgust burning in his eyes. He had looked at Hermione in the same way.
Green, The Colour Of…

Hermione stepped out of the Household class room. The aversion she had felt for this particular class had slowly developed into hate. The worst thing, though, was that Legifer hadn't hesitated to remind her of the detention Hermione would have to attend today. Obviously Legifer insisted that she read that stupid book.

_Etiquettes for the Young Housewitch._ Seriously, what is that hag thinking? Hermione wondered infuriated.

Whenever she thought about that book lying in her dormitory she could feel her level of annoyance rise to the point where she wanted to just hex Legifer to kingdom come.

Currently Hermione was walking over to her Transfiguration classroom. Maybe that was the reason she indulged into stupid mental rants. The thought of her next class didn't exactly improve her already bad mood. Since she had spoken with - or rather blackmailed - Dumbledore on Monday, Hermione had done her best to avoid her Transfiguration teacher. There always bubbled up the guilt and shame whenever she thought about him. She didn't regret her actions as there hadn't been any other option to help Tom. That knowledge still didn't dispel the guilt. So Hermione had tried to evade Dumbledore. Problem was that today was a Friday and her next class was Transfiguration. No way could she still avoid meeting Dumbledore.

_You've blackmailed Albus Dumbledore, for God's sake!_ an inner voice, which sounded suspiciously like Harry's, screamed at her reproachfully. _To help whom exactly?_

Hermione ran a hand through her messy locks. Her other hand clutched her school bag tightly as she slowly walked towards her transfiguration class room.

_Voldemort!_ the same voice now hissed the answer at her bitingly.

That sounded really bad, Hermione had to admit. She had turned her back on Dumbledore to help Lord Voldemort. If someone had told her that a few months ago, she would have laughed her head off… or hexed the head off whoever suggested something like that. But however bad it sounded Hermione just didn't feel guilty at all for having helped Voldemort.

_No, not Voldemort! I tried to help my boyfriend,_ Hermione corrected herself. _Because I don't want him to get hurt._

Yes, she might feel terrible of having abandoned Dumbledore and with him a part of her old life but she didn't feel bad at all for having helped Tom. Hermione ended that inner argument as she had finally arrived at the Transfiguration classroom. Obviously Dumbledore hadn't yet arrived as the door was still closed and the other students were loitering in the corridor. She couldn't help but notice how the students were neatly separated by house. The Slytherins stood at one side of the corridor while the Gryffindors stood on the other. Though now it seemed those two adverse houses were somehow united, at least the girls from those houses. They were right now glaring rather hostilely at Hermione. Not all of them, of course, but still quite a few. Hermione decided to just ignore this immature behaviour as there were a few things unsettling her a lot more.

She let her gaze wander over the students and it quickly landed on three Gryffindor boys. Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom were standing right beside the door. A small smile appeared on Hermione's face as she saw her three friends. She just wondered if she should walk over to them as Longbottom looked in her direction. His eyes wandered over her coldly and Hermione stiffened as
she saw anger flooding his face. It made her sad seeing her friend act like this. Not even the encouraging looks Lupin and Weasley threw her way could convince her to join them now.

Longbottom hadn't spoken one word with her ever since he had stormed out of that classroom after she had told him Tom was her boyfriend. Whenever they met, which didn't happen often these days as he was obviously avoiding her, he just ignored her. Hermione was surprised by how much his rejection affected her. But it did hurt. Especially as she could see disgust glinting in Longbottom's eyes whenever he saw her together with Tom.

"I've missed you." A deep voice came from behind her. The light taunt immediately told her whom that voice belonged to.

A smile appeared on Hermione's face and she ignored the angry frown she could now see on Longbottom's face. Then she turned around to face Tom.

"Hey, Tom," she replied.

He smirked down at her and asked, "How was your day so far?"

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "Horrible, I had Household."

Tom chuckled amused before he said in an innocent tone, "Hmm, Household. Still your favourite class I see."

She forced a sweet smile on her face and then replied while trying to suppress an amused giggle, "It sure is. Maybe next time you could join us."

Tom just smirked condescendingly down at her before he said with light scoff tinting his voice, "No, thank you. I think I'll stick with Arithmancy."

Hermione just wanted to comeback with an especially witty reply as she spotted Dumbledore coming down the corridor. Hermione stepped a little closer to Tom and somehow hid behind him. She really wasn't very keen on meeting Dumbledore after that act of the evil witch she had pulled on him.

Tom had raised his eyebrows in confusion as she hadn't replied anything to his taunt. But now he turned around and saw the cause for her sudden nervousness. Some of her tension disappeared as she felt how Tom gently took hold of her hand. Her gaze wandered from Dumbledore back to Tom. By now his grey eyes were softly sparkling down at her.

He leaned down to her and whispered in her ear, "Don't worry. He still hates me more than you."

As he bent up again a smirk was plastered all over his face but she could still spot softness glinting in his eyes. He pressed her hand reassuringly before he let go again and they walked into the class room. Hermione slowly entered the room and then went over to her table while determinedly trying to ignore Longbottom who was her seat neighbour. But she could still see the angry frown on his face as she sat down beside him. Just to divert herself from her enraged seat neighbour she let her gaze wander the classroom. Unfortunately she somehow found herself looking at the other person she tried to ignore. Dumbledore was looking back at her and Hermione could feel a stab in her chest as she was again hit by the disappointment behind his eyes. She felt rather forlorn to see that suspicion and even hostility on his face but still she didn't allow her feelings to show on her face. She controlled her emotions rigidly and forced an expressionless look on her face. It was shameful, she knew it, but it was also necessary. Dumbledore needed to be convinced that she was in fact an evil witch.
He had to believe that she was capable to go through with the threat she had thrown his way. If he doubted that she would indeed use her knowledge to deepen the hate between wizards and muggles, there would be the risk of him expelling Tom after all. So there now was this despicable mask of boredom covering her face as she stared back at Dumbledore while she tried to ignore the painful stab in her chest. Finally Dumbledore looked away again and Hermione inwardly sighed though she still maintained her cover. Hermione then watched Dumbledore smile kindly at the class in general. Though she couldn't help but feel a little sad as she knew that his kindness wasn't directed at her anymore.

"Today will be a practical class," the old professor then said as his eyes were twinkling merrily.

His announcement was met by enthusiastic chatter but Dumbledore raised a hand and the upcoming noise quickly died down again.

"Kindly take one of those screwdrivers and try to confer a little of your magic into them," he told them serenely. "I know, that spell is rather difficult but I have confidence that you can manage."

With that Dumbledore handed one of the students a box full of screwdrivers. When the box reached her table Longbottom handed her the box without even looking at her. He seemed to be really determined in ignoring her.

Hermione took one of the screwdrivers. She could only hope that Longbottom was going to get around his issues. Instead of worrying more about the blond Gryffindor she now looked down at her screwdriver. She really wondered if all the purebloods in this room even knew what that tool was used for. She grinned, lost in her thoughts. Then her gaze wandered over the class room. She ended up looking at Dumbledore and the grin quickly died from her face. Hermione turned a little in her seat and looked at Tom who was sitting behind her. She noticed that he hadn't even taken one of the screwdrivers. He was just sitting there with a rather scary expression on his face as he threw a dark look Dumbledore's way. But now he noticed that she was looking at him. Tom's eyes wandered from the professor to Hermione and she was glad to see that the frightening anger left him as he now looked at her. His eyes sparkled softly at her and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Hermione smiled back at him. Maybe Dumbledore now hated her but at least she wasn't alone. Somehow reassured she turned around to her screwdriver again. She glared darkly at the tool. It actually hurt her pride a lot that she hadn't yet managed that spell to transfer magic. It couldn't be that hard could it? Tom had managed it after his first try.

Yeah, but then again he's Tom, a nasty voice mocked her.

Hermione angrily flicked her wrist so that her wand landed in her hand. She waved it at the screwdriver.

"Confero."

Nothing happened. She breathed in deeply to calm herself down. Then she again brandished her wand.

"Confero," she whispered in a firm voice.

This time she could feel her magic reaching out for the screwdriver. There was a small stream of her magic flowing into the tool. But Hermione knew it was no good as she wasn't able to control it at all. Soon after that the stream died down again and Hermione sighed. She looked at the screwdriver lying innocently on the table. It really irritated her how she was unable to get this spell right. She had read a lot about it, after all, in Peverell's manuscript. Involuntarily her thoughts wandered to the small book and then from Peverell to the Elder Wand. Since she had managed to awake the Elder Magic
consciously for the first time at the beginning of this week, Hermione had trained this ability. It still was tremendously difficult to control the Elder Magic but it had gotten easier. Her eyes were still fixed on the screwdriver while she tapped her wand impatiently against the palm of her left hand.

*Maybe I should just try it,* she thought as an idea popped up in her mind. She needed to do that anyway sooner or later. *Why not try it now?*

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated solely on her magic. After some time she finally spotted the Elder Magic hidden in her own. She nudged it softly and soon it reacted to her. It grew and grew until it completely wrapped around her. Hermione had to concentrate on the magic to keep it in this state. As she was sure that she had the Elder Magic under control her gaze wandered back to the screwdriver.

"Confero," she whispered in a pressed voice.

She nearly gasped out loud as she sensed the Elder Magic now wrapping even tighter around her. It was difficult to tell where the Elder Magic ended and where her magic began. Before Hermione could dwell on that any longer she could feel a stream of her magic flowing to the screwdriver. Unlike before, though, it was much easier to control. After some time Hermione deliberately ended the stream of magic. The Elder Magic quickly unwrapped from her and fell back in place hidden underneath her own magic. Hermione's breathing was laboured and she felt really drained. But as she looked at the screwdriver she could see how it was suddenly surrounded by a blue light. It pulsed shortly before it died down again. A smile appeared on Hermione's face as she stared at the screwdriver.

*No, not screwdriver. Magical object,* she thought happily.

She had finally managed that spell. And, Hermione realized self-satisfied, she had used the Elder Magic to do that. It had been rather difficult and she felt now extremely tired but still the Elder Magic had obeyed her temporarily. Hermione looked up from the magical object now lying on her table. Then the satisfied smile quickly died from her face as she found Dumbledore looking at her. He had obviously seen her accomplishing this difficult spell. But there was no kind twinkle in his eyes and he didn't seem to be proud at all that his student had managed this spell. He just looked at Hermione coldly. Then he turned around and began to explain something to another student.

Hermione felt her stomach flop. He had seen her getting the spell right, but still he hadn't rewarded her any points or had acknowledged her success in any way. She looked back at the screwdriver, not feeling so happy anymore. But really, she shouldn't be surprised by Dumbledore's behaviour. He thought she was an evil witch now. Why would he want to praise her work?

Still, it hurt.

"Do you want to go to the Library?" Tom, who was walking beside her, asked.

Hermione glanced at him. "No, I still have… something to do. How about we meet later?"

She actually didn't want to leave him right now but there was really something she needed to do. Something she had procrastinated for too long already. Just to alleviate her guilty conscience she would go back to Peverell's manuscript today.

*I'm not going to find anything anyway,* she reassured herself as she looked up into Tom's startlingly grey eyes.
"Hmm… okay," Tom conceded reluctantly. "When?"

"I dunno," she replied slowly. Then she narrowed her eyes angrily and continued, "I have detention with Legifer at six."

Hermione pressed her mouth in a thin line as she saw amusement entering Tom's gaze. Then he said infuriatingly helpful, though he wasn't able to ban all the scorn from his voice, "I dearly hope that will improve your seriously lacking housewife skills."

Then he smiled down at her innocently. The amusement in his eyes even intensified as Hermione started to glower at him darkly. Suddenly the mock left his face. He took a step towards her, reached for her and started to twirl one curly wisp of her hair around his finger.

"How about I get you from your common room at eight?" he said. As he saw the confusion on her face he added, "You didn't forget that Slughorn's party is today, did you?"

Indeed Hermione had forgotten. The Slug Club had one of its famous parties. She'd received an owl from Slughorn himself two days ago.

She stared up at him but then an arrogant smile appeared on her face before she said in a smug voice, "No, I didn't forget. But whoever said that I would go with you?"

Tom arched one eyebrow indignantly at her sass but then he bent down and whispered in her ear, "I always said you belong into Slytherin."

Shivers of pleasure ran down her spine as Tom gently brushed his lips against her cheek. After he had bent up again there was a self-satisfied smirk on his face while he scanned her flustered state.

"Of course you are going with me," he told her in quite the conceited tone. Then he scoffed. "Like you could ever resist my alluring company."

After that said he looked expectantly down at her, obviously waiting for some witty retort or other. But Hermione didn't reply anything. She just stepped closer to him. She stood on tiptoes, wrapped her arms around his neck and then placed a light kiss on his lips.

"Okay," she whispered to him seductively. "I'll be waiting for you then."

After she had released him again she looked up at his face. It was once again covered by the blank mask but Hermione chuckled amused as she spotted a faint hint of colour on his cheeks.

"See you then, Tom," she chirped cheerfully, her eyes flashing mischievously at him before she turned around and skipped down the corridor.

"Don't turn into one of those mindless fan-girls," he called after her and a wide smile stole on her face as she heard the taunt in his voice.

By the time Hermione arrived in her dormitory the happy smile had left her face just to be replaced by a frown as she stared down at her trunk. After a moment of hesitation, Hermione crouched down and angled the Peverell manuscript from the secret compartment in her trunk. Then she hopped on her soft bed and drew the covers shut around her. Hermione warily eyed the small book now lying in her hands. Somehow she really didn't want to read on. Whatever excuses her mind had come up with during the last few days there actually was only one explanation as to why she didn't want to find out more about the Elder Wand anymore.

I don't want to go back.
It was as simple as that. Hermione just didn't want to return to her own time period. Nothing was there for her. Only dreadful memories and a desolated land. Why would she want to return there?

Was it really her duty, her mission, to maintain the time line? She didn't even know if it was really necessary to protect it. Maybe it was impossible, after all, to change time. So, there was no use in returning to her time, was there? It wasn't like she had wanted to be hurled back through time in the first place. So whatever happened now it certainly wasn't her fault. She hadn't created that bothersome wand which seemed to play with the lives of people.

But amidst all those very good excuses not to continue reading the book, suddenly Longbottom's face sprang up in her mind and how he now looked at her in disgust and accusation. Then his face changed and it wasn't Longbottom looking at her in that way but Harry. If he could see her now, could see what she had become, he surely would be disgusted. Hermione felt a sharp stab in her stomach at the thought of Harry.

He had sacrificed so much. He had fought so bravely and never once had he let her down. And now, Hermione wondered dejectedly as guilt washed over her, how was she repaying him? He would be angry with her, and rightly so. Her hands grabbed Peverell's book tightly as she now imagined how Ron would have reacted to the whole situation. Maybe Hermione had let down Harry, but Ron she had betrayed. She had loved him and he had loved her. Hermione trembled as she remembered the day before they had gone and faced Voldemort in the Ministry of Magic. She had been so desperate, so scared. Still, Ron had tried to comfort her. He had been afraid himself but nonetheless he had only worried about her. It had been then that they had pledged to get married.

Hermione closed her eyes tightly, trying to dispel those wonderful, terrible memories. Then she opened them again and looked down at the small book in her hands.

She owed them!

Slowly she opened the book and began to read.

_The long awaited day has finally arrived. My work is finished and my brothers will arrive at the end of next week. I was uncertain that I would manage it in such short a time but I prevailed. In the last year I created something extraordinary, something unique. The wand I made is without a doubt the most powerful and impressive thing ever created by man. It is deserving of its name, the Unbeatable Wand._

_First I had to make a wand. It took me weeks and weeks to find the suitable wood for this aspiring project. In the end my decision fell on the wood of the elder bush. Then I cast the necessary spells to change the lifeless wood into a magical wand. After I had finished the wand, I started to transmit more and more of my Magic into the wand using the spells I had invented for the transmission of Magic into an object. Thus I changed the wooden stick from a wand into a magical object. The spells I had previously used to create the wand combined with the transferred Magic will accumulate the Wand's magical power even further, increasing its might illimitable. The more it is used the more its power will develop. The spells and charms I used to manipulate the transferred Magic of the Wand are so cleverly constructed that they work in harness with the residual spells from the wand making process._

_The result of my work is something beyond believe. Whoever wields that wand will be invincible. An ordinary wand's purpose is to serve as a mediator. The sorcerer uses the wand to channel his own Magic through the wood and into a spell or curse. The wand does nothing more than a riverbed does when it is directing the flow of the water. My Wand does so much more. It is filled with Magic and as soon as a wizard's hand touches the wood, this Magic will wrap itself around the wizard thus espousing the wizard's own Magic. Every spell will be more potent and working easier whilst using_
my Wand.

I am looking forward to seeing my brothers soon for I am sure they will bow down before my genius.

Peverell's personal entry ended and with trembling fingers Hermione flipped through the next few pages in the book. She bit her lip nervously as she indeed noticed that Peverell now described the process of how he created the Elder Wand. She stared at the yellowed pages for some time, then slowly and unsure of herself she closed the book.

She needed to read that book fast. That was her mission after all! It was her duty to find a way back in her time period. This mission was the sole reason why she was here at Hogwarts in the first place. It was wrong and dangerous for her to remain any longer in this time period than necessary.

Hermione laid one hand on the ragged cover of the Peverell manuscript. She needed to read on but…

She didn't want to.

What if she really found a way back? Then she would have to leave here. Leave this time period. Leave Tom.

Hermione shuddered as this thought formed in her mind. Nothing waited for her at home and now she had something to lose if she returned. After such a long time, an eternity really, Hermione felt happy again.

So what if she just stayed here in the past a little longer? It wouldn't hurt, would it? After all she had been here for some time already. Up to now she hadn't changed the future at all. Surely no harm would be done if she just enjoyed her life a little longer. Hadn't she deserved something like that anyway? So many bad things had happened but she still had fought for the right cause. Had done her very best. Wasn't it time that her sacrifices were rewarded?

Damn! Tom cursed as he closed another book and threw it at the rather huge pile of books already lying on his table. He grabbed for another huge tome, The Work Of The Greatest Wizards, read its title. He opened the book and flipped through its content until he came upon the name he searched for, Peverell. Then he began to read. After a while Tom closed the book in frustration and threw it to the others on the table. The book only contained a brief description of who Peverell was. But Tom already knew who exactly Peverell was. Honestly, who didn't?

Tom let his angry gaze wander over the pile of useless books. Those books were full of information about Peverell, describing his biography in excruciatingly detail or explaining with an almost embarrassing deference his achievements in the magical art.

Since Tom had read in the Prophet that someone broke into Nicolas Flamel's flat, he had suspected that the thief was Hermione. The Auror report, he had ordered Malfoy to get, had finally confirmed his suspicion. Moreover the report had also provided Tom with the information of what had been stolen: A book, written by Peverell himself. Now Tom searched Hogwarts' Library for any notion of that book but so far he had yet to come over any reference to it. It was rather frustrating, Tom decided as he leaned back in his chair. Why had Hermione risked so much to get this book. What did that book deal with?

Tom tiredly buried his face in his hands and sighed. He was currently lounging at a table in the Library and was rather glad that his table stood in a secluded area. Right now he couldn't stand the
never-ending chatter of the other students. He especially couldn't stand those girls who always seemed to swarm around him. They giggled annoyingly or whispered with each other under their breaths whenever they thought he wasn't paying attention. Actually Tom was quite used to such behaviour but since he had kissed Hermione in the Great Hall those silly girls had somehow multiplied. It was really bothersome.

Not that he regretted having kissed Hermione in public, Tom thought as a smirk took form on his face. On the contrary, he was really relieved that she had finally abandoned the idea of hushing their relationship up. Now she seemed to have accepted that she belonged to him.

At the beginning of this week Hermione had done even more. She had helped him. Tom was still stunned how Hermione had saved him from being expelled. He had no idea how she had persuaded Dumbledore to let him stay but she had somehow managed. A small smile played around the corners of Tom's mouth. That had been the final proof that Hermione was his now. Tom grinned satisfied as he remembered how she had kissed him so fiercely in the corridor. That had been just before Longbottom had shown up...

Tom frowned at the thought of Longbottom. He hadn't liked it very much how that stupid Gryffindor had looked so deprecatingly at Hermione. Who did that git think he was? Tom wondered angrily. Though now he realized that it wasn't so much Longbottom's behaviour that disturbed him but Hermione's reaction. Tom balled his hands into tight fists as he remembered the sad expression on her pretty face after Longbottom had glared at her reproachfully. Why was it so damn important to her what that Gryffindor jerk thought about her?

Sure Longbottom is her friend, Tom thought wryly. But still...

Did she like that git so much? he wondered in annoyance. Suddenly a greedy feeling ripped at Tom, fiercely demanding that he took action. Hadn't Hermione gone to the last Slug party together with Longbottom?

This time around, he thought while trying to calm himself down. She's going with me not Longbottom.

It didn't work, though. Tom didn't calm down at all. The whole thing made him quite angry and furious. He actually wanted to curse the shit out of Longbottom and then make him-

"Tom, m'boy, still being studious despite it being Friday?" Tom's rather bloodthirsty thoughts were interrupted by a booming voice.

He looked up from the book in front of him and found Slughorn standing by the table and smiling broadly down at him. Tom quickly put on his charming façade of the perfect student and smiled humbly at the potions professor.

"No, sir," Tom replied politely. "This is just a little project of mine."

Slughorn leaned forward a little bit and looked curiously at the books being scattered all over the table in front of Tom.

After a moment he looked back at Tom before he said, "I am glad you found something else than... you-know-what." Slughorn whispered the last words softly.

At first Tom didn't understand but then he had to suppress a smirk as he remembered the topic of the last conversation they had had in private. A topic which Tom had rather neglected lately...

"I see, I see, Peverell, eh?" Slughorn continued good-naturedly as he let his eyes again travel over
the books on the table.

The professor reached for one of the books.

"A rather fascinating appearance, Peverell, isn't he?" Slughorn said as he scanned the book's title. Then he winked at Tom in a conspiratorial way. "But don't get your hopes up, m'boy. Many have tried to find the Deathly Hallows but so far no-one succeeded."

Tom managed to stop himself from frowning in confusion. The Deathly Hallows? What was that?

"Deathly Hallows, sir?" he asked in a smooth voice, not betraying how interested he now truly was. Slughorn just waved a finger at Tom in mock rebuke.

"Don't tell me that's not the reason for your research," he smiled fondly down at Tom.

Then Slughorn pulled a gold clock out of the pocket of his green, silk vest and exclaimed, "God gracious, is it this late already?" He turned back to Tom and said, "Have to go, m'boy, have to go. Still so much to organize until the evening."

Then the professor hurried away but not without turning around once more and asking, "You are coming to the party, aren't you?"

Tom just nodded at the professor, his thoughts already a mile away.

_Deathly Hallows... Deathly Hallows..._

Tom scowled down at the books on his table. Somewhere he had read about that, hadn't he? But where? He skimmed a finger over the dusty spine of one of the books while trying to remember where exactly he had read that term before. It wasn't anything school related, of that he was sure.

_Deathly Hallows.

Tom straightened up in his chair as he remembered where he had read it. He quickly pulled his wand and waved it at the books lying in front of him. The books flew off the table and then soared towards their places on the shelves. Tom hastily grabbed his satchel and hurried out of the Library. He quickly made his way down to the dungeons towards the Slytherin common room. It wasn't long and he stood in his dormitory. Tom strode over to his part of the dorm and started to search through his books standing on a shelf. Then he finally came upon it. A rather old book with a leathery cover. Tom had nearly forgotten that he had checked it out of the Library all those months ago.

He scanned the title of the book: _Fables and Myths of Olden_. Tom could remember how he had found the book in the Library. Back then he had done some research in the Library as he had spotted Hermione sitting at one table and reading this very book. Though back then she hadn't been 'Hermione' yet. She had still been 'DeCerto' and Tom had hated her.

_How foolish._

But that was beside the point, he decided as he opened the old book. It was actually a book of fairy tales. Still he had read it as he had thought that there was something hidden in its pages.

Tom stood in his dormitory and continued to flip through the book until he came upon the chapter he had been searching for: _The Tale Of The Three Brothers._
It was exactly three minutes to six o'clock as Hermione stood before Legifer's office with that ridiculous book pinned under her arm.

_Tell me, why do I do this again?_ she asked herself in frustration. _Because you don't want to blow your cover, time traveller,_ came the unwanted but correct answer. With a annoyed sigh Hermione raised her hand and then knocked at the office door.

"Enter," came the immediate reply.

Hermione reluctantly opened the door and entered Legifer's office. She quickly let her gaze wander over the room. It was very much like she remembered it from her last visit here. Everything seemed to be obsessively tidy. There was not one thing out of place. Hermione tried to ignore this frighteningly cleanliness and instead concentrated on the woman sitting behind that polished wooden desk. Like always Legifer was clad in those annoyingly immaculate clothes. There was not one wrinkle in her perfectly white blouse and her dark-blue robe was equally stainless and just impeccable. Her black hair was again teased into a flawless hairdo. There was just nothing out of place on that woman it seemed.

_Aside from her sanity maybe._

Legifer stared at her with her sharp eyes. "Ms DeCerto," she greeted Hermione in her strict tone "Professor," Hermione said flippantly.

Legifer's eyes wandered from Hermione to the clock hanging at one wall. A rather evil smirk appeared on her face as she said, "I think this is a first, Ms DeCerto. I have never seen you being punctual."

Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line to stop herself from answering to that insult. Instead she contented herself with glaring at the professor darkly.

"Sit down. I don't want this detention to drag out forever," Legifer declared in her piercing voice.

She gestured at the chair standing before her desk so Hermione slumped down gracelessly. Then she slammed the stupid book she had been carrying with a loud thud on the desk while looking mutinously at Legifer. The witch didn't seem to be impressed by Hermione's disrespectful behaviour at all.

"I see there's a lot to do," she just commented dryly.

Hermione almost snorted at her but managed to stop herself in the last moment. Then she reached for her bag and produced a pierce of parchment and her quill from it. Then she looked back at Legifer.

"You may begin," she just said in her cold voice.

Hermione swallowed down her more than impudent reply and dearly hoped she wouldn't choke on all her anger. Then she took her quill and opened the hateful book.

'Chapter One', Hermione read. _From 58. Great!_

Her hand tightened around her quill as Hermione forced herself to read on.

'To achieve graces and a pleasant appearance is the first step to impress your future Husband. There is no better way to gain the favour of a man than to captivate him with your feminine charms.'
Hermione had just read this one sentence and she already felt like throwing up. Her eyes darted shortly to the huge clock hanging at one wall of Legifer's. It was five past six. She shuddered involuntarily. This detention seemed to turn into a torture session, didn't it? Her gaze now wandered to Legifer who still sat in front of her. Right now, the witch seemed to lean over an essay and was correcting the work of whatever poor soul had had to write it. Hermione sighed inaudible before she turned back to that horrible book.

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Hermione searched through her trunk. Tossing around her clothes, potion ingredients and books. Finally she pulled a luridly green blouse out of the trunk. She furrowed her brow. When had she bought this crime to the fashion?

"What ya doing?" she heard a shrill voice behind her ask.

Hermione groaned inwardly. Then she turned her head around to have a look at Rose.

"I need to find something to wear," she explained curtly. "I'm going to the Slug Club with Tom."

She was rather late, too, Hermione thought frustrated. That evil hag had made her read in this stupid book for almost two hours. Seriously, what had she done to deserve something like that?

"Oh!" Lucia squealed delighted and sat up on the bed. "Your first date!"

"Yeah!" Rose agreed while there appeared a suspiciously glassy look in her eyes. "You need to be really prepared for that. And, of course, look gorgeous. It's Riddle after all. If he wanted he could have any girl here at Hogwarts. You have to be careful."

_Talk about shallow_, Hermione thought sardonically.

"You know," she told the two girls sitting on the bed, trying her best to dim their enthusiasm. "He already is my boyfriend so I think we are over this first date thing."

Though technically they really never had one, Hermione had to admit. _And thank God for that!_

She then turned away from the girls and intended to again go through her things because, honestly, she really couldn't wear this green monster, she thought as she picked up the green blouse again.

"But, Hermione, you want to look good for Riddle, don't you?" Luisa asked her. "If you wear that thing he's going to think you are ugly."

"That or colour-blind," Rose affirmed.

Hermione stared at them for a moment, still holding the greenish blouse in her hand. Then she said slowly, "I really don't care what he's thinking about my clothes."

She ignored the scandalized exclamations her answer had provoked but again went through her clothes.

"When's Riddle going to pick you up?" Lucia asked her after a while. She seemed to have gotten over her shock faster than Rose.

"Dunno," Hermione mumbled distractedly. "At around eight, I think. Why?"

Hermione jumped and nearly pulled her wand as she heard that panicky cry that followed her statement.
"But Hermione that's already in half an hour. And you still haven't decided what to wear?" Rose exclaimed shrilly.

"Your hair!" Lucia screeched frantically. "And your make-up!"

Hermione frowned as she then watched the two girls springing to their feet. She was more than bewildered as they started to tug at her clothes and her hair. Her magic was boiling up in her in annoyance and Hermione wondered if there was a spell against over-eager hobby stylists.

Precisely half an hour later Hermione waited for Tom in front of the entrance to her common room. Though, she could have had waited inside, too, as Tom seemed to always know the password to Gryffindor domain anyway. But right now Lupin, Weasley and Longbottom sat in the common room and Hermione still tried to avoid any meetings between Tom and her friends. The evil stares Longbottom had thrown her way as she had passed through the common room had been bad enough. Thus she had preferred to wait outside.

After some time she could hear the sound of steps coming from the corridor. She looked up and found Tom walking towards her. Hermione's eyes wandered over him and she noticed that he had exchanged his uniform for some black trousers, a white shirt and black blazer. Hermione had to admit that those clothes hugged his form quite nicely. Once again she realized how handsome Tom really looked. His eyes were a hypnotizing grey and his hair was arranged neatly though there were a few strands of jet-black hair softly falling into his face. Hermione couldn't help but smile at him rather stupidly. As he reached her he stopped in front of her and eyed her contemplatively. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him in question.

"Something wrong?"

"No," he said slowly but then frowned at her. "… what happened with your blouse?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"Why? I thought you like green," she replied waspishly.

Tom arched one eyebrow gracefully as his eyes again wandered over the luridly green blouse Hermione was right now wearing, just to spite her dorm mates.

"All in good measure," Tom said in his smooth voice and a grin appeared on his face.

Then he grabbed Hermione's hand and led her down the corridor. She just followed him. They were walking in silence towards the potions professor's office and Hermione felt rather comfortable as she felt Tom's warm hand holding hers. Her comfort, though, was neatly cut short as he asked his next question,

"Say, Hermione, you never really told me how exactly you convinced Dumbledore to let me stay."

She breathed in sharply and cast a sideways glance at Tom. He was scanning her inquiringly.

"I told you, didn't I?" Hermione replied in a rushed voice. "I don't want to talk about it. It was really horrible what I did. Imagine that, blackmailing a teacher. Really!"

"But it worked," Tom said quietly.

"Yeah." Hermione pressed his hand reassuringly. "Don't think I regret it. Because I don't." Here she
"Why do you need to know anyway? Let's just forget about this whole thing," she added impatiently.

"Hmm," made Tom. "I was just thinking. Maybe we could use your blackmail material to get him out of Hogwarts."

Hermione raised her eyebrows indignantly at him. "No, we will certainly not try to get Dumbledore sacked."

He frowned at her and then said, "But he is really a bother."

Hermione let go of his hand and now glared at him sternly. "Don't you think that could get us in real trouble? And by the way, it would never work anyway. Not to mention that I feel guilty enough as it is."

"Oh, come on," Tom said trying to convince her. "I'm sure we can somehow manage."

"Pff, trying to get a teacher fired," she just shook her head at him.

Up to now they had kept this conversation really quiet and had only whispered but now Hermione scoffed at him in a rather loud voice so that it echoed from the corridor walls, "Really, Tom, what are you? Stupid?"

Tom narrowed his eyes in anger but before he could reply something, another sharp voice from behind Hermione said, "Ms DeCerto, how dare you speak in that sort of voice?"

It didn't take Hermione much to recognize that piercing headache-inducing voice. She closed her eyes and tried to reign in her rising temper. But it was no use so she turned around. Sure enough professor Legifer stood not far away in the corridor. Right now she glared sternly at Hermione. Hermione just raised her eyebrows questioningly. Whatever was the problem now? She knew that the hateful professor didn't like her but right now she really hadn't done anything wrong. Legifer shook her head angrily then she stalked over to Hermione. Tom was still standing beside her and observed the whole thing. Hermione really didn't like that gloating grin on his face at all. In the mean time Legifer had reached them and now stared sternly at Hermione who met her gaze squarely.

"I am ashamed that you are one of my students, Ms DeCerto," Legifer said in her nagging tone. Then she hissed scandalized, "How can you speak to Mr Riddle in that way? In my entire career as a teacher I have never met such impudence."

Hermione stared at her. What did that woman want from her?

"What?" Was the only thing Hermione could voice at the moment without getting insulting.

At that Legifer's eyes widened a little in outrage. It seemed she was now really angry.

"Do I really have to explain the simplest of things to you?" Legifer asked sharply.

Hermione didn't say anything. She had an inkling as to where that discussion was headed but she was not going to reply anything and then get thrown into another detention with her least favourite professor.

So as Hermione didn't say anything Legifer continued her ranting, "Ms DeCerto, you cannot speak to Mr Riddle in such an insulting way. Have you no decency?"

She looked at Hermione and Tom standing in front of her with narrowed eyes before she said in a
much politer voice, turned to Tom, "Am I right in assuming that you are courting Ms DeCerto?"

Hermione's eyes wandered to Tom and she found him smiling charmingly at Legifer. She nearly rolled her eyes. He was such a hypocrite, wasn't he?

"Yes, professor," Tom answered in his silky voice.

"Well, then Mr Riddle, I am very sorry but I have to dissuade you from that," Legifer told him in a grave tone.

Hermione breathed slowly in to calm her magic down which was currently seething inside of her. Even her hands shook from suppressed rage.

Before Tom could reply anything Legifer turned to Hermione again and said in a cold voice, "Ms DeCerto, I don't know why Mr Riddle decided to choose you."

Legifer's gaze wandered slowly over Hermione's form and she seemed to be very unhappy with what she found. Hermione could even hear a soft scandalized gasp coming from the professor as she stared at Hermione's strikingly green blouse.

Then Legifer continued to lecture her in her sharp voice, "I am actually very surprised that anybody is interested in you. I'm sure Mr Riddle can easily find someone who suits him better. But it is not my place to judge his choice. I can only give you the advice not to botch up this chance you've got. It might very well be the only one you will ever get. So, I expect you to never speak to Mr Riddle like you just did. If you work hard on yourself and always obey Mr Riddle, I am sure you can still manage to one day become a good wife."

After that long a speech Hermione just stared at the professor. Her magic was now raging furiously inside of her and Hermione feared that if she was to open her mouth now, the only thing that would come out would be the incantation for one of her darker curses.

Legifer glared at Hermione obviously expecting some kind of reaction but as nothing came she again turned to Tom.

"I hope you know what you have engaged yourself in."

Tom just smiled at her disarmingly before he said smoothly, "Thank you for your concern, professor, but you need not worry. I am sure Hermione is a good choice. And she is a very lucky girl to have such a caring professor."

That small curl of her lips was the only indication Hermione had ever seen that Legifer was even capable of smiling.

"Well, it is your decision, Mr Riddle," she said. "But know that no-one will hold it against you should change that decision again."

Legifer cast one last evil glare Hermione's way and after a short "Good day" she turned around and left them standing in the corridor.

Hermione's mouth was pressed into a thin line as she watched the professor leave. After Legifer had disappeared around the next corner Hermione turned and stalked off in the opposite direction. She was still seething and her magic raged inside of her. Maybe she should have just cursed the woman. It might have been worth it. She looked at Tom who was walking beside her. There was an amused expression on his face.
"Don't you dare say anything," Hermione hissed at him.

Which only made Tom chuckle annoyingly. Hermione ignored him and stomped down the corridor. After a while of walking in silence Tom just couldn't hold back anymore, so he said in an innocent tone,

"You know, she's kind of right, isn't she?"

Hermione turned her head slowly towards Tom. He smirked mockingly down at her.

"Maybe you really should just obey me and I'm sure you will become a nice little wife," Tom said in the same innocent voice.

"That's it!" Hermione hissed at him as she grabbed his arm and pushed him against the corridor wall. "You just couldn't have kept silent, could you?"

That was when Tom finally broke down in laughter.

Hermione still stared with narrowed eyes at Tom as they finally arrived at Slughorn's office. It didn't raise her mood to find that amused grin still plastered on Tom's face. Before he could open the door she just nudged him in annoyance for good measure. It only made him chuckle infuriatingly then he opened the door. He stepped aside to let her enter first while bowing down in mock chivalry. Hermione just huffed at him angrily before she stepped into Slughorn's office.

Like the last time, Slughorn had somehow magically enlarged his office so that it now looked more like a hall than a teacher's office. It still wasn't large enough, Hermione noticed, as there were so many people here. She could see some students, obviously all members of the Slug Club. But there were other guests as well. Probably celebrities, famous Quidditch players or important politicians, knowing Slughorn.

Hermione forgot to be angry with Tom and grabbed his hand to pull him further into the room. He followed her and she chose to ignore the satisfied smirk which had by now appeared on his face. Hermione walked over to the huge buffet as she was quite hungry by now. Thanks to Legifer and her stupid and unnecessary detention she had missed dinner. Before they reached the buffet Slughorn suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto," he said happily as he recognized her.

Then his eyes wandered from her to Tom, who stood slightly behind her, and to Hermione's hand which still clutched Tom. Hermione could see Slughorn's eyes suddenly brighten up a thousandfold and a knowing smile appeared on his face.

"Good evening, Tom, m'boy," he said, turned to Tom. "I see you've found yourself a lovely date."

Hermione looked up at Tom and found that he had once again adopted his I-need-to-impress-the-teacher face. Honestly, he was even worse than her.

"Good evening, sir," he said smoothly. "Thanks again for inviting us."

"Not at all, not at all. I am glad to have two so promising students here," Slughorn replied.

Then he again glanced at Hermione's hand still holding Tom. There suddenly appeared a glint in the professor's eyes and he now looked like a proud father congratulating his only son on a job well done.
“I must say I am very glad that you two have found each other,” he told them cheerfully. “I do expect great things from the two of you. And of course I would be more than delighted to one day be able to teach your children here at Hogwarts.”

Hermione stared at her teacher and could feel her face grow hot.

“I think there is still plenty of time before we start planning a family,” Tom replied politely, though Hermione could see a slight curl of his lips. Which made her face blush even more.

Slughorn just continued to smile at them happily.

"Anthony will be so devastated," he then exclaimed, not at all looking compassionate.

Hermione frowned at him confused. Anthony?

The same confusion must have shown on Tom's face, too, as Slughorn now explained to him in his booming voice, "One of my ex-students. Has always been very bright, that one. I knew he would go far. And I've never been wrong. Now look at him, Inquisitor Vickers." Then the professor winked at Hermione before he continued, "Anthony has taken quite the interest in Ms DeCerto at my last party. He will be very disappointed to hear that she's already taken."

Slughorn cast a wide smile Tom's way which seemed to say well-done before he excused himself. And Hermione could almost feel Tom frowning down at her.

Sure enough he then asked in a soft voice, "Vickers?"

She looked up at him and sighed, "Don't even ask."

A while later Hermione walked over to the buffet to get herself a glass of wine. Tom still talked with that horribly boring man who obviously was some official or other working in the Ministry of Magic. She was really glad to leave that conversation behind. She just wormed her way through all the people and towards the buffet as she accidentally walked into someone.

"I'm sor-" Hermione stopped mid-sentence as she stared up at the person she had just bumped into. She gulped and then said in a small voice, "Hello, Marc."

Longbottom narrowed his eyes as he recognized her then he greeted her in a gruff and cold voice, "Hello."

As Hermione looked up at him she could again see anger taking form on his face as he stared at her. Without another word he just turned around, clearly with the intention to walk away and ignore her presence. Before he could do that Hermione grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Wait, please," she tried to hold him back. "Can't we talk about it?"

Longbottom slowly turned around to her again.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked irritably.

Hermione looked at him sadly. He seemed to be really angry with her. But still maybe she could make him understand her actions.

"Look, I know you don't like Tom," she said in a soft tone. "But just because I'm his girlfriend doesn't mean we can't be friends anymore."
Longbottom stared enraged at her for a while and Hermione just wondered if he was going to answer at all as he suddenly blustered rather loudly,

"Why are you together with that snake?"

"Er..." Hermione stuttered, not really knowing how to answer to that.

"You know what he is," Longbottom then said in a quieter voice. "He's dark, Hermione. And dangerous. If you stay with him, he's going to hurt you."

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "No, you just don't know him. He's not as bad as you think he is."

Longbottom just looked down at her incredulously. The anger was still visible on his face, though.

"Not so bad?" he asked disdainfully. Then he continued sharply, "Wake up! Riddle's just an evil little git. He's playing around with you."

"He's not," Hermione said in a quiet but all the same firm voice.

"Did you already forget how he treated you?" Longbottom blustered at her. "He stamped on your reputation and then he made everyone in the school hate you. And he damn well enjoyed the whole thing."

Hermione shuddered as she heard the hard edge in his voice. He now glared down at her furiously. She felt horrible as she was met by his disapproval. This angry expression on his face reminded her too much of how Harry, or even Ron, would have reacted to her new relationship.

"He's been a lousy sod but here you are, kissing him," Longbottom now bellowed at her irately, "And after all the things he did to you, too. That's just disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Hermione stared up at him with wide eyes. The indignation and anger was clearly visible on his face. Suddenly, in her mind, Longbottom's face morphed into Harry's. Now it was her best friend, her brother, staring at her with that fury burning in his strikingly green eyes. But then the face transformed again and Hermione started to tremble slightly. Now she looked at Ron's face and all she could see in his eyes was anger and disappointment. Hermione averted her eyes and looked down at her feet.

"I- ... I-" she mumbled, unable to look at him again.

Then Hermione suddenly felt an arm being wrapped around her shoulders. She looked up and found Tom standing by her side. Right now he glared darkly at Longbottom.

"Is that idiot bugging you?" Tom asked in a low, tightly controlled voice.

Hermione's eyes wandered from Tom to the still furious looking Longbottom. Before she could say anything Longbottom just turned around and stomped angrily away from them. Subconsciously Hermione leaned into Tom then she looked at him again.

"Are you alright?" he asked her gently while scanning her concerned.

She smiled weakly at him. "Yes. I'm fine."

She looked over his shoulder and saw that boring Ministry official staring at them curiously.
"Really, I'm okay," she told Tom now in a firmer voice. "You just go back to your new friend and I'm finally getting myself something to drink."

Tom continued to look at her in concern. But then he nodded and cast her a last comforting smile before he turned around and walked away. Hermione felt better. It was really a nice feeling to know that someone was looking after her. Oh, how she had missed that, Hermione thought as she watched Tom.

Then she unfixed her eyes from him and continued her way towards the buffet. She grabbed one glass of wine and nipped from it. As she turned around she saw Lupin standing not far away from her. He was accompanied by Stella Lovegood. Hermione hesitantly walked over to them. She was glad to see Lupin smile at her as he saw her approaching them.

"Hi," he said as she had reached them.

Hermione smiled at him.

"Hey, Stella," she greeted the girl standing beside Lupin. "How are you?"

Stella looked at her with her dreamy eyes. Hermione noticed that her dirty blond hair clashed horribly with the bright red dress Stella was wearing. But she still somehow managed to look lovely.

"Oh, hello," Stella smile at Hermione. Then she said happily, "You have been lying to me, Hermione."

Hermione raised her eyebrows bemused.

"You told me you were not stalking Riddle," the other girl continued while still smiling amiably at Hermione. "But now you are dating him."

"Er… yes?" Hermione mumbled with a cautious sideway glance at Lupin. Fortunately he seemed to have only eyes for Stella right now.

"You must tell me all about your stalking techniques," Stella now continued enthusiastically. "They seem to be rather promising."

"Um… not really." Hermione didn't know how to deal with Stella's weird way. She was almost worse than Luna, almost. "I'm not a stalker."

"Oh, you still won't divulge your secrets?" Stella looked at her with her dreamy eyes. "Well, a pity."

Then she turned to Lupin, smiled and said, "I need to get one piece of this strawberry cake. Be right back."

Lupin blushed and just nodded. He needed some time to calm down again after Stella had left. In the mean time Hermione looked around and tried to see Longbottom again. Though, she really didn't want to speak with him again. It made her sad how he didn't like her any more.

"Is something wrong?" Lupin then asked her concerned as he saw that dark look on her face. "What happened?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment before she said, "Marc is here."

There was a look of understanding crossing Lupin's face then he put a hand reassuringly on her shoulder.
"Did you talk with him?" he asked her in a soothing voice.

Hermione nodded then she whispered, "I think he hates me now."

"No, Hermione," Lupin tried to console her. "He's just hurt a little bit. But he'll get over it."

Hermione just looked at him doubtingly.

"You know how much he hates Riddle," Lupin said softly. "It's just hard for him to accept that you are together with him."

"I know," Hermione replied in a small voice. "But you don't approve either, do you?"

"Hermione, that's difficult," Lupin sighed. "You just don't know Riddle as good as we do."

Wrong, Hermione thought sadly but didn't say it out loud.

"We just don't want you to get hurt," he finally said gently.

Hermione was touched by that honest concern she could see in his eyes.

"How come Longbottom is here anyway?" Hermione now asked. "He's not a member of the Slug Club."

"No, but Diana asked him to accompany her," answered Lupin.

She looked at him in surprise. "Diana? Does she like Marc?"

"No," Lupin laughed. "At least not in that way. The Potters and the Longbottoms were always close. Diana and Marc practically grew up together. They are more siblings than anything else."

Tom furrowed his brow as he watched Hermione talking with that Lupin boy. He didn't like it very much how most of her friends seemed to be males. But Lupin wasn't his main concern right now, Tom decided as his gaze wandered from Hermione back to Longbottom. The Gryffindor stood on the other side of the room, leaning against the wall with a sour expression on his face. That boy annoyed Tom to no end. He had never liked Longbottom. Right from the start actually. That boy was much too Gryffindor. And even proud of it. But what angered Tom so much was how close Longbottom was to Hermione. Obviously it was very important for her what that Gryffindor git thought about her. Otherwise she wouldn't be so hurt by Longbottom's dismissive behaviour.

If Tom hadn't stepped in, would Hermione have ended up with that stupid Gryffindor? he wondered as he glared at the blond boy. Then a small smirk appeared on his face as he watched Longbottom walking towards the exit. Tom made a decision and strolled after Longbottom. This was an opportunity he wasn't going to let go to waste. He stalked confidently towards the exit doors. Before he slipped out of the room Tom confirmed with a short glance that Hermione hadn't noticed him leaving. Then he left the noisy room and stepped into the silence of the corridor. Soft steps coming down the corridor told him that Longbottom was on his way towards the Gryffindor common room. The smirk never left his face as Tom followed after him.

He had tailed Longbottom for some time when he decided that there was enough distance between them and Slughorn's party. So Tom speeded a little up and abandoned his efforts to be as silent as possible. He could now see Longbottom a few metres before him, his ridiculously blond hair standing somewhat out in the dim light of the corridor. The Gryffindor had obviously heard that
someone was following him as he stopped now.

_Took you long enough, didn't it?_ Tom mocked him in his thoughts.

Longbottom turned around and Tom nearly snickered as he watched a hostile expression enter his face after the other boy had recognized him. Cold amusement was flooding Tom as he slowly walked over to Longbottom. Though he didn't let his emotions show on his face. Completely unlike the stupid Gryffindor whose aversion and even hate was clearly visible on his face.

"What do you want?" Longbottom hissed at him, his voice shaking with barely suppressed anger.

An eerie smile played around Tom's mouth but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Why, I just want to talk with you," he said, his voice was calm, composed. To some extent even polite.

This politeness seemed to be the exact thing that boosted Longbottom's fury. His face turned an angry shade of purple as he glared at Tom.

"There is nothing I want to discuss with you," Longbottom snarled at him enraged.

Tom didn't let his mask of fake politeness slip while he scanned Longbottom.

"Oh, but there is one thing," Tom said in a suave tone, reveling in the fact that this affability seemed to rise the other's temper even further.

Tom leaned casually against the wall while he continued to scan Longbottom. Then he whispered softly,

"Hermione."

An angry frown appeared between Longbottom's eyebrows as Tom said the name. "What about her?" he growled gruffly.

"You are bothering her," Tom replied in a soft and still polite tone. "And I don't like that very much."

"I am bothering her?" Longbottom stared at him incredulously.

"Yes, don't think I haven't seen those looks you send her way." Tom now dropped the politeness though he was still not being aggressive. "You look at her like you hate her, despise her."

"I- I- " Longbottom stuttered as a look of concern crossed his face. But then he bellowed angrily, "That's none of your business."

Tom couldn't stop himself anymore. He chuckled darkly at the other boy's rage.

"You hate her, Longbottom, do you?" Tom purred, enjoying the indignation taking hold of the other. Then he continued mockingly, like he would reprimand a small child,

"Don't think you can fool me. Those angry looks you send her way, all this hatred and contempt-" Tom's eyes were now locked with Longbottom's blue ones before he whispered in a completely controlled voice, "- is a lie, isn't it?"

"What are you going on about?" Longbottom said in a quiet voice and Tom enjoyed the insecurity he could hear.
He pushed away from the wall to face Longbottom fully now.

"All this anger when in fact you... like her," Tom whispered teasingly while he slowly approached Longbottom, like stalking his prey.

A twisted smile distorted his handsome features as he now saw all colour leaving Longbottom's face. Tom took another step towards the other, now twirling his wand casually through his fingers.

"You fancy Hermione DeCerto. Isn't that right, Longbottom?" Tom said, his voice smooth as honey while this fake concern laced his words.

With malicious satisfaction he saw Longbottom stumbling a step away from him. But it wasn't long and the shocked expression on the Gryffindor's face changed into fury once again.

"And what if, Riddle?" he spat at Tom rabidly while he whipped out his own wand. "At least I'm not an insane psycho. Sooner or later Hermione'll notice what a creepy son of a bitch you are!"

Tom's fist tightened around his wand and he sensed how his magic started to rage inside of him. It turned into an angry torrent and Tom wondered for how long he would be able to hold it back, and if he actually wanted to hold it back at all. The polite mask melted from his face and Tom glared at Longbottom while an icy cold need to hurt welled up deep inside of him. His dark magic danced in unison with this vicious urge to the point where his magic left his body and bristled around him murderously.

Tom opened his mouth and his voice was now cold and hard as steel as he spoke, "Let me tell you this: I do not take it very well that you are after my girlfriend."

His words were accompanied by a flush of his angry magic. It reached out for Longbottom and tore at him unrelentingly. With cruel detachment Tom saw Longbottom wince slightly in pain as Tom's dark magic collided with him. Longbottom shied away from him but he still raised his wand and pointed it at Tom.

"Don't fool yourself. She's not really your girlfriend," he then hissed at Tom angrily. "It's only a matter of time and she'll ditch you."

Tom didn't react at all to the wand that was by now pointed at him but he felt something burn up in him as he heard Longbottom's words. And that something wrenched at him with unyielding ferocity. It wanted to be set free and to attack that Gryffindor boy. Rip him into shreds.

_Hermione would never leave me! I would never allow that!_

Despite his burning emotions, Tom's words were strangely detached and cold as he said quietly, "It almost looks like you are trying to steal what is mine." A dangerous tinge seeped through his words as he continued in a low hiss, "Are you trying to steal from me?"

"W- What are you talking about? Stealing? Hermione?" Longbottom replied indignantly. There was a certain amount of fear glistening in his eyes but his voice was still strong and brave as he yelled at Tom, "You don't own her, Riddle!"

Tom took another threatening step towards Longbottom. His magic still burned around Tom like an angry whirlwind. It was by now suffusing the whole corridor. The torches lightening the corridor flickered dangerously as they were hit by Tom's dark magic and the surface of the tapestry nearby darkened oddly as if it was singed by invisible flames.

"However you might want to define it," Tom said, malice twisting his voice into a murderous threat.
"It remains a fact that Hermione is mine now. And you better keep away from her."

Then Tom raised his wand and the magic in the corridor instantly followed his lead. He whirled his wand to cast a curse and-

"Tom!" a stern and familiar voice yelled at him from behind.

It cost him tremendous effort to stop the curse that was at the brim of his wand. His angry magic howled in disappointment as it had been defrauded of the chance to attack. Tom slowly turned his head in direction from which the slightly shocked voice had come from. He wasn't surprised at all to find Hermione standing a few metres away in the corridor, looking at him outraged, somehow even angry.

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Hermione tugged nervously at the sleeve of her blouse. She wanted to leave the party. Everyone was staring at her. At least she felt like everyone stared. She really could see those angry glares some of the students, especially the female Slytherins, sent her way. They still hadn't forgiven her for stealing their Slytherin prince away, it seemed. She rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Hermione just wanted to find Tom and then leave. That encounter with Longbottom had been horrible. Talking with Lupin had been nice though. But she didn't want to disturb him and Stella any longer. She knew how much Lupin liked the strange Ravenclaw and Hermione didn't want to disrupt that sprouting relationship. Now that she was thinking about strange relationships. Where was Tom? She hadn't seen him for a while now. Hermione let her gaze sweep again over the large room full of people. But she couldn't spot Tom anywhere. Which was odd. An uneasy feeling hit Hermione as she realized that she couldn't see Longbottom either.

After a short moment of hesitation Hermione walked over in direction of the entrance. She waved a short good bye at Lupin and Stella who stood nearby. They both smiled at her happily. Then Hermione slipped out of the room. The corridor was dark and cold. The room had been rather hot and stuffy from all those people so now Hermione shuddered took off down the silent passage way in direction of the Gryffindor common room. She had walked for some minutes as she suddenly sensed magic in the air. It was a heavy pressure hanging in the air making every movement difficult. It was an unpleasant feeling but at the same time it wasn't unfamiliar. Despite that powerful magic in the air Hermione quickened her steps and hurried towards where she sensed to be the source of that magic. She was just a few metres away from another corner as she heard a cold and frightening voice hiss,

"However you might want to define it, it remains a fact that Hermione is mine now. And you better keep away from her."

Cold chills darted down her spine as she heard that low voice. It was absolutely devoid of any warmth or emotion. The murderous magic still crackled around her and ripped painfully at her body as Hermione walked towards where that cold voice had come from. She had to breathe in deeply to suppress a memory which suddenly flared up in her, reminding her where she had sensed such dark magic the last time.

Subconsciously she pulled her wand as she rushed on. Then she finally rounded the corner. Somehow she had half expected to find Lord Voldemort standing in the corridor, evil and crimson eyed. She was relieved as it wasn't Him but Tom. He had turned his back to her and right now he was slowly raising his pale wand at none other than Longbottom. There was a determined look on Longottom's face as he in turn pointed his wand at Tom. But despite that brave look on his face, Hermione could tell that Longbottom was affected by Tom's powerful magic. As Tom raised his
wand Hermione could feel his magic in the air change its direction. It seemed to prepare itself to attack. When she felt that ominous change in his magic Hermione sprang into action again.

"Tom!" she yelled, hoping that her anxiety couldn't be heard in her voice.

She could see how Tom hesitated in his movement as he heard her. For a short moment Hermione feared that he would curse Longbottom anyway. But then he slowly, almost reluctantly, turned his head so he could look at her. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she looked into his eyes. They were smoldering pits of a frightening crimson colour.

Her grip on her wand tightened as she tried to overpower her initial fear in face of his all too familiar wrath. Hermione swallowed hard but then she cautiously walked over to Tom. He still hadn't said anything and just looked at her while his dark magic still danced in the corridor. Hermione noticed, though, that his magic didn't rip at her anymore. It let her pass undisturbed.

As she reached him Hermione looked up into Tom's eyes. They were still ruby red and burned with barely controlled hate. She could see that he still held tightly to his wand but at least he had lowered it by now. Then her eyes wandered from the angry Tom to Longbottom who stood only a few steps away. He still pointed his wand in Tom's direction. He seemed to be as angry as Tom though he was slightly shaken too. Hermione couldn't blame him. Not many people could stand their ground against Lord Voldemort after all.

*He's not Voldemort!* an angry inner voice hissed at her heatedly. Tom might not be *Him* but his magic felt just the same.

Longbottom's gaze had by now left Tom and he was frowning down at her. Hermione stiffened as she realized that. She looked at his face and there was still the anger and rage visible but she could also spot the disappointment in his eyes as they scanned her.

Hermione whispered timidly at him, "I'm sorry."

She could see confusion flooding Longbottom's eyes but before he could reply anything Hermione turned away from him and seized Tom by his arm. Then she pulled him after her, away from Longbottom who observed the whole process in bewilderment. Surprisingly enough Tom followed her. He even abandoned that dark magic swirling around him. Hermione softly sighed in relief. After she had put some distance between them and Longbottom Hermione spoke again in a tight voice,

"What was that?"

Tom didn't immediately answer but then he replied in an emotionless tone, "I was just making a point."

Hermione didn't say anything to that but just continued to lead him through the corridors.

"Where are we going?" he asked her after some time.

Hermione nearly cringed as she heard that his voice was still cold and free of any emotion.

"To the dungeons," she replied, her voice was just as emotionless as his had been. "I'm bringing you to your common room."

"Shouldn't I bring you to yours?"

Hermione turned her head and looked up at him. He stared back at her and she noticed that his eyes were back to being asoft grey.
"I think it's safer this way," she told him while tightening her grip on his arm.

They walked on in silence. Though as they entered the maze of Hogwarts' dungeons it was more Tom leading her than the other way around. After some time Tom stopped before a rather inconspicuous looking, bare, damp stone wall. It seemed to be the entrance to the Slytherin common room as Tom now turned towards the wall and started to mumble a password. Before he could finish Hermione again grabbed his arm.

"Tom?"

He turned around to her and scanned her with his cold grey eyes.

"Yes?"

She wasn't impressed by his dismissive tone at all but told him in a firm voice, "I want you to stay away from Marc."

He didn't reply anything but continued to look at her. Hermione could see a ghastly red glow beginning to tint his eyes. Then suddenly Tom seemed to lose his composure, his bored mask slipped and he burst out angrily.

"Why do you always protect him?" he hissed furiously before he added with accusation dripping of his words. "Do you like him?"

"Of course I do," Hermione replied in a calm voice. "You know he's my friend."

Tom now clenched his jaw tightly then he hissed bitingly, "I think he wants to be more than just your friend."

Hermione looked up at Tom's face. The blank mask was back again. She knew how good he was when it came to concealing his emotions and hiding them behind that perfect mask of his. But she was just as good when it came to deciphering him. So she locked her eyes with him. His face might be shut down completely but she could always read his eyes. Right now they were swirling with his suppressed emotions. Still one thing was screaming at her furiously through his eyes. Hermione nearly took a step back from him as she was overwhelmed by white hot jealousy which seemed to radiate from his eyes.

But she didn't. Instead she made a step towards him and reached out from him. She took his hand into hers and continued to look into his eyes.

Tom is jealous? she mused as she scanned him.

She had to admit that she wasn't really surprised. She had seen it coming whenever Tom saw Longbottom being around her. The magnitude of his jealousy was rather frightening, though. It was still clearly visible in his grey eyes, almost burning every other emotion in him. But behind that jealousy Hermione could spot something else. Tom really tried to hide it and she suspected that he managed to even hide it from himself. She could see it, though, the insecurity.

There was no doubt that Tom was incredibly jealous about the friendship that connected Longbottom and herself. But that wasn't all. He seemed to also be afraid that Longbottom would snatch her away from him.

Hermione pressed his hand reassuringly then she replied to his previous statement, "Maybe you are right."
She smiled softly at him as something like panic crossed his face and she continued in a soft voice, "But whatever Marc's feelings are it doesn't change my decision. I want to be with you and not with him."

Tom just stared down at her and didn't react to her statement at all. Hermione sighed tiredly. Then she stepped even closer to him and wrapped her arm around him.

"I am not some sort of prize you have to fight for," she whispered to him in a soothing voice. "I'm right here. Okay?"

She embraced him even tighter as she could feel him snaking his arms loosely around her. She allowed him to rest his head on top of hers as she continued to hold him tightly. But after a while, she pulled away from him. Tom only reluctantly let go of her but Hermione took a step away anyway.

Then she looked up at his face. He seemed to have calmed down. At the very least she couldn't spot that fury anymore which had been seething in him just a moment before.

"Feeling better now?" she asked him, her voice was still kind but now the softness had left it.

He didn't reply anything but Hermione took his silence as a 'yes'. So she continued but this time her voice was definitely not kind anymore. It was now stern and had a sharp edge around it.

"Tom, I don't want you to go and threaten my friends. If you do that again I won't just stand around and do nothing," she said slowly, seriously while staring into his eyes. "Just stay away from them."

He continued to look at her. The frustratingly blank mask covered his face once again. But then, before he turned around to the entrance of his common room, Tom nodded curtly at her.

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}
Slowly the weeks went by but the snow and ice was still reluctant to relinquish its hold on Hogwarts castle. Inside the castle's walls the school year continued as if nothing exceptional had ever happened. As if there was no visitor from a different time walking its corridors. Even the visitor herself was slowly lured into thinking that everything was fine. Somehow it really was. There still were times when Hermione was hit with doubts but she would quickly shove all thoughts of the future, time travel and unbeatable wands as far away as possible.

Life here in the forties, as annoying as it at times was, had grown to her. Hermione even managed to endure Legifer's incredibly irksome detentions. Her school mates slowly abandoned their hostile behaviour towards her. They seemed to be getting used to her relationship with the popular Slytherin prefect. Some of them still despised her, Hermione could tell, but they had obviously lost interest in ambushing her and hexing her.

Above else life in the forties was safe. It was bliss to be able to wake up in the morning and know that it was pretty likely that she would live to see the end of the day. She didn't have to worry about where she would sleep the next night, she didn't need to somehow acquire food while trying to not be seen by any evil dark wizards.

And she didn't need to struggle after the pieces of a wrecked soul, desperately trying to destroy them. Here, she was safe. No-one would be ripped from her. No-one was going to die.

Life was, for once,

...nice.

That was more than Hermione had ever hoped for. Back in the future everything had seemed to be rotten. Hope had left her and so had her friends and family. They had all died while darkness had slowly encircled her until all colour had drained from life. Until she herself had died. Her body had still breathed but it had felt as if life had left her long ago.

Now, though, Hermione felt strangely better. Her nightmares had stopped to mercilessly infest her whenever she fell asleep. The ghosts of her past seemed to have taken mercy on her and had left her alone. Hermione was incredibly grateful for that. And she did know whom she had to thank for her new-found happiness. The grotesqueness of her whole situation sometimes still hit her but by far not so often anymore.

Somehow her life seemed to be split. There was her old life and, looking back, it seemed to be so dark and overshadowed by pain and sorrow. Of course there had been a few rays of hope, too. Hermione didn't like it very much to think about her friends, because that chain of thought always led to her remembering how they all had died, but she would never forget them. As much as it pained her to remember her old life she never regretted having met all those people who still meant the world to her.

But now there was her new life. Safe and happy. Separated and protected from her old life. There was someone here who protected her from the darkness that always threatened to slop over from her old life. While Hermione always treasured the fond memories she had from her dear friends she was immensely glad that she had found this someone here in the past. With Tom by her side it was very easy to forget the dangers and fears of her old life.

Yes, life was nice. So Hermione was unprepared as darkness chose to visit her again...
Hermione walked through Hogsmeade. It was surprising how few changes would take place in the next fifty years. This Hogsmeade from the forties was almost exactly the same village Hermione knew from her time period. There was Honeydukes, crowded with students buying sugar quills or something else from that remarkable assortment. A few steps further and Hermione passed Zonko's joke shop. And 'The Three Broomsticks' was just a stone's throw away.

As she sauntered down the main street Hermione checked her watch. It was still more than half an hour until she would meet Tom. So she decided to enter 'The Three Broomsticks'. She was definitely in the mood to have one of those heavenly mugs of hot chocolate they sold there. As she entered the shop she saw Weasley and Longbottom sitting at one of the tables. Hermione hesitated shortly but then she walked over to them and sat down beside Weasley.

"Hey!" she said while her eyes wandered nervously over Longbottom.

There was a glass of butterbeer standing in front of Longbottom and he again did his best to utterly ignore her.

"Oh, hi, Mione," Weasley said good-naturedly, obviously trying to lighten the mood. "What are you doing so alone here? I thought you wanted to stay at the castle."

"Yeah, I did." Hermione said. "But then Tom asked me to meet him in Hogsmeade."

Predictably, Hermione could then watch a rather angry frown appear between Longbottom's eyebrows and he now looked as if he had just bitten into a lemon.

"So, do you always have to do what that jerk tells you?" Longbottom asked snidely.

Hermione tried to ignore his bitter taunt. Since he had learned about her and Tom he had distanced himself from her. It still hurt that she seemed to have lost him as a friend. But she still had hope left that Longbottom would somehow forgive her. She knew he wasn't being mean on purpose. He just didn't like Tom.

Hermione was glad that at this moment the waitress of 'The Three Broomsticks' came to their table and asked Hermione what she wanted to order. Hermione was a little bit surprised to not see Madam Rosmerta until she remembered in what time period she was currently stranded. She finally ordered her hot chocolate without staring too much at the strange, new or rather old waitress.

"What are you planning to do today?" Weasley asked after the waitress had left again.

"Hm, I'm not sure. Walking around Hogsmeade, I guess," Hermione answered. "Unless Tom has planned something else."

"Oh, if you are lucky, then maybe Tommy-boy takes you to Madame Puddifoot's," Longbottom threw in, his voice tripping with scorn.

Hermione looked at him and wondered if her decision to enter 'The Three Broomsticks' had been a good idea after all. She really missed the times as Longbottom hadn't hated her. She really liked him after all. He was one of her best friends. Or had been…

Hermione left 'The Three Broomsticks' a while later. It still had been a little awkward. Weasley had tried his best and Hermione had avoided to talk about Tom again but Longbottom hadn't taken part in the conversation at all. She really missed him as a friend. Hermione drew her cloak tighter around her as she walked down Hogsmeade's high street. It was slowly getting spring but the climate in
Scotland was always rather cold. With her cloak wrapped around herself Hermione made her way down the main street. She would meet Tom in ten minutes. She knew what an incredibly punctual person Tom was. He really hated to wait for anyone so Hermione hurried down the lane to their meeting place. On the other hand, she thought amused while slowing down her steps. It's always fun to see Tom losing his cool.

She just passed a side road as she heard someone yell, "Help me!"

She stopped dead in her tracks. That scream had come from the side road she just passed. With her heart beating faster now, Hermione looked down that street. It was a rather narrow back alley squeezed in between two houses. Hermione couldn't see very far as there was a bend not five metres down the lane.

"Help!" the voice yelled again. It was a female voice, Hermione could hear now.

She looked around but there were no other people near her. She seemed to be alone in this. Whoever that yelling person was, she obviously needed some help. Hermione flicked her wrist and felt her wand landing in her hand, then she ran into the dark back alley. Quickly she reached the corner and rounded it. There was no-one to be seen. But further down was another corner so Hermione raced down the street. Though 'street' was a little over-the-top as this alley was not even two metres wide.

"Help!" There was this voice again calling out desperately.

Hermione rounded the next corner hurriedly, her wand still tightly in her hand. The alley widened and formed something like a backyard. The ground was paved with grey and grimy cobble stones and the bordering houses were high enough to dive the backyard in semi-darkness. Hermione stopped running and narrowed her eyes to make something out in the twilight. There in the far end of this yard she could see a dark figure. Maybe that was the person in need? Hermione wondered. But the chills darting down her spine told her otherwise. She tightened her grip on the wand and took another tentative step into the backyard.

"Who are you?" Hermione asked and her voice was firm though she didn't feel confident at all. "Did you just shout for help?"

The dark figure moved and took a few steps in Hermione's direction.

"Yes, it was me yelling," the figure said and it was the same female voice that had called for help just minutes before. But now it didn't sound panicky at all anymore. If anything, it sounded triumphant.

Hermione saw the figure move her arm, then whisper something under her breath and the next time the person spoke it wasn't a female voice anymore. It was a deep male voice and it hissed aggressively at Hermione.

"But I don't need help. Though I can't say the same for you."

Instantly Hermione raised her wand and pointed it at the man standing a few metres away from her. To her horror she saw in the corner of her eyes something move behind her. She risked a quick glance back and her heart sank as she realized that three other men had appeared in the small backyard and were now standing in the way she had come from, successfully blocking her only escape route. She breathed in deeply and looked back at the first man. Her eyes were now adapted to the twilight and she could make him out in more detail. He was a tall man with short brown hair and a sneer on his brutal looking face. Her eyes wandered to his hand and Hermione saw that he had his wand drawn. With a jolt she noticed that he was wearing a black cloak. It was awfully familiar this cloak of his. She had seen this style of cloak before. Just where?
Then it hit her. *In Flamel's flat!*

The men who had attacked here there had all worn cloaks like this.

"What do you want?" Hermione hissed forcefully at the man.

She could see a malicious smirk on the man's face now.

"You know what we want, DeCerto," the man growled at her aggressively. "The book!"

Hermione took in a sharp breath of air. They knew her name?

"Hand it over-" the man spat at her. "-and we won't harm you."

Hermione needed to get out of this situation. Those men were after the Peverell manuscript. She would never hand it over. Even if she did, they would never let her walk away anyway.

"We know it was you who stole the book. Now give it back to us!" the man growled at her threateningly.

Adrenalin rushed through her as Hermione pondered her options. This backyard was a dead end with the only way out being the alley she had come from. That way was blocked by the three other men in her back. She wondered shortly why they thought they needed four people to overcome her. Were they not confident in their wandwork or did they just cautiously safeguard themselves? Hermione guessed on the latter.

She would have apparated away but Hogsmeade, like every big wizarding settlement, had anti-apparition wards. Sure she had once apparated through Diagon Alley's wards with the help of the Elder Magic but she didn't think she was able to reenact that feat. While the leader of those men had spoken to Hermione she had been able to sense a thin web of magic in the air. It seemed to be some sort of ward. A combination of silencing spells and repellent charms. Obviously those men were no amateurs.

Now she regretted it to have neglected to train the Elder Magic. In a real combat situation it was next to impossible to use the Elder Magic and still concentrate on her tactic and fighting. It seemed Hermione would have to use a good tactic to fight those men. There was no way around it, because handing over the book was definitely no option.

Normally Hermione would have been able to handle four opponents on her own but these men had placed themselves strategically well. She was facing their leader head on and she had three other opponents in her back. This made fighting them extremely difficult as they could attack her from two different sides. They had chosen the fighting place very well, too. This backyard was a dead end. Only the narrow street could be used as an escape route. They had cornered her pretty well, Hermione had to admit.

"The book, young lady!" the leader of her attackers yelled at her again while he extended one hand towards her.

Hermione made her decision. Swiftly and without a warning she waved her wand. A pulsing, green light left her wand and spread towards the leader. Immediately afterwards she waved her wand again and thought,

*Scutulatus!*

The strong full-body shield appeared around her, effectively protecting her from the spells that now
hit her shield in her back. Hermione could feel the shield drawing on her magic heavily as the incoming curses crashed into it. The leader was now brandishing his wand and a greyish-yellow curse left the tip of his wand. Hermione felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end from the power that curse radiated. She plunged sideways to avoid the curse while thinking,

*Definitely no amateurs.*

She reached one house wall and then spun around quickly, all the while curses were crashing into her shield. She wouldn't be able to maintain the shield much longer. But now, at least her position was slightly better. She had the wall in her back and could face all her opponents. But again those men had positioned themselves well. They were building a semicircle around her and sent curse after curse at her. Hermione's shield was getting weaker by the second.

It had been a long time since last Hermione had to fight in a real battle. Her last real fight had taken place back in her time period in the Ministry. But it seemed the time had come again for her to take off the gloves, otherwise those men were surely going to kill her.

She extended the hand grasping her wand to the side. Then simultaneously she ended her shield and brandished her wand like she would a sword to cut someone horizontally in half. With the cutting movement of her wand a huge slash appeared on the ground ripping the cobble stones apart. The slash followed Hermione's wand movement and now the semicircle her opponents were forming around her became their disadvantage. Each of them was hit by the force of Hermione's spell. As she ended the curse a deep slash was traversing the whole length of the back alley. Hermione noticed that she had been able to hit one of her opponents fully. He hadn't managed to raise a shield and the force of the curse had hit him and hurled him against the wall on the opposite side of the yard. He lay sprawled on the ground while bleeding from a deep slash in his chest. The three remaining men had been luckier as they had managed to conjure up a shield. Hermione noticed that their leader was still among them.

Suddenly a bright curse came rushing towards her. One of her opponents had attacked her again. Hermione had no time to raise a shield so she just leaped out of its course. It crashed into the house wall and debris rained down on Hermione. It had been a loud crash but Hermione knew no-one would hear it and come to her help as they were still inside the bubble of warding spells her opponents had put up.

Dust from the destroyed house wall was obscuring her vision so Hermione noticed the next incoming curse too late. She tried to dodge it but it hit her left elbow. A sharp pain shot through her arm followed by the sickening feeling of blood flowing down her left forearm. Hermione got back on her feet while pointing her wand to the ground and whispered,

"*Fulgur!*"

An electric flash of magic shot through the ground and searched its way to the next person standing on the ground. That spell was powerful but at the same time very dangerous as there was no way to guide the direction in which it would strike, making the curse unusable if fighting with companions. But currently Hermione was alone anyway so she used the curse. She watched satisfied as the man standing nearest to her was suddenly engulfed by brightly glowing sparks of magic that struck him furiously. After a few seconds the man fell down, unconscious.

Hermione had no time enjoying her victory as the next curse came flying towards her. She crossed her arms before her and then spread them to her sides while she thought,

*Subsisto!*
A thick yellow shield appeared before her and the incoming curse crashed into it. The shield absorbed the force of the curse and the colour of the shield changed into orange. But before Hermione could do anything more she saw a second curse rushing towards her. She had no time to do anything so she just concentrated on maintaining her shield. The curse crashed with force into the shield. The colour of her shield changed again. It became a dark-orange and then an alarming red before it flickered and died completely. The curse had been weakened only marginally by the shield and now continued its way towards Hermione.

It collided painfully with her chest and the air was knocked from her as Hermione hit the wall behind her with force. She slid down and black dots danced through her vision but she managed to hold onto her wand. She tried to focus through the pain and pointed her wand at her opponents.

*Contendo*! Hermione thought.

The hunks of debris from the destroyed house wall began to shoot towards the two remaining opponents. Hermione saw two blue lights flaring up. They had been able to raise a shield. The hunks of stone crashed into the shields and could do no harm. Before Hermione could get up or attack the black cloaked wizards again she saw two curses flying her way. She waved her wand shakily and managed to conjure up a flimsy shield. The first curse hit her shield heavily and Hermione knew it was no good. As the second curse crashed into the weak shield it shattered and allowed the curse to rush undisturbed towards her. It hit her in the chest and she was again slammed into the wall behind her. Pain spread through Hermione's body, paralyzing her and she couldn't prevent her wand from slipping from her hand and landing with a clacking noise on the pavestones.

The next thing she was aware of were strong hands grabbing her by the collar and brutally hauling her up. Hermione's vision cleared again and she was able to recognize the leader of her attackers staring down at her maliciously. He held her by her collar and pushed her painfully hard into the wall behind her. Behind his shoulder Hermione saw the other man standing in the now destroyed backyard and still pointing his wand at her.

"Impressive, missy!" the leader spat at her with barely controlled anger in his voice. "But that's as far as you can go!"

He pushed her even harder into the wall and Hermione could barely breathe anymore. The leader raised his right hand and then slapped her hard in the face.

"Where is the book?" he yelled furiously in her face.

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. She was scared but she wasn't going to give him what he wanted. As she stared at him she was able to see something she had previously overlooked. There on his black cloak was a familiar crest. The man raised his hand and again slapped Hermione in the face. Her head was hurled to the side, she felt her lip split open and blood flowing down her chin.

"I will only ask one more time," the leader said in a low threatening voice. "Where. Is. The. Book?" With each word he brutally slammed her into the wall.

Hermione was starting to panic. There was no way to get to her wand. Even if she managed to somehow retrieve her wand, she was not in the condition to fight those men again. Her left arm throbbed achingly where her elbow had been cut open, her chest hurt making it painful to breathe and she felt slightly sick and lightheaded. Hermione stared up at the man still holding her painfully tight.

"That's it!" the man yelled furiously. Then he pointed his wand directly in her face while he still held her in place with his other hand. "I'll make you regret not cooperating with us!"
Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the undoubtedly painful curse to hit her.

"Let go of her!" She heard a commanding voice – a familiar commanding voice.

Hermione opened her eyes again and immense relief washed over her as she saw Tom standing just a few metres away at the entrance to the backyard. He stood by the backstreet leading out of the yard, carrying an air of authority while his grey eyes wandered over the scene in front of him. Hermione saw concern flickering through Tom's eyes as he looked at her but then his gaze quickly turned to ice again.

The man holding Hermione had turned his head and was now watching Tom with narrowed eyes. The other man had spun around and was pointing his wand at Tom. Tom had drawn his wand, too, but he held it nonchalantly by his side, the tip pointing to the ground.

"Who are you?" the leader hissed at Tom aggressively.

Tom's eyes focused on the man. There was an unreadable expression on his face as he arched one eyebrow gracefully.

"I don't like repeating myself," he said in a controlled voice to the man holding Hermione. "Let her go!"

The leader just barked a laugh and said in an amused and depreciating voice, "I don't take orders from school boys."

Instantly Hermione could see Tom's expression change. His face was still carefully arranged into this mask of mild curiosity but now Hermione saw a deathly glint shining through his grey eyes. As Hermione noticed this slight shift in his appearance there was also a change in the magic surrounding them. It was just a small change but she had too often been the target of Tom's magic not to notice. Those were the first signs of him releasing his angry and dark magic.

"Take him down!" the leader ordered the other man lazily.

The man followed his leader's order and instantly sent a bright yellow curse Tom's way. The curse was very powerful as Hermione could still feel its magic even though she was a few metres away. The curse crackled threateningly as it rushed towards Tom. The corners of Tom's mouth were beginning to form a dark smirk as he watched the curse. He waved his wand in a small elegant movement of his hand. The yellow curse, though, continued its way undisturbed towards him.

The man who had fired the curse at Tom smiled triumphantly as he saw that Tom's defense had been useless. He didn't notice that Tom wasn't in the least bit concerned. Finally the yellow curse reached Tom. But as it made contact with him nothing happened. It just seared through Tom as if he wasn't there at all and continued its way until it hit the wall behind. With a loud crack the wall detonated and the curse left behind a huge crater. The dark smirk on Tom's face widened as he watched the man in front of him stare incredulously at the crater in the wall and then at Tom again.

"Nice try!" he said in his eerily composed voice though there was a fearsome coldness underlying his tone. "Now, it's my turn, isn't it?"

For the first time during this duel Tom raised his wand and pointed it at his adversary. Instantly there was a wave of malign and dark magic flooding the small backyard. Hermione felt the raw power of Tom's magic tearing at her body as she watched Tom's opponent taking a nervous step away from him.

A vicious smile danced around Tom's face as he gently whispered in a soft voice, "Aqua Latus!"
No visible spell left Tom's wand but the man facing him suddenly let go of his wand and clasped his throat with both hands. Hermione watched with wide eyes as the man coughed and spit out water. His face turned red as he sank down on his knees, still coughing up water. Tom laughed coldly down at his opponent before he waved his wand again and the man was hurled to the side. He collided forcefully with a wall and remained lying on the ground, still coughing weakly.

Tom instantly lost interest in the man and re-focused his eyes towards Hermione and the other man still holding her. A murderous look crossed Tom's face as glared at the leader of Hermione's attackers.

"Your last chance." Tom's voice was now deathly cold and Hermione could see a disturbing red sheen in his grey eyes. "Release her!"

But the leader did no such thing. He tightened his grip on Hermione's collar and pointed his wand at her throat.

"Abandon your wand or I'll curse the girl!" the leader hissed threateningly at Tom while he bored the tip of his wand painfully into Hermione's throat.

Tom stared at the man for a few seconds with a blank face. Then suddenly he laughed cruelly before he sneered at the man, "As you wish."

Hermione watched horrified as Tom really threw his wand away. She felt the man holding her relax a little bit as he, too, watched Tom's wand flying through the air. With a soft clacking sound the wand landed on the ground just a mere metre away from Hermione and her captor. The instant the pale wand made contact with the ground, fire exploded from its tip. Something slithered out from the tip of the wand. Hermione quickly realized that it was a snake made up completely of fire. She then heard Tom sinisterly hissing and she knew he was giving the snake orders in parseltongue.

The man who was still holding her was now pointing his wand at the burning snake and sent curses its way. But the snake continued to slither towards him undisturbed by the desperate curses the man sent at it. It quickly reached the feet of the man and began to wind around his legs and climb up. The man screamed in pain as the fire-snake touched him thus burning his clothes and the skin underneath. It had now reached his waist and was still wrapping itself tightly around his body. The man screamed in pain as the snake burned him. Hermione on the other hand couldn't feel any heat radiating from the snake. The man let go of Hermione and staggered away, still trying to get the snake off him but he only managed to burn his hands.

All the while Tom watched the scene in front of him with cold amusement. Though now that the man had released Hermione, Tom strolled confidently towards his wand lying on the floor. He picked it up and then looked pensively at the man, struggling with the burning snake, while the dark smirk still tugged at the corners of his mouth. After a while Tom seemed to have found a spell he could use or he was just too bored to watch the man burn any longer. He waved his wand lazily, the fire-snake disappeared and the man was hurled brutally away and hit the ground hard a few metres away where he remained lying.

Now that the man had released her and the imminent danger was over Hermione slid down the wall she had been pressed against. The multiple hurts of her body hit her again. She could still feel blood flowing down her left forearm, her chest hurt with each breath she took and her jaw was throbbing painfully were the man had hit her. She felt someone taking hold of her chin and raising it gently. Hermione looked into a pair of concerned grey eyes. Tom was crouching down in front of her. She was relieved to notice that the frightening red glow had left his eyes completely.

"Hermione?" he said softly and there was not a trace of the cruel coldness left in his warm voice.
She leaned forwards, wrapped her arms around Tom and clung to him. She put her head down on his shoulder and closed her eyes. She was exhausted and tired. Then she felt Tom putting his arms around her waist and pulling her closer to him. She felt comfortable and protected in his arms. After a while he let go off her, clutched her gently by her shoulders and held her at arm's length while he scanned her. A frown appeared on his face as his gaze wandered over her jaw and her still bleeding lip.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Tom asked her gently.

Hermione nodded at him. "My arm. And I got hit by a curse I didn't know."

The frown between Tom's eyebrows deepened as she said that. Then he got up and pulled her into a standing position. She was hit by a wave of vertigo as she stood up and grabbed Tom's arm to steady herself.

"We should leave," he said as he scanned the destroyed backyard and the unconscious men lying where they had fallen. "We don't want to be found here, especially not by any back-up they might have."

Hermione nodded and let Tom grab her by her upper arm and lead her down the back alley.

Before they reached the main street of Hogsmeade again, Tom asked in a quiet voice, "What did those men want from you?"

Hermione tensed involuntarily at his question. She couldn't reveal the real reason they had attacked her.

"I don't know," she answered in a small voice.

For a moment Tom didn't reply anything but continued to drag Hermione after him. Then he said, still in this unnerving, quite voice, "Then let me take a guess." He didn't turn to look at her. "They were after the book."

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. She stared with wide eyes at Tom. He, too, had stopped and now looked at her with his blank face.

"What book?" Hermione slowly asked in a soft voice while she still stared thunderstruck at Tom.

He looked at her calmly and then said without batting an eye, "The book Peverell wrote. The book you stole from Nicolas Flamel the day we met the first time during Christmas break."

Hermione continued to stare at him. How did he know? She had never said anything about the book in front of him.

"So, did they?" Tom asked in a light voice. "Want the book, I mean."

Hermione looked away from him. Now that he knew anyway there was no reason to deny it anymore.

"Yes," Hermione whispered. Then she looked back at Tom and asked, "How do you know about the book?"

Tom tilted his head a little while he continued to look at her calmly before he said, "I'm not stupid, you know."
He didn't explain any more but grabbed Hermione again, none too gently, and pulled her after him.

"Why didn't you tell me? About the book?" Tom unexpectedly asked her. Hermione couldn't help but notice that the coldness seeped through his voice again.

She couldn't answer him. There were many reasons why she hadn't told him. Every one of them was a good reason but she knew Tom wouldn't like them at all. They had now reached the main street leading through Hogsmeade. Hermione saw students from Hogwarts strolling down the street, chatting with each other and enjoying a day off. Tom wasn't paying them any heed. He continued to drag her behind him, his grasp on her upper arm now painfully tight.

"Why did you steal the book?" he asked her gruffly.

What could she answer him? That she needed the book to work out how to travel forwards in time? That she was a time traveler more than fifty years from the future?

…that she had used to fight against his older counterpart?

Hermione couldn't say anything so she, again, remained silent which didn't improve Tom's already enraged mood. He still pulled her furiously after him. She stumbled while she tried to follow his pace. On the other side of the street she spotted Weasley and Longbottom wandering down the street. They were now both staring at her and Tom. Hermione just hoped they wouldn't come over. Tom was irritated enough right now, without Longbottom to provoke him.

"Where are we going?" she asked him timidly.

"What do you think?" he replied snappishly, his tone still cold. "To the infirmary back at Hogwarts."

Hermione instantly stopped.

"No!" she said rather loudly.

Tom had stopped too and turned around to face her. There was now definitely anger shining through his blank mask as he glared down at her. Hermione was unpleasantly reminded of the earlier days of their acquaintance when Tom had still used to threaten her.

"Hermione," he hissed short-tempered. "You are hurt. Of course you need to go to the infirmary."

He grabbed her by her arm again and tried to wrench her after him but she bucked against his grasp on her arm.

He faced her again and then snarled at her, "Your arm is cut open, you are bleeding and you were hit by an unknown spell. I will bring you to the hospital wing!"

"Are you mad?" Hermione whispered at him. "What am I going to tell them how I got hurt? That some dark wizards are after me because I stole a book before they had the chance to steal it?"

Tom glared angrily down at her. Then he pulled at her arm harshly, leaned towards her and whispered in her ear, "Okay, I won't bring you to the infirmary. But we will still go back to the castle."

Hermione looked into his grey eyes. She knew he was furious because she hadn't told him about the book. Apart from the anger glinting in his eyes she could see something else. Tom was concerned about her.
Hermione now had a really guilty conscience. She looked down on her feet and said in a small and subdued voice, "Yes."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her. He had obviously expected more resistance. But then he grabbed her arm again and pulled her after him. Hermione followed him all the way through Hogsmeade.

They had just reached the path that led to Hogwarts as she whispered, "I'm sorry."

Tom sighed and slowed down a little bit. His grip on her arm became gentler then he turned towards her.

"That was really dangerous. They could have seriously hurt you," he said in a soft voice while his eyes scanned her anxiously.

_He must have really been worried_, Hermione realized.

Tom wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her over to him. Hermione felt herself relax as she leaned into him. Tom bent down to her and gently brushed his lips against hers, carefully avoiding to disturb the painful cut in her lip, before he whispered,

"Now let's go back to the castle."

Hermione smiled up at him and nodded.

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"What do you think how Amarys is doing?" Weasley asked Longbottom as they strolled down the street.

They had just left 'The Three Broomsticks' and headed for Zonko's.

"I really don't know," Longbottom answered with a smile on his face. "I'm still surprised he actually asked her on a date."

Weasley laughed. "Yeah, well, it was bound to happen one of these days. I think Stella Lovegood has been waiting for this for some time now."

"Yeah," Longbottom had to laugh too. "Maybe we should find them? I still have one of those joke wands somewhere here." He started to rummage through his robe pockets. "We slip the joke wand in Amarys' pocket and the next time he tries to impress her with his wandwork… whoosh!"

"You know, you are evil, Marc," Weasley chastised his friend. But then added mischievously, "I think they went to Madame Puddifoot's."

Then he noticed that Longbottom had stopped laughing and was now staring angrily at something on the other side of the street. Weasley followed his gaze and soon spotted the reason for Longbottom's anger: Tom Riddle.

"What is he doing?" the blond Gryffindor hissed enraged.

They could see that Riddle had grabbed Hermione by her arm and was pulling her after him rather brutally. She seemed to have trouble following him and staggered behind him trying not to lose her balance. Then she whispered something to Riddle. Neither Longbottom nor Weasley could understand what she was saying as they were too far away. But whatever it was, Riddle seemed to snub at her in return. Then she stopped following him and they could hear her yell a rather desperate
sounding "No!" at Riddle.

Riddle had turned towards Hermione and stared down at her. Longbottom and Weasley couldn't see Hermione's face as she had turned her back towards them but they could see Riddle. He was glaring at her threateningly. There was fury shining through his otherwise annoyingly blank face. He hissed something at Hermione then he grabbed her arm again and tried to pull her away. She resisted him; she obviously didn't want to follow him. Her resistance seemed to enrage him even further as he now yelled something at her.

"He's threatening her," Longbottom whispered angrily before he pulled his wand.

"Don't do anything harsh!" Weasley tried to calm his friend. "Let's try to get nearer."

Longbottom nodded at that with a grim expression on his face but he didn't put his wand away. Then they both crept closer to Hermione and Riddle while trying not to draw the Slytherin's attention to them. As they got nearer to the pair they had to watch how Riddle again took hold of Hermione's arm and then wrenched at her violently. There was still a murderous look on his face as he leaned towards her and whispered something in her ear. Longbottom and Weasley were finally in hearing range as Hermione answered Riddle.

"Yes," she said in a small and uncharacteristically submissive voice.

Longbottom's clasp on his wand tightened as he heard her scared sounding reply. But before he and Weasley had reached Hermione, Riddle had again grabbed her arm and now pulled her away. The two Gryffindor boys tried to follow them but that turned out to be rather difficult as the streets of Hogsmeade were crowded with students. Soon the couple was swallowed by the masses of people.

"Damn!" Longbottom snarled so loudly that a group of first years which just passed them jumped in surprise and looked at him with huge eyes. "That evil git! Did you see how he treated her?"

"Yes," Weasley said quietly. He was pretty shaken by this thing himself.

"What are we going to do now?" Longbottom asked frustrated.

"I don't know," Weasley said. "But that's the way towards the castle they took. Let's go back and wait for Hermione in the common room."

_H._._._._._.

Hermione and Tom entered the castle through the Entrance Hall. She had clasped his arm and was leaning on him a little bit. The cut on her left elbow stung now rather painfully and her chest hurt where the curse had hit her during the fight. She rubbed her jaw which was throbbing dully where the man had hit her.

_H._._._._._.

How could she have been so reckless and fall into this stupid trap?

And those men? Where did they come from? Why were they after the book anyway? Most importantly, how did they know her name? They were strong enemies and obviously well trained in fighting. It was rather disturbing that they had managed to find her.

Hermione noticed that Tom led her down towards the dungeons.

"Where are we going?" she asked him.

"To the Slytherin common room," Tom answered shortly.
Hermione looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"Don't look at me like that. I wanted to bring you to the hospital wing. I really don't know what you have against Slytherin anyway," Tom said exasperatedly. "You are a little bit prejudiced, aren't you?"

Hermione chuckled at that. It _was_ rather funny, considering from whom that comment was coming. Tom narrowed his eyes at her but didn't say anything. She didn't want to irk him more now that he seemed to have forgotten about Peverell's book, so she remained silent.

Tom led her through the maze of corridors until he stopped before a rather inconspicuous looking bare, damp stone wall. Then he hissed at the wall, "Putus!"

Hermione rolled her eyes at this rather uninventive password. It was so Slytherin. Still, it seemed to be the right password as now a stone door, which had been concealed in the wall, slid open. Tom entered through the door and dragged Hermione behind him. She felt a little bit nervous as she had never entered Slytherin domain before. Back in her time period she had always tried to avoid going anywhere near the dungeons and the Slytherin common room. Due to her blood status the Slytherins had never been very friendly towards her. Now she was entering the snakes' lair. But, Hermione tried to reassure herself, this time around no-one knew she was a Muggleborn.

As Tom was still holding to her, Hermione had no other choice than to follow him. So she stepped into the Slytherin common room. The common room was a long, low underground room. There were Slytherin-green wallpapers on the walls and Hermione saw greenish lamps hanging from the ceiling. Several soft looking, black-leather couches were located in the room. Hermione spotted a few Slytherins sitting on the couches and chairs, doing their homework or just chatting. The students were mostly first and second years as they were not yet allowed to leave the castle for Hogsmeade. But Hermione also saw a few older students sitting in the room.

She noticed that many of the students were watching her and Tom inconspicuously. If it had been the Gryffindor common room, they would be staring openly or even coming over to her and asking her if she needed something. Slytherins were obviously different. They tried to appear uninterested in Hermione but at the same time they were observing very well what exactly she was doing here. Hermione wondered what they would do now if she had come here without Tom. She clasped his hand tighter. Tom on the other hand didn't seem to notice the stares of his housemates or he simply didn't care. He started to walk towards a staircase on the far side of the common room.

"Back already, Riddle?" Hermione heard a deep voice ask as they just passed one of the black leather couches.

Tom stopped and turned towards the person sitting on the couch. Hermione wasn't very taken with seeing Ledo Avery sitting comfortably on the couch. Right beside him she saw Alfard Black, Primus Lestrange and Anthony Alba. She unconsciously stepped closer to Tom. She really didn't like those people. They were now eyeing her curiously. Hermione wondered what exactly they were thinking about her. Probably that she was another one of those girls Tom was playing around with. The most disturbing thing though was the greedy glint she could see in Avery's eyes as they wandered over her body.

"And how is that any of your business, Avery?" Hermione heard Tom's voice say. She nearly shuddered as she heard this authoritative coldness in his tone.

It seemed the fearsome tone in Tom's voice did unsettle his followers as well. They all cringed somewhat at his answer.
"Of course it is not my business. I apologize," Avery said hastily in a rather subdued voice while he fearfully glanced at Tom. "I was just being curious."

"Hmm," Tom said as he let his cold gaze glide over Avery who froze. Then Tom continued in a low, threatening voice towards Avery, "You would do well to rein in your curiosity where I am involved."

"Of course," Avery stuttered fearfully at the other, not daring to meet Tom's hard gaze.

Tom's murderous look left Avery who seemed to breathe out relieved. Instead Tom's cold eyes wandered over the whole group sitting in front of him.

Then he said in a commanding voice, addressing all the boys sitting on the sofa, "I need some time undisturbed in the dormitory. Make sure no-one barges in."

It was a sign of how scared those boys really were by Tom, Hermione thought, as they didn't start to wolf-whistle after such a declaration. Something every other group of boys that age surely would have done if one of them said he needed some time undisturbed with his girlfriend. But as it was, the boys sitting on the sofa just nodded at Tom obediently.

Tom narrowed his eyes at them before he turned away and continued his way towards the staircase, dragging Hermione after him. She was very relieved as they descended the stairs thus leaving the Slytherin common room behind. She really didn't like the Slytherins. They actually scared her a little bit. Maybe that was related with the bad experiences she had made with Slytherins in her time period. Hermione's gaze wandered to Tom walking before her. He was a Slytherin, too, she had to remind herself. But he wasn't scaring her.

…at least not anymore.

They quickly arrived at the foot of the staircase and in a dimly lit corridor. Its walls, the floor and the ceiling were made of solid rock. This corridor seemed to be carved out of the stone. Hermione guessed that they were now so deep under the castle that the builders of Hogwarts had driven the rooms and corridors directly into the rock.

They passed a few doors on their way until Tom halted before a door made of dark heavy wood. He opened the door and strode into the room. Hermione followed him. She saw him waving his wand and instantly the green lamps hanging from the ceiling lit and a fire started to crackle in the fireplace at the far end of the room.

Hermione looked around the room. It was, like the corridor she had just left, carved out of rock. But in contrast to the naked and crude stone walls of the corridor the walls of this room were more sophisticated. The stone of the walls was burnished and was reflecting the light coming from the lamps quite nicely. Here and there a tapestry was hanging on the walls. Hermione wasn't surprised to see a big green snake slithering leisurely through a landscape shown on one tapestry. On another tapestry she could see two knights in full armour fighting fiercely against each other. She walked further into the room and noticed the thick dark-green carpet on the floor, undoubtedly meant to protect the inhabitants of this room from the cold that would surely radiate from the blank stone floor.

While Hermione had taken in the room Tom had walked to one of the beds. She went over to him. Each bed was separated from the next by a room-divider. Obviously the Slytherins liked to have a little bit more privacy than what she knew from her own dormitory in Gryffindor. Hermione arrived at Tom's part of the room. There was a small shelf full of books standing at the wall. Next to the shelf stood a wardrobe. The Slytherins didn't have to live out of the trunk the whole year, it seemed.
Right now Tom had opened one of the drawers in the shelf and was searching through its content. Hermione walked over to his bed standing right beside the richly decorated room-divider and sat down. A dark-green quilt made of velvet was covering his bed.

As Hermione's gaze wandered over Tom's part of the dormitory she was not really surprised to notice how tidy everything was. Maybe she should get Tom to clean up her part of the Gryffindor dormitory so Legifer wouldn't be after her blood the next time she had one of her stupid inspections. Though that would probably disappoint the professor and she would give Hermione a detention anyway. Maybe on the spurious grounds for being too unpredictable to ever become an obedient house witch. Hermione chuckled at that thought.

"You can't be that hurt if you can laugh again." She heard Tom's smooth voice.

She looked up and found him standing in front of her. He held a few potion bottles in his hands and looked down at her with one of his eyebrows raised gracefully. Hermione beamed up at him. He just sighed at that, put the bottles down on the bedside table and sat down beside her. He turned towards her and then reached out for her. He took hold of her head and turned it so he could inspect the cut in her lip and her still painfully throbbing jaw. Hermione saw Tom's eyes narrow in anger as he looked at her injury.

"I should have killed that bastard," he hissed so darkly that it made chills darting down her spine.

Tom reached for one of the bottles he had put down on the bedside table. Then he conjured up a white cloth, put some of the potion on the textile and began to carefully dab Hermione's cut lip and her jaw. After some time he seemed to be satisfied with his work, discarded the bottle on the table again and with a wave of his wand the cloth disappeared.

"What else did you hurt?" Tom asked Hermione in a soft voice. "Your arm?"

She nodded and then took off her black outer robes. She was wearing a light-blue blouse underneath. While the black of her outer robe had been able to conceal the blood flowing from the cut in her left arm, the red of the blood now contrasted sharply with the light color of her blouse. Hermione saw that her blouse was torn where the curse had hit her left elbow. The fabric around the cut was soaked in blood which seemed to have flown down her forearm and stained the rest of her sleeve, too.

In the corners of her eyes Hermione saw Tom scanning her injured arm with his grey eyes before he said in a quiet voice, "That cut is rather deep you should have said something."

Hermione raised her arm and turned it to have a better look at the cut. There was an at least five inches long slash running from her forearm over the elbow and up her arm. It really looked deep, Hermione had to admit. But it wasn't that bad, she reasoned. She'd had worse.

"No, it's not that deep." She grinned at Tom. "See?" she said while bending her arm. "It's still attached to the body."

Tom again sighed exasperatedly. "Stop playing around!" he ordered and then grabbed Hermione's left wrist and stopped her from bending her arm again.

He pulled his wand and waved it over her arm. The sleeve of her blouse disappeared instantly. Then Tom began to gently remove all the blood from her arm with another cloth he had conjured up. As he was finished he applied a potion from one of the bottles on Hermione's arm. It stung terribly on the cut but she clenched her teeth. With another wave of his wand Tom conjured up a bandage which wrapped itself tightly around Hermione's arm.
"I still think you should go to the Hospital Wing," Tom said while he checked if the bandage wasn't too tight around her arm. "Or it might scar over."

Hermione just shrugged, "Wouldn't be the first one."

"There's no need to add more then," he countered swiftly while he looked at her rather sternly. Then he reached for his wand before he narrowed his eyes and said, "And you were hit by an unknown spell?"

Hermione nodded, then added in a small voice, "Twice."

Tom stared at her for a moment and Hermione could see a frightening red tinge appear in his otherwise grey eyes. His grip on his wand tightened and she felt the first signs of his dark magic crackling around him.

"I should really have killed that bastard," he said in a deathly cold tone.

He breathed in and seemed to regain his composure. The pressure of the upcoming dark magic vanished again.

"Okay, let me check if those spells did any harm," Tom said and Hermione was relieved to see that his eyes were this soft grey again.

He placed his left hand lightly on her chest while he waved his wand in a complicated pattern and chanted an incantation Hermione had never heard before. She noticed a warmth originating from his hand on her chest. This pleasant warmth spread slowly through her whole body. After a few moments Tom ended the spell and removed his hand.

"I don't think it was anything serious," he told Hermione. "But I'm no healer, maybe you should-

"-go to the Hospital Wing," she ended the sentence for him. "Yeah, yeah, but I'm not going."

A dark look passed Tom's face as he scowled down at her. Hermione felt a bit guilty again. He had really feared for her and now she was making fun of him. She skidded nearer to him on the bed and snuggled against him while she wrapped her arms around him.

"Don't worry," Hermione soothed while she looked up at him. "I'm fine."

Tom glared down at her and there was still a frown between his eyebrows. But she wasn't concerned because she could see the softness shining through his beautiful grey eyes.

Tom snaked his arms around her waist and pulled her over to him. He bent his head down to her and whispered, "Could have fooled me there." Before he placed his lips onto hers. Hermione closed her eyes as she felt him kissing her softly.

"What are we going to do now?" Longbottom asked frustrated. "He could have dragged her to Merlin knows where."

He and Weasley were currently walking down a corridor near the potions class room down in the dungeons. Since they had seen Riddle tugging Hermione through Hogsmeade they had tried to find her again. So after they had arrived back at the castle they had decided to wait for her in the Gryffindor common room. But Hermione hadn't shown up. After some time Longbottom had lost his nerve and insisted that they should search her. Currently they were looking for the entrance to the
Slytherin common room. Riddle was an evil Slytherin after all, so Longbottom had reasoned that he must have dragged Hermione down into the snakes' lair. But to find the entrance was easier said than done. The maze of corridors down in the dungeon was more than confusing. The two Gryffindors didn't even know what the entrance to the Slytherin common room looked like. So they were currently searching for a huge portrait of either Salazar Slytherin or a huge snake. But so far without any luck.

"I don't know, Marc," Weasley replied. "But this is rather pointless. We'll never find the entrance. We don't even know if she really is there."

"I know!" Longbottom cried irritably. "I'm so going to kill that bastard!"

"Let's go back to our common room," Weasley said trying to calm his friend. "I'm sure she'll show up there sooner or later."

"Yeah," Longbottom answered darkly. "That is, if Riddle hasn't murdered her already."

They rounded the next corner and ran directly in a group of Slytherins.

"Oh, what's this?" one of the Slytherins sneered at them.

Longbottom instantly tensed as he recognized him. That was the Slytherin Quidditch team captain, Ledo Avery.

"Look at that," Avery continued, his voice dripping with scorn. "Two Gryffindorks down here. What an honour."

The group of Slytherins laughed meanly.

"Shut up, Avery," Longbottom snubbed at him hotly.

"Watch your manners," the Slytherin sneered at him and then asked conceitedly. "What are you doing here anyway?" Then his eyes glinted maliciously and he said, "Ah, I know, you search for your little friend."

Longbottom tensed, then shouted heatedly, "Hermione? Where do you have her?"

The dark smirk on Avery's face widened.

"Well, I so happen to know where she is," he said snidely before he continued in a rather evil voice, "In the Slytherin dorm. Alone with Riddle." Avery watched in amusement how the colour drained from Longbottom's face. "But I really don't know what he's doing to her right now," Avery ended but winked suggestively at Longbottom.

Sometime later Tom walked Hermione back to her common room. She felt his arm wrapped gently around her waist. She had told him that he didn't need to accompany her back. But obviously Tom was feeling a little bit over-protective since he had found her in that backyard in Hogsmeade. She didn't mind as she rather enjoyed his arm being wrapped reassuringly around her and the warmth of his body beside her.

They rounded another corner as Tom suddenly said, "Now, can I have a look at the book?"

Hermione glanced at him sideways before she said in a soft voice, "No."
Tom looked down at her angrily. Though, Hermione noted, there was more frustration than anger on his face right now.

Then he huffed at her, "Why not?"

She replied in a firm voice, "Because it's my book."

He looked down at her for a moment. She wondered if he was going to snap now. But then Tom said in a relatively calm voice, "Technically it's Flamel's book."

Hermione looked away from him before she said in a small voice, "Technically it's Dumbledore's."

As Tom didn't say anything to that she hesitantly glanced back at him. She was surprised to find him smirking down at her rather evilly.

"You stole a book from Dumbledore?" he said in a gleeful voice. "I have to say I find that rather satisfying."

Hermione frowned at Tom. Sometimes he was really odd.

In the mean time they had arrived at the Gryffindor common room. Before she had the chance to walk over to the portrait of the Fat Lady, though, Tom snaked his other arm around her and pressed her against him. Then he leaned down to her and whispered softly in her ear,

"Let me see that book."

"No," Hermione said weakly as she was now rather distracted by his body pressed so tightly against hers and his hand caressing her back so gently.

Tom leaned even closer down to her and she could almost feel his lips against her skin as he spoke in his seductive voice, "Come on. I just want to have a quick look."

Hermione shivered as she felt Tom now kissing her cheek. Then his mouth trailed down and nibbled sensuously at her neck while his arms still pressed her tightly against his body. She felt her hands sliding up his back and clutching the fabric of his black robe.

"You know in the end I'll win anyway," Tom purred into her ear before he started to nibble at her earlobe.

Hermione could feel his hand sliding down her back until it found the rim of her blouse. His hand slipped underneath her blouse and began to caress her skin.

"No, Tom," she said, though half of her mind wasn't really paying attention anymore but just wanted him to continue.

Tom seemed to be able to read her thoughts even without using Legilimens and didn't stop. He continued to skim with his fingers over her bare skin, leaving behind a tingling sensation, while his other hand now held her head gently and bent it to the side so that Tom could trace kisses on her neck. Hermione closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of his lips on her skin.

"Show it to me," Tom whispered the command so seductively.

Yeah, Hermione thought befuddled, why didn't she just show him the stupid book? Then they could continue this. At that thought she mentally wagged her head.

Show him the book? Pull yourself together, Granger! For God's sake!
She pushed with her hands against his chest and said in a slightly panting but otherwise firm voice, "I said, no."

Suddenly an enraged voice yelled from behind Tom, "You heard her, dirty bastard! Let go of her!"

Tom straightened himself up and then turned around to whomever had just yelled like that. As he turned around he snaked an arm around Hermione's waist, pulling her against his body. Now that he had moved, she was able to see the person standing right in front of the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. It was Longbottom. His face was morphed into an angry, purple mask as he scowled darkly at Tom.

"I said, let her go!" Longbottom growled again, panting with rage.

Hermione furrowed her brow. What was happening here? She looked confused from Longbottom's angry face to Tom. But he wasn't any help as his blank mask was once again covering his every emotion. Instead a rather bored expression had appeared on his face as Tom scanned the Gryffindor boy. Though, Hermione noticed, there was a dark smile playing around his lips.

"Longbottom, how very impolite," Tom chided in a calm and condescending tone. "Can't you see that I'm in the middle of something here? So rude, no wonder you are in Gryffindor," he ended, his voice a rather insulting sneer.

After that little speech Hermione could watch Longbottom getting even redder in the face. And she noticed that his hands were shaking in suppressed rage.

"Get your filthy hands away from Hermione, you monster!" he finally raged at Tom.

Hermione could feel Tom tense and his eyes narrowed dangerously. She could even sense the first signs of Tom's dark magic in the air. The mocking smirk left his face and there was an icy cold touch in his eyes as he fixed Longbottom with a glare.

"Be careful," Tom said, his voice was a low hiss but the threat it carried was unmistakable. "You don't want to insult me."

Hermione watched Longbottom pulling his wand. As a result the pressure of the dark magic dancing around Tom intensified alarmingly. She needed to act now, Hermione decided. Lest she risked Longbottom getting hospitalized. So she extended a hand and laid it lightly on Tom's arm. He didn't pay her any attention but continued to stare threateningly at Longbottom.

"Tom," Hermione whispered in a soothing voice.

Slowly Tom looked down at her, his grey eyes were still hard as steel.

"Calm down," Hermione said softly while she looked up at him with pleading eyes.

Tom's grey eyes, radiating nothing but hatred, wandered shortly back at Longbottom before they returned to her again. She was relieved to see the burning fury leaving them slowly as Tom looked at her.

Then he bent down to her and whispered coldly in her ear, "Next time, you won't be able to stop me."

Tom straightened up again and cast one last hate-filled glance at Longbottom before he turned around and strode down the dark corridor. Hermione watched his retreating back, glad that she had been able to stop him from doing something regrettable.
…well, at least she would have regretted it.

Hermione sighed tiredly and then started to walk towards the common room entrance. This just wasn't her day. In the mean time, Longbottom had put his wand away and had opened the entrance for her. Hermione glanced at him quickly. He didn't look enraged anymore. Instead there now flickered worry over his face as he looked her way.

What was wrong with him? Why had he suddenly stopped to give her the cold shoulder? It had been weeks and weeks ago since last he had spoken with her with something else than scorn in his voice. What had happened? He hadn't seen her fighting those black-cloaked men, had he? Hermione wondered panicky. As her thoughts darted back to those men attacking her, she remembered the emblem she had seen on the leader's dark cloak. She knew it very well. A triangle, a circle and a line through the middle…

"Sit down, Hermione," she was brought out of her musings by Longbottom's soft voice.

She found herself standing before one of the sofas in the common room. Weasley and Lupin were already sitting on it. Hermione frowned as she saw the same concern on their faces she had seen on Longbottom's. She sat down anyway. She was rather tired by now and her arm still stung a little even after Tom had patched it up. Longbottom sat on the chair across from her and pulled his wand.

He waved it and said, "Muffliato."

Instantly the noise around them lessened and sounded muffled.

"Glad, you finally managed the spell," Hermione said while she smiled at Longbottom.

Smiling, though, wasn't a very good idea, she realized as the cut in her lip hurt again. She winced and rubbed cautiously at her bruised jaw which caused Longbottom frowning at her.

Then Lupin asked in a gentle voice, "Hermione, where did you get that bruise?"

She turned her head so she looked at Lupin. He was staring at her still that worry in his eyes.

"W… what?" she asked weakly.

They surely didn't know about the fight and the dark cloaked men? That would lead to a lot of nasty questions. Questions she couldn't answer. Tom was worse enough with his endless inquisitions. Hermione skidded anxiously in her seat on the sofa. Did they know something? What should she tell them? she wondered frantically. Then she flinched as she could feel a warm hand on her forearm.

"Who hit you?" Lupin asked her in a soft voice.

Hermione looked from his hand on her arm to Lupin's face. What could she tell him? That some crazy dangerous men wanted to kill her? That would be a real damper on the mood.

"W- what do you mean?" she asked weakly.

"You can tell us," Weasley told her in a soothing voice. He, too, was looking at her with concern shining in his eyes.

Then Longbottom said brusquely, "We know who it was. You don't have to hide it any longer."

Hermione stopped breathing and her eyes shot back at him. How did they know?

But then Longbottom said in a furious tone, "It was Riddle!"
Hermione's eyes widened as she stared at Longbottom in disbelief.

"What are you going on about?" she finally asked him confused.

Longbottom leaned towards her and looked at her with...

...pity?

"We have seen you in Hogsmeade today. We've seen you with Riddle." In the corners of her eyes Hermione could see Weasley nod sadly. Then Longbottom continued, "That bastard treats you like dirt. And now, he's obviously beaten you."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, trying to understand what he was talking about. Then her eyes wandered to her two other friends sitting beside her on the sofa. They were looking at her with grave faces.

What were they talking about? Why did they think it was Tom who had hit her? Her thoughts wandered back to Hogsmeade. She had seen Lonbgottom and Weasley there. And then Hermione understood. The two of them had seen her and Tom as they had had a row. Tom had really been rather intimidating back then. Maybe that was why they now assumed it was also him who had hurt her. That was ridiculous.

"No, he didn't hit me," Hermione told them in a firm voice.

The result was that she could watch Longbottom frowning at her in disbelief.

"Who was it then?" he asked her. "If it wasn't Riddle?"

"Um… it was… I..." Hermione stammered.

That was a fine mess she had gotten herself into. She didn't want them to think it had been Tom but she couldn't tell them the truth either.

"Hermione, you should really leave him," Longbottom told her in a sympathetic voice.

"No!" she replied hastily. "You see, he didn't do it, okay?"

"We know you like him," Weasley said in a gentle tone. "But he has no right to treat you like that."

"You don't have to deny it. It's plain to see that the filthy bugger is abusing you," Longbottom huffed. Then his eyes softened and he asked, "Does he demand other things from you as well?"

Hermione looked at him and then said indignantly, "What are you talking about?"

"Is he forcing you to satisfy his sexual needs?"

Hermione stared at Longbottom scandalized. "No, what are you thinking? He would never do something like that."

She ran a shaky hand through her hair. If this wasn't so damn serious, it would have almost been funny.

"Look," Hermione said in a firm voice while she looked them in the eyes, one by one. "It wasn't Tom. I can't tell you who attacked me. But you have to believe me when I say, Tom is innocent."

She could see it in their eyes. They didn't believe one word she had said. How frustrating!
But right now, she was just too tired to deal with them any longer. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed at the bridge of her nose before she said, "Let's discuss this another time. I'm tired."

She got up from the sofa and walked to the stair case leading to her dormitory. Hermione could almost feel how their eyes followed her, staring at her in concern.

Somehow it was nice to know that her three Gryffindor friends cared about her so much. It meant a lot to her that Longbottom had obviously abandoned his hostile attitude towards her. He liked her after all. He even wanted to protect her. But right now it was just irritating. Her hand wandered to her still throbbing jaw. Like Tom would ever do something like that, she thought incredulously. On the other hand, Hermione could understand where their concern about Tom mistreating her was coming from. The Heir of Slytherin could be rather frightening at times.

Hermione had arrived in her dormitory and now lay down on her bed, not bothering to change into her drew the curtains shut. Her thoughts left the three Gryffindors, sitting down in the common room and probably discussing her abusive relationship with Tom, and wandered back to the incident in Hogsmeade. Those men in the dark cloaks, how had they managed to find her? The only time they had met before today was as she had broken into Flamel's flat. At that point in time those men hadn't known who she was. They had been as surprised as she had been in finding her in the flat.

The frightening thing was that now, just a few weeks later, they seemed to know a lot about her. Their leader had addressed her by name. So somehow they had managed to find her and identify her. Hermione wondered how they had managed that. She didn't belong into this time so there was not much evidence of her existence. But those men had succeeded in finding her anyway. They had even known that she would be in Hogsmeade today and had prepared a trap for her.

Hermione rolled on her side, hugging her soft Gryffindor pillow.

The next alarming thing was the strength of those men. They had appeared to be well trained. It wasn't so much the magical power of every single one of them that frightened Hermione but the way in which they had worked together. They had been well organized with a leader being the vanguard. All this indicated that they were not a bunch of mere muggers. They were more like a tightly organized team of soldiers. Hermione didn't want to think what would have happened if Tom hadn't found her in time.

But the next question was the most important one. Who were those men?

As the leader of them had grabbed her and pressed her against the wall, Hermione had been able to see that emblem on his cloak. The triangle that was the Invisibility Cloak, the circle was the Resurrection Stone and the line through the middle represented the Elder Wand. Together they were a symbol for the Deathly Hallows. And…

Hermione hugged the pillow even tighter.

And it was the symbol of Grindelwald.

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}}
I Love You

After a night of barely any sleep Hermione woke up and groaned as she realized it was a Monday. Normally she really liked Mondays as they were the beginning of another week of classes, homework and things to learn. But lately she had come to hate Mondays. They actually made her quite jumpy. Hermione got up from her bed and shuffled to the bathroom, while ignoring her room mates' chatter.

The reason for her new aversion for Mondays was the first class right after breakfast: Potions. Hermione really didn't want to continue brewing a potion that could very well be her demise. The Ortus portion still weighed heavily on her mind. Mixed with blood this potion was able to give the exact date of birth of the test person. There was no way she could allow anyone to run that potion with her blood. So Hermione had decided to sabotage the potion. Though she still hadn't taken any action yet. It would be unwise to do it now, as they hadn't progressed very far in making the potion. If she was to ruin it now, they would still have time to start a new approach. Hermione didn't think she could pull something like this sabotage more than one time. Tom would surely get suspicious if their potion would be faulty two times in a row. He was incredibly observant.

Hermione washed up and then sighed tiredly while she brushed her hair. Well, she at least tried to brush it, she realized as she stared irritated at her fuzzy hair. Then she gave up and returned her brush to her other toiletries lying on a shelf.

Tom really was too observant for his own good, she thought decidedly as her thoughts wandered back to yesterday. How had he managed to find out about Peverell's manuscript? She certainly had never, in any way, mentioned the book while in Tom's presence. In fact, she had never spoken to anybody about Peverell's book. She had actually racked her brain about how Tom had found out. Though with no success. It was a mystery. But as his inexplicable knowledge complicated her situation, it was nothing compared to her other problem. Hermione's thoughts now drifted away from her boyfriend and to the men who had ambushed her yesterday. The more she thought on it the surer she was that those had been Grindelwald's men. That coat of arms on the black cloaks of her attackers was definitely a symbol Grindelwald had used. It actually mirrored his obsession with the Deathly Hallows. That Grindelwald was trying to steal a book written by one of the creators of the Hallows was no surprise either.

Hermione slowly walked out of the bathroom. With relief she noticed that her dorm mates had already left. She took her school bag from her bed, while her gaze sweeped over her trunk where she knew Peverell's manuscript was hidden.

That Grindelwald had stepped into the picture was a severe problem, Hermione had to admit reluctantly. She certainly didn't want to fight against him or his men. She had already fought against enough Dark Wizards as it was but apart from that, there still was the time line problem. She had obviously stolen a book that would have otherwise fallen into Grindelwald's hands. Had she changed the past with her actions? The guilt again washed over her at that thought.

Pull yourself together! she hissed at herself.

After all, she didn't know for sure if it was even possible to change the past. If so, then she was in big trouble even without having stolen the manuscript. Hermione thought as suddenly an image of Tom rose up in her mind. She shook her head in an attempt to get rid of her disturbing thoughts. There was no use in lamenting over things she couldn't change anymore. Obviously Grindelwald was after her now that was a fact. Fortunately, she was relatively safe here behind Hogwarts' protective walls. Though she shouldn't relax because of that, Hermione decided. Grindelwald's men seemed to be
rather well-trained. Maybe it would be a good idea to train her own abilities so she was prepared should they decide to strike again. She hadn't done that in some time, Hermione admitted guiltily. Lately she hadn't worked much on the Elder Magic. It hadn't been a conscious decision to abandon her attempts to gain more control over that magic but there had always been other things to do. She had had to go to classes, do her homework and of course there was Tom. During all of this she had really neglected the Elder Magic. Something she should make up for now. So Hermione decided to start working with the Elder Magic again. After all, she had gained something like rudimentary control over it. She had even managed to use the magic while performing spells. Still, there was certainly room for improvement. Yes, after classes were over today, she would go back to train the Elder Magic, Hermione thought somehow reassured, conveniently ignoring the small book that lay hidden in her trunk.

So she left her dorm and descended the stairs to the common room. But before she arrived downstairs, she could hear voices coming from the common room.

"How dare you…?" an angry voice, which sounded suspiciously like Longbottom, shouted furiously.

"Please, can't we just reconcile?" another voice, calm and exaggeratedly polite, answered with false sincerity.

Hermione sighed as she had recognized the second voice, too. She really should have expected something like this. Though she was glad that Longbottom obviously liked her again, that wasn't going to improve his potentially hazardous attitude towards Tom. Especially now that he thought Tom was a woman basher. Hermione shortly considered to just turn around, get back to bed and ignore she ever heard anything. But that would be negligent, she admitted reluctantly. So she walked down the stairs and entered the common room.

Tom was too tired to ponder how much he hated Mondays as he got up. Why did they have to start classes in the middle of the night? he wondered ill-tempered as he slowly stood up from his bed. It was twenty minutes later as he stepped out of the Slytherin common room, perfectly dressed and with still slightly damp hair from the shower. He had more than enough time before his first class, potions, would start. Tom had gotten up earlier than normal today because he planned to visit the Gryffindor common room to get Hermione. He wanted to make sure that she was alright. After all it was only yesterday that she had been attacked.

Tom shuddered as he remembered how he had found her in that back yard yesterday. That pathetic man had grabbed her while there had been blood trickling from her mouth. Tom could again feel his angry magic awaken when he just thought about that image of Hermione. He tried to prevent his dark magic from swirling around him as he didn't want any teacher to see him like that. Yesterday, though, he hadn't hold back anything. He had been beyond furious as he had found Hermione threatened by those men. He was actually surprised that he hadn't killed one of those lousy wankers. They had hurt Hermione, Tom thought as he balled his hands into tight fists. No-one was allowed to touch her, let alone injure her. That witch belonged to him after all.

Tom clenched his teeth and tried to reign in his angrily boiling magic as he remembered the wounds on Hermione's body. That filthy man had really dared to hit her. There had been a bruise on her face and her arm had been slit open. Whoever those people were, the next time he met them they would be lucky if he didn't murder them. Tom wasn't very forgiving when people tried to hurt his possessions. One thing still puzzled him though. As he had seen Hermione pressed against the wall while that man had threatened her, Tom's fury had been mingled with something else. Something
alien. He just couldn't put his finger on what it could have been.

_Fear?_ It was strange. How could he be in fear of somebody else's life? That was new and just, well, strange.

Whatever it had been, in face of his rage it had dropped in the background anyway. Tom could still feel it boiling inside of him, the wrath. Who were those men? Why had they attacked Hermione? It had obviously something to do with that book she had stolen from Flamel's flat. It was important enough so that those men attacked Hermione to get it from her. Tom felt immensely irritated by the fact that Hermione hadn't shown him the book. She had even outright refused to let him see the book as he had told her he wanted to have a look.

*How insolent.*

After all she was his, so she shouldn't have any secrets from him. By finally becoming his girlfriend, she had admitted to the fact that Tom owned her, hadn't she? Still she stubbornly insisted on having her secrets from him. The girl was not in the least bit easy to manage. With force though, Tom knew, he wouldn't achieve anything with her. No, he had to try to get the information in some other way. Thanks to Slughorn's tendency to blabber away, he now knew that the name Peverell seemed to be linked with the Deathly Hallows. Since he first heard about the Hallows Tom had done some research. Obviously there were three of those Hallows, each one with questionable properties. Tom shook his head disapprovingly. The whole topic was a little too dubious to his taste. The Hallows were more a myth than anything else. There even were rumours about this cult searching for the Hallows.

_Idiots._

One thing, though, Tom had found rather intriguing. It was said that if someone managed to combine all three Hallows, they would be able to conquer death. An interesting fairy tale, indeed. But still, a fairy tale. As far as Tom knew, there existed only one way to evade death. He had done a really extensive research on that. But however dodgy those Deathly Hallows were, it seemed that Hermione was somehow interested in them. Tom still wanted to know why.

By now he had nearly reached the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. It still irked him how Hermione ended up in that bothersome house. Those people got really on his nerve. With pleasure Tom thought back to the day when he had nearly cursed Longbottom. That had been right after Slughorn's last party. He really regretted how Hermione had caught him before he could fire the curse. Back then she had told him that she wouldn't accept such behaviour towards her friends. While Tom didn't think she was in the position to forbid him anything, he still didn't want her to be angry with him. She could be quite arduous when angered. Though he really didn't know if he could pull through with the resolution of not hexing her friends, Tom thought as he had finally reached that ridiculous portrait leading into the Gryffindor common room. As he stepped into the common room he was instantly hit by those unbearably bright gold and red colours.

_Geez, what are they trying to say?_ Tom wondered condescendingly. *'Look at me, I'm a hyperactive idiot'._

He tried to ignore this assault on the good taste and let his gaze sweep over the room. Full of ridiculously cheerful dorks but no Hermione anywhere, he noticed as he couldn't spot her. Maybe she was still up in her dorm. He shortly considered going up there but in the end decided against it. It wouldn't benefit his reputation if the perfect model student would burst into a girls' dorm. Though he wouldn't mind getting a glimpse of Hermione without her clothes on, he thought as a smirk appeared on his face. He was lost in his happy thoughts so didn't notice as a group of Gryffindors walked towards where he was standing by the entrance hole.
"What are you doing here?" Tom was brought out of his daydreams by a rather hostile voice.

He found Longbottom and his two sidekicks, Weasley and Lupin, standing directly in front of him. Tom tried to suppress it but an evil smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as his eyes wandered over the group. Longbottom seemed to be a true Gryffindor as his aversion and hate was overtly present on his face while he glowered darkly at Tom. The two other boys, too, stared disapprovingly at him.

*Oh no, what are they going to do?* Tom wondered sarcastically. *Maybe trying to curse me with their vastly superior magic?* He couldn't help but snigger at that thought.

"Listen, you sick creep!" Longbottom spat at him enraged. "This is the Gryffindor common room and we certainly don't need people like *you* here."

The deprecative edge in his voice managed to raise Tom's own temper. Though he had to admit that he wasn't doing very much to hold himself back. It was just a pity that he couldn't curse that prick here, Tom thought as his eyes shortly flashed to the other students present. A few of them were watching the whole conversation quite blatantly.

*Damn Gryffindors!* he thought and decided to pull his innocent prefect act

"I'm just waiting for my girlfriend," Tom replied in a voice dripping with earnest affability. "I don't want to disturb anyone here."

"Don't think you can fool us, Riddle," Longbottom blustered at him. "We all know what a twisted freak you are."

*How difficult.* Tom could barely hold back his furious magic from lashing out at Longbottom. Still it was worth it to see that look of helpless rage on the idiot's face.

"I'm sorry," Tom whispered, while still making sure that everyone could catch his words. "I know you fancy Hermione, too. But still there is no reason to vent your anger on me."

He then easily arranged his features into a look of honest sympathy as he eyed Longbottom. With pleasure Tom noted those whispered conversations suddenly starting all around him.

"How dare you…?" the blond Gryffindor barked furiously and his friends had to hold him back from lunging at Tom.

"Please, can't we just reconcile?" Tom said with sincerity seeping through his voice.

He knew he was overdoing it a little now but it was just too much fun to spite this idiot. Obviously the other students where buying it, Tom noted satisfied as he saw looks of outrage on their faces.

"Marc! Stop it!" Tom suppressed another evil grin as now a girl interfered in this amusing conversation.

The girl had jet-black, long hair and was obviously the ringleader of a group of other Gryffindor girls. Right now, they all glowered at Longbottom.

"Diana, keep out of this. You don't know what this is about," Longbottom hissed at the black haired girl.

"No, really," another girl with a painfully shrill voice said reproachfully. "You can't treat Riddle this way. He didn't do anything to you."
Tom had to work to not break down with evil laughter. But he was glad that he had managed to contain himself when another girl unexpectedly showed up.

"What is going on here?" Hermione asked with a sour look on her face.

She already regretted not having followed her first impulse and had gone back to bed again, Hermione thought as she let her gaze quickly take in the situation in front of her. There was Longbottom, clearly enraged, while Weasley and Lupin tried to somehow restrain him. Her dear dorm mates stood not far away, still staring disapprovingly at Longbottom. Finally Hermione's eyes landed on Tom. He was standing there in front of Longbottom and looked cool and composed. His face was covered by a mask of fake politeness but Hermione could tell that he was immensely amused by the whole incident. So she frowned at him annoyed which only made him arch one eyebrow gracefully.

"Forget it, I actually don't want to know," she finally sighed tiredly.

Then she turned to the exit of the common room planning to leave for the Great Hall. Tom opened the portrait-door for her before he stepped aside to let her pass.

"Hermione, you can't seriously want to be left alone with that evil git," Longbottom yelled after her concerned.

Hermione turned around and smiled at him. "I told you, you don't have to worry about me," she tried to soothe him.

Then she finally stepped out of the Gryffindor common room, closely followed by Tom. Hermione could just hear Rose's shrill voice nagging, "Stop insulting Riddle like that." then mercifully the portrait closed, shutting out any conversation. Hermione continued her way down to the Great Hall, while Tom fell in step beside her.

"What's suddenly up with that idiot?" Tom asked her after some time. "I thought he hates you."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr Sensible," Hermione replied snappishly. "But obviously Marc's gotten over his 'hate'."

Tom just looked down at her expectantly which caused Hermione to sigh again.

"He found me with this on my face," she said while gesturing at her still bruised jaw and her cut lip. "So of course he was a bit concerned about me."

"Hmm." Made Tom while he narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. "That might be true but it still doesn't explain why he just now tried to murder me the moment I set foot into your common room."

Hermione looked away from his piercing stare, she actually didn't want to tell him why Longbottom was again on speaking terms with her.

"My friends asked me yesterday in the common room how I got hurt," she said awkwardly and then shot a glance at Tom but quickly looked away from him again. "I couldn't tell them about those guys attacking me, of course. No-one knows that I stole the Peverell manuscript." She rushed on so fast that the words flowed together resulting in one big, incomprehensible splutter, "And now they might think that it's you who hit me."

There was a pause in which neither one of them said anything. Hermione started to fiddle nervously with a strand of her curly hair, while she still avoided looking at Tom.
"And why would they assume something like that?" he finally asked her in a demanding voice, which was slightly tinged by anger now.

"Er… I don't know?" Hermione replied sheepishly.

She turned her head and glanced at him. She found him scowling at her. There was a rather angry frown between his eyebrows and he clenched his jaw tightly.

"Look, I really don't care what your idiotic friends think about me," he stated in a frighteningly cold tone. "But Longbottom's behaviour is rather bothersome. Couldn't you have told him that it wasn't me?"

"I did," Hermione quickly assured before she continued in a meek voice, "But he kinda didn't believe me."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her in anger then he scoffed, "Some nice friends you have there."

"It's not as if you ever tried to be remotely civil towards them," she chided him in a quite tone. Anger was now clearly visible on his face as he glared down at her. Hermione sighed softly then she stepped a little closer to him and slowly slipped her arm around his waist.

"Marc's just a little hot-headed," she explained in a gentle tone, trying to calm Tom down. "He's stupid that way."

She felt him relax a little as her arm was slung around him. But then he hissed at her darkly which made her shudder a little, "Whatever the reason, someone should hold that git back when he's around me. Or I'll show him that I can be just as evil as he assumes me to be."

"How about you just ignore him?" Hermione suggested softly as she started to lead him away, still with her arm around his waist.

Instead of an answer, Tom just glared down at her darkly. But the evil glint left his eyes quickly as his gaze wandered over her face. He raised a hand and gently skimmed over the bruise on her jaw.

"Is it still hurting?" he asked her concerned.

She smiled up at him. "You know me. I've been through worse."

"Surprisingly enough, that doesn't comfort me at all," he just said dryly.

Then he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. That gesture was rather possessive, Hermione thought but she didn't say anything. She knew that Tom must have been quite concerned about her as he had found her cornered by Grindelwald's men. So she decided to overlook his possessive behaviour and allowed him to lead her down to the Great Hall. They had almost reached the first floor as Tom spoke again.

"Who were those men? Tell me!" he took her off-guard with his sudden demand.

"Um… I don't know?"

Not very surprisingly, the glare was back on his face.

"You don't know? Or you don't want to tell me?" he asked frostily. "Like you don't want to show me the book."
Hermione had to look away from the angry and even reproachful expression on his face. She knew how much Tom hated that she wasn't open with him. But this was a part of her life that she could not tell him about.

"Look, why is that so important anyway?" Hermione said in a soft voice. "They didn't manage to seriously injure me. So it's water-"

"-water under the bridge," Tom completed the sentence for her in a low and terse tone. He turned his head and again scowled down at her. "That reminds me of a very similar conversation we once had in a bar in Diagon Alley. Do you remember?"

Hermione glanced up at him but didn't answer anything. She did remember that conversation, though.

"Earlier on that very same day I was walking through London, minding my own business, as suddenly a girl ran into me. Closely followed by a pack of rather infuriated wizards," Tom said, irritation now oozing out of his voice. "And you might be surprised to hear that those wizards wore the same style of cloaks as the men who attacked you again yesterday."

"Did they now?" she wondered innocently.

"Hermione, stop playing dumb," he hissed at her in a sharp voice. "Why are those men after you?"

She just stared up at him but didn't answer anything. Hermione didn't like it very much having to lie to Tom so she preferred to not answer at all. They had stopped walking by now. He stood before her and glared rather darkly down at her.

"Why do you need that book?" he demanded to know.

Hermione continued staring at him. She could see a dangerous glint in his eyes and knew that he was rather enraged by her silence. But this was something he would have to accept.

"Tell me!" he hissed at her in a commanding voice.

Hermione sighed as she was again hit by his furious stare. Then she reached out for him and put a hand gently down on his arm.

"Tom," she began in a calm tone. "I'm sure you don't tell me everything about you either. So just accept that I have my own secrets."

He continued to glare down at her incensed but she just looked back at him with a blank face. She knew he was not at all concuring with her statement. But after a while he seemed to come to the conclusion that he wouldn't be able to get anything from her right now.

"Fine!" he just snarled at her angrily.

He grabbed her arm and resumed his way to the Great Hall. Hermione followed him. As he was stomping down the corridor she once again wondered how he had learned about Peverell's book in the first place. She knew from experience how persistent Tom could be. She was sure that she hadn't yet seen the end of it. They just entered the corridor leading to the Great Hall as he suddenly asked in a quiet voice,

"Do you think they are going to attack you again?"

He hadn't turned around to her but was still dragging her behind him. Hermione frowned at him but
then answered in a soft voice, "I don't know."

Which made him stop and whip around to her. There was again an angry look on his face but she also spotted concern shining in his eyes.

"I really don't know," she whispered honestly.

He didn't reply anything but just continued to look at her. The anger had by now disappeared only the concern remained. Then he suddenly reached out for her and pulled her towards him so that she leaned into his chest. His arms were wrapped around her and he held her tightly. After a moment he ended the embrace again, took her hand in his and continued his way towards the entry to the Great Hall. Hermione was a little confused by his sudden mood swing but she decided to not comment on it. As they finally entered the Great Hall, Tom led her over to the Gryffindor table. Hermione was somehow glad that she would, at least for the breakfast, be able to escape his interrogation.

She sat down at the table and was happy to find a plate of ham sandwiches right in front of her. Somehow she was quite hungry. After the Hogsmeade fiasco yesterday, she hadn't been able to get anything to eat. Hermione just reached for one of the sandwiches as she felt someone sliding into the seat next to her. She looked up and raised her eyebrows in surprise as she found Tom sitting beside her.

She stared at him for a moment before she asked confused, "What are you doing here?"

Tom didn't even grace her with a look but just reached for the ham sandwiches and placed one on her plate before he served himself.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he asked her in a perfectly normal voice. "I'm having breakfast."

Hermione now furrowed her brow and continued to look at him, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Don't you have to sit at the Slytherin table?" she finally asked him slowly.

"No," he replied calmly.

"What, 'no'?"

Tom finally turned his head and looked at her. His grey eyes scanned her and she could see a certain amount of amusement dancing in them.

"I don't have to sit there," he said lightly. "There's no school rule forbidding to sit at another house's table, is there?"

Hermione opened her mouth. But she actually really didn't know about any such rule, so she closed her mouth again. She tried to ignore the triumphant sneer on his face and turned back to her plate. Hopefully Tom was just feeling over-protective and didn't sit here to continue his questioning. She started on her sandwich and let her gaze wander over the other Gryffindors. Most of them had already noticed the Slytherin sitting at their table but no-one seemed to be offended by that fact.

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Of course not, Hermione thought dryly. Because everybody loves Tom Riddle.

She could even see Rose, Lucia and Viola, her ever so helpful dorm mates, staring at Tom with glassy looks in their eyes. Then Hermione's gaze wandered towards the Slytherin table. She found a few of them, mostly the girls, glaring at her darkly. They still hadn't forgiven her for stealing away their handsome prefect. Not one of the Slytherins dared to glare at Tom though. His followers ignored the whole thing altogether. Hermione just shrugged her shoulders and reached for another
sandwich. It was then that Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin sat down on the seats opposite her. Hermione was not surprised at all to find all three boys glaring at Tom angrily. She could feel her stomach drop as she saw that murderous expression on Longbottom's face.

This can't be good, she sighed inwardly.

The three Gryffindors continued to eye Tom as if they were just now contemplating on how to kill him best. Tom on the other hand just sat there elegantly, continued on his sandwich and looked as if he had no concern in the world.

"Why don't you sit over there," Weasley asked Tom, his voice uncharacteristically cold, as he gestured towards the Slytherin table. "With the other snakes?"

Tom just looked at the three boys in boredom before he said blasé, "I can sit there every day. Now I just wanted to be with my girlfriend."

He then laid a hand on Hermione's forearm which made Longbottom narrow his eyes at him.

"But we don't want you here!" the blonde Gryffindor now bellowed acridly.

Tom just smiled at him mildly and said in a sympathetic voice, "That's too bad."

Still he remained sitting at his place and calmly poured himself another cup of coffee. He then continued on his breakfast and completely ignored the three vengeful Gryffindors glaring at him.

After a while Longbottom spoke again. He asked Tom accusingly, his voice shaking with barely suppressed anger, "So how was your day yesterday, Riddle?"

Hermione rolled her eyes as she saw that insincere smile taking form on Tom's face as he looked back at Longbottom.

Then he said in an insufferably friendly voice, "Why, it was quite smashing." Before he turned towards her and smirked wickedly at her, "Don't you think, Hermione?"

She gaped at Tom. He didn't just really say that. Her shocked expression only helped to widen the evil smirk on his face. Hermione almost didn't dare to look at her friends but she pulled herself together and turned her head away from Tom. The look on Longbottom's face was just one thing: dangerous. His face was completely purple, a sharp line had appeared between his eyebrows and he was positively quaking with suppressed rage. In short, he was seething with fury. Lupin and Weasley seemed to be able to restrain themselves better but they, too, were looking far from calm as they glowered darkly at Tom.

Hermione looked back at Tom, now angry herself. He was calmly sipping from his cup of coffee while he smiled rather evilly at the three Gryffindors opposite him. He was obviously enjoying the show. Hermione would have liked to strangle him. Must he behave like this? Now her friends would be confirmed in their belief that Tom had hurt her yesterday. Hermione grinded her teeth as she understood Tom's actions. He was obviously still angry with her for not telling him about Peverell's book and about her refusing to let him see it. Thus he was trying to make her life miserable, too.

"You sadistic asshole!" Longbottom finally clamoured rabidly at Tom, which earned him quite a few shocked and outraged looks from the other Gryffindors at the table. "I'm going to make you regret what you've done to her."

As a reply Tom just leaned leisurely back in his chair, smiled at Longbottom in an offending way and raised one eyebrow gracefully as if to say 'Really? Try me.' Hermione narrowed her eyes in
anger at Tom. He was such a lying creep. Then she kicked him angrily in the shin under the table. He unfortunately managed to suppress a painful yelp and continued to sit casually in his chair. In the corners of her eyes she could see Longbottom's hand twitch towards his wand and she knew she had to prevent a duel from breaking lose in the Great Hall.

So she leaned a little forwards and smiled reassuringly at Longbottom before she said in what hopefully was a calming tone, "Don't listen to him. He's just being silly."

The angry frown never left Longbottom's face but at least he didn't reach for his wand any more. Hermione turned around to Tom again and hissed at him, "And you, Riddle. Shut up!"

Tom looked at her and she nearly groaned as she still saw that amusement glinting in his eyes. Though it wasn't mirrored on his face as, despite his apparent delight, he somehow managed to frown at her darkly.

"I don't like that tone you are using, dear. It seems you haven't been paying attention yesterday," he chided in a quiet voice, and Hermione was pretty sure her friends were the only ones close enough to be able to hear every word.

Tom leaned a little towards her, extended a hand and skimmed with his fingers gingerly over the bruise on her jaw.

"You don't want me to teach you again, do you?" His voice was icy cold as he threatened her but Hermione could still see the mischievous glint in his eyes.

She stared at him with a horrified expression on her face. She knew that wasn't exactly beneficial to her situation but she just couldn't help it. How could Tom be so devious? she wondered as he was once again presenting her with one of his trade-mark smirks. Her head whipped to Longbottom who had jumped up from his seat. He was shaking with fury as he glared at Tom.

"You… you…" he bellowed, obviously too enraged to find the right insult.

Hermione quickly got up from her seat, too. This was getting a little out of hand, she thought angrily.

"Look at the time," she declared in a loud voice, trying to distract the curious stares of the other Gryffindors away from the irate Longbottom. "We'll be late for potions."

She leaned down, gabbed Tom's arm and pulled at him. He obviously didn't want to leave yet but as he saw that mixture of panic and anger on her face he took pity on her, reconsidered his decision and got up from the table. Hermione now clutched his wrist and tugged him after her in direction to the exit from the Great Hall. She breathed out relieved as they finally exited the hall but she still clutched Tom tightly as if she were afraid he would walk back and cause more havoc any second now. She could hear him chuckling infuriatingly. She turned around to him and saw a look of amusement on his face as he sniggered at her. She narrowed her eyes in anger.

"Maybe I should teach you how to behave!" she managed to grind out.

Tom took a step away from her and looked at her with wide eyes, feigning fear.

"Are you threatening me?" he mocked her, false anxiety lacing his words.

"Stop that!" she barked at him. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from my friends?"

"Yes, and I will," he replied now perfectly calm again. Then he added innocently, "But you can't expect me to not defend myself should they ever decide to attack me."
Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as she stared at him irately. Tom just smirked at her haughtily. In a flush of anger, she flicked her wrist so that her wand landed in her hand. She whirled it in an angry motion and sent a Stinging hex his way. Unfortunately Tom had seen that one coming and had pulled his own wand which he now waved to deflect the hex. Hermione threw her hands up in frustration as she saw her hex had been unsuccessful and she growled in anger before she continued her way towards the dungeons. Tom sauntered after her, still that contented smirk in place. On their way down to the potions class room, Hermione didn't stop to rant.

"I can't believe you really did that. I mean, don't you have any decorum? And after I told you to stay away from them, too," she lectured him. "You know what you should do after graduation? Become an actor. I'm sure everybody would love you. Or, even better… a politician. No-one would expect you not to lie then. Just perfect for you."

On she went, all the way down to the dungeons. Tom had obviously long since stopped to listen as he stalked confidently after her, still with an arrogant smirk on his face and didn't say anything. They just walked down a deserted corridor as he changed his mind and interrupted her ranting in his smooth voice,

"You know what, Hermione?" She turned around to him and found him smiling at her attractively which only made her scowl at him. "You look cute when you are all nettled like that."

Hermione just stared at him enraged. Her hand twitched but this time she resisted the urge to pull her wand. Instead she turned around and continued stomping down the corridor. His soft chuckling didn't help to lift her mood. She angrily readjusted her school bag which hung over her left shoulder. The bag slid down and banged against her arm. A sharp pain seared through her as it hit the deep cut she had received yesterday. Hermione gasped softly and cradled her left arm. Tom was instantly by her side, took the school bag from her and steadied her. All taunt had left his face as he scanned her arm worriedly. He slid an arm around her waist and led her towards one of the doors in the corridor. As he made to open the door Hermione had recovered enough to whisper,

"What-?"

"I need to look at that," he cut her short while gesturing at her arm.

He opened the door and pulled her inside.

"Tom, this is a girls' toilet," Hermione exclaimed indignantly as she entered.

"Yes, and you are a girl. Where's the problem?" he retorted distractedly as he pulled her over to the sinks.

"But you are not," she said but still followed him.

He turned around to her and smirked. "Glad that you noticed."

Hermione ignored his jibe but just stated, "We are going to be late for potions."

He shrugged at her and then helped her remove her black outer robes before he took her left arm and rolled up her sleeve. With a wave of his wand the bandage around her forearm and elbow was gone. Hermione couldn't see the cut very well but what she saw didn't look too good. The wound looked raw and deep but now also purulent. Black veins were originating from it and even stretched over her still intact skin.

"Hmm." Made Tom as he examined her arm.
"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I thought so yesterday but I wasn't sure," he explained as he looked up from her arm. "It's cursed."

"What?"

Hermione was a little worried now. She knew from experience that a cursed wound was no laughing matter. Her arm certainly hurt more than should be expected from such a small cut.

"Don't panic," he said in a reassuring voice. "I think I can break the curse."

He drew his wand and started to wave it over her arm while he whispered an incantation she had never heard before. She actually didn't even know the language he was using. Suddenly a pleasant coldness spread through her arm. It managed to numb the throbbing ache. The black veins slowly disappeared. Tom stopped his spell and again examined the wound. After a while he looked up at her with a small smile tugging at his mouth.

"See? The curse is gone." Then he waved his wand again and a bandage wound itself around her arm. "It's going to heal properly now."

Hermione looked at the white bandage around her arm contemplatively. She hadn't even noticed that something was wrong. Her eyes wandered to Tom who looked rather self-satisfied as he scanned her. Sometimes she forgot what an exceptional wizard her really was.

"Thanks," she whispered.

He shook his head sadly before he said in mock concern, "You are so helpless without me."

Hermione giggled softly then took his arm and said, "We are late for potions."

"Yes, and I'm going to blame that on you if the old Slug wants to give us detention."

"Whatever happened to chivalry?" she wondered wryly.

"I'm a Slytherin, you know," Tom said in a steady voice as he led her out of the girls' toilet. "We never were into this self-sacrifice business."

Suffice to say that Slughorn did not give them detention. He didn't even take points from them. Hermione had an inkling that the professor would never give his favourite student any detention whatever crime Tom would commit.

Biased Slytherins! Hermione grumbled in her mind as she walked over to her table, trying to ignore the concerned looks her three Gryffindor friends were throwing her way. They had obviously noticed her being late and by the looks on their faces had come to several horrible scenarios as to what had held her up. Especially as her companion had been the evil Tom Riddle.

"Now, where was I?" Slughorn said in his booming voice while smiling down at his class. "Ah yes, the next step of brewing the Ortus potion."

Here he waved his wand and suddenly instructions appeared on the black board behind him. Hermione groaned as she read it. Why did Slughorn always need to make her already complicated life even worse?

Later that day Hermione sat in DADA and tried to listen to professor McGray droning on about
some dark creature or other.

"...and those first signs would be a sudden severe drop in temperature followed by a strange feeling of gloom. Though there is a protection spell against them, the best action is still to avoid."

Hermione had her quill in her hand and really concentrated on what the professor said. It was highly likely that she had already met whatever creature he was talking about but she still didn't want to miss anything in class. It seemed her know-it-all nature didn't allow her to not pay attention. But that proved to be rather difficult as her seat neighbours insisted on discussing with her.

"Why don't you realize that he is evil?" Longbottom whispered to her, his voice was mixed with anger and worry.

*Here he goes again,* Hermione thought tiredly.

"I can't believe you forgive him for hitting you," he continued.

"I told you," she finally hissed back at him. "It wasn't Tom."

"He openly admitted it during breakfast," he returned indignantly.

Hermione sighed and looked at Longbottom. Right now he was scanning her concerned.

"Look, Tom was just joking around. Okay?" she replied impatiently.

"He didn't look like joking," Weasley piped up, now butting into this grotesque conversation.

"And I really don't see how this would be funny at all," Lupin whispered at her from her right side.

"Well, he's got a really bad sense of humour," Hermione said soothingly, trying to make up for the damage Tom had caused.

The looks of worry on her friends' faces told her that she wasn't very successful. Hermione turned her head away from them and let her gaze wander to the Slytherin side of the class room. She quickly found Tom sitting at one of the tables. Right now he was looking back at her with an unsavoury smirk on his face. Hermione's mouth was pressed into a thin line as she looked back at him angrily. Now he even winked at her. She balled her hands into tight fists and sent him a death glare. But Tom just smiled innocently; he was obviously enjoying her predicament.

*That scheming, little...*

If he had been a little less talented with magic, she would have just let Longbottom attack him. But as it was, she really needed to somehow calm her friends down.

"Then what happened after breakfast? Why were you late?" Longbottom insisted on the topic of their conversation. "You were awfully pale as you finally turned up in potions. Did he threaten you or what?"

"Nothing happened," Hermione said adamantly. "He's my boyfriend why would he do something like that?"

She knew that was a rather weak excuse but slowly she was running out of explanations.

"Hmm, maybe because he's just using you?" Longbottom replied this time in a rather sharp tone. As he saw her opening her mouth to say something he continued seriously, "You should ditch him. He's not good for you."
"Why do you say that?" Hermione was getting irritated. "You don't really know him."

"We warned you about him, didn't we?" Lupin interjected with his calm voice. "Riddle's dangerous. There are all sorts of strange rumours going on about this little group of his."

"Listen, I'm not going to leave him," she whispered insistently.

"Even after what he did to you?" Weasley said, staring at her bruise.

"For the hundredth time, Tom did not hit me," hissed Hermione.

"Can't you understand that we are worried about you?" Lupin said quietly. "We just want to protect you."

Hermione sighed softly then turned to him and said in a sympathetic voice, "I understand. I really do. But you have to understand that I don't need anyone protecting me. I can look after myself, okay?"

The skeptical looks on all of her friends' faces told her that they in fact did not understand or that they didn't want to. Their conversation came to an intermittent standstill. But then after a while Longbottom started again,

"You can't be serious. Did you forget how he treated you before the Christmas break? And now it's gotten even worse. He's abus-"

"That's it!" Hermione exclaimed rather loudly. "I'm not discussing this anymore!"

"Ms DeCerto!" another voice now intervened exasperated.

She looked up and found professor McGrey scowling at her, then he reprimanded, "If you have time for chatter with your friends, then I'm sure you already know the name of the spell able to drive away a Dementor?"

Hermione could feel her face growing hot as the professor frowned at her.


McGrey raised his eyebrows at her. He obviously hadn't expected her to know the answer as she hadn't been paying any attention at all.

"That is correct," he then said. "But I still want you to pay more attention in my class."

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered softly.

McGrey frowned at her seat neighbours and said, "That applies to you, too, gentlemen."

McGrey turned away from them again and continued his class. Hermione threw another glance at Tom and found him smirking at her. It rather infuriated her. He had known exactly in what his inappropriate behaviour during breakfast would result. Now he seemed to thoroughly enjoy the problems he had caused her. In a fit of childishness she stuck her tongue out at him. She could see his eyes widen slightly with surprise but then he seemed to chuckle. Hermione sighed and turned away from him to again listen to professor McGrey's explanations about Dementors.

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It was a while after classes were finished that Tom sat in the Slytherin common room, pouring over a roll of parchment. A few books lay scattered here and there on the table in front of him as he was
preoccupied with his homework.

"Tom?" a voice disturbed Tom's train of thought.

Irritated by this interruption, he turned his head and looked at the speaker. He inwardly groaned as his eyes fell on Melanie Nicolls. She stood right beside the sofa he was sitting on and observed him with a ridiculously seductive look on her face and a rather disturbing hunger in her eyes as she scanned him.

"Melanie," he replied in a glacial yet still polite tone.

Nicolls smiled at him and obviously took his reply as an invitation to sit down beside him. As she was sitting so near him he almost gagged as he smelt her heavy perfume in the air.

"What are you doing today?" Nicolls cooed at him.

Tom shortly considered to just crucio her. To hell with his untainted reputation. *Yeah, and directly into Azkaban if Dumbledore has any say in the matter,* a voice snorted at him derisively.

"Nothing much," he replied instead in a bored sounding voice.

And it was true. Hermione had told him that she needed some time to complete her essay for Binns. Tom hadn't believed one word she had said. It was more than unlikely that Hermione DeCerto had not yet finished an essay that was due the next day. No, she probably needed time to study that book she had stolen, Tom mused annoyed. How could she have not shown him? Hopefully her friends were now so idiotically concerned about her that they didn't leave her any time to read the book. On the other hand, Tom didn't know if he would prefer Hermione spending more time in Longbottom's presence instead of reading that mysterious book. At the thought of the blonde Gryffindor Tom's temper rose a few notches.

*That dunce.* How could the fool think that Tom had hit her? *Like I would ever hit her.* Unless there was a very good reason, Tom didn't intend to ever hurt her.

He was brought out of his musings by a voice cajoling at him, "If you are free. Then how about we do something together?"

He turned his head and found Nicolls clinging to his arm while she looked up at him in what was probably supposed to be a voluptuous way. That girl was rather persistent, wasn't she?

"Hmm… no, I'm sorry. Wanted to finish this essay," Tom replied, not at all sounding sorry, while he gestured at the roll of parchment lying in front of him.

Instantly a frown appeared on Nicolls' face.

"You are meeting with that Gryffindor chick, aren't you?" she whined at him. "Why are you together with her anyway? She's a Gryffindor and not even pretty. I'm sure you can find someone better…"

Tom looked at her with a blank face, though his brow was furrowed dangerously.

"You really shouldn't talk about my girlfriend like this. I don't appreciate it very much if someone insults her," he said conversationally, though that didn't lessen the hard edge hidden in his tone.

He could watch a deep blush taking form on Nicolls' face and she awkwardly looked away from him while mumbling an apology. Tom didn't care though. That girl really got on his nerves so he turned to his homework again and completely ignored her sitting beside her. He started to review his
Arithmancy essay for professor Gauß, though he really didn't need to do it. He never had anything less than an O in Arithmancy. Actually he never got anything other than an O in any of his classes, Tom thought as a haughty smile appeared on his face. He never failed any class. Well, aside from the flying lesson fiasco in first year.

*Or Transfiguration*... he admitted and the smirk dropped from his mouth. That wasn't due to his inability to do the magic but more to the fact that Dumbledore just hated him. Absentmindedly he noticed how Nicolls stood up from the sofa with a disappointed look on her face. Tom didn't care at all.

Instead he wondered if Hermione was going to fail Transfiguration now, too, just like him. Obviously Dumbledore wasn't so fond of her anymore. Once again Tom racked his brains as to how she had blackmailed the professor to let him stay at Hogwarts. She still refused to tell him, insisting that it wasn't *anything to be proud of*. Her refusal to divulge her secrets really bugged him greatly.

He was again interrupted in his thoughts as Avery walked over to his couch, stood warily before him and then asked hesitantly, "We wondered when we would have the next meeting."

Tom angrily looked up from his essay. Avery cowered away from him as he saw that dark look on his face. A little gratified by the other's obvious fear, Tom pondered his request. They hadn't had a meeting since more than a week ago. Maybe he could relieve some of his stress and curse one of those twits.

"You are lucky. I don't have anything better to do," Tom declared condescendingly. Then he ordered curtly, "Get the others."

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Hermione currently stood in one of the many unused class rooms of Hogwarts castle. The door was magically locked and warded so that she would notice if anyone tried to enter. She was glad that she had managed to escape her overly concerned Gryffindor friends. After Tom's warped act during breakfast, they were now more convinced than ever that he was bad company.

*Snaky brat!* Hermione thought angrily and she could feel her magic swirling inside of her irately.

She had come here to this class room to train the Elder Magic. She took deep and steady breaths of air to calm her temper down again. Quickly she felt her magic transforming into a steady flow. Now all she needed to do was find the Elder Magic inside of her, grasp it and then she intended to perform a spell. She had done that before actually. First time she succeeded doing it with the Confero spell. After that she had tried other simple spells using the Elder Magic. Though she hadn't been as diligent as she probably should have been.

Hermione closed her eyes. Her brow was furrowed in concentration and her hand clasped tightly around her black wand. She squeezed her eyes shut and beads of sweat were forming on her forehead as she tried to summon all of her magic. The flow inside of her intensified. There she could feel it. The Elder Magic had no place to hide anymore. It pulsed through her body with the rest of her magic. Hermione concentrated on the Elder Magic. She caressed it, she lured it out of its hiding place and then she tried to get a hold on it. It wasn't easy but she managed it in the end. Next, she sent the Elder Magic out of her body. It crackled around her powerfully.

Now that the Magic was outside of her, invading her surroundings, Hermione could feel it again, that strange pulse originating from Hogwarts castle. It was humming through everything, the stone walls of the castle, the glass of the windows, the suits of armour standing in the corridors, the portraits on the walls. Hermione opened her eyes and now she could even see that bluish pulse again. Everything
inside the castle sang in the rhythm of that powerful force, even its inhabitants. Hermione wasn’t completely sure but she assumed that this pulse was the warding magic protecting Hogwarts.

Now that the Elder Magic was swirling around her, she was somehow separated from that pulse of power. The Elder Wand's magic seemed to serve like a shield around her and stopped the warding spells from reaching her. As Hermione so stood there, protected by this cocoon of magic around her, she suddenly had an insane idea. Normally she would never have considered something as crazy as this but the power of the Elder Magic crackling around her made her feel a little light-headed.

*Ah, what the heck! Let's just try it.*

So without putting much thought in it, Hermione decided to use the Elder Magic now. She grasped her wand even tighter before she went through the familiar preparations. Then she swirled on the spot and nearly gasped out in surprise as the dark pressure really engulfed her.

After only a few seconds the pressure on her body left again. Hermione's eyes were still closed. She was afraid to open them and find parts of her body spread all over the castle. But, she noticed, she didn't hurt anywhere. As she breathed in she could smell the rich odour of earth and decaying wood. Hermione opened her eyes and found herself standing in the middle of a clearing in the Forbidden Forest. She stared in wonder at the tall Blood Acorn tree standing in front of her. This was the clearing she had had once served detention by collecting blood acorn seedlings with Tom and professor McGray. The very clearing she had focused on to apparate to.

*And it worked!* Hermione thought excited as she turned around herself and stared in amazement at the tall trees of the Forbidden Forest surrounding her. She couldn't believe it. She had just apparated inside of Hogwarts.

*To hell with you Hogwarts: A History!*

Hermione giggled. It was just inconceivable. Amazing. Her second thought was she had to show Tom.

So Hermione apparated back into the castle. It worked again, even easier than the first time. She felt giddy. This new power that flowed through her was making her feel like she had drunk too much alcohol. She felt somewhat intoxicated by it. The giddy feeling didn't leave her now that she was back in the castle. Right now she probably shouldn't make any decisions of great importance as the power behind the Elder Magic obviously influenced her but Hermione didn't care. She was feeling too good to ponder her options. She didn't want to act responsible for once. So, she put her wand back in its holster, left the deserted class room and then started to search for Tom.

He was frustratingly difficult to find but Hermione finally thought of going down to the dungeons. Stupid idea, because it didn't take her more than five minutes to get hopelessly lost in that maze of corridors. But she wasn't concerned as she was in high-spirits and the Elder Magic was still flowing through her making her feel rather invincible. Luckily after some time, she stumbled over a group of Slytherins in one of the dark corridors.

*Who would have known I would one day call such a situation lucky?* Hermione thought amused as her eyes swept over the group. There were Alba, Lestrange, Avery, looking somewhat ruffled, a few she didn't know and there was Tom. He looked at her surprised before he stepped towards her.

"Hermione, what are you doing down here?" he asked in his deep voice.

She smiled up at him, "Searching for you."
Then she grabbed his wrist and pulled him after her. She briefly wondered what his followers now thought as she dragged Tom after her like that. She had to giggle again.

Hermione heard Tom's voice behind her. He sounded a little irritated but also somewhat amused, "Where are you dragging me to?"

She turned around to him and beamed, "You wouldn't believe."

Then they came upon a wooden door. Hermione opened it. It led to an old, unused class room. **Perfect!** She stepped into the dark class room. Tom followed her.

"Well, I think I already like your plan," he whispered into her ear in his sensuous voice.

Hermione could feel him snaking an arm around her waist while he still stood behind her. She turned around in his arms and looked up at him.

"I'm sure," she said amused while she smiled up at him. "You ready for something friggin' awesome?" she asked while she flicked her wrist so that her wand landed in her hand.

"'friggin' awesome'?" Tom asked her confused.

Hermione giggled again, and then she wrapped her arms tightly around Tom before she summoned the Elder Magic. With a swish of their robes the pair disappeared from the dark class room, leaving nothing behind but a small cloud of dust.

They reappeared at the other end of the country and staggered a little bit as they landed in a back alley of London. Hermione let go of Tom and looked around. It was just perfect. Exactly where she had wanted to apparate to. The Elder Magic was truly impressive. And dead useful, it seemed.

"What…?" She heard Tom ask in surprise. "Where are we?"

"Why, Tom," Hermione chortled. "I would have thought you were able to recognize your home town."

Tom's eyes wandered back to her. She grinned at this confused expression on his face. It was really a rare occurrence to see him like this. And it was funny.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked and his grey eyes bored into her.

"Like I said. We are in London now," Hermione replied while still grinning at him. "So let's have some fun."

She reached for him, grabbed his hand and started to walk away. But he wasn't following her. So Hermione turned around again and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked him.

"What…? What do you mean 'is something wrong'?" he huffed at her. "Of course there is something wrong. How the fuck did we end up here?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. The Elder Magic was still humming inside of her making her quite careless.

"Do you always have to ask so many questions?" she said. "It's really arduous."

She watched his eyes narrow at her. Then he hissed in a dangerous tone, "Hermione, how did we
end up here?"

It was then that she finally had doubts about her recent actions. Whatever had come over her to grab him and apparate through Hogwarts' wards like this? Of course he was now suspicious. Who wouldn't be? The flush of power from the Elder Magic had made her act stupid and rash. Hermione bit her lip nervously as she stared at Tom. He was standing right in front of her and scowled at her rather darkly.

"Er…” she mumbled. "I… I just thought…"

Problem was, she hadn't been thinking. Now she had yet again put herself in a nasty situation. Tom was still glowering at her and Hermione now noticed that upcoming suspicion in his grey eyes.

"How did you apparate through Hogwarts' wards?" Tom asked her in a commanding voice.

Hermione averted her eyes before she said in a small voice, "I… I can't tell you."

Her head shot up at him as she felt Tom grabbing her upper arms harshly. He was staring down at her and the anger was clearly visible in his eyes.

"I am tired of your secretiveness," he hissed at her coldly. "You are going to tell me everything now!" There was a frightening tone in his voice as he hissed that command.

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. His grip on her arms was now painfully tight and his eyes were a dangerous crimson colour. She looked at those red eyes and was caught in the familiar wrath they radiated. Everything else dropped in the background and the only thing she could see were these crimson eyes.

…and her memories. They rushed back to her. Invaded her mind and flooded her so completely that there was no room for anything else. She saw the combats, the Death Eaters, her desperation, people suffering, all the blood and darkness. And Death itself. While above all, there floated terrible, red eyes.

*Abicere!* screamed Hermione in her mind.

Tom released her arms as he was pushed away from her by her magic. Hermione saw how he was flung against the wall. Then she turned around and ran away. As she dashed down the small alley way she felt her wand in her hand. She hadn't even noticed how she had drawn it. Her hand clasped tightly around the wood as if she clung to it for dear life. Farther and farther down the alley she run. Rounded corners and crossed small back yards. The houses stood narrow here and the ground was grimy and full of dirt. But she didn't care. There was only one thing she could concentrate on right now. And that was to run. She didn't even know what she was running away from. She was scared and those images still tore at her mind. Her breathing was ragged but she still didn't stop to run. Her memories and her fear had left her alone for so long now that she was unprepared for them to show up again.

Another alley down and she left the maze of backstreets behind to reach one of the main streets. Cars drove down the street and people walked on the pavement. Hermione stopped and stared with wide eyes at this strangely calm scene in front of her. Her breathing was laboured and she felt her whole body tremble. She felt sick and her head hurt fiercely. With a shaking hand she stowed away her wand in its holster then she took a hesitant step out from the back street to walk down the pavement.

She passed a woman in a blue skirt holding the hand of a small child. The woman stared at her with a frown on her brow. Then she grabbed the child tighter and seemed to drag him away from
Hermione. As Hermione continued down the lane she noticed a few people gaping at her. She looked down at herself. It suddenly hit her that she still wore her school uniform. A uniform from a magic school which she right now wore in Muggle London. Of course people now stared at her black outer robes that screamed 'witch'.

The Elder Magic had made her abandon every caution. As the power of the magic had hummed in her body Hermione had felt so intoxicated by it. That had led to her making mistakes. Like apparating to Muggle London in her Hogwarts' uniform.

Or taking Tom with me.

She sighed loudly which made the old man passing her shake his head disapprovingly at her. She didn't pay any attention to the man but turned to the entry of a house and sat on the steps leading to the front door. She felt so drained and tired, somehow even hollow inside. Hermione sat on the stone step and stared blankly at the street in front of her, not taking in anything.

What had just happened? As Tom had grabbed her so harshly Hermione's old memories of the war had resurfaced again. They had left her alone for so long. Why did they have to come back now?

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Tom rubbed his shoulder. It hurt where he had been smashed against the wall. He had to admit he had been quite unprepared for Hermione's sudden attack. But he had to attribute that lapse of attention to the fact that he had still been more than confused that she had apparated him through Hogwarts' wards. How could she do that? It was supposed to be impossible.

What was it that enabled Hermione to do the impossible? She had done something like that before. She had apparted through Diagon Alleys wards. But this, Hogwarts' warding magic, was something entirely else. Hogwarts' wards were centuries old and every generation of wizards had added to the castle's wards so that they now were impenetrable.

Well, almost impenetrable, he corrected himself.

How had she done it? Why didn't she want to tell him? This wasn't by far her only secret. Hermione had a lot of them and she was not willing to reveal them to him. His anger at her secretiveness had let to him grabbing her. At that point in time he had been prepared to force the truth out of her. But then she had attacked him rather unexpectedly. Now she had disappeared into the maze of London's streets. Tom knew where exactly he was right now. But that knowledge didn't help him to find Hermione. So a little bit of magic was in order, he thought as he pulled his wand.

"Point me," he whispered at his wand lying on the palm of his hand.

He walked in the direction the tip of his wand was pointing to. It wasn't long until he came across a bigger street. There were a lot of Muggles walking around so Tom took of his black outer robe which would appear rather out of place in this Muggle area. He strolled down the pavement. After a while he finally spotted Hermione. Tom breathed out relieved as he saw her sitting on the steps of an entry to a house. She had a vacant expression on her face as she stared in front of her. He had almost reached her as she finally noticed him and looked up. There was no surprise on her face but still this blank expression. He sat down beside her and she resumed staring at the street again.

After a while she said in a hollow voice, "I'm sorry."

Tom was shocked by that dead tone in her voice. It didn't match with her normally so cheerful self. But he shouldn't be surprised. Not after he had seen that look on her face as he had grabbed her. He
knew that she always looked like this when she had to think about her past. Tom hated that look of sorrow and pain on her face. He was quite unsettled that she had looked at him with fear in her eyes. Or was it that in her past someone had grabbed her just like he had? That thought enraged Tom quite a bit.

He looked at the witch sitting beside him and found her still staring numbly in space. It suddenly didn't matter anymore that she was constantly hiding things from him. What mattered was that he didn't want her to look so forlorn anymore. He raised his arm, wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled her over to him. Hermione stiffened as she felt his arm around her but Tom was pleased with the fact that she now leaned into him. He could feel how she relaxed against him as he caressed her cheek gently.

"What are we going to do now?" Tom asked her after some time.

She looked up at him with a confused expression on her face. He smiled down at her.

"You said we were going to have some fun. So, what have you planned?"

Tom was pleased to see a smile taking form on her face as she looked up at him.

Hermione leaned against him. She was relieved to have him sitting beside her. It was terrible to deal with her memories on her own. She needed Tom so that she wasn't exposed to those merciless ghosts. She couldn't fight them alone. She snaked her arms around his waist and clung to him.

"Well, we are in London now, so let's go to a pub," Hermione smirked up at him.

Tom arched one brow gracefully. "Hm, and here I thought I was the evil one in this relationship," he said amused.

Hermione beamed up at him and embraced him even tighter.

"You know what I don't understand?" Hermione's voice was very slurred but she still managed to point with her index finger at Tom, roughly at least.

"No, I don't know," he said in a calm voice.

Currently they were sitting at a table in one of the many pubs of London. It was rather shady, in Tom's opinion. And a tad bit on the dirty side but at least they hadn't hesitated to serve alcohol to two under-age students.

So right now there stood a glass of beer in front of Tom. It was only his first one. Something that couldn't be said about the girl sitting right beside him. He frowned down at Hermione. He hadn't really expected her to end up this drunk as she had proposed they go to a pub. Right now she leaned rather leisurely back in her chair while she looked up at him with glassy eyes. He had to admit she was kind of amusing when drunk. But it still was strange to see her losing control like this. He would never have thought that Hermione would ever let herself getting drunk like this. A frown appeared between his eyebrows as he looked at her. He remembered that scared look on her face as he had grabbed her in that back alley. He knew that somehow her old memories of the war had been triggered again. His magic swirled around him angrily as he wondered whether she was now this drunk because she didn't want to think about those memories any longer.

"I mean… why French?" Hermione suddenly asked. She tried to raise one eyebrow questioningly at him but failed miserably. She didn't care but just continued, "Of all the languashes… mnh…"
languages. You pick French. Do you speak French? It's a beaut-t... beauti... well, a pretty language, I grant you that. But still... why French?"

"I think you had one beer too much, Hermione," Tom said as he frowned at her.

"Or... you had one too less," she exclaimed happily before she broke down in giggles and clutched Tom's arm to stop herself from falling off her chair.

Tom smirked down at her. He had never seen her giggle so inanely before, it was a bit amusing. Though her next statement wiped the smirk right from his face.

"Folder- No no, thas not it. Wait... I'll get there." She narrowed her eyes in concentration before she continued, "Vol- I'm almost sure thers a 'mor' in there somewhere. Volmor- Nope." Then her eyes brightened up and she beamed at Tom. "Volde... mort. This the one. Told ya, I'll find it. Voldemort."

She soon found Tom's hand over her mouth, thus successfully stopping her pitiable attempts with the human language.

"Shh, what are you doing?" he hissed at her under his breath while he looked around nervously to see if someone had overheard that conversation. "No-one's supposed to know that name."

Hermione giggled again though it was rather muffled by Tom's hand on her mouth. She reached for his hand and tugged at it so that she was able to speak again.

"Why so shy, Volde- de- mort?" Hermione looked up at him and tried to focus on his face, though it didn't work very well. "Don't you like the name?" She furrowed her brow in concentration. Something didn't make sense with her last sentence. But then she just shrugged her shoulders and continued, "How long... did you have to – think – to make it up?"

Tom frowned at her, though Hermione didn't notice as she became very interested with the beermat in front of her. She tried to fold it into a crane but only managed to rip it in two.

"How do you even know that name?" Tom asked her in a very quiet voice.

Hermione looked away from her origami attempts and concentrated on him again. Her intoxicated brain needed a while but finally she understood his question.

"What do you think, silly?" she said not very informatively.

Then suddenly she became aware of how very tired she actually was. So she grabbed one of Tom's arms and skidded nearer to him until she was able to put her head on his shoulder.

"Read it in a book," she mumbled sleepily.

Then she slid slowly down until she came to rest lying in his lap. Which made Tom blush slightly as he was now hit by many curious and a few outraged looks from the other guests as they saw a young lady disappearing under the table and bending down to the lap of a young man.

"You definitely had enough," Tom said curtly as he grabbed Hermione and hoisted her up again.

"Mmmm..." Was the only apology he could expect right now.

Tom wrapped one arm around her waist before he stood up from the table and lifted her up with him. She slipped her arms around him and clung to him tightly.

"And how are we going to get back to Hogwarts now?" Tom asked irritated, though he wasn't
expecting to get an answer.

Contrary to all expectations his question seemed to have reached Hermione somehow as she now mumbled, "I can't drive anymore."

"Well, who would have thought?" Tom answered sarcastically, though he knew his sarcasm was wasted on her.

"I booked a room," Hermione offered after a while.

Tom stared down at the witch clinging to his side.

"When- How did you-?" Tom ran a hand through his hair. "Never mind. Let's get you into bed."

He half carried her out of the guest room and towards the rather grimy reception. A filthy man with greasy brown hair and a matching beard was sitting behind the counter.

"Did my friend book a room here, sir?" Tom asked and had to fight to keep his voice polite.

The man eyed him but didn't seem too interested before he said gruffly, "Name?"

Tom readjusted his grip on Hermione as she was again slipping down then he said, "Decerto."

The man seemed to check a list, though Tom doubted they had enough guests to warrant a list. Then the man looked up at him again and said, "Nope."

"Riddle?" Tom asked.

Again the man checked the list and again he shook his head bored at Tom. Tom looked down to Hermione and remembered the conversation they just had. His eyes wandered back to the filthy man. He hesitated shortly but then said in a low voice,

"Voldemort?"

The man checked the list and Tom was berating himself for being so stupid. Surely Hermione wouldn't-

"Ah, yes," the man said. "Mr and Mrs Voldemort. Yes. Strange name."

He turned around and reached for one of the keys hanging at a board behind him. Tom cursed under his breath as he stared down at Hermione.

"When you are sober again, I'm going to kill you," he whispered angrily at her.

"Mmmm… what spell are you going to use?" Hermione mumbled inarticulately.

Tom suppressed another string of curses and then accepted the room key.

"Number seven," the man said distracted as he was already reading in his magazine again.

Tom tightened the grip he had on Hermione before he climbed the staircase which seemed to lead to the rooms. Quickly they arrived in a dimly lit corridor. The dirty, red-carpeted floor was as appealing as the flickering light bulb hanging on wires from the ceiling. Tom tried to ignore the inch thick layer of dirt on the window they just passed and the rather ominous stench in the hallway. Then they finally stood before the room number seven. Though the hook on top of the metallic number was somehow broken so that it was now standing upside down, looking more like a weird L than a
seven. Tom took the key and tried to open the door. It seemed the lock was broken but the door could be opened anyway, he noticed as he pushed against it.

_How reassuring._

Tom maneuvered Hermione inside the room. It was as confidence inspiring as the filthy corridor had been. He wrinkled his nose as his gaze wandered over the room. There was a double bed standing in the middle of the room. Judging by the grey colour of the bedclothes Tom doubted that it had been changed recently, if ever. The window was opaque from all the dust and he really didn't want to know if that strange brown colour of the carpet was actually its real colour or something else.

Tom sighed before he pulled his wand. First he pointed it at the door and locked it magically. Then he casually waved it at the room in general. The grey bedclothes changed into white and the thick layer of dust and cobwebs everywhere disappeared. Though the grimy window remained grimy as Tom couldn't see any curtains. He again let his gaze wander over the room. It wasn't perfect but loads better than before.

"Legifer would be so proud of you." He heard Hermione's slurred voice.

Tom frowned down at her again. "I think it's really time for you to go to sleep," he told her before he walked her over to the bed and sat her down.

He waved his wand at her and transfigured her clothes into something more comfortable then he removed the wandholster that was still attached to her right forearm. He discarded the holster with her wand on the bedside table then he faced her again. Tom watched amused how Hermione slowly slipped down on her side until she half lay on the bed. He took her legs and put them on the bed so that she could stretch out. Then he covered her with the now white blanket.

Tom yawned tiredly as he slowly removed his own clothes. This had been a rather eventful day, he decided. Who would have thought that the Gryffindor know-it-all was such a drunk? He wondered amused as he looked down at Hermione.

He stripped down to his black shirt and boxers, waved his wand at the lamp hanging from the ceiling to switch it off before he slipped under the blanket beside the sleeping witch. Though Hermione wasn't as fast asleep as he had assumed. She had obviously noticed how he had laid down beside her as she now rolled over and skidded over to him. He could feel one of her hands gliding slowly over his chest while the other ruffled through his hair. She propped herself up on one arm while she leaned over him. Tom raised his eyebrows as she placed a kiss on his mouth. Then she started to trail more kisses on his face. Tom was rather enjoying the whole thing until his conscience kicked in as she tried to climb on top of him and started to remove his shirt.

He could not do that, not when she was totally drunk.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Hermione," Tom whispered a little breathlessly as he tried to disentangle her from him. "You would kill me in the morning."

It took him a lot of self control not to give in to his desires. Especially now that Hermione sagged against him and came to rest lying halfway on top of him. He could smell the seductive scent of lilac coming from her hair as she put her head down on his chest. He exhaled slowly. Hermione should be really grateful that he wasn't taking advantage of her vulnerable state, he decided while he wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes. He could feel sleep pulling at his mind as he wondered why he was suddenly so self-effacing.
It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning as Tom woke up again. At first he didn't know where he was but then he remembered how Hermione had grabbed him and apparated the both of them through Hogwarts' wards. Tom's eyes wandered to the sleeping witch beside him who had curled up into a ball under the blanket.

How did she always manage to do the impossible? No-one could disapparate inside of Hogwarts. It was completely impossible. Tom stared at the witch lying beside him in the bed. It seemed that she was dreaming. But this time it was not one of her nightmares. And she was talking.

"Ron," Hermione whispered in her sleep.

Tom frowned at her. White-hot jealousy started to soar through him. Who was this 'Ron' that Hermione dreamed about him? But it were her next words that made him almost lose his control.

"Ron," she whispered again and then, "I love you."

Tom exhaled slowly, trying to reign in his magic. It was burning up in him, that dark force, and begged him to be released. She was sleeping so peacefully and Tom wanted nothing more than to strangle her now. Another part of him wanted to wake her up and demand to know who this 'Ron' was. Yet another part of him was just too sad to want anything but curl up in a dark corner and die.
The next morning Hermione woke and felt surprisingly well rested. She had expected to have a headache or something like that after yesterday. But she didn't feel bad at all. Maybe she had had a nice dream?

She was a little confused as she wasn't greeted by the Gryffindor red curtains around her four-poster but a rather bare white ceiling with a lamp hanging from the middle. Then again she surely hadn't been able to apparate yesterday. Not after all the beer she had drunk. She rolled over in the bed and was surprised to find Tom, fully dressed, sitting in a chair and glaring at her furiously. Hermione slowly sat up in the bed and frowned at him in confusion. Why was he so enraged? His eyes were glowing red. Had she done something yesterday? She couldn't remember much. But there obviously was a murderous glimmer in his crimson eyes as they wandered slowly over her body. A chill darted down her spine as she saw that detached coldness on his face. She noticed that his hands were clutching the armrest of the chair tightly as if he tried to force himself not to lose his control. What had happened to have angered him so?

Then Tom said in a fearsome but eerily composed voice, "Who is Ron?"

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. Where had he learned that name?

"W... what?" she stammered in a small voice.

Tom's eyes narrowed at her and then Hermione could feel that raw and angry power radiating from him. She skidded away from him on the bed and her breathing was becoming faster. Tom abruptly stood up from the chair and she was so startled by his movement that she flinched away from him. He took a step towards her and the pressure of his dark magic even intensified. Hermione gulped and stared at him fearfully.

"Who is Ron?" he asked again, emphasizing each word and his tone made it very clear that he wouldn't tolerate it if she didn't tell him.

Hermione still stared at him. Her hands were balled into fists to stop them from shaking.

Suddenly Tom yelled at her furiously, "Answer me!"

Hermione flinched and her eyes shot back at his face. His crimson eyes were boring into hers and there was a deadly glint in them. His magic still flowed from him and furiously tore at her body. But she couldn't tell him. There was no way she could tell him about Ron. She hadn't talked about Ron since he had died. With no-one! She wasn't up to it; she wasn't ready. Hermione felt her body starting to tremble as her thoughts circled around Ron. He was dead. He had died because she couldn't stop Bellatrix from cursing him. He had died because of her.

Tom took another threatening step towards her and she shied away from him. That murderous fury still burned behind his eyes. Hermione remained silent. Suddenly Tom reached out for her, grabbed her upper arm and wrenched her up from the bed. Hermione whimpered as he grabbed her arm so painfully tight.

He violently pulled her over to him and then hissed at her in a dangerous voice, "You speak in your sleep, Hermione. Did you know that?" She stared at him with scared wide eyes as he continued in his low threatening voice, "You said that you love him."

By now tears started to run down her cheeks. Then she grabbed his hand which still clasped her arm
and she tried to loosen his grip on her.

"Let go of me!" she screamed at him as she couldn't manage to get away from him.

As an answer his grip even tightened and he shook her.

"You said you love this Ron. Who is that? I'm going to kill him!" Tom snarled at her and he seemed to be beyond furious.

A twinge went through her chest as she heard him say that. Her eyes shot up at him. She stared into his enraged red eyes as she said in a colourless tone, "You are too late. He is already dead."

Tom looked at her in surprise and Hermione used that hesitancy to break free from him. She backed away from him until her back hit the wall behind her. The tears still streamed from her eyes so she raised her hand and wiped them furiously away. There was no reason to cry here. She hated it to cry. Her gaze wandered back at Tom. He was still standing in the middle of the room and stared at her. His crimson eyes seemed to be glowing in the darkness of the room. Hermione could see his right hand twitch as if he longed to pull his wand while his eyes still radiated nothing but rage as they travelled over her form. She wondered if he was going to curse her now. It certainly looked like he wanted to do it. Her own wand lay together with her holster on the bedside table, unreachable at the moment. Though right now, she didn't think she would defend herself even if she had her wand. Hermione stared back into the red abyss behind Tom's eyes and waited for him to do something. Yell at her, curse her, anything.

Suddenly Tom just turned around and left the hotel room, banging the door shut behind him. She was left behind still pressed against the wall and stared at the door he had just left through. Her breathing was quickened. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply to calm herself while she slowly slid down the wall until she sat on the floor.

She didn't want her memories to come back. They hurt her and she was tired of having to face them. Yesterday they had so suddenly attacked her again. Maybe that was the reason for her dream tonight and the return of her ghosts. She so desperately tried to forget her old life and the harrowing things that had happened to her and to the people she loved. She didn't want to remember those things anymore but she felt guilty for this yearning for closure. It felt like she betrayed them all by wanting to forget the ordeal they all had had to go through. They were dead and she was the only one to remember them, their fight and how they had died. But those memories…

Those memories were just so cruel. She didn't want to be confronted with her old life anymore but at the same time she was terribly afraid to forget Ron's face. What he looked like, the sound of his voice, the mischievous glint in his eyes whenever he and Harry had planned one of their stupid little adventures. She didn't want to forget how it had always been enough to encourage her and give her the feeling of being protected when Ron had just wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Hermione's breathing got ragged and it felt like icy cold hands wrapped mercilessly around her heart. She raised a hand and put it over her face. The memories still attacked her ruthlessly but she forcefully calmed her breathing down. Tears burned in her eyes but she didn't want them to spill. She leaned her head back against the wall and stared numbly at the white ceiling. She trembled slightly but she stubbornly clenched her jaw and took in deep steady breaths of air.

*There's no reason to cry, Granger!* she hissed at herself. *Pull yourself together!*

What would all her friends say if they could see her breaking down like this? That was pathetic.

*Surely, you are stronger than this?* a voice scoffed at her snidely.
Hermione slowly got up from her position on the floor. There was no use in sitting around and wailing over things she couldn't change anyway. As she got up she noticed for the first time the clothes she was wearing. It wasn't her Hogwarts uniform but a comfortable silk shirt and a pair of silk trousers. Hermione could feel traces of transfiguration on the clothes. She guessed Tom had transfigured her uniform. Only he would have chosen this Slytherin green colour, she thought fondly. The small smile on her face quickly dropped as her thoughts wandered back to Tom. He was really angry with her. Hermione could still see the red colour in his eyes. Unpleasant chills darted down her spine as she remembered the expression on Tom's face. He had been furious. Why did she need to talk in her sleep? Why tonight when Tom could hear it? Hermione knew how jealous Tom could be.

*It's not like you are any better than him,* a tiny, annoying voice reminded her how she had lost control and then cursed Melanie Nicolls just because the witch had clutched Tom's arm.

Hermione sighed softly. This whole situation was really bad. Tom was angry because of Ron. Hermione could understand that it hadn't been so great for him to hear her declare her love for another guy. It was just very bad timing that she had to dream about Ron exactly this night, when Tom would hear it.

Maybe she should explain it to Tom? Who Ron was and what he meant to her. Once again Hermione felt her throat constrict. She didn't want to talk about Ron. She just couldn't do it. Not when she still somehow thought that it had been her fault he was dead. If she had just stopped Bellatrix, then the witch wouldn't have been able to throw the Killing curse at Ron. She knew that Ron wouldn't blame her. She also knew that she had done her best to stop that dark witch. But obviously it had not been enough. So there still remained the doubt that if she had done things differently, Ron would still be alive.

*Stop that!* she reprimanded herself. *'What-ifs' weren't going to bring Ron back.*

Hermione turned around and walked back to the bed. She took her wand and holster from the bedside table and adjusted it to her forearm. With a flick of her wrist, her wand landed in her hand. She waved it and changed her clothes back into her Hogwarts uniform. Hermione wondered what she should do now. Her old memories were still tugging unrelentingly at her mind. Right now she actually wanted Tom. Maybe she should search for him? But he had been so angry. He probably didn't want to talk with her. She sank down on the bed. Tom couldn't just disappear on her. She needed him. There was no way she could deal with her memories on her own.

Well, at least he wasn't able to get back to Hogwarts without her, she reasoned with herself. Though maybe he was so disappointed in her that he would never come back.

*Now, you are over-reacting, Granger.* He surely would calm down. He couldn't leave her. Her ghosts would never leave her alone if Tom wasn't around. Hermione groaned frustrated and got up from the bed again. He surely would come back sooner or later. If only because she was his only way back to the castle. So Hermione decided to wait for Tom to cool down and come back to her.

In the mean time, just to occupy herself with something and to stop her thoughts running wild again, she went down to the reception and paid for the room. She had to admit that at daylight and being in a sober state this hostel or whatever it was looked like a disgusting dump. Hopefully Tom would come back soon. As she stepped back into their room she noticed that it was a great deal cleaner than the rest of this establishment. She assumed this had been Tom's doing. Reluctantly Hermione stepped into the bathroom. Obviously Tom's cleaning spells hadn't reached it as it was covered in grime. For the first time ever she admitted that Legifer's household spells might be worth knowing. Hermione sighed, pulled her wand and waved it at the bath room.
"Scorgify," she whispered.

Well, it wasn't awe-inspiring but still clean enough to be used, she decided. So Hermione washed up to then return into the bedroom where she sat down on the edge of the bed and waited for Tom. The longer she had to wait the worse she felt. He obviously needed a long time to calm down again. She felt somehow guilty as this whole thing had apparently rather touched him.

Hermione's head shot up as she finally heard the door open. She was unbelievably relieved to see Tom entering the room. Though her heart sank a little bit as she saw that blank look on his face. Tom had his emotions so completely reined in that she couldn't tell what he was feeling even as she stared into his now grey eyes. He walked over to her and Hermione got up from the bed. He stopped in front of her and looked down at her. She nearly shuddered as she saw that disturbing emptiness in his grey eyes. There seemed to be nothing inside. His gaze was completely void of anything.

Then he said in a low voice, "We should go back to Hogwarts."

Hermione scanned him with worried eyes before she said in a pleading voice, "Tom, let's-

"I'm fine. Let's just go back," he cut across her.

Hermione frowned at him, then she extended a hand and laid it lightly on his arm. Tom looked down at her hand touching him and his façade crumbled for the shortest of moments so that Hermione could see that he was anything but fine. There was still an unbound fury inside him but also disappointment and pain.

"You don't need to be jealous," Hermione whispered in a steady voice.

His eyes flashed at her and she could see this red tinge threatening to break through again. But she didn't remove her hand from him.

"Who says I'm jealous?" he hissed at her and Hermione flinched as she heard the anger behind his words.

Then Tom stepped a little away from her before he continued and sarcasm seeped from his voice, "Why should I be jealous? Because you love another?"

He looked away from her and the emotionless mask was suddenly back in place again. The next time he spoke his voice was soft and terribly empty, "We need to return to the castle or we'll get into trouble."

Hermione knew that she would have to discuss everything with him but he was right. Maybe now was not the right moment. He seemed to be really churned up. When they were safely back at Hogwarts and he had had more time to calm down she really needed to talk with him about Ron. Though Hermione was very reluctant to do so. She didn't feel up to talking about Ron. She was barely able to just think about him let alone tell Tom about him.

For the time being she just wanted to get the both of them back. So she held her hand out for Tom to take. His grey eyes wandered apathetically over her offered hand and she could see that he was reluctant to take it. After a long moment he slowly raised his arm and ever so hesitantly closed his fingers around her hand. Hermione cast him a soft smile which he didn't return then she grasped his hand tightly while simultaneously drawing her wand. She called upon the Elder Magic and it swiftly followed her wish. With a swish of their robes the pair disappeared from the hotel room and stepped into the tight pressure of apparition. Seconds later they reappeared in the cover of a spruce grove not far away from the Great Lake. Hermione felt again a little dizzy as the Elder Magic crackled around
her but this time she wasn’t surprised by the sensation and managed to keep a clear head.

Immediately upon arriving, Tom let go of her hand as fast as if he had been burned. Hermione frowned at his dismissive demeanor especially. She didn’t say anything, though, but just checked her watch. It was almost noon already; they had neatly missed their Charms class. Hopefully no-one had noticed their absence. Though that was a foolish hope Hermione had to admit. After all they hadn't been in their dormitories this night. Maybe Tom's dorm mates hadn't said anything as they were too afraid to peach on Tom but Hermione wasn't so sure about her own dorm mates.

"Let's go to the castle," she said, turned to Tom.

He just stared at her with his unbearably empty eyes and nodded curtly. Then he took off in direction of Hogwarts. He didn't turn around to make sure she was following. Hermione felt hurt by his cold behaviour but right now there was nothing she could do about it.

Tom stalked back to the castle. Although he never turned around to Hermione, he knew that she was following him. His hands were balled into tight fists and he could feel his magic wrenching at him furiously. It rushed through him and almost burned him with its insatiable anger. He wanted to do nothing more than to pull his wand and curse the girl following him. He wanted to throw his magic at her and make her hurt. Make her feel pain for those words that had caused so much grief.

Those words still run around his head. Words spoken so softly and affectionately. Words that had fallen so gracefully from her pink lips.

…words that weren't meant for him.

His magic bulged violently and his blood boiled as he remembered how she had slept, rolled up on that bed right beside him, while she had whispered those words for another.

And he had felt…

... empty.

Tom didn't want to admit it. It irritated him and he didn't want to dwell on it further but deeply down he knew that her words had had an incredibly huge impact on him. He quickened his step as if this way he would be able to escape his own thoughts. A new wave of anger rushed through him and made him want to turn around and yell at her. He was so furious and his dark magic was thundering through him aggressively.

But it somehow felt as if all this anger and rage served to hide something else. There was something beneath his violent temper. It clasped at him with icy cold fingers and bored mercilessly into his newly inflicted wounds.

*It hurts*, he realized surprised.

Tom was utterly confused by this new feeling. But it was there, undeniably. As she had whispered those words, this new feeling had overwhelmed him and he had felt numb by its quantity. Her words had hurt him. They had cut through him and Tom had never felt so vulnerable before. It had only been mere words. Nothing else. Just words. But they had managed to inflict pain he had never known before. How did she do that? It was incomprehensible.

But above all else it was frightening. Why was he so afraid? There wasn't much Tom ever was afraid of. But certainly not of words. How could her words have such an effect on him? It again made him almost tremble when he just thought about those words. Though what made him tremble? Anger? Hate? …fear?
They had almost reached the entrance to the castle and Tom could still hear Hermione's steps. She was following him. But she hadn't said anything since they had arrived here. Tom actually didn't want to talk with her right now. He was too enraged and might say or do something he would regret. But why wasn't she speaking with him? Did she feel too uncomfortable speaking with him now that she had confessed the truth? Tom almost flinched at that thought and this violent reaction he had made him again feel so disgustingly vulnerable. His anger suddenly flamed up and ripped at him again.

Hermione looked at Tom's back as they were walking to the castle. He still hadn't said anything. The silence stretched between them uncomfortably. Maybe she should say something. But Hermione had no idea what. Obviously Tom was still really angry. She didn't want to aggravate him further. So Hermione remained silent as she followed him up the steps to the door leading into the castle. The huge Entrance Hall behind was empty and their steps were the only thing heard as they walked through. As they left the hall Tom turned right and stomped down the corridor. Hermione knew that it would eventually lead them to the staircases and she assumed that Tom was headed for the dungeons. She just wondered if she should follow him as she heard a voice calling after them, "Halt!"

Hermione turned around and found Mr Barnes, the caretaker, shuffle after them. It was almost amusing how he was so similar to Mr Filch she knew from her time.

Sans the cat, of course, Hermione thought as her eyes wandered over the man in front of her. His face was lined and looked somehow weathered despite the fact that he was always indoors guarding the corridors of the castle and looking out for troublemakers. His hair was an unidentifiable colour which could have been grey or a dull brown and he wore a thick greyish cloak. Now he had stopped before them and hit them with a dark glare through his bleak eyes.

"You two!" he bellowed at them. "The headmaster wants to see you!"

Hermione felt her heart sink. Talking to Dippet was the last thing she wanted to do. There were other things she had to take care of. But obviously she didn't have that option as Barnes now gestured impatiently for them to follow him. So they wandered through Hogwarts corridors in silence. Hermione could see Tom glowering angrily at her sometimes which made her rather uncomfortable. After a while they reached the two gargoyles guarding the headmaster's office. Barnes hissed the password at the gargoyles which immediately pounced out of the way. Then he cast them a last reproachful look, grumbled something about 'troublesome pests' before he turned around and walked away.

Hermione gulped before she walked up the stairs to the headmaster's office. She could hear Tom following her with equally reluctant steps. As she arrived before the entrance to the office she hesitantly turned around to Tom. She nearly groaned in frustration as she saw that blank mask on his face. Hermione decided to ignore him for the moment, turned around to the door and knocked weakly.

"Enter," came the reply from inside the office.

She sighed softly before she opened the door and stepped into Dippet's office. Hermione let her gaze quickly sweep over the interior of his office. It was still impeccably tidy to the point where it appeared as uninviting and cold. The shelf displaying different shiny trophies and medals stood impressively behind the headmaster's huge desk, obviously there to show off the achievements of the school. Dippet himself was situated behind his desk while he was busy with sorting through a stack of documents, just like always whenever Hermione had met the man. She shortly wondered if he had placed this stack of documents on his desk just for situations like this where he wanted to appear as
busy. The all important headmaster bothered again by mere students.

She couldn't dwell on her thoughts for too long as now Dippet looked up from his apparently important work. He scanned the two students standing before him with narrowed eyes. Hermione was pretty sure that the man had no idea what this all was about as his gaze travelled over her. Then she could see a glint of recognition in his stern eyes as they wandered to Tom who stood beside her.

"Mr Riddle," he finally said severely with a tinge of disappointment in his tone. "That is now the second time this school year that you are causing trouble."

"Yes, sir," Tom answered in this overly polite voice he only used when trying to impress someone. "I am truly sorry."

Dippet swiped his apology away with one hand and continued, "As I understood it you and Ms… " Here Dippet eyed Hermione and she could see that he was trying to remember her name.

"DeCerto, sir," Tom said quietly.

"Yes yes, Ms DeCerto," Dippet retorted impatiently, not in the least bit embarrassed that he didn't even know the names of his students. "So, you and Ms DeCerto, here, have left the castle since sometime around yesterday. Is that true, Mr Riddle?" Dippet finished and hit Tom with a hard stare.

"Yes, sir," Tom replied and Hermione nearly raised her eyebrows as he was being so truthful. "I am very sorry about all of this," he added, apparently contrite. "I assure you, it will never happen again."

"I see," Dippet commented dryly, seemingly not impressed by Tom's act of repentance.

Without another word he got up from his desk and walked over to the fireplace. He took a little floo powder from a vase standing on the mantelpiece and threw it in the flames. Then Dippet stuck his head in the green flames and seemed to talk with someone on the other end. As he was finished he walked back to his desk. He hadn't even reached his chair as a figure stepped out of the fireplace. Blond hair, blond moustache, a rather protruding belly and an obviously expensive taste in clothes; Slughorn had just entered the headmaster's office. Hermione could see the potions teacher look at Tom and her standing in the office. There was an amused glint in his beady eyes as they wandered over them. She was rather taken aback as he then even winked at her in a conspiratorial way.

"Armando," Slughorn said in his booming voice turned to the headmaster. "I hope you haven't been too strict with our young friends here. They look awfully crestfallen."

Dippet, though, hadn't the chance to answer as another figure emerged from the fireplace. Hermione nearly groaned as she recognized Dumbledore. He wore bright aquamarine robes and for a change the colour of his hair didn't clash with his clothes. Unfortunately the expression on his face wasn't nearly as cheerful as his colourful appearance. Instead there was a sharp frown on his brow as he eyed Hermione and Tom suspiciously.

"On the contrary, Horace. We need to be strict with them," Dumbledore commented on Slughorn's last remark while his piercing stare still hit Hermione. "By leaving Hogwarts they broke a very important school rule. Students are not allowed to leave the castle. During the school year, we are responsible for their well-being. Their families expect us to keep their children save."

Hermione didn't comment that neither Tom nor herself had any family left who could be concerned about their well-being. She didn't like that accusatory look on Dumbledore's face at all. It made her feel quite guilty actually. She hadn't forgotten how she had blackmailed him after all. She was ashamed of herself. And she actually thought that Dumbledore was right. It had been absolutely
irresponsible to leave the castle like that.

"Come on, Albus," Slughorn said jovially. "We've all been young, once. It's not like they did anything harmful. They just left the castle for a few hours to have fun."

Neither Dumbledore nor Dippet looked like they wanted to agree with him but Slughorn just ignored it. He strolled over to where Tom and Hermione stood. To Hermione's surprise he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, almost squashing her in the process.

"Ms DeCerto, is a fine student," the professor declared cheerfully. "I'm sure she'll have no problem in catching up on the classes she missed today."

After that Slughorn released her again but not without sending her an amused wink. Then he stepped to Tom and said, "And Tom here is the best student we have in Hogwarts. He's very responsible. Why, it was you yourself, Amando, who made him prefect in the first place."

Slughorn patted Tom on the back before he continued, "This was just one harmless escapade. I'm sure they already regret it. We shouldn't punish them too severely."

Hermione had to admit that Slughorn would be a good attorney should he ever decide on a different career.

"You have a point, Horace," Dippet finally said.

He eyed Tom pensively. Obviously Slughorn's words had hit ground. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes. Of course Dippet couldn't punish Tom too severely. The headmaster himself had made him a prefect. It wouldn't look too good if his chosen prefect turned out to be quite irresponsible. Parents wouldn't like that at all. After all, it was the prefects' duty to look after the younger students.

Obviously Dippet was thinking along the same lines as he now said, turned to Tom and Hermione, "I will not note this incident in your school records," he declared pompously. "But you still need to be punished for breaking the rules. I will leave this to the heads of your houses."

Hermione betted that part of the reason behind his 'generosity' was that he didn't want to deal with the whole thing himself. So he shuffled the task on someone else. She nearly groaned as she realized that this someone would be Dumbledore in her case.

"Good good," Slughorn exclaimed happily. "Tom, why don't you come to my office later and we talk about this?"

"Of course, professor," Tom replied politely.

Slughorn beamed at Tom then he said to Dumbledore, "Can I invite you to a cup of tea?"

"Certainly, Horace," Dumbledore answered serenely.

Though the kind twinkle left his eyes immediately as he looked at Hermione.

"I expect you in my office after classes are finished today, Ms DeCerto," he said curtly.

"Yes, sir," Hermione responded, feeling quite miserable at the prospect.

Dumbledore didn't reply anything but just turned around and left the office, following Slughorn. Hermione turned around to Dippet but he was again immersed in his important paperwork. Tom seemed to take that as their cue to go as he now walked over to the door. After a "Good day,
headmaster", which Dippet didn't return, Hermione hurried after Tom. He hadn't waited for her but had already descended the stairs from the headmaster's office. Hermione scudded down the stairs, passed the gargoyles and entered the corridor behind.

"Tom, wait," she called after him as he stomped down the corridor.

She quickened her steps until she walked next to him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered contritely. "It's my fault you are in trouble now."

He turned his head and glared down at her. Then he hissed at her irately, "Yes, it is your fault."

"I'm really sorry," Hermione replied timidly in face of his anger.

To Hermione's distress she saw Longbottom walking down the same corridor towards them. As expected, there instantly appeared a frown on his face as he spotted Tom. Tom on the other hand hadn't noticed the Gryffindor or he just didn't care.

"Hermione, where have you been?" Longbottom asked her concerned as he had reached her.

She stopped walking and surprisingly so did Tom. Though the anger never left his face.

"I… um… we-" she couldn't tell Longbottom what really had happened.

"What did you do to her?" the blond roared angrily at Tom.

"I didn't do anything," Tom replied with cold anger in his voice as he was looking at Hermione.

He was barely able to control his temper as he glowered at her darkly. She stiffened as she saw the anger in his eyes. A gesture that wasn't lost on her friend.

"Did you harass her again, Riddle?" Longbottom bellowed furiously.

Hermione could see a dangerous red sheen appearing in Tom's eyes as he now looked at Longbottom. But then he didn't reply anything to the Gryffindor's accusation. Instead he turned towards her again and Hermione was startled as she noticed that the red glint didn't leave his eyes as he looked at her.

"I still have a lot to do," he said in a clipped tone. "So I'll see you later."

Without another word, he turned away from her and started to walk away. Hermione grabbed his arm to stop him.

"I'm sorry. I really am," Hermione said desperately and right now she was not talking about the trouble they both were in.

Tom didn't turn around to her. He just shrugged her hand away and proceeded to walk away. Hermione stared sadly at his retreating back.

"Why did you apologize to that conceited prick?" She heard Longbottom's surprised voice.

Her friends tried to question her during lunch but Hermione was too preoccupied with staring at the Slytherin table to pay them any attention. She even manage to ignore the curious stares the rest of the school's population was sending her way. She didn't even want to begin to imagine what they all thought about her having spent a night Merlin knew where alone with Tom. The dark looks on the Slytherin girls' faces were hint enough, though. This whole thing was not good at all.
During her next class, History of Magic, however, she wasn't able to ignore her friends any longer. Even though they sat a row behind her, it still didn't stop them to whisper to her. Professor Binns didn't seem to mind, though. Even as he was not yet a ghost he already didn't pay much attention to living human beings, it seemed.

"Hermione, what did you do last night?" Longbottom asked her for the hundredth time now.

"Nothing. We just sneaked out for Hogsmeade and then lost track of time. That's all," she replied curtly.

"Why did you do that?" Longbottom insisted in being inquisitive it seemed. "That's just not like you at all. Did Riddle force you to do it?"

"No," Hermione said now irritably. "Tom didn't. It was actually my idea."

She wasn't sure but she thought that she heard a whispered 'Yeah, as if' coming from the table behind her.

"Why did you stay the whole night, though?" Lupin's cool voice came from behind her.

"Riddle didn't do anything to you, did he?" Longbottom interjected worriedly before she had a chance to answer Lupin.

Hermione groaned softly as she heard the concern in her friend's voice. Merlin, what did he think Tom could have done to her? She decided it would be better not to dwell on this particular thought and whispered back to Longbottom,

"I told you. He didn't do anything," she declared irritated. "We went to Hogsmeade, forgot the time and then it had been too late to go back to the castle so we spent the night there."

It didn't sit too well with her that she had to lie to her friends but she couldn't very well tell them what she had really done. Apparition through Hogwarts' wards was still impossible.

Hermione then heard a muffled voice exclaiming indignantly, "You spent the night with Riddle?"

That was followed by Lupin's reprimanding voice, "Marc, stop being so nosy."

If Hermione hadn't been so worried about Tom being angry with her, she would have tried to calm Longbottom down. But as it was her thoughts always wandered nervously back to Tom.

"Did they punish you for leaving the castle?" She suddenly heard Weasley ask her softly.

"Not yet," she whispered back as dread flooded her. "But I have to speak with Dumbledore after classes."

"Don't worry too much about it," Lupin tried to soothe her. "Dumbledore's rather indulgent."

Hermione doubted that he would be very indulgent with her.

"He's not going to punish you too hard," Weasley conceded, trying to cheer her up.

"Yeah, just blame everything on Riddle," Longbottom suggested darkly.

"Certainly not," Hermione hissed at him. "I told you it was my idea. I just dragged Tom along."

Longbottom answered something but Hermione didn't understand it as at this moment Binns ended
the class for today.

"...and I want you to read about the goblins' war of 1263, led by Gorik the Bloodthirsty against Wislar King of the Northern Tribe," Binns declared in his narcotic voice.

Hermione quickly noted it down on a piece of parchment, though she guessed that, aside from Lupin, she was the only one doing so. Then she gathered up the parchment and her quill and stuffed it into her school bag. As she exited the class room her three friends were hot on her heels. Before either of them could say anything Rose and Lucia, her dorm mates, passed them. Hermione didn't like this nosy glint in their eyes as the girls grinned at her.

As Rose passed her she looked at Hermione in amusement then she asked in a suspiciously innocent voice, "So, had fun last night?"

After that, she and Lucia broke down in silly giggles and Hermione stared at them enraged. Really, did they not know when to shut their mouths? She didn't answer anything to Rose's unnecessary statement. But the two other girls didn't seem to expect a reply anyway. They just continued to giggle inanely as they walked down the corridor. Hermione scowled at their retreating backs then she turned to her friends again. They were walking beside her and Hermione could see a mortified expression on Longbottom's face. Clearly he didn't like at all what Rose had been insinuating. But Hermione was not in the mood for his stupid jealousy. Tom was already enough to deal with.

So she tried to change the topic of their conversation, "Something happened while I was away?"

Longbottom obviously wasn't happy as he looked like he wanted to discuss her nightly activities further. Fortunately Weasley spoke before Longbottom had the chance.


Hermione's eyes wandered from Weasley to Lupin and she saw with amusement how he blushed deep red.

"Really?" she chirped expectantly. "So what did happen, Amarys?"

"Er… I… that is…" Lupin stumbled uncomfortably while he looked down at his feet.

Hermione smiled at him as she saw him so nervous. Lupin never got nervous like this. With just one exception, she thought amused. The only time as she had ever seen him losing his cool was when a certain Ravenclaw girl had been around.

"Tell me," she inquired innocently while still looking at Lupin. "Does this have anything to do with Stella Lovegood?"

The blush on Lupin's face even intensified and Weasley laughed while he playfully punched Lupin's arm.

"You bet it does," the red-head guffawed. "Guess who has a new girlfriend."

Hermione smiled fondly as she saw Lupin's embarrassment, though there still was contentment visible on his face.

"Congratulations," she said genially. "I always knew that she likes you."

Lupin finally looked up at her and Hermione giggled softly as she saw a small grin tugging at his mouth.
"Well, who didn't?" Longbottom said exasperatedly, finally contributing something to the conversation.

He tried to suppress a grin as he now looked at Lupin in mock sadness and shook his head.

"Gosh, what are you still doing here, man?" he asked slyly. "I'm sure your girl already waits for you." Longbottom pushed him down the corridor. "The Ravenclaws' common room is this way," he stage-whispered at Lupin while gesturing down the corridor.

Lupin turned his head around to Hermione but she just smirked at him amused. He shrugged his shoulders, grinned at her and took off down the corridor.

"You are such a player!" Longbottom yelled after him.

Hermione betted that the blush was back on Lupin's face, though she couldn't see it. But she could see the pack of second years that came down the corridor stare at Longbottom in shock. She giggled and then tugged Longbottom in the opposite direction towards their own common room.

Sometime later Hermione reluctantly wandered to Dumbledore's office. She really didn't want to talk with him. Once his presence had been reassuring now it only unsettled her. It still hurt her how she had had to antagonize him. But back then she hadn't seen any other way than to blackmail the transfiguration professor. Otherwise he would surely have sent Tom back to the orphanage. However disappointed Dumbledore was in her at least she knew that she had a very good reason for displeasing the professor. Hermione swallowed down her guilt as she stood before Dumbledore's office. She donned a conceited expression on her face. She still needed to play the dark witch in front of Dumbledore. He wasn't allowed to suss out her bluff.

She knocked on the door and the professor beckoned her to enter. Hermione opened the door and was immediately greeted by the cozy atmosphere of the office. As her gaze wandered to Dumbledore, though, she was quickly reminded that she was not exactly welcome here. A sharp frown had appeared between his eyebrows as he scanned her through his half moon spectacles.

"Please sit down, Ms DeCerto," he finally said, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk.

Hermione sat down and looked at him expectantly while trying to hide how very nervous she was right now. Her heard sank as she saw that the kind twinkle was completely absent in his eyes. It made her sad how Dumbledore seemed to be convinced that she was dark and evil. She wondered shortly if that was how Tom had always felt towards the professor. She quickly reminded herself that Tom simply hated him in return and would certainly not feel sad about the whole thing. Besides, Dumbledore's mistrust in Tom wasn't completely unfounded either.

The professor still hit her with his piercing stare, then he asked her sharply, "Where did you go after you left the castle yesterday?"

Hermione looked at him and hid her guilt and shame behind a blank mask on her face.

"I- we just went over to Hogsmeade," she finally mumbled with the appropriate amount of contrition in her voice.

"I see." Dumbledore piercing stare did not waver. Then her unexpectedly shot at her, "Where did you stay?"

"What?" Hermione asked confused.
"I'm sure you didn't sleep on the streets," Dumbledore stated in a cold voice, "So where did you stay for the night?"

"I… I…" Hermione was desperate to find an alibi.

"Don't forget Ms DeCerto," he reminded her in a glacial tone. "I can verify your statement by asking the local barmen."

She swallowed hard. What could she possibly tell him? They hadn't spent the night in Hogsmeade, after all. Of course she could still claim that they had apparated to someplace else if there hadn't been the slight inconvenience that she officially didn't have an apparition license.

"I repeat my question," Dumbledore insisted mercilessly. "Where have you been?"

"Okay," Hermione whispered in a soft voice while trying to appear embarrassed. "I didn't want to admit it. Tom and I, we slipped out to go to Hogsmeade," she said while staring down at her hands. Then she slowly raised her eyes to look at Dumbledore again. "We somehow got drunk, you see. We wanted to go back to the castle. But we didn't make it."

Hermione felt horrible for lying again to Dumbledore. It made her sick having to play the guilty student here. She was guilty but for completely different reasons. Her confession now was just a disgusting lie.

But she couldn't let her mask drop so she continued in her embarrassed voice, "We got lost between Hogsmeade and the castle. So we just stayed there for the night. We had our wands so we had not problem putting up warming charms. Then we waited for the morning."

Dumbledore scrutinized her over his half-moon spectacles and had Hermione not been a rather experienced Occlumens she would have thought that he read her mind right now.

After a while he said while the disappointment seeping into his voice made her almost wince, "Ms DeCerto, I've been a teacher at this school for quite some time already. I can tell if students lie to me."

Hermione couldn't help but raise her eyebrows. She had to admit, he was good, even without Legilimency as her Occlumency shields were still in place.

"Why don't you try it with the truth now?" Dumbledore suggested in a sharp tone.

The truth, though, would pose too many new questions. Hermione couldn't very well tell him how she had apparated through Hogwarts wards all the way to London. If she did that, why not tell him about Peverell, the Elder Magic and her temporal problem?

So Hermione replied defiantly, "I am not lying."

Her declaration was met with an uncomfortable silence. Dumbledore looked at her with his clear blue eyes and Hermione had to stop herself from squirming under his stare. She dearly missed the Dumbledore from her time period. He had never looked at her in this way. Like he was suspecting her of having done horrible things. Hermione could barely stand his mistrust. She wanted to tell him everything. She wanted him to understand that she was not an evil witch. That she had actually fought on the right side. She wanted him to tell her that she was doing the right thing.

Hermione felt lost as she looked back at him. Before he had died, Dumbledore had always been their moral compass. Now he was convinced that she was evil. It was hard to maintain her act of the dark witch when she actually wanted him to confirm that she was good and her cause right. But she
knew, she mustn't let her mask slip.

After a while, in which she did not cave in, Dumbledore suddenly sighed tiredly, "Do you really want to walk this path, Ms DeCerto?"

"Sir?" Hermione asked, earnestly confused.

"I know how Tom is," the professor replied. "I have watched him for some time now. I've tried so hard to sway him from that dark path." There was now sadness in his voice as he continued, "Alas, I could not pull him back. I think he is forever lost. It is something I regret very much."

Hermione felt horrible as she now looked into Dumbledore's light blue eyes. She somehow understood that he had always tried his best to save Tom. She still didn't like the way in which Dumbledore had tried it but she could see that he honestly wanted to help Tom.

"I always wonder if I could have done more," Dumbledore admitted while there still seeped unbearable regret through his voice. "Maybe if I had put more effort into it, if I had tried harder, then I might have saved Tom."

He leaned a little forward in his chair and looked directly into her eyes. Hermione still couldn't see the kind twinkle in his eyes but now at least the hard glint was gone.

Then Dumbledore continued in his soft-spoken voice, "You see, when I first met Tom as he was only eleven years old but I could already see how vulnerable he is to the lure of Dark Magic. I promised myself then to watch out for him and to protect him." Here Dumbledore paused shortly and shook his head slightly. "I failed him. I could not help him. Now, I have to accept that it is too late to save him. It hurts me, having to watch such talent go to waste. Tom could have been great, a very powerful sorcerer. But he decided to follow another way. He could not resist the pull of the Dark Arts."

Again Dumbledore sighed softly. His eyes had lost their focus shortly but now the shot back at her piercingly.

"I know what the Dark Arts represent, Ms DeCerto," he suddenly declared while he looked at her intently. "They offer power and strength. Dark Magic likes to lure and to ensnare. It promises many things. Things you have always dreamed of but would never have dared to hope for. Abilities you wanted to command but never achieved. The Dark Arts will give it all to you. The more it offers, the more you want to take. As a result you will delve deeper and deeper into the Dark Arts. You will even start to trust them and you will begin to think that you are strong. Strong and smart enough to control the darkness, to know when to stop. You are at the peak of your power, master of the Dark Arts."

"But then, after some time, slowly you will start to have doubts. It is then that you will come to see that there is no controlling darkness. You are just stumbling through the dark, nothing more than a plaything to this magic. It is then that you will realize that Dark Magic is deceitful. But by that time it will be too late for you to turn back. Dark Magic is a cruel mistress, who promises a lot but keeps no pledges. Instead it will eat away from you until there is nothing left."

Dumbledore still stared at her with sadness shining in his eyes. Then he said in a hollow voice, "That is the path Tom Riddle has decided to follow, Ms DeCerto." He added gravely, "It is very painful for me to watch him losing himself in the dark but I cannot help him anymore. He is now beyond my reach."

Hermione stared at him. She didn't let her blank mask drop. But his words had hit her much. She
knew he was right. She had seen herself what dark magic truly meant. It was a disgusting branch of magic. Though there certainly was a lure behind that powerful magic. It had never managed to catch her but Hermione had nevertheless noticed it. The Dark Arts unmistakably offered much power. But she knew how dangerous and ghastly such power could be. With one thing, though, she found herself wishing that Dumbledore was wrong. Tom was not yet beyond any help, was he? But she had seen it this morning, that glint of anger and hate in his eyes. She had seen a glimpse of Lord Voldemort in Tom's crimson eyes. She would lie if she said that this hadn't frightened her.

Lord Voldemort had been the most powerful wizard she had ever met, even more powerful than Dumbledore. Voldemort had been very well versed in dark magic and Hermione would say that he had truly been a master of the Dark Arts. But Dumbledore was right, wasn't he? In the end, Voldemort had lost everything to this dark magic. Even himself.

Hermione was totally startled as Dumbledore spoke again, "Are you sure you want to follow Tom?"

"W… what?" she asked weakly.

"I know Tom is a charismatic person," he said softly, almost sympathetically. "He can be very persuasive when he wants to be."

Hermione frowned at him confused what did he try to say? That it was dangerous to be around Tom? Well, she already knew that.

"But you should not let yourself getting blinded by his charisma," he continued. "I implore you not to follow him."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock as realization finally dawned on her when she heard that word, 'follow'. Now she could see what Dumbledore tried to do here. He thought she was one of Tom's followers? He wanted to convince her to leave Tom and not follow him into the dark. She wanted to tell Dumbledore how wrong he was. She did not intend to ever really delve into the Dark Arts.

But she knew, she could not reveal herself. There were too many risks. She was not going to tell Dumbledore the truth about herself. Then there was Tom. Hermione knew that she was the only thing that stopped Dumbledore from expelling Tom and forcing him back in the orphanage. There was no way she could risk Tom's safety. She had tried to convince Dumbledore to let him stay but nothing had helped. So here she was, the dark witch. Hermione didn't like it to have to lie to Dumbledore but at the moment there was no other way.

So Hermione took on a cool and indifferent mask on her face. She tried to look like his words had had no impact on her whatsoever. It was an utter lie but Hermione knew that over the time she had become a very good liar.

Then she told Dumbledore in a conceited tone, "You do not have to worry on my behalf, sir. I am quite old enough to make my own decisions."

Hermione knew she had said it in a very cold and offensive way but she actually meant what she said. She truly didn't want Dumbledore to worry too much about her. He meant well and she hated herself for lying to him. She didn't want to add guilt on top of everything by knowing how concerned he was on her account.

Sadness flooded the professor's eyes and Hermione nearly cringed.

"I see, you do not want to change. But know, that my door is always open for you. If you should realize that to follow Tom into the darkness is a grave mistake, then please feel free to seek me out. I
will be able to help."

Hermione didn't nod at him but just got up from her chair and tried to appear calm as she walked over to the door. She grasped the handle and opened the door but before she could step out on the corridor Dumbledore spoke again, "Oh, Ms DeCerto?"

She turned around to him and looked questioningly.

"Forty points from Gryffindor," he informed her in an emotionless voice. "For breaking the school rules by leaving the castle without permission."

Hermione inclined her head slightly. She had actually expected something worse. Was he going easy on her because he still hoped she would change her mind and leave Tom? She didn't know so exited the transfiguration teacher's office, slightly wobbly on her legs.

She felt horrible. Her life was getting more complicated by the minute. Dumbledore obviously thought she was a misguided witch directly on her way into the Dark Arts. Tom hated her because she actually had a past he never knew about and, well, her past enjoyed it how it was to pop up at random times just to torment her. To top it off Grindelwald seemed to want to kill her. Three of those problems she couldn't change at the moment so she would try to concentrate on Tom. She didn't like it how he was angry with her. They really needed to talk.

Later that day Hermione decided to find Tom. She really didn't want to talk with him about Ron but she couldn't stave it off any longer. Since they had had this row in the hotel room Tom hadn't spoken one word with her. As she so wandered towards the stairs leading down to the dungeons she wondered what she should tell Tom. She knew that he was jealous because he had found out about Ron. But he would just have to come to terms with the situation, Hermione decided stubbornly. He hadn't assumed that he was her first ever boyfriend, had he? On the other hand, he had told her himself that she indeed was his first girlfriend. So Tom obviously hadn't much experience in the serious-relationship-department. After the things she had learned about his past in the orphanage and had seen here at Hogwarts, he probably had never had any attachment to any person, romantic or not. That didn't exactly help her situation.

As Hermione strolled though the castle's pathways in direction of the Slytherin common room she was suddenly brought out of her thoughts as a sharp voice yelled at her from behind, "Ms DeCerto!"

It didn't take Hermione much to guess whom that voice belonged to. Only her least favourite teacher was able to screech in that sort of voice. Hermione groaned audibly but she didn't care if the hysteric woman behind her heard her or not. Then she turned around. Sure enough professor Legifer came walking towards her. Her robes were, as usual, squeaky-clean. All this perfection actually made Hermione quite dizzy. Legifer wore her dark hair in a bun without even one strand out of place. Her hard eyes now wandered coldly over Hermione's form. Like always, the woman seemed to be personally offended with what she found. Hermione actually knew that her own hair was extra frizzy today as she hadn't brushed it at all.

Legifer now shook her head reproachfully but she didn't comment Hermione's less than perfect appearance instead she said in her sharp voice, "Don't think I haven't heard about your latest misbehaviour."

The witch then looked at Hermione expectantly as if she wanted to hear some form of apology. Hermione on the other hand didn't see why she should apologize for anything to that crazy woman.
So as she didn't say anything Legifer continued outraged, "I couldn't believe it when I heard. But I really shouldn't be surprised." She eyed Hermione in disgust then she said, "I knew you would cause trouble when I first met you, Ms DeCerto. I have never met a more uncouth young woman than you."

Hermione raised her eyes in challenge. What did the woman want from her? she wondered exasperated. She slowly got the impression that Legifer just enjoyed it to yell at her.

Sure enough, Legifer continued to reprimand her, "I warned Mr Riddle again and again. You are bad company, that's what I told him."

Now that did it. Hermione seethed and she balled her hands into tight fists. She seriously considered pulling her wand now. How dare that woman do something like that and bother Tom? He hadn't even told Hermione about it.

"First you drag poor Mr Riddle into detention after that indecent behaviour you showed during professor McGray's class," Legifer hissed at her in her stern voice. "It was completely your fault. You should know better than try to duel with your male fellow students. It is not your place to do something like that. You are a girl, after all."

Hermione had to press her mouth into a thin line as she tried to stop herself from shouting at the bothersome woman in front of her. She remembered that incident well. Back then Tom and herself had still hated each other. The whole thing had resulted in them using rather severe curses in a duel during DADA. McGray had punished them consecutively. But it certainly had not been solely Hermione's fault, she thought infuriated.

Legifer just ignored Hermione's upcoming rage and continued bitingly, "Now you did it again. You again caused trouble for Mr Riddle." Legifer glared at her with stern eyes. "It is even worse than before. Such behaviour is inexcusable. I was deeply shocked when I heard what you did. It is a shame to have a student like you, let me tell you that."

Well, poor you, was the only thing Hermione could think now that she stared at the enraged woman in front of her. At least she managed to not roll her eyes at her.

"Imagine that, a young woman tugging a young man into some shady bars in Hogsmeade. I've never heard of something like this," Legifer declared indignantly. "It's a disgrace, that's what it is."

The woman's sharp gaze still hit Hermione but she had decided to just ignore the whole thing. It wasn't worth to get worked up on this.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself?" Legifer asked her reproachfully after there came no reaction whatsoever from Hermione. "If you don't care about your own reputation, then you should have at least considered Mr Riddle. He is such a fine young man but all you cause him is trouble."

The irony of it all was just too much for Hermione. Though there was something else and it made her feel uncomfortable. Legifer wasn't right, of course, but still her words held some truth. Hermione, in fact, did feel guilty that she had dragged Tom to London. For completely different reasons than what Legifer suggested but guilt was definitely there. It angered her, having to admit that Legifer had a point here.

Hermione let her rage get the better of her as she now hissed at Legifer, "Professor, whatever you might think about my actions you are not my head of house. You cannot punish me."

She could almost see the indignation seeping into Legifer's dark eyes as the woman glared at her.
"Such impudence," Legifer huffed, her voice tight and angry. "I assure you we will discuss your inappropriate behaviour during your detention next Friday."

Oh joy, Hermione thought sarcastically as she eyed Legifer. In the mean time the professor's cold eyes once more wandered disapprovingly over Hermione.

"I more and more lean to the opinion that you are a lost cause, Ms DeCerto," Legifer finally stated snippily. "If you don't change your ways, Mr Riddle will surely leave you. Only Merlin knows why he decided to give you a chance in the first place."

Hermione seethed now. Even her magic rushed through her enraged.

So she said in a clipped voice, "Thank you, professor. You are right, we should discuss that next Friday."

Then she just turned around and walked away leaving Legifer standing there in the corridor. This just wasn't her day, Hermione thought as she continued her way towards the dungeons.

She needed a while to calm down again after her encounter with Legifer. By that time Hermione arrived down in the dungeons. Now her anger was again replaced by anxiety. The truth behind Legifer's words hadn't left her. It certainly was her fault that Tom was in trouble now. She had grabbed him and apparated to London without asking him beforehand. After that she had talked in her sleep about Ron. Hermione felt sick as she had to think about Ron again but she desperately tried to suppress the upcoming memories. She needed to speak with Tom now. So Hermione stubbornly walked down the dark corridors of the dungeons.

After a while she stood before a perfectly ordinary, bare stone wall and felt very frustrated. She knew this was the entrance to the Slytherin common room but unfortunately she didn't know the password. The one Tom had used a few days ago to take her to his dorm and look after her injuries obviously didn't work anymore. So currently Hermione waited for any Slytherin to show up and get Tom for her. At this point in time, Hogwarts house system was rather bothersome.

Hermione just wondered if she should use a little bit of magic to open the stupid common room as a group of three or fourth year Slytherins came strolling down the corridor. They eyed her suspiciously as they reached the entrance to their common room but Hermione ignored their borderline hostile behaviour and said, turned to a brown haired boy,

"Can you look if Tom Riddle is in the common room and tell him I'm waiting for him?"

Hermione had to suppress an amused giggle as the boy stared at her saucer-eyed after hearing Tom's name.

"R… Riddle?" he stammered nervously. "You want me to address Tom Riddle?" he ended in a rather panicky tone.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Tom and his ability to intimidate people was really something else. Had he ever done something to this poor fourth year or was it only his peculiar reputation that made the boy gape at her rather scared looking?

"Yes, Tom Riddle," Hermione replied exasperated. "Tell him his girlfriend waits for him."

The boy just nodded at her and Hermione guessed that he was too nervous to say anything right now. It looked like Tom didn't bother to play the perfect student when he was in his common room. She watched the now rather pale boy and his friends enter the common room. She wondered shortly if she should enter herself but then decided against it. She wouldn't feel very comfortable in there.
Those Slytherins made her somehow nervous. So she remained standing in the dark corridor.

It was after a good solid five minutes that Hermione started to wonder if the boy had told Tom at all. A little while later and Hermione considered to give up. Then, finally, the common room door opened. Out stepped Tom. He was wearing his uniform pants and shirt though without the green sleeveless pullover or tie.

"Hi," Hermione greeted him timidly.

Tom just eyed her shortly before he said, his tone level, "You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes. Let's walk a bit," Hermione gesturing down the corridor.

Tom nodded curtly so she took off. He fell in step beside her but he never once looked at her. She could see that his face was completely free of any emotion. Hermione then decided to just be blunt. He was a Slytherin maybe he would be taken by surprise by her bluntness and confess to things he otherwise wouldn't.

So she asked casually, "Are you angry with me?"

But Tom remained silent and Hermione sighed softly.

"I take that as a 'yes'," she replied dryly. "I spoke with Dumbledore," she then informed him. "It might cheer you up to know that it was quite dreadful for me. And he took loads of points from Gryffindor. I'm sure Slytherin'll win the House Cup now."

Hermione cast a quick glance at Tom. He was still walking calmly beside her. His face was once again unreadable but she could at least tell that he was listening to her.

"Oh, and he gave me the 'look' again," Hermione said ominously. "You know, that look he casts at you, too, all the time. It's like he thinks I'm planning something evil."

Still, no reaction at all, Hermione noted frustrated. So she decided to just go on and chatter with him.

Tom eyed the witch walking beside him. She was talking on and on about petty things while neatly avoiding the one thing that plagued his mind. He was greatly unsettled by the incident that had happened this morning. The words she had spoken while asleep still freaked him out. Whoever this Ron was, dead or not, apparently Hermione still had feelings for him. Tom was not going to accept that. She was his after all and he was not prepared to share her with anyone. Tom just had to remember how she had uttered those words, how content she had looked as she had dreamed about that other guy and he would feel sick. It wasn't supposed to go like this. Hermione was his. His property actually. How was it that she had such influence over him? It should be the other way around.

But now she was looking at him with concern in her eyes. She even stepped a little closer to him and gently clasped his hand. A soft smile played around her mouth as she looked up at him and Tom could feel her hand pressing his reassuringly. A pleasant warmth originated from her hand on his skin and it spread through his whole body. He quickly pulled his hand away from her.

She was his property. He had wanted to possess her, had wanted to own her. But at the moment, she was the one in control.

That made Tom angry. He did not like it when others were in control of his life. There had always been people who had tried to control him. Like Mrs Cole or Carter. And Dumbledore, of course. But they would never succeed. He would always fight against them. They were not going to gain any
ground. Now there was Hermione. She had a frightening lot of power over him. Today, she had taken over completely. Just like that, without any effort. He hadn't fought her off. He had given her this power willingly.

While all this feelings cursed through him one thing overshadowed everything else. It was the fact that Hermione hadn't answered his question.

Who is Ron?

She hadn't told him. She had dreamed about another guy and she had confessed her love for him. And then she hadn't told Tom anything. She hadn't answered his question. Only that this person was supposedly dead. Did that change so much? It certainly didn't change her feelings. How did she know that guy? When had they met? Had she been his girlfriend? Had he returned her feelings? Tom felt like going crazy as a million questions run through his head. So far, all of them remained unanswered, he thought angrily as he stared down at Hermione.

Hermione felt a little hurt as Tom pulled his hand away from her. He was angry, though. He didn't mean it, she tried to calm herself down. She had unsettled him by letting slip that bit of information about Ron. That was why he reacted so dismissive right now.

The two of them had by now reached the Entrance Hall. Hermione wanted to talk with Tom undisturbed and had decided to do that outside. Maybe a bit of fresh air was able to calm the both of them down. She now opened the door and stepped outside.

"And I met Legifer just as I was walking to your common room," Hermione continued chattering away.

Obviously Tom wasn't willing to contribute anything to their conversation as he insisted in ignoring her. But she wanted him to speak with her. So she tried again, "She wasn't very impressed by my performance either," Hermione told him while trying to sound conversationally. "But I think that woman just hates me whatever I do. Not that I care. She is a right pain in the neck."

Hermione shortly glimpsed at Tom but the distanced look was still plastered all over his face. He wasn't reacting to her in any way other than just ignoring everything.

"One day, I might just go on and curse Legifer," she said and then added thoughtfully, "Perhaps they are going to expel me then. Though it still might be worth it. What do you think?"

Now she tried to deliberately get a rise out of him, but he still refused to react to her. Slowly his silent treatment was getting on her nerves. Hermione took a deep breath to control her rising temper.

Then she inquired tentatively, "So what did Slughorn say? Did he give you detention?"

"No," he replied monosyllabically.

"Well, you are lucky then, aren't you?" she said in a forced cheerful voice.

Tom just shrugged his shoulders and Hermione lost her patience.

"Tom, please, say something," she exclaimed frustrated.

He turned around to her and glowered down at her.

Well, at least that blank look is gone, she thought wryly as she looked up in his angry face. It seemed she had finally managed to make him crack.
"What do you want me to do? Should I dance around in joy?" he asked aggressively. Then he continued while slowly cold sarcasm seeped into his voice. "Because this is such a wonderful day, isn't it? It started so very nicely." Hermione winced at the sharp tone in his voice. "And now it gets better and better. Look, I didn't get any detention for a thing I was completely innocent of. How lucky indeed. Maybe Slughorn suspended my prefect privilege. But, hey, who cares?

Hermione stood before him and stared at him. He seemed to be really furious. Maybe she shouldn't have tried to make him open up because that dark glint in his eyes now was rather intimidating.

"He… he suspended you?" she asked timidly. "For how long?"

Tom just narrowed his eyes at her and then hissed acridly, "Two weeks."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't want that to happen."

"Well, congratulations. You still managed," he replied frostily.

"I'm sorry," she repeated weakly.

Hermione felt horrible as she looked up at him. This whole disaster had really been her fault. She shouldn't have dragged him to London. That had been one huge mistake. Tom's eyes were hard as steel as they now wandered over her form. She could see anger but also accusation in them. Though there was something else. She had seen that in him before. He was incredibly jealous.

As though to confirm her train of thought Tom now hissed at her demandingly, "You said you love this guy. How did you meet him?"

Hermione was not really surprised by this abrupt change of topic. She knew this had been the actual problem boiling underneath the whole argument. Now that she got him started Tom didn't stop to rage at her.

"Do you want him back?" he asked defiantly. Then he continued with false concern, "Obviously you love him so much."

Hermione didn't answer. It still was impossible to talk about Ron. So while she could understand Tom's anger, she was not able to say anything.

"Did he love you, too?" Tom asked snidely.

She still remained to be silent. His questions hurt her. Each mention of Ron's name invoked more painful memories which now invaded her mind.

By now they had reached the Great Lake. The grey of the dreary sky was reflected on the smooth surface of the lake, making its water look uninviting and cold. Not far away Hermione saw a small bench facing the lake. Tom's inquisition about Ron was slowly making her feel faint so she walked over to the bench and sat down. Tom didn't sit down but instead paced furiously up and down in front of her.

Hermione knew he was a very jealous person but this was a whole new level. She had no idea how to calm him. She certainly wasn't going to lie and tell him that Ron didn't mean anything to her. Then Hermione noticed that Tom had stopped his pacing but now stood a few steps away from her and stared at her with narrowed eyes.

"Did you sleep with him?" he suddenly asked her in that fearsome, icy cold voice.
Hermione's eyebrows shot up and she stared at Tom incredulously. His grey eyes fixed her with a hard glare.

"What?" Hermione managed to say shakily. "Why is that so important?"

She had to watch as a malign red colour seeped into his grey eyes. Tom took a step towards her and Hermione couldn't help but breathe in sharply as she felt the first signs of his dark magic in the air.

"It is important because I want to know it," he hissed at her in anger. "Tell me, did you sleep with him?"

Tom's last sentence sounded more like a command than anything else. Hermione stared up at him with wide eyes. Her breathing was quickened now but she answered his question in a firm voice,

"Yes."

The dark magic in the air even intensified as Tom heard her answer. There was now a murderous expression on his face as he stared down at her. His red eyes glowed with the fury raging inside of him. Hermione was more than a little unsettled by his anger. But she didn't see why she should feel bad for having slept with Ron. He had been her boyfriend back then after all.

It had been the night before they had had to go to the Ministry of Magic to finally face their opponent. Hermione remembered how scared she had been. She had been so sure that the only thing they would find in the Ministry would be their deaths. That war had been raging around her for the past two years and all of it was going to culminate with the next day when they would either lose horribly or pull the country out of the darkness. Everything depended on their strength.

Accordingly, during that night, no-one of them had been able to find any sleep. Harry had gone out of the tent to be alone and to prepare himself for the task ahead of him. Ron and Hermione had stayed back in the tent. It was then that she had slept with him for the first time.

And for the last time, Hermione thought as she felt a painful twinge in her stomach.

They had been at the eve of a battle they did not want to fight. A battle they knew would most probably cost them their lives. They had fought against the evil for far too long already. Sacrificed so much to their cause. There had been so incredibly much at stake. They just couldn't afford to lose against the darkness. If they lost, the whole country would fall with them. The act of love between them had been overshadowed by this terrible fate they knew was awaiting them. What should have been a wonderful experience had been tainted by fear and desperation.

Hermione felt incredibly sad again as she thought back to that night. It had been the right decision, to spend the night with Ron. Because the other day he had died.

Her eyes wandered back to Tom standing in front of her and still staring at her so furiously. He seemed to be really angry with her. His dark magic was still dancing around him viciously. Why was he so angry with her? Hermione wondered as she could feel her own temper rising. She had done nothing wrong. At least she had slept with a person she loved whereas Tom had slept with a lot of girls he had never given a damn about.

"What are you so angry about?" she hissed at him defiantly. "Didn't you sleep with a lot of girls before we met?"

A dangerous look crossed his face as she said that and his red eyes seemed to burn even fiercer. Then he said in a barely controlled voice, "Yes. But you are a girl, Hermione."
Hermione raised her eyebrows indignantly. Was that again a forties thing? Where men were allowed to do whatever they pleased but all hell broke loose if a girl did the same thing? She watched Tom's hard gaze travel over her form before he opened his mouth and said in a snide tone,

"I can't believe you let yourself getting fucked like a cheap whore!"

Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she heard him hurl those cold, hurtful words at her. How could he say something like that? How dare he insult and belittle that time she had spent with Ron? Suddenly there were tears threatening to fall from her eyes. From anger or sadness, Hermione didn't know but she fought against them. She looked up into Tom's furious crimson-red eyes.

She breathed in deeply to get her feelings under control again then she said in a stiff voice, "It is not your place to judge me."

As she continued to stare at him, not seeing any emotion other than anger in him, she suddenly sniffed. Then she could feel that she wouldn't be able to hold her tears back any longer. So she got up from the bench and started to hastily walk away. She couldn't bear Tom's presence anymore. Not after what he had just said. His cold words had hurt her very much.

She turned her back to Tom and hurried away as she felt the first tears running down her cheeks. But Hermione only managed to walk a few steps until she felt someone grabbing her upper arm, thus stopping her flight successfully. She tried to wriggle away from Tom's grasp but it was no use. Then he turned her around to him but Hermione averted her eyes, she didn't look up at him. She didn't want to see those red eyes again. They always reminded her of things she really tried to forget. The unwanted tears were now running freely down her face.

"Hermione?" She heard Tom say softly.

She still didn't look up. What he had said had been just vile. She sniffed again but tried to suppress the tears that still ran down her cheeks. She didn't want to cry. Not in front of Tom after he had insulted her in such a way. What did he want to do now? Insult her some more? Hermione bit on her lip to stop herself from sobbing. She couldn't take it if he started to talk so derisively about her relationship with Ron again.

Then unexpectedly she could feel Tom's fingers touching her face, gently wiping the tears away.

"I didn't mean to say that." She heard him say in a soft tone.

Hermione breathed in deeply then she lifted her head and reluctantly looked up at Tom. His grey eyes were gazing back at her anxiously.

"I'm not a whore," Hermione whispered in a shaky voice.

She saw a small, hesitant smile on Tom's face as he answered her in a soothing voice, "I know that. I didn't mean what I said."

His eyes sparkled down at her softly and the anger that had been burning in them before was completely gone just to be replaced by worry. Tom really looked a little contrite. That didn't change the fact, though, that his words still stung. As Hermione looked up at Tom and stared into his grey eyes, suddenly memories flooded her again. She was reminded of how she had always looked up at Ron just like this. His blue eyes had always looked lovingly back at her. Even when they had had a row she had always been able to see his love. Hermione had to squeeze her eyes shut. Images of Ron came crashing down on her again. She could remember how he had held her hand as they had walked to the Ministry of Magic to face their fate. He had pressed her hand reassuringly while each
step had taken them closer to their enemy. Back then his hand in hers had meant the world to her. Without him she would have been lost. Then suddenly, cruelly, he had been ripped from her.

Hermione had to take in deep shaky breaths of air while her eyes were still squeezed shut. She desperately tried to fight off all those images that now invaded her mind so ruthlessly. Her daemons were back and Hermione did her best to subdue them again. Though she could feel that she was losing.

Tom looked down at Hermione. Her head was bent but he could see that she had her eyes closed. Her breathing was ragged just as if she tried to suppress sobs. He had been so angry with her. He had felt betrayed by her. This had enraged him and he had wanted to hurt her just like she had dared to hurt him. But now he looked down at her and he regretted his words very much. She looked so broken, so desperate. He had wanted to cause this but now that he had succeeded he wanted nothing more than to take his words back.

Her confession about her relationship with Ron had shocked him. She was his and the knowledge that somebody else had touched her made him almost senseless with anger. But he should never have hurt her so.

Hermione still stood before him and had her eyes tightly closed as if she tried to force her tears from not spilling from her eyes. Tom hesitantly raised his arm and then gingerly laid his hand on her trembling shoulder. The instant she felt him touching her Hermione's eyes flew open then she whipped around and tried to run away. Before she could flee him Tom caught a trembling hand. She stopped dead in her tracks as he grabbed her hand and he was relieved that she didn't immediately try to wrench away from him. Though she also didn't turn around to him either. In an attempt to calm her down Tom squeezed her hand gently. He could feel her tense at his contact. They stood like this for a moment, Hermione still with her back to him, and Tom hoped that she wouldn't decide to run away again.

Then abruptly she turned around to him. Before he could say anything she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. He could feel how tightly she held to him, almost desperate. He quickly slung his arms around her. One of his hands gently held the back of her head as he pressed her against him. She still held tightly to him but Tom could feel that she was not crying. She was just standing there holding him. They stood like this for a long time and Tom wondered what she was thinking about now.

Was she considering leaving him? Tom nearly cringed at that thought. What he had just spat at her had been really cruel. Again, he had lost his temper so easily. It was as those thoughts run through his head that Hermione suddenly released her hold on him and Tom was reluctant to unwrap his arms from her but he did.

"Let's sit down," he whispered to her while gesturing at the bench.

He wanted to prevent her from running away again. Hermione just looked up at him with her blank face. After a while she nodded. Tom took her hand, which made her tense slightly, then he pulled her over to the bench. She sat down and Tom sat beside her. Hermione drew her knees up and slung her arms around them. Then she just stared numbly at the Great Lake in front of them. Tom cast a sideway glance at her.

"You do know I didn't mean that, do you?" he asked her hesitantly.

She didn't turn her head but just continued staring at the lake.

After a while she said in a strangely unemotional voice, "It's okay."
"I shouldn't have said that," Tom was now rather unsettled by her dead tone. "It was stupid."

Hermione turned her head, her face was still a blank but he could see honesty in her eyes as she looked at him and said, "You were angry. Sometimes we say stupid things when angered. Don't worry."

He felt a little reassured by her words but that lost look in her eyes was still horrible to watch. Hermione turned away from him to again stare at the lake. She didn't say anything for a long time.

As she spoke again her voice was soft and ridged by some unknown emotion, "Have you ever lost anyone you loved?"

Tom's head shot at her. He hadn't expected her to talk with him after he had insulted her like that. She was again looking numbly at the lake in front of her.

"No," he finally replied softly and truthfully

A small smile appeared on her lips but he could see that it didn't reach her eyes.

"That is good," she whispered. "Because it hurts."

By now the smile had vanished, leaving her face abandoned. As her pretty eyes fell on him, Tom nearly shuddered as he could see the pain lurking behind.

She opened her mouth and said almost desperately, "And it doesn't stop."

She shortly closed her eyes but then turned and stared out at the lake again. He could see her arms around her knees tighten.

Then she continued in her empty tone, "I don't know why I dreamed about him. I didn't have any dreams about my past for quite some time now." Her voice was extremely soft. "Actually not since that night when you found me on the Astronomy tower."

Tom glanced at her. He could remember that night very well. She had tried to curse him back then, after all. But it was also the night were she had finally agreed to become his girlfriend.

"This time it wasn't a nightmare, was it?" he asked somewhat worried.

"I can't remember," Hermione replied numbly. "But I don't think so."

"Those dreams. They are..." she started but then stopped in the middle of her sentence as if she was not sure how to phrase it. Then she tried again in a shaky voice, "My friends, my family, Ron... they are all dead. Dreams and memories are the only things I have left of them. And yet those pictures are haunting me."

Her voice was now no more than a whisper, barely audible over the cold wind that skimmed over the Scottish land, but her pain and desperation still hit Tom like she had yelled those words at him. He stared at her but she seemed to be lost somewhere else as her eyes were still fixed at the lake in front of them, not seeing anything. Tom wanted to hold her but she appeared to be so unapproachable now. Another silence tore at their conversation and Tom got the impression that he shouldn't break it.

After a long time Hermione suddenly spoke again, "He proposed to me."

Tom took in a sharp breath of air. That was something he had neither expected nor wanted to hear. He could feel his dark magic reacting to her declaration with rage and anger but the desperation he
saw in her eyes stopped him from jumping up and yelling at her.

Instead he pulled himself together and asked, "What did you answer?"

Hermione didn't answer his question she just continued looking at him sadly. Tom actually wanted to shake her and force her to tell him. He desperately needed to know if she had said 'yes'. But again the forlorn look in her eyes held him back. After some time she spoke again.

"War was crashing down on us. As always," she told him in her emotionless voice, "It dragged on and on. And... after some time, there was nothing much left. I felt empty. Tired. I had started to think about giving up. It would have been so much easier. In a way I envied-"

Hermione stopped herself in midsentence and Tom wondered whom she had envied. He couldn't dwell on it longer as she continued,

"It was as I thought about giving up, that he asked me. And for a tiny moment, a precious speck of time, everything vanished and I was just happy." With her last words a serene expression appeared on her pretty face.

That expression was enough to answer Tom's previous question. He would have lied if he had said that this information didn't make him painfully jealous. This Ron had asked her to marry him and she had obviously said yes. Tom could feel his angry magic protesting at the mere thought of her marrying someone else. But he suppressed another fit of anger and managed to master himself even as Hermione continued while that smile was still on her face,

"I was so happy. I wanted to stay with him forever."

As she went on, though, the happiness was suddenly wiped from her face to be replaced by sorrow and pain, "It was then that he left me. Just like that. He died."

Tom looked at her and didn't know how to feel. He was glad that this Ron guy had died. He had been a rival. And as it was, without him dying Tom would probably have never met Hermione. But as Tom now looked into her brown eyes he could see how much she was riven by grief. He had glimpsed her sorrow before and he didn't like it at all. Now he could see it again. The despair seemed to have a mercilessly tight hold on her. Tom didn't want Hermione to have to suffer so much.

He was ripped from his conflicting feelings as Hermione suddenly whispered in a hushed voice, "And it was my fault."

"How?"

As she didn't immediately answer Tom searched her face. The grief was still present in her eyes and now he could also see that she didn't want to go on. She did not want to talk about that incident, he could tell. As she looked back at him one single tear was running down her cheek on her otherwise completely blank face. It was the only emotion she seemed to allow herself.

Hermione turned her face away from him and began to speak in a voice that was hard now and full of raw emotion, "We... we were all fighting. And I was dueling this witch. She was very powerful. I could barely hold her off. But all the same, she was my opponent. I should have stopped her."

Tom noticed how bitter her tone now was and he hated that look on her face, filled with self detestation.

"But I was too weak. I failed them all. I let myself getting distracted. And this dark witch used my hesitation and fired the Killing curse at Ron."
Tom stared at her wide eyed. Hermione had told him how she had had to fight in the war against Grindelwald but what he had not realized was how frighteningly close she had been. She had had to fight against strong opponents who apparently did not refrain from using deadly force. Tom shuddered as he realized that this Killing curse could as well have hit Hermione instead.

He stared at her. She still had her knees drawn up to her chest with her arms slung around them. Her head rested on her knees but was turned slightly so that she could look at him. There was so much pain in her pretty hazel eyes. Tom couldn't stand that. Tom slowly slid nearer to her on the bench. As he sat directly beside her he wrapped one arm gently around her shoulders and pulled her slightly against him. He was relieved as she didn't pull away. She leaned against his side and Tom felt how she put her head down on the crook of his neck. Her warm breath gently skimming over his skin, inducing pleasant goose bumps.

"How did you get away after he died?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"I... I killed that witch," Hermione admitted reluctantly. She added as if to justify her actions, "It was war. There was no other way."

Tom tightening his grip on her and soothed her, "I know. You don't have to feel guilty about it. You tried to save your life."

"But I do. I feel guilty. Guilty about having killed people and guilty because I should have been able to save Ron. I simply failed him," she said acrimoniously. "And now he's dead and it's my fault."

Tom could feel her burying her face in the crook of his neck. As she closed her eyes her eyelashes tickled softly on his skin. There had been so much desperation in her voice. Even worse, conviction. Tom still didn't know what to think about Ron but now he just wanted to make Hermione feel better.

"If Ron was here right now, do you think he would really blame you?" he asked softly.

Hermione didn't answer for a very long time. Just as Tom thought she wasn't going to reply anything at all, she spoke, her voice was muffled as she still leaned against him,

"No... he wouldn't"

She unwrapped her arms from around her knees and slowly slid them around him.

Hermione slung her arms around Tom and held tightly to him. It was reassuring to be able to touch him, to feel his body against hers. Suddenly the unbearable sorrow that had previously burned through her receded. Somehow Tom's words had really made her feel better.

Over and over she had told herself that Ron would never hold it against her. He wouldn't be angry with her nor think that she had failed him. Ron would never blame it on her that Bellatrix had killed him. But the guilt had gnawed at her. So she had tried to convince herself that it wasn't really her fault. There was nothing she could have done to save Ron. That was what Hermione had told herself.

But she had never believed it. Somehow, deep down, she had always blamed herself. Surely she could have done something to prevent Ron and Harry from getting killed.

Hermione still didn't know if she could have somehow saved them. But now Tom's simple words had taken the guilt away. For the first time she had said it out loud: Ron would not blame her. As she had spoken them, those words had felt so true. It was like a revelation. She felt a lot better, so light, without the ever present guilt.
Hermione snuggled closer to Tom. His arms were still slung around her reassuringly. She raised her head from where she had leant it against him and stretched her neck to place an affectionate kiss on the line of his jaw. Tom turned his face so that he was able to look down at her. His eyes were a delicious grey and no trace of red was left. She felt one of his fingers tilting up her chin. Hermione closed her eyes as he leaned down to her. His lips gently brushed against her own and Hermione felt just happy as he kissed her so tenderly.

As he ended the kiss she didn't open her eyes. She just sighed contently to then lean her head against his shoulder. She was incredibly glad that he was with her right now.

Tom was satisfied with the fact that Hermione had allowed him to kiss her and that he had managed to calm her down. She now nestled against him and he could feel how she relaxed as she leaned into him. This whole story about her ex irked him a great deal and it made him almost go crazy with jealousy to know that Hermione obviously still loved Ron, but he wasn't going to rage at her again. He didn't want to invoke that grief again. So Tom rigorously controlled his temper and instead of yelling at her and forcing her to tell him everything about her and Ron, he just wrapped his arms gently around her and held her.

The comfortable silence that wrapped around them was broken not until Hermione spoke again.

"You know, since Ron died everything is different," she told him softly.

Tom stiffened slightly as he heard her words. And he wondered if she meant that her life was different in a bad way. Did she want her life to be like it was before? Did she want Ron back?

Hermione didn't seem to notice how uncomfortable Tom felt but just continued, "Without him, my life is nothing like before. Everything is just upside down. The war is far away. I'm here at Hogwarts. I even made a few new friends. And… I have you," she whispered the last words but they still made Tom relax a little.

"Even my magic is different," Hermione breathed almost inaudible as she tightened her arms around his waist.

Tom furrowed his brow at her last statement. Then he asked confused, "How is your magic different?"

Hermione's head shot up at him. She looked as if she just now realized that she had said the last part out loud.

"I… I…" she mumbled, clearly searching for a way out.

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me," he uncharacteristically offered her.

Hermione looked at him and he could see a strange glint in her hazel eyes. She bit her lip nervously as she scanned him. Tom held his breath as he stared down at her. She seemed to consider something.

After a moment she seemed to have come to a decision. So she told him in an unstable voice, "It's… it's just that after… after Ron died there happened something to my magic. I don't know exactly what it was and I don't know how, but somehow it changed my magic."

"Changed your magic?" Tom asked cautiously.
"Yeah," Hermione continued reluctantly. "I didn't want that. Surely not. But it never left me again. And then it took me here," she finished and left Tom in a state of confusion.

He raised an eyebrow questioningly at her. "What do you mean it took you here?"

"One second I was on the battlefield," she explained, obviously searching for the right words. "Then this power jumped me and ripped at me like it wanted to tear me apart and then I wake up here." As if an afterthought she added, "In England."

"What, you ended up here? From France? But that is too far away to apparate." It made no sense to Tom. Magical ways of travel were surely superior to anything muggle but even magic had its boundaries.

Hermione just looked at him frustrated, clearly thinking that he was slow. Then she tried to explain impatiently,
"I didn't apparate. It was something else. It hurt a lot. I thought I was dying. Actually at that moment I wished I would die. And then I lost my consciousness. After I woke up again I didn't know where I was. But I quickly realized that something was wrong. Then I ended up in London. And, well, after that I applied for Hogwarts. I certainly didn't want to go back. There is nothing there for me anymore."

Tom was excited. He didn't know why she had decided to trust him with so much information now but he was certainly not going to question her openness.

Instead he asked, "You said a 'power' suddenly jumped you. What is it? Where did it come from?"

Hermione broke eye contact and looked away from him.

"I don't know," she said but Tom got the impression that she wasn't telling the whole truth. He let it go for the time being and listened to her go on, "It was suddenly there. Though I realized that only a whole lot later. And now I can even use it sometimes."

Now they seemed to get to something crucial, Tom realized excitedly. But he still managed to make his voice smooth and calm as he asked, "Is that how you can break down wards and apparate through them?"

"Yes." Was her simple answer.

Tom could hear from her voice that she was not going to give him any more. But he still decided to try one more time, "Why did you steal Peverell's book?"

But sure enough Hermione just looked up at him reproachfully. "I told you, didn't I? I have my secrets just like you have yours."

Tom was disappointed that she wasn't going divulge anything else, though she had already told him more than he could ever have expected. He turned his head away from her and looked out at the Great Lake. His arms were still slung around her and he could feel how she huddled against him but his thoughts were elsewhere as he tried to process what information she had given.

So Hermione had gained a mysterious new power and with its help was suddenly able to apparate through wards that were otherwise unbreakable. Was there a connection with Peverell? Or the Deathly Hallows?

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Garden Of Eden

Tom was pacing to and fro on the cold stone floor. His steps echoed eerily from the walls. He shortly stopped and looked up at the ceiling. It was so high up that it was lost in the darkness of the chamber, imposing pillars stood like sentries guarding this place. A greenish sheen weakly illuminated the huge stone figure Tom was standing before. His eyes slowly wandered over its face. His ancestor looked indifferently back at him. Tom tore his gaze from Salazar Slytherin and resumed to pace around. He was in the Chamber of Secrets. Or rather, in a very accurate replication of the chamber provided by the Come-And-Go room and his own memory. Since he had found the chamber last year, he had always descended to its calming silence whenever something troubled him. Slytherin's chamber somehow allowed him to better collect his thoughts.

Tom continued to pace around as he let his thoughts drift towards the very problem he sought to solve. Immediately Hermione popped up in his mind. She was still shrouded in mysteries. Though the confessions she had made that day they had arrived back from London had illuminated some of her past. She had spoken of a power which had somehow jumped her. It had 'changed' her magic. Tom wondered what that mysterious power could have been. Hermione obviously knew but didn't want to confide in him. That insight made Tom angry. Hermione had no right to withhold information from him.

Grudgingly, he had to work with what little he got. Whatever origin Hermione's mysterious power had, it definitely was an impressive force. She could do things that were virtually impossible, like breaking down Hogwarts' wards. According to her, this ability was something she had gained very abruptly and very recently during the war in France. Very peculiar, that something could change a person's magic to such extents.

Additionally to this strange new power, there was Hermione's suspicious interest in Peverell. She had risked a lot to steal that book Peverell had written. Why would she do that? Peverell was a prominent figure in wizarding history and was linked to the Deathly Hallows. Peverell and his two brothers were said to be the creators of those fabled objects. Were Hermione and those dark cloaked men who had attacked her after the Hallows?

Tom stopped his restless pacing and leaned against one of the stone pillars. A snake was carved out of the stone and wound elegantly around the cylindric column. He ran a hand over the body of the snake and could feel stony scales adorning it.

To sum it up, Hermione had gained a new power and she was interested in Peverell's work and probably in the Deathly Hallows. Tom pushed away from the pillar and slowly strolled over to Slytherin's statue. He longingly cast a glance at the stony face. Behind the statue's mouth was the entry to the Basilisk's home. If this wasn't just a mere replication, Tom would have been able to summon the great snake. If Dumbledore just wasn't on his case…

*Back to the problem at hand.* Maybe Hermione's interest in the Deathly Hallows was the key to everything. Tom didn't know, and had a fair amount of doubts, whether the Deathly Hallows really existed. They seemed to be more of a fairy tale than anything else. He shook his head in disgust as he remembered all the esoteric books he had read during his research on the Hallows.

Tom sat down on the pedestal Slytherin's statue was standing on and leaned back, propped up on his arms. Even if the Hallows did not exist, it seemed that at least one of them, the fabled Unbeatable wand, did. Hallow or not, Tom had read a few accounts telling about a wand which was more powerful than any other wand. This wand had left behind actual proof of its existence in history. Unbeatable Wand, Deathstick, Elder Wand... it had many names, but it always had the same
properties. It was exceptionally powerful. Whoever was wielding that wand would be virtually invincible.

*Incredibly enhanced magic…* Tom thought as he stared at the chamber, wrapped in darkness, in front of him.

Didn't he know a certain someone with mysterious magical talents? Someone who could do magic that was impossible? Tom started to wonder about Hermione's wand. Was it possible that she had actually gained the Unbeatable Wand? Was that the reason behind Hermione's incredible magical strength?

Tom ran a hand through his dark hair as his thoughts wandered to Hermione's wand. He remembered how he had once stolen that wand from her. That had been before the Christmas break. He shuddered as he remembered in what circumstances he had taken the wand from her. He had cursed her, stolen her wand and had then even hurled the Torture curse at her. He breathed in deeply, still amazed about how she could have forgiven him.

Back then as he had held her wand, he hadn't noticed anything unusual. Then again, he hadn't used it. So he didn't really know about its powers. Another thought hit him. During the Christmas break, Hermione had apparated the two of them through Diagon Alley's wards. Back then she didn't have her own wand, but she had still been able to break through the impenetrable wards. So in the end her abilities couldn't be ascribed to the Elder Wand, could they?

Still, he shouldn't rule out the possibility. What did he know about the powers of the Elder Wand anyway? Maybe there was a ritual involved when it came to taking possession of the wand. It could very well be possible that the wand and its new owner were irreversibly linked. He had read that it was necessary to beat the previous owner to gain the allegiance of the Elder Wand. By defeating the previous owner maybe a link between wand and wizard was formed, thus changing the new owner's magic?

It pretty much sounded like a dark ritual to Tom and he knew his fair share about Dark Magic. Powerful dark rituals were able to influence a wizard's magic greatly. Something like that could even be able to completely alter the wizard's magic and, combined with the Elder Wand, form something entirely new. After all, anything was possible with Dark Magic.

So being the owner of the Elder Wand could have changed Hermione's entire magic. She had said it herself, hadn't she? Her very magic had been different after something had happened to her during the war. She hadn't told him any details but it could have been the ritual around the Unbeatable Wand she had been talking about.

Still, he definitely needed to re-check the books on the Unbeatable Wand, Tom decided as he walked towards the exit of the Come-and-Go Room. Hermione was not a reliable source of information in this case. But first, he was going to search for her. He hadn't seen her the whole day, aside during meals in the Great Hall. Lately, Tom felt uncomfortable when Hermione wasn't around. So, instead of going to the Library, he turned in the other direction and headed for the Gryffindor common room.

"How did you do that?" Longbottom exclaimed frustrated as he snatched a roll of parchment away from Hermione.

His eyes narrowed as they wandered over the parchment. Then he looked up at her and said reproachfully, "We were supposed to write three foot, Hermione. This-" He held up her parchment. "-is more than four. How do you do that?"
Now Weasley, who sat on the sofa right beside Longbottom, took the parchment from him and he, too, scanned Hermione's writing.

"And your script is tiny and narrow," he said awed. "I only managed to write two foot. And look, I really tried to put as much space between the words as possible."

As if to prove his statement he pointed to a scrap of parchment which was covered to only one third with his spidery writing. Hermione chuckled, then she leaned forward and took her parchment away from Weasley.

"This was about the different properties of the ingredients used in the Ortus potion," she explained in a mock condescending voice. "I couldn't wait to write it. It's so fascinating."

Yeah, fascinating and dangerous, she thought frustrated as she glared at the essay Slughorn had asked them to write in last potion class. As she looked up again she found the two boys frowning at her as if she were insane, while Lupin, who sat on a chair beside their sofa, chuckled softly.

Longbottom sighed tiredly, laid a hand on Hermione's shoulder and said with false graveness, "It seems you are just crazy. But don't worry. As soon as we find a cure against it, you'll be the first to be healed."

"If you continue to not do your homework at all, you'll never find a cure against anything," Hermione grinned at him triumphantly as she held up his, still empty, parchment.

Longbottom huffed indignantly and then tried to get the parchment away from her. Hermione had seen this one coming and pulled it out of his reach while giggling.

"Hey, give it here," Longbottom ordered, though his commanding aura was ruined as he had to laugh, too.

She still held the parchment out of his reach, so Longbottom started to tickle her teasingly. Hermione laughed even harder.

Their playful banter came to an abrupt standstill as someone sat down between them on the sofa, neatly separating them. Hermione glimpsed dark hair, pale skin and the unmistakable green colours of Slytherin house. Then there was an arm around her shoulders and Tom pulled her possessively against him. Hermione looked up at him and found him glaring angrily at Longbottom who had by now slid away from Tom on the sofa and looked at him in disgust.

"What are you doing here?" she miffed at Tom.

He turned his head, looked haughtily down at her and then informed her in his smooth voice, "I can do whatever I want."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Look, I was in the middle of doing my homework here," she said in a clipped tone and pushed him slightly away from her.

Tom didn't let her push him away but still held her tightly as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Didn't look like homework to me," he said with a touch of asperity. Then he continued in a ridiculing tone, "Besides you really shouldn't do your homework with those dunces."

Hermione just growled at him which, sadly, also didn't make him release her.

"What do you want here, Riddle?" Longbottom intervened into their conversation; his voice had lost
all jocoseness and turned into a sharp hiss.

"Don't get your hopes up. I'm not here because you," replied Tom mockingly.

Then he stood up, grabbed Hermione's arm and tried to pull her, rather harshly, up from the sofa. By now she was peeved by his behaviour and resisted him.

"Stop that!" Longbottom bellowed at Tom indignantly and jumped up from his position on the sofa as he saw this rough treatment of Hermione.

Tom let go of Hermione and turned around to Longbottom. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes as he scanned the Gryffindor hatefully. Longbottom was standing in front of Tom and Hermione got the impression that he was about to attack the Slytherin any second now. She sighed softly.

"Stop treating her like this!" Longbottom barked irately.

A condescending smirk took form on Tom's face as he now looked at the Gryffindor coldly.

"Listen. She is my girlfriend," Tom told him smugly. "So, it's none of your business how I treat her."

"And she's my friend!" Longbottom thundered at Tom, his face purple from anger. Then he took a step towards Tom and threatened, "You better not hurt her again, Riddle."

"Pff, like you could stop me," Tom replied in a perfectly calm voice, though Hermione could hear the fury underlying his cold exterior.

With dread Hermione noticed how her dorm mates, Rose, Lucia and Viola, sat on a sofa nearby. They seemed to follow this dispute with quite the enthusiasm. Hermione wondered in vexation if she should offer them some popcorn and ask them if they enjoyed the show. Then her gaze wandered back to Tom and Longbottom. She groaned as now Weasley and Lupin had joined them, glaring murderously at Tom. During all this, Tom still managed to keep his face impenetrably blank though Hermione did notice a malevolent glint in his eyes. Longbottom reached for his wand and Tom pulled his own wand. Finally, Hermione lost her cool.

"That's it!" she yelled at them.

They looked at her and stopped their attempts to murder each other. The indifferent mask still covered Tom's face but he raised one eyebrow at her questioningly.

As if he doesn't know what's wrong, Hermione thought infuriated.

"I've about had it now. Stop being so immature," she growled at them. Then she flung her hands up in frustration, turned to the angry Slytherin and hissed, "We were just doing homework, Tom. What's wrong with that?"

"Why do you need to do your homework with them?" he shot back. Then he eyed Longbottom and said in a condescending voice. "It's not like they are any help."

As a result, Longbottom's face turned a few shades more purple and he glared at Tom, looking ready to commit murder. Tom was not impressed by this hostility at all but twirled his wand nonchalantly through his fingers. Hermione just narrowed her eyes angrily at them.

She finally snapped and clamoured at the both of them, "If you want to kill each other, go ahead. But don't pull me into this."
Then she turned around and stormed away. She had barely left the common room and stepped through the portrait hole before Tom fell in step beside her. That didn't stop her from brusquely stomping down the corridor, though.

Hermione tried her best to ignore Tom but after some time he said in an innocent tone, "So you don't mind if I kill him?"

Hermione turned her head and glared at him darkly.

"I'll have your head if you try that," she hissed at him enraged.

Tom raised his hands in surrender while he said, not at all sounding ashamed of himself, "Okay okay, calm down."

Hermione just narrowed her eyes at him dangerously and their conversation frizzled out. It was a pity that he seemed to be immune to her glare, she decided as she looked at Tom's, yet again, blank face.

After a while her anger had built up enough and she was not longer able to remain silent, so she inquired impatiently, "Why?"

Tom only glanced at her questioningly and asked in an infuriatingly innocent voice, "Why what?"

"Why do you feel the need to always try to sabotage my friendships?" Hermione inquired in a rather clipped voice.

The blank look disappeared from his face and a rather nasty smile replaced it, "Because I don't like those gits."

At his exclamation Hermione rolled her eyes at him in exasperation but before she could get in a sharp reply, Tom continued his rant, "They are as stupid as Gryffindors can get. And did you see how Longbottom always tries to protect you from me? It's ridiculous."

"Yeah," Hermione replied, her voice now thick with sarcasm, "I wonder whoever gave him the idea that there is the need to protect me from you." She looked at him pointedly.

"Maybe they aren't good friends if they don't trust your judgment," Tom replied stiffly.

Hermione didn't take his bait. She was tired of playing his game.

"Tom, I really don't care what you think of them," she told him in a sharp voice. "I don't expect you to like them. However, I do expect you not to bother my friends."

She could see him balling his hands into fists after her declaration. Of course, he didn't like to hear that, but Hermione thought it was necessary.

"And by the way, I never said anything about your more than dubious acquaintances," Hermione continued, a cold edge had now appeared in her voice.

Tom's eyes wandered back to her and he stared at her in indignation and a good amount of anger.

"I don't like those guys at all," Hermione said in a clipped tone. "Avery for example. He always looks at me in a creepy way. Or Lestrange, he even cursed me if you remember. But I never told you to stay away from them, have I?"

By now she could feel bits of Tom's dark magic bristling in the air, but she wasn't impressed at all.
"But my friends don't try to seduce me," he finally replied in a steel hard voice.

Hermione stared at him and then deadpanned, "I wouldn't be so sure about that, if I were you. Have you ever seen that longing glint in Malfoy's eyes whenever he looks at you?"

Even though the situation was far from funny, she had to stop herself from bursting out in laughter as she saw how Tom's mouth was pressed into a thin line. He glared at her, clearly annoyed now.

"I'm serious here," he finally hissed reproachfully.

"No, you are not," Hermione replied dryly. "You are being silly."

After that Tom just looked at her sullenly and didn't reply anything.

"I'm going back to the common room," she informed him in an offhand tone. "And you are not going to disturb me again," she added sternly, which made the look on his face even darker.

Tom didn't reply, but just turned around and angrily stomped down the corridor without looking back at her. Hermione sighed softly. Maybe he had for now stopped to argue, but she was pretty sure that he wouldn't just let it go like this.

Of course she was right. As Tom marched down the corridor his thoughts flew back to that image of Hermione and Longbottom on the sofa. She had laughed so gaily while that insufferable Gryffindor berk had touched her. And she still insisted on telling him that their relationship was purely platonic?

Ridiculous! Tom huffed.

This incident had been the last straw. He wouldn't allow this to continue. He didn't like it at all how very little control he had over Hermione. Now she even started to order him around, Tom realized frustrated as he found himself walking away from the Gryffindor common room, just like she had told him to.

Her probable ownership of the Unbeatable Wand and her not telling him about it, irked him, but that relationship she had with those Gryffindor boys infuriated him to no end. Before he tried to find out more about her mysterious power, he first needed to ensure that Hermione didn't leave him for one of those berks.

At that thought he could feel his magic starting to course through him angrily. He could barely stand it whenever Hermione was out of his sight. To top it off she was now back in the Gryffindor common room. Together with all her friends.

Her male friends, an inner voice hissed at him, inciting him to take action.

Since that incident when she had told him about her ex, Tom had been overwhelmed by a greedy and jealous feeling whenever he saw her speaking with another guy. It made him extremely uncomfortable to see her interacting with males. It actually made him want to rush to her and curse whomever she had been conversing with. It was a pity that Hermione was such a headstrong woman; otherwise he could have just cursed all those gits around her and gotten away with it. But as it was, Hermione would never tolerate such behaviour.

Why were all of her friends male anyway? he wondered not for the first time. As he so thought about her stupid Gryffindor friends something Longbottom had said came to mind. Normally, Tom wouldn't put much importance to anything that jerk came up with but surprisingly enough this one thing had stuck. It had happened after Slughorn's last party that Longbottom had yelled at Tom enraged.
'She's not really your girlfriend,' Longbottom had hissed angrily. 'It's only a matter of time and she'll ditch you.'

Back then Tom hadn’t taken it seriously because it had seemed to be utterly ridiculous that Hermione would ever leave him. But know…

Tom shuddered as he remembered that expression on Hermione’s face as she had spoken about Ron. It had been so sad and forlorn, that expression on her face, and so full of love.

Tom's hands balled into tight fists and he didn't stop his magic from crackling around him murderously. He didn't even care to suppress this angry torrent of magic as a bunch of third year Hufflepuffs came running down the same corridor he was in. They all stared at the angry Slytherin with scared, wide eyes, but Tom was not in the mood to act the innocent prefect. His thoughts still danced around Hermione and her relationship with Ron. Even if that person had somehow died, as she had claimed, she obviously still loved him. Hermione was not permitted to love anybody but Tom. He was certainly not going to share her with anyone.

Again Longbottom's words came back to him, 'It's only a matter of time and she'll ditch you.' That was ludicrous; Tom tried to calm himself down. After all, who would ever want to leave him? Seriously? Wasn't he the best looking guy here in Hogwarts? He was a prefect, the teachers simply loved him. He was friends with everybody and every female in this castle fancied him. Why in Merlin's name would anybody ditch him? He was the perfect boyfriend.

Lies! an obnoxious, little voice whispered to him.

Yeah, so what? Maybe he had spun a net of lies around him. He had created this persona of the perfect, charming young man who is utterly innocent and completely harmless. It worked, didn't it? This persona. No-one had ever bothered to look underneath his web of lies.

Tom descended the stairs to the dungeons with determined steps, though, he didn't feel as confident as he would like to appear. It was true, wasn't it? Everybody fell for this façade he had put up around him.

Everybody, aside from Hermione, the little voice informed him generously.

Tom could feel his stomach constrict painfully. But it was true. Hermione had made his façade crumble and she had taken a look behind. She knew so much about him. And she certainly knew that the person he acted in Hogwarts was not at all who he truly was. She knew about his darker tendencies as he had, in fact, thrown more than enough dark curses her way. Hermione had seen the evilness behind his perfect façade. She knew that he was not innocent and amiable but dark and mean. Aside from that darkness she also knew about his weakness. There were not many people who had ever seen him in such a weakened state as Hermione had. After all, she had rescued him from that horrible orphanage and he had been pathetically weak back then.

Only a matter of time and she will ditch me, Tom thought numbly. After all the things she knew about him, it was actually a mystery that she had wanted to become his girlfriend in the first place. On top of that there still was Ron. He was the one Hermione really wanted.

…maybe she's going to grow tired of me…

But he was never going to let her leave him! he thought determinedly as he walked through the dark corridors of the dungeons. Even if he had to curse her and force her to stay with him, Tom would never allow her to abandon him. Though it might be better to first try a less violent and more
sophisticated way.

How could he make her stay by his side? Tom was faced with a problem he had never met before. He knew how to threaten people into doing what he wanted them to do. He knew how to force people and bend them to his will. But with Hermione this was not an option. If he tried something like this, she would surely leave him.

He felt helpless and insecure about the whole thing. Something he didn't appreciate at all.

What made that Ron guy so special anyway? he wondered infuriated. After all Ron seemed to have received Hermione's love. What if at some point in time another guy walked by and she would decide to go for him? At that thought Tom really had to work to suppress his boiling emotions. Maybe he couldn't force her to abandon her friends, but he could ensure that she never did more with them than friendship would suggest. If Hermione never had the chance to converse with any potential rivals to Tom's position, then she would never leave him.

It was time to have another of those little meetings with his knights, Tom decided as he stopped before the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Then he hissed in a low voice, "Pullus."

Immediately the wall in front of him slid away, thus opening the entrance into the room. Tom strode into the room behind. His gaze swiftly wandered over the common room. The unobtrusive greenish colour of the wallpapers and the invitingly soft black leather couches had a soothing effect on his nerves. Something quite welcome after having to suffer through this lurid colour attack in the Gryffindor common room.

As Tom's gaze swept over the room he noticed that many of the Slytherins present were looking at him in a scared way. He then realized that his angry dark magic still swirled around him. Tom quite enjoyed the intimidated and reverent looks that were cast his way. Sadly, he didn't have time right now to revel in their fear. So, he strutted through the room towards one of the couches standing in the far end. He had spotted Avery and Black sitting in this corner of the room. As they noticed him approaching them they instantly stopped their chatter and stared at him. A vile smirk appeared on Tom's face as he saw something like fear in their eyes.

Finally he stood before them and looked down at them imperiously before he said in a low voice, "There's a meeting now. Get the others."

They immediately nodded at him obediently but Tom wasn't paying attention anymore. He had already turned around to leave the common room again. They knew where they would meet and they also knew what would happen to them if they let him wait. So, Tom wasn't surprised as his knights caught up with him even before he had reached the Come-and-Go room. They didn't say anything as they reached him but just continued to follow him in a deferential distance.

Just a few minutes later, Tom strolled through the Come-and-Go room which had transformed into a huge hall. Its floor was tiled with polished black flagstones. His heels clacked authoritatively as he walked over to a wooden throne-like chair. His gaze wandered swiftly over the dimly lit room. Fat candles stood in small alcoves, which were recessed into the stony, windowless walls of the room. Their flames burned in a flickering light, letting eerie shadows dance over the ceiling. The blood red wax of the candles trickled slowly down the wall and on the black floor.

Tom sat down on the throne-like chair and leaned lazily against the high backrest. Then he let his cold eyes slowly wander over the group in front of him. His knights had gathered around him, forming a semi-circle, and were now looking at him respectfully. A vicious smile tugged at his mouth as he spotted a readiness to follow whatever orders he would give them.
"My knights," Tom began in a quiet and even placid voice. "-again it is too long since last we met."

His gaze grew cold and hard as it continued to wandered over the young men in front of him, making them squirm. As Tom spoke next all softness had left his voice, "You did not presume I had forgotten about you, did you?"

His knights muttered hastily how they would never presume something like that and assured him their loyalty. Tom raised a hand to shut them up.

"I did not summon you, to listen to you sniveling away," he hissed. Then his grey eyes narrowed and a smirk twisted up his mouth. "I have job for you."

He again let his eyes wander over them and noticed satisfied how they stiffened under his gaze.

"I want you to keep an eye on Hermione DeCerto. She's mine now and I don't appreciate it very much when people are getting too close to her. I want you to make sure that no-one bothers her. Especially any males." Tom's dark glare rested unwavering on his knights.

His knights bowed to him, as a sign that they would obey his command. Then Lestrange took a step forward, fell on one knee and didn't dare to look up at Tom as he asked in a shaky voice, "Please, can you reveal to us, why DeCerto is so important?"

Tom didn't answer but just stared at Lestrange. The other still didn't dare to look at Tom but remained kneeling on the floor. He squirmed uncomfortably as Tom remained to be silent. The pressure in the air slowly spiraled up until it was unbearable and Lestrange again spoke.

His fear was now overtly present in his voice as he continued, "She is just a Gryffindor. If you want to extract information from her, we could be of help."

Tom snickered darkly. Then he stood up from his chair and slowly strutted over to Lestrange. The evil grin on his face widened as he saw Lestrange bowing his head even lower. Tom stopped as he stood a metre away from the other.

"You dare question my orders?" he whispered softly at the crouched figure in front of him.

Lestrange's head shot up at him and there was panic present on his face as he frantically tried to explain, "No, never. I was just… just offering our help."

In one swift motion Tom pulled his wand and waved it at Lestrange. The force behind Tom's magic hit the other violently and hurled him to the floor. Lestrange grunted painfully.

Tom put his wand away again and a mercilessly hard tint was in his voice as he sneered, "I do not need you to offer me anything. I take what I want."

Without waiting for any reply from Lestrange, he turned around and walked back to his chair while stating, his words laced with frost, "Whenever I'm not around Hermione, I want at least one of you to guard her. You are going to escort her to her class rooms, to the Great Hall, to her common room or to wherever the hell she wants to go. If you ever see anyone getting too close or even touching her, you are going to deal with that person. Understood?"

His knights instantly muttered their affirmations. Tom reached the chair and gracefully sat down again.

"Though don't be mistaken," he continued in a voice that made sure he wouldn't tolerate any disobedience here. "You are to guard her and to stop any guys from approaching her. However, I
won't tolerate it if you start to attack her. If you ever force her to do anything she doesn't want to do or if you curse her or hurt her in any way, I will make sure that you regret it very much."

His knights shuffled fearfully as they heard the threatening touch in his voice.

"So if she gets pissed by your presence or just feels bored and decides to curse you, you are not going to counter-attack. I don't care if it's something harmful she throws your way, you will just take it and after that continue with your mission."

The young men in front of him bowed their heads subserviently. Then one of them spoke.

"What about her friends?" Avery inquired tentatively as if he expected Tom to attack him any second. "Are we allowed to curse them?"

Tom just chuckled maliciously. "I don't give a damn about her stupid friends." Indifference seeped into his voice. "If one of them dares to do something fishy, then you stop them with whatever force necessary."

An evil smile appeared on Tom's face as he added, "Be prepared though. For some inexplicable reasons, Hermione is very fond of her idiotic Gryffindor friends. So it's highly likely that she will react hostile to anyone attacking them."

February turned into March and slowly winter released its hold on Hogwarts castle. Snow and ice finally melted away. Although the Scottish weather was still somewhat chilly, it had lost its biting coldness. So, weeks went by, and nothing changed in Tom's behaviour. If anything it just got worse. During those weeks there were a few incidents that made Hermione's patience wear very thin...

"Hermione, that git is trying to control your whole life," Longbottom huffed at her.

He was right, Hermione had to admit. It did get slowly on her nerves as well. Sadly, she had no idea how to stop Tom's foolish behaviour. He had always been very jealous, but this situation was just unbearable. Since he had found out that she had had a boyfriend before him, and especially since he knew that she had slept with Ron, Tom was unbearably possessive. It was rather arduous dealing with him right now. He didn't tolerate anyone near her. Now he knew that she could like other guys he probably was afraid he could lose her.

Hermione looked back at Longbottom. He was frowning at her. She knew that he was still
concerned about her. He didn't trust Tom at all. More like hated him, actually. Ever since he had seen
that bruise on her face which she had received from Grindelwald's men, Longbottom was convinced
that Tom was mistreating her. It was ridiculous but whatever Hermione told to soothe him, the
Gryffindor didn't believe her.

"Tom's just going through a lot lately. He'll get over it," Hermione told Longbottom, trying to calm
him down.

"So he's going through a lot, is he?" Longbottom sneered and Hermione could hear the scorn
dripping from every word.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders as he continued, sounding as if he tried to convince her of
something quite obvious, "Riddle's treating you like he owns you. You shouldn't defend his
behaviour."

Hermione looked up at him but before she had the chance to reply, someone cleared his throat
behind them. Longbottom unwrapped his arm from her and turned around to whomever had
interrupted them like that. As Hermione turned, she found Malfoy standing in the corridor. Wherever
had he popped up from?

"Don't touch her," was the only thing Malfoy said as he stared at Longbottom.

Hermione furrowed her brow at the blond Slytherin. What did he want here? Normally he pretty
much ignored her and her friends. Malfoy's emotionless eyes wandered now from Longbottom to
her. He shortly bowed to her, which made her feel slightly uncomfortable, then he offered in a cold
and distanced voice,

"Lunch is about to be served. I would be pleased to accompany you to the Great Hall."

_How very polite_, Hermione thought as she pressed her mouth into a thin line. Anger started to flow
through her as she stared at the blond Slytherin in front of her. She shortly imagined Draco Malfoy
ever talking so civilly to her. The shock would have surely killed her, Hermione decided dryly.

By now, though, she was pretty sure Tom had put this Malfoy up to... _what? Guarding me?_

Whatever Tom tired to achieve here, he was sailing very close to the wind, if he thought he could
control her through his lackeys.

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Tom sat in the Library, and he was in a sour mood. Hermione had told him to leave her alone as she
obviously needed 'some time for herself'. That was ridiculous, he thought enraged as his fingers
drummed angrily against the table. If she needed time for herself, then she could have that but right
here where he could see her. To top it off she had gone to her common room. That was the only
place where his knights couldn't follow her.

Thus far, his plan of constantly observing her worked rather well. The only down side was that she
seemed to be rather miffed by his knights following her. As a consequence she was a little bit thin-
skinned lately. She had even cursed Alba the other day. Tom grinned as he remembered that missing
chunk of hair on Alba's head. The grin quickly died as he wondered why Alba had felt the need to
attack one of her friends in the first place. Had one of those gits tried to touch her? Had he embraced
Hermione?

… would she have liked it?
Tom groaned in frustration as he flipped through another book, not taking anything in as his thoughts still circled around Hermione.

She had surely liked it whenever her fiancé had embraced her. She had actually liked to do a lot more with that guy. Unbidden images of Hermione in bed with another guy swirled through his mind. Tom's hand balled into a tight fist, thus crumbling the page of the book he was just reading in.

He forcefully tried to concentrate on the book again. It was just one paragraph later that he again wondered about Hermione. What if she suddenly decided that Tom was no adequate replacement for her almost-husband? He was quite the bother, actually. There were all his problems with Dumbledore, for example. That had eventually resulted in the transfiguration teacher hating Hermione, too. Tom knew how fond Hermione had been of the professor. On top of that, a huge part of the female population of the castle still hated her just because Tom spent time with her. What if she decided he was not worth the trouble?

Tom closed the book in front of him with a loud and determined thud. He got up from his place at the library table and waved his wand casually at the books in front of him so that they soared back to their places on the shelf. Then he took off in direction of the Gryffindor common room. Surely Hermione had had by now enough 'alone time', hadn't she?

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"So, what do you want to do now?" Tom asked Hermione. "We could sneak out to Hogsmeade."

Hermione just stared at him incredulously. "You are kidding, right?"

Tom's expression told her otherwise, though.

"I am not sneaking out of the castle. And neither are you, Tom," she ordered sternly. "They are going to expel us if we do that again. And by the way I still need to do my Care of Magical Creatures essay. So I'll be off to the common room."

Before she could stalk away, Tom managed to grab her arm. He narrowed his eyes at her and then asked in a sharp tone, "Why do you need to do that in the common room? We could go to the Library."

Hermione just rolled her eyes at him. "Because then you'll finally stop bothering me," she mocked him gently. Then she continued seriously, "We are not even in the same Care of Magical Creatures class. Why should we do the homework together?"

Tom just snorted at her, "I'm pretty sure we have to do the exact same essay. Kettleburn is a lazy bastard."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him reproachfully as she heard him badmouthing a teacher like that. In reality though, she wasn't really fond of Kettleburn herself. His class was a hazard actually. There was not one lesson where no student, or the professor himself, got somehow hurt.

So she didn't defend the professor but just said, "I'm still going to the common room. I don't have my school bag with me right now."

"I can give you some of my parchment," Tom tried to convince her.

Finally Hermione lost her nerve and said in a clipped tone, "I'm not doing my homework together with you again. That's just pointless."
"Why?" Tom asked before a haughty smile curled up his mouth. "I'm the best student in Hogwarts. What better homework partner could you hope for?"

"You are not the best student. That would be me," Hermione's expression was now nearly as haughty as Tom's.

But then she had to think about the last time she had done her homework together with Tom. That had been a horrible experience. They had written an Arithmancy essay for professor Gauß. Hermione was really good in Arithmancy. Honestly! For this essay they had had to describe a rather difficult derivation rule for arithmetic calculations. So, she had gotten the books necessary for the job, had read them, re-checked with other sources, had tried to summarize everything and then she had started to write her essay. It had not been easy to say the least.

In the mean time, though, Tom had sat there right beside her at the table and had done just nothing. He had doodled on his roll of parchment and had occasionally watched her trying to make any sense out of the books she read. It had quite aggravated her. Her only consolation had been that at least her essay would be a lot better than his.

It had been a good solid two hours after she had started, that Tom had shown signs of doing any work himself. Hermione had been adding the last finishing touches to her essay as Tom had lazily flipped through a book, clearly not really paying attention, then he had started to write. They had finished the work at the same time, though Tom's essay had been half as long as her own. By that time, she had been rather annoyed by his lack of seriousness when it came to homework. She would have scolded him, but back then she had thought the low mark for his essay would be punishment enough.

The worst part of the story was that, in the end, Tom had gotten a better mark than herself. She had then sworn never to do school work together with him. It was frustrating, if anything.

"I'm not working with you again. You are just doing it wrong."

"Excuse me?" Tom raised an eyebrow at her.

"I'm better off without your 'help'," Hermione clarified.

With that she turned around and again walked away.

"Wait," Tom called after her.

Next, Hermione could feel an arm being slung around her waist. Tom had followed her and had again stopped her from walking away. His arm was now wrapped around her waist and his chest was pressed against her back. Hermione's annoyance about Tom's possessiveness abated quickly and was replaced by a tingling feeling in her stomach as she could feel him so near.

"After you're finished with your essay, you'll come back to me," he disguised his order quite well as he whispered seductively into her ear.

Hermione felt herself nod. She didn't even notice how Tom snapped his fingers at Black, who leaned against the corridor wall, not far away. Black inclined his head obediently at Tom, then he pushed away from the wall and followed Hermione as she walked towards her common room.

Hermione entered the DADA class room. Before she could walk over to her place at a table with Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin a hand held her back. Hermione turned her head and looked...
questioningly at Tom. He just grabbed her wrist and started to pull her over to the Slytherin side of the room.

"Tom, what-?"

"I want you to sit at my table," was all he gave as explanation.

At that point in time professor McGray entered the classroom. Hermione didn't want to start an argument with Tom right in front of her professor so she followed him over to his table. With a wave of his hand Tom shooed Lestrange away from his place, to then draw the chair out for Hermione. By now, she was very annoyed.

... so, yes, the few weeks that followed Hermione's 'confession' about her former relationship with Ron had been a real pain in her side...

Tom walked down a corridor in direction of the Library. It was pretty late already but he hoped he could manage to convince Ms Peters to let him enter. If that didn't work, he could still sneak into the Library, he thought smugly. Either way, he needed to go through the books on the Deathly Hallows. He was especially interested in the Unbeatable Wand. If there was any ritual involved to gain the wands service, it had to be written down somewhere. Maybe he had overlooked it before. Which was unlikely, he thought haughtily, but he would still check it over.

The more he thought on the matter, the more he was convinced that Hermione had somehow gained the Elder Wand. He knew that she was a rather strong witch but skill alone wouldn't explain how she broke down Hogwarts' wards. Irritation bubbled up in him. Why was Hermione not open with him? He should just steal her wand from her and see if it was the Elder Wand.

Yeah, and then she's going to murder you, a voice scoffed at him dryly.

Though, that would be difficult without a wand, wouldn't it?

Tom sighed tiredly. There was no way he could get the wand from her. She would never forgive him something like that. It seemed he had to take the old fashioned way and sneak the information from her. After all, he didn't end up in Slytherin for nothing.

Tom's train of thought was interrupted as he heard steps echoing in the deserted corridor. He looked up and saw one of Hermione's friends walking towards him. Of course it had to be Longbottom. Tom wrinkled his nose in disgust as his gaze wandered over him. The Gryffindor seemed to have noticed him, too, and glared at Tom darkly. Tom chose to just ignore him. He probably should curse Longbottom, just to make a point, but he somehow wasn't in the mood. It wouldn't be a challenge, anyway, to attack him. He was disgustingly weak. Tom looked the other way, determined to not pay any attention to the stupid Gryffindor. He tried to not think about the fact that he, yet again, did exactly what Hermione had ordered him to do.

Tom passed the Gryffindor and had taken a few steps away from him as he suddenly heard Longbottom yell at him indignantly, "How can you strut around the place after what you did to Hermione?"

Tom slowly turned around to him, just to find Longbottom glowering at him in anger. It was time to
play his role of the responsible prefect again, Tom decided. So he just tilted his head and pasted an expression of mild curiosity on his face.

"You shouldn't talk to a prefect in that sort of voice. I might feel offended and take points from your house," he said politely.

With satisfaction Tom noted how the blond's face erupted into a grimace of fury. Then he turned around, intending to resume his way to the Library.

However, he was held back by Longbottom's enraged voice, "Don't you notice how you are bothering Hermione?"

Tom's eyes narrowed dangerously and an angry twitch rippled through his magic, but he schooled his features as he turned and faced the Gryffindor.

"I am bothering her?" he replied in a calm but now unmistakably cold voice. "Did she tell you that?"

Longbottom shot back angrily, "She's much too kind to ever say anything bad about another person. But it's quite obvious how she is bugged by you."

"Funny, that she is still my girlfriend if she doesn't like me," Tom's voice was by now low and dangerous, not wanting to play the nice prefect anymore.

Longbottom didn't seem to notice the change in his behaviour and he yelled at Tom, indignation tinting his tone, "We all know that you are forcing her to stay with you!"

An evil smirk twisted up Tom's handsome features as he now cruelly scoffed at the Gryffindor, "I don't need to force her. She seems to enjoy my presence very much." To infuriate Longbottom even more, Tom added a suggestive wink.

Sure enough Longbottom's right hand twitched angrily as if he wanted to pull his wand. That would be fine by him, Tom thought in cold amusement.

The amusement, though, left him quickly as Longbottom bellowed at him, "Don't delude yourself, Riddle. Someone like Hermione is too good for you. She'll realize that and then she's going to leave you."

As Tom heard that, a thought again flew through his mind. *Only a matter of time and she'll ditch me.*

Suddenly, his dark magic rushed through him forcefully and fuelled his anger even more. Though there was another emotion embedded in it, but Tom was too aggravated to notice that fearful knot in his stomach.

Instead of analyzing his feelings, he sneered at Longbottom, "She's never going to leave me. I won't allow that!"

"You lousy bastard!" Longbottom clamoured at him enraged. "What are you going to do if she wants to leave you? Slap her again?"

His face was taking an angry shade of purple and he was obviously seething with anger by now. Tom didn't care and just looked at him with a smirk curling up his mouth.

"Leave Hermione alone!" the blonde Gryffindor bellowed at Tom. "I won't allow you to hurt her again!"
"I'm in a bad mood as it is. I wouldn't advise you to exacerbate me further," Tom finally said in an eerily soft voice.

By now he didn't stop his magic to swirl balefully around him. It ripped at himself as much as it seemed to disturb Longbottom. His magic wanted to be set free, it wanted to attack the Gryffindor. Tom could feel a detached coldness wrapping around his mind and restrictions fell from him. Hermione's angry face, as she had told him to keep away from her friends, was pushed into a dark recess of Tom's mind.

It was then that Longbottom, too, seemed to lose the last bit of his control, pulled his wand from his pocket and pointed it threateningly at Tom.

"So you can go and vent your anger on her?" he roared at Tom. Then he waved his wand angrily and yelled,

"Stupefy!"

Tom was prepared. At some point during this dispute he, too, had pulled his wand though he hadn't been as obvious as Longbottom. Now he waved his wand slightly and the red light of Longbottom's stunner flickered and died before it even had the chance to reach Tom. Tom's magic was dancing around him violently, in consent with his dark intentions. A sinister smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. He waved his wand in a small casual movement, thus casting a nonverbal Silencing spell and some warding magic over the part of the corridor they were standing in. The smile on Tom's face widened. He didn't have to hold back anymore. Longbottom's behaviour had irked him for far too long already. No-one was allowed to speak to Lord Voldemort like that. With cruel amusement, Tom observed the Gryffindor waving his wand again. He didn't even have to hear the incantation to recognize this weak spell.

"Impedimenta!" Longbottom yelled, as if the force of the spell would be intensified by raising the volume of his voice.

Tom just lazily brandished his wand, as if he were waving away a bothersome insect. The jinx never reached him, but impacted harmlessly with the corridor wall. With an unsavory smile on his face, Tom stared at the surprise present on the Gryffindor's face.

The blond again waved his wand in crude movements while bellowing, "Incendio!"

A cold, high pitched laugh escaped Tom's mouth in face of the other's incompetence. He twirled his wand to deflect the harmless spell. It collided with a tapestry hanging on the corridor wall, causing blazing hot flames to lick at the material. Did this fool want to continue throwing childish curses at him? Tom's hand tightened impatiently around his wand.

The Gryffindor then barked his next spell, "Incarce-!"

This time, Tom didn't let him finish the spell. He raised his own wand in one sharp movement, allowing his magic to flow through the wooden stick and form into a curse. His magic eagerly followed his command and wrapped itself around Longbottom. A mad glint appeared in Tom's eyes as he felt his magic completely engulfing the Gryffindor, thus rendering him unable to move. Tom swished his wand in one angry movement to his right side so that the tip now pointed at the wall. Simultaneously, the magic wrapped around Longbottom followed Tom's wand movement and Longbottom's body was hurled like a puppet against the window beside him. The glass cracked loudly but didn't break. Longbottom groaned painfully as he fell down to the ground at the foot of the window. There was a web of cracks in the glass of the window. Twisted satisfaction ran through Tom as he saw that pain on Longbottom's face. His dark magic, though, still rushed through Tom,
angrily demanding to cause more devastation. Tom sneered at Longbottom's fallen form. There was a mixture of fear and rage on the other's face.

_Not afraid enough, yet._

Tom brandished his wand in a complicated pattern. This time he preferred to speak the incantation out loud, just to be on the save side, "Malusdeus."

Instantly, the torches flickered and an unnatural darkness fell over the corridor. The shadows, cast by the dying flames, grew darker. Tom snickered coldly as he saw the panic on the Gryffindor's face. Tom's own shadow was by now pitch-black and twitched oddly, even though Tom hadn't moved at all. It was then that a strangely distorted hand seemed to rise from the shadow. Like the shadow, the hand was pitch-black, sucking up all the light around it. An arm soon followed and then a dark figure detached itself from Tom's shadow. At first it consisted only of the deformed upper part of a body. Slowly the figure pulled itself fully from Tom's shadow. It now had the shape of a human being, though there were no features discernible and its contour was blurred, while the whole form flickered strangely. A small wisp of white light, broken by black strands, was embedded in the middle of the torso, pulsating irregularly. The shadow had by now straightened up completely and stood in the middle of the corridor. All light seemed to be sucked into the pitch-black creature so that the corridor grew steadily darker.

Tom grinned evilly as he saw a look of horror on Longbottom's face. Then he turned to his creature. There were actually just a few commands the creature would accept. One of them was 'Kill!'. Though sadly Tom couldn't use that. So he, reluctantly, used another one.

"Extundo," he whispered to the shadow.

The creature followed his command. It began to move towards the Gryffindor. Its motions were oddly mechanical and abrupt as it crept towards Longbottom. While its shape held some resemblance to a human being, its movements were just wrong and made the human-like appearance seem to be hideously out of place. Tom watched contently how his creature slowly advanced on Longbottom, who seemed utterly scared now. The Dark Magic from the spell still rippled through Tom. It was a cold pressure swirling around him and enforcing his magic greatly. It felt good.

By now the shadow had reached Longbottom. Its motions didn't gain in speed as it steadily bent down to him and slowly latched onto him. Longbottom tried to push it away, but it was completely useless. The creature wasn't at all influenced by Longbottom's struggle.

Tom's cold laughter echoed from the corridor walls as he heard Longbottom's painful screams. Wherever the creature touched him, Longbottom's skin lost its colour and paled sickly. It seemed like all life was driven away by the creature's touch. Now the creature's arms had snaked completely around Longbottom's form and his screams intensified as he tried to push it away. Tom watched exited how the Gryffindor began to sink into the shadow. He would very much like to see Longbottom be completely sucked into the shadow, but that would be too much. Tom wouldn't be able to explain the sudden disappearance of a student.

So, Tom strolled towards Longbottom while he hissed in a low voice towards the dark creature, "Quiesce."

The creature heard his order, but it only reluctantly released its victim. As Tom reached them the creature's arms were still grabbing Longbottom. Tom positioned himself so that his own shadow slightly touched the dark creature. With an unearthly wail it finally let go of Longbottom, gracefully fell back into Tom's shadow and melted with it. Instantly, with the creature's disappearance, the light came back to the corridor.
Tom's cold eyes wandered over the Gryffindor who lay before him on the ground. It was a pity, but Tom couldn't risk really hurting Longbottom. A cold smile played around his mouth as he heard the Gryffindor's heavy breathing. Tom slowly circled around his victim, grinning down at him and drinking in the pain he had obviously caused. Remnants of the dark spell were still tangible in the air, making Tom's skin tingle excitingly. Then he casually leaned against the corridor wall and looked down at Longbottom. The blond was still sprawled on the floor and stared with wide eyes up at Tom.

"That was interesting, don't you think?" Tom inquired in a pleasantly suave voice, which contrasted sharply with the mad grin on this face.

He could see the Gryffindor still shivering, heavily weakened by the shadow's ability to suck all strength from its victims. The feral smile on Tom's face widened and, twirling his pale wand elegantly through his fingers, he drank in the other's weakness.

Then he said in a perversely kind tone, "Very interesting, indeed, how you think you can protect Hermione when you can't even protect yourself."

Tom was slightly displeased as he saw a look of rightful anger entering Longbottom's eyes. The fool tried to sit up, but he only managed to lean with his back against the wall. Tom's hand itched to whirl his wand again and finally curse that righteousness off the other's face. The crazed grin finally left Tom's face as he heard Longbottom's answer.

"You disgusting asshole!" the blond groaned hoarsely and even though fear tinted his voice, it was still strong. "You just proved my point: You are not good enough for Hermione! Do you really think she wants to stay with someone like you?"

The grip Tom had on his wand tightened so that his knuckles turned white. His angry dark magic awakened. It came back with a vengeance and rushed through him implacably. Wrapped around Tom's mind, it demanded retaliation. Why should he resist it? Tom decided to use his hate and form it into a truly beautiful curse. So he waved his wand in the well-known motion while he started to hiss the incantation,

"Cruc-"

Suddenly a translucent yellow wall appeared in the corridor, neatly separating Tom from the Gryffindor. The force of the shield made Tom stumble a few paces backwards. Longbottom remained to be unaffected and just stared at the shield in confusion. Tom narrowed his eyes at the shield. It was a very strong defensive spell. Vast quantities of magic radiated from it. He knew that magic. It belonged to Hermione. But it was different somehow. It was more powerful. It felt strange, changed.

Tom turned around. He found Hermione, stomping down the corridor towards him, an angry expression on her face as she glared at him.

Longbottom was surprised as suddenly a yellow shield appeared in front of him, just in the moment when Riddle wanted to hurl another, surely dark, curse at him. At first, he thought Riddle had conjured up that translucent wall which now separated the both of them, but there was a mildly confused look on Riddle's face. Then he turned around to someone. Longbottom took in a sharp breath of air as he saw Hermione walking towards Riddle. Why had she come here?

There was a murderous expression on Riddle's face as he glared at Hermione. Obviously, it had been
her who had cast the shielding spell. Obviously Riddle didn't like her actions at all.

Longbottom scrambled to his feet and watched how Hermione told Riddle something. He couldn't hear what she said as there was no sound reaching his side of the shield. He just had to watch helplessly how Riddle seemed to furiously snub back at her. Riddle now vented his fury on Hermione. The Gryffindor was silently proud of her as she stood her ground against Riddle. She even seemed to yell at him angrily. But then fear gripped at Longbottom's heart as he saw that look of malice on the evil Slytherin's face. He could see Riddle's hand tighten around his wand and dangerous green sparks erupted from the wand. Longbottom was afraid that the Slytherin would now start to curse Hermione. Riddle again screamed at her aggressively. Hermione yelled back at him but Longbottom wished she would just try to get away. If she continued to anger Riddle like this, there was no knowing what the Slytherin would do to her. With dread Longbottom remembered the ugly bruise on her face.

He then raised his wand and fired a curse at the yellow shield. "Reducto!"

Even though he had put all his magic behind the spell, it didn't manage to destroy the shield. Longbottom peered back at Hermione. She was now looking at him. He stiffened as he saw that she didn't notice at all how Riddle stalked towards her, still with that murderous expression on his face.

"Watch out!" Longbottom tried to warn her but Hermione didn't seem to hear him.

Riddle reached her and brutally grabbed Hermione's arm. Then he bent down to her and seemed to whisper something into her ear. Longbottom hurled another Reducto at the shield, again with the same results. He saw how Hermione fought against the grip Riddle had on her, but then she seemed to give up. The evil snake tightened his grip on her and then dragged her behind him, away from Longbottom.

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Hermione felt panicky as she ran down the dark corridor. That magic in the air was definitely Tom's. It bristled very angrily, occasionally tugging at her aggressively. As a reaction to her panicky state, Hermione subconsciously called upon the Elder Magic. It quickly answered her call and wrapped reassuringly around her.

A few more steps and she entered another corridor. She threw in a breath as she found what she had feared. Tom and Longbottom were in the corridor, a few metres away from her. Tom was looming over Longbottom, who was crouched on the floor. Tom's dark magic was all over the place. It hit her now harder than before.

Right now, Tom was pointing his wand at Longbottom. Hermione shuddered as she saw that look of pure malice on Tom's face. He waved his wand and she stopped breathing as she recognized those wand movements. Fury bubbled up in her as Hermione pulled her own wand and swiftly brandished it.

Obex!

She could feel the Elder Magic rushing through her wand to then form into a powerful spell. Instantly a yellow shield appeared in the corridor. It neatly separated Tom from the Gryffindor. Hermione breathed out relieved. Tom lowered his wand before he turned around to her. The complete lack of guilt on his face, made her grip her wand even tighter as she glared back at him. Then she walked over to him.

"What the hell are you doing?" she hissed enangered.
She now stood just two metres away from him and his angry dark magic tore at her violently. The Elder Magic, though, managed to protect her from this onslaught. Hermione could see that Tom's eyes were of a blood-red colour as he glared at her darkly. Chills darted down her spine as she saw that detached coldness on his face.

"I am putting a few things right. If you don't mind," Tom replied coldly.

"You are putting a few things right?" Hermione spat at him disdainfully. As he didn't react to the accusation in her voice, she yelled at him lividly, "Didn't I tell you to stay away from my friends?"

"Oh, so now, everything's my fault again!" he clamoured, equally angry. "He attacked me first."

"I don't care who started it. Don't think I wouldn't know what curse you were about to use," Hermione thundered at him, unable to suppress her temper. "There's no excuse for that."

"He deserves it!" Tom yelled furiously back at her.

"No-one deserves that!" She glared at him incensed. Then she hissed venomously, "I'm fed up with you! I've put up with this for long enough. You're going to stop this, now!"

"You want me to stop?" Tom replied with incredulity tinting his voice. "How about you stop being all over him whenever there's a chance?" he demanded in a dangerous voice, while gesturing at Longbottom.

Hermione clenched her teeth and the Elder Magic crackled around her furiously. Probably Tom could feel it, too, but she didn't care at all. She was way too angry right now.

"You better not go there, Tom!" she said in a low and bitingly cold voice. "It's enough that you always try to attack him. Unprovoked."

She could see Tom's hand tighten around his wand and his eyes flared up as the crimson colour intensified. They glowered at each other for a while. His dark magic was still crackling in the corridor but it was now met by the Elder Magic which danced around Hermione. The air seemed to be charged with electricity and she could feel, through the Elder Magic, where the two forces collided. Tom's magic pushed against her own but Hermione did not yield.

Tom's eyes narrowed dangerously as he felt her fighting against him. There were angry green sparks erupting from the tip of his wand. It was pretty obvious that he wanted to curse her now. Somehow she wished he would, Hermione thought in a fit of violent temper as she clasped her own wand. At least that would give her an excuse to curse him in return.

In the end he never raised his wand at her, instead he seemed to prefer to yell at her, "Why do you always have to think the worst of me? It's like you expect me to be the evil one."

"Oh, I wonder why," Hermione hurled cold sarcasm at him. Then she spat, "Maybe because usually you are the villain."

Tom pressed his mouth into a thin line and Hermione could tell that he was fighting to keep his self-control. Though he seemed to lose.

"And you are soo perfect. A saint. It's like you never do anything wrong," Tom bellowed furiously. He took a threatening step towards her, intensifying the pressure of magic on her, and then hissed, "Why don't you go have tea with Dumbledore. I'm sure he would be de-lighted to hear everything about my evilness."
"What the hell is your problem?" Hermione snapped as she violently pushed against his magic, forcing it back. "You behave like a lunatic."

"My problem is that my girlfriend seems to thoroughly enjoy the company of other men," Tom shouted at her and strands of his dark magic tried to breach her defence, but the Elder Magic sustained.

"What? You make it sound like I do Merlin-knows-what with them. They are my FRIENDS!" Hermione yelled at him enraged. Her anger enforced the Elder Magic and it finally ended Tom's attempts to take it down.

Then she continued and brutal sarcasm seeping from her voice, "I am soo sorry that, unlike you, I have friends."

"Well, my condolences, if that's the best you can manage," Tom replied glacially while gesturing at Longbottom.

At this point in time Hermione's yellow shield suddenly flared up and showered the dark corridor momentarily in bright light. Hermione turned her head and looked at the shield. It was still working, though it seemed like Longbottom tried to take it down. He had drawn his wand and fired curses at the barrier. He also seemed to shout something but Hermione had no idea what he tried to say as the shield prevented anything from passing, even sound waves. She then felt someone grabbing her upper arm. Her head shot up and she found Tom standing right beside her. There was still fury on his face as he tried to drag her away.

As Hermione resisted his grip, he hissed at her, "I want to continue this conversation somewhere more private."

Hermione's eyes wandered shortly back to her Gryffindor friend. He was still trying to take the shield down. Hermione knew it was quite the strong shield but it wouldn't hold forever. Maybe it really would be better to not continue this quarrel right in front of him. Hermione grudgingly had to admit that Tom had a point here so she followed him down the corridor. He pulled her through the castle's passage ways until they arrived at a bare stone wall. Hermione knew where exactly they were and she was not surprised that Tom had managed to unveil another of Hogwarts' secrets. Sure enough, Tom walked three times by that particular wall. Immediately a huge wooden door appeared in the wall. Tom didn't hesitate but walked over to the door and pushed it open, then he entered and disappeared in the room behind. Hermione huffed at his impossible behaviour. He couldn't know that she had in fact visited the Room of Requirements before. It would have been only polite to at least explain a little bit.

Hermione stomped after him and passed the threshold, stepping into the room. She had barely taken a few steps as she stopped dead in her tracks. She had just entered a huge hall. It was dark and cold here. Imposing stone pillars stood a few metres from each other, flanking a way into the room. Hermione raised her head and followed their structure. The pillars seemed to be lost somewhere high up in the darkness. Hermione felt chilly but she still took more steps into the room. Tom's footsteps could still be heard as they echoed loudly from the cold stone walls, so she followed him.

She'd never been in this place but she had no problems to recognize it from how Harry had described it. Those scary snakes carved into stone were a hint, too. This was unmistakably the Chamber of Secrets. Hermione shuddered involuntarily. Finally, she reached what seemed to be the heart of this hall. She found Tom pacing furiously in front of a huge stone statue. Her eyes fleetingly danced over the statue's face. It was the face of an old wizard with a long beard. Hermione knew who was portrayed here, Salazar Slytherin himself.
As she reached Tom, she asked him in a surprisingly firm voice, "What is this?"

He only shortly looked at her and replied in a clipped voice, "The Come-and-Go Room."

Hermione inwardly relaxed as she heard his answer. Shortly she had really thought this was the Chamber of Secrets and that there existed more than one entry into the chamber. Thank Merlin, it was just the Room of Requirement. Then anger bubbled up in her again as she looked around the chamber. So typical Tom to ask the room to change into something sinister and dark. Abruptly Tom stopped his pacing and glared at her. There was a look of anger on his face.

"I don't want you to talk with him anymore," he snarled at her.

"And with 'him' you mean Marc?" Hermione asked curtly.

"Yes, Longbottom!" Tom spat the name like it was an insult. "I forbid you to talk with him."

Hermione was taken aback by his forcefulness and raised her eyebrows.

"Forbid?" she said, fighting to not lose her self-control. "You can't forbid me anything!"

"You are my girlfriend!" he yelled at her as if that was justification enough.

"Yes, girlfriend," Hermione said in a dangerous, low voice. "Not slave! And certainly not one of your followers!"

Her reply just earned her another of his death glares. Then he asked her snidely, "How can you even be friends with him? He's an idiot. You don't need him."

"Merlin, is that so hard to understand?" Hermione exclaimed exasperated. The scowl on Tom's face told her that it was obviously not so easy to understand so she yelled at him, "I just like him!"

"Oh so you like him, do you?" he said in a derogatory tone.

He cast her a dark accusatory glance before he continued his furious pacing. Hermione just shook her head at the raving mad Slytherin.

"What is wrong with you?" she then asked him gruffly. "Why are you doing all of this?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and hit him with a withering look. Tom, though, did not react to her at all. He just stopped his pacing to look at her reproachfully. He arched one eyebrow questioningly as if he really didn't know where he had misbehaved. Fed up with his undiscerning conduct, she flung her hands up in frustration.

"Need I really remind you?" she hissed at him irately. "First you send your goons after me like a bunch of watchdogs. Then you start attacking my friends to the point where you nearly crucioed one of them. And now you think you can order me around."

She started to pace around in front of him, desperately trying to rein in her temper. Then she glanced at him.

"It gets old, don't you think?" she griped challengingly. "Whatever are you trying to achieve? Destroying my sanity? If so, then you are doing a great job!"

By now fury twisted up Tom's face as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"What do you expect from me?" he hissed at her mordantly. "Should I just sit back and watch how
that Gryffindor idiot seduces you?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "You are not starting on that again, are you? Haven't I told you over and over again that I. Do. Not. Fancy. Marc," she yelled the last words at him in a pique of temper.

Tom wasn't at all impressed by her outburst of fury, instead he took a threatening step towards her.

"Then tell me why you spend all your free time hanging around the git?" he gritted at her.

Tom glared at her incensed, clearly expecting an answer to his stupid accusation. Hermione was very enraged as she stared back at him. The Elder Magic was still wrapped around her and it again bristled around her, joining Tom's magic which swirled around him equally wrathfully. Hermione strongly assumed that Tom had by now sensed this change in her magic. Even though a small portion of her mind advised her to hide the Elder Magic again, she was way too furious to listen to that voice of reason.

Actually, she had half a mind of pulling her wand. Tom's insane jealousy had been jarring on her nerves for far too long already. Why did he need to be so irrational? Hermione glowered at him infuriated.

Tom just scowled back at her darkly then he hissed in a commanding voice, "I'm not going to accept that any longer. You are going to stay away from him!"

She looked at him enraged. Then she inquired incredulously, "Do you really think I'm just going to do whatever you tell me?"

Tom just glared at her infuriated and she could see an eerie red glint flaring up in his eyes. Then he said in a low and fearsome tone, "You better, or else-"

"Or else what?" Hermione cut across him, completely losing her composure by the sight of that red sheen in his eyes. "Are you going to curse me? Are you going to use the Cruciatus Curse on me? It wouldn't be the first time."

It was a low blow. As soon as Hermione said it she realized that. Tom just stared at her with a stony face. Then he turned around and walked away. She instantly followed him. As she reached him Hermione grabbed his arm.

"Wait," she ordered. "Don't run away."

Tom turned around to her and Hermione raised her eyebrows as she saw that a blank mask covered his face. Then he replied in a quiet but all the same sharp voice, "Why? Obviously I'm evil, I'm the villain and it seems that I like to curse you. Why would you want me to stay?"

"Tom, calm down," Hermione said in a stern voice. "And stop being so melodramatic. You are my boyfriend, of course I like being around you."

"I'm not so sure about that," Tom replied acridly. "Maybe you prefer Longbottom's presence."

Hermione still grabbed his arm and looked up at the anger lurking behind that blank expression of his. The jealousy was still burning in his grey eyes. She was tired of this jealousy, especially as there was no reason for him to feel this way. Sure, she liked Longbottom but certainly not in that way. It actually angered her that Tom thought she would just leave him and go for another guy.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, feeling aggravated again. But as she now scanned Tom's
features, she could suddenly spot something she hadn't noticed before. He still stared at her angrily but there was more visible in his eyes. How could she have missed it before? There, undeniably, was something flickering in his grey eyes that had nothing to do with his anger. Hermione furrowed her brow as she tried to decipher Tom's emotions. Now that she paid closer attention, she could clearly see fear flickering in his eyes. As she finally took notice of that anxiety, her violent temper completely died down. Tom seemed to be thoroughly afraid of something.

What scared him so?

It was then that his last words seeped through to her. He had said it in such a disparaging and insulting way, but maybe he had been shockingly honest. Hermione was shaken by that forlorn look on his face. Was Tom really afraid that she would leave him? Where was that fear suddenly coming from? She frowned at him. Then her grip on his arm loosened slightly, so that she could hold him more gently.

Hermione asked him in a soft voice, "Why are you so convinced that I would cheat on you?"

She could see that he was taken aback by her sudden change of mood. His angry dark magic finally died down around him and he just looked at her with his grey eyes. He didn't reply anything but the fear remained to be visible in his eyes. Hermione sighed softly as she realized, he wouldn't yield so easily. Obviously she needed to convince him gingerly to tell her what upset him so.

"Tom, I decided to be with you. You are my boyfriend," she told him in a gentle but all the same firm voice. "I am certainly not going to run off with Marc."

"How am I supposed to believe that?" he asked frostily. Then he spat in a bitter tone, "Obviously neither Longbottom nor me are your true love." His last two words were oozing with cruel scorn. "You're just killing time, staying with me."

Ah, there it was, the core of his problem. He wasn't really thinking that she would run off with Longbottom. It was something else that troubled him. Somehow she had known it the whole time. Maybe that was the reason she hadn't wanted to talk with him about his problem sooner but had preferred it to put up with all his possessiveness the last few weeks. It was a topic she herself wasn't very fond of talking about. Hermione looked up at Tom's enraged face then she cautiously addressed the true cause of his insecurity.

"Since we went to London, you've behaved strangely," she told him while she still held his arm gently. "Actually since I told you about Ron."

The moment she spoke Ron's name, she could watch his face completely shutting down. An indifferent mask covered everything up. Then he turned his head and avoided her eyes. Hermione had expected something like this. She just looked at him patiently and waited for him to somehow react.

"If he hadn't died, you would be with him now. I'm just second choice," he stated in a painfully hollow voice.

Hermione was shocked to hear that his voice was suddenly so empty. The anger had completely vanished and had left absolutely nothing behind. She stepped towards him until she stood directly in front of him, nearly touching his chest. But Tom still didn't look at her. She extended a hand towards him, took his chin in her hand and bent it towards her, so that he was forced to look at her. His face was still carefully arranged into that emotionless mask. Though his eyes were different now. They swirled with emotion. There was a great deal of anger in his eyes but also fear and pain. Tom was insecure and desperate even.
Hermione locked her eyes with his then she started to say in a firm voice, "I loved Ron. And I will always love him."

She could see Tom's eyes widen for the tiniest fraction as she said that. Her hand released his chin, wandered to his cheek and cupped it gently.

"But Ron is a part of my past. He is gone. Nothing more than a memory. And now you are here with me."

It hurt her to say this about Ron, but it was something she needed to resolve to help Tom and maybe to help herself.

"But…" Tom whispered in a soft tone. "If he hadn't died, you would have stayed with him. Not with me."

Hermione smiled sadly up at him. "I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't died," she told him in a soothing voice. "It was a chain of events that led to me arriving at Hogwarts. Not all of them were connected with Ron. But I did end up at Hogwarts and I met you."

Hermione's hand sank from his face as she stepped even closer to him so that she now almost leaned into him. One of her arms wrapped itself cautiously around him. She looked up into his grey eyes.

"I won't deny that Ron is still very important for me but, Tom, he is no threat to you. I'm not going to leave you for any other guy, okay?"

She could feel him tremble slightly at her declaration and wrapped her arm even tighter around him. Then she put her other hand on the back of his neck and pulled his head down to her. She pressed her lips against his and kissed him gently while her hand fondled with his dark hair. After a while she could feel how Tom cautiously slipped his arms around her and pulled her against him. Then he responded to her kiss and deepened it. After he released her again she smiled contently up at him.

"Do you feel better?" she asked him gently.

He looked at her and Hermione was relieved to see that the desperation and insecurity had left his incredibly grey eyes again. Then he nodded shortly. Her smile even widened before she said in a teasing voice,

"Now, will you stop being so incredibly jealous and call your goons back from stalking me?"

A small, guilty smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as Tom nodded again.

"Good." Hermione smirked right back at him. "Otherwise I would have been forced to transfigure them into a bunch of fluffy ferrets."

Tom chuckled before he said, "Why ferrets?"

"It suits them, don't you think?" was her taunting reply.

Hermione removed her arms from him and stepped a little away. All jest left her eyes again as she looked up at him.

"Tom, I know that you don't like Marc, or any of my friends for that matter," she said in a serious tone. "I also know that they, at times, provoke you. So, you are not the only one at fault here. But you almost cast an Unforgivable at Marc. This is something I cannot accept."
Hermione saw Tom taking a step away from her, as some of the anxiety re-entered his eyes.

"I'm not going to leave you because of it," she quickly tried to allay his fears but then she continued in a sharp and firm voice, "But you will never do something like that again."

Hermione continued to look at him expectantly. She wasn't angry with him anymore, but she still wanted confirmation that this conflict was now finally resolved. Tom stared back at her and she was slightly assuaged as she saw a bit of insecurity in his eyes.

Then he whispered, "I… I'm sorry."

A soft smile took form on her face as she heard him. She again stepped closer to him and snaked her arms around him, telling him that she accepted his apology. Tom sighed softly then he slung his arms around her. Hermione leaned into him and put her head against his chest. The fabric of his dark green pullover was rather scratchy against her cheek but she enjoyed Tom's nearness. It never occurred to her how very odd it was that she embraced Tom Riddle, the Heir of Slytherin, standing in the very chamber his ancestor had once built in secret.

Later, Hermione accompanied Tom back to the Slytherin common room. He had actually insisted on bringing her to her own but Hermione had declined. She didn't think it would be a good idea if he accidentally ran into her Gryffindor friends again. Before Tom could open the door to his common room Hermione grabbed his shoulders, stood on tiptoes and placed a kiss on his mouth.

"Good night," she whispered at him.

Tom smiled down at her and Hermione was relieved to see that all anger and jealousy but also the fear and insecurity had by now left his face. Then she stepped away from him again and said,

"Don't forget to inform your dear friends to stay away from me."

Tom smirked at her then he said, "I thought we just determined that I don't have any friends."

Hermione smiled at him for she knew that he would tell his followers anyway. She turned around and strolled down the corridor she had come from. It didn't take long and she was back at the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

"Lion fish," she whispered the pass word.

As soon as she opened the portrait hole and stepped into the common room she was instantly assaulted by her upset friends. Longbottom even hugged her tightly while Weasley and Lupin seemed to check her over for any injuries.

"Guys," Hermione stuttered. "What…? Stop. I'm okay."

"Are you alright?" Longbottom asked as he scanned her concerned. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, no," Hermione assured with a smile on her face.

Then she noticed the many curious stares the other Gryffindors were sending their way. So, she grabbed Longbottom's arm and pulled him over to one of the many sofas in the room. Her friends followed her but still scanned her worried as if they expected to find any wounds on her body. As Hermione reached the sofa she sat down and pulled her wand.

"Muffliato," she whispered while brandishing her wand.
"What happened?" Longbottom immediately exclaimed. "I just saw how he dragged you away."

"Did he do anything?" Weasley asked, worry present on his face. "Did he curse you?"

Hermione raised her hands to quieten them down. "It's okay. You don't have to worry. I just talked with Tom."

"What did he want from you?" Lupin queried as he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Did he tell you to keep away from us?"

Hermione leaned back on the sofa and smiled at Lupin. He was always very sharp. He had assessed the situation rather accurately.

So Hermione smiled at him and said, "Yes, he actually did."

"Did he threaten you?" Weasley stared at her with wide eyes. "He's not going to do anything to you if he sees us together, is he?" He looked around in the common room as if he expected Tom to pop up any moment.

"He can't do that!" Longbottom bellowed angrily. "The evil git!"

"Don't worry. I actually told him something similar," Hermione giggled. "Though without insulting him… much."

She had to giggle even more as she saw those incredulous expressions on her friends' faces. But then she got serious again as she continued, "I am really sorry that Tom attacked you just like that, Marc. I promise you he's never going to do that again."

"We are more concerned about you actually," Longbottom said quietly.

"You don't need to be," Hermione replied confidently. "I've had a conversation with Tom. I told him that I'm not accepting if he starts to attack you."

"You shouldn't speak to him at all," Lupin warned her. "He's dangerous. Just leave him."

"No," Hermione said in a quite but firm voice. "I know you don't like him, but at least now he's going to stay away from you."

"You don't really think he's going to just do that, are you?" Longbottom asked, still enraged.

"I am," Hermione told him calmly. "He promised me to tone it down somewhat."

"Tone it down?" Longbottom exclaimed incredulously.

"What did you have to promise in return?" Lupin's cool voice intervened.

Hermione had to suppress a smirk. Lupin knew very well how a Slytherin's mind worked, didn't he?

"Actually nothing," she told them. "But I would advise you to keep away from him as best as possible and don't try to provoke him. He's not very fond of Gryffindors, you see. And I think it's pretty obvious that you'll never become friends. So it's for the best if you all just avoid each other."

"Not fond of Gryffindors, the evil snake," Longbottom grumbled angrily. "Did he notice that you are a Gryffindor?"

"Yep," Hermione said amused. "And believe me he's not exactly delighted about that fact."
"He should feel honoured that you are spending your time with him," the blond said in exasperation. "He's a conceited brat, that's what he is."

"Probably," she smiled at him. "But do you think you can stop picking quarrels with him? Because that would be really helpful. I'm tired of having to argue with him."

"Don't you want to reconsider?" Lupin said in a calm voice while he looked at her intently. "Maybe it would be better if you, too, avoid him."

"No," Hermione said determinedly. "He's my boyfriend and he'll remain to be my boyfriend. So? Do you think you can live with that?"

Lupin eyed her, unconvinced but then he said, "Yes, if that's what you want."

Longbottom had sour look on his face but then he, too, conceded, "Okay. But if he hits you again we won't just stand back and let him do it."

Hermione smiled at her friends in relief. "He's never hit me so I don't see a problem."

A few days passed and Hermione was more than content to notice that Tom held his word. His lackeys no longer stalked her. Finally Tom seemed to have accepted her friendship with her three Gryffindor house mates. Hermione could see that he was sometimes still jealous but he abode by the truce she had demanded of him. He did not try to attack her friends again.

There were times, when Tom saw her together with Longbottom, that he surely wanted to curse the Gryffindor. Hermione could tell just by looking at Tom, but he never lost his temper again. Her past relationship with Ron probably still played on his mind but Tom now obviously trusted her enough to believe her that she was faithful.

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Tom was sitting in the Slytherin common room and felt restless. He was lounging in one of the leather sofas and was reading in a book but he couldn't quite concentrate on it. His thoughts always wandered to Hermione. Even after they had talked about everything and she had assured him that he was not just a cheap replacement for her lost fiancé, he still didn't like it when she was not around him. He knew that she wouldn't run away with Longbottom in the near future - … almost sure at least… - but the desire to search the castle for her was still overly present in his mind. The witch was just too stubbornly self-subsistent. Tom's gaze wandered to a bunch of girls sitting in one corner of the common room. They giggled inanely and threw him seductive looks as they noticed his attention.

Her stubbornness is still better than their silly infatuation. He sighed and again resumed his futile attempt to read his book.

After a while he heard a rather condescending, female voice, "What do you want here?"

"None of your business," another voice, tinged with cold amusement, replied.

Tom looked up from his reading as he had recognized the second voice. A smirk appeared on his face as he found Hermione walking towards him. The eyes of the Slytherins in the room followed her but she didn't notice as she was right now smiling at him. Tom was slightly surprised that she had sought him out. It seemed she wanted to spent time with him even without him having to force her.

Hermione sat down beside him on the couch. Tom could hear muffled chatter breaking out and the
smirk on his face widened. The other Slytherins knew not to disturb him when he was trying to read a book. No-one of them would have ever dared to sit down beside him. Not even his Knights would ever approach him without showing the necessary respect. Tom's eyes wandered from his indignant housemates to the witch lounging leisurely on the couch beside him.

"How did you enter the common room?" he asked nonchalantly.

Hermione just smiled at him sweetly before she whispered tauntingly, "What? Do you think you are the only one with a mysterious source for the school's passwords?"

Tom raised one eyebrow at her in doubt.

She continued to look at him arrogantly but soon caved in and admitted, "Okay, okay. I was waiting outside the common room and then someone opened it for me. Happy?"

"Yes," he purred at her.

She just sighed and leaned back against the couch.

"Do you want to do something?" Tom asked her. "We could go outside and sit by the lake."

Hermione turned her head lazily at him. "It's raining outside," she informed him before she drawled, "But of course you people of the dungeons wouldn't know."

Tom smirked as he saw that condescending expression on the witch's face.

*Almost worthy of a Slytherin,* he mused.

"There's no need to entertain me," Hermione said as she bent down to her bag and retrieved a book from it. "See?" She showed him the old leather bound book.

"Manifestation of Magic in inanimate Objects," Tom read its title.

He contemplated the book for a while before his gaze wandered back to her. "Hmm…a pity," he finally concluded airily.

Hermione frowned at him and then at the book in her hands. "What's a pity?"

Tom smiled at her in his most innocent way, which just made her roll her eyes, then he said, "I was hoping you had brought another book."

"What book?" she asked confused.

By now Tom couldn't hide the evil smirk any longer. "Well, there's a certain book in your possession that you acquired by, let's say, bending the law somewhat."

A scowl appeared on Hermione's face as she glared at him. Tom wasn't scared by that fearsome expression on her face but extended a hand towards her and tucked a wisp of her riotous hair behind her ear. He chuckled softly as she shuddered when his fingers skimmed gently over her cheek. She was so sensitive. He leaned down to her which made an adorable blush appear on her cheeks before he whispered in her ear,

"I haven't forgotten about Peverell's book."

Sadly, Hermione seemed to be drawn from her trance as the glassy look, which had been a result of his close proximity, vanished from her eyes again.
"And I already told you: I won't give it to you," she snapped at him.

*Stubborn as always.* Tom eyed the witch at his side.

"Why do you want to read that transfiguration book anyway?" he sighed as he leaned back and spread his arms out on the backrest of the sofa.

"Because, unlike you, I'm interested in transfiguration," she huffed.

She threw him another dirty look before she opened her book and began to read. He had to grin at her cheeky behaviour but then he, too, returned to his book. It was after a while of comfortable silence that Tom felt how Hermione slid closer to him. She even grabbed his arm and held tightly to him. He looked down at her and found her scanning the common room nervously.

"Something wrong?"

"They are staring at me," she replied in a whispered tone. "I think they don't like me."

Tom looked up and sure enough a lot of his house mates still cast inconspicuous but curious glances Hermione's way. Though the looks coming from the group of girls on the other side of the common room were neither friendly nor in any way inconspicuous. Tom wasn't at all surprised to see Nicolls being one of the girls glaring murderously at Hermione. Tom ignored his house mates and refocused on Hermione.

"Well, I would be disappointed with them if they did like a Gryffindor," Tom taunted her gently.

Though he knew that another reason for the stares was that the Slytherins wondered why he allowed her so many liberties with him.

"We could go down in the dorm. No-one's there," he offered as he saw she wouldn't calm down.

Hermione nodded, stuffed her book back in her bag and quickly got up from the couch. Tom chuckled softly as she then scuffled, rather hastily, over to the stairs. The glares coming from that group of girls grew even darker as Tom followed her in a more dignified pace. He didn't care at all what his house mates thought about his relationship with Hermione. If one of them had a problem with him dating a Gryffindor, then it would be Tom's pleasure to help them solve their problem. A twisted smile appeared on his face as he walked over to the stairs leading down to the dormitories.

As he finally entered his dorm, he found Hermione already sitting on one of the sofas standing in the sitting area of the room. He strolled over to her and sat down beside her.

Hermione looked at him reproachfully before she said, "Why's the Slytherins' dorm at least twice the size of the Gryffindors'?"

He smirked at her arrogantly, "Because most of the Slytherins are spoiled brats coming from rich families with huge manor houses. They wouldn't know how to survive in a place smaller than Buckingham Palace."

Hermione just chuckled softly at his explanation then she curled up on the sofa, reached for her book and continued reading. Tom tried to resume his reading, too, but found that he couldn't quite concentrate anymore. The dim light made reading difficult but the main reason for his distraction was that his thoughts were magically drawn to the witch on the sofa beside him.
It somehow was easy with Hermione. She didn't fancy him because of his good looks or the power he commanded. She wasn't like all the other girls who always swarmed around him, seeing something in him that wasn't really there. It was ridiculously easy to trick those girls. All he had to do was spin a few lies and they would do whatever he wanted from them.

Not Hermione. She had never bought any of his lies. She could always see right through him. Although that ability was quite annoying at times, it was also relieving that he didn't have to act around her. Hermione knew who he really was. She had seen his dark side and even his weakness and still stayed with him. Whenever she was around, he could just drop his façade.

Tom had no idea why she wanted to be with him. If she were a normal girl, she would have ran from him and never come back after all the things he had done to her. But Hermione had come back to him, she had helped him when there was nothing to gain and she had even forgiven him. It was a mystery why she wanted to stay with him. That lack of understanding had led to him trying to force her to stay with him. Now that he had stopped trying to control her every action, it was even better when she still came back to him.

Tom was lost in his thoughts but then he noticed how Hermione again skidded nearer to him on the couch. This time, though, her intentions were completely different, he realized, as he suddenly felt her leaning towards him before she placed a kiss on the corner of his mouth. She took the book from his hands and deposited it on the sofa while she rained more kisses on his face. Tom couldn't suppress a moan from escaping him as she slowly ran her hand up his chest. Her other hand gently held his head while she continued to nibble at his lower lip. All rational thought completely left his mind as he felt her tongue brushing along the seam of his mouth. He opened his mouth slightly, thus allowing her to deepen the kiss. As he felt her tongue exploring his mouth he somehow didn't mind that right now she was the one in control.

Her hands ran demandingly through his hair as she finally broke from his mouth. Then she suddenly grabbed his hair rather gruffly and pulled at it, thus exposing his throat. Tom panted slightly as she began to trace more kisses down his neck. He could feel her body pressed against him. But it wasn't enough. She wasn't close enough yet.

His self-restraint was slowly leaving him, to be replaced by fierce desire. He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her tighter against him. Then he leaned down to her and pressed his lips against hers, catching her lower lip between his own. By now she was sitting on his lap but she was still not close enough.

His lips left her mouth again to trace more kisses on the line of her jaw. He could hear her breathing heavily which only drove him on to elicit more reactions from her. He could feel her arms being wrapped around his neck as she clung to him, thus making the distance between them nonexistent. The sweet scent of lilac coming from her almost made him go crazy. The consuming desire intensified as he heard her moan in pleasure when he nibbled at her earlobe. She was so close to him now. But this time he needed more.

Hermione was overcome by her feelings as she kissed Tom. She had surprised herself by her sudden actions. But as Tom had sat there on the sofa, reading in his book, he had just looked irresistible. Hermione had been unable to hold herself back. She had had to kiss him. Now he responded to her. She could feel Tom's arm being snaked completely around her waist. He didn't stop to kiss her as he pulled her even closer to him so that she ended up sitting on his lap, leaning against his chest. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and ran a hand through his dark hair, ruffling it up. Tom broke from her lips and started to plant more kisses on the line of her jaw. Hermione shuddered with pleasure as she felt his lips on her skin. His warm hand had wandered up her back and was now holding her head in place. As his mouth found her ear, he started to nibble teasingly at her earlobe.
Then he whispered in a soft but resolute voice into her ear,

"I'm going to sleep with you now."

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard those soft spoken words. Tom bent her head to the side and started to kiss the soft skin of her neck while his other arm was still wrapped around her tightly, pressing her against him.

Hermione suddenly felt incredibly nervous. Those feelings she had were so compelling and she really didn't want Tom to stop, he was making her feel so good, but at the same time she was scared. She wanted to be with Tom but she was terribly inexperienced. She had only once slept with a man and now she just felt insecure. Tom's words had sounded like a statement against which she couldn't do anything but she knew him better. She knew that it had been his odd way of asking her. Hermione just didn't know what to do.

Obviously Tom had noticed her insecurity. He gently cupped both her cheeks with his hands and looked down at her. She stared at him with her huge eyes and found him smiling reassuringly at her. Then he bent down and placed a soft kiss on her mouth. As she felt him kissing her so affectionately, she just knew that he would take care of her. She didn't need to worry. Hermione leaned into him and slowly responded to his kiss. The insecurity left her. There was no reason to be scared for Tom was here with her.

As Tom felt her responding to him he started to deepen the kiss while his hands released her cheeks, wandered down to her blouse and started to undo the buttons. He slid the blouse over her shoulders so that it fell softly down on the floor. His fingers skimmed over the bare skin of her back and Hermione felt pleasant shivers following his touch.

Tom shifted again so that he could get up from the sofa. He bent down to her and wrapped one of his arms tightly around her waist while the other positioned itself under the hollows of her knees before he lifted Hermione up from the sofa. He carried her to his bed and gently laid her down on the soft mattress. Then he leaned over her, supporting his weight with his arms. He again kissed her and Hermione felt him nibbling at her lip sensuously. A burning desire slowly took hold of her and her own hands became more demanding as they slid up his chest to undo his green and silver Slytherin tie. After she had removed the tie, she unbuttoned his shirt. Tom quickly took it completely off before he resumed to kiss her. Hermione enjoyed running her fingers over the bare skin of his back. He leaned on one arm and his other hand cupped her cheek while he kissed her passionately. His lips then left her mouth and slowly wandered down her neck. Hermione felt her breathing hitch as he reached her breasts and started to kiss the skin where it was not covered by her bra. One of his hands had reached her skirt. Hermione felt him opening the skirt. He nibbled gently at her neck and Hermione's arms wrapped around him pulling him closer to her. There was a tingling and rather demanding feeling originating from her stomach. It quickly spread and flowed through her whole body.

Tom bent up a little while pulling her with him so that his hand reached her back where he undid her bra. He put her down on the bed again and gently removed the last layer of cloth that covered her breasts. Hermione felt Tom's lips on her skin again. She gasped softly as he now began to caress her breasts. His fingers, his lips and his tongue left behind a burning tingle on her skin.

Then she felt his hands sliding down her sides until they reached the only piece of clothing that still covered her body. Tom slowly removed her underwear and Hermione felt her breathing quicken again. The passion started to overwhelm her as Tom bent down to her and kissed her. He was now half lying on her but Hermione's arms clasped around him pulling him even closer. She needed him
near her now, not one bit of distance was allowed between them. The feeling of his bare skin against her own was so exciting. The burning desire nearly robbed her off her sanity as her fingers glided lightly but all the same demanding over the skin of his well toned arms. Tom seemed to realize the state she was in as he now quickly shed his boxers before he leaned over her again. Hermione panted heavily as she felt him against her, this time though they would finally completely merge into one another. Hermione gasped as she felt Tom slowly moving into her. His breathing was ragged now as he lowered his head to again kiss her passionately. He was moving in and out of her and she was overcome by the feeling of ecstasy. It felt like she would burst from it. The only things she was aware of now was this incredible feeling suffusing her and

Tom.

Just Tom. His nearness, his taste, his scent, his body.

Then her thoughts stopped as the wonderful feeling engulfed her completely, sending shivers of pleasure through her whole body.

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Tom was looking satisfied down at the witch lying asleep beside him. She was huddled against his side. Tom noticed amused how one of her arms was spread across him, holding him rather possessively. That little gesture of hers was nothing compared to the possessive feeling he experienced as he looked at her sleeping form.

Who would have thought into what their relationship would develop, Tom mused, as they had met for the first time in the Great Hall when she had insisted in ignoring him and as he had decided to show her her place. He still wanted to show her her place. Though that place was now right by his side. He was never going to let her leave again. Not his most prized possession.

The bond that tied her to him, which had at first been flimsy at its best, had now strengthened. Tom was extremely pleased with how things had developed. Truth be told, he hadn't expected Hermione to succumb to him this quickly. But he had managed and it had been incredible. Tom had slept with a few girls already but it never had been even close to what he had just experienced with Hermione.

Hermione, it seemed, had enjoyed it just like he had, Tom thought with contentment as he remembered how her body had responded to him. That was a new thing for Tom: that he wanted the girl to enjoy their time together as much as he did. He had never cared about the girls' feelings when he had slept with them. But Hermione, it seemed, was yet again something special.

Tom extended a hand towards her and ran his fingers gently through her soft, curly hair. Hermione stirred as he touched her but she didn't wake up. She just huddled closer against him. Then she whispered in her sleep,

"Tom."

A triumphant smile tugged at the corners of Tom's mouth. His grey eyes filled with a dark glint as they wandered over her form. The greedy feeling that ripped at him whenever he looked at her was for once satisfied. And he basked in to knowledge that she was finally his.

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Tom woke the next day and yawned tiredly. He hadn't even noticed when he had fallen asleep. He rolled over and, to his displeasure, found no Hermione lying beside him. He sat up on his bed and looked around the dorm. She was no-where in sight. He was pretty much alone in the room actually. Not even his dorm mates were here. They obviously had had enough common sense to not disturb Tom and his girlfriend. He had no idea where they had slept last night and, frankly, he didn't care either. Though he did wonder where Hermione had gone to.

Tom stood up from his bed. He was completely naked and a small smirk stole on his face as he remembered the reason for his nudeness. Yes, last night had been rather pleasurable, hadn't it? Though, this morning would have been a lot better if it had greeted him with Hermione's nudeness. The smirk on his face widened as he remembered the sight of her body.

…which he now knew a whole lot better than ever before. He knew that it hadn't been her intention to end up sleeping with him as she had started to kiss him, but she obviously hadn't been able to resist him. He chuckled softly as he remembered the softness of her skin under his fingers and how she had moaned in pleasure at his every touch.

Maybe a cold shower was in order? Tom sighed and shuffled over to the bathroom. It had probably been for the better that Hermione had gone back to her dorm sometime during the night. Otherwise her foolish friends might have called the Aurors and accused Tom of having abducted her. He chuckled slightly at that thought. Maybe he should really do that sometime? Sounded like a lot of fun…

He entered the bathroom and walked over to the marble sink with its golden taps. Hermione had been right, he thought amused, Slytherins were rather posh. He didn't mind the luxury though. As Tom looked into the mirror, he had to stare at his reflection and then blinked a few times. But it didn't go away, this deep red lipstick mark on his forehead. He leaned forward, turned his head a little and pushed a few strands of his dark hair away to have a better look. There surely was a sinfully red mark on his skin, left behind by soft lips kissing him on the forehead. A crooked grin broke out on his face.

That little witch…

Had Hermione marked him? He chuckled softly as he wondered how she had done it for she never wore any lipstick. And certainly not such a startling red. Naturally she must have conjured it up. He shook his head at his girlfriend's silliness, still softly laughing. Then he stepped into the shower.

Twenty minutes later, Tom left the dormitory, his hair slightly damp. He ascended the stairs and stepped into the common room. To his amusement he found Lestrange, still fully dressed, sleeping on one of the black leather couches. Tom's other dorm mates must have found asylum elsewhere. He ignored Lestrange and left the common room.

As Tom entered the Great Hall, he was greeted by the usual noise of the other students and clatter from cutlery. He paused for a moment, standing in the door, and let his gaze travel over the hall. Most of the students were already sitting at their tables, but Tom wasn't interested in them. His eyes fell on the Gryffindor table and he searched it for a certain bushy-haired witch. He quickly found Hermione sitting at the table, absorbed in conversation with her friends.

Tom couldn't stop a haughty smile from taking form on his face as he scanned her. Somehow, she must have felt his gaze on her as she suddenly looked up. Her hazel eyes searched the Great Hall.
When she finally saw him, Tom was very amused to witness a deep blush take shape on her face. But even though her face was now beet red, she didn’t look away from him. Instead she just smiled at him. Tom was surprised as he found himself smiling softly back at her. Before he finally lost all his Slytherin pride, he winked at her tauntingly. Instantly, the red colour on her face even intensified and he had to chuckle slightly.

"Why did you come back so late yesterday night?" Rose asked in her usual, shrill voice.

Hermione just grunted in response. Silently regretting that her dorm mates insisted on accompanying her to the Great Hall.

"I know why!" Lucia exclaimed loudly, before she continued while almost breaking down with giggles, "You’ve been with Riddle, haven't you?"

Hermione just narrowed her eyes at Lucia. Her dorm mates were a little bit too chatty to her taste on an early Monday morning. Lucia stepped nearer to Hermione, wrapped an arm around her waist and whispered conspiratorially in her ear,

"Tell us the truth. Riddle didn't want to let you leave. Hm?"

"What did he do?" Rose inquired instantly upon seeing Hermione's distress.

"Did you snog?" Lucia asked, poking Hermione's side mischievously. "Or more?"

At that Rose finally broke completely down in insane giggles and Hermione felt the need to draw her wand.

"You are so lucky, Hermione," she managed to say between her giggles. "Riddle's a real hotty, isn't he?"

"Now, tell us, tell us!" Lucia whined. "Why were you so late?"

Hermione was not going to divulge any secrets in front of the two worst gossip mongers she had ever known. So, she remained to be silent and endured the girls' never ending prodding until they finally reached the Great Hall. Hermione quickly checked the Slytherin table, but was not surprised as she didn't spot Tom anywhere. It was early Monday, after all, and she knew what a late riser he was. She walked over to the Gryffindor table and was more than happy to be able to leave her dorm mates as she spotted Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin already sitting at the table.

"Morning," Lupin greeted her, looking up from his Daily Prophet.

Hermione smiled at him. "Good morning," she replied genially as she plopped down beside Lupin. She reached for a pot of coffee and poured herself a nice cup before she took some of the scrambled eggs and piled them on her plate.

"You seem to be quite cheerful today," Lupin stated calmly while he peered at her over his newspaper.
Hermione stopped piling her plate as she noticed that she had been humming some stupid tune under her breath. Again the silly blush was back on her face. Quite annoying, actually.

"Well, it is a nice day, today, isn't it?" she finally answered without looking at either of her friends.

Merlin, I'm behaving like an idiotic school girl.

"Yeah." Longbottom luckily saved her any more embarrassment as he explained happily, "It's the perfect weather for Quidditch practice."

Weasley, who was trying to eat several sausages in one go, just managed to nod at him.

"Maybe we should ditch DADA," Longbottom contemplated while staring up at the ceiling of the Great Hall, gauging the weather situation. "And have an extra training session. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Weasley answered while reaching for some more sausages.

Hermione's nerdy tendencies were, once again, breaking through as she narrowed her eyes at the two boys, sitting opposite her.

"You are most certainly not skipping class," she said in a bossy tone. "You'll never get any NEWTs with that attitude."

"Aww, Hermione," Longbottom gave her the puppy-dog-eyes. "NEWTs are for seventh years. We are in the sixth. We don't have to worry until next year."

Hermione huffed at him indignantly. Lupin chuckled amused as he resumed reading his newspaper. She was about to explain to Longbottom - in a very nice and surely polite way - that not taking school seriously was a bad idea, as she felt someone staring at her. Hermione paused and furrowed her brow. Then she let her gaze sweep over the Great Hall. It wasn't long and she spotted Tom, standing by the entrance and looking back at her. As she gazed at Tom, memories of last night popped up in her mind and the deep blush returned to her face. She didn't avert her eyes from him, though. He looked quite nice standing there in his sleek uniform. Not even the haughty look on his face irritated her. As he winked at her suggestively, though, she could feel her face burn even fiercer.

Damn Slytherins!

For the remainder of the breakfast, Hermione tried to finally get rid of her stupid blushing problem. Though, however annoyed she was by her blush, she didn't fail to notice that content feeling in her stomach whenever she threw a glance at the Slytherin table.

As it was time for their first class, potions, Hermione walked with her friends to the classroom. She felt uneasy as her friends talked about the potion they were trying to produce in Slughorn's class.

"-and then we can finally move to the next phase," Lupin said enthusiastically. "That's quite tricky, I think. Normally, myrtle flag wouldn't work while also adding starweed. They'd cancel each other's effect. But then again there's still the wartcap powder making up for that."

And on he went, talking about the Ortus potion. Each time that particular potion was mentioned, Hermione felt faint. She yet had to take action to sabotage that stupid age-revealing potion.

"You know," Weasley whispered to Longbottom. "I am really glad he's in our group." Here he pointed at Lupin. "Otherwise we'd surely fail."

"Too true," Longbottom replied, shaking his head with a somber expression pasted on his face.
Though he didn't quite manage to suppress that grin which was shining through.

"Hey, I'm not going to do all the work by myself," Lupin said, staring at the two other boys sternly.

"Oh no." False panic flooded Longbottom's face. "You can't do that to us. We'll surely fail then. Do you really want something like this on your conscience?"

Despite her worries about the Ortus potion, Hermione had to giggle softly. She was startled as suddenly someone took a hold of her hand. Turning her head, she found Tom walking beside her. He smirked down at her but Hermione ignored his Slytherin behaviour and concentrated on the softness glinting in his eyes. Her fingers closed around his hand and she held him gently. In the corners of her eyes she could see her three Gryffindor friends tense as Tom leaned down to her and spoke into her ear.

"Good morning, Hermione," he whispered in his smooth voice. "Slept well?"

A smirk of her own stole on her face as she looked at Tom. She raised a hand and wiped away a few strands of his dark hair which had fallen into his startling grey eyes. She purposefully brushed over his forehead where she had left behind that ridiculous lipstick mark. Then it was her turn to wink at him mischievously. He elegantly quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Quite good, actually," she finally answered his question.

It was then that Longbottom couldn't hold back any more. So he asked gruffly, turned towards Tom, "What do you want?"

Hermione saw Tom narrowing his eyes in anger as he glared at the blond Gryffindor. His arm twitched shortly as if he wanted to sling it around her waist and pull her against him possessively. In the end, he contained himself and settled with glowering darkly at Longbottom.

"You know, somehow I don't see the need to explain my actions to the likes of you," Tom sneered in a clipped voice.

Longbottom just stared furiously at Tom. Hermione sighed as she realized that Longbottom, despite what he had told her, would probably never fully accept her relationship with Tom. She was quite happy as they reached the potions classroom. Maybe Tom was on his best behaviour but Hermione knew that he had quite the volatile temper. If Longbottom pushed too much, Tom would surely loose said temper.

As they entered, Tom grabbed her hand rather tightly and dragged her over to their table. Malfoy was already sitting at the table, the calculating look in his cold eyes disturbing her. Sitting down beside Tom, she tried to ignore Malfoy. She placed her parchment, quill, and potions kit on the table. While she arranged everything neatly, the class room door opened and Slughorn entered.

"Good morning, class." Slughorn beamed cheerfully.

After a mumbled, not so cheerful, reply from the class, he turned to the blackboard behind him and waved his wand. Instantly, the instructions for the next step of creating the Ortus potion appeared.

Hermione had to stop herself from groaning in frustration. She had a hunch that this potion would be her downfall.

"Before you start, let us first go through the different steps for today," Slughorn said in his booming voice. "The first step, for example, cutting the myrtle flag roots, seems to be fairly simple. But don't be mistaken." He then started pacing to and fro in front of his class. "If not cut completely symmetrical, the myrtle flag’s effect will drastically diminish and thus the amount of roots will not
suffice. Of course, you will be able to save the potion by adding more roots, though to estimate how much is needed is relatively difficult and requires much experience. So, the best way—"

Hermione dropped out of Slughorn's explanations and her gaze wandered back to the troubling potion. She itched to draw her wand and send a nice Reducto at the potion, simmering innocently in the cauldron. Sadly, she couldn't do that. A more stealthy strategy would be necessary. She needed to sabotage it at the last possible moment. That way there wouldn't be the time to start a new approach. The last step of finishing the Ortus potion was done by adding powdered boomslang skin and fairy wings. It might be difficult do sabotage that. Hermione twirled one of her locks absentmindedly around her finger. Maybe, she should use a step that was rather simple. A step where people wouldn't expect any mistakes to occur.

…maybe the hemlock…

Hemlock would be added shortly before the last finishing steps. It would be perfect. It was a very easy step as there was no special way of cutting the hemlock or anything else.

Yes, tampering with the hemlock could really ruin the potion, Hermione contemplated. It was almost ironic, that she was going to fail her first potions mark while Slughorn, and not Snape, was her teacher.

After some time into the lesson, Hermione noticed how Tom didn't pay any attention to Slughorn's lecture either. Instead, he stared at her intently. His eyes slowly wandered over her body while a greedy look crossed his face. All thoughts about the hazardous Ortus potion suddenly forgotten, Hermione grabbed her quill tighter and tried to re-focus her attention on Slughorn. It was no use. Images of last night's occurrences burned up in her mind. She couldn't help but feel her heart skipping a few beats as it hammered merrily away in her chest. She was completely put off balance as Tom's hand gently skimmed over her arm, sending shivers through her whole body. Hermione tried to block it out but it didn't work.

"-now, I think it's time for the practical approach," Slughorn very astutely announced in his booming voice.

His statement was followed by the usual scraping of chairs and chatter. Just to occupy and divert herself from that fluttery feeling in her stomach, Hermione pulled her wand and waved it at the Ortus potion, which still simmered inconspicuously in the cauldron. The flames, heating up the potion, burned higher. She looked up from the potion and saw that Malfoy had started to cut up the myrtle flag roots. Tom, on the other hand, was still not doing anything but staring at her, his eyes glistening with smugness. Hermione sighed softly and tried to concentrate on the potion. Her concentration, though, was again broken as Tom leaned towards her.

"Why did you leave so early?" he purred at her in his silky voice.

His voice alone was enough to send pleasant shivers down her spine.

"I… I..." she stuttered as she felt the blush hitting her again.

The fluttery feeling in her stomach was now combined with the sudden urge to grab Tom's shoulders and push him down on the table while finally wiping that smirk off his face by kissing him. As Hermione realized the course her thoughts had wandered off to, her face again heated up. Despite her deep blush, she cast a glance at Tom. He still scanned her with his incredibly grey eyes, but the haughty conduct left him as he spotted her flustered face.

His next words weren't laced with taunt anymore as he inquired tentatively, "You… don't regret
anything, do you?"

She raised her head and found an apprehensive glint in his eyes. She suppressed a grin as she whispered in a deliberately timid voice,

"I do regret something actually."

He kept a straight face but his eyes widened slightly as he stared at her anxiously. Hermione couldn't hide her grin any longer as she drawled at him, all timidity gone from her voice, "I regret that you haven't been sorted into Gryffindor. Then I wouldn't have had to tiptoe around half the castle to get back to my dorm."

The unease quickly left Tom's eyes and he sniggered softly while he smiled at her relieved.

"Hermione, Hermione," he tsked at her. "You are rather evil, if I may say so," he enlightened her while he leaned comfortably back in his chair. "If anything, then I think the Sorting Hat made a mistake placing you into Gryffindor. Clearly, you are a Slytherin."

"Oh, please," Hermione scoffed at him. "Let's stop talking about idle house rivalries." She leaned towards him, reached out for him under the desk and laid her hand teasingly on his leg. "...when there are so many other things we could do," she whispered to him in quite the seductive voice.

Hermione was pleased with herself as she saw him finally losing some of his impeccable self-control. She removed her hand from him and said, in a bossy tone, "So, don't waste any more time with your chitchat and help cutting the myrtle flag roots."

She giggled quietly. Tom breathed in deeply to regain his composure. Sooner or later, that witch would surely drive him nuts, he thought as he gazed at Hermione. Her eyes sparkled mischievously and an amused smile played around her mouth as she cautiously stirred the potion in counter clockwise turns. Tom's eyes hungrily wandered over her pink lips, then down the soft skin of her neck until they landed on her chest. Now, he had to fight the urge to rip that blouse off her body right here in the class room. Images of her lying underneath him started to fly across his mind. He could still feel the softness of her body under his touch, could sense her every movement and could feel each tremble that ran through her. He needed to touch her hot skin. He wanted to make her scream again. His eyes plummeted further down and now wandered greedily over her slender legs. A longing twinge went through him as he remembered how she had slung those legs around him.

With a regretful sigh, Tom forced his gaze away from Hermione. It was too bad that they were in a crowded class room right now. At least he now knew that Hermione had finally submitted to him. He would never let her go again. She was his, and no-one, not even Hermione herself, could change that.

Out of the corners of his eyes, he again peered at her. She was still stirring the potion and now accepted the cut myrtle flag roots from Malfoy. Tom had to pull himself together to not let his thoughts wander away again. As seductive as Hermione might be, that couldn't completely distract him from her many secrets.

What about her strange powers? She was impossibly strong and could even rip down Hogwarts' warding magic. Where did Hermione's power come from? Tom remembered how angry she had been with him as he had tried to curse Longbottom with the Cruciatu Curse. Back then they had
argued in the Come-And-Go room and Tom hadn't been able to hold his own magic back. He knew that his magic was very powerful, especially when he was this angered. There weren't many who could stand up to him. Hermione had, though. Her magic had crackled in the air and had felt changed, feral even.

Tom slightly turned his head and looked at the witch working beside him. Currently, she slowly and meticulously added the cut myrtle flag roots to the boiling potion. What was the source of her powerful magic? His gaze wandered from Hermione to her black wand, she had discarded on the table. His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he considered her wand. It looked like any other wand. Was this wand the explanation for Hermione's incredible power? Was that really the most powerful wand ever created? The Unbeatable Wand? It would explain everything that had happened so far, from her extraordinarily strong magic to her interest in Peverell's book.

Tom's train of thought was interrupted as Hermione looked up from the blue potion and narrowed her eyes at him. Then she snapped, earning herself a raised eyebrow from Malfoy who could hear it as well,

"What? Are you going to just sit around for the rest of the lesson?"

Tom smirked and leaned leisurely back in his chair. "I might as well."

Hermione huffed at him indignantly before she returned her attention to the potion. Tom still smirked while Malfoy threw a confused but all the same calculating look her way.

Later that day, Hermione stepped out of the DADA class room, followed by her friends. For once, she was actually quite happy that classes were over. Somehow, she hadn't been able to focus at all. Her thoughts had always drifted away and away, so that in the end she had no idea what professor McGray had been talking about.

"That was pretty interesting" Lupin said enthusiastically. "I never knew chimereas can be tamed."

An incredulous look appeared on Longbottom's face as he stared at Lupin.

"Clearly there is something seriously wrong with you," he finally told Lupin in a pitying tone. Then a broad smile broke out on his face and he exclaimed happily, "Classes are over for today! No more talking about school work."

Lupin just raised an eyebrow at him before he said unperturbed, "Actually there is this essay for Herbology I still wanted to look over and-"

"I said," Longbottom cut over him loudly. "No more school work!"

Lupin just sighed in face of his friend's enthusiasm. Hermione had to giggle softly.

"So, what are we going to do with this nice day?" Longbottom wondered cheerfully.

"Well, we have Quidditch practice in half an hour," Weasley now threw in.

"Oh?" Longbottom stared at him confused. "Is it Monday again?"

Lupin again sighed before he said in his calm voice, "And you tell me that there's something wrong with me?"
Longbottom wiped that comment off with a casual wave of his hand.

"Never claimed that I'm not crazy." Then he turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you wanna accompany us to practice? It's real fun."

As Hermione wasn't very fond of Quidditch at all, she didn't really want to watch them trying to break their necks on those insanely fast brooms. So, she was going to decline that offer and said,

"Er... actullay I-

She couldn't finish her sentence as someone called her name. Hermione turned around and found Tom walking towards her. There was a tiny smirk playing around his mouth and she could see his eyes wandering over her body. Predictably, the flush of heat hit her face again. Tom reached her and amusement began to dance in his eyes as he looked down at her, taking in her fierce blush. The heat on her face got even worse as Tom took her hand in his and held it gently. Maybe she should go and jump into the Great Lake, Hermione wondered wryly. That would surely stop this silly blushing.

Longbottom had by now obviously spotted Hermione's uncharacteristic shyness and began to scowl darkly at Tom. She didn't want to imagine what exactly the blond Gryffindor thought had evoked her sudden timidity around Tom. Tom, who had seen Longbottom's hostile behaviour, raised one eyebrow at the Gryffindor mockingly. Before Tom could open his mouth and say something probably insulting, Hermione pressed his hand warningly. She was actually surprised as he complied with her. Tom just threw a rather nasty sneer Longbottom's way but remained to be silent. The scowl on Longbottom's face grew even fiercer and Hermione saw him reaching for his wand.

She was incredibly relieved as Lupin broke the tense silence. He smiled at her encouragingly before he said, "How about we meet later again in the common room? You could check my Herbology essay over. That would be helpful."

"Sure." She smiled at him gratefully. "But only if you check mine."

Lupin then turned to his two friends and said, "Now, I thought you had a Quidditch practice to attend to."

Longbottom didn't answer anything but narrowed his eyes at Tom angrily but he managed to control his temper. Lupin grabbed his arm and pulled him away. Hermione heaved a sigh of relief and allowed Tom to drag her away in the opposite direction. He only slowed down and released his rather firm grip on her hand as they had walked some distance away from the DADA class room. They still hadn't spoken one word yet.

Without looking up at him, Hermione whispered, "Thank you."

She could feel how he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer to him.

"Pff, it's just no challenge to curse an idiot like him," Tom drawled at her arrogantly.

Hermione peered up at him and found a rather smug expression on his face. She smiled sheepishly at him and slung her arm around his waist. Even with that rather haughty look on his face, Tom was still incredibly handsome. The fluttery feeling was back in her stomach as Hermione scanned him. Tom was so near that she could smell his pleasant scent. Unable to resist that longing feeling inside of her, Hermione snuggled closer against him. Though now that Tom looked at her so intently the stupid blush hit her again. By now she was rather annoyed by it. Tom seemed to have spotted her red face, too, as a frown appeared between his eyebrows.

"Hermione?" he asked cautiously while scanning her worried. "Are you sure you are okay?"
She could now see concern flashing through his eyes. Hermione bit her lower lip as she stared up at him.

"Y... yes," was the only thing she could stammer.

That answer did nothing to dispel the concern on his face. If anything, it grew worse and now was mingled with a touch of anxiety.

"It wasn't my intention to pressure you into something you didn't want," Tom told her hesitantly while casting her a look of trepidation.

Hermione didn't want him to worry because there was no need for that. There really wasn't anything she regretted. Maybe it hadn't been her plan to sleep with him yesterday but she still was very glad that it had happened. It had been perfect in every way she could have wished for. It had simply taken her breath away. Though as her thoughts had wandered back to last night, the heat on her face had intensified yet again.

"I understand if you don't want to talk about it," Tom continued, sounding very alarmed. "But you do know that you can tell me everything, don't you?"

Hermione looked up at him but found herself unable to listen to him. Her thoughts still danced merrily around last night and it seemed that her gaze was magically drawn to his lips. Maybe that was the best solution to get rid of her ridiculous shyness around him. It promised to be a lot more pleasurable than a jump into the Great Lake.

Hermione still didn't reply anything, causing the worried frown on Tom's face to deepen. He stepped a little closer to her, took her hand in his and held it gently. She could see him opening his mouth to say something surely nice and reassuring, but Hermione didn't leave him the time to do so. She raised her hand, cupped his cheeks and pulled his face down to her. She could see his eyes widen in surprise at her rather rough actions, but that didn't stop her to press her lips against his. Her arms were wrapped around his neck as she deepened the kiss. The fluttery feeling in her stomach burned up and her heart beat incredibly fast as she felt Tom responding to her kiss. He slung his arms around her waist and pressed her tightly against him.

Hermione needed to gasp for breath as they finally broke apart again. Then she looked up at him and a smile broke out on her face as that silly blush finally didn't hit her again. Tom was staring back at her and Hermione noted satisfied that the concern had left his impossibly grey eyes.

"I guess that means you are not angry with me after all," he stated, light taunt seeping through his voice, though the relief was over-present on his face.

Hermione just grinned up at him and said in a teasing voice, "You know what?" She didn't leave him the time to answer but again pulled his head down to her and drawled in a rather haughty tone, "You talk too much."

She kissed him rather forcefully while she started to run her hands demandingly through his velvety hair. Tom didn't respond to her at all, Hermione noted amused. He seemed to be stunned by her sudden actions.

Suddenly a rather sharp voice rang through the corridor, "That is quite enough."

Hermione was so startled that she released Tom and took a step away from him. She turned her head to see who had disturbed them. Somehow she should have known it, Hermione thought in exasperation as her eyes fell on the unbidden guest. Just a few metres away in the otherwise deserted
corridor stood none other than Legifer. Her appearance was as impeccable as ever with her squeaky clean clothes and her immaculate hairdo. A furious scowl on her face, the professor glared at Hermione. Hermione actually wanted to roll her eyes but was stopped by that dangerous look on Legifer's face. It was then that Legifer broke the stupor of indignation she had fallen into and walked over to Tom and Hermione. The fierce scowl only shortly left her face as her dark eyes wandered over Tom but was back again, as Legifer stared angrily at Hermione.

"Ms DeCerto," she hissed in a clipped tone. "Never in my life have I been met with such impudence. I actually didn't want to believe my eyes."

Legifer stared at Hermione irately. For once, Hermione knew what was going on in that twisted mind of this woman, but she just didn't care. She planted a look of polite interest on her face as she looked back at Legifer. She knew that this would only aggravate the professor more, but right now Hermione couldn't stop herself.

"Have all those hours in detention not taught you anything?" Legifer spat at her, seething with anger. Hermione didn't reply anything. All she could do was stopping herself from screaming an angry 'no' at the professor. Legifer's level of ire spiralled upwards as Hermione remained to be silent.

"I am disgusted by your behaviour," Legifer finally told her in a cold voice. "How can you hassle Mr Riddle like that?"

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line as she heard Legifer's absurd reproach. What did that demented woman think? That Hermione had kissed Tom against his will? How absolutely ludicrous! Legifer threw another cold glare her way before her eyes wandered to Tom. Hermione raised her eyebrows in wonder as there was now something like concern seeping into that crazy woman's gaze.

"Are you all right, Mr Riddle?" Legifer inquired, sounding almost concerned.

"Yes, professor," Tom replied blandly.

A contrite look appeared on his face and Hermione couldn't help but admire his acting skills. As he continued she could hear fake repentance in his voice, though, Legifer seemed to believe his act.

"I am very sorry. I don't know what got into me," Tom said, looking ashamed of himself. "I promise it's never going to happen again."

"There's no need for you to apologize. I know it wasn't your fault," Legifer replied in an oddly sympathetic tone.

Her eyes wandered to Hermione again and aversion flared up in them. Hermione just ignored it and desperately tried to get her furious magic under control. Legifer turned towards Tom again and said,

"Mr Riddle, I have told you before: this girl is not good for you." Her voice had lost its usual sharpness and sounded almost kind. "You shouldn't spend your time with her. She'll only ever get you into trouble."

Legifer sounded as if she tried to convince Tom of leaving Hermione. Consecutively, Hermione really had to fight to stop herself from pulling her wand. Her magic bubbled up in her, enraged by that woman's concern for Tom.

Then Legifer spat at Hermione, the inflection in her voice far from kind, "The only reason I'm not punishing you for that embarrassing behaviour is that I would then have to punish Mr Riddle, too. Seeing as he is innocent, I wouldn't want to cause him any more problems." Legifer's glacial look hit
Hermione and clearly told her that the professor thought Hermione was Tom's biggest problem.

Hermione shortly wondered why she was holding her magic back in the first place. That lunatic would deserve to be cursed anyway. After Legifer's last statement, Hermione saw out of the corner of her eyes how Tom seemed to relax a little bit. She cast a sideways glance at him and nearly groaned in frustration as she found a gleeful look on his face. Now that they were not going to get punished for – For having done nothing, in fact! – Tom seemed to be very amused by the whole thing. That rather unsavory smirk, curling up his mouth, wasn't really reassuring either.

"Thank you, professor," Tom said, gratitude tinting his voice while there was not even a shadow of his vile amusement visible on his face. Hermione cursed the fact that he was such a damn convincing actor. "I'm sure Hermione is grateful as well."

He cast her a determinedly insecure smile and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him in anger. She could see a mischievous glint in his grey eyes and she knew he obviously wanted to torment her now. Probably, because she had caused him to worry so much unnecessarily.

"You know," Tom continued towards Legifer in a conversational tone while that innocent look was still on his face. "Hermione can sometimes be a little hot-headed but she is a nice girl."

Here he inserted a pause and seemed to ponder something. Hermione knew, that he only did that to savour that frosty glare Legifer now sent her way. Then he smiled charmingly at the professor and said,

"Even if she is a little bit... er... dominating."

Now, that was enough!

"Tom!" Hermione hissed at him threateningly, anger clearly lacing her voice.

He looked at her with false apprehension, taking a small step away from her, but Hermione could see the triumph in his grey eyes. It couldn't have been more obvious if he had smirked at her.

"It's even worse than I anticipated," Legifer stated mordantly.

Hermione's glare wandered from an amused Tom to Legifer who shook her head in indignation.

"You shouldn't treat Mr Riddle like that," she snapped curtly at Hermione.

Yeah, what I should do is cursing that lying jerk! Hermione thought enraged.

Legifer turned to Tom and said kindly, "If she causes you more problems, don't hesitate to come to me. I can help you."

Hermione could see that by now Tom had to really work to prevent himself from breaking down in laughter. He still managed to answer, though.

"Thank you," he said in a soft voice.

"Yes, thank you!" Hermione almost yelled at Legifer, trying to not completely lose her temper.

She grabbed Tom's hand and gruffly dragged him after her as she stomped down the corridor, away from Legifer before she would really curse the woman.

… or Tom!
As they were some distance away from the professor, Hermione let go of Tom's hand. Her magic was furiously pulsing through her as she walked down the corridor in angry strides. Tom's footsteps behind her told her that he was still following her.

*The nerve of him!* Hermione lost her temper again and whipped around to him. Her eyes glinted dangerously as she drowned him in a withering look.

"Are you happy now?" she barked.

A smug smile broke out on his face, then he purred contently, "Yes, quite."

"Why did you have to do that?" she thundered at him, nettled by the amusement on his face.

He just smirked at her arrogantly. Hermione growled at him menacingly as she wasn't able to put her anger into words anymore. Her magic left her and crackled vindictively around her. Maybe she should just curse him that would at least relieve some of her stress.

As her magic bristled so violently in the air, suddenly, a strange look passed Tom's face. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. What did he plan now? Did he want to torment her some more? The strange look didn't leave his face as Tom's eyes slowly wandered over her. Without giving an advance warning, he abruptly walked towards her. Instantly, a deep frown appeared on Hermione's face. Her magic was still raging around her, but that force was not enough to stop Tom. Strands of his own magic seemed to be wrapped around him, protecting him from her.

As Tom reached her, he stopped standing right in front of her. Hermione raised her head and continued to hit him with her venomous glare. There was an oddly hungry look on his face as Tom stared down at her, taking in her livid expression. Hermione was just about to draw her wand in order to finally release some of her pent up anger, as Tom suddenly grabbed her shoulders roughly and pulled her towards him. His lips crashed on her own and he kissed her forcefully. Hermione was left stunned by his sudden actions and didn't stop him as he demandingly slung his arms around her, pulling her even tighter against him. Despite her previous anger, she found herself unable to push him away. Her magic still rushed around her and ripped at him fiercely, though anger was strangely absent. A muffled moan escaped her as Tom continued to ravish her mouth. He had pushed her against the corridor wall while his tongue was exploring her mouth aggressively.

He reached for the door that was right beside them and opened it. He never stopped to kiss her as he tugged Hermione into the dark class room. She barely registered his action because her attention was solely focused on the sensation of his mouth on her own. He crushed her against the classroom wall and continued his onslaught while he closed the door. Hermione let out a cry of surprise as he bit her lower lip. His hand had now wandered to the back of her head and he pushed her into position while tracing more kisses down her neck. Hermione's breathing was ragged and she found herself unable to think coherently anymore.

She could feel Tom smirking against her skin, before he straightened up again and pulled his wand. With a small casual movement of his wand he had locked the door and put a silencing spell on the classroom. Hermione looked up at him and found that smirk still curling up his mouth. His eyes darkened considerably as they lazily wandered over her body. Then he raised his wand again and waved it at her. Hermione gasped as her clothes vanished from her body. Before she had the time to protest, Tom grabbed her again and pushed her into the wall. He firmly planted his lips on her own, thus stopping any objection she might have had. Though, admittedly, Hermione was way too distracted by his hands running over her body to be in any state to defy him. His fingers left behind an almost painful burn of desire. All her thoughts had long since fled her mind and the only thing she could concentrate on was to find a way to bridge the distance between them. Tom seemed to have found a very convenient way. He grabbed her around her waist with both his hands and hoisted her
Hermione instantly wrapped her legs around him and clung to him. Her back was still pushed against the wall. Tom captured her lips with his mouth and kissed her passionately. She ran both her hands through his dark, silky soft hair while tightening her legs around him demandingly. His mouth left her lips and slowly wandered down her neck. Hermione gasped as he bit her again. But she didn't mind at all. In fact, his actions evoked an exciting tingle running over her whole body and her breathing became rather laboured. The fluttery feeling that had tormented her since potions class turned into a burning need. It welled up inside of her and Hermione was desperate to satiate that desire.

She removed her hands from Tom's velvety hair and moved them down, skimming over his neck and then down his chest. As he felt her movement, Tom looked up at her. Her desire only intensified as she looked into his stormy grey eyes. A predatory glint appeared in his eyes before he again covered her mouth with his, kissing her hungrily. Hermione moaned in pleasure. Then her hands finally found his belt and she quickly opened it. Tom's kiss became even more demanding as she opened his trousers and slowly pulled them and his boxers down. By now Tom's breathing was rather ragged, increasing Hermione's own desire even further. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him nearer.

She could feel him pushing into her and Hermione had never felt more alive. Her magic was cracking around her excitedly, now joined by Tom's magic. The two forces danced around them. Strands of their magic connected and entwined with each other just as much as their bodies were merged. Hermione was panting, breathing heavily, as she felt Tom so near her. Her hands had wandered to his back and clutched the fabric of his green uniform pullover tightly. If the fabric hadn't protected him, her fingernails would have surely left behind scratch marks on his back.

The feeling of his movement and of their connected magic was too much for her. The burning feeling, originating somewhere deep in her stomach, grew until it quickly engulfed her completely. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut and she clasped Tom even tighter while she screamed out in pleasure, his name hot on her lips.

Hermione lay, still breathing heavily, in his arms. She had put her head down on his shoulder. A thin film of sweat covered her forehead and her body still shivered from the pleasure. She sighed softly and tightened her hold on Tom. He turned his head and placed a soft kiss on her neck before he held her firmly around her waist and put her down. Hermione huddled against him and slung her arms around his waist. Tom embraced her and pulled her even tighter against him. She raised her head to look up at him. There was softness glinting in his eyes as he smiled down at her. Hermione could feel her heart skip a few beats and she smiled back at him. She was very glad that the blush didn't return while she lost herself in his grey eyes.

"Don't think that you can now end every argument like that," she warned him in a stern tone, but she didn't manage to wipe the smile from her face.

"I would never," Tom assured her with sincerity seeping through his voice. The smirk on his face, though, wasn't that sincere.

Hermione was feeling too content to want to argue about his honesty, so she leaned her head against his chest. His arms were still wrapped reassuringly around her and Hermione was just happy to feel him so near her.

After some time she was starting to get a bit chilly as coldness was seeping through her from the stone floor. It was then that she remembered how she was actually not wearing any clothes while Tom was again perfectly dressed in his uniform. She raised her head at him and said,

"Now, are you going to conjure back my clothes?"
He just smirked down at her. "Hmm, I don't know. I prefer you this way."

Hermione scowled at him which only caused him to chuckle softly. Then he bent down, brushed his lips against hers before he released her and took a step away from her. His eyes once again wandered over her body then he pulled his wand and waved it at her. Her clothes seemed to reappear out of nowhere and swirled back around her body. He took her hand in his and led her out of the deserted class room.

Tom liked thinking back to the actions that had followed after Hermione had dragged him away from that ridiculous teacher who had found them kissing in a corridor. He had been surprised that the woman hadn't given them any punishment, but he had always been very convincing, hadn't he? Not even Hermione had been able to resist him, he thought haughtily.

He snuck a look at her, standing before the shelf full of his books. Right now, they were in the Slytherin dorm and Tom sat cross-legged on his bed while trying to finish his Ancient Runes essay. Hermione, being somewhat determined to never do her homework while in his presence, was going through the books he had collected over his years at Hogwarts.

Tom enjoyed the triumphant feeling as he continued looking at the witch. Since he had kissed her for the first time during the Christmas break, he had known that Hermione would be his. She had put up an admirable fight and had forced him to surrender a little bit of himself to her but finally she belonged to him. A dark look crossed his eyes as he stared at her. She had taken one of the books from the shelf and flipped through it before she placed it back. Tom returned his eyes to his essay in front of him but he couldn't concentrate. His thoughts still circled around Hermione. He might have finally claimed her, but there still was a long way to go. After all, there were so many secrets, swirling around her person.

"You can't tell me that you really bought all those books, or that somebody gave them to you," Hermione suddenly brought him out of his thoughts with accusation tinging her words.

A smirk appeared on Tom's face, but he didn't look up at her again. Well, she was right after all.

"Let's just say I acquired them," he told her amused.

"Yeah, yeah, 'acquired'… as if," she mumbled to herself in exasperation.

"Pff, you are just jealous," Tom teased her lightly while rolling up the parchment with his essay. "Because I have so many useful friends, giving me books. In contrast to your Gryffindor idiots who don't even know what a book is. You know."

Tom hesitated as he suddenly heard a soft gasp and then the sound of something falling on the floor. He turned around. Hermione stood beside the shelf, seemingly frozen to the spot, and was staring wide-eyed at something on the floor. Tom furrowed his brow as he walked over to her. There was a strange look of panic on Hermione's face. What had scared her so? Tom's eyes wandered from her to the black book lying on the floor. He instantly recognized the book. He had bought it in Diagon Alley before the start of this school year as he had gotten everything he needed for Hogwarts. It hadn't been expensive, as Tom never had much money to spare, still this black book was a rather important thing. He bent down and picked it up. It had opened when it had fallen down on the floor, but its pages were empty anyway. Tom would never write his secret plans and thoughts down in a book for everyone to read. No, he thought as a small smirk curled up his mouth, he actually intended to fill this book with something else than written words.
"Something wrong?" he asked Hermione gently as he noticed that fearful expression was still on her face.

As if his voice had woken her from her stupor, the trepidation seemed to leave her and she looked up at him.

"No," she replied in a firm voice which betrayed nothing of her fear. "I just remembered that tomorrow's Friday and I have Household again."

Somehow he knew that she was lying but he didn't know why. What had scared her so? It sure couldn't be the book, he thought as his gaze wandered to the small, black book in his hands. It was, after all, just a perfectly normal and ordinary diary.

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The next day, Hermione sat hunched up in her chair and tried to appear as inconspicuous as possible. She wondered why she still put up with this farce. Seriously, she should have just skipped this class. Since Legifer had caught her kissing Tom, Hermione had tried to evade the professor. Now it was Friday and Hermione couldn't very well eschew her anymore.

Over her text book she cautiously peered at the professor standing before the class and lecturing about one stupid thing or other. Hermione, for one, had long since stopped to listen. Oh, how she hated Fridays, Hermione thought tiredly as she looked at Legifer's stern deportment. Her clothes were impeccable as always and her hair was pulled back in a neatly and completely immaculate bun. Not one strand of her dark hair was out of place as she stalked in front of the class, still talking about something Hermione tried to ignore.

Hermione hadn't thought it possible, but since that horrible woman had thrown her into detention right after the Christmas break, her dislike for the teacher had even grown. That horrible detention proved to be never-ending. Every Friday evening, Hermione had to force herself to walk to Legifer's office. She had yet to finish the stupid book Legifer wanted her to read. Normally, Hermione was a fast reader, but it was hard to finish a book if after reading only one word you just wanted to rip it apart and throw the pieces at Legifer's head.

...and I always rebuked Harry when he complained about Snape, she thought as her gaze wandered back to Legifer. She silently envied Tom, who sat in his Arithmancy class. Hermione hated the Arithmancy professor, too, as he was one nasty chauvi, but Gauß was still better than Legifer. At least he just ignored Hermione during class.

Sometime later suddenly chatter broke loose and the other students stuffed their quill and parchment into their bags. Hermione looked at them in confusion. The class couldn't be over already, could it? After checking her watch, Hermione saw that she was indeed not so lucky. There was still at least half an hour left. But then why did the other students gather up their stuff? She leaned to Rose who sat beside her and was busy with stuffing her parchment into her bag.

"What's happening?" Hermione asked.

Rose just looked at her with wide eyes, then she inquired in her shrill voice, "Haven't you been paying attention at all?"

Hermione just continued to look at her blankly. Rose giggled infuriatingly before she chortled, "Of course, it's hard to concentrate for you. Been thinking about Riddle, have you?"

Hermione didn't deign to answer to that but just began to pack her things away, copying the other
"Please, ladies," Legifer's annoying voice echoed loudly through the classroom. "Hurry up, we don't have the whole day."

Hermione looked at the professor standing before the class. That incredible and pointless perfection the woman's clothes exhibited was enough to raise Hermione's already seething temper even further. Legifer's dark eyes wandered over the class, seemingly impatient. She wrinkled her nose in distaste as her gaze fell on Hermione. Hermione kept her face absolutely blank as she, without breaking eye contact with Legifer, took her piece of parchment, stuffed it into her bag and then slammed the bag on the floor beside her table. After that she just continued to look at the professor while raising her eyebrows provocingly. In fact, Hermione had no idea why she was behaving like this. It was not at all like her to be anything but polite to a professor. But Legifer, it seemed, was an exception. No matter what Hermione told herself, it was just not possible to be anything but insolent in this particular class.

*Maybe it's mum's fault*, Hermione mused. *She was a hippie back in the sixties.* Back then, she had barely been older than Hermione now was. And she had met Hermione's dad. A small smile appeared on her face as she thought about her parents. She really missed them.

Legifer had long since abandoned her attempts of glaring at Hermione and now hissed in her usual sharp voice, turned towards her class, "-and I will stress it again: Don't make any mistakes, for I will be grading your work today."

Hermione was ripped from her happy memories as she heard the word 'grade'. That always managed to trigger her know-it-all mode. So, she focused her attention, for once, at Legifer. The woman waved her wand in one firm movement and, suddenly, out of thin air, packages of eggs, several bags of flour and different backing pans appeared on the tables. Hermione could just frown at this in confusion. What the hell was going on here?

"Now, ladies," Legifer announced in a clipped voice. "I want you to bake a cake. You can use whichever recipe you want, though I recommend one of those I have introduced earlier this lesson."

Her stern eyes swept over the class before she stated in a terse tone, "If you want to get a good mark in this, I suggest you give your very best and also use the charms we've been going into those last few lessons. Don't forget, though, you are not learning all of this just to achieve good grades in school. This will be part of your chores after you are married. Now, you don't want to disappoint your future husband, do you?"

*Yeah, imagine that, disappointing my dear husband because I can't bake*… Hermione thought dryly before her gaze wandered from the sour looking professor to the ingredients standing on the desk before her. She was feeling rather lost now. She noticed that the other students had already started with their work. Diana waved her wand at the eggs while crying "Foris!". Immediately, the eggs floated up in the air and over Diana's bowl, before they cracked open and landed neatly in the bowl.

Hermione sighed and looked back at her own ingredients. It wasn't like she didn't know how to bake a cake. In fact, she had often baked together with her mum when she had come back from Hogwarts during the breaks. Problem was, though, that she was Muggleborn. Thus, she only knew the Muggle way of making a cake, and that required some form of oven. Whatever spells Legifer had just spoken about; Hermione didn't know any of them. For months, she hadn't been paying any attention in this class. For the first time, she understood how Harry and Ron must have felt during potions, Hermione thought as she stared helplessly at the baking utensils before her.

*Ah, whatever. I'll just try my luck.*
So, Hermione reached for the flour. There actually was a good nut cake recipe she could try. But as Hermione wanted to put the flour into a bowl she noticed the absence of any measuring cup. Obviously, there was some spell for that. Hermione sighed tiredly. This was going to take some time, she thought, already wanting to quit.

Sometime late, Hermione was just stirring her rather strangely coloured dough with a wooden stick, as Legifer came to her table. The professor narrowed her dark eyes disapprovingly at the dough and how Hermione stirred it.

"Doing it by hand, are you, Ms DeCerto?" was the only thing Legifer hissed derisively, before she strode on.

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line and stopped herself from sending a tripping jinx Legifer's way. As her dough was as good as it would get, Hermione stood before her next problem: the absence of any oven. Well, there were quite a few spells that created heat. But Hermione just wasn't sure she could create a heating spell and have it constantly on 350 F° for half an hour. She just shrugged her shoulders. What did she care anyway? This class was stupid, after all. Baking was supposed to be fun. It was ridiculous that she even played along. Hermione just filled her dough into one of the backing pans, before she pondered which spell to use.

After having found a spell, she waved her wand and whispered, "Aestus."

Instantly, heat surrounded the baking pan. As expected, the whole thing soon proved to be rather difficult. The dough turned an unhealthy black on the outside. The table on which the baking pan stood began to smoke slightly.

Hmm, not a very good spell for making a cake then, Hermione decided as she waved her wand again, thus ending her spell.

The cake had by now turned into a nice charcoal black and the table was still smoking forebodingly. There went her efforts of coming out of this as top-of-the-class. Legifer would truly be surprised to see her favourite student fail. Hermione chuckled softly at that thought. Then she put her blackened cake on a plate, sat down on her chair and waited for this stupid class to be over soon.

Before the class was over, Legifer took a piece of parchment in one hand and a quill in the other, then she slowly stalked through the rows of tables. She eyed the different results of the class and wrote something down with each student she passed. Hermione had to work hard to not snort at the whole process. It wasn't long and Legifer stopped before Hermione's table. Only Diana and Hermione had by now managed to finish their cakes. Though, in Hermione's case that was more due to the fact that she had given up. Diana, on the other hand, had even covered her deliciously smelling chocolate cake with a dark frosting. Hermione impatiently checked her wrist watch while Legifer's eyes wandered over Diana's cake. The professor didn't say anything to Diana's efforts but just noted an 'A' behind Diana's name on her parchment, then she continued on.

Only an 'Acceptable'? Hermione wondered annoyed. Too high and mighty to give one measly praise, is she?

Legifer proceeded to examine Rose's and Lucia's work. The professor just wrinkled her nose and narrowed her eyes as she saw Lucia's half done cake, before she turned to Rose. Rose nearly whimpered in fear as Legifer's cold eyes wandered over her. Hermione felt the need to roll her eyes.

"Ms Smith, I dearly hope that is not the best you can manage," was all Legifer commented sternly as she prodded Rose's cake with the tip of her wand.
Rose whimpered for real and replied weakly, "N- no, professor."

Legifer didn't say anything else but just noted a 'P' down on her clipboard. Hermione shook her head indignantly. That was a perfectly fine cake. Hermione, for one, would have been glad if she had had something like that back in her time as she had lived in that tent with no steady food supply. Her eyes wandered to her own baking attempt. That thing resembled more a coal than anything else. She wondered if it was even edible.

"Why am I not surprised?" a condescending voice brought Hermione back from her musing.

She looked up and found Legifer standing right before her. There was an evil smile on the professor's face as her eyes wandered over the black coal on Hermione's desk. Without saying anything to Hermione she just waved her wand over Hermione's baking attempt and the whole thing instantly vanished. Seriously, Hermione couldn't even blame her this time, but that triumphant glee on the professor's face still managed to raise her temper a few notches.

"Now, I don't want you to force Mr Riddle to eat something like that," Legifer stated in a cold voice. "It's difficult enough for him as it is. And he would be too polite to tell you how awful that really was."

Hermione just glared defiantly at the professor.

"I still hope he'll come to his senses," Legifer continued in her sharp voice. "It is a mystery what he sees in you."

Hermione had to bite her tongue hard to stop herself from replying something which would surely get her into another detention… or expelled. Straight into Azkaban, more like. Hermione decided as she spotted that self-satisfied look on the professor's face and she had to resist the urge to pull her wand.

"That is five points from Gryffindor, I think," Legifer declared with a fat smile still on her face. "I've never seen a more pathetic attempt before. I even feel I'm overrating you by giving you a 'T'."

Hermione's mouth formed into a thin line. She had never before failed any class. Aside from Divination maybe, but that was not really a class. Legifer shook her head reproachfully while her cold eyes wandered over Hermione. What else was wrong? Surely, that insane woman couldn't find a fault with her clothes. Hermione was wearing a uniform for Merlin's sake. It was just not possible that anything was out of place with her. But the disgusted look on Legifer's face told Hermione that she would whole-heartedly disagree.

Suddenly, sickening pity entered Legifer's voice as she continued, "Ms DeCerto, if you don't try to change, you will never find a husband. No man would marry someone like you! Not even Mr Riddle would be able to put up with such a failure."

"Unmarried forever – what a horrible, horrible fate that would be," Hermione replied in a steady voice, while fighting to contain her sarcasm.

Legifer just huffed at her and again shook her head as if Hermione was a lost case. Then the professor turned away and continued her way through the class, leaving behind a very pissed Hermione in her wake.

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Later that day, Hermione angrily stomped down a corridor in direction of the Library. Since that Household class, she had been unable to calm down. That had resulted in her being rather snippy
towards her Gryffindor friends. So, she had decided to visit the Library lest she curse an innocent bystander. She secretly hoped she would find Tom in the Library.

*Maybe I can curse him…* It was his fault that Legifer was so nasty towards her, wasn't it? Hermione ignored her voice of justice that gave a yelp at that train of thought. She was still way too furious to be reasonable right now. That ridiculous class was just unbearable. How was she supposed to deal with so much stupidity?

*Really, a 'T'?* Hermione growled darkly, making a few Ravenclaw first years jumping nervously out of her way.

She had never gotten a 'T' for anything. Not even in Divination. Though, that was because she hadn't stayed long enough to give Trelawny the chance to grade her. Sadly, dropping Household was not an option. After her very first Household class Hermione had gone to Dumbledore and had demanded to leave that class. She balled her hands into fists as she remembered how Dumbledore had looked at her sympathetically before he had told her that it was a compulsory class for every girl. How dare they force her to suffer through Legifer's insanity?

*I can't believe she gave me a 'T'!* Hermione thought furiously before she kicked a suit of armour, standing nearby.

She muttered a hasty apology as said suit tried to kick her in return while releasing a string of profanities. Hermione hurried down the corridor. Legifer's words somehow still ran through her head. *You will never find a husband. No man would marry someone like you!* That was ridiculous, Hermione thought as the fury again bubbled up in her. How dare that woman judge her like that? Hermione was seething, though there was no denying that her irritation was mingled with something else.

Her previously angry steps became more hesitant as she slowed down a little. Hermione knew that the woman was completely wrong. But still, what if there was a modicum of truth in her insanity? She ran a hand through her curly hair as she reluctantly decided to follow that thought a little longer. After all, she was stranded in the past. The expectations men had towards women were different from what she knew from the nineties. But surely, Legifer was over the top, wasn't she? Hermione tried to convince herself, while insecurity still disturbed her piece of mind. All this housewitch stuff where the woman needed to be submissive and obedient towards her husband was just unbearable. Hermione had almost reached the Library as the thought that really bucked her flashed up in her mind. What did Tom expect her to be? Hermione tried to quench her worries and walked into the Library.

"Good evening, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters, the librarian, greeted her while smiling kindly at Hermione.

"Good evening." Hermione smiled back.

"Really, Ms DeCerto, its Friday evening," Ms Peters now chided her gently. "You don't plan to spend your free time in the library, do you?"

Hermione's smile even widened so that Ms Peters sighed, "You need to have a little more fun, instead of wasting away in the library. That's actually the same thing I told Mr Riddle, but he didn't want to heed my advice either."

"Tom?" Hermione asked. "Is he still here?"

A knowing smile appeared on Ms. Peters friendly face as she spotted Hermione's hopeful expression.
"I see you do know how to have fun after all," the librarian teased her gently. "Yes, Mr Riddle is still somewhere in the library."

"Thanks," Hermione threw back over her shoulder as she hurried into the Library.

She couldn't see Tom at either of the tables. Just a few Ravenclaws where assembled around one of the tables, seemingly busy with their homework. Aside from them the Library was deserted. It was a Friday evening, after all.

As Hermione searched the Library for Tom, her previous chain of thought came back to her. Her anxiety was silly, wasn't it? Surely, Tom didn't want her to be that obedient housewitch Legifer unsuccessfully tried to form her into. Though, he still was a product of his time, while Hermione was a stranger travelling through the past. She could never be that manageable woman, Hermione thought while walking towards the Restricted Section. If Tom expected something like that, he would need to think again.

… or leave me… Hermione swallowed nervously at that thought.

She passed the Restricted Section and walked towards that huge window, hidden behind a huge book shelf. Tom had once shown her that place. If he wasn't there, then Hermione didn't know where else to look. She needed to step around the shelf full of old, dusty books to finally reach the window. A smile instantly curled up her mouth as she found Tom lounging comfortably on the wide window sill. He was propped up against the window frame and held an old, leather-bound book in his hands.

Without looking up from his book, Tom said in his smooth voice, "Hello, Hermione."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "How did you know it's me?"

A haughty smirk appeared on Tom's face then he turned his head slightly and scanned her with his grey eyes.

"Who else could it be?" His reply was tinged with amusement.

Hermione just sighed. Then she walked over to him and pecked him on the lips before she sat down beside him. She opened her school bag and pulled out her Transfiguration text book. Dumbledore had asked them in class today to read the chapter on advanced ways to transfer magic. Hermione drew up her legs so that she ended up sitting cross-legged on the window sill with the book in her lap. Before she began to read her gaze wandered back to Tom. He still leaned leisurely against the window frame and had by now refocused his attention to his book. Hermione's eyes swiftly took in the book's title.

"Maledictions Most Potent?" she inquired curiously.

Tom didn't say anything but just peered at her over the book.

"You still haven't finished that?" Hermione jeered at him. "I bought you that book almost three months ago."

"It's actually the second time I read it," Tom countered smoothly. Then a sickeningly cheesy smile grazed his features and he said, "How could I not re-read it, after such a wonderful girl bestowed it to me?" His fake charm was so overtly done that Hermione had to roll her eyes at him.

He chuckled at that, but then there appeared a rather derisive smile on his face before he remarked patronizingly, "Really, Hermione. You are in no position to disapprove of other people's ability to
learn." The evil smile on his face widened before he said, scorn oozing from his words, "Not after that obviously disastrous Household class."

Hermione's eyes widened at him. "How do you know about that?"

Tom didn't answer but just shook his head pityingly at her. Hermione was sure the Slytherin girls from the class had told him about her performance during Household today. So, that was how Tom spent his free time? Chatting with inane girls in the Slytherin common room? Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but he only smirked back at her.

She lost her patience and snapped at Tom, "I should like to inform you that the whole thing was certainly not my fault."

"Uhu," Tom made skeptically.

Hermione glared at him but that didn't dispel the condescending amusement, still showing on his face. So he reached for a rolled-up piece of parchment, containing her Transfiguration notes from today, and whacked him on the head with it.

"Ouch," Tom exclaimed, feigning hurt. Then he again smirked at her and Hermione groaned softly.

"Now, I see why you are so bad in that Household class of yours," he drawled, his voice thick with scorn. "You are just too violent. How can that poor professor be supposed to teach you anything if her life's in danger every time you are around?"

Hermione tried to glare at him, but she didn't manage and instead had to giggle as she imagined the satisfaction of sending a Bad Bogey Hex Legifer's way.

"If she's continuing like that, then her life's really in danger," she informed Tom, still laughing. "And now stop disturbing me, I have to read this chapter."

Tom just sent her another of his arrogant smiles then he went back to reading his book. Hermione finally opened her Transfiguration text book and started to read the chapter about advanced ways of transferring magic. Soon, she had to admit that there still was something nagging at her mind. It was then that Legifer's sharp words came back to her. She glanced at Tom reading in his book. He seemed to be enthralled with the knowledge the book provided him with. A few strands of his silky, dark hair fell into his eyes but he didn't notice.

'It's a mystery what he sees in you.' Hermione now bit her lip as she scanned him.

"Tom?" she asked hesitantly.

"Hm?" made Tom, still distracted by his book.

Hermione scanned him. He hadn't looked up from his book yet. So she mumbled nervously, "Do you- What would you-"

Her stammering somehow caught his attention and he curiously looked at her.

Hermione sighed then she whispered softly like she was revealing a huge secret, "I... I really suck at cooking and baking spells."

Tom chuckled amused before he put his book down on the window sill beside him. "Why do you come up with that now?"
"I don't know… um…" Hermione suddenly felt very unsure of herself. "We learned them in Household today."

"Ah, that's why you are going to fail this class?" Tom scoffed, a fat grin appearing on his face.

"I am certainly not going to fail any class!" Hermione huffed. "No-one could consider this farce to be a class!"

She crossed her arms before her chest and glared at Tom rebelliously.

"Okay, okay. So, you're not going to fail anything. Got that." Tom still smirked at her infuriatingly. "But what are you trying to tell me?"

The insecurity quickly returned and Hermione averted her eyes from him before she said in a weak voice, "Just that I'm really bad at this household thing in general. It's not that I can't do it. But I don't think it's my duty to do everything just because I'm a woman."

"Yes…?" Tom obviously didn't see where this was going.

Hermione continued timidly, "You don't expect me to, you know, give everything up I want to do, so that I can stay at home, watch the house, cook and clean. Because that's never gonna happen."

Tom didn't immediately answer and for a short moment Hermione feared that he had really expected something like that. She looked hesitantly up at him and was totally bewildered as she found a triumphant smile on his face.

"Does that mean you want to stay with me even after we leave Hogwarts?" Tom asked in a half-joking, half-serious voice.

Hermione blushed fiercely. She hadn't thought about it to this extend. Tom sniggered amused then reached out for her and pulled her over to him.

"Don't worry. I'm sure we won't starve just because you are a lousy cook," he mocked her gently. "Unlike you, I am extraordinarily good with cooking spells."

Hermione frowned up at him. "What?"

"Yes, first thing I learned after starting at Hogwarts," Tom said amused.

Hermione still stared at him incredulously. She had actually expected that the first thing Tom Riddle would do after starting his first year at Hogwarts was to sneak into the Restricted Section of the Library and read every Dark Arts book he could get his fingers on.

"Why? she finally asked weakly.

"Clearly you never had to live through something like that horrible food they gave us in the orphanage," Tom replied in a light voice. "I learned the spells so that I would never have to eat that trash ever again."

He paused shortly as if to ponder something then he added, "You can't imagine how annoyed I was after I found out that I had to return to the orphanage during the summer and that we are not allowed to do magic during breaks."

Hermione giggled softly as she wrapped her arms around Tom. She felt him embracing her tightly before he leaned down and placed a kiss on her cheek. The soft touch of his lips on her skin sent
exiting shivers down her spine and Hermione suddenly regretted that they were sitting here in the Library in plain view of any student who should feel the need to read one of the books here. But that was something easily remedied, she thought mischievously and flexed her wrist so her wand landed in her hand. Then she called upon the Elder Magic, concentrated on her destination and heard a soft gasp of surprise coming from Tom as they apparated away.

Tom was taken by surprise as suddenly the pressure of apparition wrapped around him. As the pressure left him again the window sill had vanished and he lost his balance. He fell over while Hermione still clung to him tightly. So they both tumbled to the ground. But the impact wasn't as painful as he had expected due to the fact that the hard stone floor of the Library was now replaced by soft grass. Tom propped himself up on his elbow as he scanned his new surroundings in bewilderment. Obviously they were now on what seemed to be a meadow. Here and there young birches interrupted the gentle slope of the landscape. Some distance away Tom could see more trees and the beginnings of a forest. The vernal sun was still hanging above the tree tops shining warmly down on this grassy land. Tom furrowed his brow in bafflement as he noticed the gaily laughing witch who still clung to his side. Right now she looked up at him and seemed to be very amused by his confusion. Tom's eyes wandered from her face to her wand which she held in her hand. As he saw the black wand he finally understood. Obviously Hermione had again done the impossible and had apparated from Hogwarts' grounds.

He asked irritated while trying to ban the bewilderment from his voice, "Where are we?"

Hermione's hazel eyes still glinted with laughter as she answered him, "Somewhere far away from Hogwarts."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her. Since she had apparated them the first time through Hogwarts' wards Tom had racked his brains as to how she had managed that feat. His gaze went back to the black wand in her hand. Was that really the Unbeatable Wand?

"How?" he queried in a firm voice while fixing her with a piercing glare. "How can you apparate inside of Hogwarts?"

To his frustration Hermione now just smirked up at him. Tom raised his eyebrows as he saw a strange burning gleam appearing in her eyes. Suddenly she unwrapped her arms from his waist and took hold of his shoulders before she leaned into him. Tom blinked in surprise as she captured his lips with hers and started to kiss him rather fiercely. He could feel one of her hands wandering from its place on his shoulder up his neck until her fingers played gently with his hair. Tom couldn't suppress that soft moan of pleasure as he felt her nibbling teasingly at his lower lip. Then her lips left him again, leaving behind a cold sense of loss. He opened his eyes and looked down at Hermione. He found her smiling at him and looking rather self-satisfied.

"You can continue to try and squeeze information out of me which is going to fail anyway," she whispered sensuously in his ear, her breath tingling excitingly against his skin. "Or we could do something else."

Hermione then nestled even closer to him and started to trace more kisses on his neck. Tom shivered with pleasure as he felt her soft lips on his skin and he quickly decided to adjourn his interrogation. That didn't mean he was going to let her off the hook, he reassured himself. He would just do it later. He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her against him while his other hand cupped one of her cheeks. He leaned down to her and pressed his lips against her mouth. He gently brushed with his tongue along her lips. As a result Hermione eagerly opened her mouth a little, admitting him in.

As he was deepening the kiss Tom felt one of Hermione's hands wandering down his chest. He started to pant slightly as she slowly opened his belt before she pulled it out of the pant loops. She
proceeded to undo the buttons of his shirt to then run her fingers demandingly over the bare skin of his chest. If there had still remained a little rest of his self-restraint, it now went flying out of the window. He grabbed Hermione's shoulders and she let out a soft cry of surprise as he pushed her down on the ground.

Tom was sitting in the Great Hall and had to work from falling asleep. Someone should really curse that self-important codger, he thought annoyed as his eyes wandered over Dippet. If that wouldn't have meant to risk his perfect reputation of the model student, Tom would gladly have helped out here. He stifled a yawn as he tried to appear attentively listening to every word of that git.

"-so that finally the school governors and myself came to the conclusion that we should definitely initiate such an event," Dippet droned on and on with his insufferably pompous voice.

Tom sighed softly and leaned back in his seat. This could go on for hours, who knew. Dippet just so enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice.

"-that is to say, the invitations have left the castle by now and should reach your parents by tomorrow, depending on where they live," Dippet declared in his self-important voice. "So, Saturday next week we will finally have our very first Parents Day."

Tom couldn't help but groan in frustration. A parents day? That just sounded like so much fun, he thought wryly while scowling at Dippet. Then his gaze wandered over the other students. They seemed to be sickeningly excited about the prospect of such a pointless event. Tom felt the need to curse the whole lot of them.

Dunces!

Tom's eyes narrowed angrily as they wandered over the delight in the eyes of the other students. It wasn't long though and his gaze stopped at Gryffindor table. He found Hermione, surrounded by her seemingly excited friends. Tom quickly realized that even though Hermione smiled at them, this smile didn't quite reach her eyes. It was then that he remembered that she had told him her parents had died in that war in France. Tom balled his hands into fists as he stared at the sad smile on Hermione's face. Maybe he should really curse Dippet, he thought furiously. How dare that fool remind Hermione of the war.

Anger still rushed through him, so Tom hadn't noticed that Dippet had by now ended his speech. He was only brought out of his dark thoughts as he heard a hesitant voice speaking to him.

"Riddle?" that voice asked, rather fearfully.

He turned around and found Avery standing behind his seat, causing Tom to wrinkle his nose in distaste.

"Yes?" he hissed at him in an impatient tone.

"We… we have a request," Avery replied carefully.

Tom scanned the Slytherin in front of him with cold eyes, which made Avery squirm slightly. Tom turned away again before he inquired in a sharp voice, "And what might that be?"

"There is this Hufflepuff, Nathaniel Bowett," Avery whispered, fear tinting his words. "You know, from seventh year."
As Avery didn't continue after that, Tom felt his annoyance rise again.

"No, I don't know," he hissed, now angry. "Why would I want to keep track of this asinine house?"

Tom was a little placated as he watched Avery cowering away from him fearfully.

"Of course," the other Slytherin quickly conceded. "It's just that Bowett started to become a bother."

Tom sat a little up in his chair and eyed Avery now a bit more interested. "In what way?"

Avery didn't immediately answer so Tom commanded darkly, enunciating every word clearly, "In what way?"

Fear glinted in Avery's eyes as he then confessed in a very quiet voice, "He... he saw us practicing some spells."

"Dark?" Tom inquired sharply.

"Yes," came the frightened reply.

Tom breathed in deeply. Then he gestured at the empty seat beside him. "Sit down."

Avery obeyed instantly. Tom stared at him darkly. He didn't even need to ask him if they had had enough common sense to modify that Bowett's memory. He knew well enough that not one of his knights was able to cast the necessary spells.

Useless gits!

"Tell me, Avery, how are you going to get out of this mess?" Tom asked in an emotionless tone, though a frightening glint had by now appeared in his eyes.

"I... we hoped you could help us," Avery mumbled helplessly.

"Me?" Tom asked innocently before a rather evil smirk appeared on his face. "Why would I want to help you?"

Avery shuffled nervously in his seat and Tom's cruel smile intensified. He liked seeing the other suffer. Though in the end, he knew, he still had to somehow straighten this thing out. After all, the Knights of Walpurgis were directly linked to him. He couldn't risk anyone finding out about them. That would only be one small step away to figure out who exactly their leader was.

"Do you think that guy knew what you were doing?" Tom stopped his cruel teasing and came down to business.

"No," Avery said, the relief clearly present his voice. "But he certainly thought it was suspicious. He might want to investigate."

That was bad. The only way out of this would be to erase part of that guy's memory. So, either Tom had to modify the memory himself or he used other means. He didn't really want to ambush that Hufflepuff in some dark corridor. It sounded like the guy didn't know anything for sure. Maybe a complete memory modification wasn't even necessary.

"You are lucky that I am in an indulgent mood," Tom said lightly, though the dangerous touch in his tone was obvious. "This is what you do: You are going to apprehend that idiot. I don't give a damn how you do it, but I advise you to this time not muck anything up. No witnesses, understood?"
"Y- yes, of course," Avery inclining head.

"Then you'll feed him a potion I'll give you later. And miraculously his nosiness will find an abrupt end. Problem solved," Tom ended, cruelty dripping from his voice.

"Thank you," Avery said, almost bowing at Tom.

Tom just waved him away with a casual hand movement. As Avery stood up, Tom grabbed his arm harshly.

"No mistakes, Avery," he threatened the other. "If you mess up again, I will not be so lenient anymore."

After a hastily muttered promise not to blunder around, Avery quickly hurried away from Tom. Tom's hard gaze followed him. His knights were such idiots, he decided angrily. The last thing he needed was Dumbledore getting wind of that little society of his. Tom turned his gaze away from Avery and looked over to the Gryffindor table. He found Hermione still sitting there. With ire he noted how she was conversing with her foolish friends again. Maybe his knights weren't so idiotic, after all. Considering their competition… Well, at least that sadness had left her face.

Tom sighed and got up from the table and walked over to Hermione. There actually was now a free period before his next class, History of Magic. Tom knew that Hermione had a free period as well. It would be the perfect opportunity to try and pry some information out of her. At least he could test his theory concerning Hermione's wand.

Hermione was sitting at the Gryffindor table, talking with her friends, as she felt a hand her shoulder. As she turned her head, she found Tom standing right behind her. Instantly, a smile broke out on her face. He, too, was smiling softly down at her, completely ignoring the hostile looks Longbottom threw his way.

"Are you finished?" Tom asked her.

"Yes," she replied cheerfully.

She got up from the table and grabbed her bag. After a short "See you later, guys." towards her friends she followed Tom out of the Great Hall.

"How were your classes today?" Tom asked her as they walked down a corridor.

He was holding her hand gently and the content smile was still on Hermione's face as she looked up at him.

"Quite okay, I think," she replied and chuckled softly as she continued. "At least no-one lost a limb during Care of magical Creatures."

"Ah, yes, Kettleburn," Tom replied knowingly while shaking his head slightly.

As he didn't add anything else, Hermione asked him, "So, what do you think about that parents day?"

Tom looked at her like he had bitten into a lemon causing her to chuckle softly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," she said sardonically, but then added pensively, "You know, we could do something else. Hmm, like-"
"Apparating to London maybe?" Tom cut across her. Then he said, voice thick with false innocence, "No wait, we already did that. Edinburgh perhaps?"

Hermione sighed as he gazed at her provokingly. As she didn't react to his challenge, Tom narrowed his eyes at her.

"How can you break down Hogwarts' wards?" he demanded to know, changing his strategy from teasing to commanding.

She just rolled her eyes at him impatiently. "I won't tell you."

His hand tightened around hers and there was anger in his eyes by now. Hermione decided to just ignore his reaction and continued walking down the corridor. They didn't speak for a while. Hermione started to hope that he would let it drop but then Tom spoke again.

"Say, Hermione," he inquired and suddenly his voice was completely expressionless. "You never told me what happened with that book you stole."

Hermione couldn't help but stiffen. She stopped walking and her head shot up at him. Tom stared down at her, his face yet again an unreadable mask. Not even his grey eyes gave anything away.

"What?" Hermione asked weakly.

"You didn't think I had forgotten about it, did you?" Tom stated in a strangely cold voice.

She couldn't help but avert her eyes from him. It didn't help that now a rather guilty feeling hit her, too. She hadn't touched Peverell's book in weeks.

"No… but…" Hermione mumbled awkwardly. Then she mustered up her courage and looked at Tom's inquisitive eyes. "I told you before," she said in a firm tone. "I'm not going to show you that book."

"Hmm…" made Tom. Then his eyes narrowed and he inquired, "But you did steal it from Flamel, didn't you?"

Hermione didn't see where he was going so she thought it best to stay with one word answers, "Yes."

By now the blank look had left Tom's face, just to be replaced by a reassuring smile. That new look only managed to unsettle Hermione more. He obviously was up to something.

"I'm just surprised that you managed to steal something from Flamel," Tom said innocently while still smiling down at her. "I mean he is supposed to be a very powerful wizard." The smile didn't leave his face as he then casually threw in, "Did you know that he is more than six hundred years old?"

"Six hundred and eighteen," Hermione replied softly. "I know. He is the supposed owner of a Philosopher's Stone."

"Yes, that's at least what people assume," Tom worded carefully. "That is really impressive."

Suddenly, Hermione could spot a strange glint in his eyes. She didn't like it at all.

So she queried suspiciously, "In what way?"

"He practically can't die. That is a feat to be admired," Tom replied, excitement tinting his tone. "Though, of course, not perfect. Flamel is still depended on that stone. If he lost the stone, he would
eventually die. True immortality would mean that you can't die whatever happens."

By now Hermione was feeling rather sick and there were chills running down her spine.

"True immortality?" she asked in a soft voice, speaking more to herself than to Tom.

"Yes," he said nonchalantly. "You should know about immortality, shouldn't you?"

Hermione's head shot up to him. What did he mean by that? He had arched one eyebrow and seemed to watch her every movement.

"After all, you've read a book written by Ignotus Peverell." The innocence in his tone couldn't quite manage to conceal that he was, in fact, observing her like a hawk. "I'm sure he mentioned something about immortality."

"Why would he?" Hermione asked in a shaky voice, dreading the answer.

It was then that a rather triumphant smirk curled up the corners of Tom's mouth.

"He and his brothers are the supposed creators of the Deathly Hallows. It's said that the owner of all three Hallows will be master of death," Tom said lightly, but she could tell that he was very interested by now. "Do you think that is true?"

Hermione had paled as she heard him talking about the Deathly Hallows. She tried to ban all fear and shock from her face as Tom still seemed to closely observe her. She shouldn't be so surprised. It was Tom after all. Of course he would catch up on the Hallows. Hermione scanned him for a while contemplating how to answer. She really didn't like that excited glint she could see in his eyes.

"Master of Death," she whispered softly. "Yes, I know that myth. But I don't think it is something to be taken literatley."

As Tom raised his eyebrows she inquired, "Did you read the fairy tale?" Tom nodded at her and she continued in a severe voice, "Then I'm sure the morale didn't escape your notice. The true Master of Death is not immortal but just unafraid of death."

He furrowed his brow then he said in a strangely disappointed voice, "So you think the Deathly Hallows cannot conquer death?"

"No, that's not it." Hermione shook her head while still scanning him, a little unsettled by that longing in his eyes. "I don't think that immortality exists."

Tom looked at her with an odd, dark glint in his eyes before he said in a low voice, "You are wrong."

Hermione stared at him for a long time. For the first time since months seeing something in him that was completely dark and evil.

Then she said in a soft but grave voice, "Nothing and no-one is immortal."

She looked away from him and out of the window. Her gaze wandered over the rough Scottish landscape as she continued slowly in the same soft voice, "Everyone dies, sooner or later."

He didn't reply at once so Hermione looked back at him. His grey eyes scanned her intently but she was unable to read the emotions behind them.

Then Tom spoke and his voice was determined and cold, "There are ways. You just don't know
about them."

Hermione considered him for a very long time. She knew what he was talking about.

**Horcruxes.**

How could he be so wrong? Couldn't he recognize those horrible instruments for what they were? It wasn't the murder, necessary to create them, that made them so abhorrent. Certainly, murder was a terrible, terrible crime *but* it was not inhuman. In fact, it was actually a very human habit. No, what made those Horcruxes so warped and evil was the price with which they came.

**Half of your soul.**

It sounded not so bad but if you replaced that rather undefined word 'soul' with your 'own self', your 'essence', 'ego' then it suddenly became an unreasonably high price. Immortality certainly was a very luring concept. She had seen too many people die to not understand the craving behind that idea. But it remained to be an illusion. All his Horcruxes hadn't saved Lord Voldemort. It hadn't done him any good.

Hermione had got to know both, Lord Voldemort and Tom Riddle. Voldemort had just been a shadow of the person he once had been. There was just one explanation for that. He had tried to protect himself against his own mortality when in truth he had begun to sell part after part of himself to Death.

Hermione looked into Tom's eyes and said while an inexplicable sadness tore at her heart, "Don't assume my ignorance. For I am sure I know more about those ways than you do."

Tom stared at her with his grey eyes. Hermione could see that he didn't believe her.

"I doubt that," he said in his emotionless voice.

Hermione stepped nearer to him and took his hand in hers. She caressed his hand and then lifted it up and kissed it gently. As she bent her head up again her gaze lingered on the golden ring he was wearing. Her fingers skimmed over the gold-ring with the black stone on its middle. The stone felt strangely cold. She continued to stare sadly at the ring. It was the second Horcrux they had managed to destroy. Dumbledore had done it. In the end he had paid with his life for it. Yet, that ring was still empty. No piece of Tom was inside of it. Her finger kept touching the ring then Hermione let go of Tom's hand and stared up at him again. He was frowning at her in bewilderment.

Hermione smiled faintly at him before she said in her soft voice, "There are things we can neither fight nor run away from."

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Almost a week later, Tom walked together with Hermione towards the Great Hall while she told him how very much she hated her Households class which she would have to attend the next day. Silently, Tom was rather glad that he didn't have to go there himself. It really sounded horrible.

As they entered the Great Hall Tom instantly noticed a large group of people. They had obviously gathered around something in the middle of the hall. A frown took form on his face as he scanned the hall. No teacher was present. He sighed tiredly. He was not in the mood to break up any stupid brawl between some third year idiots. Unfortunately, though, he was a prefect. If he wanted to keep his image of the responsible student, he had to do something to clear up this mess. So, Tom reluctantly walked over to the crowd. Hermione followed him.
"Make way!" Tom commanded as he had reached the crowd.

As the students recognized him, they immediately scurried out of his way, so that Tom quickly reached to cause of this mess. There in the middle of the Great Hall lay a student. He was unconscious and, by the looks of it, completely naked. That was, if one didn't count the sign, which was fixed with a string around his neck.

Tom's mouth twitched traitorously as his eyes swiftly wandered over the writing on the sign. It wasn't exactly his style, but Tom had to admit that the whole thing was immensely amusing. Combined with those shocked looks on the other students' faces it was hilarious, actually. But he needed to contain himself, he couldn't burst out laughing right here, in front of the whole school. He wondered, while still trying to hold back his laughter, if that was really blood they had used to write with. It certainly looked like blood. What an artistic way to express oneself, he decided amused as his eyes again wandered over what was written on the sign:

**Mudblood**

"No!" a voice suddenly echoed through the hall.

Tom watched a girl running to the boy lying on the floor. She fell down beside him and tried to wake him up while tears streamed down her face. Why did she want to help him? If that really was a Mudblood, then he just got what he deserved, didn't he? Tom's eyes wandered over the girl's uniform. She was a Hufflepuff. No wonder she was such a sentimental fool. This time Tom couldn't completely hide the smirk from his face.

"Nate, Nate," the stupid girl now sobbed. "Nathaniel, wake up."

**Nathaniel?** Tom somehow remembered that name. Where had he heard it again? Ah, yes, hadn't Avery talked about one Nathaniel?

Tom swiftly searched the crowd. His gaze fell on a group of Slytherins with barely hidden looks of glee on their faces. Tom really needed to teach them how to conceal their emotions better. But he wasn't too angry with them right now. This whole thing was just too funny. He caught Lestrange's eye. The other stared back at Tom, still that self-satisfied smirk on his face, then he bowed slightly to Tom. That was all he needed to know. He looked back at the unconscious Mudblood lying in the dirt. Tom now knew that this boy was in fact Nathaniel Bowett. The Hufflepuff student Avery had talked about.

Tom chuckled softly as his eyes wandered over the unconscious boy. Avery hadn't told him that Nathaniel Bowett was a Mudblood. Obviously his knights had dealt with the whole problem quite satisfactorily. He, for one, was very entertained by this show. He thought as he looked down at the naked boy. His Hufflepuff girlfriend, or whatever that blood traitor was, still held firmly to the unconscious Mudblood and cried. What a spectacle, Tom decided coldly as he still tried to suppress an evil smirk from curling up his mouth.

The traitorous smirk was wiped from his face, though, as suddenly his own girlfriend ran over to the unconscious boy and the Mudblood-loving girl. Tom watched with utter distaste how Hermione fell down beside that dirty boy. She then seemed to feel his pulse and checked if that Mudblood was still alive.

Honestly, who cares? he wondered dismissively.

It was certainly more than revolting, how Hermione touched that Mudblood. Tom wrinkled his nose in disgust as he saw her hand on his shoulder as she shook him and tried to wake him up. Why was
she doing this? That guy was a Mudblood. Why did she lower herself and even touched something so inferior?

Hermione pulled her wand and brandished it over the Mudblood, obviously trying to find the cause for his unconsciousness. After that she unfixed the sign from the Mudblood's neck. Tom was more than surprised to see an angry expression on her face as she shortly glanced at the word written in blood. Another quick wave of Hermione's wand and a blanket appeared out of thin air. She took it and covered the boy up. What the hell was she trying to achieve here? Tom wondered confused. Did she want to save that guy's dignity? It was a dirty Mudblood, for Merlin's sake! Tom shook his head as he watched how Hermione now tried to console the Mudblood's girlfriend who was still sobbing disgustingly.

Tom just wanted to walk over there and pull his girlfriend away from all the filth and dirt as, suddenly, the doors of the Great Hall were thrust open. He turned his head to see who had entered. Somehow he wasn't really surprised to find his least favourite teacher standing in the doorway.

Dumbledore's eyes wandered swiftly over the hall until they landed on the cause of this commotion. Tom felt the need to snicker darkly as he spotted that look of anger on the other wizard's face. Dumbledore quickly hurried over to the boy lying, still unconscious, on the floor. A furious glint entered his eyes as he scanned the sign that now lay beside the boy. The writing, though, was still legible.

Tom had the mad urge to break down in an evil cackle as Dumbledore's gaze instantly wandered from the sign on the floor to him. Tom contained himself, though, and stared stoically back at the professor, daring him to make any accusations. The anger was visible on the professor's face and Tom could even sense Dumbeldore's unpleasant magic in the air. The other was still staring at him but Tom just lazily erected his Occlumency shields. It was quite obvious that Dumbledore suspected him.

And he is right to do so, Tom admitted amused. But there was no way he would be able to proof Tom's guilt. He so wanted to laugh into Dumbledore's face, but he pulled himself together and planted a mask of mild shock on his face.

Yes, it is shocking that dirt like that is allowed to enter the magical world, Tom thought in disgust as his gaze wandered to the boy lying on the floor.

He was brought out of his musing by Dumbledore's booming voice, "Everybody leave for your common rooms!"

The other students immediately followed this order and began to file out of the hall. Tom sneered at those docile idiots. They just needed someone to lead them and they would do just about anything.

Tom didn't follow them as he wasn't going to leave Hermione behind. To his immense irritation she was still holding that idiotic Hufflepuff girl in her arms. Tom stepped closer to the two girls and then bent down to Hermione and grabbed her arm. She looked up at him as she felt him touching her. There was confusion on her face but Tom just gestured at Dumbledore who was by now tending to the unconscious Mudblood. Hermione seemed to understand as she now let go of the crying girl and allowed Tom to pull her up. Without saying a word Tom dragged Hermione out of the Great Hall, away from that meddlesome old coot.

As they left the hall, Tom didn't follow the masses of students but turned into another corridor. After a few minutes they had left the Great Hall and the noise of the other students behind and were walking down a dark and secluded passage way. Tom still held Hermione's hand and she was following him, walking slightly behind him. They hadn't spoken till now.
Finally, Tom couldn't hold back anymore. He was actually very proud of himself that he hadn't broken down right in the Great Hall. This whole thing had just been way too hilarious. The shocked and indignant expression on Dumbledore's face had topped everything, though. That old fool knew that Tom was behind it but he couldn't do anything about it.

It was then that Tom broke down in cold laughter. He let go of Hermione's hand and had to support himself by leaning against the wall while his laughter rang through the corridor.

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Hermione followed Tom into the Great Hall and nearly bumped into him as he abruptly stopped. She was just about to ask him what was wrong when she noticed the commotion in the hall. A crowd of students had gathered right in the middle of the hall.

What's wrong? she wondered as she could see looks of shock, anger and even fear on their faces.

Tom resumed his way and Hermione followed him as he walked over to that crowd of students. As they reached to other students, Tom ordered them to let him pass. She was slightly surprised that they obeyed him as the other students seemed to be quite unsettled and, in some cases, even hysterical. Hermione saw a blonde girl, a Ravenclaw, sobbing into the shoulder of another Ravenclaw. A few steps away stood a Hufflepuff seventh year, looking pale as a ghost, as he stared with a stony face at something Hermione couldn't yet see. By now apprehension was bubbling up in her. Whatever had happened here it must have been something serious.

Tom still walked swiftly towards the cause of this misery so Hermione, not wanting to be left alone, hurried after him. After a few more steps he stopped looked at something on the floor. Hermione quickly reached him and her eyes widened in shock as she, too, stared down at the floor. She threw in a shaky breath of air as her eyes wandered over the fallen form of a boy. He was lying on the cold stone floor unmoving and completely naked. Nausea rose up in her as she noticed that sign which was attached to the boy. Only one word was written on that sign and Hermione felt herself starting to tremble as she read the hateful word:

*Mudblood*

It seemed to be written with blood, Hermione realized horrified. Hopefully not with the blood of this poor boy. Her eyes darted back to the unconscious boy. Panic was starting to rip at her as she saw that the boy looked as if he were dead. Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as memories of dead bodies invaded her mind. She had seen so many people die. It was enough! She didn't want to see that anymore.

She forcefully calmed her breathing down and scanned the boy more attentively than before. After a while she relaxed slightly as she spotted the soft fall and rise of his chest. He was still alive. The sickness, left behind by fear, still coursed through her body, though.

Suddenly a girl rushed towards the boy. Her black hair whipped behind her and tears ran from her eyes as she sobbed, "No!"

As the girl reached him, she fell down beside the boy, grabbed his shoulders and shook him. More tears flowed down her cheeks as her attempts to wake him remained to be unsuccessful.

"Nate, Nate," the black-haired girl cried desperately. "Nathaniel, wake up!"

Her stomach gave a painful lurch as Hermione watched the girl's anguish. The girl's fear and pain seemed to be so familiar. Hermione had been there herself and she knew how much it hurt. There
were tears threatening to fall from her own eyes as she remembered how she had wept over her friends' dead bodies.

A new pitiful sob brought her out of her painful memories. Hermione sprang into action. She hurried over to the unconscious boy and the still crying girl. After she knelt down beside the boy she quickly checked his pulse. She nearly cried out in relief as she felt a weak pulse. She then tried to wake him up by shaking him gently but he did not respond so Hermione flexed her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. With a practiced movement she waved it over the boy's form. The diagnostic spells she used ascertained that the boy's life was indeed not in danger. Hermione sighed relieved.

Her eyes again fell on that sign which seemed to be tied to the poor boy's neck with a string. Hot fury started to rise up in her as she read that offending word: Mudblood. In a fit of anger she cut the string with her wand and hurled the sign at the floor. After that, she again turned towards the boy. Now that she knew his life wasn't in immediate danger, she noticed that he wasn't wearing any clothes. With a wave of her wand she conjured up a blanket and wrapped the boy in it. The distraught girl still sat on the floor beside the boy and cried. Hermione just wrapped an arm around her shoulder and hugged her reassuringly.

"He's alive," she whispered softly to the girl. "He's going to be okay."

The black-haired girl clung to Hermione and cried into her shoulder.

"W… what's wrong with him?" the girl managed to ask between her sobs.

"It's nothing serious," Hermione tried to console her. "He's going to be up and about in no time."

She rubbed the girl's back in an attempt to calm her down.

"Everything's going to be okay," she soothed the girl.

The sobs died down somewhat as the girl finally calmed down. Tears still ran from her eyes and she clutched Hermione's robes tightly but she had stopped to cry so desperately. Hermione continued to hold the girl. She knew exactly how terrible it felt to be so worried about an injured friend.

It was after a while that Hermione felt someone grabbing her by her arm. She looked up and found Tom standing right beside her. Concern was shining in his grey eyes as he scanned her intently. Hermione felt relieved now that he was here. He gestured at something. She turned her head and was surprised to see Dumbledore crouching beside the unconscious boy. He had his wand in his hand and examined the boy. When had he shown up here? Tom didn't leave her more time to ponder the professor's sudden appearance as he pulled at her arm again. Hermione looked up at him. He seemed to want to get away from here as fast as possible. But that was no surprise, Hermione realized.

Shortly, she had forgotten that neither Tom nor herself were on Dumbledore's good side anymore. Tom was right. They should leave here quickly before Dumbledore started to question them. So, Hermione let go of the crying girl and let Tom pull her up. He took hold of her hand and hastily dragged her out of the Great Hall. She followed him into Hogwarts' maze of corridors. While she followed him so blindly, she could still see that word written in blood red letters before her minds eyes. *Mudblood!*

Hermione swallowed hard and grabbed Tom's hand tighter.

So much hate in just one single word…

Hermione felt sympathy for that unknown boy who had lain there in the middle of the Great Hall. He had fallen victim to that word as much as his black-haired girlfriend had. She nearly cringed as she
remembered the tears of worry, fear and disbelief that had flowed from the poor girl's eyes.

Those had been Hermione's tears… once.

She breathed in deeply, determined to change the direction her thoughts had so unwillingly turned to. She didn't want to think about that time. So she forced herself away from her memories and paid more attention to her surroundings. It was now that she noticed how Tom led her down some secluded corridor. She had no idea where he planned to go. Hermione furrowed her brow and was just about to ask him where they were headed as Tom suddenly let go of her hand. His back was turned to her as he leaned against the corridor wall. She noticed with worry and confusion how his shoulders shook as he propped himself up against the wall.

She took a step towards him to see what was wrong with him when, suddenly, cold laughter tore at the silence of the corridor. Hermione stopped dead in her tracks and stared with wide eyes at Tom. He had turned so that he now leaned with his back against the wall and still he was laughing loudly. Hermione's heart clenched anxiously as she noticed that cruel malice which was unmistakably entwined in his laughter. Instead of taking a step towards him, as she had intended, she shied away.

Hermione still stood frozen to the spot and stared at Tom as he finally calmed down. A vile smirk still ghosted around his mouth as he looked at her. Her mind was reeling as she saw a dark glimmer flaring up in his beautiful grey eyes and she took another step away from him. He arched one eyebrow gracefully as he saw her cowering away from him.

"What's wrong?" he asked and traces of his twisted amusement were still lacing his words.

"How… how can you laugh?" Hermione choked out in a weak voice. "That was just horrible. Somebody hurt that boy. And that sign… how can you laugh about that?"

Tom pushed away from the wall and took a step towards her. A cold smile still curled up the corners of his mouth as he looked at her. Her mind was reeling as she saw a dark glimmer flaring up in his beautiful grey eyes and she took another step away from him. He arched one eyebrow gracefully as he saw her cowering away from him.

Then he answered, sounding as if he explained something quite obvious to her, "Because it was dead funny, that's why."

Fear suddenly darted through her with a jolt as she spotted appalling satisfaction on his face. A painful feeling of foreboding wrapped around her.

Hermione just stared at him with huge eyes until she was able to formulate a question, she did not really want to pose, "Did you attack that boy?"

"No," he replied casually.

Hermione didn't relax as she could still see that horrible amusement dancing in his eyes. Then he continued arrogantly, "I wouldn't have been so blunt." He shortly reflected something before he sniggered darkly, "Though that idea with the sign was rather amusing."

Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as realization hit her. Then she stated in a numb tone, "Your followers did it."

Tom just looked at her expectantly but didn't reply anything. He didn't need to say it out loud anyway, the warped approval in his eyes was answer enough.

"You… you knew they were going to do something like this?" Hermione asked in a weak voice.

"Not exactly." He dismissed her concern with a casual wave of his hand. "I knew they had planned
something, but I didn't know they would be so… public."

Hermione still stared at him thunderstruck. He seemed not in the least bit disturbed by that display of cruelty from his followers instead he approved of the whole thing. Tom took in her shocked state. Slowly the warped glee left his face and was replaced by dangerous suspicion.

He narrowed his eyes at her and inquired demandingly, "Why are you so unsettled by this thing? Didn't you notice? That guy was a dirty Mudblood!"

Tom spat that last word with so much disgust that Hermione stumbled a step away from him.

"Does that change anything?" She could feel her heart beating painfully fast now as she looked at him. "Is it okay to attack him, hurt him and humiliate him just because he is a Muggleborn?"

He frowned at her and a dark look crossed his face. Then Tom answered with just one word.

"Yes."

The conviction behind his icy cold words made Hermione tremble now and she could feel her throat tie up.

"That's… that's wrong," she stammered, horrified by that frightening dark glimmer in his eyes.

A dangerous frown appeared between his eyebrows as he glared at her intimidating. Then Tom stepped towards her and grabbed her upper arm roughly. Before Hermione could buck against his hold he dragged her towards one of the wooden doors in this corridor. He opened the door and pulled her harshly into the classroom behind. He obviously didn't want to continue this conversation in the corridor where people could hear his girlfriend siding with Muggleborns, Hermione thought glumly. Tom closed the door again and turned towards her. The fierce frown was still on his face as he now glared at her angrily.

"What do you mean 'it's wrong'?" he hissed at her bitingly. "Don't tell me you have pity on that dirty Mudblood. That pathetic Muggle got exactly what he deserved. He should never have dared to enter Hogwarts and besmirch it with his unclean blood."

Hermione could feel numb coldness creeping up on her as she heard the hate hidden behind Tom's words. Suddenly she felt very sick and there was the need to run away from him as fast as possible. That hate radiating off of him in angry waves was too much for her. It scared her and she wanted to flee. She observed how Tom's gaze turned into ice as he spotted the shock and disapproval which was surely visible on her face. As she didn't react to his statement in any way, he took a step towards her and Hermione shuddered as she could feel traces of his angry magic in the air.

"You know it's true, Hermione. Everyone knows it," Tom spat at her, fury seeping though his voice. "They don't belong here. They are worthless."

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Hermione still stared at Tom with wide eyes. There was so much hate in his gaze. She felt chills darting down her spine as she stared at Tom. She had seen that hate before. Now there was Lord Voldemort lurking behind Tom's grey eyes.

"No, they… they are not," Hermione whispered. She heard her voice shaking with fear as she continued. "They are normal witches and wizards. The only difference is that they have Muggle parents."

"Don't delude yourself," Tom hissed snidely at her. Then he added with so much venom in his voice. "They are scum!"
Hermione flinched as if his words had physically hurt her.

"Those Mudbloods have no right to be here, in the magical world. They should stay with their own disgusting ilk," Tom said with a fearsome tone in his voice.

"But… but…" Hermione stammered as she looked fearfully at Tom. There was still a deathly cold gleam in his eyes. Right now, he wasn't 'Tom' anymore. He was Lord Voldemort. And Hermione was afraid.

She could see it, that hate in his eyes. It was the same hate that had once destroyed her life and had burned down a whole country. Hermione balled her hands into fists as she continued to stare at Tom with wide eyes. She had fought against him, against this hate.

*Because he is wrong!*

How could he say something like this? How dare he insult the Muggleborns and the Muggles? Her parents? Herself? Hermione could feel her fear turning into anger.

She yelled at Tom enraged, "They are NOT inferior! Neither Muggleborns nor Muggles themselves."

Hermione watched as Tom's face turned into a mask of pure hate. There was a murderous glint in his steely grey eyes.

"Hermione," Tom said threateningly but Hermione didn't cower away. She wasn't going to back down from him, not then and not now. "You are a Pureblood, you should be able to recognize them for what they are: disgusting trash!"

She was staggered as she stared at Tom. He did not just say that. There was a burning fury raising up in Hermione.

"Hermione," Tom said threateningly but Hermione didn't cower away. She wasn't going to back down from him, not then and not now. "You are a Pureblood, you should be able to recognize them for what they are: disgusting trash!"

She was staggered as she stared at Tom. He did not just say that. There was a burning fury raising up in Hermione.

It was impossible to restrain that wrath so she glared coldly at Tom before she snarled at him, "You hypocrite! How can you say that, being what you are?" She watched as a frown appeared between his eyebrows then she continued in the same cold tone,

"Yes, I know all about your heritage, Tom. What about your father?" she asked provocingly.

She could see Tom clenching his jaw as he stared at her. There was a red tinge in his grey eyes now. But Hermione didn't care, she continued while smiling at him meanly,

"Oh yeah, he was a Muggle, wasn't he? And that's why you killed him."

Tom's eyes had turned completely red as he was glaring at her murderously. But Hermione wasn't yet finished. What business did he have to be so enraged? It was the truth she was telling right now.

She looked into Tom's crimson eyes as she hissed in a low voice, "So, Muggleborns have dirty blood, you say? Well, then your blood is dirty, too. At least half of you is scum!"

Tom fixed her with a glare so full of rage that Hermione unconsciously flinched away from him. It seemed like his blood-red eyes were on fire, burning every emotion until the only thing left was this unbound hate.

"How dare you?" Tom whispered in a deathly cold tone, his voice was shaking with uncontrollable fury. While his eyes were still keeping her imprisoned with that fearsome rage.
Suddenly Tom yelled furiously, "How dare you speak to me like that?"

His dark magic now flooded the whole classroom and ripped at her. Hermione looked at his red eyes and she felt cold shivers running down her spine.

"You have no idea what I've been through because of that bastard," he now hissed at her piercingly, his voice was cold and cruel. "He infected me with his dirty Muggle blood and left me to be raised by those sickening animals."

His fury still hit her in form of his dark magic which crackled around him. Hermione refused to show him how much he intimidated her.

So she squared her shoulders and said in a surprisingly steady voice, "Muggles are neither dirty nor animals. They are human beings. Or do you want to say that I have 'unclean blood' that I am 'disgusting trash'"

There was a strange glint flaring up in Tom's eyes but Hermione was too enraged to notice.

She spat at him heatedly, "Yes, I'm a Muggleborn."

As she made that declaration, suddenly, Tom's magic in the air seemed to lose control completely and it attacked her body painfully. Her fury immediately died down and was replaced by fear as she felt his magic on her body. But Tom's dark magic was nothing compared to that murderous look on his face as he now scanned her. Something seemed to snap in his blazing red eyes as he looked at her so dangerously.

Before Hermione could do anything, he suddenly raised his hand and slapped her in the face. She was hurled to the side where she slammed hard into the wooden cabinet which stood at the wall beside her. She slid down the wood until she was huddled at the floor. Her left hand shot up to her cheek which stung painfully. She stared up at Tom, momentarily paralyzed. Then she realized that she had drawn her wand which she now pointed at Tom. She hadn't even noticed how she had flicked her right wrist to release her wand from its holster. It must have been an instinctual act.

Hermione looked with huge eyes up at Tom. Her cheek throbbed achingly and her hand, holding her wand, trembled heavily. Tom was staring down at her. His eyes were still glowing in a threatening red as he scanned her fallen form coldly. Hermione could feel hot tears running from her eyes. She bit her tongue to stop herself from sobbing. But she couldn't stop the stream of tears that now flowed down her face and fell on her blouse, soaking the fabric.

"You don't deserve to bear a wand," Tom now spat at her pitilessly. "You are just filthy Muggle-trash."

There was not one spark of repentance in his crimson eyes as he glared at her, laying at his feet. Hermione stared up at him. This hate in his eyes... She had never thought to meet that bottomless hate again. She had been so sure that she had left it behind.

Her breathing was ragged now and the tears still streamed from her eyes. Then slowly she got up from the floor, never lowering her wand. On shaky feet she slid to the door, always keeping her back against the wall and skirting around Tom. All the while she pointed her wand at him. Hermione reached the huge wooden door and opened it with one hand while the other still pointed her wand at Tom. He was staring at her with his terrible crimson eyes. Hermione slipped out through the door, leaving Tom behind.

As she left the classroom she saw Melanie Nicolls standing right beside the door. She was smirking
evilly at Hermione. Had she heard the whole argument? Judging from the triumphant expression on her face, she probably had. Hermione didn't care. She ignored Nicolls and ran down the corridor. Away from the classroom, and away from Tom.

She never stopped until she reached the familiar painting of the Fat Lady.

"Mantis!" Hermione snapped the password at the Fat Lady before she had a chance to say something.

The Fat Lady tsked at Hermione's seemingly rude behaviour but permitted her in anyway. She entered the Gryffindor common room which was crowded with students discussing the incident in the Great Hall. Hermione ignored them all and rushed through the room towards the stairs leading up to her dormitory. She heard the voices of Longbottom and Weasley calling out for her but she ignored them and raced up the stairs, leaving the common room behind. She noticed with mild relief that the dormitory was deserted as she hurried to the bathroom. Hermione entered and locked the room behind her. Then she leaned with her back against the door as silent sobs shook her body. Her feet were so shaky; they were unable to support her any longer. Hermione slid down the door and sank to the floor. She drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her head rested on her knees as she continued to cry. Her left cheek was still hurting where Tom had hit her.

After some time Hermione managed to get herself under control insofar as the stream of tears finally ran dry. She leaned her head back at the door and tried to calm her ragged breathing. Then she pushed herself up before she walked over to the sink. Her whole body was still trembling slightly. She put her hands on the sink and leaned on them. Then she raised her head and looked at the mirror. Her reflection was staring back at her with a pale and tear-stained face. Her eyes were puffy and red. Hermione's gaze wandered reluctantly to the angry red stain that was on her cheek where Tom had hit her. She could see the beginnings of a bruise taking shape.

Immediately new tears were threatening to fall from her eyes. Hermione quickly averted her eyes from her sad looking reflection and opened the taps. She cupped her hands and let the water flow into her hands. Then she plunged her face into the water. The cold water eased the pain on her cheek a little bit. After that Hermione dried her face and left the bathroom without looking into the mirror again. She walked slowly over to her bed in the dormitory. There she sat down, drew the covers shut around her four-poster and curled up into a ball onto the soft mattress. As Hermione closed her eyes the only thing she could see were red eyes glaring at her so full of hate. New tears were running from her eyes and fell softly onto her Gryffindor quilt.
The next morning Hermione woke from a nightmare ridden sleep, still curled up tightly into a ball on her bed. She didn't feel rested at all but reluctantly sat up in her bed. The curtains of her four-poster were still drawn, and she could hear her room mates merrily chattering away as they got ready for the day. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the fact that a new day had begun, and that she had to wake up now. She didn't want the memories of last night rushing back to her nor did she want to get ready and then head down to the Great Hall. But what else could she do? She couldn't very well hide herself here, in her dormitory, for the rest of the day. Hermione grudgingly reached out for the curtains and pulled them away. Then she stood up from her bed, grabbed her clothes and shuffled to the bathroom door.

"Good morning, Hermione," Rose chirped gayly Hermione's way.

"Mhm." Hermione wasn't in the mood to contribute anything to her dorm mates' chatter.

She entered the bath room and locked the door behind her before she slowly walked over to the sink. As she stood before the sink she raised her head and stared at her reflection in the mirror. A rather down looking girl was unenthusiastically staring back at her. There were dark shadows under her eyes and her skin was quite pale, which made the bruise on her cheek even more pronounced.

Hermione leaned forward and looked at the bruise. It wasn't that big. She ran a finger over the sore skin. It stung. But Hermione had had worse before.

It wasn't so much the bruise itself that made her nearly cry now. It was the fact that it had been Tom who had hurt her. Hermione sniffed as she tried to suppress the tears. Her thoughts flew back to the fight from yesterday. Tom's gaze had been so full of hate as he had talked about Muggleborns. Hermione hadn't been able to hold back. No-one was allowed to badmouth Muggles or Muggleborns in front of her. Not even Tom.

No, especially not Tom.

So Hermione had fought back. She had lost her temper, she had to admit that, but that topic was just a sore point to her. Maybe she shouldn't have said the things about Tom's father and certainly not in that insulting way. But whatever she had said yesterday didn't justify his behaviour, Hermione thought as she stared at the bruise on her cheek.

'You are just filthy Muggle-trash.' She took in a shuddered breath of air as Tom's last words run through her head.

There was no denying that his words hurt. Especially as they were not new to her. She had been insulted like that before, hadn't she? Coming from Tom, though, this insult was unbearable. Hermione shivered as she remembered that icy cold glint in his eyes as he had thrown those words at her. How could he do that to her?

He's done it before …and worse, a hard voice hissed at her, mercilessly bringing back memories she did not want unburied.

She stared at her reflection and slightly shook her head as if that was enough to get rid of her memories. She didn't want them to come back. Those memories belonged to someone else. A girl that had been devoured by darkness long ago. She shouldn't return.

Hermione raised a trembling hand and once again skimmed a finger over the dark bruise on her
cheek. It still hurt. Just like his words which still threatened to throw her back into her past. But she
did not want her memories to step back into her life. Even if Tom had looked so much
like Him yesterday, it didn't mean He was back. Tom was still Tom.

No connection with my past! Because her past was something that couldn't come back. Hermione
ignored the painful knot in her stomach and averted her eyes from the mirror. Then she washed up,
put on her uniform and left the bathroom. She didn't want to go down to the Great Hall. Right now,
she just wanted to curl up in some dark place and stay there while she finally got rid of those stupid
memories. Unfortunately, she didn't have much of a choice.

I've been through worse, Hermione thought, trying to encourage herself. It didn't quite work.

She sighed heavily, took her school bag and left the dorm. Then she walked slowly,
unenthusiastically down to the Great Hall. As she entered the hall Hermione remained standing by
the entrance door. Her gaze immediately found the Slytherin table, scanning it for Tom. She quickly
found him sitting at his usual seat. But he didn't look her way. It even seemed as if he was
deliberately ignoring her as he blankly stared into space. His face was a frustratingly emotionless
mask. It was impossible for her to say what he was thinking right now, especially because she
couldn't look into his eyes.

One thing she did notice though. And that was the behaviour of the other Slytherins sitting around
Tom. They had obviously seen her standing by the entrance door and were now staring at her. Some
of them whispering with their neighbour while casting glances her way, others scanned her openly
with disgust. The worst, though, was Melanie Nicolls. She looked at Hermione with a triumphant
expression on her pretty face while an offensive smirk played around her mouth. She mockingly
inclined her head towards Hermione, still with that evil smirk on her face. Hermione had to suppress
a shiver as she saw that cruelty, glinting in the other girl's eyes. She quickly looked away from
Slytherin table. It seemed she had been right yesterday. Nicolls had overheard how she had argued
with Tom and now the stupid witch told everyone who wanted to hear how Hermione had had a
quarrel with Tom. She clasped her schoolbag a little tighter before she made her way to the
Gryffindor table.

As she turned her back to the Slytherin table, she could hear it. It was just one word but it struck her
to the core. That word, it was more like a weapon than anything else. This simple, small word had
sparked off a terrible war. It had cost so many lives. Hermione hated that word, which was now
hissed behind her back.

"Mudblood!"

She didn't let show how that hiss startled her and she didn't falter in her steps. She just continued
walking to her table, holding her head high. There was a murmur going through the hall and
Hermione felt many gazes following her process. It seemed that the other houses knew as well.
Maybe they didn't care as much as the Slytherins, did but they knew. Reaching the Gryffindor table
she sat down beside Diana. Hermione saw Diana's green eyes scanning her curiously. But there was
also a tiny bit of concern in those green orbs. For that Hermione was grateful.

"Are you all right?" Diana whispered under her breath.

Hermione looked at her and just nodded.

"Are you really a Muggleborn?" Hermione hadn't noticed that Rose and Lucia sat right beside
Diana. And now Rose had posed this stupid question in her squeaky voice.

"Wow," Lucia exclaimed while she eyed Hermione like she would an exotic animal in the zoo. "I
would have never guessed."

Both girls were staring nosily at her, ready to absorb whatever gossip they might catch. They weren't the only ones either. The other Gryffindors seemed to watch her with equal interest. With one exception. A few seats away Hermione could see Lupin and he was staring angrily at his house mates. Longbottom and Weasley, it seemed, had yet to show up in the Great Hall.

"Really," Lupin huffed, while he in turn glared at the Gryffindor students sitting at the table. "Why is that suddenly so important?"

Some of them now really looked a bit ashamed of themselves. But not all of them.

"Because she said she's a pureblood," one Gryffindor, a fourth year boy Hermione didn't know his name, was throwing in. "Why did she lie?"

Hermione could hear an approving murmur around her and there was slowly anger building up in her. She looked back to the Slytherin table and found some of them still staring at her. Some with disgust on their faces, some with scorn. But the only one who really mattered still didn't pay her any attention. Tom didn't even look her way.

"I don't think that's any of your business!" Lupin hissed and Hermione's attention was brought back to her own table.

"It's okay, Amarys," Hermione said and she was surprised how calm her voice sounded. "I want to answer that question."

She looked at the Gryffindor boy who had asked the question.

"You want to know, why I didn't tell anyone that my parents were Muggles?" she asked in a cold voice that could even frighten herself.

Hermione paused and stared in turn at the Gryffindors sitting around her and listening into the conversation. How could they not know? How could they be so ignorant and naïve? And right after that boy had been attacked yesterday, too.

She continued, still in that detached voice that didn't quite seem to belong to her, "Because where I come from such a declaration would be a death sentence."

After that Hermione stood calmly up from her seat turned around and left. Her house mates stared at her while all the chatter at the normally so cheerful Gryffindor table had died down. Hermione didn't care and left the Great Hall quickly. Not quick enough not to be able to throw a last glance at the handsome Slytherin sitting at his table. Her heart sank as Tom still ignored her.

She stepped out of the hall, glad to leave those prying eyes behind, and made her way back to the common room. Hermione had decided to ditch Household. She just knew that today she wouldn't be able to bear Legifer's insulting way nor the other students continue to stare at her. She had nearly reached the entrance to the common room as she heard someone call out for her,

"Hermione, wait!"

She turned around and found Lupin rushing after her. As he reached her he fell in step beside her.

"I'm sorry how they reacted," Lupin said in a quiet voice.

Hermione looked at him, walking beside her, and was very glad to at least have a few people still
liking her despite of everything.

"Don't be," she said in a soft voice. "It's not your fault."

They entered the common room. Hermione subconsciously breathed out relieved as she stepped into the red and golden decorated room. As her gaze wandered lovingly over the well-known room she quickly spotted where Longbottom and Weasley were sitting, or rather lounging. Weasley sat on one of the chairs with his feet propped up on a table and flipped through a magazine. Quidditch Monthly its cover read. Longbottom was half lying on a couch while eating a cauldron cake. There was a box with more cakes standing on the side table. Hermione noticed amused that Longbottom was still wearing his pyjama top combined with his uniform pants. Upon Lupin's and her entrance Longbottom looked up and then, recognizing them, waved them over.

"What are you doing here, Mione?" Weasley asked her as she sat down on a couch opposite them.

"What's with Household?"

"I'm skipping. What's your excuse?"

"We have a free period whenever there's Household." Longbottom grinned at her.

Then he looked at Lupin sitting beside Hermione and the smile dropped from Longbottom's face. He had obviously seen the grave expression on his friend's face.

"Is something wrong?" Longbottom asked in a worried tone.

Lupin just shortly glanced at Hermione but didn't answer. Hermione sighed, looked at Longbottom and said, "Obviously, Nicolls found out that I am in fact a Muggleborn and told the whole school." She looked away from him and then added bitterly, "And all the Slytherins hate me now."

"What?" Longbottom yelped and sat up on his sofa.

Hermione leaned back on the couch and was more than glad to let Lupin do all the explaining. She tuned their conversation out though Longbottom's angry voice that shouted "Stupid Slytherins!" every so often was quite soothing.

Had she been right? Hermione wondered frantically. Did really all Slytherins hate her now? No, that wasn't possible. She reasoned with herself. Her hand wandered to her left cheek and touched it cautiously. It hurt where Tom had hit her. Hermione could still see those angry crimson eyes staring at her. So full of hate. She shuddered. How could he have slapped her? She felt again tears building up in her.

"Hermione?" a concerned voice called out to her.

Hermione looked up and found Longbottom eyeing her worried. Weasley and Lupin, too, were staring at her.

"How did you get that bruise?" Longbottom asked her in a gentle voice.

"I… " Hermione stammered.

She was suddenly reminded of the last time her friends had found her with a bruise on her face. Back then they had suspected Tom doing it, and Hermione had been outraged by that suggestion.

"Hermione, you know you can tell us everything," Lupin said in his soft voice.
Hermione felt his hand reassuringly on her arm. She lowered her eyes and looked down at her hands, lying in her lap. Last time she had told them that Tom hadn't hit her. She had been so convinced that he would never do something like that to her. Now there were tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

Then she heard Longbottom's enraged voice say, "It's obvious, isn't? It was Riddle!"

Hermione glanced up at him. Longbottom was staring at her with an angry face. The anger though wasn't directed at her, Hermione knew, as he was scanning her left cheek. She averted her eyes and stared down at her hands again. It was terrible but this time she was unable to object. There was no denying it because Longbottom was right after all.

So, Longbottom's statement was followed by a pregnant pause in which neither one of them said anything. After a while Hermione could feel a weight sitting down beside her and then an arm around her shoulders. She looked up and found Longbottom sitting beside her. He looked at her with concern shining in his eyes.

"Hermione," he told her gently. "You can't continue like this. You can't let him treat you this way."

Hermione breathed in deeply, but she didn't reply anything.

"Marc is right," Lupin said in a kind voice.

She looked at him and found him gazing at her steadily. He smiled reassuringly but Hermione could see the concern in his eyes.

"He has no right to hurt you," Lupin continued in his soft voice.

Hermione closed her eyes shortly, trying to get her emotions under control again. They were right... and yet... She just didn't know what to do. She liked Tom so very much. He was her boyfriend and Hermione felt safe and protected when he was around. He liked her too, didn't he? Affection was always glinting in his soft grey eyes whenever he looked at her. But now every time she thought back to yesterday, the only thing she could see were those crimson eyes, staring at her full of hate. As this colour had manifested in his grey eyes, suddenly, Tom himself had disappeared to be replaced by...

No!

Hermione's eyes snapped open again. Her heart was hammering painfully fast in her chest, making her feel slightly sick. She stared at Lupin who looked at her worried. Longbottom's arm was still wrapped around her shoulders reassuringly.

"Look, Hermione," Lupin told her in his calm and kind voice. "I know that you like Riddle, but this is just something you can't let him do to you."

Hermione still stared at him. What did he want her to do? Leaving Tom? She couldn't let go of him. No, she needed him.

... but those eyes...

She knew those red eyes so very well. They had haunted her and made her life hell. The sight of those angry red eyes was enough to make her tremble in fear. She had lost everything to the infinite wrath that burned behind this crimson colour. And as there had been nothing left to be taken from her, those eyes had infested her dreams and turned them into nightmares.

As she didn't react to Lupin at all, suddenly, Longbottom yelled angrily, "Damn! I should go and
Hermione's head shot up at him. "No!" she burst out panicky.

Longbottom stared at her, slowly shaking his head. "You can't expect us to just lean back and watch him treating you like that."

"That's… that's something between Tom and me," Hermione said softly, sadness tinting her voice. She didn't want her friends to always worry so much about her.

"No, he hurt you," Longbottom said in a gentle but all the same determined tone. "I won't let him continue with that."

"We are your friends," Lupin supported Longbottom. "We can help you."

"I know," Hermione whispered shakily. "But… please, let me try to solve this myself." She didn't want her friends to get involved into this. Especially now that Tom had turned into… "I ask a lot of you, I know. Still, this is something I need to figure out on my own," Hermione said, opting for a strong voice in order to calm her friends down.

Of course, it didn't work. Longbottom tightened his arm around her shoulders and the concern on Lupin's and Weasley's faces intensified.

"We did promise you to stay away from that bastard," Longbottom told her gently, though the anger still shone through his voice. "But only if he wouldn't hurt you again."

"Which he now has," Weasley concluded in a soft tone.

Hermione bit her lower lip as she stared at her friends. There was no way she could let them oppose Tom. She didn't want him to hurt them.

Like he hurt you? A colder part of her inquired angrily.

"It's not going to help my situation if you attack Tom," Hermione finally said while looking up at Longbottom.

She could almost see the indignation taking a hold of him so she quickly assured, "I'll solve it myself."

"Hermione…" Longbottom started weakly, clearly not convinced.

"Please," she whispered beseechingly.

Longbottom looked down at her helplessly. He clearly didn't want to comply with her plan but he also had a hard time to refuse her anything. Before Longbottom could give in, Lupin cleared his throat so that Hermione's eyes wandered to him.

"Okay," Lupin said reluctantly, gazing at her unsmilingly. "We will not confront Riddle." Here he threw a warning glance at Longbottom. Then he concluded, graveness tinting his voice, "But only if you promise us something."

Hermione kept looking at him while raising her eyebrows. Taking this as his cue to continue, Lupin said in a severe tone, "If you fail to… solve the problem, as you phrased it… so, if you fail, you are going to leave Riddle."

Involuntarily, Hermione's eyes widened as she heard his condition. Panic started to course through
her as she suddenly realised that while she had claimed she would solve it, she actually had no idea how.

_He slapped me._ The full force of that realisation finally hit her and flashed through her like a bolt. How was she going to solve something like that? Her eyes lost focus as she stared in front of her.

'Muggle-trash!' Tom had called her. How could he make up for something like that? Did he even _want_ to make up for it …?

_No, no._ Hermione shook her head, trying to bring herself out of her reverie and dispel the insecurity. That was Tom she was thinking about here. Of course, they could put things straight again. So, Hermione's eyes wandered back to Lupin who still eyed her concerned. All three of her friends seemed to wait for her answer. She took in a deep breath and then said in a surprisingly steady voice,

"Okay. I promise."

"I am sure you all will be relieved to hear that Mr Bowett has regained his consciousness again and seems to be well enough, considering the circumstances," Dumbledore said, while standing before his class.

The Gryffindor girl who had posed the question heaved a sigh of relief as she heard his answer.

_Fool._

"Unfortunately, though, he cannot give us an account as to who attacked him," the transfiguration teacher continued.

His clear blue eyes shortly fell on Tom and his gaze hardened considerably. Tom on the other hand looked back at the professor, completely unimpressed, his face arranged into an impenetrably blank mask. He could see the accusation in Dumbledore's eyes and would have like to smirk at the old fool. But Tom contained himself.

"But, sir," another stupid Gryffindor interjected, concern ridging his voice. "Isn't it possible to extract his memories and trace his attackers?"

"No, Mr Burington." Dumbledore looked at him, sadness staining his voice. "Obviously, the traumatic nature of this incident caused Mr Bowett to suppress the memory."

Tom could feel his lips curling up slightly, but he quickly schooled his features again. That Mudblood didn't repress anything. It actually was the potion Tom had provided his Knights with, that had destroyed the memories.

"Don't worry too much," Dumbledore said, trying to calm his class down. "Mr Bowett will completely recover—"

_Pity._

"—and return to class soon." Here Dumbledore smiled at them all reassuringly, which made Tom sick. "So, let us now continue with our lesson. We were talking about the Carcer spell with which it is possible to temporarily confine magic into an object. Who can tell me the incantation—"

Tom dropped out of the lecture. He had no intention of following that ludicrous class. He leaned back in his chair and let his eyes wander away from the professor. It wasn't long and his gaze landed
on the girl sitting at the table right in front of him. Again, his thoughts started to circle around the incident from the day before. He could still not believe what he had found out. The burning fury invaded his mind once again and he had trouble holding back his magic from crackling around him fiercely. He couldn't risk losing his control. Not in front of Dumbledore who was already suspicious of him.

Tom's now slightly red eyes were fixed on the girl in front of him. Hermione had her head propped up on her elbow. He wondered what she was thinking about as she didn't seem to pay Dumbledore any attention either. He watched as she raised her head from its position leaning on her hand. Then she propped up her other elbow to put down her head again. As Hermione leaned her head down, Tom saw how she winced in pain. She had tried to lean on her left cheek, he noted. That was where he had hit her yesterday.

There was an unpleasant jab in his stomach as he watched Hermione rubbing cautiously at her cheek. He could see a dark bruise where he had hit her. Tom hadn't realized how hard he had slapped her.

I shouldn't have slapped her at all, he thought, somehow shocked at his own behaviour. But the shock quickly subsided, driven away by a strange coldness which seemed to wrap around his mind. His thoughts were again drawn to the incident from yesterday and the red sheen returned to his eyes as they now wandered with cold detachment over the girl. She had insulted him! Where had she learned all the things about his father? He certainly had never told her that his father had been a Muggle. His housemates were too afraid of him to ever talk about his heritage. Still Tom could hear Hermione's words. 'At least half of you is scum!'

He balled his hands into fists while he desperately fought to prevent his magic from lashing out at her. How could she say something like that? he wondered furiously and had to rigorously control the dark magic. How dare she remind him of that detestable parentage? His bastard of a father had destroyed Tom's life right from the start. How could his mother have fallen in love with a lowly Muggle? It was disgusting to know that in Tom's very veins flowed the blood of a Muggle.

He was the heir of one of the oldest and noblest families in wizarding history. Yet he had to grow up in that shoddy orphanage and had to bow down before the Muggles. It was outrageous, really. If anything, those Muggles should crawl in the dirt before Tom's feet. That was where they belonged. They should thank him on their bended knees that he didn't just kill them.

Oh, how he despised them all, Tom though, his blood boiling with anger. It made him sick to know, that part of him was Muggle. He could feel his magic vengefully tugging at him in protest, denying that very thought, but it was the truth after all. His father had been a filthy Muggle.

Though, Tom had dealt with that problem, hadn't he? He was oddly contented by that thought, while a twisted smile slightly curled up the corners of his mouth. He had obliterated that shameful connection with the Muggle world. In the end, he had cleaned himself of that disgusting heritage. No-one knew, no-one could know what he had done. It was impossible to link him with those murders that had taken place in Little Hangleton.

... no-one knows...

His gaze wandered back to Hermione. She still rubbed her cheek but this time Tom didn't feel a jab in his stomach as he narrowed his eyes at her.

How had she found out?

His angry magic peaked, as he remembered that day when she had legilimized him. Back then she
had seemed to be unstoppable. With ease, she had taken down all his Occlumency shields. He had been disgustingly vulnerable as she had attacked him with an overpowering force. How did she manage to break his shields?

An image of her black wand flashed through Tom's mind. He opened his fists and laid his hands on the table. His face was arranged into a mask of indifference. He knew that to everyone else in this room he must appear as composed, slightly bored even. In reality, though, his fingers itched to pull his wand. That was why he put them on the table, to be able to resist that urge. The red sheen in his grey eyes was the only indication of the fury that washed over him. He continued to stare at the girl in front of him.

Had Hermione done it again? Had she invaded his mind and forced the information about Tom's father from him? He breathed in deeply to calm himself down. She might be more skilled in Legilimency, but he would have noticed any attempts of her breaking into his mind, wouldn't he? How was it even possible that she could be better in Legilimency than him? Had she used that wand of hers to overwhelm him? That was the only explanation he could see right now. It couldn't be that she was really more skilled than him. Not when she was...

He clenched his jaw tightly and the red sheen in his eyes deepened as his thoughts reluctantly wandered to the last words that witch had spoken to him. He still couldn't believe it.

A dark look crossed Tom's face and the parchment, lying on the table between his hands, suddenly started to smoke slightly. Black scorch marks appeared, slowly gaining in size while destroying the parchment. Tom's hard gaze was still directed at the girl in front of him.

*She is a Mudblood!*

She had lied to him, she had deceived him! From the very beginning she had always had her little secrets from him, but this was too much. That girl had tricked him. Tricked him into believing she was a Pureblood when in fact she was nothing more than a filthy Muggle. A Muggle that, by some perverted vagaries of nature, had a little control over magic. She was a worthless, disgusting creature.

*It is appalling,* Tom decided as his cold eyes wandered over her once again.

No wonder she had had to flee France! And here Tom had racked his brain as to why she had to leave France and what had happened to her. Now, he knew. Grindelwald was fighting a war against all those Muggles and Mudbloods. Of course she had been frightened that she would be one of his victims. So she had run away and then she had pretended to be a Pureblood.

How could she dare to impersonate a Pureblood?

Tom felt disgusted as he remembered how close that Mudblood had been to him. He had even started to trust her. How stupid he had been! He could trust no-one. Tom shuddered as he remembered how much he had let his guard down around her. The things he had told her! All the while she had been lying to him. How much of what she had told him was actually true?

*Probably nothing!*

She might have even mocked him behind his back. Because he had so easily fallen into her trap. Because he had so willingly believed her lies. Her alluring kindness had awoken a long buried hope in Tom. The hope that someone could care for him, that he was not all alone. He had been foolish to not have discarded that hope once and for all.

Tom knew that Hermione's betrayal had finally destroyed that hope. All he could see now that he
looked at the girl in front of him, was something tainted. Something sullied and worthless.

* A Mudblood!

Hermione's hand sank down on the table again. All the rubbing didn't help, her cheek still stung painfully. She didn't want anything more than to just run from the class room. She couldn't follow Dumbledore's explanations anyway. She just wanted to run away. Away from Hogwarts, from this time she was trapped in, from the curious glances the other students were throwing her way, but above all she wanted to run away from Tom. Hermione could almost feel him staring at her. Tom was sitting right behind her and Hermione felt very self-conscious. Unfortunately though, she couldn't run away from her problems.

Her thoughts continued to circle around the argument from yesterday. Hermione now regretted the things she had thrown Tom's way. Not only had she insulted him but she had also given away how much she actually knew about him. She had just been so shocked as he had talked disparagingly about Muggles. Why had she been so surprised by his hate? Hermione wondered numbly. It wasn't new or unexpected coming from him. In the end, Tom was-

Hermione reached for her quill and held it tightly, while she forcefully stopped that thought from fully taking form in her head.

It was no surprise that Tom didn't like Muggles that much, was it? After all, he had had to grow up in that disgusting orphanage where Carter had mistreated him. Of course Tom wouldn't exactly like the Muggle world. Hermione could hardly blame him. This didn't change the fact, though, that his eyes had been blazing with hate, yesterday. It had seemed like there was no room for any other emotion. The only thing left had been this unending hate.

That hate was something Hermione wanted to forget. She had faced it before and it had brought her nothing but grief. Hermione had struggled with that evil for far too long, so she had been more than willing to just forget it. It had been so nice to live a normal, a peaceful, life for a change. Hermione knew that she had acted imprudent yesterday. She had revealed too many of her secrets. But as Tom had shown her this other, darker, side of him, he had hurt her very much. She had yelled back at him and had insulted him in return.

Hermione looked down at her hands lying on the table. She bit her lip.

She should have never said those things about Tom's father. That had been stupid. Hermione admitted, it had been unfair to have insulted Tom. She had simply lost her temper. But his reaction hadn't been justified either. It had been wrong of him to have slapped her. That fight had just been unnecessary and regretful. They had both said and done things that had been wrong.

Hermione looked up from her hands again and stared in front of her, not seeing anything.

What she needed to do was to talk with Tom. Hermione didn't really want to face him right now, but it was the only thing she could do. She had no idea whether she would be able to forgive him. But she knew they had to talk.

Her eyes shortly wandered to Longbottom who sat right beside her. He seemed to look at her in concern. Hermione felt guilty for causing her friends so much worry. But they didn't need to worry anymore, she decided determinedly. She would talk with Tom and they would put things right again. Hermione sat up in her chair. Yes, now that she had taken that decision she was feeling a little better. She just had to explain to Tom why she had been so upset about the things he had said. He now knew that she was a Muggleborn, so he would understand why she hadn't taken it well when he had insulted Muggles.
"Kindly read pages 134 to 165 in your textbooks and write a two foot essay about the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods of transferring magic." Hermione heard Dumbledore finish the lesson for today.

She was rather glad that the class ended now as she wanted to get over this conversation with Tom quickly. So she hurriedly stuffed her unused quill and parchment in her bag and then turned around to talk with Tom. He had been faster than her and was just leaving the classroom. Hermione hurried after him. She left the classroom and could see Tom standing in the corridor and talking with Lestrange.

Hermione hesitantly walked over to Tom. Lestrange sneered at her as he spotted her then he turned around and walked away. Tom’s gaze turned to ice as his eyes fell on her, but Hermione wasn’t scared off by that. As she reached Tom, she looked timidly up into his face. Hermione bit her lip as she found him still staring down at her coldly, his grey eyes radiating nothing but anger.

"I… I…” Hermione couldn't help but stammer under his piercing gaze.

She breathed in deeply, reached out for him and put her hand lightly on his arm.

"We need to talk, Tom," she finally managed to say in a soft and shaky voice while she avoided looking him in the face.

As Tom didn’t answer, Hermione cautiously peered up at him. He was currently staring at her hand lying on his arm then his gaze wandered from her hand back to her face. Hermione's eyes widened in shock and her whole body stiffened as she stared up at him. Unmistakably, there was disgust and contempt flaming up in Tom's eyes as he scanned her.

She quickly removed her trembling hand from his arm and could feel tears building up in her as he continued to look at her in this unbearable way. Hermione avoided his gaze, unable to stand the disgust in his eyes, and stared down at her feet.

Then she whispered in a teary voice, "I'm sorry."

The words had barely left her mouth as she spun around and nearly ran from him. She could feel her body shaking slightly as she ran down the corridors. The look on his face was still present in her mind. He had scanned her as if she was a repugnant piece of dirt, something so sickening that he couldn't be expected to stay in her presence. Hermione felt her heart beating painfully fast in her chest as she darted down a well-known corridor. She passed three doors in the corridor before she flung open the fourth and tumbled into the room behind. It was a girls' toilet. Hermione's gaze wandered from the tiled floor to the row of sinks at one wall. She felt sick as her eyes lingered on one sink. There was a strange feeling of numbness spreading through her body as she slowly walked over to the row of sinks. For a few minutes, she just stood there and stared vacantly at the sink in front of her. The disgust in his eyes still haunted her mercilessly. Never had she expected him to look at her like this. So much disdain, so much abhorrence.

So very familiar, she admitted reluctantly.

Hermione took another step towards the sink and leaned a little forward. There she could see it. It was engraved on the tap of the sink, easy to overlook and very inconspicuous, but still present. A tiny snake was engraved on the metal of the tap. It was easy to ignore. If one really wanted, one would be able to never notice the small snake. That still didn't make it go away, though. It didn't change the fact that beneath this normal façade lay one of Hogwarts' worst secrets.

Hermione extended a trembling hand towards the tap. She skimmed one finger over the tiny snake.
She had done that already, a long time ago, as she had asked Harry to show her the entrance. Yes, she had done that before… she should have known better.

"What are you doing here?" a voice wailed behind her.

Hermione whipped around while flicking her wrist so that her wand landed in her hand. But she never raised her wand as she looked at the translucent person who had just spoken. The ghost of a teenage girl was hovering before her. She was staring at Hermione with a look of misery on her face.

"Hello, Myrtle," Hermione whispered tonelessly.

"Ah, so you know my name." Myrtle frowned at her with a wry face. Then she continued with cold sarcasm in her voice, "Someone really knows my name. How very exciting."

Hermione ignored the accusation in the ghost's voice, but continued to numbly stare at her. Then she broke eye contact with the dead girl and looked around the girls' toilet. This was pathetic, wasn't it? she wondered miserably.

"Here's where you died?" Hermione asked in an emotionless voice.

"So it seems," Myrtle replied snippily. Then she lamented in a shrill tone, "But do you think anyone cares? No! Of course not. Not about poor, insignificant Myrtle. Who would ever miss her? No-one, that's who! Not when they have wonderful, popular Olive Hornby."

Hermione's gaze moved from the whinging girl in front of her and once again swept over the room towards the sinks. She shuddered as her eyes fell on the shiny taps. Hermione's grip on her wand involuntarily tightened. She wanted to get away from here where she had all his transgressions thrown at her.

She turned back to Myrtle, who was still complaining about Hornby, and said in a soft voice, "I'm sorry you had to die."

Myrtle stopped her ranting and looked at her in surprise and shock, but Hermione didn't stay to see more. She whirled her wand before she stepped into the dark pressure of apparition. She reappeared miles and miles away. Immediately upon her arrival cold wind ripped mercilessly at her and salty air filled her nostrils. Hermione breathed in deeply. She was standing on a cliff. The stone was washed out and rough from the force of the ocean. Waves of the churned up sea clashed hard against the stone and came dangerously close to the spot where Hermione now stood.

The rock was some distance away from the shore. Normally it was only reachable by boat, and certainly not today as the North Sea was raging furiously against the land. Hermione stood still on the unreachable cliff while she stared at the ocean in front of her. At the horizon the hazy sky and the grey water met and melted so that a parting line was undiscernible. Seagulls were flying in the sky, fighting desperately against the strong wind. Hermione felt drops of sea water showering her face as the waves still thundered loudly against the cliff.

She still held her black wand in her hand while she stared numbly at the threatening sea in front of her. There was the illogical wish to throw the wooden stick away into the angry ocean. Instead of tossing her wand away, Hermione just crouched down on the stony surface of the cliff and stared out at the sea.

She squeezed her eyes shut and rested her head on her knees while the ocean still clashed, deafening loud, against the cliff. There was a sickening feeling in her stomach. It gnawed at her mercilessly and didn't want to release her again. It made her body shiver and unpleasant chills shook her.
Why had he looked at her like that?

Hermione grabbed her wand tighter as this question coursed through her mind.

_How_ could he look at her like that?

Often people had stared at her in that way. Back in her time period many people had despised her due to her parentage. Dark wizards had even tried to kill her because she was Muggleborn. In their eyes she was nothing more than an animal. A pest that had to be exterminated. They were cloyed by here mere existence.

But, not Tom, not her boyfriend.

She was still the same, wasn't she? Nothing had changed. Why would he suddenly be disgusted by her?

He was always so gentle towards her and he protected her. He liked her. She needed him.

He was her boyfriend.

He was Tom.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and her face was twisted into a mask of pain as memories flooded her. She saw dark figures attacking her and cursing her. There was hate visible on their faces. They hated her for being a Muggleborn. Suddenly among all this pain and darkness Hermione could see smoldering red eyes. They were filled with malice and disgust as they observed, indifferently, how she suffered.

_No!_ Her eyes shot open again and she stared at the North Sea in front of her. It still raged furiously against the cliff.

He was Tom! No-one else. Just Tom!

She stood up. Her hands were trembling now and dizziness flooded her.

She had escaped this darkness, hadn't she? It was her past. People had despised her, they had attacked her and tried to take her life. She had fought them with all she got. She had tried to stop their hate. It had been horrible, unbearable and agonizing, this life. But it was her past! It was over. She was safe here. There was no need to fight anymore. She didn't *want* to fight. She wanted to be safe and protected. Not alone and lost in darkness.

Hermione started to pace to and fro in an erratic manner. The small surface of the cliff was jagged and rough. Froth of the waves still hit her face.

The darkness could not have found her again. She was not ready. Hadn't she done enough? She deserved some happiness. Closure. He had *not* looked at her like that! He had been angry, she thought frantically while she still paced on top of the cliff. Yes, just angry. He would calm down again. Maybe he was even going to apologize.

Her hand wandered to her left cheek and rubbed cautiously over the bruise.

He would realize that he still liked her. He would apologize because she needed him. Her past was not allowed to return. He needed to protect her from the darkness. She didn't want to fight again. And she didn't want to be hit by hate and disdain again. There was no way she could bear that. Not again.
And not from him.

Suddenly Hermione slipped on the algae on the cliff’s surface. She tumbled and nearly fell over the edge but managed to catch her balance. She still fell on the rough surface of the cliff and painfully grazed her knees. Her heart thrummed away in her chest as she stared at the angry sea in front of her.

"He is still Tom!" she screamed desperately at the ocean.

Her voice was lost in the loud thundering of the waves against the cliff.

Hermione didn't know how long she sat there on the cliff, staring at the angry ocean. Her clothes were damp from the salty water that sprayed her whenever a wave hit the cliff. She knew she should feel cold now, but there was nothing.

After a long time, which must have been hours, the sun slowly disappeared and darkness fell over the sea. Hermione stood up from her crouched position on the stone. Her eyes wandered over the now black water in front of her, then she pulled her wand and apparated away. She reappeared on Hogwarts' grounds, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Without paying any attention to her surroundings she took off and walked up to the castle. As she entered Hogwarts, she was greeted by empty corridors. Obviously, dinner had already been served and the student population had gone to their common rooms. Like in trance, Hermione wandered through the castle and towards the Gryffindor common room. She had just reached moving staircase as she heard a sharp voice calling after her.

"Ms DeCerto!"

Hermione knew who it was, but somehow she couldn't find it in herself to care. Normally, she was hit by irritation whenever she heard that particular voice, but now there was nothing, just a heavy exhaustion weighting down on her, numbing all her feelings.

"Ms DeCerto." The anger in the voice seemed to have grown. "Did you not hear me?"

Hermione slowly turned around. As expected she found professor Legifer standing in the corridor just a few metres away. She was looking as neat as always with her spotless clothes, emanating an air of superiority as she glared darkly at Hermione. It was somehow strange how Hermione didn't feel in the least bit annoyed by the pointless perfection that woman so liked to flaunt. The evil look on Legifer's face had intensified as Hermione had not reacted at all. The professor briskly walked over to where Hermione was standing, stopped before her and stared disapprovingly at her.

"I would be very delighted to hear what kept you to attend my class today," Legifer snapped irately while still hitting Hermione with her glare.

Hermione continued looking at the clearly enraged professor but her own temper still didn't react at all.

"I… I wasn't feeling so well today," Hermione finally said softly.

A nasty glint appeared in Legifer's eyes and then she spat mordantly, "I don't appreciate it very much if my students cut my class."

"I apologize," Hermione replied in a strangely emotionless voice.

A sharp frown took form between Legifer's eyebrows as she narrowed her eyes at Hermione.
"Be that as it may," she declared in a clipped tone. "It still doesn't excuse your intolerable behaviour."

Hermione didn't answer anything, causing the professor to huff at her irately.

"Follow me," she ordered tartly.

Without another word, Legifer abruptly turned around and walked down the corridor.

"Where to?" Hermione dared to ask.

She didn't want to spite the professor. But that painful numbness was still wrapped around her and Hermione just wanted to be alone.

"You still have detention today," came Legifer's terse reply.

It was then that Hermione remembered it was a Friday. Since the Christmas break, she always had to serve detention at Fridays.

… Christmas break… Hermione visibly flinched as her thoughts wandered to the incidents that had occurred during that break. It had been during the Christmas break that Hermione had, for the first time, seen more in Tom than just-

With an effort she shook off that chain of thought and hurried after Legifer. They didn't talk as Hermione followed the professor through the deserted corridors. Hermione wondered if she should ask Legifer to adjourn the detention. She didn't feel up to it at all. Company was somehow the last thing she needed now. In the end, she remained to be silent for she knew Legifer would never acquiesce anyway.

As they arrived, Legifer opened the door to her office and entered. Hermione followed in. The professor ignored Hermione's presence completely, walked over to her desk, sat down and started to work on a pile of essays. That rude behaviour would usually enrage Hermione, but she somehow was glad not to be expected to talk. She just walked over to the professor and sat down at the chair in front of the desk. Then she reached out for the huge tome, lying on the desk, and opened it at the passage where she had stopped reading last Friday. As Hermione's eyes wandered over the words, the expected indignation didn't take hold of her. Words that would otherwise have evoked an outcry for gender equality now just washed over her. With a detached apathy she continued to read, now and then mechanically writing something down to add to her summary.

It was almost an hour later, that Legifer spoke again. She looked up from the essay she had just been marking and stared at Hermione with her cold eyes. Then she asked in a glacial tone, "What chapter are you reading now?"

Hermione looked up from the book and peered at the professor.

"Forty-nine," she answered. Her voice was cold and completely controlled. The absence of any emotion in her own voice disturbed her. But again, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Slowly a cold smile curled up the corners of Legifer's mouth as she continued to hit Hermione with a glare. Then she said, an edge of malice hidden in her tone, "As you seemingly don't feel well today, I don't want to keep you too long." Her voice turned suspiciously friendly as she continued, "So, why don't you skip to chapter fifty-one?"

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion, not being used to acts of kindness coming from Legifer.
But there was no other option to react, so she just nodded at the professor and then flipped through the book.

‘Chapter Fifty-One’, Hermione read. Then her stomach flopped as she read on.

‘Even if you heed all the advice that has been given in this book, this is no guarantee that you will never be met by setbacks during your marriage. In fact, it is very unlikely that you will be spared from quarrels, churning up your relationship. As a wife, it is your duty to resolve any domestic dissension that might occur. Before a trifle matter can turn into serious discord, you should talk with your husband and admit to your mistakes. Even if you are convinced that he is the one responsible for the quarrel, it should be you starting to make amends.’

Hermione shortly stopped reading and just stared at the words in front of her. Something broke through that numbness which seemed to suppress all her feelings, but she wasn't entirely sure what it was nor did she want to know. Hermione then raised her head slightly and let her eyes wander to Legifer. She still seemed to work on the essays and her head was bent, while her quill danced over the work of one of her students. Still Hermione was able to spot that evil smile, playing around Legifer's mouth. It was quite obvious that even Legifer knew about that quarrel between Tom and herself. Hermione shortly closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Then she returned her attention to the book in front of her.

She continued reading the chapter. It was full of advice on how to end a dispute between spouses and how everything was most likely the wife's mistake. Hermione caught herself wishing this book was right. The world this book depicted was so simple. Everything was neatly divided into right and wrong, black and white.

It was all complete nonsense. Still, Hermione wished it were true. It would make life a lot easier. Unfortunately, she knew better.

It was another hour later that Legifer spoke again. The twisted smile still curled up the corners of her mouth as she told Hermione the detention was over for today. Hermione just nodded at the professor, closed the book and put it down on the desk. Then she rolled up her parchment with her notes and stuffed it in her bag, before she stood up, intending to leave the office. Before she could turn around Legifer asked, taunt badly concealed in her words,

"I hope you learned something from this detention?"

Hermione just stared at her, not knowing how to answer. That feeling of detachment still coursed through her, preventing her temper from flaring up.

So she just replied in an empty voice, "Yes, professor."

"As I understood it there has been discord between you and Mr Riddle," Legifer said in her usual clipped tone. "You know that I have advised Mr Riddle to leave you. But that doesn't stop me to give you an advice as well."

Hermione just continued staring numbly at the professor. Legifer huffed at the lack of reaction and then told Hermione in a cutting tone, "Whatever the reason for this dispute, you shouldn't forget how very lucky you are that Mr Riddle is willing to spend any time with you."

Her eyes displayed nothing but disapproval as they wandered over Hermione's crumbled uniform. There were several stains on her black outer robes where the sea water had dried and left behind white salt.
"So, it's best you heed my advice: you should abandon your pride, seek out Mr Riddle and apologize for whatever it is you have done."

Hermione breathed in deeply as she looked at Legifer's stern face. Then she said in a soft, though still so strangely emotionless voice, "And what if it has been his fault?"

The professor just shook her head before she said impatiently, "Even if he is at fault, which I doubt, you should still apologize. Or do you want him to leave you?"

No, Hermione thought. It struck her then, how much she wanted Tom to stay with her. She needed him, didn't she? And maybe… didn't Tom need her as well? He wouldn't leave her just because she was Muggleborn. She had barely formulated that thought as the disgust in his eyes once again flashed through her mind, making Hermione swallow hard. An emotion finally cut through that numbness which had taken hold of her. And that emotion was fear.

She was utterly afraid that Tom would abandon her … that He had found her again.

No, he is Tom, she angrily hissed at herself. There was no reason to despair. She knew Tom, after all. He would never hurt her.

…he slapped you yesterday, another part of her threw in cautiously.

"Ms DeCerto, you should be grateful that Mr Riddle put up with all your deficiencies." Legifer's cold voice seeped through to her. "It was only a matter of time that he would find something he couldn't accept. If you want him to stay with you, you need to apologize and change whatever it is he is displeased with."

Hermione balled her hands into fists. This was a problem she couldn't just 'change'. She was born with it and actually didn't want it to change. But could Tom accept it?

"Yes, professor," she said in a completely emotionless voice.

Legifer just raised one eyebrow at her in doubt, clearly not believing that Hermione had understood her. Then she turned away from Hermione and continued marking the essays, Hermione took that as a sign for being dismissed, turned around to the door and left the office. She shut the door softly behind her. A soundless sigh escaped her while she stood in the corridor. Her back was still turned to the heavy, wooden door and the passageway was dived in semi-darkness. Somehow this silence was soothing, compared to the uncomfortable tension in Legifer's office. She was glad, that the detention was over for today. But as bothersome as the whole thing was, Hermione couldn't find it in herself to get aggravated by the professor's inept behaviour anymore. Legifer didn't make her blood boil with anger, because Hermione felt empty. So empty, it seemed, that not even Legifer's words could reach her anymore.

Hermione closed her eyes in an attempt to fight that emptiness inside of her. As she opened her eyes again she flicked her right wrist. The feeling of the smooth wood of her wand in her hand was calming and provided her with a feeling of security. She looked at the black wand in her hand. So many memories were connected with that wand. A lot of them were bad, but still, Hermione felt reassured just by feeling this weight in her hand. She had used this wand in the war while she had fought alongside her friends. Harry and Ron had never backed down, regardless of what fate had thrown their way. They had been so brave. Just like the wand, they had always given her a feeling of security. They had protected her.

Hermione stiffened slightly as she found herself thinking of her lost friends. She hadn't done that a lot, lately, had she? But now, images of them flooded her mind, making her dizzy and her head hurt.
Ultimately, her thoughts landed where she didn't want them to go at all – the last memory she had of her friends. They had been in the Ministry of Magic. And He had been there, too. The Dark Lord.

Hermione's stomach clenched painfully and her hand grabbed her wand tightly.

Back then, she had been so afraid of him. Even now, the mere memory greatly unsettled her and made her tremble in fear. He had emanated such hate and malice that it had been almost palpable in the air. He had been like a monster, released from her worst nightmares. Cruel, merciless, … unstoppable.

With a sharp breath of air, Hermione pulled herself away from those memories. It made her feel weak and frightened to think about Him. In order to break her stupor, she stowed her wand away in its holster and took off down the dark corridor in direction to the Gryffindor common room.

Still, those terrible, crimson eyes didn't want to leave her alone. But as they might still infest her mind, Hermione was sure they had left her life. He had left her life. He was gone. There was no way she would be able to face Him again.

As she rounded a corner and entered another corridor, Hermione's left hand skimmed over her cheek. The pain was still there, reminding her of what Tom had done to her. Her heart clenched painfully as she remembered that look on his face as she had wanted to talk with him after Transfiguration. It had been so full of disdain and revulsion.

That just couldn't be true. It couldn't. Sure, she was a Muggleborn, but that didn't change anything. Certainly, Tom would have realised that by now.

*I need to talk with him,* Hermione decided determined while she ignored that feeling of doubt which had started to gnaw at her since she had received that bruise on her cheek.

Maybe she should leave him more time to calm down, but she needed to make sure. He was still Tom, her boyfriend. While Hermione was convinced of that, she needed him to allay her fears and dispel that speck of doubt. The hate behind those crimson eyes was haunting her, and she needed Tom to assure her that that hate was not going to come back. She was still safe.

She turned around and walked back the way she had come from. Hermione knew that this week Tom had to do his prefect duties. He would be patrolling the corridors to catch any student out of their common rooms. Thanks to Legifer, it was after curfew and Hermione would search for Tom.

She walked down the dark corridors of the castle in direction of the first floor. She knew Tom always started doing his rounds at the first floor, so she climbed down the moving staircases. As she arrived at the first floor, she turned left and entered the maze of corridors where many of her classrooms were situated. After a few more minutes of wandering the deserted corridors of the castle, Hermione passed her Ancient Runes class room and then turned left into another passage way. Thick tapestries decorated one wall of this corridor while the other was flanked by many windows. Their coloured glass reminded Hermione of church windows. The moon shone brightly outside and its light was broken by the windows' glass throwing eerie lights on the corridor floor.

Hermione's steps echoed loudly on the stone floor as she walked down this corridor. It took her another few steps to realise that not all those echoes came from her. She stopped walking but the sounds of footsteps still rang through the corridor. Hermione breathed in deeply and felt her heart starting to beat painfully fast. Unbidden, the image of Tom's crimson eyes flashed through her mind and she wondered whether her plan of searching him had been a good idea after all. It was too late for doubts, she realized as she heard the steps growing louder. A moment later, the person stepped into the corridor Hermione was in right now. Her eyes widened and she stood stock-still as she saw it...
was Tom. Somehow, she was surprised that it was really him. She didn't know if she should feel relieved now that she had found him, or just scared.

Tom, for one, didn't show in any way that he had even recognised her. He obviously had seen her standing in the corridor, but he had yet to react to her presence. Hermione's gaze wandered cautiously to his face. The light provided by the moon was bright enough to illuminate Tom's features. She nearly flinched as she saw a detached coldness radiating from his grey eyes as he scanned her. He had nearly reached her but Hermione could still not see any sign that he had recognized her. His face was a blank as his eyes wandered over her form.

She shuddered as she felt herself under his scrutiny. While he scanned her she could see the horrible disgust flare up in those cold grey eyes. Tom looked away from her, seemingly determined to ignoring her. The disgust, though, was still visible in his eyes. As she stared at Tom, Hermione felt like she was something way beneath him. Something he couldn't be bothered to waste any time on. He looked as if her mere presence was appalling to him. Still, Hermione found that she couldn't look away from him. She was biting her lip in an attempt to stop it from quivering.

Tom finally passed her but Hermione still stood paralysed in the middle of the corridor. He didn't show in any way other than the contempt burning in his eyes that he had recognized her. Hermione started to tremble as he passed her so near. He had just done a few more steps away from her as Hermione spun around and blurted out,

"Tom, please, wait."

She watched him stop before he slowly, reluctantly, turned around to her. She took an unconscious step away from him as she saw a fearsome and deathly cold glint enter his eyes. The immaculate, blank mask was still covering his face, but Hermione felt sadness tearing at her as she saw what was behind his mask. She breathed in, trying to calm herself down.

He is still Tom. Your fears are ridiculous. He is Tom! she told herself as she saw the repulsion in his hard eyes.

Then she whispered in a soft voice, "Let me explain."

The repulsion did not leave his eyes and Hermione swallowed hard. But he would surely understand her if she could just explain everything.

She ignored the disgust in his eyes and continued in a shaky, soft voice, "I- I know that you are angry with me because I lied to you for so long. This whole thing must be a surprise to you. I… I'm sorry I didn't tell you. But I didn't know how you-"

Hermione stopped her whispered confession. Yes, she hadn't known how he would react. She bit her lip as she stared up at him with wide, scared eyes. Right now, he was reacting in the worst way possible.

No, he is Tom! He will understand!

"I was just afraid people wouldn't accept me here," she finally concluded in a scared sounding voice. The disgust though was still on his face, so Hermione continued beseechingly, "Where I come from, I was shunned for what I am. I didn't want that to happen here, too, so I lied. I'm… I'm so sorry I lied even to you, Tom."

The steel hard glint never left his eyes as he stared down at her. Hermione's breathing was very fast now. There was not even a glint of sympathy or remorse showing on Tom's face as he still fixed her
with a deadly cold glare. Hermione worried her lip as she looked up at him.

*Please, prove me wrong. Show me that you are not him.*

She breathed in deeply, trying to calm her ragged breathing down. Then she told him, her voice surprisingly stable, "Yes, I'm a Muggleborn. But that is not a bad thing. It doesn't change who I am."

She looked up at him and searched his face for any indication that her words had reached him, but was met by a wall of indifference. The only thing that shone through was his disdain. Hermione was flooded by a feeling of dread as she looked into his cold eyes. She wanted to give him an opening, because she needed him to prove her fears wrong.

So, she said, her voice laced with nervousness, desperate to give him that chance, "I... I'm sorry that I lied to you for so long. And I'm also sorry that I mentioned your father yesterday. I didn't mean to insult you."

Despite her apparent distress, there was no reaction coming from Tom. He wasn't replying to her apology at all, so Hermione whispered fearfully, "Please, talk to me."

A dark look crossed his face and Tom narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione was shaken by the hate she could see starting to burn behind his eyes. He took a threatening step towards her and she couldn't help but cower away from him. Suddenly an inappropriate thought flew through her mind that made her feel bad for thinking it. But right now, she felt the need to flex her wrist and have her wand in her hand. She wanted to be prepared to defend herself. Why would she need that?

It was Tom after all who stood now in front of her. The air seemed to bristle with his angry magic, though.

"There is nothing we have to discuss anymore," Tom hissed at her in a cold and piercing voice. Hermione felt her hands shaking uncontrollably. She balled them into fists to stop them from trembling. Then she set her shoulders and said in a firm voice that didn't quite mirror the turmoil inside her, "There is a lot we have to talk about. You can't just treat me like this."

Hermione's body froze in horror as she felt that peak of dark magic in the air that followed her statement. Tom glared at her and the expression on his face was just murderous. She couldn't help but remember where she had seen that dark expression before. There was no denying it anymore. This angry magic, the hate on his face, the merciless glint in his cold eyes, this was all too familiar. She had seen it all before.

Hermione's world was crashing down around her and she felt herself being ripped from this time period and hurled back into her memories, into her time. She continued to stare at Tom, but she was unable to see him. All she could see was…

*Lord Voldemort!*

She felt like a deer caught in the headlights of a car as she stared at the malevolence blazing in his steel hard eyes. She was still paralysed by fear as Tom took a step towards her. He grabbed her upper arms painfully tight and brutally slammed her into the wall behind her. Hermione whimpered as her back collided hard with the stone wall. He was pressing her harshly against the wall while his raw magical power was still crackling around them.

...and it was *his* magic. It was Voldemort's magic.

It pierced Hermione's body painfully, making breathing difficult. She trembled as this terrible and so familiar force ripped at her. Slowly, she raised her eyes at Tom. His expressionless face didn't match
the furious magic swirling around him. Hermione was stunned speechless by this all consuming hate she could spot behind his mask. That hate had followed her for so long. It had destroyed everything and had left only her behind.

*Alone and broken.*

She should pull her wand now. It was still safely stowed away in her holster and she would need it now. But as she stared up at the hate blazing viciously in his eyes, creating a fearsome red glint, she just couldn't draw her wand. It was still Tom. Why did she need her wand? He wouldn't hurt her, would he?

*He already hurt you!* a colder part of her hissed at her harshly. *Pull your wand!*

Hermione looked up in his fearsome red eyes and still didn't draw her wand. She didn't want to fight, because she didn't want to believe. Nothing scared her more than that His hate could have found her again. She could not face it again. So, she just looked up at Tom, silently begging him not to break her again.

*Prove me wrong!*

His grip on her arms tightened achingly as he hissed at her, a murderous touch in his voice, *"If you know what's good for you, then you stay away from me."*

Hermione's eyes widened as she understood the threat that lay behind his icy cold words.

*"You don't want me to hurt you, Mudblood."*

His magic intensified as he hissed those words at her. As if to underline his threat it attacked her, breached her body and Hermione couldn't stop that gasp of pain escaping her lips. Though, the last word he had uttered hurt a lot more than the brutal force of his angry magic on her body. Tom released her arms and stepped away from her. Now unsupported, Hermione crumpled to the floor as her legs were no longer in the condition to hold her upright. She panted heavily, trying to catch her breath again. Tom was looking down at her with his cold, pitiless eyes, uncaring. Then, abruptly, he turned around and walked away from her.

Hermione called after him with a soft, pleading voice, *"Tom. Please."*

She watched in horror how Tom pulled his wand while he faced her again. The cruel glint never left his eyes as he brandished his wand in a small, elegant movement. Hermione felt a hard force hitting her so that she was hurled to the floor. The power behind the spell made her skid on the floor until she collided with the other wall of the corridor. Hermione felt pain searing through her shoulder as she hit the wall. The air was knocked from her and she slumped down on the ground. Her breathing was ragged but she was still able to hear the noise of the steps. The echoes of his steps in the deserted corridor were getting softer and softer until she couldn't make them out anymore.

Tom had left her.

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Hermione walked slowly, like in trance, back to the Gryffindor common room. Her shoulder hurt. But that pain wasn't really there. It *couldn't* be there. If she accepted the pain, she had to accept the reason for her injury, too. On her way, she met a group of third year Slytherins who obviously ignored curfew. They were sneering at her in contempt as she passed them. Hermione didn't care. They even hissed at her,
"Mudblood!"

To Hermione it didn't matter. Why should she be bothered by their hate? She just couldn't let it touch her. Because if she did, she would have to admit that the look on his face had hurt her, too. That those emotions behind his eyes had broken her.

Hermione entered the Gryffindor common room. It was crowded. Lessons were long over and it was Friday so the students didn't have to do their homework. They still had all the weekend to finish it. Instead, they now enjoyed their time playing games with their friends, chatting or reading a book. Whatever it was, Hermione didn't want to join them. She passed the common room in direction of the stair case.

"Hermione!" She stopped and turned around to Longbottom who had called out to her.

He stood from the chair he had been occupying and walked over to her.

"You suddenly disappeared after Transfiguration," Longbottom said in his gentle voice. "We were worried. Are you alright?"

Hermione nearly cringed as she saw honest concern shining in his eyes. She couldn't deal with that concern right now. If she did, she would have to admit that the opposite of that feeling existed. And that he had looked at her, radiating off that horrible feeling.

"Yes, I'm okay," Hermione said in a calm and steady voice.

"Why don't you stay here with us a little bit?" Longbottom asked her softly while he gestured to Weasley and Lupin.

"I'm really tired, you know," Hermione said in an emotionless, almost frosty voice. "I think I'm going to sleep."

Still there was this unbearable concern in his eyes as he looked at her. "Okay. But if you change your mind you know where we are."

Hermione nodded while casting him a hollow smile. Then she turned away from him and resumed her way to her dormitory. She had hoped to find it empty but she had no such luck. Rose and Lucia were sitting on Lucia's criminally pink bed and were flipping through a magazine. They both looked up as Hermione entered. Hermione could instantly see that offending curiosity flaring up in their eyes.

"Hermione, want to join us?" Rose asked her in a shrill voice.

Hermione just shook her head. That was the last thing she wanted to do right now. Sitting there with them, reading stupid fashion magazines and discussing her blood status. Because that was what they wanted to know, wasn't it? Hermione ignored the two girls and went over to her bed where she sat down and drew the covers around her. She lay down and stared at the red covers surrounding her.

She couldn't ignore it any longer. There was no denying it. Since he had looked at her in this unbearable way it had been back. Her pain, her grief and the bitter loneliness, they tore at her very being. It struck her again. Darkness had stepped back into her life and she was unprotected.

Maybe not all was lost? Maybe she could save it somehow? Hermione rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. She could still see the disgust in those grey eyes. And she knew her hope was lost. She had to accept it, his hate was back. Lord Voldemort had finally found her again.
Sleep didn't want to come to Hermione for a long time, but when it came it was accompanied by nightmarish memories.

"No! Not Ginny!" Hermione heard Harry's desperate scream. She turned around and just saw Ginny crumple to the floor. Harry ran towards her while he threw curses at the Death Eater who had struck his girlfriend down. Hermione quickly brandished her wand and cast a powerful curse at the Death Eater she was fighting right now. The man couldn't defend himself and was hit. He fell down and Hermione knew that he had died. But right now, she didn't care. Couldn't feel the guilt.

Hermione turned around and ran to where Harry and Ginny were. She sank down beside Ginny. Her eyes were closed and her face deathly pale. But there was still life in her, Hermione realised as she felt her pulse. Then she grabbed Ginny's hand and Harry's shoulder and apparated them away. They reappeared far away. In front of the tent. On save grounds.

Weeks went by. And with each day that passed Hermione became more and more desperate. The curse that had hit Ginny was devious. Dark Magic. First it had taken Ginny's strength. Then her legs had gone numb. Hermione had tried everything to stop the curse, to no avail. But still there had been hope.

Then the pain had struck. Ginny screamed in pain. And no potion Hermione made could ease her suffering. It was horrible, seeing her friend in so much agony, unable to help. Harry always sat at Ginny's side. Hermione knew it broke him. But what could she do? Tell him to leave her? Tell him that all hope was lost?

For they all knew it. Ginny was dying in the slowest and cruellest way possible. She was in so much agony that she couldn't even recognise her boyfriend any longer. And Hermione found herself wishing that Ginny would die.

She didn't want her to die! Ginny was her friend. She couldn't picture life without her. But Hermione knew, it would be better for Ginny to be able to go.
Change Of Plans

The next morning, Hermione woke up with a piercing headache. She felt sick and strangely exhausted. She rolled over in her bed and softly moaned in pain. Her shoulder still hurt and so did her cheek. The pain hit her, just like the realization, which now ran through her head; yesterday, Tom had left her. He had really left her. She had seen it in his eyes. He despised her now. Hermione didn't want to remember that horrible disgust in his eyes as he had looked at her. It had felt as if she was drowning in the hate he had radiated. As she had seen that all too familiar hate, Hermione had known that Tom would never come back to her. It was this exact hate that had haunted her for the last two years. Now, it was back.

Hermione carefully sat up in her bed and rubbed her aching shoulder. Then she got up and shuffled over to the bathroom. She had barely taken a step as an enthusiastic "Morning, Hermione!" was thrown her way. Hermione blinked a few times and nearly groaned in frustration as she found Lucia and Rose, sitting on Lucia's bed and eyeing her nosily. Hermione just stared back at her seemingly excited dorm mates. What did they want now?

As if she had heard Hermione's last thought, Rose now said, her voice thick with false compassion, "We've heard about you and Riddle. It's so sad."

Here Lucia sighed, though that gesture of pity couldn't completely conceal the curiosity glinting in her eyes.

Rose continued, the nosiness almost oozing from her words, "What happened?"

There was a painful stab in Hermione's stomach, but she chose to ignore it. Instead she replied stiffly, not wanting to discuss anything with those two girls, "We broke up."

"Yes, that's what we heard," Lucia threw in before she scanned Hermione inquisitively. It seemed, though, polite tact wasn't Lucia's thing, so she inquired, "Who was it?"

By now Hermione had tried to slip away from them towards the bathroom but now she turned around and frowned in confusion.

"Who was what?"

Lucia started to giggle inanely, unable to continue talking. Rose, obviously, didn't have any problems to continue rubbing salt into Hermione's wounds. So, she now said, her eyes shining excited, "Well, Riddle broke up with you because you cheated on him. So, who was? It must have been someone really good looking, if you ditch Riddle for him. It wasn't Marc, was it?"

Both girls looked at her nosily, ready to absorb whatever information Hermione would give. Hermione, though, just felt sick. She stared at her dorm mates with wide eyes, disbelief washing over her. It hadn't taken very long until someone had made up a rumour about her again, had it? Hermione felt anger building up in her as she looked at her dorm mates. Maybe she should just draw her wand and put a silencing charm on her again, had it? Hermione felt anger building up in her as she looked at her dorm mates. Maybe she should just draw her wand and put a silencing charm on them. Permanently. What did they expect? That she was going to discuss her disastrous relationship with them? Certainly not, Hermione thought enraged. Without saying anything, she just turned on the spot, stalked over to the bathroom and left those two gossip mongers sitting on the bed. Hermione locked the door behind her, shutting the two girls out. Hot anger still cursed through her. Was that how the other students saw her? First a 'Mudblood' and now a slut?
In a fit of temper, Hermione kicked the laundry basket. The basket flew through the bathroom until it collided with the opposite wall, scattering used towels all over the floor. Hermione was breathing hard, anger still mounting up in her. Why did they always have to make up such rumours about her? Life was hard enough without those idiots trying to ruin it further. Hermione's eyes landed on the chaos she had created and she sighed softly. The anger left her as quickly as it had infested her. She pulled her wand and waved tiredly it at the mess. The laundry basked soared to its place beside the shower cabin and all the towels flew back into the basket. She really shouldn't get so aggravated over something so stupid, Hermione thought, shaking her head at her own volatile temper. It wasn't the first time that she had been the victim of silly rumours. Though, she did wonder who had made up this lie. Maybe Nicolls? Or... She hesitated to pursue her next thought. Tom? No, it couldn't be. On the other hand, did she really know Tom? Before the last two days she would have said, yes. But now...

*Considering the future, I actually know him too well,* she thought numbly.

As that thought grazed her mind, Hermione felt herself being drawn into her memories. Her hands started to tremble violently. She balled them into tight fists and squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't want her thoughts to drift off in that dangerous direction. Whenever she thought of that time, there was something dark tugging at her. Something she had tried to forget. Now, darkness and painful desperation seemed to be at the brim of breaking through. Sorrow, and grief had left her alone for so long. Hermione didn't want to be devoured by those emotions again. She had so hoped that they had left her forever. Now, it seemed, they wanted to rush back at her with a vengeance.

How could she deny, that it was back? It so obviously came crashing down on her, her old life. The memories and dreams chose to visit her again. They ripped at her mind and at her very being, reminding her that they were still there, had never left her.

Hermione hissed in irritation. Then she tried to clear her mind off those thoughts. She knew how to control her mind, after all. She was an Occlumens. It shouldn't be that difficult. So, she started to sort through her memories. The memories, which tormented her so, needed to be put away, somewhere deep down. She had to lock those memories away, where she would never find them again. Somehow though, Hermione was unable to reach that unemotional state of mind, which was necessary to practice Occlumency. So, whatever she did, there remained this dull pain in the background. Hermione quickly washed up, got dressed and left the bathroom again. The two girls were still sitting on the bed, clearly waiting for her. Hermione paid them no attention but just left the dorm.

As she entered the Great Hall the expected stares hit her. Some of the other students eyed her in an unobtrusive way, while others just stared at her openly. Hermione felt very exposed as she walked over to her table. As she passed the Slytherin table she didn't look their way, though, she again heard them hissing insults at her. She tried to ignore it and arranged her face into an impassive mask. There was no way she was going to let them know how very much they hurt her. As she finally arrived at her house table she sank down on one of the seats beside her friends, glad to finally be out of the spot light.

"Good morning," Lupin greeted her friendly.

"Morning," Hermione whispered back.

She looked up and found Lupin smiling at her encouragingly while Longbottom and Weasley glared at the other students around them, daring them to say anything insulting to Hermione. She suddenly felt very grateful to have found friends like them. She noticed Stella Lovegood sitting right beside Lupin. Stella was looking at Hermione with her large, dreamy eyes. Strangely, her gaze didn't disturb
Hermione at all, though the girl did stare in a rather blatant way.

"I didn't know you were Muggleborn," Stella finally stated while smiling at Hermione.

"N… no. I suppose not," Hermione mumbled insecurely. "No-one knew."

The smile on the other girl's face even widened, then Stella said enthusiastically, "But this is wonderful, isn't it? Think about all those Muggle ways you could use to cheat during tests in class."

Lupin just raised one eyebrow at his girlfriend. "And what mysterious ways would that be?" he inquired sceptically.

Stella's dreamy eyes fell on him and Lupin blushed slightly.

"I have no idea," the Ravenclaw said happily. "But I don't need to know, have I? That's what Hermione's for."

Hermione just stared at the other girl in bewilderment. It was strange, but although she felt so depressed, Hermione wanted to giggle.

Stella grabbed one of Hermione's hands and looked at her with a glint of urgency in her eyes as she asked, "Would you teach me?"

"Now, now," Lupin said amused while he tried to pull his girlfriend away from Hermione. "It's too early for one of your insanely crafty plans. Let Hermione have some breakfast first."

Longbottom took that as his cue as he now exclaimed, turned towards Hermione, "Here take some of the sausages. They are really good."

Then he began to fill her plate.

"Thank you," Hermione said in a soft voice.

She wasn't really hungry but she needed to eat something. She hadn't eaten anything yesterday.

"So, Hermione," Weasley then said in a conversational tone. "Do you want to come with us to Hogsmeade today?"

Hermione looked at him. She hadn't known that this weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't feel much like going out."

"Aww, Hermione. You have to come with us," Longbottom said. "You need a break from all those idiots around you." Here he eyed the other students with narrowed eyes.

Hermione chuckled softly. "Yes, maybe. I'll think about it."

Longbottom smiled down at her. Then Hermione started to eat and just listened into the conversation her friends had. She was glad that they liked her so much and that they were looking after her. It made her feel a little better.

"-had to somehow persuade them to not bring Aunt Henrietta along," Weasley told them while he still managed to stuff scrambled egg into his mouth, "You know she hasn't been the same since my sister burned the Christmas tree and with that Auntie's old wig." He shortly shook his head, but then shrugged and said, "What about your parents? Are they coming?"
"Sure thing," Longbottom said while refilling his glass with pumpkin juice.

"My mother'll come," Lupin told them contemplatively. "I don't know about my father yet. He wasn't sure he could get off from his work."

_Parent's day_, Hermione noted while she half-heartedly stabbed a tomato with her fork. She had totally forgotten about that. The students' parents would come to visit their children next weekend. Hermione wasn't exactly looking forward to that day. It promised to be rather depressing. Actually, she and Tom had planned to spend that day somewhere else, Hermione remembered and her heart clenched painfully. They had planned to apparate away and enjoy a day off. With all the ruckus of the parents visiting, surely no-one would have missed them. Now, though, Hermione was contemplating spending that day hidden away in the Library, buried under a mountain of books. Or maybe she could go for a stroll in the Forbidden Forest, far away from the castle. She shortly wondered if Aragog had already started his family.

As she was so deeply in thought, she didn't notice how her gaze travelled over the Great Hall until it fell on the one table she really tried to ignore. Hermione was suddenly wide awake as she noticed that her eyes had fallen on Tom. He was sitting at his usual spot at the table, looking as handsome as ever. Hermione stiffened as she saw that he was looking back at her. His grey eyes slowly wandered over her form until they locked onto her eyes. Hermione's breathing was now ragged but she couldn't look away from him. As she stared into those incredibly grey orbs she was again hit by the disgust she could find in them. Tom was looking at her coldly, his face was a blank giving nothing away aside from that terrible contempt his eyes were radiating as he looked at her. Hermione couldn't breathe anymore as she was again confronted with his aversion. She felt so dirty and inferior as he stared at her in that way. Then Tom just looked away from her as if he didn't want to lose any more time over her.

With wide eyes Hermione continued to stare at him, her breathing shallow. Now was the time she had to admit that her Occlumency skills were seriously lacking. She could feel that horrible pain and darkness she had banned from her conscious slowly breaking through. It hurt. No longer were her thoughts scrupulously ordered. They ran around her mind, unbound. Her Occlumency walls were still protecting her mind from outer forces, but within those walls, chaos raged. She had lost control completely. The memories, she had so worked to bury forever, surged up once again. They had been at the brim of infesting her before, but now they boiled over and flowed through her mind, until nothing else was present anymore.

Hermione's breathing hitched and she felt really sick now. Her head started to hurt piercingly as the images flew through her mind. She ran a shaky hand through her hair. Cold sweat was building on her forehead as the memories welled up in her. She didn't want to see those terrible images again. Hadn't they left her? So much blood, death, pain and, oh, this horrible darkness. They were grasping at her again. Trying to pull her down. It hurt unbearably as this so familiar grief and the sorrow infested her once again.

Hermione shakily got up from her seat. She couldn't stand it to stay any longer here in the Great Hall. She nearly ran from the hall and as she had left the hall she really started to run at full speed. She didn't stop until she reached the highest tower of Hogwarts castle. As she stepped out on the platform of the Astronomy Tower, she found it deserted. Hermione's bag fell from her limp fingers as she walked out on the platform. With a few steps she reached the balustrade. Hermione's hands clasped the stone balustrade tightly and her gaze wandered over the landscape in front of her. The weak sun was only just rising so that the grounds of Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest behind were still dived in darkness. The trees were casting long shadows and thick wafts of mist were rising from the tree tops, obscuring the sight even further. Hermione felt cold as an icy wind tore at her cloak. It was already spring but the mornings were still rather cold here in Scotland. She breathed in deeply. Her
head hurt and she bit the inner side of her cheek hard.

However much she tried to suppress them, the terrible memories didn't leave her again. Each time she closed her eyes, she could see it. She could see her friends fighting, suffering…

…and dying.

So much pain. And she amidst it, powerless to do anything.

This had been her life.

Now, the memories of that life came back at her. With those images, the grief hit her again. She knew that grief so well. Since that war had started and had slowly torn everything apart, since she had seen all those unspeakable things, the grief and the sorrow had been her constant companions. Like a dull ache in the background, they had never once left her.

Now they were back.

As she stared at the landscape in front of her, Hermione felt her breathing suddenly getting ragged. Her hands on the banister started to tremble and then she could feel tears running from her eyes. She wiped them angrily away with her sleeve.

Get a grip, Granger! There was absolutely no reason to cry, was there? What had she expected?

Hermione wiped a last time over her eyes before she opened them again. The cold wind pierced her face even more now that it was still wet from her tears. Hermione shook her head.

This, she thought numbly, is not at all surprising. It had just been a matter of time until something like this would happen. It was bound to end. Her illusion. Yes, she had lived an illusion. It had made her forget who she was. Where she came from. And what I have fought for. That thought was suddenly accompanied by hot anger and her magic started to pulse through her furiously.

How could she have ever thought that the happiness would last? Hadn't she seen, experienced firsthand, that happiness never lasted long? She had been naïve! Naïve to believe that someone could save her, smother her pain, make her wounds heal. Naïve to think that someone would want to save her.

A mirthless laugh escaped Hermione's mouth. It sounded strange even to her own ears.

I should have known better! She had been so obsessed with getting rid of her memories and getting rid of the old Hermione that she hadn't noticed how pointless such an endeavour was. There was no running away. Hermione balled her hand into a fist, raised it and then smashed it against the stone banister. A sharp pain seared through her hand but she didn't care and again rose her fist and struck the banister. The skin on her knuckles burst and Hermione felt the blood reassuringly flow down her hand.

How could I have been so stupid? Hermione thought as she again smashed her hand angrily into the stone.

No-one was able to save her. Those memories, it might be possible to numb them for some time and their numbness would make her forget that they were still there, but then, after some time, the images would catch up with her, hurting more than before.

Her past had returned to her. She was broken. Nothing and no-one could mend her.

Hermione let her gaze once again wander over the castle's grounds in front of her. The piercing pain
now coming from her hand was somehow soothing. The drops of blood falling from her hand were at least proof that she was still alive, after all. But those stupid tears were again traitorously flowing down her cheeks. Reluctantly, Hermione averted her eyes from the untamed wilderness in front of her and turned around to face the door leading into the castle's inside. She flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. Then she took it in her left hand and cast a healing spell on her injured right hand. Now the only remnant of her fit of temper was the blood still sullying her skin. She stowed her wand away, walked towards the door and picked up her bag on her way.

The grief and sorrow were again banned from her face. She knew, her features were cold now, emotionless, the tears the only remainder of her pain. But they would dry and nothing visible would be left behind. The pain, though wiped off her face, continued to rage inside of her, accompanied by her memories. Hermione didn't try to suppress them anymore. Finally, she was ready to accept her pain for what it was: a part of her. Running away wouldn't work. She would face it now. Maybe her old life had been full of suffering and losses, but it was the only one she got. The easy way out had proven to be fake. It was time to be strong again. She couldn't deny that Tom's behaviour had destroyed something inside of her. But she had been broken already before she had arrived here in the past, now she was just a little more broken. Nothing she wouldn't be able to handle. She knew what to do for she had done it before, after her parents had died, after her friends had died and after the war had slowly destroyed everything. Now, her situation seemed to be completely hopeless again. Yes, she was lost and alone and broken.

But I am still here! She could still fight on. Her illusion of a happy life had ended, so, she was going to become the cold, determined warrior again.

Hermione descended the stairs, leading from the Astronomy Tower and entered a corridor. She walked towards the Gryffindor common room. There was, after all, something very important she had to do there. Something she had neglected for far too long. It was almost funny how a part of her had believed, really believed, that she could stay here in the past and lead a better life. Over the last months that part had been growing and growing until she had even stopped to find a way back into her time. Hermione shook her head at her own naivety. That part of her had died and she was going to resume fulfilling her mission again.

Shortly later, Hermione entered her dorm and found it abandoned. She wasn't surprised, though. Her dorm mates had probably gone to Hogsmeade already. Slowly, Hermione walked over to her trunk. She opened the lid and retrieved something before she sat, cross-legged, down on her bed. For a long time, Hermione just looked down at the inconspicuous little book in her hands. It was tattered and old and looked quite innocent, like it wouldn't hold any information of great interest. She skimmed her index finger slowly over the book's spine. How long was it since she had last opened it? Too long!

And yet, she was reluctant to do it now. She berated herself for having abandoned her mission for so long, indulging into sweet dreams and hopeful plans of a future instead. It seemed she had just forgotten about the small book and her task. Now, her sweet dreams had died and she didn't need to plan her future anymore. Still, she was reluctant to open the book. The book that was her mission, her job… her old life. If she continued on it, she would have to admit that the dream was over and that she had to wake up again. She would have to finally abandon all hope.

Hermione breathed in deeply. This was ridiculous. Her hope had been destroyed already. No use procrastinating this any further. With a sigh Hermione opened the book. Then she read. She remembered were she had stopped the last time. Peverell had decided to create the Elder Wand in order to beat his brothers in their challenge of who could create the most powerful magical object. After that he had described the first steps of creating the wand.
Now Hermione again struggled with Peverell's explanations. His words were difficult up to incomprehensible. But she needed to understand. Hermione needed to leave here. In this time period there was nothing for her. Not anymore. So, Hermione drowned herself in that little book. After hours of reading, she had to lit the candle, standing on her bedside table, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to discern the letters anymore. Then she again continued to read. She read on and on, but with every word her desperation increased. She didn't understand. The concept behind Peverell's magic was difficult. More often than not, she needed to re-read paragraphs or even whole chapters. Another few hours later, she had already missed dinner, her dorm mates entered the room. Immediately, they tried to press information from her again, but Hermione didn't answer. She paid them no heed, but just drew the covers around her four-poster shut, not caring how impolite that might be.

After more hours of reading, the dorm was now dived in darkness aside from Hermione's lit wand, she still sat on her bed with the book in her lap. Now, though, panic grabbed at her heart as she stared down at the little book. What hours before had only been small suspicion, now was a certainty: The book was beyond her. There was no hope she would be able to understand it. Peverell's words were just impossible to follow. Hermione was lost. Completely.

Then she reached the last page in the book. It was Peverell's final personal note. As Hermione read it, coldness clasped at her heart. She had suspected it the whole time. Peverell's way of magic had been suspicious. His views questionable. In horror, Hermione stared down at the yellowed page with its tiny script. Everything was dark. His theories, Peverell himself, the Elder Wand – just everything. Dark and hopeless.

My brothers have arrived. I have underestimated them. They might be novices in the art of creating magical objects but they still are part of the Peverell family so I should have expected something like this. They did not create something superior to my Wand, of course, but I have to admit their creations are acceptable.

A cloak, able to hide things from all eyes.

A stone, able to bring back the dead.

Those objects are... desirable...

...using them together with my Wand could be intriguing...

...combined they should be irresistible...

I want to own them all...

My brothers are guarding their creations, they are watching over them.

I need to own all three of those objects!

My brothers do not want to part with them.

To own these objects is my right. My fate! I am the most talented of us brothers, I should own those objects. My brothers have no right to withhold what should be mine.

I used my Wand. It is invincible. I own all three.
My brothers are dead.

I own all three!

The next day, Hermione woke, lying fully clothed on her bed, as the sun shone brightly through the window. It had to be noon already. The first thing she saw as she opened her eyes was that little book. Disgust hit her as she stared at Peverell's manuscript. He had been a Dark Wizard!

Hermione berated herself for not having seen that sooner. She had suspected it, but nothing more. This whole book just reeked of Dark Magic. That alone disgusted her to no end. Even though she had read a few Dark Art books, Hermione had never really delved into the topic. It was always dangerous dealing with the Dark Arts. Of course, the curses and spells were incredibly powerful and in some ways superior to the normal way of magic.

… but nothing comes without a price.

Dark Magic might be powerful and luring but it was equally demanding. It did not forgive any mistakes. If cast improperly, dark curses, in contrast to normal curses, had the tendency to attack the caster instead. Even if used properly, Dark Magic would always try to overcome the caster. It would take something away, often even without the wizard noticing it until it was too late.

How had Dumbledore phrased it? 'Dark Magic is a cruel Mistress.' Hermione remembered his words. He had been right. Dark Magic could offer immense power, but it would also destroy the wizard in the process.

That Hermione knew all of this, wasn't a fact she was very proud of. But it was true, after all, she had learned a few dark curses. The war had dragged out and she had become desperate. But she had never immersed herself completely into the Dark Arts. She had quickly realized that, like the war, Dark Magic was just one thing: disgusting. That hadn't stopped her from using it, but it had helped her remain immune to the lure the Dark Arts obviously emitted.

Hermione's eyes again focused on that book lying beside her on the quilt and she was again hit by nausea. Peverell had been dark. His magic had been dark, just like his creations. So, the Elder Wand was a dark object, Hermione thought numbly. She really shouldn't be surprised. That wand was nothing but trouble. She knew well enough that almost every owner of that wand had been murdered. Death had always followed the Elder Wand through history. Now its Dark Magic was inside of her. Hermione felt unclean. It just made her sick to know that she was dependant on Peverell and his twisted creation. On top of that, she didn't even understand anything of the concept behind the wand. Peverell may have been dark, but obviously still a genius. Hermione was very reluctant to admit that and glared at the book on her bed.

She definitely had to re-read that part about the wand. Maybe she was able to understand it. There surely were some books in the Library that could help her. But first, she would go down to the Great Hall and get something to eat. She hadn't eaten properly since...

...since Tom left me, Hermione thought, despair cruelly welling up again.

Somehow the Peverell disaster had distracted her from Tom, but she still felt miserable whenever she thought of him. Though, as now tears threatened to fall from her eyes, she decidedly shook her head. She wasn't going to drown herself in self-pity again. Tom had left her and obviously didn't plan to ever come back. It hurt, but she would have to live with it. There was still something to do, after all, she decided as she looked down at Peverell's manuscript. She stored the book away in the secret
compartment in her trunk. She would just get a bite to eat and then she would return to read about that dark wizard's evil inventions.

Not even ten minutes later, Hermione walked down to the common room. As she passed the room, she saw her friends sitting on one of the couches. She hesitated shortly but then she walked over to them. It actually made her feel guilty, how she had treated them lately. They were such nice people. But since she had arrived here, she had only managed to worry them and pull them into her problems. As Hermione walked over to them, Longbottom looked up. He recognized her and then smiled at her.

"Come, sit down," he said while he patted on the spot on the couch beside him.

Hermione returned the smile, though, she knew it didn't reach her eyes. Then she sat down beside Longbottom. All three of her friends now eyed her attentively, concern clearly visible in their eyes. Hermione shortly wondered why they still wanted to be friends with her. She was nothing but trouble.

"How are you feeling?" Longbottom now asked her gingerly.

"Good," Hermione lied.

"We missed you yesterday," Weasley said in a soft voice. "You should have come with us to Hogsmeade."

"Sorry, I wasn't feeling that well," she replied, guilt gnawing at her. "I just wanted to be alone."

After that, the conversation kind of fizzled out. Hermione's gaze again wandered over her friends and the concern was still clearly visible on their faces. She really was a horrible friend, wasn't she? It was then that Lupin softly asked, "Did you break up with Riddle?"

Hermione glanced at him. She only found kindness in his eyes.

"No," she whispered shakily. But as she continued her voice was firm and oddly detached, "He broke up with me."

Longbottom sat up straight and Hermione saw an angry look crossing his face. Then he huffed loudly, "That evil bastard. You should be glad to be rid of him."

Hermione continued to stare at his enraged face. No, she felt horrible now that Tom had left her. But as Hermione looked at that concern on her friends' faces, she was finally ready to accept the truth: Tom had only left her without a second thought. It had been his decision to go. She had given Tom chances to turn around. He hadn't wanted to take them. Maybe she shouldn't have lied to him, but he could have forgiven her. He could have accepted that she was Muggleborn – he could have accepted her. Instead, he had decided to reject her and to insult her. He could have turned back, but he just hadn't.

To be fair, she shouldn't have ever expected him to react otherwise. She came from the future, she knew who he was and what he was going to become. Suddenly, anger was burning up in her. She was angry with herself for not being able to assess the situation correctly and she was angry with Tom for behaving exactly like it could be expected from Lord Voldemort.

"Why did he leave you?" Lupin asked sympathetically, bringing her out of her thoughts.
Hermione's eyes wandered to him.

"Because he found out that you are Muggleborn?" Lupin continued in his soft voice.

That summarized the whole thing quite correctly, Hermione noticed wryly. Though she could feel her stomach clench painfully as Lupin said it out loud.

_The truth always hurts, doesn't it?_ an inner voice, which sounded suspiciously like Harry, scoffed at her coldly.

She didn't answer Lupin but just nodded her head. That caused another string of curses from Longbottom.

"That filthy monster!" the blonde Gryffindor blustered, anger clearly tinting his voice. "I would so like to curse his sorry ass off!"

Hermione looked up at him. It somehow felt good, that her friends got so angry over the whole thing. It showed her that they really liked her. They didn't give a damn about any rumours and didn't care that she was Muggleborn – completely in contrast to Tom.

"He's not worth it," she suddenly heard herself say, again in that unemotional voice.

Longbottom stopped his ranting and looked down at her. The anger left his face again, then he skidded closer to her on the sofa and slid an arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry he's such an asshole," he told her, warm honesty wrapped around his words. "He doesn't know what he's missing out. Otherwise he would regret it."

"Yeah, he's right," Weasley concurred with his friend while smiling at Hermione suavely.

Then she could feel Lupin, who sat in an armchair beside her, taking her hand gently. Hermione was surprised as now a genuine smile curled up her mouth.

"Thank you, guys," she whispered softly.

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Malfoy just poured himself a cup of Earl Grey tea as he saw Riddle entering the Great Hall. He shuddered as he saw that dark look on Riddle's face. Suddenly, Malfoy was very glad that he sat far away from the place Riddle normally occupied at Slytherin table. These days it was very easy and especially dangerous to get on Riddle's wrong side. Actually, Malfoy had seen him cursing that fifth year, Willkins, just yesterday as Riddle had come back to the common room from his prefect duties. He had cursed Willkins only because the boy had talked about the last Quidditch game and had then dared to say that he thought Longbottom was quite the good Chaser. Malfoy knew that the blond Gryffindor was a very close friend to DeCerto. To actually mention her while Riddle was present was as good as a death sentence lately, but obviously talking about her friends was enough, too. Willkins hadn't even spoken to Riddle as he had mentioned Longbottom, but that hadn't stopped Riddle to send a very nasty hex his way. Malfoy wondered if the poor boy still was in the hospital wing. Probably, yes.

Inconspicuously, his eyes wandered to Riddle. He sat at his usual seat at Slytherin table and Malfoy pitied Avery and Black, who were sitting directly beside him. Malfoy shortly wondered if Avery would be stupid enough to somehow try to talk with Riddle. He might even be insane enough to mention DeCerto. Avery was an idiot after all, Malfoy shrugged his shoulders indifferently. As long as that jerk didn't pull him into it, Malfoy couldn't care less. Though, it always was dangerous
business if Riddle lost his temper. Normally, he never lost control. It was quite eerie actually, that perfectly controlled mask he always seemed to wear. But Malfoy had seen what was hidden beneath and he had no desire to evoke Riddle’s wrath.

It was then that Malfoy noticed DeCerto entering the Great Hall. Now, that one was really in trouble, wasn't she? Malfoy wondered coldly amused. He still couldn't believe that the girl really was a Mudblood. And she had had the nerve to lie about her parentage. Something she surely regretted now that Riddle knew the truth.

Malfoy's gaze left the girl and wandered back to Riddle. He appeared to be composed and perfectly poised as he sat, nonchalantly, at the table. But Malfoy could see that he was staring at DeCerto and there was a dangerous red gleam in Riddle's eyes. Malfoy gulped nervously as he saw that vicious sheen in the other's eyes. Riddle seemed to be beyond angry, even though one could never tell just by looking at him. With trembling fingers Malfoy put his cup of tea down on the table in front of him.

He wondered what Riddle was going to do to DeCerto. His thoughts involuntarily jumped back to that incident last year. His fifth year had been overshadowed by a serial of attacks on Mudbloods. The whole thing had resulted in the death of a girl. Back then there had been many rumours as to who was behind those attacks. The widest spread rumour had been that the Heir of Slytherin had opened the Chamber of Secrets and tried to cleanse the school off all Mudbloods. The culprit, though, had never been caught. Malfoy was still convinced that Riddle had been behind those attacks. It didn't really shock him, how Riddle seemed to hate Mudbloods so much. But it still was kind of disturbing to know that he didn't even stop at murder. Riddle really was a scary bastard.

Malfoy didn't doubt that Riddle actually had had an ulterior motive for having spent time with DeCerto. He had been interested in DeCerto since she had arrived in Hogwarts. There obviously was something Riddle wanted from her. First he had used violence to force it from her. As that hadn't gotten him what he had wanted, though, Riddle had changed his strategy and had tried to seduce her. Whatever information he tried to get from DeCerto, though, Riddle would have never touched her if he had known that the girl was a Mudblood.

Malfoy looked back at the Gryffindor girl. A cold smirk curled up his mouth as he watched her, talking with her friends. She probably had no idea the danger she was in.

Tom narrowed his eyes as he looked at Hermione entering the Great Hall. Once again, she was accompanied by those idiotic Gryffindor boys. Tom could feel his dark magic awaken in him as he watched Hermione, being surrounded by these boys. How could they still spend time with that dirty Mudblood? Tom wondered disgusted as he watched Longbottom's arm being wrapped around Hermione's shoulders while they walked over to their table. Gryffindors really were useless gits, weren't they? Tom could feel anger pulsing through him. As far as he knew, all three of Hermione's friends came from Pureblood families. Despite that fact, they still chose to spend time with that scum. Didn't they have any pride?

Tom could feel his magic budge violently as Longbottom seemed to whisper into Hermione's ear, which made her giggle amused. Tom just wanted to get up, walk over there and curse the both of them.

How could that Mudblood be in such a good mood anyway? Obviously, she didn't regret at all how she had treated him. He continued to glower darkly at her as Hermione sat down at her table, still not even glimpsing in his direction. His dark magic was begging him to be released as Tom saw that smile, still playing around her mouth while she continued to talk with her so-called friends.

So, she thought this whole thing was amusing, did she? Tom was convinced that she was trying to
ridicule him with her indifference. It made him seethe with anger. Well, she had mocked him for months now, he thought while a strange coldness wrapped around his mind, stifling any doubt that might have still disturbed him. Since that dirty Muggle had set foot into Hogwarts, she had lied. She had lied about everything.

First, there was this strange business about Peverell and the Deathly Hallows. She obviously tried to find the Hallows and had possibly taken possession of the Elder Wand. How else should a mere Mudblood do all this incredibly advanced magic, Tom decided haughtily as he remembered all the spells and curses he had ever seen Hermione use. Surely, no Mudblood could ever command such magic without help. He was convinced now that she had somehow managed to steal the Unbeatable Wand. Thus, her strange interest in Peverell's book. The very book she hadn't wanted to show him, Tom remembered irately as his gaze once again skimmed over Hermione, talking animatedly with her friends. She had never let him read the book, nor had she ever talked with him about her hunt for the Hallows. She had preferred it to lie!

Even if she had told him something about her past, it had still always been spiced with lies and half-truths. He knew next to nothing about her life before she had arrived at Hogwarts. The things she had told him had always been pretty much useless. They had been so vague, that he would never be able to verify the information she had given. So, everything could as well have been just a lie.

It most probably was all a lie, considering how she had tried to swindle about her blood status, too. Now, Tom had to really work to prevent his indifferent façade from melting from his face. He felt sick as he remembered how he had embraced that Mudblood. He had kissed her and had even slept with her. This whole thing disgusted him to no end and he just wanted to take a shower to wash all this dirt away from him.

What made everything even worse, was that everybody knew how he had spent time with a Muggle. Tom's gaze unfixed from Hermione and swept over the other Slytherins. Of course, they didn't dare say anything insulting to him but the whole thing irked him nonetheless.

His eyes went back to Hermione. She was just leaving the hall and Tom felt his magic violently tugging at him as he saw how Longbottom had grabbed her hand while he led her out of the Great Hall. A frown appeared between his eyebrows and Tom couldn't understand why it disturbed him so much to see her together with that Gryffindor idiot. Why would he care?

"If you wish, I could go and punish that girl," a voice whispered to him, bringing him out of his thoughts.

Tom turned his head and found Avery. Right now, he looked after Hermione and there was a rather dirty smirk curling up the corners of his mouth while a disturbing glint had appeared in his eyes. As Tom stared at Avery, he almost lost control of his magic.

"Rather presumptuous, don't you think?" Tom said with an icy cold tinge in his voice. The fury, rushing through him was completely banned from his tone.

Avery turned his head to look at him. Tom just continued to glare darkly at the other, finally seeing a perfect opportunity to get rid of his pent up anger. He kept his face completely straight as he sent his magic towards Avery. The other still held his fork in his right hand. Tom wrapped his magic around Avery's hand, so that it clenched around the fork. He almost smirked as he saw all color leaving Avery's face. Tom's dark magic now flowed into the fork, slowly heating up the metal. A sadistic smirk tugged at his mouth as he watched that painful expression on Avery's face as the heat now reached the point where it burned the skin. Tom didn't stop, though, and lazily bent towards Avery to then whisper in a steel hard voice,
"Do not assume I need your help for anything," he hissed at Avery, an edge of malice hidden in his tone.

"Of course not!" Avery pressed out, his voice shaken by pain.

Tom chuckled as he heard the fear in Avery's tone. Then he withdrew his magic and calmly stood up from the table. The evil smile was still on his face as he watched Avery holding his burned hand. Then Tom just sauntered out of the hall. That had been fun, hadn't it? A nice distraction from that Mudblood. He should really stop thinking about Hermione. She wasn't worth his attention. After all, Hermione DeCerto was nothing special. She had just somehow managed to steal the Unbeatable Wand. That was why she was such a powerful witch. A Mudblood more powerful than himself? Ridiculous! And even with an unbeatable wand, she was still weak.

No, he should just ignore that hussy. Tom decided, though he couldn't suppress that angry peak of magic as he remembered how Hermione had left the hall together with Longbottom.

Later that day, Hermione climbed the stairs to her dorm. Somehow, she felt a little better now. After lunch she had accompanied her friends outside. They had sat by the Great Lake in the grass and had talked. Hermione had enjoyed it very much to sit together with her friends and just talk. They hadn't grazed the topic of her relationship with Tom again and Hermione had been grateful for that. They had just talked about petty little things, like homework. Then Longbottom and Weasley had told her how they planned to charm the huge hourglass-like vessels for the house points, so that Gryffindor would never lose points again. Lupin hadn't stopped to reprimand them, as they had gone into the details of this charm.

And Hermione had laughed.

Talking with her friends was like taking a break; a break from her life and the problems. Now, though, her friends had gone off to Quidditch training. Lupin, though, had preferred it to go and search for Stella instead. Weasley and Longbottom had wanted her to come along, but Hermione had declined. She spent the rest of Sunday locked away in her dorm. Peverell's manuscript was her only companion. She re-read it. She hurried to the Library and got some reference literature. It all was frustrating, and above all else, hopeless.

It was a very disheartened Hermione who started classes on Monday morning. She didn't want to waste her time with classes when she needed to understand that book. Above else, though, she didn't want to face Tom again. During the last two days she had been able to avoid him, but during classes that was impossible.

She stepped reluctantly into the potions class room. Almost everyone else was already seated at their tables, she noticed as her eyes wandered over the room. The expected glares hit her again when the Slytherins saw her standing by the door, but Hermione ignored them. Her years at the Hogwarts of her time period had taught her how to ignore their hostility. So, it wasn't until her eyes finally landed at her own table that she could feel a painful stab in her chest. Tom was already sitting in his usual seat and whispered something to Malfoy, who sat right beside him.

While she had to admit that Tom's presence disturbed her, she was certainly not going to let that show. So, her face was schooled into a perfect mask of indifference as she walked over to Tom. She sat down beside him but he didn't pay her any attention. Hermione could hear her heart pounding loudly in her ears as Tom was so near her. She knew how to keep that weakness off her face, but she was unable to even slightly relax in his presence.
Then Slughorn entered and started the class. He immediately lectured about the next step in the Ortus potion, making Hermione feel even worse. But she couldn't concentrate on the class anyway. She found herself still staring at Tom. He was sitting in his chair, his quill in hand and seemed to pay Slughorn his utmost attention. Not once did he even glimpse at her. He seemed to just don't care. From time to time, he took some notes in his elegant, neat script. Hermione could see strands of his silky, dark hair softly falling into his eyes as he slightly bent his head whenever writing something down. Tom looked still the same. It was as if nothing had changed. But when she now looked into his grey eyes, she was afraid.

*You are silly!* an inner voice reprimanded her harshly. Hermione unfixed her eyes from Tom and looked down at her own, still empty, parchment. She was silly for allowing him to hurt her so much. She would not let him do it again. That was why her face was now covered by a veneer of detachment. She couldn't let Tom know how much he managed to hurt her.

"Now, I want you to proceed with the potion," Slughorn declared in his booming voice while smiling at his class.

The students got up from their seats and started to work on the Ortus potion. Hermione remained to be sitting on her chair. Tom, on the other hand, had gotten up and seemed to prepare everything for the next step of creating the Ortus potion. Still, he didn't even look Hermione's way. Obviously, he expected her to just keep away from everything.

Again, her heart stabbed her chest painfully as he was so completely ignoring her. She could almost feel the hate radiating from him.

From her time period Hermione was used to people hating her just because she was Muggleborn. The prejudices had accompanied her through all her six years at Hogwarts and it had gotten even worse as she had left school to fight in the war. She had had ample of time to get used to the prejudices but that revulsion appearing in Tom's eyes whenever he looked at her, that really got to her.

Over the last months, Tom had somehow grown to be the most important person in her life. She knew that she had fallen in love with him. Somehow he had saved her, from her dark past and from her merciless memories. She had been broken beyond repair. Or so she had thought before she had met Tom. He had liked her despite the darkness which had so obviously destroyed her. He had cherished her and had started to mend her. Finally the darkness had slowly relinquished its firm grip on her. It had been such a relief to be able to forget all those horrible things that had happened to her. Then suddenly, Tom had just stopped. He had stopped protecting her, stopped healing her and stopped liking her.

As much as Hermione had been ostracised, persecuted, or hated for being Muggleborn in her time period, something like this had never happened before. She had never been despised by someone she loved. Not one of her friends had ever thought ill of her because of her parents. She never had had to feel dirty or worthless. That had changed now. She knew it was nothing bad to be Muggleborn. But his stares, the looks Tom cast her way, they were drained with that contempt and disgust. He made her feel like an especially repellent piece of filth. She knew he was wrong to judge her, but his dirty looks still stung.

*Get a grip!* she hissed at herself, disgusted by the direction her thoughts had wandered off to.

She straightened up on her chair and tried to reign in her upcoming feelings. She had decided to bury them, hadn't she? The… love or whatever it was she felt for Tom had to go. It didn't mean anything. She couldn't afford it anymore. She needed to cast it away.
Something Tom had already done, Hermione thought numbly as she let her gaze wander to him. Right now he did what he had done for the last half an hour since the class had started. He completely ignored her presence. He carefully crushed the fruit of the angel's trumpet, which was the next ingredient that had to be added to the potion. He still hadn't asked her to participate in any way.

She had been really stupid, hadn't she? Stupid to not have seen this coming. He was Lord Voldemort after all. In later life his main goal was to annihilate every Muggleborn witch or wizard. She now realized how she had subconsciously avoided this topic all the time she had been together with Tom. She had never asked his opinion about Grindelwald's war against Muggleborns. She had stayed clear from every conversation that could have led to him talking about Muggles or Muggleborns. Now she knew why she had done that. It was because she had already known what he thought about the matter and hadn't wanted him to speak it out loud. That would have destroyed the happy little world she had created around them. The world that now lay in shatters around her feet.

Hermione's eyes left Tom again and she looked at the black board where Slughorn had written down the next steps to the Ortus potion. Hermione didn't really need to read it. She knew that damned potion inside-out. Now that Tom was her enemy again, it was more crucial than ever that she ruined that potion. But she had a plan. She just had to bide her time. With the last finishing touches, she would sabotage the potion.

No-one would ever find out where she came from, Hermione decided and her eyes wandered back to Tom. He was still occupied with adding the angel's trumpet to the simmering potion. The powdered fruit fell softly into the potion and its green colour changed into bright red.

What did Tom expect her to do? she wondered and there was slowly anger boiling up in her. It now ripped at her furiously and Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line. Did he expect that she was going to sit here for the rest of the school year and concede everything to him? She decidedly put her quill down on the table, moved her chair a little away from the table and stood up. As she stepped towards the cauldron, she completely ignored Tom, took the wooden ladle and began to stir the potion in the required clockwise turns.

"What do you think you are doing?" asked a tight voice, tinted with barely concealed anger.

Hermione didn't look up but continued to stir the potion in an unperturbed way.

"I'm just doing my work," she replied stiffly.

She peered up at Tom, standing opposite from her. Once again an emotionless mask covered his handsome face, but as Hermione looked into his grey eyes she could see the hate smoldering underneath. Cold shivers run down her spine as she was confronted with his aversion but she didn't react to his hostility at all. Instead, she said in a cold voice,

"We should treat this situation like adults. So, I suggest that you keep your temper in check and that we continue our interactions on a purely professional level only."

Tom leaned a bit towards her and Hermione had to suppress a shudder as he hissed into her ear, his voice laden with malice,

"You are lucky we are in a classroom right now."

Hermione's grip on the wooden ladle tightened, making her knuckles turn white.

"You can threaten me as much as you want," she replied in a completely controlled voice, which held no hint of how much the viciousness in his inflection had unsettled her. "But I'm not going to
step down just because you have problems with my parentage."

How could she ever have taken Tom's care for something she needed? How could she have compared his superficial affection with the love Ron had had for her? At the thought of Ron, Hermione had to close her eyes to get her upcoming feelings back under control. She was pretty sure, that at one point in time, Tom surely had liked her. But that affection had been flimsy at its best. It was nothing that could provide her with stability or security. Tom would have never sacrificed anything for her; least of all his beliefs.

Tom could feel anger flaring up in him so strongly he could barely hold his magic back from lashing out at her. How dare that Mudblood speak to him in that tone of voice? If Slughorn hadn't been in the classroom right now, Tom would have cursed her. Even in front of the other students. To hell with his untainted reputation. He narrowed his eyes at her while he fought for composure. Hermione, though, seemed to be completely poised. She just stirred the potion, not paying any attention to him anymore. Her hand, holding the wooden ladle, was steady as stone.

How dare she remain to be so aloof in his presence? Tom wondered and he could feel his self-control slipping away. After all the things she had done to him, this Mudblood should be crawling in the dirt before his feet, begging for forgiveness.

Without looking up at him, she reached for the dried rove beetles lying on the table. Then she cautiously, meticulously, added some to the potion. A small puff of violet smoke left the cauldron. Tom could feel his magic furiously rushing through him. He needed to hold himself back though. Some people might not appreciate his efforts of trying to get rid of that Muggle dirt. Hermione stopped to stir the potion and walked over to the potion cabinet where the ingredients were stored. As she passed him, Tom could smell a faint scent of lilac in the air. A strange shiver ran down his spine. He hesitated and just stared after her.

Then he pulled himself out of that odd stupor he had fallen into.

_Disgusting!_ he thought infuriated, forcing his eyes away from her. It was nauseating how he was forced to work together with that Muggle! That disgusting… _thing_ shouldn't be allowed to enter Hogwarts at all.

Hermione returned and put the cherry laurel down on the table. Then she pulled her wand and waved it over the small berries, thus peeling the skin and pulp off the seeds. Tom's gaze wandered to the black wand in her hand.

_How grotesque was this? A Muggle being allowed to hold a wand? Fury was now raging inside of him. She shouldn't have that wand._

As he scanned the wand in her hand, he again wondered if his deduction had been correct. Tom was more convinced than ever that her wand was, in fact, the Elder Wand. It would explain her mysterious magic. Everything fit together.

She was not allowed to own something so valuable.

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}

This was a huge set-back, Hermione decided as her eyes wandered reluctantly over the small leather-bound book in her hands. Once, that book had been her hope, now, it only disgusted her.

Right now, she was sitting on a tiny ledge that was formed by the rock. She was very high up in this mountainous region, and only experienced mountaineers would be able to reach the little ledge she
was sitting on. A few tufts of grass had managed to gain footing on her small platform, otherwise the
surrounding was bare rock, coloured only by lichen growing here and there on the stone. Hermione's
legs dangled dangerously over the edge of the small platform. Deep down in the valley, grass land
was spread out in front of her. Far off, she could even see a herd of sheep, grazing in the warm
sunshine. From up here, they were almost lost in the vastness of the landscape, looking like small,
white dots amidst the green of the grass. Hermione's eyes left the idyllic view and wandered back to
the book in her hands. It was enough to look at Peverell's book to make her feel sick and tired.

Actually, she felt exhausted.

By now, she had read the part about the Elder Wand a second and a third time, but the concept
behind the wand was still elusive. The main problem was that Peverell hadn't written his manuscript
to explain to outsiders how he had managed to create the most powerful wand. No, Peverell's
manuscript wasn't supposed to be a tutorial on how to create an unbeatable magical object. It was
only meant to be some sort of memory aid for Peverell himself.

Unfortunately, that made understanding his book all the more impossible. As he described the
process of creating the wand, Peverell seemed to confusingly jump to and fro between the different
steps. On his way, he only explained the things he had deemed important, while he dropped other
parts completely. He had obviously not seen it necessary to explain every single step or theory that
was too simple and obvious to him. Hermione, on the other hand, was unable to fill in the blanks and
still follow Peverell's huge mental leaps.

She knew that she was not stupid or slow, but she realized that it would be next to impossible for her
to decipher Peverell's theories. His way of magic was just too intuitive. So, the little he did explain in
his manuscript appeared to be just abstruse. Hermione, for one, was not able to follow him. She was
in well over her head. She had read too many books not to be able to at least realize that.

Hermione sighed tiredly and leaned her back against the rock behind her. The surface was pleasantly
warmed by the evening sun, but that didn't help to calm her. She absentmindedly opened the
manuscript and flipped through. Maybe she should read it a fourth time, she wondered
unenthusiastically, shuddering at the prospect to be lost in Peverell's twisted thoughts again. Deep
down, Hermione knew that re-reading the book wouldn't do her any good, but she was getting
desperate.

Everything was so unsure. Her escape plan away from this time period was completely based on
assumptions and conjecture. The Elder Wand had brought her here, so Hermione had assumed that it
could bring her back again. But was that really true? She didn't know. Then she had stolen the
Peverell manuscript. Again, on the assumption that it would help her to understand the magic behind
the wand. That had proven to be a dead-end, Hermione thought frustratedly and stopped flipping
through the book. She had by now reached the book's last page. Her eyes, once again, wandered
over Peverell's last personal entry. It made Hermione sick, to be dependent on something that evil
wizard had created.

Yes, Peverell had been evil and dark. He hadn't hesitated to kill his own brothers to gain even more
power. Hermione wrinkled her nose in disgust as her eyes wandered over Peverell's words. But then,
suddenly, an idea formed in her mind.

...even more power... Her last thought replayed in her head and Hermione sat up straight on the
small ledge.

Maybe she had concentrated too much on the Elder Wand? And had attached too much importance
on Peverell's manuscript...
Just because she didn't understand Peverell's manuscript, didn't mean she had to give up. The Elder Wand was the source of all her misery. Without that wand she would never have landed in the past. So, her first choice of action had been to fully understand that wand, and then use it to return home. Maybe that initial plan of hers had been wrong from the start. The Elder Wand had brought her here, but maybe it couldn't bring her back.

\[\text{...at least, not alone.}\]

Hermione's finger trembled with excitement as she skimmed it over Peverell's words. She knew it, she was onto something important here, and she dared to formulate a question that could very well be her way out of this mess,

\emph{Is the wand's power reversible?}

However powerful, every magic could be undone. Hermione had learned that there existed no such thing like an unbreakable spell. There was no hex that couldn't be taken down, no spell without a counter-spell, and no curse that couldn't be broken. Even the Killing Curse was not unstoppable. Harry's mother had proven that, hadn't she? So while the Elder Wand's magic had brought her into the past, there must exist another power that could bring her back. A power stronger than the Elder Wand.

Her eyes wandered once again over Peverell's script on the yellowed paper. Hadn't Peverell himself provided her with an answer?

\emph{'...combined they should be irresistible...'} Hermione read in his last personal note.

In his vanity Peverell had thought his creation was superior to his brothers', but even he had admitted that combined, the three Hallows were even stronger than his wand alone.

\emph{Master of Death...} Hermione's thoughts now danced around the fairy tale. Whoever managed to gain all three Hallow's would then be Master of Death.

\[\text{... but death was something no-one could escape from. As time goes by, everything grows older until it dies.}\]

\[\text{...as time goes by...}\]

But what happened if time didn't go by? If somebody controlled time, then that person would also control death. Was that true? Were the three Hallows so powerful that not even time could resist them? It would explain where that myth of the Master of Death came from.

\[\text{...but, she was digressing. Again, losing herself in assumptions. Whether the master of the Hallows could conquer death or not, meant very little to her. She wasn't interested in immortality. She just wanted a way back. But could the Hallows provide her with a way out of this?}\]

\emph{'A cloak, able to hide things from all eyes. A stone, able to bring back the dead.'} Hermione's gaze wandered over Peverell's note.

Were the objects his brothers had created able to do the impossible? Ignotus Peverell had insidiously murdered his two brothers, but maybe they could defeat him even in death. Undo his twisted, dark magic.

With a determined thud, Hermione closed the Peverell manuscript. Her eyes wandered once again over the green landscape far down in the valley.
She would try it!

She needed to stop putting hope in dark wizards, who were unwilling and unable to help her, anyway.

Hermione walked out of the Library. Right now, she was dead tired and she wouldn't be surprised if there had been dark rings under her eyes. So, she stifled a yawn and staggered through the exit doors of the Library. Just as she stepped out on the corridor, she heard a screech. Hermione almost dropped her school bag. To her surprise she found Ms. Peters, the librarian, standing right beside the Library entry. She had a huge key in one hand and pressed the other against her chest as she stared at Hermione.

"For Merlin's sake," Ms Peters said shakily her eyes wandering over Hermione. Then a smile appeared on her face. "Oh my… Ms DeCerto. You scared me."

"Sorry," Hermione replied, a wry smile on her face.

Ms Peters’ smile widened then she shook her head.

"I thought the library was empty. I was just about to lock it," she told Hermione while holding up the rather large key.

Hermione furrowed her brow and then checked her watch. It was almost eleven. The time, it seemed, had just flown by.

"Really, Ms DeCerto. What am I going to do with you?" Ms Peters now scolded her, though the kind smile on her face destroyed the strict impression again. "Do you never leave the library."

Hermione just smirked at her. "Not if I can help it."

"It seems you don't know how school works," Ms Peters now said, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "You don't break curfew to study in the library. You do it to… I don't know, sneak down in the kitchen and steal some oak-matured mead to have a drinking party with your friends."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the librarian.

"Er… not that I have ever done something like that," Ms Peters stuttered. "No no, certainly not."

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle softly. "I'll keep that in mind, for the next time I want to break curfew."

Ms Peters just grinned at her, then she said amused, "So, how about I ignore that I've caught you out of bed out of hours and you forget about that little story?"

"Sounds good," Hermione answered, equally amused.

After a short 'Good night.' Hermione left Ms Peters and made her way towards the common room. Actually, since she had decided to find and unite all three Hallows she had spend her time in the Library and had again gone over all information she had on them. Luckily, she already knew where all the Hallows were.

The Resurrection Stone… she didn't yet know how to get the stone. It made her actually quite sick to think about the stone and the ring, it was embedded in.
Well, she would go over that bridge when the time came. For now, she concentrated on the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione knew that the Potter family had owned the cloak for a long time already before Harry had inherited it. So, it now was with Diana's father, Hermione assumed. How to get it, though? She wondered as she walked down another dark corridor.

It was then that it hit her: a new plan. Hermione smiled contently. Plans were always a good thing. They made things easier, more predictable and orderly. She liked order and plans, because her life was a huge mess lately.

She wanted to steal the Invisibility Cloak from the Potters. It was right now stored at Godric's Hollow, in Potter manor. Hermione just needed a time when the Potters were gone from home. And here it was, her perfect opportunity: Parents' day would be at next Saturday. That meant all the parents would visit their children at Hogwarts. The Potters would surely want to visit their daughter, Diana. That would leave Potter manor quite unprotected and deserted. This was Hermione's chance. She would break into Potter manor and steal the cloak. Somehow, raiding Potter manor didn't sit right with her. But Hermione was sure Harry would forgive her. She needed the cloak after all.

She started to form her strategy now. Parents' day clearly was the perfect opportunity. Diana's parents would be at Hogwarts. That was when she should strike. The parents would arrive at around lunch time at Saturday this week. Then they would spend the day with their children, to leave the castle sometime after dinner. Hermione wouldn't be able to leave before lunch as people would definitely notice her absence. This left Hermione a time frame of a few hours to get to Godric's Hollow, search the manor for the cloak and get back to Hogwarts before dinner started. Lunch would probably end at 1400, depending on how talkative Dippet would be with his obligatory speech, then dinner would start at 1800. Four hours were more than enough for Hermione to obtain the cloak.

_Breaking and entering it is again_, she decided a little frustrated as she thought back to the last time she had broken into a house. That had been back in London, as she had searched the Peverell manuscript in Flamel's flat. Many months had gone by, but Hermione realized that she hadn't made any progress since then. If anything, she had strayed from her path, distracted by her wishes and hopes.

_Foolish!_

But not anymore. The Deathly Hallows were her best chance. She had no idea if her plan of uniting the Hallows would bring her any closer to returning home, but it was all she had at the moment.

"Oh, look at that," an oily voice brought her out of her musings.

Hermione's head shot up and she found a few Slytherins standing in the corridor right in front of her. Her heart clenched as she spotted Tom amongst them. The others were Avery, Lestrange and Black. How stupid of her. She had strolled too near to the Room of Requirement. That was where Tom had his little Death Eater meetings, wasn't it?

Hermione pressed her mouth into a small line as she stared at them. All of them, Tom included, were sneering at her, condescension clearly visible on their faces. Hermione subconsciously fell into her duelling stance and could feel her right hand itch to pull her wand.

"It's Ms DeCerto," Avery continued lazily while his eyes slowly wandered over her. "Such a nice body. Unfortunately, tainted by Muggle filth," he added meanly.

Hermione's eyes left Avery and shot to Tom. He was staring back at her and the darkness in his eyes almost made her tremble. Disheartened, she turned back to Avery.
"Grotesque," she said in a calm, controlled voice. "How right you are." Her gaze once again wandered to Tom while she continued, a cold smile grazing her features, "Though, not in the way you meant it, I'm sure."

A red sheen appeared in Tom's eyes as he heard her last statement. Predictably, his dark magic began to slowly fill the corridor. Hermione had no idea why she provoked him now, but it gave her a perverse feeling of satisfaction to rile him up. His followers obviously hadn't understood the subtle insult of Tom's purity of blood, but they noticed their master's wrath, bristling in the air, and reacted accordingly. All three drew their wands and pointed it at her, menacing looks on their faces. Hermione flicked her wrist and felt her wand land in her hand, though she didn't raise it at them… yet.

"What?" she inquired mockingly. "I thought we wanted to chat some more. You know, being old friends." A disdainful smirk grazed her features and Hermione wondered why she was being so reckless.

As a result, Lestrange snarled menacingly and took a threatening step towards her. "It's about time, someone teaches you manners, Mudblood!"

Hermione snickered at him condescendingly, while she still watched all of their movements alertly. "Believe me, others have tried," she reciprocated, scorn tinting her voice. "…and failed."

Obviously, Lestrange was lost for words, as he just waved his wand and sent a violently crackling curse Hermione's way. It was dark magic. Hermione didn't need an expert to tell her that. She swiftly raised her wand over her head to then bring it down again in one single movement. Lestrange's curse was deflected from its trajectory and impacted harmlessly with the stone wall right beside her. The mocking smirk had left her features, and Hermione glared at the Slytherins in front of her. There was anger building up in her. It enraged her how readily Lestrange had used dangerous dark magic on a fellow student.

Her gaze left Lestrange and wandered, reluctantly, over to Tom. He was looking back at her, while his features were carefully arranged into a mask of indifference. Hermione's stomach flopped, as she saw the disgust behind his mask. A numb feeling of loneliness hit her.

Tom hadn't done anything to stop Lestrange attacking and potentially hurting her.

Hermione breathed in sharply and tried to stifle the grief, which threatened to overwhelm her. This was not the place to lose herself in her feelings. It was her own fault, she was in this mess in the first place. To mourn over the situation wouldn't help her. So, her gaze left Tom and she looked back at Lestrange.

"Really, Primus," she chided Lestrange mockingly, deliberately using his first name. "You shouldn't attack me like that. And in the presence of a prefect, too." Her eyes left Lestrange and shot back at Tom. "Don't you want to take points from him?" she inquired in a perfectly normal and polite voice, raising her eyebrows.

Why she was being so self-destructive right now, she didn't know. Predictably, Tom abandoned the indifferent mask and anger twisted up his handsome features. Hermione's heart clenched painfully as she saw the hate blazing in his eyes. Maybe that was the reason why she provoked him. She needed to see and be hit by his hate, otherwise she wouldn't believe it. Suddenly, the anger left Tom's face again and an evil smile ghosted around his mouth.

"I don't see why," he finally said in his smooth voice. "I think Lestrange did us all a favour by trying to clean the castle off all the dirt."
Tom sent her one of his charming, and fake, smiles, while his followers snickered darkly. Hermione had to swallow hard. It hurt. She had decided to give up her feelings towards Tom, but it was difficult. He could still hurt her. Easily. Hermione was determined not to let that show. She banned all emotion from her face as she stared back at Tom. The degrading grin was still present on his face as he scanned her with disdain.

"Asshole," she whispered darkly, unable to stop the insult from bursting out of her.

Instantly, the anger returned to Tom's face and she could see his hand flicking towards his robe pocket, probably to pull his wand. Hermione was desperate to find out if he would really curse her. But then, out of the corner of her eyes, she could see his followers move. Enraged by her insulting their master, they now attacked. All three of them angrily flashed their wands and sent their curses at her. Hermione could feel the power behind their curses. Certainly no child's play. But then again, Death Eaters should never be taken lightly. So, she quickly crossed her arms before her body, and then spread them to her sides while thinking,

Subsisto!

Immediately, a yellow shield formed in front of her. Not even a second later, the three curses crashed violently into that shield. As they impacted, Hermione could feel the force behind those curses rippling through her own magic and her shield turned from yellow to a deep orange.

Her gaze, though, had never left her adversaries. They seemed to prepare their next attack, if their angry wand movements were anything to go by. Hermione had had enough. Fury was washing over her. She had fought against enough Death Eaters in her life, she didn't need more. A small flick of her wrist and her shield vanished. Then she moved her wand quickly in a complicated, but well known pattern. Her incensed magic was more than willing to comply and formed into a powerful spell.

Opprimo, Hermione screamed in her head, while she brought her wand down in one sharp, oblique movement.

As she performed this movement, simultaneously, a bright light left her wand's tip and sped at an unnatural speed towards the four Slytherins in the corridor. Before the Death Eaters had any chance to take measures to defend themselves, Hermione's spell collided hard with them. Avery had managed to raise his wand and had started to erect a shield, but it was too late. He was hit squarely in the chest. The force of the impact threw him across the corridor. Lestrange and Black weren't any better as the power behind her spell hit them full force and made them lose their balance and skid a few metres on the floor. All three of them remained lying a few metres away on the corridor floor, moaning in pain.

Hermione didn't pay them any more attention. Her eyes wandered from the three Slytherins on the floor towards the only shield that had appeared in the corridor. Behind a golden barrier, she could see Tom, completely unharmed and seemingly at ease. A small swirl of his pale wand, and the shield disappeared again, leaving the corridor darker than before. His angry magic was still all over the corridor, not in the least bit affected by Hermione's attack.

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line, in face of Tom's nonchalance. She turned towards Tom, her wand still in her hand. There was faint amusement showing on his face as his eyes slowly wandered over her defensive stance. He even raised an eyebrow at her, silently asking her if that was all she got. Hermione just grabbed her wand tighter.

Without breaking eye contact with her Tom hissed at his followers, "Leave!"
They quickly scrambled to their feet and hurried away, down the corridor. Hermione didn't pay them any heed but continued to stare at Tom. Soon, they were completely alone in this deserted corridor. Neither of them said anything. They just glared darkly at each other.

Finally, Hermione had had enough. So, she broke the silence by asking, anger making her voice shake slightly, "Is it really so bad that I'm Muggleborn? I mean, you are making such a big thing out of it."

Tom's eyes wandered over her body. Now, he didn't even try to hide the disgust from his face anymore. Hermione nearly shuddered as his cold eyes wandered over her.

"I can't believe that you still dare to speak to me," Tom said in a cold voice.

Hermione breathed in deeply as she heard that repulsion. How could he stand there and say all those things? He had been her boyfriend. How could he insult her like that? Suddenly, Hermione could feel hot fury mounting up in her. Tom knew her so well. Why did he now reject her so cruelly? Slowly, Hermione was losing her temper. It seemed to be slipping away as she continued to stare at that disgust in Tom's grey eyes. Then it just snapped and Hermione yelled at him, unable to hold herself back,

"What's wrong with you? We've been together for so long now. Why is it suddenly important that my parents were Muggles?"

Tom just continued to stare at her. Hermione could still see the disgust, the anger and, above all, the hate bristling in his eyes. There was no way she would be able to hold back her rising temper, so Hermione continued to yell at him, not caring if a teacher would hear her.

"Do you really think that's changing in any way who I am?" she screamed at him, her anger freely flowing out of her. "I arrived here in this... in England almost half a year ago. You know me so long now. Does this little revelation really change who I am? Does it allow you to judge me?"

She took a step towards him while she raged at him, "Who gave you the right to judge me or my parents?"

Her anger had by now infected her magic and it started to crackle around her, reinforced by the Elder Magic. The two forces joined once again and danced around her furiously. Hermione didn't want to feel this hollow desolation anymore and was more than willing to let her anger get the better of her. Her magic prickled on her skin and even made her hair stand on end.

Around her, though, filling up the entire corridor, was Tom's dark magic. Her magic formed a cocoon around her, protecting her from the pressure in the air, but she could still feel its presence. Where her magic was fuelled by her lost temper and her churned up emotions, Tom's magic was fuelled by cold hate. Aside from that, it was an emotionless force, backed up by his raw power.

As she felt that coldness behind Tom's magic, Hermione shuddered involuntarily. This magic was again so familiar. Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. Then she slowly shook her head. How could she have been so wrong? She wondered now. Her fury left her again, but that didn't stop her to put even more power behind her magic.

Then Tom spoke, his voice a hiss and deathly cold, "Who gave you the right to enter our world? As if that wasn't enough, you have the nerve to pose as a real witch. You know it as well as I do: you don't belong here."

Hermione clenched her teeth as she heard the malice in his voice. The darkness, so obviously
flowing off of Tom, made chills darting down her spine, but she didn't let her discomfort show on her face. She continued to stare at him steadily then she said, her voice composed and strangely emotionless,

"I am a real witch. Your view of the world is cruel and just wrong."

If her words had somehow reached Tom, he certainly didn't let it show on his face. In fact, Hermione had no idea what he was thinking right now. His emotions were expertly hidden behind this dark look and the only thing she could see in his eyes was cold hate.

"It's a disgrace, that you were allowed to enter this world," he spat at her, disgust dripping from his words. "You are just like all the other Muggles: Dirt!"

Again, his words and the cruel conviction behind, hit Hermione hard. She wanted to run away from all this hate, but she didn't. She suppressed that urge and just stared back at Tom. Her emotions were reigned in and she knew that her face was an impenetrable mask. Cold and uncaring.

Then she said, scorn wrapped around her words, "You realize that you insult your own father and indirectly yourself, don't you?"

Unsurprisingly, the pressure of Tom's magic around her increased violently, but Hermione's defences still held it off. She could feel the malice behind this onslaught, though. It made her heart drop.

Suddenly, Tom yelled at her aggressively, making her jump, "Don't compare me with something like yourself! I'm no Mudblood!"

"That insult is getting old, don't you think?" Hermione just replied dryly.

He narrowed his eyes at her while his magic still mounted up around her.

"But that's what you are," he finally hissed maliciously. "You are Muggle filth. You know that and that's why you spread this lie of being a Pureblood. It's pathetic. But I shouldn't be surprised. You can't expect more from a squalid Mudblood."

Hermione stiffened as he now drowned her in that hate radiating off his eyes.

"That's not true. And you know it," she whispered, desperately trying to banish all sadness from her tone.

He didn't react at all but just wrinkled his nose in disgust. That managed to wake her temper again. White hot fury washed over her. Then Hermione said, anger making her voice shake,

"Tom, I already told you, I'm sorry I lied. But the problem is not that I lied, it's that you are a prejudiced jerk." Then she added coldly, indignation tinting her voice, "I apologized, maybe you should return the favour."

Tom just glared at her darkly, then, after some time, he opened his mouth and said, without any emotion audible in his voice, "I despise you."

Hermione had to swallow hard. But then she just nodded at him.

"I know… I know…" She breathed and shortly closed her eyes to get her emotions under control. As she looked at him again, she hurled his cold words back at him. "But I shouldn't be surprised. You can't expect more from Lord Voldemort."
Instantly, fury broke out on his face. His dark magic, which up to now had been an inert force, now ripped at her fiercely, trying to find an opening and attack her. Hermione's magic was protecting her from this onslaught, but she could still feel it. It hurt, as his evil magic wrenched at her violently.

"How do you know that name?" Tom inquired threateningly, his voice a dangerous hiss.

As Hermione looked at the darkness lurking behind his eyes, she felt fear wrapping around her, but she couldn't let him see how much he actually managed to intimidate her. So, Hermione looked back at him, unwavering.

"What does it matter to you?" A disdainful smile appeared on her face as she continued, scorn dripping from her voice, "Or does the great Voldemort feel threatened by a small insignificant Muggleborn?"

Without any warning, Tom waved his wand and a dark curse came rushing towards her. The smile instantly died on her face. Tom hadn't hesitated to attack her! There was no time to dwell on the sadness clenching up her stomach, so she ignored her feelings, brought up her own wand and rammed it into Tom's curse, shortly before it would have reached her. A sharp pain seared through her wrist as the force of Tom's curse made contact with her wand. Hermione ignored the pain and completed her wand movement by moving her arm down. The dark curse followed her lead and crashed into the corridor floor at Hermione's left, exactly where she was pointing her wand to, leaving behind a black smoking spot on the stone.

She suppressed a painful wince as she felt her right wrist throbbing painfully. Instead, she looked back at Tom. His eyes had widened slightly as he saw his curse deflected, but he quickly hid that surprise from his face. Hermione shuddered inwardly as she then saw the deathly cold glint and even a little bit of an angry red colour entering his grey eyes. This crimson colour always managed to make her quacking in fear. But she banished all emotion from her face and stared back at him, a distanced look on her face. Then she copied his earlier actions and rose her eyebrows, asking him if that was all he got.

You are being unreasonable, a voice that sounded so much like Harry's, hissed at her in alarm. Despite the despondent feeling now coursing through her, a small smile curled up the corners of her mouth. Yes, unreasonable… and stupid.

"Do you really think you can take me on?" Tom hissed at her, malice oozing out of his words.

"We both know that I can," Hermione retorted, her voice calm and composed, though she actually doubted her own statement.

She knew how powerful a wizard Tom really was. He was very resourceful and probably knew a lot more about magic than she did, at least in the Dark Magic department. But then again, she had an insane wizard's creation backing her up, she thought as she felt the Elder Magic dancing with her own magic. Now, that she knew about Peverell's dark side, she didn't like it anymore how the Elder Magic seemed to merge with her.

To hell with it! Hermione thought desperately while slashing her wand at Tom.

An angry red curse now rushed towards Tom. Before it could hit him, though, he lazily raised his wand and flicked it at the curse. The curse lost momentum until it completely stopped. Another flick of his wand and Hermione saw her own curse soaring back at her. Quickly, she waved her wand to release a counter curse. Instantly, her curse flickered shortly, then it completely died down.

Hermione's eyes shot back at Tom. He smirked at her in an offending way. Then he raised his own
wand. But before she could find out which curse he wanted to hurl at her, suddenly, there were the sounds of steps coming from the corridor behind Tom. Tom seemed to have noticed, too, as he now stopped his attack and even stowed his wand away. Whoever came walking down the corridor, they would reach them in a matter of seconds. It most probably was a teacher as it was way after curfew already. Hermione nervously bit her lip. She actually didn't want to get thrown in detention again. Her eyes wandered back to Tom who still stared at the corridor behind him where the noises were coming from. She really didn't want to spend any detention together with him. Tom turned his head and looked back at her, an angry expression on his face. He obviously shared her opinion for once. It was then that Hermione had an idea. She would spare him having to spend a detention with her.

So, Hermione forced a smug smile on her face as she stared back at Tom. As a reaction his glare only grew darker. She ignored his hostile behaviour and waved a mock good-bye at him, still smiling derisively. The steps had almost reached them, as Hermione raised her wand and softly tapped her head. The familiar feeling of eggs rippling down her head hit her and she knew that her Invisibility spell worked. With satisfaction, she watched Tom's eyes growing wide as she disappeared right before him. It was just a second later that Professor McGray turned around the corner and stepped into the corridor Hermione and Tom were standing in.

"Mr Riddle!" the professor said in a sharp tone as he saw Tom.

Tom narrowed his eyes at the spot Hermione was standing. He seemed to be fighting for his composure, if the way his jaw was clenched was anything to go by.

"You realize it is after curfew?" McGray asked in a stern voice.

Tom turned around to the professor and replied contritely, "Yes, sir. I am sorry."

His previous anger had now totally vanished from his voice. Hermione couldn't see his face, but she was sure his expression matched the repentance in his tone.

"I forgot the time. I've been in the library," he continued in a soft voice while letting his head hang somewhat.

The stern glint in professor McGray's eyes softened a little as he saw that very convincing act of Tom.

"I understand, son," the professor said kindly. "But you know that I can't just let you get away with it. So, this is fifteen points from Slytherin and a detention."

"Yes, sir," Tom replied in a tight voice.

This time he didn't manage to ban all anger from his tone. There was a grim expression on Hermione's face as she stared at his back. Then she turned around and tiptoed away.

{{{}}{{{}}}{}{}}}
Memory Lane

It was midnight, Hermione checked her watch. She was lying in her bed in the Gryffindor dorm and seemed to be unable, or perhaps unwilling, to fall asleep. That nightmare she had had last night had been horrible and unexpected. She hadn't had any nightmares for so long that now it hit her hard as they started to torment her again. She had decided to admit her past and with that her memories back into her life, but that acceptance still didn't make the pain go away. During the day she had a little control over those memories and her emotions, but at night her mind was vulnerable. She was helpless to stop her memories from torturing her again.

Hermione sighed and sat up in her bed. It seemed sleep was not coming to her tonight. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. Then she drew the curtains of her bed open. Her dorm was dived in darkness and the only sounds she could make out were the breathing of her dorm mates. They could sleep, Hermione noted. None of them lay awake; they didn't have to worry about their dead friends coming to visit them during night.

Hermione reached for her pillow and produced her wand and her holster from underneath it. She adjusted the holster to her right forearm, but kept the wand in her hand, before she walked over to the bathroom. She entered and closed the door cautiously, trying not to make too much noise and wake her dorm mates. Standing in the bathroom, she didn't bother to turn the lights on. Instead Hermione's grip on her wand tightened and she concentrated on her magic. Instantly, the steady flow of magic answered. Entwined in her own magic she could feel the Elder Magic. Peverell's creation sent chills down Hermione's spine. Dark as it was, she didn't like how that magic resided inside of her. Still, it was her only way out of here. So, she reached out for that foreign magic. Readily it wrapped itself around her. As it enfolded her, Hermione could instantly feel how she was unlinked from the pulse of magic that belonged to Hogwarts' wards. Then she closed her eyes, turned on the spot and with a soft popping noise she left Hogwarts castle.

Her eyes remained closed even after the feeling of pressure from the apparition had left her again. The air around her was colder now, and it smelled different. There was the humid and earthy smell of decaying leaves. A soft breeze hit her, carrying the fresh scent of wood and trees nearby. Hermione slowly opened her eyes. It was dark here, but she could make out the black contours of firs against the night sky. The stars twinkled down at her and illuminated the small clearing on which she was standing. The trees made soft swishing noises as they bent slightly in the wind and the moss, which grew on the clearing, felt damp but soft against her bare feet. Hermione breathed in deeply and enjoyed the feeling of solitude. Right now, she was far away from everything that bothered her so cruelly. She had apparated here to this forest, which was situated in the North of England. And it wasn't the first time she had been here.

Hermione shuddered as she was again hit by a light breeze. Nothing but her nighty protected her from the cold air. She waved her wand and transfigured her nighty into something warmer. Jeans now covered her legs and she wore a tight white t-shirt with red sleeves. Her fingers shortly skimmed over the fabric of her jeans. They were familiar. And so was this clearing.

She slowly walked farther onto the clearing and stopped as she stood right in the middle. She crouched down, extended a trembling hand to the ground and laid the palm of her hand softly on the moss. That was the spot. It had been here, she was sure. Here was the place where their tent had stood. The tent that had been their home for almost two years. They had been on the run for so long, always in search for the next place they could hide and put up the tent.

*Always in search for the next place...*
Hermione's hand on the ground closed and she could feel the moss and earth she now held in her fist.

This was the last place. This was the place they had put up the tent for the last time.

Hermione stood up and let her gaze wander over the trees around her. They were still cast in darkness. The last time she had been here, she hadn't been alone. Her friends, her only remaining family, had accompanied her. As they had put up the tent, they had known that one way or the other it would be the last time they did that. Because the time had finally come and they had had to face their last battle. Hermione still shuddered as she remembered how scared she had been. There had been no hope left in her. She had known that even if they won and saved all the other people from this darkness, no-one could save her. Not anymore. She had been scared, but at least she had not been alone. Harry and Ron had stayed with her. They had always been with her. They had protected her and comforted her. They had laughed and cried with her. However bad her situation had been, at least she had been able to draw comfort from the knowledge that whatever happened, she would surely share her friends' fate. Whatever would happen at least she was not alone.

Hermione now stood here on this clearing, clad in the same clothes she had worn on the day of the battle - and she was all alone.

She raised her hand; it was still balled to a fist. She opened it. Pieces of earth and moss lay on the palm of her hand. Then the wind skimmed over her and blew it away. Hermione's eyes wandered a last time over the silent clearing. The place was still dived into the weak light coming from the stars above her and it looked almost serene.

"I miss you," she whispered softly.

Then she summoned her magic, grasped the Elder Magic and swiftly turned on the spot.

Tom leaned with his back against the bookshelf. He yawned tiredly as he slowly closed the book lying in his lap. He still couldn't believe how that Mudblood had managed to distract him so successfully from his plans. Since she had appeared in Hogwarts and had caught his attention, he had just abandoned all his previous projects. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so obsessed with her? It now disgusted him.

He stood up from his position sitting on the floor. Then he returned the book to its place on the shelf. Right now, Tom was in the Restricted Section of the Library. He had sneaked into the closed Library to go undisturbed through all the books. He still had a problem to solve, hadn't he? The conversation he had had with Slughorn before the Christmas break had been informative, but it hadn't really resolved anything. Tom checked his wrist watch. It was nearly one in the morning. He again yawned. Obviously, his problem would have to wait a little more, he decided as he left the Restricted Section. Then he snuck back to the exit of the Library. He didn't want any teacher to catch him here. He might be a prefect and the teachers rather liked him, but he wasn't sure he could talk his way out of it if they caught him in the middle of the night, coming from the Restricted Section. And he surely didn't want any detention on top of the one he had gotten from McGray.

Without causing any trouble, Tom slipped out of the Library and crept back in direction to the Slytherin common room. He still felt irritated by the lack of progress he had made since that girl had distracted him so thoroughly. The time he had wasted on her! If that hadn't happened, he could have been so much farther with his plans. Maybe he would have already created at least one. But no, he had had to listen to her lies and had let her distract him, Tom thought angrily.

He couldn't help his thoughts to jump back to the day she had told him the truth. The truth about her
revolting parentage. A filthy Mudblood! He still couldn't believe it. Tom balled his hands into tight fists. Everything she had told him had been a lie. Here he was, having spent his time with a Mudblood. Tom felt disgusted as he remembered how he had touched her. How he had kissed her and even-

He didn't want to think about it any longer. It was just sickening. During all this she had known full well what she was and she hadn't told him. People like her were even worse than the Muggles. Muggles were disgusting, but they didn't try to corrupt the wizarding world with their unbearable presence. The Mudbloods, though, were like a boil infesting the magical world. They were weakening the wizard blood, begriming this pure and innocent world with their filth and deficiency. How could the wizards not see what those creatures did to their world? They were welcoming this dirt into their midst, not knowing that they would quickly be overwhelmed by their sheer number. Soon, the wizarding world would be doomed. How could they not realize that those Mudbloods should be stopped before it was too late?

But of course, they didn't know. Wizards hadn't seen the things Tom had seen as he was forced to live among the Muggles. Muggles were hideous creatures. Mudbloods were even worse. They were inferior to any real wizard and shouldn't be allowed to manifest in the wizarding world. If they were a boil infecting the magical world, then someone should cut away this morbid tumour.

Here Tom was, having spent time with one of those disgusting creatures. That lousy Mudblood had even had the audacity to mock his own ancestry. Tom felt his magic rush through him furiously as he remembered how Hermione had gibed him by reminding him of that repellent part of him: His Muggle father. How could she have said that to him? He was the heir to the noblest and oldest wizarding family. She should be grateful that he had even spent any time with something like her.

Though, Tom wondered how Hermione knew so much about his family. It had cost him a lot of effort to find out anything about them.

Since he had learned that he was a wizard, Tom had been obsessed with finding out more about his ancestry. He had just somehow known that he was no Muggleborn. He had been convinced that at least his father had been a wizard. He had been so sure that his mother had not been able to perform magic. If she had been a witch, then why had she been straying around the streets of London, impoverished? She could have just used her wand and ended her predicament. But she had done no such thing. Instead, she had ended up in a run-down orphanage where she had given birth to him. Then she had died. How could that pathetic woman have been a witch? No, Tom had been convinced that if he had inherited his magic from someone, then it must have come from his father's side of the family. Oh, the hours he had spent searching through every book he could find about wizarding families and pedigrees. But he had never found any mention of any 'Riddle'. It had taken him an eternity until he could accept that his father hadn't been a wizard after all. He had been a Muggle. A Muggle! Tom had been disgusted by the realization that he was related to a Muggle and it had been then that he had abandoned his search for his father forever, just like his father had abandoned him.

So, Tom had decided to look closer into his mother's family. He hadn't expected much and had even been afraid to find out that his mother, too, had been a Muggle. Tom was lucky to have been able to find out about the Gaunts at all, because all he had had to go by had been his mother's father's first name: Marvolo. So, it had taken him some time to find traces of his relations, but in the end he did find the Gaunts. Tom had been delighted as he found out that the members of the Gaunt family were the last living descendants of Salazar Slytherin himself. Suddenly, everything fell in place. The reason why he had been sorted into Slytherin house, despite the fact that Muggle blood ran through his veins. The reason why he was able to speak with snakes. Everything made sense. He was a descendant of Slytherin, the Heir of Slytherin. Where else would he belong but the house of snake?
This realization had been a revelation to Tom. As he had been sitting there in Hogwarts' library with the old, dusty book in front of him he had decided to one day pay his relatives a visit. That day had finally come last summer. Tom could still remember that day in every tiny detail, though, at the same time the memory seemed to be unreal as if it belonged to someone else.

It had been during last summer break. Like every summer break Tom had been forced to return to the orphanage without his wand. Not even his little manoeuvre of framing that third year of being the Heir of Slytherin had saved Tom from having to go back to the hateful place. Dumbledore had once again outvoted Dippet. And then some time into the summer break that day had come…

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Carter had grabbed him tightly by his upper arm as he dragged Tom brutally down the corridor. He stopped before one of the many doors that led into the orphans' rooms and tore it open. He wrenched at Tom violently until Tom was forced to face the man. Carter sneered at him evilly then he raised his hand and his fist collided painfully with Tom's jaw. Tom was sent sprawling on the floor inside of the room. He groaned in pain as he tried to get back up again. Then he could hear Carter walking into the room. The soft clicking of the door as it was closed told him that the detestable man wasn't yet finished with him.

"Tell me, Tom. Do you think you are better than the rest of us just because you go to this fancy boarding school?" Carter asked him in a conversational tone.

Tom wasn't fooled, he could still hear the danger in the other's voice. He lowered his head, his eyes were downcast and he didn't look at Carter.

"No, sir," he replied in a soft voice.

Tom felt nothing but disdain of that lousy Muggle, but he knew that Carter would hurt him even more if he didn't show that disgraceful submissiveness. Next Carter grabbed him by his hair and painfully arched his head back so that Tom was forced to look at him.

"Of course you are not!" he yelled at Tom cruelly. "You are worthless trash. Not even your own family wanted you."

Tom's eyes widened a little as he heard Carter's last statement.

"They were smart enough to realize what a twisted freak you are," Carter sneered the words at Tom.

Carter again hit him brutally in the face and Tom was flung to the floor. This time he didn't bother to get up again. He knew what that man would do now.

"You know that you don't deserve any better, don't you?" Carter's sharp voice scoffed at him.

Then Tom gasped in pain as the first strike hit him.

Tom was still lying on the floor, after Carter had long since left the room. He was curled up into a ball while he looked up at the only window of the room. He had watched how the strong summer sun had wandered over the window until it had set with a blood red afterglow. Now it was dark outside, but Tom still stared out of the window. His breathing had evened out again, though, his body still hurt all over where Carter had hit and kicked him. Tom had listened to the other orphans going to bed and now the building was deathly quiet. As he was lying there on the hard floor of his room he felt detached from the other inhabitants of the orphanage. He was nothing like them. He didn't belong here at all. As Carter had asked him if he thought himself better than the rest of them Tom had denied it. But the truth was that he was superior to them. He shouldn't be forced to live here.
It was then, as Tom felt this strong detachment from everybody else that he decided to visit the Gaunts, his only remaining relatives. He had planned to do it long ago, why not now? He wouldn't be gone for long. No-one would even notice he had left. Slowly Tom got up from his position on the floor. He ignored the shooting pains coming from his body, and walked over to his school trunk where he then retrieved the money, he had hidden at the very bottom of his trunk. It wasn't much, but enough to buy a train ticket.

It wasn't much later as Tom sat in a train compartment on his way to a small village called Little Hangleton. As he sat on the uncomfortable wooden bench he wondered if he really wanted to meet his relatives. He even wondered if Carter had been right...

Tom stared out of the window of his compartment. It was dark outside and nothing could be seen but the occasional lights, rushing by, when the train passed a village. Otherwise there was just darkness.

After he had finally managed to solve the mystery of his descent, new questions had started to pop up in Tom's mind. They were just as tormenting as the preceding ones. How had his mother, member of one of the oldest wizarding families, ended up in that disgusting orphanage in London? Why did she die, leaving Tom behind with nothing if she could have saved herself with magic?

Why did the Gaunt family never try to find him?

Tom exited the train at Great Hangleton as there was no station in Little Hangleton. It was late and the sun had long set, so Tom hurriedly walked through the deserted village. On his way he stole a lamp he saw standing at a house entry. He lit the lamp and then continued his way through the village until he reached a country lane which led to Little Hangleton. Tom took off down the lane, bordered by high tangled hedgerows. The Gaunts' house had to be somewhere between Great and Little Hangleton. Tom followed the curvy lane for some time until it fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside. In a distance Tom could see the flickering lights of lit windows down in the valley. That was Little Hangleton. He continued his way down the valley. After some time, Tom came upon a smaller path, bending away from the lane he was walking on. He stopped and lifted up the lamp to have a better look at this path. It was narrower and dirtier than the main road, but Tom could feel the prickling sensation of magic nearby. It apparently came from that muddy track. He followed that new path until he came upon a patch of trees.

He could barely make out the old shack that was half hidden among the trees. But now that he stood before that run-down house, he could definitely feel magic in the air. Tom knew that the only wizarding family, living in the vicinity of Little and Great Hangleton, were the Gaunts. So, this shabby ruin of a house was supposed to be the Gaunts' premises? Tom could feel disgust as his eyes wandered over the hut. The wooden walls were rotten, tiles had fallen off the roof and the windows were so full of grime that Tom couldn't say whether there was still light inside the house or not. He reluctantly walked over to the front door. He frowned as he could see a dead and shrivelled snake that was nailed to the wood over the entrance.

*Descendants of Slytherin treating snakes like that?* he thought in bewilderment. He ignored that contradiction and knocked on the door. As nothing happened he slowly tried to open the door. It wasn't locked.

Tom entered the house his mother had grown up in. His eyes quickly scanned the room. It was as mangy as the exterior of the house had promised. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs and the floor disgustingly grimy. In one corner stood a table with moldy food on top. Then Tom's eyes wandered to the only light source in the room. A lonely candle was standing on the floor. Right by the fireplace stood an armchair and Tom saw a man sitting in the chair. The man looked just as squalid as this revolting house. Now, he had obviously noticed Tom as he jumped up from his chair. Tom could see
empty bottles rolling over the floor.

Suddenly, the man shouted at him, "YOU!" he bellowed. "YOU!"

Tom tensed as he saw the man drawing his wand and even a knife before he dashed towards him, though the repugnant man wasn't very fast as he seemed to be quite drunk. The disgust Tom felt even intensified now.

"Stop," Tom said in a commanding voice while reverting back to Parsletongue.

If that abhorrent man really was a descendant of Slytherin, he would be able to understand the snake language. Tom watched amused how the man skidded into the table. He seemed to at least be surprised to hear Parsletongue, but did he understand?

"You speak it?" the man asked in a drunken voice. Tom couldn't help but feel a little bit disappointed as the man indeed spoke in parsletongue. Was he really related to that lousy scum?

"Yes, I speak it," Tom said and his voice didn't transport any of the anger he could feel slowly mounting up in him.

He moved further into the repugnant room and heard the door behind him close with a soft click. Now that the door was closed Tom could smell the stench inside of the room. It smelled of a mixture of rotten food, sweat, smoke and cheap alcohol.

"Where is Marvolo!" he demanded to know.

"Dead," the man answered. "Died years ago, didn't he?"

Tom frowned. He hadn't known that. If this man wasn't Marvolo…

"Who are you then?"

"I'm Morfin, ain't I?" the man said in his heavy voice.

"Marvolo's son?" Tom asked slowly.

Tom continued to look at Morfin coldly. That was really supposed to be his uncle? It was repellent, if anything. Disappointment and anger washed over him.

"Course I am, then..." Morfin unexpectedly spoke again. His voice was thick with alcohol.

"I thought you was that Muggle," Morfin whispered. "You look mighty like that Muggle."

A Muggle? Tom narrowed his eyes at Morfin. His magic started to flow through him angrily.

"What Muggle?" Tom asked sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way," Morfin said before he spat on the floor. "You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, i'n 'e? He's older'n you, now I think on it..."

Tom could feel his magic ripping at him furiously. Morfin was talking about Tom's father here.

"He come back, see," Morfin unexpectedly spoke again. His voice was thick with alcohol.
Tom's eyes flashed dangerously as he heard that. He had never taken the effort to find out more about his father after he had discovered that the man was a Muggle. So, Tom hadn't known that the bastard lived here. But it wasn't that surprising, was it? Where else would his fool of a mother have met him? Though if his father really lived here in Little Hangleton…

"Riddle came back?" Tom asked in a very quite tone.

"Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!" Morfin again spat on the floor. "Robbed us, mind, before she ran off! Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?" He was talking himself into a rage.

But his rage was nothing compared to what Tom was feeling as the realization hit him. His father was here! He lived here somewhere in that peaceful village Tom had seen on his way down in the valley. A cruel coldness wrapped around Tom's mind. It smothered everything else until only his hate remained. That hate rushed through him furiously, rousing the dark magic inside of him.

Suddenly, Morfin brandished his knife and shouted, "Dishonoured us, she did, that little slut! And who're you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit… it's over…"

Tom could still feel that detached coldness directing his thoughts as he looked at the repulsive man in front of him. That scum didn't deserve to be called a descendant of the noble Salazar Slytherin. Tom moved towards the man while he slowly raised his hand. His angry magic willingly followed his lead and couldn't even be stopped by the fact that Tom didn't use a wand. He just flicked his fingers and, instantly, the wand was ripped from Morfin's hand. It soared through the air towards Tom. He caught the wand elegantly. It was with satisfaction that Tom fired a Stunner at Morfin.

Tom grasped the lantern tighter as he left the disgusting hut again, the golden ring Morfin had worn was now safely stored inside of Tom's pocket. He looked around. What had Morfin said? The big house over the way? Tom took off and left behind the house his mother had grown up in, without looking back. It didn't mean anything to him.

He resumed his way down the country lane in direction of Little Hangleton. He passed the silent houses. The village appeared to never have been touched by the war that currently ripped at London. After a while Tom stopped, standing before a huge house. The burning anger that had overwhelmed him since speaking with Morfin was suddenly replaced by numb disbelief. He felt the lantern gliding from his fingers. The cracking noise of it hitting the ground shortly tore the silence of the night but then all was quite again.

This was where his father lived? The house before Tom was a huge manor and it looked well cared for. Tom felt betrayed as he stared at the obvious wealth in front of him. He didn't know what exactly he had expected, but it certainly hadn't been this. Images of his childhood rushed through his head. He saw himself walking through the snowy London with nothing but his summer shirt and trousers because he couldn't afford more. He remembered the many nights he had had to go to sleep hungry because Mrs Cole hadn't been able to get enough food for everyone. He could see himself using the flimsy control of his magic to steal from passers-by on London's streets, always in fear to be caught.

Tom balled his hands into fists as he stared at the silent house on front of him. It looked so inviting. Two windows of the ground floor were lit and illuminated the grass underneath them merrily. Obviously someone was still awake.

Tom felt offended by the peaceful quiet this house radiated.

He waved the wand he had stolen from his unconscious uncle and the iron gates opened thus
admitting him in on the grounds. Tom entered the grounds of this manor house. A gravel road led up to the building. It was bordered by flowerbeds, which were in full bloom and emitted a sweet scent. Tom's steps made soft gnashing noises as he walked the path up to the manor. Finally he stood before a huge, wooden door. He extended a hand and skimmed his fingers hesitantly over the varnished surface.

I can still leave... There was no reason for him to be here. He didn't need to meet his father to know that he was a useless Muggle. A Muggle who had infected Tom with his filthy blood. He breathed in deeply before his hand on the door wandered to the door knocker. He clasped the cold metal and then knocked. At first nothing happened, but then, after a while, he could hear footsteps.

The door was opened by a man and Tom instantly knew who that man was. He was illuminated by the light coming from the hallway behind him while Tom stood in the darkness of the night. The man was taller than Tom and seemed to be in the beginning of his thirties. Tom felt numb shock grasping at him and his stomach clenched as his eyes wandered over the man in front of him. Tom had known what to expect, but now that he stood in front of his father, he felt like not being prepared at all. It was like looking in a mirror. Although the man was older than Tom, they unmistakably shared the same features, the same dark hair. It was eerie, this likeness in appearance.

"What do you want?" Tom jumped as he heard his father speak to him. His tone was gruff and impatient.

Tom was still standing at the threshold of his father's house covered in shadow, obviously Riddle Sr. couldn't see his face. But his voice had finally brought Tom out of his stupor.

"I wanted to meet you, father," Tom said, his voice was calm and icy cold. It served very well to conceal all of his emotions.

As Riddle Sr. heard the last word his face contorted into a mask of anger. Though, Tom could see something else mingled into the fury. Was it apprehension? Even fear?

"How dare you address me like that?" Riddle Sr. barked at Tom.

Tom took a step forwards so that the light, coming from the opened door, now illuminated his face. A small smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as he watched his father recoiling from him.

"How else do you want me to call you? 'Dad'?" Tom asked him in a light and even jovial tone. Though, right now he wasn't feeling at all as calm as his tone had suggested. Riddle Sr. stared at him with wide eyes and Tom could see realization and then disgust flitting over his father's face. Tom felt anger boiling up in him as he saw that look on the man's face. He didn't wait for any retort, but sidestepped his father and entered Riddle manor. He was standing in a huge hall. In front of him he could see a pair of stairs leading up to another floor. A richly decorated carpet covered the floor and a chandelier hung from the high ceiling.

"What do you want?" Riddle Sr. asked in a low voice.

Tom turned around to him again and saw that the surprise on the other's face was now overshadowed by his disgust. Tom stared at the man who looked so strikingly like him. What do I want here? he asked himself numbly.

"Money?" his father asked him sharply. "That's why you are here, isn't it?"

"I don't need your money," Tom hissed at him.
What did he care for filthy Muggle money? He shouldn't have come after all, Tom thought as he looked at his father. He was a pathetic Muggle. Obviously afraid his lost son would demand money from him. Tom noticed an open door just a few paces away from him. The room behind seemed to be lit.

"We shouldn't discuss the reason of my visit in the hallway, should we?" Tom told the other man in a cold tone. "That would be rather ill-mannered."

Before his father could say anything, Tom turned and walked towards the open door he had seen. He had just reached the door as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You can't just enter here and do what you want," his father blustered at him.

Tom shook away the hand on his shoulder and stepped through the door. His eyes quickly scanned the room. It was a large room, probably the drawing room of the mansion. On one wall Tom could see windows, showing a nice view of the village down in the valley. Another wall was almost completely covered by a bookcase. An old richly ornamented globe stood in front of it. Everywhere Tom could see huge portraits, which probably showed ancestors of the noble Riddle family. The flooring of the room was made of expensive dark wood. Small cabinets and commodes made of mahogany stood here and there. But soon Tom's gaze was drawn to a sitting area with lush sofas and armchairs. There was an old woman with white hair sitting on one sofa. She was occupied with embroidering a white cloth. A man of the same age as the woman sat in one of the comfortable looking armchairs with a book in his hand. Tom walked over to them, followed by his father.

"Who was it?" the old man asked without looking up from his book.

As he got no answer he looked up. His eyes quickly wandered from Riddle Sr. to Tom.

Tom didn't know who those two people were, but if he had to guess, he would say those were his grandparents. He never had any relatives and now he was confronted with his father and grandparents. It was somehow weird. Though, not in a good way as all three of them seemed to stare at him in a defensive and rather hostile way. But what did he care what those stupid Muggles thought about him.

Tom smirked at the old man coldly before he said in a controlled voice, "Let me introduce myself. I am his son," Tom finished as he gestured at Riddle Sr.

There was a soft thud as the book his grandfather was holding fell from his hands. The man stared at Tom with disbelief in his eyes. The woman on the sofa, too, looked at Tom with shock visible in her eyes.

After a moment Tom's grandfather seemed to have recovered from this news as he now asked Riddle Sr. abruptly, "What is that boy talking about, Tom?"

"I don't know." Tom heard his father reply. "He just appeared on the threshold and wouldn't leave again."

"I had expected a little more hospitality from you, father," Tom said cynically and emphasizing the last word.

The old man turned to Tom before he yelled rather angrily, "Preposterous! Tom doesn't have children. How can you claim to be his son?"
"I don't claim anything," Tom answered coldly. "I know he is my father."

"You insolent little liar. How dare you enter my house and spread such ridiculous stories?" the old man spat at Tom enraged.

Tom stared at the angry man. He hadn't expected his so called family to welcome him with open arms, but this contempt made him quite furious.

"Who's your mother then?" a quiet but all the same calculating and hard voice asked.

Tom turned to the woman, sitting on the sofa. She looked at him with sharp eyes.

"If you say Tom is your father, then who is your mother, boy?" she again asked him while there was suspicion in her eyes as they scanned him coldly.

"Merope Gaunt," Tom replied in a steady voice.

Tom could hear a sharp intake of breath, coming from his father, who still stood beside him.

"You are the offspring of that crazy woman?" the old lady stared at Tom with obvious disgust on her face. Then she turned away from him and towards Riddle Sr. before she continued in her snobbish voice. "See, Tom, that's what we get for your inappropriate behaviour. Now we have this thing on our hands."

"I have a name, you know," Tom growled at her. "I'm Tom Riddle."

"Ha, now it gets better and better," the old man scoffed at Tom before he continued in a low and aggressive voice, "Listen, boy, you are no Riddle. You don't belong to our family."

"Funny that," Tom replied and his voice was now icy cold. "How do you explain my name then?"

"Don't delude yourself, boy," Tom's grandfather bellowed at him enraged. "You are certainly no Riddle."

Tom could feel his magic flowing angrily through him. He still managed to stop it from crackling around him, but he slowly started to not care anymore.

"I know he ran away with Merope Gaunt," Tom hissed at his grandfather in anger while he pointed at Riddle Sr. "I am his son."

"You don't have proof, boy." The old man seemed to lose his composure completely as he now snarled at Tom, "That woman was a slut. You could be the son of any man from the village."

"My looks are not proof enough?" Tom asked in a dangerous voice.

"You are no son of mine!" Riddle Sr. suddenly yelled at him. Tom could see his hands shake with anger. "Spawn of the devil that is what you are!"

Tom was momentarily speechless as he could see that look of disdain his father was hitting him with.

"That woman hoodwinked me! Forced me to marry her", Riddle Sr. exclaimed.

"Right you are," the old man acknowledged before he again turned to Tom and hissed at him in an angry tone. "Now listen here, boy, we don't want you here. You will leave this house right away. I will make you regret it if you spread your ridiculous lies."
"I am not lying," Tom whispered as he balled his hands into tight fists.

"Do you think you can walk in here and ruin our family?" the old lady asked him coldly.

Tom's magic was raging inside of him and he was surprised by this violent reaction he had. Why did he care what these lousy Muggles thought? Why did he feel so offended by their rejection?

Tom turned to his father and locked eyes with him then he said in a quiet and emotionless voice, "You know that I am your son. Why do you hate me?"

His father stared at him and Tom could still see the disgust in his eyes, but there was something more. Was it shame? Before Tom could identify it, though, it disappeared from his father's face again and then Riddle Sr. hissed at him coldly, mercilessly,

"You are no Riddle. You don't deserve that name. Disgusting scum is what you are. Just like your mother."

Tom didn't answer anything to this insult. White hot fury washed over him and he was slowly losing control. He could feel how his magic begged to be set free. Tom didn't consciously decide what to do next. He just reached for his pocket and pulled Morfin's wand.

He had read about this curse in countless books. Had been obsessed with it and fascinated by the concept behind the curse. Sometimes he had even been afraid of that magic. But never had he used it before.

Tom could see the fear on his father's face and a little bit of recognition as he pointed his wand at the older man.

"Avada kedavra," Tom said in a soft voice.

A flash of green and Tom Riddle Senior lay dead on the floor in the middle of the drawing room. His fear was still etched on his face. Tom turned around as he heard the shouts of surprise and shock, coming from his grandparents. He again raised his wand and cast the curse for another two times. He could feel the magic flushing through him and then through his wand. The magic, though, felt suddenly neutral and pure, strangely unconnected with his previous hate.

It was so surreal. Tom felt like he was standing outside of his body. Somehow floating over everything as he stared down at the scene below. He was eerily detached from his emotions as he looked at the dead body of the man who had been his father. He had expected to feel something. Wasn't he supposed to at least feel some emotion after having murdered his own father? But there was nothing. Neither satisfaction nor triumph or anything else.

Not even guilt.

He looked down at that man and all he could see was just another worthless Muggle. Tom took a step back. And another and another. Until he stood by the door, leading out of the drawing room. His gaze, though, was still fixed on the three bodies lying by the sofa.

He had never used that curse before and he had never murdered before. The picture of that stupid little Ravenclaw girl flashed through his mind. But that had been unplanned, an accident. He had never really intended for the Basilisk to kill anyone for he had known the school would be closed then.

He had never murdered anyone.
But there, not five metres away, now lay three dead people. Tom's hand clenched tightly around the wand that was not his. It felt strange in his hand, just as strange as this absence of any emotion in him. But Tom knew that somehow he had crossed a line and it was very unlikely that he would ever find the way back.

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After that, Tom had left Riddle manor. He couldn't remember much of how he had gotten back to the shabby hut of the Gaunts. But somehow he must have found the way back, because the next thing Tom remembered was how he stood before his uncle. He had found him still lying, unconscious, in the middle of the room. Tom had known that he had to do something. Something to prevent people from ever finding out what he had done. And he had been successful. No-one had ever connected the murders of the Riddles with him. His uncle, though, was now locked away in Azkaban with a completely modified memory of the night Tom had visited him.

Tom had slowed down as his thoughts had wandered to this night, but now he was resuming his way to the Slytherin common room.

He still didn't know how he felt about having killed his own father. He never really thought about it. That man never took a place in Tom's life and now Tom wasn't willing to concede him one in death. He had decided to ignore that part of his family. That Muggle part. It was rather embarrassing that he was related to those dirty Muggles. But what did it matter now? They were dead. No-one could find out about his role in their deaths. No-one knew.

Aside from Hermione, that is, Tom thought angrily and a little concerned, too.

Suddenly, he heard steps coming from the dark corridor in front of him. Obviously someone was walking towards him, judging from the fact that the echoes of the steps were growing louder. He didn't know who it was, but most probably it was a teacher. Tom didn't want to be found here in the corridor after curfew. So, he now looked around. A few metres away he spotted a small alcove, which was partly covered by a tapestry. Tom quickly walked over to the alcove, hid inside of it and carefully positioned the tapestry in front of him. By now the sound of the steps had grown even louder and the person had almost reached him.

Tom's eyes narrowed and hate boiled up in him as he could finally recognize the person. It was Hermione. He could feel his magic swirling through him angrily as he watched her walking by. He had wasted so much time with the Mudblood. She was worthless trash, not deserving of his attention. Tom's eyes wandered slowly over her form and he furrowed his brow as he saw her strange attire. Hermione was wearing trousers. He had never seen her wear trousers before. And she didn't wear any shoes nor socks but walked barefoot through the corridor. Her shirt was odd, too. It was tight and somehow strangely cut. As his eyes so travelled over her form he saw that she was clasping her wand tightly in her hand. What was she up to? Her face was expressionless and Tom couldn't tell what she was thinking right now. Though, there was a familiar flicker in her brown eyes. He could recognize that flicker. He had seen that desperation and sorrow in her eyes a few times already. Tom nearly shook his head as he remembered how he had racked his brain to find out what had happened to her to cause that sorrow. What a waste of time that had been. Tom silently sneered at her. Whatever it was that had hurt her, that dirty Mudblood had deserved it.

After Hermione had passed him and had walked some distance away from him, Tom finally left his hiding place. He shortly looked in the direction Hermione had disappeared to, but then he turned around and resumed his way to the Slytherin common room. As he was walking back to his common room, though, there was one thing stubbornly flying around his mind. It was something Hermione had said. Tom berated himself for attaching so much importance to something that Mudblood had
told him, but still, her words were echoing through his mind.

'Can you imagine that? Someone killing his own father? What a despicable crime!'

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"You know how much I like you, don't you?" Tom whispered softly into her ear.

Hermione sighed contentedly as she felt his arms being wrapped around her. She raised her head to look up at him. There was so much affection in Tom's eyes as he was gazing down at her. A warm feeling, originating from her stomach, spread through her whole body as she smiled up at Tom. Then she slung her arms around his waist as she leaned into him. He smelled so good. And his embrace was so caring. Hermione felt protected and happy as she could feel his arms around her so gently.

Everything was perfect.

Just perfect.

Nothing could touch her here. Nothing hurt her.

Hermione closed her eyes and leaned her head against Tom's chest. She could feel him placing a light kiss on her forehead. She wanted to stay like this forever. Together with him.

After some time, though, Hermione was hit by an inexplicable restlessness. Something troubled her. What could it be? The content smile left her face and she opened her eyes. As she still leaned into Tom the first thing she expected to see was the green fabric of his uniform pullover. But now that she opened her eyes she was met by a black robe, made of thick and heavy material. Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. What was this? She wanted to take a step away from Tom, but she couldn't. His arms were still wrapped around her, and by now they had tightened painfully. She wriggled in his grip, trying to break lose. Why didn't he let her go?

"Tom?" she asked, trepidation making her voice shake slightly.

Hermione raised her head to look up at him, but she wasn't met by Tom's handsome features. She saw terrible red eyes with slits for pupils. Skin so pale that it looked like belonging to a corpse. A lipless mouth twisted into a frightening sneer. Hermione stiffened as panic and fear washed over her. Her head swirled and she could feel herself starting to tremble as terror invaded her thoughts. All she could do now was to stare up at him.

"Tsk, tsk," his voice scoffed at her.

It was deathly cold and devoid of any emotion which could have indicated that it belonged to a human being. "You know I hate that name."

Then he leaned down to her. Hermione's breathing was ragged by fear as he whispered cold words into her ear, "Say my true name."

It was not a request, the murderous edge in his voice told her so. He would make her regret it if she wouldn't obey him. He had straightened up again and Hermione could feel her heart beating painfully fast as she stared up at him. She felt like choking, but she still found herself opening her mouth as it was unthinkable not to submit to his command. His crimson eyes were still drowning her with malice, waiting for her answer.

Her voice was soft and ridged by fear as she whispered his name, "Lord Voldemort."

Cruel satisfaction was seeping into his red eyes and a twisted smile slightly curled up the corners of
his mouth. Then he grabbed her painfully tight by her upper arms.

"That is right," he hissed at her and the darkness in his voice made her tremble. "And you would do well to remember it, Mudblood."

Suddenly, he hurled her away, and Hermione gasped in pain as she was flung to the floor. Her shoulder throbbed achingly as she stared up at him. Her eyes were wide with fear as she watched him pulling his pale wand.

"You disgust me," he stated, while his eyes scanned her mercilessly. "This is what you deserve," he continued, before he brandished his wand and hissed, "Crucio."

The last thing she apprehended before her world exploded in pain was his cold laughter.

Hermione started up in her bed. Her breathing was fast as if she had just run a mile at full speed. She felt herself shaking uncontrollably, and she was drenched in cold sweat.

This is getting ridiculous, she growled at herself. But she knew that even if she had decided to bury all her feelings for Tom, didn't mean her feelings would just leave her alone. She had experienced it before, hadn't she? The nightmares. It seemed they were back, trying to make her life even more miserable than it already was. Hermione groaned in frustration and then opened the curtains of her four-poster and got up.

"Morning, sunshine," Rose chirped at her happily.

Hermione doubted very much that she had any distant resemblance to a 'sunshine' right now but didn't comment on it. Instead she grumbled something that could have meant 'Good morning.' or just 'Leave me the hell alone!'. Then she stooped down to retrieve her clothes from her trunk. She grabbed a black skirt and a rather washed out mauve blouse. As she gathered up her clothes she noticed how her room mates ran around in an excited way. Rose had dumped what seemed to be her entire wardrobe on her bed and went through it, occasionally picking up one piece to examine it closer. Lucia was posing before a mirror she had obviously conjured up and was contemplating her shiny high heeled shoes. Viola seemed to be occupied with braiding Diana's long, jet-black hair. Hermione was a little bewildered by their antics. She didn't really care what they were up to, but she also wouldn't fancy if her dorm mates' sudden urge to spruce up was evoked by one of Legifer's infamous inspections. So as Hermione shuffled over to the bathroom she asked Lucia,

"What's with the uproar?"

Lucia only distractedly unfixed her eyes from her black shoes and looked at Hermione.

"Do you think the heels are too high?" she asked, completely ignoring Hermione's query.

"Er… no?"

"I'm not so sure," Lucia replied as she again looked at her shoes. "My father doesn't like high heels very much."

Rose looked up from her quest of searching the right outfit and suggested in her shrill voice, "Then don't wear them. Seriously, you have a lot of other shoes."

"Yes," Lucia replied reluctantly as she stared at her black shoes. "But they are the prettiest."

Hermione chose to ignore the rest of that discussion and resumed her way to the bathroom. She now knew what the whole thing was about anyway. As soon as Lucia had mentioned her father,
Hermione had remembered. Today was parents’ day. Of course, how could she have forgotten? It was the very day on which she would break into her best friend's house to steal from his family, she thought frustrated as she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Harry would understand, wouldn't he? she tried to assure herself. It still felt somehow wrong, but Hermione knew that this was part of her new plan. This was part of her plan of finally getting home again.

Whatever home means.

Hermione flipped through a book while standing beside a shelf in the Library. Since breakfast was over, she was working on an essay for professor McGray. The students' parents would arrive for lunch, so Hermione had some time left before she would go off to her little thieving trip. Currently, she researched the different ways to fight off manticores. Though, admittedly, there didn't seem to be many ways to do so, Hermione decided as she read through a paragraph about those creatures in the fifth book already. The author suggested the best way to not be eaten by a manticore, would be to avoid it altogether. Hermione slowly suspected that there was no curse to actually subdue a manticore. Maybe McGray had given them a catch question.

A small smile crept on her face. She kind of liked her DADA professor. He was rather unconventional. Aside from Remus Lupin, who was the best teacher ever in her opinion, she only had had a lot of failures as DADA professors. To be fair, Mad Eye Moody in her fourth year had been rather good, too, but he had actually been a Death Eater in disguise. So, she wasn't going to count him. Snape hadn't been too bad either, she had to reluctantly admit, but he had always been a rather dodgy character. To this day she didn't know on which side he had fought.

A spy, from start to finish, she mused as she wondered about Snape's loyalty. Dumbledore had been convinced of his honesty. But then again, Snape had killed Dumbledore after her sixth year. Hermione didn't know what to think of Snape. She sighed tiredly, closed the book about manticores and placed it on the shelf. She was pretty much alone in the Library as it was Saturday and still rather early. The parents wouldn't arrive for at least another two hours. They would all meet in the Great Hall for lunch. She dreaded to go there. With all the family members present it was going to be plainly obvious that she was alone. Hermione had accepted her parents' death, but at times like these their loss hit her hard. Her Gryffindor friends, on the other hand, were overly enthusiastic about the whole thing. Longbottom and Weasley had been thrilled to have their family visit them. Lupin had been a little nervous as he would introduce his new girlfriend to his parents and he would need to talk with the Lovegoods, too. All in all, though, he had seemed pretty happy about the whole event.

Hermione would have gladly avoided the thing altogether. She could already imagine the looks of pity she was going to receive when she arrived at the Great Hall completely alone. Though, the Slytherins would probably enjoy her misery. Since the whole school knew about her parentage the Slytherins had become downright nasty towards her. Well, she had had ample experience with Slytherins hating her, hadn't she?

Hermione reached for another book, standing on the shelf, but as she started to flip through its pages her thoughts were elsewhere. Her mind wandered back to her first years at Hogwarts.

Merlin, I was so naïve back then, she mused as she remembered that day in her second year when Draco Malfoy had called her a 'Mudblood'. Back then she had sensed that it was an insult but hadn't known what exactly it meant. She hadn't known that this single word was packed with discrimination, social exclusion and eventually hate. As she had stepped into the wizarding world, enthralled by its wonders, she had had no idea that there was a deep rift, running through this world, splitting it in two.
It hadn't taken her long to understand it, though, because Draco Malfoy's insult had only been a prelude to more and more hostility. After her sixth year, all the hate and aversion had finally resulted in a war that had covered the country with chaos. As everything had slowly drowned in darkness, Hermione had often wondered if it wouldn't have been better for her to have stayed in the Muggle world. A weak smile ghosted around her lips as she remembered how Harry and Ron would always scold her whenever she voiced something like this.

"You are the best witch I have ever known. I tell you, you belong here," Ron would always say. Then he would loop an arm around her shoulders and recount every time she had managed to best those 'pureblooded bigots' in school.

Hermione felt her stomach clench as she thought about Ron. She missed him very much. And Harry, too. They had always stood by her. They had been there for her, back then in second year as Malfoy had insulted her and later, too, as the war had struck and people had tried to kill her because of her parentage. Thanks to them, the hate and disgust against Muggleborns had never really hit her. She had been protected by her friends because she had known that they would never abandon her because of her blood status.

Then that protective shield had been taken away from her. Now, she stood alone. When there now was disgust in the eyes of the Slytherins, Hermione had to deal with it alone. The only person who could have been able to protect her had chosen to abandon her.

Hermione's hands clenched tightly around the book as her thoughts drifted in a direction she desperately tried to ignore. *Stop that, Granger,* she hissed at herself and stuffed the book angrily back on the shelf. She wasn't facing any dark wizards here. Only school children. There was no need for anyone protecting her.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps echoing on the stone floor of the Library. Hermione frowned; she hadn't expected anyone to be here. She turned around to whoever was walking towards her. Her blood froze as her eyes fell on her unbidden guest. Tom was confidently stalking down the aisle. As always his hair was perfectly coiffed. She remembered how she had liked to destroy his hairstyle by running her hands through his dark silky hair. His eyes were still that beautiful shade of grey, she had always admired.

He still looked the same. Handsome.

But his attractive appearance was now marred by a depreciative smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth, and disgust glinting in his eyes as he scanned her. Hermione could feel her heart stabbing her chest as he looked at her in this way, but she swallowed down any upcoming emotions and stared back at him indifferently. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he did hurt her with his cold behaviour.

"Hermione," Tom said in his melodious voice as he had reached her. His next words were warped by brutal scorn, "What a *pleasure* to meet you."

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line. She did not want to speak with him. Instead she reached for her bag and then turned to quickly leave. She might have decided to ignore the feelings she had towards him, but that was very difficult when he was standing right in front of her. She had only taken a few steps away from him as she felt a hand grabbing her upper arm, thus stopping her. Tom twirled her around so that she was forced to face him again. Then he rammed her against the bookshelf, making her wince in pain. He had her firmly pinned against the shelf and tightly held her shoulders so she wasn't able to escape. His face was still a blank as he looked down at her, though Hermione could see anger slowly seeping into his features.
"That's not very polite, don't you think? Just walking away in the middle of a friendly conversation," Tom told her quietly. An offensive smirk appeared on his face as he said in a patronizing way, "Some people would call that ill-breeding."

Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she heard his last word, but she would not allow her emotions to get the better of her so she said in a cold, clipped tone which did not betray how much he unsettled her,

"Release me."

A twisted smile curled up the corners of his mouth as he looked down at her. Then he said, his words dripping from his mouth, sweet as poison,

"Why so alone here in the Library? Why are you not preparing to meet with your dear parents?"

Hermione just stared back at him and did not reply anything. He knew perfectly well that her parents had died. She set her shoulders and looked defiantly back at him.

The evil smirk on his face suddenly turned into one of his charming smiles as he said in mock sympathy, "Oh yes. I forgot. They are dead. How unfortunate for you."

Hermione again tried to shake him off, but as there might be a soft smile on his face his hands still held her ruthlessly in place. He seemed to reflect on his words, and as an afterthought he said in a suave tone that contrasted sharply with the message of his words,

"Though, others might think it's not a big loss. You know, them being dirty Muggles and all."

At his words she could feel her composure slowly forsake her. The vile amusement, dancing in his cold eyes, made her want to curse him on the spot. Her right hand was prepared to release her wand from its holster any time now.

Rightful fury coursing through her, she hissed at him heatedly, "I said get off me! I don't want anything to do with you!"

Instead of releasing her, Tom just raised one haughty eyebrow at her elegantly. "You really shouldn't talk to your superiors like this, Mudblood."

She had to swallow as she heard him using that word so casually. But she would not allow her façade to crumble, so she looked him squarely in the eyes as she said in a firm voice,

"You are certainly not my superior."

Without breaking eye contact with him, she flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. She allowed her magic to swirl around her furiously. The force of her magic, though, didn't throw Tom off. Instead his own magic met hers. As he felt her magic in the air, Tom's eyes narrowed at Hermione dangerously and a fearsome smirk played around his mouth. Then he said, cruel condescension dripping from his every word,

"Of course I am. Even the most stupid Hufflepuff first year is your superior."

The anger which had flamed up in her suddenly left her again and she felt drained and empty as she gazed back at him.

"Unless that first year is a Muggleborn, I assume?" Hermione replied in an expressionless tone.
"Exactly," Tom sneered down at her cruelly. Then the hate which had until now only been visible in his eyes distorted his handsome features and he spat venomously, "People like you don't deserve to be here."

Hermione didn't know whether he was speaking about Hogwarts or life in general. Both interpretations were possible after all and this insight made her stomach flop. She stared up at him and the only thing she could make out on his face was this abysmal hate. It even crackled around him in form of his dark magic. She wondered if there really had been a time when he had looked at her with something else than hate. She shook her head as if to dispel her memories.

"You are hideous," said in a hollow voice.

A frightening look crossed his face as he heard her. His hands on her shoulders tightened painfully and an eerily red sheen tinted his eyes. Hermione was fully prepared to him attacking her now and her hand tightened around her wand. She was certainly not going to let him walk all over her. Her whole body was very tense, awaiting his attack.

So she was utterly surprised as that upcoming crimson colour disappeared from his eyes again. Strangely enough, even the anger that had previously twisted up his face left him as he looked down at her. Hermione felt drawn to those incredibly grey eyes as Tom scanned her so intensely as if he had seen something new in her. She was mesmerized by the softness that suddenly appeared on his face.

Then Tom leaned down to her. Hermione stiffened as she felt his lips brushing against her own. It felt so soft, just like she remembered it. She closed her eyes as he was kissing her tenderly. It seemed her rational mind had abandoned her as the only thing she could comprehend was his mouth on hers as he caressed her. His hands released her shoulders and slid gently down her body. One of his arms snaked around her waist and pulled her against him while his other hand started to run comfortingly over her back, sending a burning tingle over her skin wherever he touched her. Hermione was dazed by his actions and his closeness which she had missed so dearly. She could feel the heat of his body through her clothes and could smell his pleasant scent. Her heart started to beat so fast, and she was lost in her feelings. Her emotions overwhelmed her completely, and she couldn't stop herself to huddle closer against him. She leaned into him and started to respond to his kiss. Her wand fell from her hand and landed with a soft clang on the stone floor. Hermione lifted her arms and slung them tightly around him.

The moment her fingers clasped the fabric of the dark robes on his back, Tom suddenly ended the kiss. Hermione's eyes flew open as she was ripped from her dream-like state. She stared at him with huge eyes, apprehension wrapping around her heart. There was not one speck of emotion on his blank face. Hermione's heart beat at an incredible pace as Tom again leaned down to her. But this time he turned his head to speak into her ear. She could still feel his arms slung around her body. His hands on her back and waist were so warm and gentle as he held her pulled against him. His voice was equally gentle as he spoke to her.

But his words were not. They were like sharp blades, cutting through her, attacking her weak spots and seeking to rip open painful wounds. "If I'm really so hideous, then why are you moaning like a slut right now?" His cruel scoff was hidden behind twisted politeness.

Hermione stiffened in his arms as his words sunk in and finally dispelled her upcoming hope. Her hands released the fabric of his robes like she had been burned by it. Tears welled up in her eyes as she tried to wriggle away from him.

"Let go," she finally sniffed as her attempts to shake him off remained to be futile.
As an answer his arms tightened around her, and he pulled her against his chest. Then he whispered in his velvety voice, "With pleasure."

With that he released her and took a step away from her trembling form. Hermione desperately tried to get her violated emotions back under control as she stared up at him. He was standing there, looking as attractive as ever, and sneered down at her. Sickening triumph swelled up in his eyes as he took in her shaky state.

When he spoke next he didn't even bother to hide the malice from his tone, "I can't believe something like you dares to insult me. You and your lousy Muggle parents are worth less than the muck, sticking under my boots."

Hermione stared up at his eyes, blazing with hate and revulsion, while they slowly wandered over her form.

Then he continued to abase her, his cold words rolling with cruel conviction from his tongue, "It just is obscene how you are allowed to walk around, to breathe, when it is so obvious how you defile this place with your mere presence."

The demeaning streak in his words made her freeze in shock. Then he leaned a little towards her, and Hermione could feel her body starting to tremble as he hissed into her ear, wielding each word like a knife used with merciless precision,

"You make me sick."

Hermione was stunned and only her eyes widened in fear as he drew his wand. A vicious look crossed his face when he saw her discomfort, but then he didn't raise his wand at her. Instead he waved it at the front of his uniform shirt and pullover and said,

"Scorgify."

Then he scoffed at her snidely, "Don't want to be dirtied by your Muggle filth."

He threw her one last disgusted glance before he turned around and sauntered down the aisle, leaving her leaned against the shelf. Hermione's breathing was laboured as she watched his retreating back. Tears still burned in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

You idiot, Hermione! she hissed at herself, disgusted by the hope he had managed to evoke in her. Situations like these were the very reason she had decided to bury her dispensable emotions. Confronted with her feelings, Hermione felt angry and furious at herself. Once again she had allowed him to hurt her. She was disgustingly weak. With a trembling hand she picked up her wand and reached for her school bag, which had also fallen down at the floor as Tom had assaulted her. She grabbed it tightly and quickly scurried out of the Library.

Tom couldn't suppress a soft snicker as he watched Hermione almost running from the Library. How could that Mudblood ever think she would be able to stand up to him? he thought condescendingly. It had been amusing to spite her, but Tom wondered why he had gone so far as to kiss her. He shouldn't go around and kiss Mudbloods. That was just disgusting. Sure he had wanted to prove his point, but there certainly were other ways to do that than by embracing and kissing her.

How could he have been so blinded by her lies? It made him shudder in disgust as he remembered how he had coveted her. How humiliating to have spent time with a lowly Mudblood. But he shouldn't forget that there had been a reason for him to have wanted to possess her. Since she had arrived at Hogwarts, Hermione had proven to be an exceptionally powerful witch. Of course Tom
had been drawn to that kind of power. She had appeared to be so valuable, so desirable.

Now he knew better, though. He knew that her power and her magical ability was all but a lie. Hermione herself wasn't that powerful. Being a Mudblood, she most probably was a poor witch. No special talent at all. Hermione was completely worthless.

As that thought unfolded in his mind, Tom was suddenly hit by the memory of her in his arms. Why had he kissed her? And why had he liked the feeling of her in his arms? As that final thought took form in his mind, Tom shook his head angrily. It wasn't Hermione herself who he had liked to embrace. It was more the idea, he was still fascinated with. For so long he had thought her to be a formidable sorceress. Someone desirable. Of course, it now took him some time to get over that impression of her. But he had to accept how worthless she truly was, he decided furiously. He might have thought her powerful and valuable, but that had been a mistake. After all, Tom had a theory as to why that Mudblood could perform such powerful magic. He needed to finally find out once and for all if that theory of his was right.

Had that Mudblood really managed to steal the Unbeatable Wand? Was that the secret behind her power?

A vile smirk took form on his face as he skimmed his index finger over the book Hermione had been reading in. Beasts of the Woods, he read its title. She had been trying to research for that essay McGray had given them? That Mudblood should stop wasting the teachers' time and school resources by doing homework. The smirk on his face even widened. There was no way Hermione could compete with any pureblood, Tom thought haughtily.

Wasn't today the perfect opportunity to confront her and steal her wand? Tom mused as he sauntered towards the exit of the Library. The castle was swarming with students and their family members. Everyone, the teachers included, were distracted and wouldn't pay him any attention. He just had to wait for an opportunity were Hermione was alone. Then he would strike.

The evil smile re-entered his face as Tom left the Library.

It was sometime later that Hermione descended the stairs from her dorm. After she had met Tom in the Library, she had decided to wait for lunch time in her dorm, avoiding him. She could still feel shame taking hold of her whenever she remembered how easily Tom had managed to seduce her again. There still were feelings she had for him, and Tom obviously knew that. He didn't hesitate to use that against her, Hermione realized darkly.

As she walked through the deserted common room, she forcefully banned all thoughts about Tom from her mind. There were other things, more important things, she had to concentrate on. Hermione had almost reached the portrait hole as a soft hooting noise made her turn around again. An owl was sitting on the back rest of one of the arm chairs. The owl's large yellow eyes blinked at her knowingly and hooted again. It was then that Hermione saw a tiny piece of parchment attached to the Owl's leg. The bird hooted even more enthusiastically as she unfixed the letter from the Owl's leg. As soon as the bird was free of its burden, it took off and flew out of one of the windows. Hermione's eyes wandered from the disappearing bird to the letter in her hand. To Ms Hermione DeCerto, the envelope said in a fine, elaborate handwriting. Hermione furrowed her brow and opened it. The enclosed letter was written in the same elegant hand:

Ms DeCerto,

If your time table allows, I would be very delighted to meet with you. I will be waiting for you in my
office on Monday at six o'clock.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Perfect. Just perfect! Hermione thought annoyed as her eyes again wandered over the letter. Didn't she already have enough problems? Now, she would have to deal with Dumbledore, too. She sighed tiredly as she slipped the letter into her robe pocket. There was no doubt in her mind as to what the old teacher wanted from her. Hermione couldn't stop a frustrated groan escaping her lips, as she exited the common room. Last time she had spoken with Dumbledore, Hermione had blackmailed the professor. She still felt bad about the whole thing. To save Tom from getting expelled, Hermione had threatened Dumbledore with making public how a Muggle had mistreated Tom in his orphanage. To release a story like that in these times would surely fuel the hate against all Muggles and Muggleborns. Dumbledore hadn't wanted to risk that, so he had allowed Tom to stay at school.

Of course her threat had been a big bluff. Hermione would never endanger any Muggles or Muggleborns, but the Dumbledore of the past didn't know that.

By now Hermione had reached the moving staircase. She was deep in thought as she walked down the stairs, not paying any attention. This new development was making everything even more complicated. Obviously, the latest gossip, running up and down the castle, had finally reached the teachers. It was safe to assume that Dumbledore knew about her parentage. With that her blackmail was void. That was definitely the reason why he had summoned her to his office. Hermione had no idea what to tell him on Monday. The truth? Another lie? Either way, it seemed the following Monday was going to be real fun, she thought dryly. Aside from the Dumbledore problem, there still was the Ortus potion. It was almost completed, so next potions class Hermione would have to ruin that potion without anyone noticing. And right after that little stunt she would have to talk with Dumbledore.

Damn! she thought enraged as she turned into the corridor with the entrance to the Great Hall. The situation had changed again, but she shouldn't get so worked up about it. Hermione tried to get some order into her messed up thoughts. The Dumbledore situation could wait for now. She still had until Monday to come up with something. For now, there was another mission she needed to complete, Hermione decided as she walked through the doors and entered the Great Hall. She needed to concentrate now. After all, there was a plan she had to execute. Hermione let her gaze wander over the hall. The four large house tables had vanished just to be replaced by smaller ones, each with room for four people.

How nice, Hermione thought cynically. Now I can sit at one of those tables alone for everyone to see that I have no family.

That was going to be a field day for all those Slytherin stuck-ups. Their favourite Muggleborn all alone and miserable. They could enjoy the company of their parents while pointing and laughing at her.

Hermione let her gaze once again wander over the Great Hall. It seemed most of the parents had already arrived and were sitting with their children at the tables. There was a painful stab in her chest as she saw all those happy families around her. The other students were sitting there, enjoying a day with their parents, and probably told them what an exciting school year they had had so far. And the parents would laugh and look lovingly at their children.

Hermione balled her hands into fists and looked for an empty table. She would just grab something to eat, hope that Dippet's welcoming speech wasn't too overflowing and then she would flee this
As Hermione walked through the rows of tables in search for an empty one, she let her eyes inconspicuously wander over the people already sitting at the tables. She had almost crossed the whole length of the hall as she finally spotted them. There, a few metres away, she could see Diana Potter sitting at one of the tables. She was laughing merrily and her eyes were sparkling jovially. Hermione's gaze wandered from Diana to the two others, sitting with her at the table. There was a man with light brown hair which stood from his head at odd angles. Like Diana he was laughing joyfully and had even removed his glasses to wipe tears from his eyes. Next to the man, Hermione could see a woman with long, jet-black hair. She seemed to glower reproachfully at the man beside her, but there was also a mischievous glint in her eyes and the corners of her mouth twitched traitorously. As Hermione watched that cheerful scene unfold before her eyes, a strange longing hit her. At that moment, she would have given anything to be able to have what Diana seemed to have.

Hermione quickly averted her eyes from the Potters. Well, at least she now knew that the Potters had indeed left Godric's Hollow. Now, she just had to stay here until lunch was over, then she would finally execute her plan: get to the Potter's house, find and steal the Invisibility Cloak.

Hermione suddenly heard a voice calling for her, "Hey, Hermione!"

She stopped and looked up in confusion. Then she spotted Longbottom sitting at a table not far away and waving at her enthusiastically. A man with blond hair and a woman, wearing beautifully embroidered witch’s robes, were sitting at the table with him. Probably his parents, Hermione guessed. She hesitantly walked towards them as Longbottom beckoned her over. The man and woman had wide smiles on their faces as Hermione finally reached the table.

"Mum, dad, this is Hermione," Longbottom told his parents cheerfully.

"Hello, dear," Mrs Longbottom greeted her kindly. "Why don't you sit down and join us?"

"Er..." Hermione stuttered. She didn't want to disturb their day with their son.

"Don't be shy," Mr Longbottom exclaimed amused.

"Oh... okay," Hermione said timidly and sat down.

Mr Longbottom positively beamed at her and Mrs Longbottom smiled while she poured Hermione a cup of tea. Hermione noticed that the woman seemed to be well advanced in a pregnancy.

"So you are Hermione Without-a-Surname?" Mr Longbottom asked her, his blue eyes glistening mischievously.

A smile appeared on Hermione's face. It seemed he and his son had a lot in common.

"DeCerto," she said in a soft voice. "My name's Hermione DeCerto."

"Ah," Mr Longbottom said in mock surprise. Then he turned to his son. "So she does have a surname, but you just forgot to tell us."

Longbottom's face was turning bright red and said, "Dad, stop being so embarrassing."

Hermione had to chuckle slightly. Longbottom scowled at his father who grinned mischievously. Mrs Longbottom just shook her head and smiled in amusement. Hermione reached for her cup of tea and took a sip. A smile took from of her face. This was really nice.
"So, Hermione," Mrs Longbottom said kindly. "I hear that you are a new student. How do you like Hogwarts?"

Hermione smiled at the woman, then she replied, "It's nice. I really like it. Classes are okay, I think. Not too difficult. I can follow."

At that Longbottom chuckled and exclaimed, "'Not too difficult'? Come on, Hermione, you are top of every class."

Mr Longbottom raised his eyebrows at her and said, turned towards his son, "Top of every class, you say?" He then wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders and ruffled with his other hand through Longbottom's blond hair. Then he wailed in mock grief, "Ah, here you are, having such intelligent friends, my dear dear son, but it just doesn't seem to rub off on you."

Longbottom pushed his father away, the scowl on his face intensifying. Though Hermione could see a grin breaking through.

"Dad, stop it," Longbottom reprimanded. Then the scowl left his face, and he sat up straight on his chair while pronouncing, "I don't need to be good in school. I'll become the best Chaser ever. Can't waste my time with school work."

Before Mr Longbottom could reply anything, Mrs Longbottom just softly wacked her son over the back of his head. Longbottom rubbed his head while he looked reproachfully at his mother.

"Hey, what was that for?"

"No lagging at school work, mister," she warned him, though the gentle glint never left her eyes as she looked at her son.

Hermione had to chuckle again. Yes, this was definitely nice, she decided as she watched the family in front of her. Then her thoughts were interrupted by a rather penetrating voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, dear students," Dippet declared in his pompous sounding voice. "I am very pleased to be able to welcome so many guests into our midst. It's a great privilege to finally be the host of the very first parents' day. We, that is the school governors and myself, have wanted to organize this event for quite some time, so…"

Hermione just had to drone out Dippet's self important voice. She could only hope that his wasn't going to take forever. Mr Longbottom now yawned tiredly and she could only agree with him.

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It was some time later that Hermione left the Great Hall, silently glad that this was over. Like expected Dippet's speech had been unbearably long. She was more than happy to be able to flee all this, although the Longbottoms had really been nice. As she hurried out of the Great Hall, she was so determined to get away as fast as possible that she didn't notice a pair of grey eyes following her process through the hall.

"Excuse me," Tom said while plastering a polite smile on his face as he got up from the table.

"Are you leaving already?" Lady Malfoy asked, disappointment playing around her beautiful face.

She was still sitting at the table, her eldest son, Hereweald, to her right and Abraxas to her left. Tom bowed slightly towards the Malfoy matriarch. She was a woman of exceptional beauty. Her long hair was white as snow, but there was not one line on the flawless skin of her face, making it impossible
to estimate her age. The exquisite silky dress she was wearing accentuated her beauty even further. But the most striking feature about this woman might as well have been her eyes which seemed to bore into Tom right now. Her eyes were the shade of a very light grey. Their pale colour made them look somehow washed out as if belonging to a blind person. But the sharp, icy cold glint in them immediately destroyed that impression again.

"You know how much I enjoy having you around, Mr Riddle," Lady Malfoy continued, her voice a soft whisper.

Her eyes, though, remained to be cold, almost dead-looking if there hadn't been that calculating edge in them. As Tom looked back at her, a bland expression on his face, he wondered, not for the first time, if the rumours about Lady Malfoy were true. Since her husband had died some years ago, there had been rumours flying around the magical community. Rumours stating that it wasn't dragon pox that had taken Lord Malfoy's life, but that it had actually been murder, carried out by none other than his beloved wife. Whatever the truth though, after her husband's death Lady Malfoy had become the matriarch of the Malfoy clan and with that one of the richest and most influential people in wizarding Britain. Lady Malfoy was truly an amazing woman, Tom thought as he stared into her cold eyes.

"I apologise," he finally said silkily. "I would prefer to spend my time in such enchanting company, unfortunately I don't have a choice in this matter as I still have to satisfy my obligations."

A small smile grazed Lady Malfoy's lips as she continued scanning Tom through her milky grey eyes.

"Always so very busy, Mr Riddle," she purred at him, though her hard eyes were still scanning him like a hawk. "I do hope you find the time to join us again later."

Tom allowed an ingratiating smile to take form on his face as he replied, "It would be my pleasure."

He bowed again before he turned to leave the hall. He could almost feel Lady Malfoy's amused but cold eyes following his process through the hall. She was one of the very few people who managed to make him feel slightly nervous when in their presence. To his own surprise he even felt something like respect for that woman.

Tom exited the hall and took off down the corridor. He needed to find out where Hermione had gone off to. The students and their parents, as well as all teachers were assembled in the Great Hall, making this the perfect time to catch Hermione alone. A dark smile tugged at the corners of Tom's mouth as he stalked down the corridor. He passed a row of windows and his gaze distractedly wandered over the landscape while he wondered where Hermione could have gone. He stopped dead in his tracks as he spotted a figure walking towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Tom instantly recognized Hermione even though she was some distance away.

Why was she wandering off to the Forbidden Forest? Tom wondered suspiciously as he dashed down the corridor towards the Entrance Hall. He left the castle through the front gate and hurried towards the forest. As he passed the shore of the Great Lake, he could finally see Hermione again. She had almost reached the edge of the forest. She obviously hadn't notice him yet, Tom realized. He stayed in the shadow of a grove of spruces as he rushed after her, never letting her out of his sight. He was still quite the distance away as she reached the edge of the forest. Tom suppressed a snigger as he watched her stopping. This was almost too easy, wasn't it? They were so far away from the castle that no-one could spot them here.

No, witnesses.

It was as those triumphant thoughts flew through Tom's head, that Hermione suddenly pulled her
wand. He stopped his pursuit and watched her with narrowed eyes. Obviously, that witch was planning something. Tom almost growled in frustration as he saw her performing a very familiar wand movement. Then she swirled on the spot and was gone.

Hermione reappeared in a small orchard of pear trees. She turned around to check if someone had seen her apparating, but no-one was in the close vicinity. So, she took off and passed the orchard until she reached a road. A distance away, she could see the houses belonging to a small village. With determined steps she followed the lane in direction to that village. It didn't take her long and she reached the first houses. The cottages stood on either side of the narrow road. She passed more houses with well-cared-for front yards. The sun shone brightly down on the village, diving everything into a merry light. The careless atmosphere, though, contrasted sharply with Hermione's mood. She felt very tense as she scanned the name plates at the house entries for the name 'Potter'. She continued following the little lane through the village of Godric’s Hollow.

A little while later, Hermione could see an old man walking down the road while his Yorkshire terrier followed him dutifully. As the man passed her, he eyed her curiously but then gave her a friendly nod. She returned the gesture and then continued down the lane. As she walked on she inconspicuously pulled her wand and cast a quick notice-me-not on herself, silently berating herself for not doing it sooner. She really mustn't be seen here.

The street curved to the left, and Hermione reached what seemed to be the heart of the village; a small square. Some people passed the square, intending to go to the post office or one of the shops, flanking the square. Hermione could see a group of men entering a pub not far away from her. No-one noticed her, though, as her concealing magic was still in place. She actually had no idea where exactly she could find the house of the Potters. Back in her time they had never found the time to visit Godric's Hollow. Hermione knew that Harry had always wanted to visit the home town of his parents, but the war had once again stopped him from having his wish.

Hermione sighed softly as she crossed the square. On her right side stood a small church and there, behind a kissing gate entrance, Hermione could see tombstones. This was obviously the grave yard of Godric's Hollow. She wondered if it would still look the same in forty years time when Harry's parents would find their final resting place here. Despite the warm sunshine a shudder went down her spine and Hermione hurried on. On her way she passed a fountain which stood in the middle of the square, then she walked down a street opposite from where she had come from. Godric’s Hollow wasn't very big, it wouldn't take her long to find the Potter house. After a while of following this street, Hermione could see the end of rows of cottages where the street led out of the village. Obviously, this had been a dead end. She almost cursed under her breath and turned around to walk back to the small square. It was then that she suddenly sensed traces of magic in the air. The magic seemed to come from that cottage at the very end of the row of houses. Hermione knew that many wizarding families lived in Godric's Hollow, but maybe she was lucky and this was indeed the house of Harry's family. She neared the cottage that emitted the magic. Its garden was surrounded by a hedge and there was an apple tree in full bloom standing in the garden. She smelled a sweet flowery scent as she approached the waist-high metal gate. Her hands clasped the metal and she scanned the house in front of her. It didn't look in any way special. Hermione's heart gave an excited extra throb as her gaze wandered over the name plate attached to the house wall right beside the wooden door. 'Potter' the plate said and Hermione knew that this was the right house.

Her notice-me-not charm still in place, Hermione opened the gate. It made a squeaking noise. Then she entered the front yard. The sweet scent, coming from the apple tree, was now even stronger and Hermione could hear the slight buzzing of bees. Then she reached to wooden front door, which was painted in a light green. Hermione pulled her wand and waved it. To her utter surprise she found no
spells or any wards, protecting the entrance. Obviously, the Potters didn't expect anyone wanting to rob them.

_That's going to change_, she thought sadly as she sent a simple Alohomora towards the door. The lock clicked softly, then the door cracked open. Hermione breathed in deeply before she grasped the handle and stepped into the house. She stood in a small hallway. Its walls were painted in a friendly yellow colour. To her right, stairs were leading up to the second floor, to her left was a wooden door and ahead of her Hermione could see the living room. She closed the front door silently and then took another step in. Cloaks, jackets and a flowery apron hung from hooks on the wall right beside the door.

Hermione tried to not be drawn into the homey atmosphere the house seemed to emit, but crept silently towards the wooden door, her wand still in hand. She stood with her back against the wall as she cautiously opened the door with her left hand. As nothing happened she peeked into the room behind and found the kitchen. There was a hearth, cupboards and the window opposite the door showed a view out to the front yard with the apple tree. The sun shone merrily on the herbs growing in flowerpots, which stood on the window sill. A small table stood in one corner and Hermione could see two cups and a coffee pot standing on top. She didn't enter the kitchen but turned towards the living room. Just like the kitchen and the hallway this room, too, was not very tidy but felt somehow cosy and full of life. Magazines lay scattered on the coffee table, and the sofa looked so welcoming. It invited her to sit down, wrap that many-coloured quilt around her and relax.

Hermione sighed and shortly wondered how that house was looking like in her time period. Had it been repaired after Lord Voldemort had so ruthlessly attacked its inhabitants on that October night? Or had it been torn down? Somehow she hoped that new people had moved in and that it now again looked so warm and friendly.

But, she reminded herself, she wasn't here to get all teary eyed and nostalgic. She actually needed to find that cloak. So Hermione entered the living room and stepped towards a commode. Unfortunately, a simple summoning charm wouldn't do the trick, as the Invisibility Cloak was immune to any spells. She would have to do it the old fashioned way. A flick of her wand and black gloves appeared on her hands. She softly chuckled as she realized how stupid it was trying to avoid leaving fingerprints. These were the forties after all. But she was from the nineties and a Muggleborn on top of it. So, no fingerprints of her on the scene of crime. Hermione searched through the drawers, but in the end she didn't find any signs of a cloak.

After a while, she gave up, left the living room and turned towards the stairs. Hopefully the cloak was somewhere up there, she thought as she climbed the stairs to the second floor. Upstairs, she tried to first door and stepped into a small room. The walls were painted in a cheerfully red colour. A desk stood under a window and Hermione could see parchment, quills and pens, lying on the desktop. A bookshelf stood on one wall, and Hermione recognized a few of the books. _Standard Book of Spells Grade Three, Intermediate Transfiguration, A History of Magic_, those were Hogwarts textbooks. This was probably Diana's room. Hermione left the room again. She actually didn't expect the cloak to turn up in Diana's room. She entered the next room. A double bed stood in the middle. Opposite from the bed stood a rather large wardrobe. Now this was more like it, Hermione thought and entered the room. She saw a picture standing on the bedside table. It showed the couple she had seen back in Hogwarts sitting with Diana at a table. Obviously, this was the room of Diana's parents. Again, Hermione felt like a lousy thief as she stepped towards the huge wardrobe.

_Well, you are a thief, Granger_, a voice reminded her unnecessarily. Hermione just stuffed her guilty conscience in a dark corner of her mind and opened the wardrobe door.

A while later, Hermione still hadn't found the cloak, she cursed under her breath as she raked around
in the clothes and decided to stop trying to leave no tracks. It wouldn't have been successful anyway, she thought as she sorted through what seemed to be Mrs Potter's skirts. This wardrobe was really packed with clothes. She would clearly need some time to go through everything. Hermione sighed and put the things, she had looked at already, down on the bed.

It was a quarter of an hour later that Hermione searched through a drawer of socks. So, far she hadn't come up with anything. Frustration came over her as she rummaged through the socks. Then suddenly, she heard the front door being opened. Hermione stiffened in shock and her eyes widened in fear.

She heard a male voice calling, "Mum! Dad! You still here? I couldn't make it sooner."

Her heart leapt in panic. Someone was here! Shit! Hermione screamed in her mind as she turned her head around to the door. She hadn't closed it. Shit!

By now she could clearly hear some rustling coming from downstairs. It sounded as if someone put off their cloak. This was not good at all. She bit her lip as she looked back at the wardrobe in front of her. Up to now, she hadn't even gone through half of it, and she didn't know if the cloak really was somewhere inside.

There were more noises, coming from downstairs. Who was that? Hermione stood stock still and didn't moved an inch. Her wand was stowed away in her holster. She just had to flick her wrist and she could apparate away. Her eyes wandered over the chaos she had created while searching the cloak. Clothes were scattered everywhere on the bed and the floor. The Potters would know someone had been here. They would be warned, and Hermione wouldn't be able to enter here again so easily. No, she had to find the cloak now, she thought as her eyes again wandered over the opened wardrobe in front of her. Hermione took a step towards the wardrobe. She needed to be quick now. With shaky hands she frantically tugged at a pile of shirts, sitting on one panel. This was her only chance to find the cloak. She just had to be quick. Maybe a little bit of luck and-

Her heart almost stopped beating as she heard the creaking noise of someone climbing the steps.

"Mom? Dad?" the same voice called again, now dangerously close.

Hermione bit her lower lip in panic as she feverishly searched through another drawer, but no Invisibility Cloak anywhere. She could feel her heart hammering away in her chest as she heard someone reaching the second floor. Hermione hastily ripped the clothes off their coat hangers and threw them on the floor. Still no Invisibility Cloak anywhere.

Too late! Too late! a voice chanted in her head, but she still didn't pull her wand to apparate away. This was her only chance. The steps had now almost reached the room she was in. Just a few seconds and she would be caught. Just as this encouraging thought flew through her mind, Hermione's gaze wandered to a lime green bandbox, standing on the topmost panel. The steps had almost reached her.

Fuck it! she thought wildly as she flicked her wrist, and her wand landed in her hand. A wave of it and the bandbox soared down and landed in her hands.

"Hey!" a deep voice, coming directly from behind her, yelled at her sharply. "Who are you? What are you doing?"

Hermione swallowed hard. Without replying anything, she slowly opened the lid of the bandbox. She slid the lid open and was greeted by a silvery material. Hermione stared down at the Invisibility Cloak, neatly folded in that box. She had made it!
"Put that down!" the voice yelled angrily. "Who are you?"

Hermione's hand tightened around her wand. It was very crucial that no-one saw her here. Her face mustn't be seen. She flexed her right wrist in a small movement, while sending her magic through her wand. Instantly, she could feel the cold, smooth material of a mask, appearing on her face.

Good. Now she just needed to get away from this guy. With him pointing his wand at her back, she couldn't go through the preparations for apparition. She needed to get some distance between them. Hermione pressed the box with the cloak against her body while she whirled around, facing her opponent. She raised her wand at the man, standing in the door, but as her eyes wandered over him, she stopped breathing. His hair was mussed and jet-black. His face, his pose, just everything…

"Harry?" Hermione asked weakly as she stared with wide eyes at the man.

Was that Harry? He looked just the same. Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. A frown appeared between his eyebrows as he stared back at her. That expression looked just like Harry's had whenever something really confused him.

"What…?" he mumbled bewildered.

Hermione's gaze wandered to his eyes, but she wasn't met by a vibrant green. His eyes were brown. Painful disappointment grabbed her heart, almost constricting her, as she realized that his man was not Harry.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered, her voice muffled by that mask on her face.

Then she quickly brandished her wand. A red curse left her wand, but before it reached this Harry image, he waved his own wand and yelled,

"Protego!"

A blue shield appeared around him and her Stunner vanished harmlessly, without hitting him. Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line. Whatever had she thought? That she could bring him down with a simple Stunner? He was most probably Harry's granddad! As she stared at the man in front of her, she could feel herself trembling slightly. She wasn't able to fight against him. He looked too strikingly like Harry. She couldn't fight against Harry.

Suddenly, the black haired man, waved his wand at her while yelling, "Expelliarums!"

Hermione reacted instantly. She brought up her own wand and waved it in the familiar pattern. A shield appeared before her and the disarming spell harmlessly impacted with her shield before it vanished into thin air.

Dammit! Hermione cursed as she waved her wand to end the shield. The man brandished his wand again, surely to attack. Hermione couldn't be engaged in a fight any longer. She had to get away from here. Before he could finish his curse, Hermione swirled her own wand.

"Depulso!" she cried while pointing her wand at that black haired man.

It was just a fourth year charm, but the advantage lay in the simple wand movements. So she had been able to finish the charm way before that black haired guy had completed his own curse. He was forced to stop his attack to quickly form a shield around himself. He would surely be able to fend her charm off, but Hermione didn't care. Right after she had released the charm, she sprinted towards the man. Her charm impacted with the shield, causing no further harm, and the shield around him disappeared again. Hermione could see that man's eyes widen in surprise as she rammed her shoulder
into him. He was a lot taller than her and surely heavier, too, but she had caught him off guard, and he lost his balance. He stumbled a few steps backwards, trying to catch his balance again. But that was enough for Hermione. The man didn't block the door any longer. She used his moment of bafflement, slipped past him through the door, out of the room and ran towards the stairs.

"Hey!" he yelled after her. "Stop!"

Hermione dashed down the flight of stairs while she still pressed the bandbox tightly against her. She reached the first floor and ran to the front door. As she flung open the door, she could hear the man on the stairs. He was following her.

Rather persistent.

Hermione left the house, rushed through the front yard, past the apple tree and out through the creaking gate. Then she turned left and raced down the street leading out of Godric's Hollow. What she needed right now was a save apparition point. Hermione continued running down the lane at full speed. She could hear the man still behind her. He was catching up with her. Hermione passed the hedge, fencing the Potter's yard, and ran out of the village. By now she was pretty much out of breath but still didn't dare slowing down. She chanced a glance backwards and could see that black haired man only a few metres behind her. Just a matter of time and he would catch up.

Hermione abruptly turned direction and ran off the street. More fruit trees were standing in straight lines. She grabbed her wand tighter. She would have to be fast now. There would only be seconds before the man would reach her. She stopped running and instantly went through the familiar preparations. She waved her wand and then turned on the spot. She could see the man extending his hand as if to grab her, but he was too late and the feeling of dark pressure welcomed her. The box with the Invisibility Cloak still pressed against her chest, Hermione disapparated from Grodric's Hollow.

Breathing very hard, she reappeared, standing in the shadow of a concrete wall. She bent forward, taking in deep breaths of air while she leaned with her hand against the wall. After she had calmed her breathing down again, she raised her head. She seemed to be standing in a small backyard. Hermione furrowed her brow. Then she took in a sharp breath of air, as realisation hit her. Just now, she had broken the first law of apparition: Destination. She had been so determined to escape that guy, she hadn't focused on where she actually wanted to disapparate to.

Brilliant, Hermione, a voice told her dryly. You're lucky you're not splinched all over the country.

Well, she wasn't dead. So, success there. Hermione snorted wryly, then she raised her hand to her face to remove that mask, she had conjured up earlier. At least that had been some quick thinking. Otherwise her face would be all over the papers tomorrow. She slipped the mask off her face. Then she just stared with wide eyes at the mask in her hand, her breathing was quickened again. It was a smooth white mask, covering the whole face. That kind of mask was awfully familiar and staring down at that emotionless face made her actually very sick. How… why had she conjured up that thing? Hermione had no idea why this had appeared as she had wanted to cover her face. She just raised her wand and waved it quickly over that disgusting thing. It disappeared into thin air.

"Okay…" she whispered in a shaky voice. "That doesn't mean anything."

She swallowed hard, and pushed that strange event off her mind. Then she focused on the bandbox again. She had clamped to box under her arm, but now opened it again. Relief struck her as she was greeted by the silvery material of the Invisibility Cloak. She took the cloak out of the box and carefully put it into her bag.
Now, she scanned her surroundings more closely. Wherever had she apparated to? It took her some time, as everything was so different, but then it struck her. She recognized that brick house, some twenty metres away. Very familiar. She stared at that house while clenching her jaw almost painfully. Reaching for the brim of the concrete wall, she heaved herself up. Hermione sat down on the wall, dangling her legs. On the other side of the wall was a small street. There were more houses, and even some cars drove by. This street was completely different, much smaller, but Hermione still knew where exactly she was right now.

_I shouldn't be so surprised._ She inwardly groaned as she stared at the scenery in front of her. When was the last time she'd been here? Almost two years ago. Or, considering her strange form of being, more than fifty years from now. Why did she have to apparate here? she wondered annoyed. She didn't want to be here. Yet, she sat here and stared at the house in front of her. It wasn't the same house, but it was the same place.

_Home…_ she mused pensively. Today she had been confronted with that concept one too many times. First, all those happy families in Hogwarts, then that invitingly warm and homey feeling in the Potters' house. And that Harry look-a-like…

No wonder she ended up here. Of all places. Hermione shifted slightly on the stone wall, she sat on. It was pleasantly warmed by the sun. People walked by, some of them casting curious glances at the strange woman sitting on the wall. Now and then a car drove by.

She always tried to avoid it to think too much about her home. It was gone, burned down. It didn't make too much sense to think about it anymore. Hermione shuddered slightly as suddenly a cold draft hit her. The wind ruffled up her already frizzy hair. She didn't care. Her hair was always a mess anyway. The wind was probably making it less tousled than it was before. Despite that strangely hollow feeling inside of her, a small smile started to tug at the corners of her mouth as she remembered whom she owed to have such unmanageable hair.

As she had been younger, way before she had gone off to Hogwarts, she had often wondered why her hair was like this. Her mother, for one, had always had beautiful, long and straight dark-brown hair. Hermione had envied that nice hair and she had been confused as to how she had ended up with that curly mob on her head. That was before she had one day flipped through one of her parents' old photo albums. There she had seen him: her dad. The photo had been taken in the year of 1970 and her dad had been only seventeen back then. The smile on Hermione's face grew a bit. On the photo her dad hadn't worn the short haircut he had always sported since she could remember. No, his hair had been incredibly long as it had fallen down over his green batik t-shirt. Very long and above else: curly. Maybe his hair had been a shade lighter than her own, but aside from that, it had been just the same mess of curls.

Strange, how one remembered such things. Hermione sighed softly while her gaze wandered over the street in front of her, and then to the house standing at the opposite side of the street. It was almost two years ago, but sometimes it still hit her how much she actually missed them. Today had been such a day.

_‘You and your lousy Muggle parents are worth less than the muck, sticking under my boots.’_ Tom's words suddenly and very mercilessly run through her head. Hermione clenched her teeth as she was hit by a wave of anger.

How could he say something like that? Tom didn't even know her parents. How dare he insult them? He did not know anything about them. Just that they had been Muggles. But obviously, that was enough for him. That was all he needed to know. Hermione's gaze wandered over the row of houses in front of her. Her house was missing, another stood in its place. The house of her childhood wasn't
even built yet. Here, it wasn't even built yet and in the future it was destroyed. Just like herself, Hermione mused. She didn't belong in this time period either, but there was no place for her in the future anymore.

*Now, you are getting melodramatic,* she chastised herself as she stood up from her place on the wall. Whether there was a place for her or not, the future was her destination. Her hand wandered shortly to her bag. The Invisibility Cloak was still there, she ascertained satisfied. There was no reason to be so morose. This day had been a success. Her mission was, for once, completed. Yet a step closer to being able to travel back into her time period. It was still better than to stay here in the past, she decided and hopped off the wall and down into that back yard again. No-one would see her from the street now, so she flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. It was time to return to Hogwarts. As tempting as it was to stay here, she eventually had to return to the castle and its inhabitants. She twirled on the spot and disapparated from her home town, this time with a destination in her head.

The dark pressure of apparition engulfed her for a few seconds then it left again and Hermione opened her eyes. She stood exactly where she had left Hogwarts a few hours ago. As not to draw unwanted attention to her short trip, she had disapparated from the edge of the Forbidden Forest. So now she stood, rather secluded, a fair distance away from the castle. She just had to creep back to the castle and everything should be fine. She stowed the wand away in its holster and took off towards the castle. She hadn't taken more than a few steps as she saw someone approaching her. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air. If someone had seen her disapparating from Hogwarts' grounds, she was in deep trouble. Who could that be? Hopefully, not any teacher. It would take a lot of explaining to talk her way out of this.

She stood stock still as that person neared her. Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she recognized Tom. Since he had assaulted her in the Library this morning, she hadn't seen him, but here he was again. This was rather suspicious, actually, she decided.

*Why was Tom here?*

Hermione was angered with herself as she suddenly felt hope flaring up in her. Maybe Tom wanted to apologize for everything? But that was a ridiculous hope. He would never apologize. Hermione quickly snuffed that traitorous feeling as she watched him nearing her. Sure enough, as her gaze wandered over his face, she could spot a hostile look. He stared back at her and there was unmistakably hate smoldering behind his steel hard eyes. As he was still a few metres away from her, he stopped and eyed her in disgust. Sorrow ripped at Hermione as she stared back at him. It was unbearable to have him looking at her in this way. The softness that had always been glinting in his eyes whenever he had looked at her was completely gone.

Hermione balled her hands into tight fists and she could feel tears building up in her as she was hit by his merciless gaze, but she didn't allow her feelings to show. Her face was a mask, hiding her inner anguish. Maybe Tom was good in hiding his emotions, but she was not bad either, Hermione thought.

"What do you want?" she asked him in a low voice. It was so strange, that voice. It didn't sound like her at all. It was icy cold and emotionless.

His grey eyes wandered over her form, and Hermione had to work to stop herself from squirming under his scrutiny. The tears still wanted to run from her eyes as she saw the disgust on his handsome face, but she wouldn't allow herself to cry in front of him. Her throat may constrict now, but she wouldn't let her façade crumble. Tom didn't need to know how very much she was hurt by his behaviour.
"Where did you go?" he asked in a sharp voice, which was missing all softness she had come to associate with him.

"None of your business," Hermione replied harshly.

Tom didn't seem to be impressed by her cold exterior but continued to scan her disdainfully.

"How can you break Hogwarts' wards?" was all he said in this sharp, commanding tone.

Hermione didn't immediately reply but looked at him while she made sure that her mask was still firmly in place, covering her every emotion.

"Do you expect me to just tell you?" she asked him quietly. The emotionless tinge in that voice would have made her shudder, but she suppressed that, too.

Tom's steel hard eyes still watched her. Then she could see an offensive smirk curling up his mouth.

"Actually, yes," he finally scoffed in cruel amusement. "It's obvious that someone like you is overchallenged by so much power."

Hermione's mouth formed a thin line as she now glared at him. 'Someone like her'? She knew all too well what he was talking about here. Tom obviously thought that something powerful like the Elder Magic, shouldn't be wasted on a lowly Muggleborn.

The anger ruled her next actions as Hermione opened her mouth and said in a snide tone, "If I can't control such power, how are you supposed to have a chance then?"

Immediately she could see a murderous red sheen seeping into Tom's eyes, and his dark magic started to dance around him sinisterly. Before Hermione could comprehend what happened, a bright light came soaring towards her. Instinctively, she plunged to the side so that the curse rushed over her, missing her by inches. Her eyes darted to Tom, and she could see that he had drawn his wand and was pointing it at her. Just now he had attacked her, Hermione realized numbly. A tight knot took form in her stomach, but for the time being she chose to ignore it. Instead she flicked her wrist so that her black wand landed in her hand. Now was not the time to indulge into sadness, for it seemed that Lord Voldemort had once again decided to attack her. Still, something crumbled inside of her as she looked at Tom.

"You really shouldn't insult me, Mudblood," he threatened maliciously.

Hermione could feel his angry magic all over the place while he stood there, looking composed and self-assured with an unsavoury smirk distorting his face. He looked as if it was the most normal of things to attack one's girlfriend.

_I am not his girlfriend anymore! _Hermione thought while hot fury bubbled up in her. _How did that saying go again? The best defence is a good offence?_ 

Hermione jumped to her feet while simultaneously waving her wand then she cried, "Discessum!"

An angrily yellow-green curse left her wand, bristling with magic as it rushed towards Tom. Before it could make contact with him, he lazily brandished his wand thus deflecting the curse's original trajectory. With a loud bang it crashed into the forest floor a few metres beside Tom, leaving behind a huge crater.

He sniggered at her disdainfully, "How very impressive."
He again waved his wand. No spell came flying towards her, but Hermione wasn't reassured because she could feel his magic in the air change slightly. It surrounded her threateningly. Suddenly Tom flicked his wand and Hermione gasped in pain as she was pushed to the ground. Though there was nothing pushing her, it was more like gravity had increased to the point where she was not able to stand upright anymore. Hermione gasped for air, but it was impossible to inflate her lungs. Even the leaves on the forest floor around her were crushed flat to the ground. Black dots began to dance in her vision, and Hermione could feel unconsciousness tugging at her mind as she was still unable to breathe. Panic ripped at her, but she was too weak to raise her wand or do anything else. Like through a haze she could make Tom out, standing a few metres away from her. She spotted cruel satisfaction on his beautiful face as he watched her mercilessly. Hermione could feel pain cutting through her that had nothing to do with the curse keeping her still hostage. She was not willing to deal with that pain right now, so she drowned it in fury. Using her rage, she forced her magic into a spell even though she was not able to perform the necessary wand movements.

**Eximo.**

Instantly the pressure left her as Tom's curse was broken. Hermione breathed in deeply as she was finally able to get air into her lungs. But she didn't relax at all, instead she quickly picked herself up from the ground while pointing her wand at Tom. There was a furious scowl on his face as he saw his curse defeated. For a moment they both just glared at each other, assessing the enemy.

Without giving him any advance warning, Hermione slashed her wand in an angry movement. A spell left the tip of her wand and rushed towards Tom. In the mean time he, too, had released a curse. Hermione had no time to erect a shield around her, so Tom's curse crashed violently into her. She was thrown away until the trunk of a tree stopped her flight painfully. A moan escaped her mouth as she hit the tree hard. She slid down the trunk but managed to remain upright. In the mean time, her own curse had hit its target. Tom had conjured up a shield before the curse hit, but he was still hurled away. Unlike her, though, he managed to catch his balance and landed gracefully on his feet. Hermione still pointed the tip of her wand at Tom. The distance between them had expanded to a few metres. Her heart hammered away in her chest, and she wondered how she could take him down. It wouldn't be easy as it seemed they were evenly matched.

Just as this thought flew through her mind, she could feel Tom's magic in the air change. The pressure intensified and his magic started to painfully rip at her body. Hermione's grip on her wand tightened nervously as Tom's magic suddenly grew dark, its power reinforced greatly. She nearly jumped in fright as she saw a malicious grin taking form on Tom's face. Then he whirled his wand to release a sickle of dirty-orange light. It soared towards her at an impossible speed. It soared towards her at an impossible speed. There wasn't even a second to react. Hermione hurled herself out of the course of his spell. She could feel the heat of the spell as she rolled out of its way and screamed in pain when the curse grazed her shoulder. With a loud crack the curse crashed into a tree trunk. Splinters of wood and bark flew everywhere. Before she had time to catch her breath, Hermione cast a shielding spell around herself. The impact of another powerful curse into her blue shield told her that Tom had attacked her again. Her eyes flew towards him. An angry scowl had appeared on his face. Was he disappointed that his curse hadn't hit her? Hermione turned her head and glanced at her hurt shoulder. Her robes were torn and she could see black, burned skin underneath. The pain, though, hadn't reached her yet. Not in this fight-or-flight situation. Her eyes shot to the destroyed tree beside her. It still stood, but the smoldering hole in its trunk told her that it would fall soon. Had Tom really risked hitting her with such a destructive curse? Hermione wondered frantically.

**Focus!** another, colder, part of herself yelled at her aggressively. She was still huddled on the soft forest floor as she ended her shield to cast a curse of her own.

**Verbero!**
Instantly smoke erupted in a thin line from her wand’s tip to then form into a silver rope. The solid end of the rope snaked towards Tom, ready to attack him, but he remained standing where he was and just eyed the silver rope in boredom. With a small casual flick of his wand, Hermione's silver rope lost its form and quickly transformed into smoke again.

"This is not the classroom, DeCerto," Tom cruelly scoffed at her. "Please, at least make an effort."

Hermione was shocked that he had so easily stopped her spell, so she didn't notice how Tom's left hand slid into his robe pocket as he mocked her. He pulled something silvery from the pocket and as he was finished with insulting her he swiftly threw the silver thing at her.

Hermione hadn’t counted on him using something else than magic to attack her with, so she was unprepared as a small silver dagger flew towards her. Only her fast reflexes saved her as she brought up her arm to protect her face. A sharp pain cut through her right forearm as the dagger sliced deep into her flesh. Instantly hot blood flowed from the wound. Hermione stared at the silver knife, which was embedded deeply into her arm. Before she could pull it out, Tom flicked his fingers and the dagger shot out of her arm and flew back towards him. He elegantly caught it by its handle.

Hermione stared with wide eyes at him. A mad grin twisted up his handsome features as he examined the silver dagger in his hand. She could see that her blood still dripped from its blade. Tom brandished his wand in a complicated pattern over the blood-stained knife while he chanted an incantation Hermione did not understand. Suddenly, Tom pointed his wand at her and without her permission her magic welled up in her until all of it crackled around her. The smile on Tom's face grew even more sinister as he moved his wand towards the dagger. Hermione was horrified as her magic followed Tom's wand movement. She could feel her magic leaving her body as it was sucked towards the small dagger in Tom's hand. The steady pulse of power had completely left her, and she stared, now quite defenceless, at Tom.

"I advise you to surrender and tell me everything I want to know," the softness in his voice couldn't belie the cruel malice that lay underneath.

His eyes wandered to the wand in her hand and a strangely hungry look appeared on Tom's face. Then he looked up at her face and continued, in the same cold voice, "Or else, face the consequences."

Hermione stared at him with wide, scared eyes, while she cradled her still bleeding right arm. How could he do that? How could Tom Riddle command such powerful magic? She would have never been able to do what he had just so casually done. Even now, at this age, Lord Voldemort was overwhelmingly strong. There was no way she would ever be able to beat Tom. He was way too strong.

The evil smile on his face widened as he scanned her now, seemingly pleased with the fear he had invoked. Then he suddenly raised his wand again and slashed it in an angry movement. Hermione recognized the spell. It was a simple cutting hex, maybe improved by Tom's powerful magic, but still only fourth year material. Instinctively, Hermione waved her own wand to release the counter-spell. She took in a sharp breath of air, and her blood ran cold with panic as there was no spell leaving her wand. There was no response at all coming from her wand. Just nothing.

The hex, though, still rushed towards her. Shortly before it would cut into her chest, Hermione brought her arms up to protect herself. She hissed in pain as she felt the hex hitting her, slashing open the skin of her forearms and slicing deep into her flesh. It felt as if somebody had dragged a knife over her forearms. Hermione's hands began to shake. She lowered her arms and stared at Tom. Both her arms were hanging down her sides. Hot blood flowed down her hands and dripped on the forest floor. Tom still looked at her and Hermione was appalled to find twisted mirth and glee on his face as
he scanned the wounds he had inflicted.

He opened his mouth and his voice was thick with overt disdain, "You are pathetic, Mudblood. Just tell me everything and spare me to waste more time on you."

She closed her eyes to block out the image of Tom with that aversion glinting in his eyes. What to do? She couldn't tell him anything about the Elder Magic, and she shouldn't forget that right now the Invisibility Cloak was hidden in her bag. He must never gain the cloak. But if she didn't tell him at least about the Elder Wand, Hermione knew Tom would not hesitate to hurt her. He was capable of a lot of things.

**He must not know the truth!** an angry voice insisted. Hermione's right hand tightened around her now useless wand. Her blood still ran down her arm, over her hand and then down the black wood. As she stood there with closed eyes, desperation washing over her, she suddenly noticed that not all magic had left her. A very familiar strand of pulsing magic suddenly welled up in her.

**Elder Magic!** Of course! It hadn't left her. The Elder Magic did not really belong to her. It was a foreign power in her body, and thus it was neither bound to her nor to her blood. Tom's spell had not been able to summon the Elder Wand's magic from her to bind it to her blood on the silver dagger. Hermione hesitated to draw upon Peverell's twisted creation. She opened her eyes and looked at the murderous expression on Tom's face. He scanned her coldly, clearly expecting an answer and promising her severe punishment should she not submit to him. This time it wouldn't be a harmless cutting hex.

Hermione breathed in deeply. There was not much of a choice, so she let the Elder Magic take her again. How much she might hate Peverell and his warped magic, it seemed she was once again dependent on it. Hermione winced slightly as she felt a painful jolt as the Elder Magic took hold of her. The magic was changed now that her own magic wasn't mingled with it. It felt different as it crackled, unadulterated, around her.

Hermione saw Tom taking a step away from her as he felt the Elder Magic in the air. Finally, his haughty conduct seemed to leave him. Her gaze wandered over him and she noticed that he had stiffened slightly. There went her effort of hiding the Elder Wand's power from him, Hermione thought dryly. Though she assumed that Tom already knew at least a bit about that power inside of her.

Her eyes arrived at the silver dagger which Tom still held in his hand. With the Elder Magic's help Hermione was able to see her own magic as a bluish mist, swirling around the dagger. She sent strands of the Elder Magic towards the dagger and could feel the powerful spells Tom had created to imprison her magic and bind it to her blood on the dagger's blade. Very powerful magic, and clearly dark.

**Pitch-black, actually,** she thought numbly.

She knew that the Elder Magic, being itself rather dark, could break those spells. She ordered Peverell's creation to latch onto the silver dagger to then start to take down Tom's net of spells. Hermione saw how the dagger started to vibrate heavily in Tom's hand. His eyes widened in shock as he tried to hold onto it, but it was no use. She could feel his spells yield. The binding magic finally broke, and Tom had to let go of the dagger. It fell down but before it had even reached the ground, the Elder Magic had wrapped around the bluish mist that was Hermione's magic, and had guided it back to her. Hermione was relieved as she felt her own magic merging with her body. It quickly spread through her and mixed with the Elder Magic. As Hermione looked back at Tom, she found a shocked expression on his face. But she didn't wait for him to regain his composure, instead she waved her wand quickly in a complicated pattern.
Vulnere! she screamed in her mind while pointing her want at Tom.

A bright, white light soared towards Tom. Her curse was greatly backed up by the Elder Magic and crackled violently as it attacked Tom. Hermione wasn't surprised to see him waving his own wand, erecting a greenish shield. Her curse impacted hard with Tom's shield. Hermione could see him stumbling a step back as he was confronted with the force behind her spell. His greenish shield flickered dangerously before it completely died down. It wasn't strong enough to hold Hermione's curse off. Tom's eyes widened in surprise as he saw his shield destroyed. It had been able to take most of the curse's power away, but bits of it managed to reach him. Tom winced in pain as he was hit by Hermione's curse. There were now scratches on his left cheek. Drops of blood ran down his face while a frightening dark look appeared in his eyes. He straightened up again and glowered at her. Hermione, though frightened by that evil look on his face, didn't cower away from him. She could feel her magic flowing through her. She was not going to just give up, she decided grimly as she stared back at him.

It was then that Tom slashed his wand at her and hissed maliciously, "Ictus"

Hermione stiffened as he hurled yet another very dangerous curse at her. She knew that one. It was dark. Again a cutting hex, but this one wouldn't just inflict a few minor gashes. If she was hit by its power, the force behind was enough to cut off her arm. Again a hollow feeling took hold of her as she watched his curse angrily rushing towards her. Tom didn't have any problems throwing dangerous curses at her, did he? she wondered numbly. But this was not the time to lose herself in her hurt feelings, Hermione decided and quickly raised her own wand to release a counter-curse. Before Tom's magic could reach her and cause serious damage, Hermione stopped his curse. Before he could react and sent another curse at her, Hermione quickly brandished her wand.

"Phasma!"

It was a borderline dark curse. She knew that, but right now, she didn't care. So far Tom had only used dark magic on her, why should she play fair if he wasn't? Hermione watched as fog arose out of nowhere, slowly engulfing herself and Tom. Though she was still able to make him out, she knew that she was now hidden from his eyes. There was a glint of recognition and even surprise in Tom's cold eyes. He obviously knew that curse.

Slowly shadowy, human-like shapes took form around him. They were made up from the fog and remained blurred, without any steady contour. They flowed into one another while dancing spookily around Tom. Then the figures reached out for him with their formless arms. Hermione watched them wrenching at Tom angrily. He tried to push them away, but his hands went straight through them, just managing to make the fog swirl around. Originally Hermione had wanted to use this spell as a diversion so she could flee Tom, but before she could turn around and hurry away, she suddenly saw a furious look crossing Tom's face. He raised his wand over his left shoulder before he brought it down again in one angry movement. His raw, powerful magic flooded everything. The fog dissolved instantly and with it the shadowy figures. Hermione had to take a shaky step back as she, too, was hit by his angry magic.

She looked at Tom and stiffened as she saw the ruby red colour of his eyes as he scanned her evilly. There was a fearsome look on his face which made cold shivers running down Hermione's spine. Without saying anything he began to wave his wand. His dark magic in the air changed direction and Hermione could already feel the power of the curse Tom wanted to hurl at her, building up in the air. She could even recognize the wand movements.

This was very dark and very dangerous magic. It was a powerful curse that could - and would - seriously injure her. Tom had told her once, how he had used that very same curse as he had been
barely eleven years old. Back then he hadn't been able to flawlessly perform the curse but Hermione
didn't doubt that now he would be more than capable to complete it. The Haz Curse would transform
Tom's hatred for her into magical power. Then this newly created power would mercilessly attack
her. Did Tom really want to hurl something like that at her? Hermione wondered and could feel how
her stomach knotted.

"Stop!" she yelled desperately before he had finished his curse.

Unexpectedly, Tom really stopped his wand movement, but the malice didn't leave his face as he
now stared at her.

She looked at him with wide eyes before she whispered in a broken voice, "What are you doing?"

Sadness tore at her unrelentingly as she then had to watch a vile sneer twisting up his face.

"Something I should have done a long time ago," he replied cruelly.

She still scanned Tom. The red colour danced viciously in his eyes. Pure malice, fury and hate
radiated from the wizard, standing just a few metres away from her, and all of it was directed at
Hermione. She tried to reign in her emotions but the sorrow was ripping at her almost unbearably.

"Why?" she asked softly, still managing to ban the desperation from her voice. "I thought we wer-"

"You are nothing but filth," Tom cut across her rabidly. Then his hate-filled eyes once again
wandered over her before he said, his voice cold as ice, "I can't believe how much time I wasted with
something like you. Scum like you doesn't even belong here. You should have stayed away from
the magical world. We don't want you here and we don't need you here. You are polluting this world
with your unclean blood, posing as a witch when it is plain to see that you're nothing but trash."

Hermione just stared at him. She couldn't say anything in face of his contempt. Then his anger
seemed to leave him and the blood red colour vanished from his eyes. But she knew, in reality his
hate was still there. Now it was just hidden behind a mask of indifference.

Hermione felt sick as there suddenly appeared a polite smile on his face. Then he said in a light,
almost conversational, voice, "You know, it disgusts me now." The genial smile never left his face as
he continued, "How I've slept with you. Makes me want to throw up."

Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she heard his words. She bit the inner side of her cheek
hard to stop herself from sobbing. There was the taste of blood in her mouth as she continued to stare
at him numbly. By now her breathing was ragged and she knew she wouldn't be able to hold back
much longer. Tom on the other hand seemed to be calm and composed. There was a derisive sneer
on his face as he eyed her coldly.

"The only one disgusting here, is you," Hermione whispered softly.

She knew her voice was cracking, but she couldn't do anything about it. There was no reason to do
so either. That self-satisfied smirk on Tom's face told her that he knew very well how much he had
hit her. It hurt so very much, the contempt she could see shining through his scorn. But Hermione
just swallowed down her upcoming tears and clenched her teeth as she looked back at him, holding
her head high. She wasn't going to break down. Not now and not here. Her hand, holding her black
wand, tightened around the smooth wood. She raised her wand and flicked it in one sharp
movement.

_Uliscor_, she thought.
A curse left her wand's tip and rushed towards Tom. Obviously, he had been unprepared for any attack. The power behind her spell didn't leave him time to erect a shield. There was no gratification as Hermione saw that her aim was true and the curse hit Tom. Again, her curse was dark, but Hermione didn't care anymore. Tom winced in pain and stumbled a step backwards as the curse, in form of an electric blue bolt, snaked around him. Hermione still pointed her wand at Tom thus maintaining her attack. The curse was powerful, Hermione knew, not easy to throw off, and it would leave behind painful marks.

Tom raised his wand, she could see that he had difficulties moving at all, and waved the wand in an attempt to bring down her curse. He whispered something under his breath while pain was visible on his face. It was then that Hermione could feel her magic losing its grip on Tom. It wasn't long and he managed to completely throw the curse off. His eyes wandered back at her and Hermione saw that they had turned an aggressive red again. Without saying anything, Tom brandished his wand. Obviously, he wanted to complete the Haz curse he had started previously. His magic ripped at her dangerously, preparing to attack.

Hermione didn't want to fight on. She didn't want to find out if Tom would really hurl that curse at her. She drew upon the Elder Magic and with a whirl of her black robes, she stepped into the pressure of apparition. The last thing she saw before plunging into darkness were those beautiful grey eyes filled with cruel contempt and hate.

She reappeared on top of the Astronomy tower, though this time not on the platform but the actual roof top. Hermione stumbled, fell on her back and nearly slid down the slippery tiles, but then managed to hook one arm around the stone gargoyle guarding the rim of the roof. Her legs dangled over the rim, but she managed to end up in a sitting position. One arm was still slung around the stone figure to steady herself. She was so high up that her fear of heights hit her hard. That was exactly the reason why she had apparated here. The fear now rippling at her at least managed to numb her other emotions. Not enough, though, to stop that steady flow of tears running from her eyes. Silent sobs shook her body as Hermione clung, almost desperately, to the stone gargoyle.

"You are nothing but filth!" His words didn't stop to run through her head. He was so wrong. How dare he insult her like this? She should hate him for doing this. But instead of that hate there only coursed sorrow and grief through her. She felt so hopeless. He only needed to say a few words and would manage to cut through all her defences, tearing open painful wounds. Why was she so weak? She had already gone through so much; why did it hurt? She was supposed to be stronger than this. She should be ashamed of herself.

Hermione breathed in deeply trying to calm down.

"The mission, Granger!" she hissed angrily at herself. "You still have the mission!"

Yes, that was true. There was purpose!

She ran a shaky hand over her face, wiping away hot tears. It didn't matter. Nothing of it. Her feelings were neglectable. Maybe she felt painfully hollow inside, but that was not important. Her feelings should be shoved aside. This pain was not really there. It didn't belong to her. It was not needed. Not important to accomplish the mission.

Hermione's arm tightened around the stone gargoyle until its sharp points bored into her body painfully. But what did she care? The traitorous tears finally stopped to run from her eyes. Hermione raised her wand and waved it mechanically over her left shoulder. Instantly the torn material repaired itself so that it hid the burned skin underneath. Another wave of her wand and all the dirt, blood and dead leaves left her. She was clean again and nothing indicated she had just now fought with the most dangerous wizard she had ever known.
Hermione leaned a little bit forward and ignored her fear of heights as she peered down at the Astronomy platform a few metres below her current position. No-one was there, she noticed relieved. Using the Elder Magic, she apparated down to the platform. She staggered a little bit as she reappeared on the platform. Vertigo hit her as she had to stand up-right. Finally, the pain, coming from her wounds, was no longer concealed by adrenalin, pumping through her veins. A sharp pain came from her arms where the cutting hex had sliced open her skin. The wound on her shoulder, though, was a lot worse. It hurt so much, she was feeling slightly sick. For now, though, Hermione ignored the pain and just checked her watch. Not even five. There still was some time until dinner would be served in the Great Hall. Then the parents would leave the castle after what must have been a pleasant day with their children. Hermione let her gaze shortly wander over the Scottish landscape, she could see from her point on the Astronomy platform. It looked so nice and inviting while the sun shone brightly.

Hermione turned around, entered the castle and started to make her way towards Gryffindor tower. As she finally entered the common room she found it deserted. Everybody seemed to still be together with their parents, passing their time in Hogsmeade or sitting by the Great Lake in the sunshine. Hermione quickly ascended the stairs leading up to Gryffindor her dorm. She entered and found it deserted then she waved her wand at the door, thus locking it. Most likely she wasn't going to be disturbed, but Hermione didn't want to risk anything. As she had reached her part of the dorm, she cautiously tried to take off her cloak. She hissed in pain as the material of the cloak rubbed over the burn on her shoulder. Under the cloak, Hermione still wore her mauve blouse. She could see that both her sleeves were soaked in her own blood, which still flowed from the cuts in her arms. Slowly, she moved out of the blouse. Some of the blood had already clotted and now she ripped it off the cuts. Hermione suppressed a moan of pain and discarded her ruined blouse on the floor.

She sat down on the edge of her bed and examined her wounds. On her right forearm, just a few inches under her elbow, Hermione could see a wound shaped like the crescent moon. That was the entry wound of the dagger Tom had hurled at her. Well, it was still better than if his dagger had hit its original target: her face. Hermione's gaze wandered from the relatively small knife-induced injury to the deep and long slashes the cutting hex had left behind. They run in a slight angle over the full length of both her forearms. Blood was running freely from the cuts.

Hermione sat on her bed and just stared at her bleeding arms. She observed numbly how the blood was flowing from the deep cuts down her arms, leaving behind bright red tracks on her skin, then it dropped from her hands to the floor. Slowly, a small puddle of blood was building on the dark wood of the floor. She watched with an odd emotional detachment how that pool of blood grew bigger. She balled her hands into tight fists and as a result more blood streamed from the cuts.

She shook her head as she stared down at all the blood. How had this happened? She closed her eyes. A painful emptiness was ripping at her. It hurt a lot more than those cuts in her arms.

Suddenly, an image of Harry flickered through her mind. She could see his startling green eyes laughing at her as he smiled at her encouragingly. Harry had never given up. He had always fought on, even as everybody else had long since lost hope. He had fought until the end. He would never give up. Hermione opened her eyes again and looked down at her heavily bleeding arms. Harry had always been strong. A lot stronger than her actually. She didn't want to disappoint him.

She reached for the black wand she had discarded on her bed. Then she pointed it at her trunk and instantly her first aid kit soared out of the trunk and landed softly on the bed beside her. Another wave of her wand and the blood around the cuts clotted quickly before it completely crusted over the wounds. Hermione reached for one of the potion vials in the wooden box. She removed the stopper and began to administer the potion to the cuts. It was a greyish goo that smelled strongly of burnt car tires, but it would fasten the healing and help keeping the wounds from breaking open. After
smearing the potion on the cuts, Hermione waved her wand and the blood vanished from her skin. Then she conjured up bandages that wrapped around her wounded arms.

Now that she had dealt with the cuts, Hermione turned her head and looked at the wound on her shoulder. She could see that the skin was completely burned away and her flesh underneath was, to some degrees, charred black. It was worrying that the immediate area of the wound didn't hurt at all. Only the rims of the huge burn ached sharply. This numbness of the wound suggested that the heat of the curse had burned really deep into her and had destroyed the nerves. Luckily, she was still able to move her left arm normally. That, at least, meant the injury wasn't going to restrict her ability to use the arm. Hermione again reached for the wooden box and produced a small pot out of it. It contained a green ointment. She took some of the ointment to apply it to the burn mark. She could hardly feel anything as her fingers touched the burned flesh. She slathered the ointment on the burn before she waved her wand again and a thick, soft mull wound itself loosely around her shoulder.

After having tended to her injuries, Hermione angled a blue blouse from her trunk and slipped into it. The fabric of the blouse concealed everything perfectly. No-one would be able to tell that underneath the pale blue material, painful injuries marred her skin. Though, Hermione could feel it. Not only the pain, but something else. Everything felt different, now, that he had attacked her like that. This had been more than a slap in the face. Much more.

Hermione stared vacantly down at the black wand in her hand. He had used dangerous, dark curses on her and had risked her getting seriously injured. He had even wanted to throw the Haz Curse at her. Again, he had mocked her. Had called her scum and trash.

… unclean…

Hermione could feel the coldness radiating from those words. It wrapped around her and quickly spread through her whole body. As he had attacked her, Hermione had felt something crumble inside of her. It seemed to still be broken into pieces.

Stop this! You always knew who he is, an angry voice now hissed at her sharply. Hermione breathed in and exhaled slowly. Then she reached for her bag. She opened it and was met by the familiar silvery fabric of the Invisibility Cloak. A small smile lit up on her face as she looked down at the silvery cloak. She cautiously pulled the cloak out of the bag. Its material felt smooth and cool in her hands, just as if the fabric was interlaced with fine, metallic threads. Hermione looked misty-eyed down at the cloak. The small smile still tugged at the corners of her mouth, as she remembered how she had seen that cloak for the first time. It had been in her first year that Dumbledore had given Harry the cloak; an heirloom from Harry's deceased father.

And a very useful one at that, Hermione mused as her eyes wandered over the silvery cloak. Harry and Ron hadn't hesitated to use that cloak for their stupid adventures and night time strolls, she remembered amused. More often than not, the cloak had saved them their necks. Or at least spared them a detention. And she…

She had done her best to lecture the two of them after each of their rash ventures. Hermione chuckled softly as she looked down at the cloak. For the first time since an eternity, she allowed her good memories to embrace her. She didn't fight them off, but let them unfold in her mind. Normally, those memories frightened her, maybe even more so than all those horrible pictures the war had left her behind with. Those happy memories were dangerous, as they reminded her of a careless time that was lost to her. To think of that happy time made her present life seem all the more bitter.

But now, as she pressed Harry's cloak against her, she wanted to remember. Maybe her friends had died, but they hadn't really left her. Hermione had decided to stop repressing the memories she had from the war. Now, she was ready to allow her good memories to come back to her, too. A small
smile grazed her features and it felt good as she lost herself in the memories of her years at Hogwarts.

"Shit!"

Tom furiously slammed the door shut behind him. He pulled his wand and angrily waved it at the bed, standing nearest to him. His dark magic was more than willing to follow his lead. It rushed through his wand and formed into a curse. Flames engulfed the bed and ate hungrily away on the Slytherin-green quilt. Tom ran a hand irately through his hair as he watched the flames destroying the dormitory. Somehow, though, that destructive frenzy didn't manage to calm him down. Despite this act of vandalism, anger still coursed through him. With a frustrated groan, Tom raised his wand and brandished it in a small movement. Instantly, the flames died and the smoking, black remains turned back into a bed. The Slytherin dorm again looked like nothing had happened.

Tom put his wand away and walked to his space of the dorm. He took off his black uniform robe and threw it over the back of his chair, before he slumped down on his bed. He propped himself up against the headboard of the bed and stared with narrowed eyes vacantly in front of him. His anger still ran, in form of incensed magic, through him. He could feel it ripping at him, begging him, ordering him to be set free.

The magic now pulsing through him, rose his anger lever even further. Why did it choose to show up now? He wondered rabidly. He could have used that hatred behind his magic earlier when he had faced that Muggle.

Then he wouldn't have failed.

That darn curse really wasn't that difficult, was it? Tom thought enraged. But then why had he botched it up? Again? There it had been, the perfect opportunity to get the Unbeatable Wand. And what did he do? He just let it go to waste!

Yes, it was the Elder Wand. After having felt that strange magic radiating off of Hermione, Tom had known that it hadn't come from her. He knew her magic quite well actually which was disgusting enough on its own. But all the same, the magic, that Mudblood had radiated while fighting him, hadn't been her own. It had been powerful and somehow uninhibited. It had felt even feral as it had crackled around her. Tom had bound her magic to his dagger. Hermione shouldn't have been able to perform any magic after that. But he had still felt it, bristling in the air, that irresistible force. That had been the Elder Wand. Tom was sure now.

So, why the hell hadn't he then taken that wand from her? Why hadn't he been able to finish his curse? His wand movements had been perfect. He surely hadn't made any mistakes. Still, as the power had built up, Tom had been able to sense that something was wrong. The whole process had been slow and the power had been inert. He had then known that the result would be just as unacceptable.

Weak! he thought as he angrily sprang up from his bed and began to pace. How could he mess up like that? He wasn't that eleven year old fool anymore! He knew the magic, he had the power to complete the curse. Hell, he even had cast that curse successfully before. But still, he had failed today.

Secretly, Tom was glad that Hermione had left when she did, otherwise she would have witnessed his weakness. He had no idea why the Haz Curse seemed to be such a problem for him. It should have worked. He knew that he had made no mistakes, but still the power behind the curse had been embarrassingly weak. It wouldn't have caused any serious damage. He had wanted to turn his hate
into magical energy to then hurl it at that Mudblood, but he had come up with nothing. She would have laughed in his face, Tom thought furiously.

He still needed to somehow acquire the wand from Hermione. That was a given. But it was a complete mystery to him why he hadn't been able to do it today. It irked him a great deal whenever he couldn't manage a spell, and the Haz Curse seemed to quite be elusive.

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It's Like Magic!

The maps and blueprints, lying on the metal surface of the table showed the key plan of a complex of buildings and the immediate terrain around the facility. Five men were bent over the maps, scanning them intently. A cone of light, coming from a brightly shining orb floating over their heads, illuminated the table; otherwise the room was dived in semi-darkness. Only a small window in one of the bare concrete walls allowed a little bit of sunlight to fall into the room. Aside from the metallic table, the room was empty. The five men didn't care for the dreariness of their surroundings as they were still studying the maps. Four of them wore some kind of uniform. They were all clad in olive shirts, black combat trousers and black boots. Their wands were stored away in leather holsters attached to their belts, making them look less like a wizard's tool but more like a weapon.

The only exception to this military conformity was the last man of the group. He wore grey slacks and a dark brown vest over a white shirt. While his comrades were ready to defend themselves with their easy accessible wands, this man didn't seem to be armed at all. He did not visibly carry any wand. In contrast to the other men in the room, who were tall and had a muscular build, this man was at least a head smaller than them and rather thin. His golden coloured hair was dishevelled, thus again separating him from the other men with their short haircuts, and it fell slightly into his eyes as he was bent over the maps. While there were serious expressions on the other men's faces, the blond man's eyes twinkled as they wandered over the map, looking as if he was amused by the information he found there.

After some time, the blond man asked in a soft but firm voice without looking up from the maps, "What did recon come up with?"

One of the men clad in uniform swiftly answered, "That they've heightened security by hiring external personnel."

The soldier hesitated to go on, still looking at the blond man. He obviously contemplated whether he should give his personal opinion. The blond man seemed to notice the other's hesitancy and raised his head. He scanned the other man expectantly.

The soldier took that as permission to continue so he said, "They seem to be acting without thinking. They're like headless chicken. The additional guards are clearly just a precaution. They don't know anything about our plan. But it still poses a problem."

The twinkle never left his eyes as the golden haired man said, a lopsided grin tugging at one corner of his mouth, "Well, problems are there to be solved, ain't they?"

"Yes, sir," Soldier replied immediately.

The mischievous smile was still on his face as the blond man bent over the table again and his eyes wandered over the terrain, depicted on the map. He pointed with his finger on a spot on the blueprint "Considering the increase in their protective measures, to attack from here would be a suicide mission," the blond man said in his soft voice while running his finger over the map. As his eyes wandered over the map, the soft twinkle left them completely. They grew hard and cold.

All jocoseness had left his voice as he continued, "We should change our plan accordingly. We attack from here and here," he commanded in a sharp voice while gesturing on different points on the blueprints. "We need to be in and out quickly and quietly. We always knew that their forces would be on high alert. They would be idiots not to expect an attack, considering who their clients are. So,
if we attack head on, we will be engaged in a full blown battle and the fight would drag out unnecessarily, only drawing unwanted attention towards us."

"And we would be caught by ministry officials with our knickers down," one of the other man in the room supplied. He had dark red hair and wore glasses which looked out of place on the hard features of his face.

The mischievous smile crept back on the blonde's face while he still looked at the map in front of him.

"Exactly," he said as he bent up and smiled at the man with the glasses approvingly. "Exactly so, Rousseau." The twinkle was back in his eyes as he added, "And we don't want le Ministère to rain down on our parade, now, do we?"

His gaze unfixed from Rousseau and wandered over the other men standing around the table. Admiration and respect shone in their eyes as they attentively listened to their leader. The golden haired man grinned at them and ran a hand through his already tousled hair. Then he said,

"Gents, never forget this is not yet a full scale war. All we want to do for now is spread a little chaos and fear among those-who-do-not-belong and their sympathizers." The grin left his face and an icy cold sheen appeared in his eyes. "We want to let them know that we are still here and that we will not let them continue to undermine le Ministère. We are not going to allow them to destroy this country and our society."

He stepped a little away from the table. There unmistakably was an air of authority surrounding him as the golden haired man started to pace, his hands behind his back, while he still scanned his men, "I know for a fact that many ministry officials lean to our side, but that doesn't mean they would tolerate open acts of war."

"Sir, why don't we just drop the pretence?" Rousseau asked, his voice low and respectful. "Sooner or later the officials won't be able to ignore us anyway."

The blond looked at him, considering his suggestion. He didn't seem to be offended by Rousseau's inquiry. Instead he answered, "That is true. At one point in time we will have to antagonize the ministry, that's for certain. But that day has not yet come. We need patience."

"Yes, sir," Rousseau replied. "But do we need the Ministry?"

A grin took form on the blonde's face. Then he said, his eyes twinkling, "In fact we do."

"Sir?"

"Right now le Ministère de la Magie is the only thing protecting us from all the other forces which want to destroy us," the golden haired man elaborated, not in the least bit annoyed with having to explain himself in front of his men. "So far, even the minister himself has turned a blind eye on us. I know that, in secret, he is endorsing our cause. But if we start to act too blatantly, the minister will soon have no other choice than to strike back. He cannot risk losing credibility in the eyes of the British, German or Spanish. His position already is weakened due to our actions. If the minister should decide that we are a threat to his position, he will not hesitate to mobilize all his forces. He cannot risk discord with the other countries. So, he will try to disband us."

The blond man stopped his pacing and grinned at his men, just as if this whole situation was amusing to him. "Le Ministère is strong. You know the strength of the French Auror divisions, do you not,
Rousseau? And very quickly we would be high up on their shit-list."

"But our forces are a match to the Aurors," another of his soldiers now interjected cautiously.

"Obviously." The golden haired man grinned, his eyes twinkling at the man. "Don't worry, Morel. I still think that a confrontation with the Ministry is inevitable. You will get your chance to fight them. But I want to protract the moment the Ministry steps in as long as possible. That gives us more time to operate freely."

"So, until the day we step out of the shadow and into the light, our operations need to be deniable. Otherwise we will soon have to fight a war at two fronts." The blond man chuckled softly then looked back at his men, a playful smirk on his face. "Don't forget, often wars are won by politicians not soldiers."

At this point in time a knock on the only door of the room abruptly stopped the conversation. Without having to be ordered, Morel walked over to the door and opened it. A man, wearing a black shirt and olive trousers and equipped with a wand holster at his belt, stood in the door. Morel was just about to demand an explanation for this intrusion, as the blond man commanded,

"Let him pass."

Immediately, Morel stepped away, letting the other man enter the room.

"At ease," the golden haired man ordered as the soldier had reached him. The twinkle was back in his eyes as he then inquired, "Have you been successful?"

"Yes, commander," the soldier replied duteously.

"Any reportable events?"

"No, sir," the soldier continued readily. "We could complete the mission as ordered. Our spy is still in position behind the castle's walls."

A triumphant grin broke out on the golden haired man's face then he asked, "The portkey?"

"Delivered and ready to be activated at your command," the soldier answered concisely.

"Nice work, Girard," the golden haired man said. "Take your men and re-join your squad team. You are dismissed."

"Yes, commander Grindelwald."

The soldier saluted before his commander then left the room with military pace, his polished black boots clacking softly on the floor. Grindelwald ran a hand through his already mussed blonde hair and stared for a moment into blank space, seemingly pondering something. His hand reached for a pocket in his grey pants and he pulled a wand out of it. His eyes almost lovingly wandered over the polished wood.

After a while Grindelwald's eyes lost their glossy look and sharpened. He grabbed the wand tighter and put it back into the pocket before he stepped to the table with the maps. He again scanned the blueprints as he noticed his second in command glancing at him questioningly. Rousseau obviously wondered what this little interruption was about. Normally, Grindelwald was very open with him, so this episode had managed to spark Rousseau's interest. Still, he would never have been so insolent as to ask his commander about his actions. As Grindelwald noticed Rousseau's curiosity, he chuckled amused.
"Not to worry, Rousseau." Grindelwald's eyes twinkled serenely as he scanned his second in command. "This mission has nothing to do with our plan of action. It is just a little past-time of mine."

Hermione walked slowly down a corridor in direction of the dungeons. It was Monday again and she really didn't want to go to class. The first class would be potions and she dreaded to go there. It was finally time for her getting rid of that darn age estimating potion. She had to foil it. She should have hurled a Reducto curse at that potion a long time ago. Hermione thought ill-tempered as she stomped down the corridor. It would have saved her a lot of trouble. But no, Hermione rolled her eyes. She had to be sly and cunning, so that no-one would suspect her of having sabotaged the potion. Especially not her seat neighbour.

Involuntarily, her right hand wandered to the bandage which was wrapped tightly around her forearm. Her fingers skimmed over the material of the bandage. There was a deep painful gash on her forearm. In fact, there were gashes on both her forearms, Hermione thought while her upcoming anger was now interlaced by a heavy sombre feeling. She balled her hands into tight fists and instantly a sharp pain seared through her forearms. She slightly shook her head. It didn't matter. There was no reason to feel so despondent all of a sudden. After all, she had a plan. Hermione relaxed her hands again and continued her way towards her potions class room. Today they would finally do the finishing touches to the Ortus potion.

Not if I have a say in it, she thought determined as she readjusted her school bag on her shoulder. The potions kit in her bag contained the ingredient she needed to finally ruin the Ortus potion. One of the last ingredients added to the potion was hemlock. The step in itself wasn't very difficult. No-one would expect any mistakes to occur here. The only difficulty was that Hermione needed to replace the hemlock from the potions cabinet in the classroom with the one hidden in her bag. For the potion to work, it was necessary to add hemlock that was collected during the first night of the waning moon. Any other hemlock would ruin the potion. That was why the herb in her bag had been collected in plain daylight. No moon involved at all. If she added that to the potion, the potion would never work and her year of birth would remain to be a secret. Yes, she thought determined, today she would finally solve her problem with the Ortus potions.

That would be one down on her rather long list of problems. Hermione sighed. Actually, there was something else she had to straighten out today. Dumbledore still wanted to speak with her. But for that, too, Hermione had a plan. Lately, she was full of those, wasn't she? she thought cynically. Really, plans were nice. They put order into things which were totally messed up …and they were a good excuse for doing things which were despicable, Hermione thought darkly. It's not me, you know, it's the plan…

Well, whether she liked it or not, she had decided what to do with Dumbledore's request to see her. It was easy, actually. Now that she had thought of it, she was surprised it hadn't grazed her mind sooner. Her initial plan was to unite the Deathly Hallows and then use their power to return into her time. By now she had managed to acquire the Invisibility Cloak from Harry's family. But she still needed the wand from Grindelwald and…

The stone from Tom. Hermione closed her eyes and had to swallow hard as she was once again overwhelmed by her emotions. But she couldn't afford them anymore.

The Elder Wand, she knew, would eventually fall into Dumbledore's possession. When that happened, she would strike. She would take the wand from him. It was still easier - or at least less dangerous - than to steal the wand from Grindelwald himself. To get the wand from Dumbledore,
she would need to be close to him. So, she would need to be in his good graces again. At the moment, he didn't trust her at all and thought she was a dark witch. If she now tried anything with him, she would surely lose. Dumbledore was too strong a wizard. She would never be able to equal him in a duel. To get that wand from him, she needed to first convince him of her innocence.

The next Hallow was the Resurrection Stone. That stone was right now set into the Gaunts' ring which was in Tom's possession. Now that Tom thought she was not even worth the air she breathed, he would never give her the stone. Problem was that just like Dumbledore Tom was an incredibly strong wizard. Hermione had reasonable doubts she would be able to take the stone by force.

So, those were her two problems: Dumbledore didn't trust her and Tom didn't even consider her to be a human being. Both of them were too strong for her to beat them and each of them had one Hallow. This brought her back to Dumbledore's request to see her. A guilty knot formed in her stomach as she once again went over her plan. It wasn't pretty, but it would clear both obstacles in one go. She really was left with no other choice, Hermione told herself, trying to dispel that unpleasant feeling in her stomach.

He left me with no other choice!

Dumbledore had requested to speak to her today. All those weeks ago she had saved Tom from getting expelled by blackmailing Dumbledore. She had threatened to release the story of Tom's mistreatment at the hand of a Muggle, thus sparking hate in the magical community. Dumbledore now knew that she was a Muggleborn. He would question her actions. The moment he did that, Hermione planned to call the bluff. She would tell Dumbledore how she had lied and how she would never endanger anyone. She would tell him how very sorry she was, and that she had made a big mistake. By confessing all of this, Dumbledore would surely believe her. He was a man who liked to give second chances. Thus, she would re-gain his trust and with that she was a step closer to getting the Elder Wand.

Two down, one to go. She was still short of one Hallow: the Resurrection Stone. Tom would never give her the stone and she would never be able to re-gain his trust. In his eyes, she was now nothing more than a bothersome insect. To get the stone by beating him magically, was a risk she was not ready to take. So, how to get the stone? As the next part of her plan unfolded in her mind, Hermione could feel her stomach clench painfully. All of this didn't sit right with her at all. She hated what she had to do. But then again, why should she feel bad about this? If Tom was in her position, wouldn't he do the same?

She was going to get Dumbledore's trust by taking back her threat. But this very threat was the only thing that kept the professor from expelling Tom. Accordingly, after her confession, Dumbledore's next action would be to throw Tom out. Hermione was not going to convince him to do otherwise. In fact, she would even tell Dumbledore how Tom had forced her to lie. Tom would lose his wand, and he would have to return to the orphanage. That was when she intended to strike. Back in the orphanage, Tom would be weakened and he would be wandless. It shouldn't pose any problem to get the stone from him.

A sickening feeling of guilt coursed violently through her, as she entered the corridor where the potions classroom was situated. Hermione just clenched her teeth and squashed the unpleasant feeling. Her eyes wandered over the students standing in the corridor. Obviously, Slughorn had not yet arrived. It wasn't long and her gaze landed on Tom. He was staring back at her. Hermione had to swallow hard as she was once again confronted with that evil glint in his eyes. His grey eyes slowly wandered over her form, and Hermione could see disgust and aversion. Then he just looked away from her and continued talking with Malfoy. Feeling vindicated in her decision to get him expelled, Hermione turned her back to Tom and walked over to her friends.
"Hey, Mione," Weasley greeted her, smiling at her.

"Morning." Hermione beamed at her friends.

Longbottom stepped towards her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Ready to finally finish that horrible potion?" he asked her mischievously.

Hermione smiled up at him, thinking, *You have no idea how ready I am.*

"Sure," she answered. "How about you?"

Longbottom just grinned down at her and shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to ask Amarys," he declared happily. "I had no idea what we were doing right after we started the potion."

Lupin, who stood beside Weasley sighed tiredly and shook his head at his blond friend. Before he could say anything, though, Slughorn finally showed up and opened the class room door.

"Now, in with you," he said in his usual booming voice while smiling at his class.

As Hermione walked into the classroom, Longbottom still by her side, she again got a glimpse of Tom. His cold grey eyes wandered over her and then to Longbottom's arm which was still wrapped around her. Tom's gaze snapped back to her, and Hermione furrowed her brow as there was an eerie red glint in his eyes. What was his problem? Unless, of course, he didn't like this interaction between a pureblood and 'Muggle filth', as he had so fondly called her the other day. Longbottom unwrapped his arm from her and bent down to her.

"Good luck with the evil git," he whispered in her ear.

Hermione stared at that angry red colour which still swirled in Tom's eyes, and she thought that she could really do with a little luck. She nodded at Longbottom and then hesitantly walked over to her place. He elegantly lounged in his chair and watched her intensely. She ignored him and pulled her stuff out of her bag. There was a nervous shiver running down her spine as she placed her potion kit on the table. The hemlock was safely stored inside the kit. She risked a peek at Tom. He was still staring at her through narrowed eyes. She stiffened as he leaned towards her.

"Didn't take you long to find a replacement," he hissed maliciously into her ear.

Tom's cold words had been spoken with so much venom that Hermione stared at him in confusion. Then his eyes darted to the table her three Gryffindor friends were sitting at. The red colour viciously flared up in his eyes as they wandered to Longbottom. Then Tom looked back at her.

"Of course, it's not like you can be choosy," he spat derisively. "Now, that everybody knows about your dirty blood."

Hermione felt anger burning up in her as she heard that demeaning streak in Tom's voice.

"Don't you think that's a bit conceited, coming from a halfblood?" she asked him in a low voice.

The crimson colour in his eyes intensified, but before he could have retorted anything, Slughorn started the class.

"Settle down, settle down," he cried over the rustling and chattering. "I hope you all had a nice weekend."
Splendid, Hermione thought dryly while ignoring the death glares her seat neighbour was sending her.

"Today, we will finally finish the Ortus potion," Slughorn continued while he waved his wand at the blackboard. Immediately the instructions appeared on the black board. Hermione only shortly glimpsed at it. She already knew everything about that horrible potion by heart.

"I advise you to follow the instructions carefully," Slughorn continued, winking at his students. "And don't be disappointed if your potion doesn't turn out to be a success. The Ortus potion is quite advanced." Then he clapped his hands and said cheerfully, "All the same, give it your very best."

His beady eyes wandered over Tom and Hermione saw the professor smile proudly. Well, let's see what happens when his star pupil fails, Hermione thought a little gleefully. Then she watched Malfoy walking over to the potions supply store to get all the ingredients they would need for today. Tom completely ignored her, started to prepare their work place and kindled off a fire under the cauldron by waving his wand. The flames immediately began to lick at the cauldron with the Ortus potion. Malfoy came back to their table with the ingredients. Hermione instantly spotted the hemlock, lying innocently among the other ingredients. She went closer, intending to get the hemlock. She needed to somehow swap it with the hemlock in her potions kit. Then, she was safe.

Malfoy looked at her, seemingly disgusted by her close proximity to him, and stepped a little away from her. Hermione just sent him a glare, then she leaned over and inspected the ingredients. Her eyes wandered to the hemlock, but then she saw the gilly weed, lying right beside it. A memory broke down on her. A small smile appeared on her face, as she remembered how Harry had used it in their fourth year during the Triwizard Tournament. It was a pity that she had missed it. At the time, though, she had been unconscious and very deep down in the Great Lake. She chuckled softly as she remembered how embarrassed she had been after she found out that Victor had, at that point in time, thought she was the most important person in his life. She wondered what had become of Victor. In the last letter she had gotten from him at the end of her sixth year, he had told her how he was going to marry. Back then, she had been surprised but also happy for him. Actually at that point in time, many people had married seemingly a little rushed. Maybe because of the war that had already threatened to break down on them.

The happy glimmer in her eyes was considerably dimmed as she looked at the gilly weed. After that letter, she hadn't heard anything from Victor anymore due to the fact that she had been engaged in the war. Even if he had written her more, his letters would never have reached her. She wondered if he had managed to marry, in contrast to herself. Her fiancé had died before they could have married.

Hermione reached for the gilly weed, which had managed to invoke such memories. Before she could touch it, though, a hand grabbed her forearm tightly. Hermione winced slightly as there still was a rather deep cut in her arm. She looked up and found Tom glaring down at her.

"What are you doing?" he snapped at her angrily.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him and opened her mouth to retaliate something. Before she could say anything, Tom's hand tightened around her arm, making her clench her teeth in pain.

"I won't let you ruin the potion with your incompetence," he said in a deadly cold voice.

Then Tom took the gilly weed and narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione stared up at him enraged but didn't contradict him. She knew why he was saying this. Preparing the gilly weed was probably the most difficult part of today's tasks. Obviously, Tom didn't think a Muggleborn was able to do it.
Hermione died to hiss something in return, but she had to hold herself back. After all, this was quite beneficial to her plan. She just averted her eyes from Tom, not returning anything. Thinking he had won over her, he let go off her arm and stepped away from her.

Hermione suppressed an evil smirk from taking form on her face and reached for the hemlock. With the plant in hand she returned to her own space at the table. She put it down on the wooden worktop and opened her potions kit to retrieve her knife but left the kit open. Hermione peered inconspicuously at her two group members. Tom was occupied with cleaning the gilly weed and Malfoy was bent over the simmering potion, from time to time stirring it with clock-wise turns.

Now or never, Hermione thought as she felt her heart beating painfully fast. She again reached for her potion kit, while still observing the other two out of the corner of her eyes. She found the prepared hemlock and quickly pulled it out before she placed it on her workplace. Then she took the original hemlock and cautiously hid it in her potions kit. A relieved breath of air escaped her as no-one had noticed her actions. She now hastily closed the lid of her potions kit. A smile played around her lips as she began to cut the hemlock.

Almost an hour later, Hermione again peered at Tom. He was now cutting the gilly weed into exactly two inch long pieces. Actually, he had been tending to the gilly weed since they had started today's class. He had had to wash it cautiously to get all dirt and sand off the plant, and then he had had to meticulously un-tousle its many leaves so that he would be able to cut them. Hermione almost had pity on him as she knew that all his work would be for nothing. …almost, she thought with a small smirk on her face.

Now, though, Tom seemed to be satisfied with his work. He laid his knife down and carefully piled the cut gilly weed into a bowl. Then he stepped over to the cauldron and stirred the bluish potion. Satisfied with the potion, he laid the wooden ladle away. Then he looked up and his cold eyes landed on her. Hermione couldn't help but stiffen. He hadn't noticed anything, had he?

"Where's the hemlock?" Tom now asked in a commanding voice.

Hermione felt like choking as she saw his eyes now wander to the cut hemlock, lying on her working place. She prayed that he hadn't noticed anything of her act of sabotage. Her heart rate sped up as his gaze now snapped back at her. His grey eyes were hard as steel as he looked at her and Hermione had to swallow nervously.

"Bring it here," Tom ordered harshly, obviously expecting her to just do his bidding.

As she heard him, a triumphant smirk begged to take form on her face. Hermione suppressed it. Instead, she averted her eyes from Tom, took the cut hemlock and walked over to him. She forced all malicious joy from her face as she then hesitantly looked up at Tom. She offered the hemlock to him and said in a soft, timid voice,

"Here."

There was an ice-cold sheen in his grey eyes as they wandered over her, and Hermione held her breath, still offering him the hemlock. After a moment, Tom reached out and accepted the hemlock from her. Hermione would have liked to dance in joy as he then added the cut pieces of hemlock to the simmering potion. Its blue colour didn't change, but it wasn't supposed to anyway. Hermione was sure that her eyes now glinted with triumph, so she had them downcast. Tom shouldn't see that.

Another half an hour later, the potion had simmered enough, so the other ingredients could be added. Malfoy had prepared the sulphurous acid which Tom now added before he slowly put the cut gilly weed into the boiling potion. As he cautiously applied the ingredients to the potion, Hermione had to
fight to suppress a smirk. *Really, he doesn't need to be so cautious,* she just thought scornfully. After Tom had added all the ingredients, he again stirred the potion. It was now supposed to turn into a crystal clear, odourless liquid. And it did turn clear, Hermione noted, though there was an unmistakable whitish touch to the colour. It wasn't perfectly clear. Now, the smirk really broke out on her face, and Hermione was very lucky that Tom was occupied with glaring at the potion and didn't pay her any attention.

That was the moment Slughorn clapped his hands and declared, "Class is almost finished. I'll now go around and check on your results. The ones of you, who managed to brew the potion correctly, will then have the chance to test it with their blood."

Hermione's gaze wandered from the beaming professor back to Tom. She could see him cursing under his breath as he still glowered at the potion. It made her want to sing in joy. Chatter had broken out in the classroom after Slughorn's declaration. Hermione looked at the other students in the room. Obviously, there were very few with halfway acceptable results. The potion Lupin had managed to produce, though, seemed to be perfect, Hermione noted contently. Weasley and Longbottom stared at him in awe, their mouths fallen open. She smiled at them.

"Now, let's see what we have here." Her attention was brought back to her own potion.

Slughorn had walked over to their table, a smile of pleasant anticipation on his face. He obviously expected his star pupil to have managed the potion. The smirk was back on Hermione's face. She was unable to suppress it anymore. In contrast, Tom's face was a blank as he now stared at the professor. Hermione, thought, could tell that he was definitely furious. Slughorn bent over the cauldron to have a look at the potion. Hermione watched as the smile slowly drained from the professor's face and was replaced by an unpleasant frown. He now stirred the potion carefully as if he hoped to somehow make it work, but nothing happened. The potion's colour remained to be milky and just wrong. Slughorn shook his head in disappointment as he straightened up again. The frown was still on his face as he now looked at Tom reproachfully. Hermione almost laughed out loud as she saw Tom clenching his jaw, seemingly fighting for composure.

"I'm afraid this is not the result I had anticipated" Slughorn said, this time without a smile, as he eyed Tom almost accusingly.

"No, sir," Tom managed to grind out.

"Very unfortunate," The professor sighed while he still looked at Tom, disappointment evident on his face.

Then distaste took form on his face as he looked at the ruined potion. He faced Tom again and said in a grave voice, "I can only give you an Acceptable for that work. It's certainly not good enough for Exceeds Expectation."

"I understand, sir," Tom fumed through gritted teeth.

Hermione silently celebrated while observing the whole thing. She didn't even mind that Slughorn completely overlooked her and Malfoy. They had worked on the potion, too, after all. Slughorn again let his eyes slowly wander over Tom, obviously deeply dissatisfied with him. Hermione could see Tom's hand twitch as if he longed to reach for his wand. But who he would curse, she wondered idly. Himself? The smirk was back on her face. Though she had to quickly hide it again as Slughorn now turned to her and Malfoy.

"Ms DeCerto, Mr Malfoy," He began slowly. "I'll give you, too, an Acceptable for the potion."
The accusing touch had by now left the professor's voice again as he no longer spoke with his favourite student. Malfoy nodded politely at the professor, his face his usual blank. Hermione, on the other hand, couldn't help but smile sweetly at Slughorn.

"That's okay, professor," she almost chortled at him cheerfully.

_Merlin, I need to pull myself together_, she thought half-heartedly. Slughorn cast a last disappointed look at Tom, then he turned around and continued grading the potions. Hermione started to clean up her work place and the instruments she had used.

After a while, Slughorn exclaimed in his booming voice while looking at his golden pocket watch, "Look at that. Time has flown by." Then he turned his eyes to the class and said, "Now, I want everyone who did not succeed in creating the potion to write an essay as to where you think the mistake occurred."

Hermione stuffed her potions kit into her bag, and got up from her table. Then she turned around and waved at her three Gryffindor friends, signalling for them to wait for her. Before she walked over to them, she glimpsed a last time at Tom. He was still staring angrily at the potion as if it had insulted him. Hermione just turned around and left him.

"Hermione." Longbottom positively beamed at her. "You won't believe what happened."

She just smiled up at him. Not even the death glares Tom was now sending her way could dim her smile.

Longbottom then continued, "I really got an Outstanding," he told her enthusiastically. Then he added, looking as if he not even believed it himself, "In Potions! Mind you."

Hermione grinned up at him and said, "Well, congratulations."

"Yes, I'll have to send mum an owl right away," The blond Gryffindor continued, a broad smile on his face. "She won't believe it!"

Hermione laughed at him merrily and didn't notice how the glare, Tom was sending their way, grew steadily darker. Instead, she now continued her way towards the exit of the class room, still laughing gaily.

"How about you?" Lupin asked her as she stepped out of the class room.

Hermione turned and smiled up at him. Then she said happily, "Oh, I got an Acceptable."

She again had to laugh out loud as all three boys now stared at her wide eyed. Then Weasley exclaimed nonplussed, "You got an Acceptable? Whatever happened?"

"Yeah," Longbottom conceded astounded. Then he seemed to consider something before he added slowly, "Wait... does that mean Riddle got an Acceptable, too?"

Hermione just grinned and nodded. Now a smile broke out on Longbottom's face and he scoffed, "Can you believe it? Mr Perfect-Grades got an Acceptable. While _I_, on the other hand, have an O."

Longbottom then high fived with Weasley. Hermione couldn't help but still grin at them.

"Sorry, you got only an Acceptable," she heard Lupin's composed voice. "But it's not that bad. The Ortus potion is really difficult."
Hermione turned around to him. He was smiling at her, obviously trying to soothe her. "Don't worry," she answered mirthfully. "I am very content with my grade, actually."

It was only a few hours later that Hermione's cheerful mood had completely vanished, leaving behind an anxious feeling of tension. She breathed in deeply to get her nerves under control. It did not work in the slightest. Right now, she was standing outside her transfiguration teacher's office, and she really didn't want to speak with Dumbledore. She knew what she had to do, there was her plan, after all, but that didn't make the thing any the easier. Hermione again tried to calm herself down. She needed to concentrate now. It didn't seem to work, but she couldn't wait any longer. It was already five minutes after six, so Hermione raised her hand and knocked at the door.

"Enter," Came Dumbledore's reply.

Hermione sighed softly then she opened the door and stepped into the transfiguration professor's cozy office. She didn't pay his office much attention, though, as her gaze quickly wandered to the man, sitting behind the desk. There was a hard glint in Dumbledore's eyes as he scanned her, and Hermione was quite proud of herself for not flinching under his scrutiny.

"Please, sit down, Ms DeCerto," Dumbledore said and Hermione was not surprised to hear that the kind touch in his voice was completely missing again.

She walked over to his desk and sat down on the chair, standing right in front of his desk. Dumbledore's penetrating gaze was still directed at her, and it made her want to squirm. Hermione pulled herself together, though, and stared right back into those light blue eyes. In that moment, she actually yearned to tell him the truth. She wanted to confide in him. Tell him the truth. The whole truth about her time travel and how she was trapped in the past. She wanted him to solve everything. She wanted to be saved.

But Hermione remained to be silent. She had to stop hoping someone would save her. She needed to solve her problems alone. Dumbledore truly was a wise man, but he had his own problems at the moment. He actually had a whole war to deal with. Sooner or later, he would have to confront Grindelwald. He needed to end that disgusting war, taking place in France. Hermione wouldn't want to distract him with her time travel predicament.

The transfigurations professor still imprisoned her with his scrutinizing gaze, suspicion clearly visible. It made her stomach flop that Dumbledore didn't trust her. He considered shortly before he straightened up on his chair and asked her,

"Ms DeCerto, may I inquire where your parents are? You never explicitly told us when you enrolled at Hogwarts."

Hermione stiffened as she heard his question. He had obviously opted for an open approach, hadn't he? She looked at him and could still see suspicion in his wary eyes. Hermione felt suddenly weak and exhausted as she saw that mistrust on his face. She couldn't stand it and averted her eyes from him. Her right hand rubbed nervously over left forearm, and she felt how dry her mouth seemed to be.

Without looking up at him, she answered, her voice sounding as weak as she was feeling, "They… they died…"

Dumbledore's tone was very gently as he commiserated with her, "I am very sorry to hear that."
Hermione couldn't answer she just nodded shortly, still without looking up. Dumbledore continued, the gentleness never leaving his voice as he inquired gingerly, "I assume they died in the war?"

Hermione knew he was talking about the war in France. That was her cover story after all. 'Hermione DeCerto' came from a small village in France. Still, she didn't have to lie as she replied in a very soft voice,

"Yes."

As he didn't instantly answer anything, Hermione slowly raised her head to look at him. Her eyes widened in surprise as she didn't find the expected cold look of mistrust on his face. Instead, there was earnest sympathy in Dumbledore's blue eyes.

"War is a terrible thing," he said severely, though his sympathy still wrapped comfortably around her.

"That is true," Hermione replied, her voice suddenly curt and hard.

Dumbledore seemed to be slightly taken aback by the steeliness seeping through her words. A sad glint in his eyes, he told her kindly,

"I see you had to go through more than I would wish for anyone to have to face."

Hermione held his gaze unwaveringly but didn't answer. The sad glint even intensified as he looked back at her. After a moment, though, a warm smile took form on his face. Then he stated, his eyes twinkling at her, "Though I am a teacher, sometimes the school's rumours even reach my ears. Your parents were Muggles I take it?"

Hermione blinked surprised. For a moment, she had completely forgotten why she was here in the first place. She had been distracted by that familiar twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes," she whispered softly, not seeing why she should deny her parentage any longer.

She had to raise her eyebrows in surprise as Dumbledore smiled at her amused and said, "You have tricked me, Ms DeCerto."

Hermione frowned and then asked, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Though she did know. Dumbledore now wanted to talk about her attempt to blackmail him. The kind smile on his face had shortly distracted her, but now she needed to be strong again.

The old professor said, "If I had refused to let Mr Riddle stay at Hogwarts, would you really have told the public how a Muggle mistreated him? Thus fuelling the hate against Muggles?"

Hermione stared into his clear blue eyes. Her plan still danced around her mind. Then she answered meekly, "Never."

The smile on Dumbledore's face even widened as he exclaimed, "You are a good actress, Hermione. I for one, believed you."

"I know," Hermione said in small voice, feeling miserable. Then she balled her hands, lying in her lap, into fists and inquired in a firmer voice, "Are you going to send Tom to the orphanage, now that you know I wouldn't pull through with my threat?"

Dumbledore considered her pensively. When he replied his voice was sombre, "I take it you do
Hermione could see where Dumbledore wanted to go. Her old threat was rendered useless. He obviously wanted to go back to his old plan of expelling Tom. She stared into his clear blue eyes. There was regret in them. He didn't seem to be happy with the decision he had to make, but she could also see determination. Dumbledore didn't want to give up on Tom, but he knew it would be pointless to try and change him. Hermione could only agree. Tom would never change. Here it was, her chance to get the Resurrection Stone from Tom. She only had to tell Dumbledore to get rid of Tom. Tom would have to go back to the orphanage, and he would be defenceless there. Then she could apparate there and get the stone from him. He would be powerless to stop her. Hermione breathed in deeply as she suddenly felt very sick. Tom really didn't deserve to be at Hogwarts, did he? Everything he had ever learned here, Tom would misuse. He was already a dark wizard. There was no place for him in the magical world. They all were better off with him gone.

Hermione leaned a little forward in her chair and looked at Dumbledore. She was opening her mouth to tell him to expel Tom. It was her plan and the only way. Just as she was about to tell Dumbledore how evil and twisted Tom was, and that he needed to be thrown out of school, an image seared through her head. She tried to push it away, but it was ever persistent. Hermione could see Tom, curled up on cold concrete floor, while blood was seeping out of deep wounds on his back.

She hesitated and stared at Dumbledore. Then she shook her head, trying to get rid of that image. This needed to be done. *It is the only way*, she told herself determinedly. She was going to encourage Dumbledore in his plan to commit Tom to that horrible place again.

But as she opened her mouth, other words came out, "Please, don't expel him, sir."

Hermione's eyes widened as she said it. Why did she still want to protect Tom? He hated her now. That much was clear. If their places were reversed, Hermione was fairly sure that he wouldn't do anything to help her. He would even laugh while he watched her going down. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. She needed to put everything right, and to be able do that she had to deliver Tom to that orphanage. *The plan! Remember the plan!* an angry voice hissed at her.

Her determination was broken again as more images burned up in her mind's eye. She could see Carter, how he mercilessly beat Tom. He had hurt Tom so much. Then she could see Tom, sitting under that old willow tree by the Great Lake. He had been clinging to her tightly as he had told her in a broken voice how he couldn't go back to the orphanage.

Her eyes flew open. She didn't want Tom to return there and have to suffer through it again.

"Don't send him back," she implored Dumbledore, now with more conviction in her voice.

The professor raised his eyebrows. "I have to admit I am surprised," he said gently. "I had the impression you and him were not so close anymore."

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line. "You were right."

Why was she doing this? Hermione thought in panic. Her breathing was fast and her head swirled.

"I can only guess how Tom reacted after he heard you are Muggleborn, Hermione. But I guess that is the reason for your break-up?" Dumbledore inquired gingerly.

"Yes," came her soft reply.

"But you still don't want me to expel him?"
She did want Tom to be expelled, Hermione thought frantically. He needed to go. Again, she was unable to voice this and found herself replying something completely different.

"No," she said weakly.

Dumbledore sighed while his penetrating gaze was once again on her, "Why are you still helping him?"

She didn't know. She just didn't know. Tom did not deserve her help. "Because he needs all the help he can get."

Dumbledore scanned her pensively. Then he said cautiously, while conviction laced his words, "Tom is well on his way of becoming very dark. You do know that. How can I let him stay here and endanger other students?"

"I know," Hermione replied. Then she looked at him pleadingly. "But still, you can't do this to him."

"It would be foolish to risk so much for Tom," Dumbledore said while scrutinizing her. Hermione's heart sank as she saw that determined expression on his face. "I know this solution is far from perfect, but I don't see any other way out of it. Tom is dangerous, and he is a threat to the other students. Certainly, you can't deny that." Sadness appeared on his face as he continued, "As much as I would like to let him stay and give him another chance, how am I going to justify my actions if he again decides to hurt another student? I can't watch over him all the time. The incident with Mr Bowett proved that again."

Hermione considered him for a while. She knew all too well how right he was. Tom shouldn't be allowed to stay. Still, the images of how she had found him in the orphanage burned through her mind. He had been badly hurt. This was just wrong. Her plan lay shattered at her feet as she stared into Dumbledore's eyes and said,

"It seems I will have to tell you the truth."

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Earlier that very same day, Tom could feel his angry magic rushing through him. He glared irately at the cauldron, standing right beside him. He still couldn't believe that he had failed the class. How was that even possible? He wondered incensed. He got an Acceptable? An Acceptable? Never in his life had he gotten less than an O for anything. Even Dumbledore had to grade his essays with straight Os, even though the old coot hated Tom from the bottom of his heart.

But now this! he thought as he glowered furiously at the stupid potion. He just couldn't get over it. How could that have happened? Where had be gone wrong? It was a complete mystery to him, and that fact was enraging him even more. He hated it not to know things.

It was then that Tom saw Slughorn pulling his golden watch out of the pocket of his silk waistcoat. "Look at that," he said while studying the clock. "Time has flown by. Now, I want everyone who did not succeed in creating the potion to write an essay as to where you think the mistake occurred."

As he heard that assignment, Tom could feel his anger spiralling up. He couldn't believe that he had messed up the potion. Now, he was one of those idiots who had to write the stupid essay. He was furious as he gathered his things and threw them angrily into his school bag. He never failed any class. His gaze fell on Hermione and his temper got even worse. That witch seemed to be extremely happy. Tom narrowed his eyes at her. Perhaps an Acceptable was enough for a Mudblood, but he was certainly not satisfied with that low a mark.
Another flush of anger now hit him as he saw Hermione conversing with those Gryffindor idiots she called her friends. She seemed to be completely happy and content with talking to Longbottom. Now she even smiled up at that git. Tom couldn't help but feel confused as he was sent into another fit of temper as he saw Hermione together with Longbottom. Why did he care? He didn't understand that anger. But as the Gryffindor berk smiled flirtingly down at Hermione, Tom could feel his angry magic almost leaving his body. He needed to concentrate to not send a peak of his magic towards the blond Gryffindor. And Hermione just continued smiling cheerfully up at that guy. Did she like how he flirted with her?

A dangerous red sheen flashed through Tom's eyes at those thoughts and his infuriated magic gave another powerful budge. He shook his head angrily and unfixed his eyes from Hermione. He just Did. Not. Care. what the dirty Mudblood did, Tom decided enraged. He grabbed his school bag and turned towards the exit of the class room. He could still feel his magic bubbling angrily inside of him. It was really about time he got out of here, because he needed to get rid of that pent up anger.

Before he could leave the class room, though, Slughorn's annoying voice held him back, "Tom, could you, please, stay behind?"

Tom grinded his teeth and the red sheen tinted his eyes again. It took him a lot of self-control to get his temper back under control. He schooled his features into a polite mask before he turned around to the potions professor.

"Of course, sir," he answered blandly, casting an empty smile Slughorn's way.

He slowly walked over to Slughorn's desk with each step trying to get back his lost composure. As he reached the professor, Slughorn beamed at him and then waved his wand and conjured up a chair.

"Please, have a seat."

"Tom, Tom." Slughorn shook his head at Tom. Then he sighed, "What is wrong with you lately?"

Tom really needed to restrain his dark magic now. It wouldn't do to hex his head of house. So, he schooled his face into an innocent mask. He needed to play the dutiful student.

"Sir, I am sorry about that potion," Tom said contritely. "I really don't know where we went wrong."

"Well, it is the first time you ever failed in my class," Slughorn replied, a touch of disappointment tinging his voice which churned up Tom's angry magic even more.

"Yes, sir," Tom said, letting his head hang. Though he only did that to hide the furious glare which he by now couldn't suppress any longer. Why did that damn potion not work? "It won't happen again. I promise, I'll be more attentive from now on."

"Of course, Tom," Slughorn said indulgently. "I know that you are an exceptional student. This little incident won't affect your grade at all."

He paused here and Tom's suspicion grew as the professor now eyed him oddly. Then Slughorn said cautiously, "I'm just a little concerned about you."

"Sir?"

Slughorn locked eyes with him then he asked in a grave voice, "Is there something troubling you?"

The only thing Tom had trouble with was maintaining that polite smile on his face. He still managed to ban all hostility from his voice, though, as he said blandly, "No, sir. Everything is fine."
Slughorn still eyed him, concern now very evident on his face. Then he said, carefully choosing his words, "Normally, I don't stick my nose into my students' affairs." Here Tom nearly choked on a not so polite comeback. Fortunately, Slughorn didn't notice and continued, "But as your head of house, I couldn't help but notice that you are not quite yourself lately."

By now, the angry magic, running through Tom, was just too much for him and he wasn't able to reply anything. He might have just cursed the fool. As he didn't answer, Slughorn continued in a sort of fatherly voice, "I know that you are under a lot of stress. You are taking quite a few classes this year. In fact, I think your time table is the maximum of what is even possible. On top of that you have your prefect duties."

Tom clenched his jaw. What was Slughorn insinuating? That he couldn't handle the work load?

The professor continued in his horribly soothing voice, "You might want to consider dropping a few classes next year." He looked pensively then added, "I actually shouldn't tell you that… Dippet would have my head if he knew I told you… but it's almost certain that you will be Head Boy next year. Though it, of course, is a privilege, it will also mean a lot of additional work for you."

Tom was surprised himself as he did manage to suppress his fury but answered quite politely, "Sir, it would be an honour to become Head Boy. But I don't think I'll need to drop any classes. I'm sure I can handle."

Another fit of temper almost made Tom crack as Slughorn now eyed him, scepticism clearly visible on his face.

"Well, you don't have to decide that right now. Just give it a thought," he told Tom indulgently. "But now back to my initial question." As Tom rose his eyebrow in confusion Slughorn elaborated, "If it's not your classes, then what is troubling you, Tom? Could it be something concerning your private life?"

"No, sir, I'm really fine," Tom grinded out.

To his horror, Slughorn winked at him in a conspiratorial way while saying lightly, "Ah, there's no need to be embarrassed about anything. You know how small this castle is. News even reach my humble ears." Slughorn demurred and smiled at Tom. "I take it that you and Ms DeCerto are not longer a couple?"

Tom couldn't help but his eyes widened slightly. His magic raged inside of him, and he fought to contain himself.

"No," he finally replied, his voice now icy cold.

An infuriating look of sympathy took form on Slughorn's face. Then he said solemnly, "That is a pity. I can understand that a broken heart can be quite distracting." He smiled encouragingly, sending Tom into another fit of rage. "Once, I've been young, too. I know how it is."

"Sir, I assure you, this will surely not influence my school work," Tom managed to grind out.

Slughorn waved his comment away with his hand, "Yes, yes." Then he leaned a bit towards Tom and considered him for a while before he added, "I have no idea what made you two break up, Tom, but whatever it was, you should reconsider."

"What?" Tom asked, honestly surprised.

"I just want to give you an advice, m'boy," the professor continued. "Not as your teacher, but as a
man, who has a bit more experience than you." He again leaned back in his chair and eyed Tom attentively. Then he seemed to come to a conclusion and continued in a serious voice, "Ms DeCerto is something special. You shouldn't let her slip away so easily. I haven't had the privilege to teach her for long, but I can already see that she is a very talented young witch. She might be Muggleborn, but she is still very powerful. And she seems to be rather quick witted, too. Now, some people might tell you, that that is not important in a woman, but I say, they are wrong."

A disturbingly knowing look crossed his face then he added, sounding very convinced, "You surely don't want to endure a marriage with a featherbrain." He shook his head and continued while looking at Tom intently, "Not only is Ms DeCerto quite bright, no, on top of that she is pretty, too. With all that said, Tom, I really think you should try to get her back. You might regret it if you don't. If you don't make a move, others surely won't hesitate."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked, now a sharp edge in his voice.

"Ms DeCerto is very popular with the boys," the professor replied and Tom could feel an inexplicable wave of anger hit him. Slughorn continued implying things Tom didn't want to hear at all, "Whenever I see her, she's surrounded by admirers. She won't wait forever for you to change your mind."

Tom forced away the strange feeling in his stomach and narrowed his eyes in anger at his professor. Why should he want to get that Mudblood back? This was as ridiculous as it was disgusting.

His now ice cold eyes wandered back to Slughorn and he said in a completely controlled voice, "Thank you for your help, sir. I will consider it."

Slughorn beamed at him contently. Then Tom got up from the chair, intending to leave this place as fast as possible. Before he could turn around, though, a thought suddenly hit him. There was a calculating touch in the disarming smile which now played around his lips. Then Tom asked in an innocent tone,

"Sir, can I ask you a favour?"

Slughorn raised his eyebrows, but still smiled at Tom. Then he said, "Sure, Tom, m'boy. Whatever you want."

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"The truth?" Dumbledore asked while his clear blue eyes wandered over her.

Hermione stared back at him, her face schooled into a calm mask, while her thoughts frantically scudded through her head. If she really wanted to, at some point in time, be able to get the Elder Wand from Dumbledore, she needed to re-gain his trust. Her plan of going home hinged completely on her being able to unite all three Hallows. If she wanted to get back Dumbledore's trust, she would have to offer him something in return. That would either be Tom or…

…the book!

"Yes, it's time I tell you," Hermione replied calmly.

*Okay, I need to pull myself together,* she thought. *This was important. Inexplicably, she did not want to send Tom back to the orphanage and to Carter. So, she had to convince Dumbledore that she was no evil dark witch without using Tom as a bait, while simultaneously saving him from getting expelled.*
Good luck, a nasty voice hissed at her sceptically.

Hermione breathed in deeply. Then she locked her eyes with Dumbledore before she said in a firm voice, "Sir, I've been fighting in the war for a very long time."

A sad glint appeared in Dumbledore's blue eyes as he looked at her. But he didn't seem to be particularly surprised to hear that she had to fight in a war. He had obviously guessed it by now. A weak smile appeared around Hermione's mouth as she scanned that sombre expression on Dumbledore's face.

Then she continued, and her voice was again so horribly cold, "I never understood how people could develop so much hate. They committed many atrocities, all in the name of 'blood's purity' – whatever that means."

Hermione looked up at Dumbledore. The sad glint in his eyes had even intensified. He didn't interrupt her, so she continued, a dark tint in her voice, "I hated them! I hated them so much that I wanted to hurt them, just as much as they had hurt their victims. I wanted to kill them."

Hermione swallowed hard and had to fight to get her emotions back in control. As she continued the dark tint had left her voice, leaving it behind hollow and empty, "... and I got my wish. I fought them and I killed some of them ...my hate, though, didn't go away."

Both her arms lay on the arm rests of her chair and her hands clenched tightly around the wood. Then she said, her voice a mere whisper, "The war progressed, and I lost a lot. My family, my friends; they died. I saw many good people die. And somehow, during all of that, my hate left me, and I got tired of fighting. I wanted it to end. I wanted to go home. I was desperate and stupid, and I might have made mistakes while trying to get home."

She locked eyes with Dumbledore, then she said in a firm voice, "Sir, I stole the Peverell manuscript from Flamel. And I broke into your office the last day before the Christmas break started."

She could see surprise flooding Dumbledore's expression. If the situation hadn't been so severe, it would have been almost funny. Hermione stared at the old professor and prayed that she wasn't making a big mistake here.

"That was you?" Dumbledore asked while scanning her intently over his half-moon spectacles. "Why would you do that? Why would you steal Peverell's book?"

Hermione looked at him. So far, the truth had been her companion, now she needed a lie.

She opened her mouth and began to explain in a strong voice which didn't reflect the chaos of emotions inside of her, "I've been fighting in that war for almost two years. But I couldn't change anything and we were losing. Grindelwald and his soldiers are too strong." There now was a sharp and angry touch in her voice as she continued, not thinking about Grindelwald but about the Death Eaters in the future, "I did not want to accept their predominance. I couldn't understand how those racists could win this."

She pulled herself together and forced her emotions back again. Her voice was composed again as she now spoke, "During those years I fought in the war, I managed to gather a lot of intel on Grindelwald's army and on Grindelwald himself."

Hermione glanced at Dumbledore. He still seemed to follow her intently. So, far he hadn't thrown her out of school, and she took that at a good sign. She still didn't know why she was doing this. Why risk so much for Tom? It was stupid.
"As I was searching for a way to bring him down, I heard many rumours, whispers and, sometimes, lies," Hermione proceeded cautiously now. "People were saying that Grindelwald truly is invincible. That when he raises his wand, victory against him is impossible."

"I did not believe in those stories. A Dark Wizard who is so strong that no-one would ever be able to defeat him? I needed to find out more. I needed to find his weak spot. But the more I searched, the clearer the picture became. He is so strong, he even managed to make a whole country bow before him. Grindelwald seemed to truly be unbeatable. Still, I could not believe that. So, I tried to find the source of his power. And last year, I succeeded. I found a clue, an explanation for his incredible strength."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore and she could see a bit of scepticism in his eyes. He did not really believe that she had found anything of importance concerning Grindelwald, did he? Surely, Grindelwald knew not to tell anyone why he was so incredibly strong. It seemed that she now had to play her trump card.

"Grindelwald is the owner of the Unbeatable Wand," Hermione said in a steady voice while she stared at Dumbledore.

She could see his eyes widen slightly. There was even a touch of nervousness flitting through his eyes. He clearly hadn't expected anyone aside from Grindelwald and himself to know about the wand.

"You think he uses the Unbeatable Wand?" he asked cautiously.

"I am sure he does," came Hermione's reply. "As I found out about the wand, I tried to find a way to destroy it. And I thought, the best way to go about that would be to ask the creator of the wand. That's why I travelled to England and why I enrolled into Hogwarts. I knew you had the manuscript Peverell had written."

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at her, then he cut in, "You knew I had the book? How?"

Hermione hesitated. She didn't want to say this as she knew it was something the professor wasn't very proud of. But now she needed to use it.

"Sir, I tried to collect as much information on Grindelwald as I could. So, I discovered that you have been close to him." Here she could see Dumbledore's eyes widen slightly. "I thought it would be wise to learn more about you. So, before I knew about the wand, I had already found out about your interest in Peverell. As I later learned about the Unbeatable Wand, I remembered your interest in Peverell and how you had obviously acquired a book written by him. That's why I went to England, adopted a new name and entered Hogwarts."

"So, this is why you used a pseudonym," Dumbledore said as he scanned her, a sharp glint in his eyes.

Hermione's eyes widened and she stared at the old professor. "You already knew that?"

"You did not think that this school would accept new students without checking their identity first."

Hermione breathed in sharply.

"The headmaster actually asked me to check your family background right after he got that letter from you, asking for a place at this school," Dumbledore continued while eyeing her attentively. "I ran into a few problems in finding any information about you, Hermione. That was when I realized that your name was most probably a cover. Though, I did not tell Armando about this. I assumed
you, coming from a war zone, had good reason to hide your true identity. And as I met you the first time, I did not think you a danger."

He hesitated shortly but then said in a grave voice, "It was only after that spectacular threat you delivered the last time we spoke, that I changed my mind about you."

"But then…" Hermione stuttered weakly. "… then why did you let me stay? You knew I was lying, why did you still cover for me?"

"Because, Hermione," Dumbledore said in a serious voice. "I did not want you pulling through with your threat."

"I see," she replied quietly.

Dumbledore looked at her sharply then he inquired, "So, you found out about Gellert's wand and about the manuscript. Why this play of hide-and-seek? You could have simply asked me."

"I did not trust you," Hermione answered. "I come from a war zone, trust is very rare and shouldn't be given away lightly. For another thing, I did find out that you once were friends with Grindelwald." Hermione didn't want to bring this up again, but the sharpness in his eyes forced her to. "They say that you once were on Grindelwald's side. How was I supposed to know that you weren't still working with him?"

The pain flitting over Dumbledore's face made her feel disgusted with herself, so she continued quickly, "I did not want to take the risk of confiding in you. Very soon I learned that you did not have the book anyway, but gave it to Nicolas Flamel. I knew what to do next; I had to get the book from Flamel. I used the Christmas break to travel to London and find Flamel's flat."

"I heard about your endeavours after the break," Dumbledore told her. "Nicolas told me about the theft of the book. I was very surprised by it. I hadn't expected anyone to know that I found the book. I actually thought, Tom was behind it."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at him. "No, for once, he is innocent."

She was relieved that Dumbledore seemed to believe her story so far. Maybe this was really going to work out well. "This brings me back to the reason I tell you all of this. As I was in Flamel's flat, I got surprised by Grindelwald's soldiers."

Concern was flooding Dumbledore's face now and he asked sharply, "They knew about the book, too?"

Hermione nodded and continued in a grave voice, "Yes, I don't know how they found out, but just as I had finally gained the book, they charged into the flat. I was completely outnumbered. So, I fled. But as I tried to get away, I ran into Tom."

Dumbledore furrowed his brow, obviously surprised by that information, but he didn't interrupt Hermione.

"We managed to get away from Grindelwald's men, but they have seen Tom's face," she told him.

The fingers of his right hand now thrummed absentmindedly on the surface of his desk as Dumbledore slowly said, "So, they might think he helped you."

"Yes," Hermione quickly conceded. "But there is more. A few weeks ago, as I was in Hogsmeade, I got attacked."
Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at her, silently asking her to continue.

"They cornered me in some back street," Hermione explained. "It were Grindelwald's men again. They had found me and wanted the book. I refused to give it to them. So they attacked me. They would have defeated me, but then Tom showed up."

As she saw that surprised expression on Dumbledore's face, Hermione continued to explain, "That was before he left me. Tom beat them easily and saved me."

"But they have seen his face again," Dumbledore mused in a soft voice, his fingers tapping at the desktop.

Hermione inclined her head. "Yes. They've seen him together with me twice now. First in London and then in Hogsmeade. They now surely assume that Tom is working with me."

"Which he is not?" he asked suspiciously, the sharp glint back in his eyes.

"No, sir. I never told him anything about my task," Hermione quickly negated. Then she added in a dark voice, "It was for the better, it seems."

She shook her head slightly. Then she raised her head and looked Dumbledore in the eyes. "You see, you can't expel Tom. If you send him away, he will be in great danger. Grindelwald will surely order his soldiers to get him. Then they will try to force all information from him."

This part, Hermione mused, could very well be true. Though, the true danger may lie in the fact that Tom might want to join Grindelwald. They had the same aims, after all.

Dumbledore brought her out of her dark thoughts, "You risk a lot by telling me all this, when you still think you cannot trust me. Just to save Tom?"

Hermione smiled at him sadly. Then she said, being, for once, honest, "I do trust you now. I know that you would never choose Grindelwald's side. And I think it is partly my fault that Tom is in trouble. I don't want him to get hurt just because of me. Sir, are you still going to expel him?"

Dumbledore scanned her for a very long time. Hermione shuddered as she found herself under his scrutiny. She held her breath now. How could she have risked so much? Just for Tom? This was insane. She should have stuck to her old plan.

After an eternity, Dumbledore said in a severe voice, "Hermione, I know that you did not tell me the whole truth."

Hermione stiffened involuntarily as she heard it. Dumbledore continued hitting her with a penetrating gaze then he stated, "There is a lot that doesn't add up. And I think you left out a few important details."

Hermione's heart was beating incredibly fast as she stared back at Dumbledore's eyes. He didn't believe her! She shouldn't have done it after all. She shouldn't have helped Tom. Now, she was going to pay for it.

"Professor, I-" she started to say in a weak voice but Dumbledore interrupted.

"You didn't tell me the whole truth," he repeated in a grave voice and Hermione's stomach flopped.

Dumbledore removed his half moon spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then he sighed tiredly, "But I still believe you." A small smile played around his mouth as he added, "It seems you
are a very fierce interceder."

Hermione stared at him incredulously as she asked in a weak voice, "You are not going to send Tom away?"

"No, I will have to let him stay," Dumbledore sighed.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered.

Dumbledore inclined his head. "But don't be mistaken, Hermione. If Tom again endangers other students, I will have no other choice but to expel him."

"Yes, sir." Hermione quickly nodded.

Dumbledore again sighed as he looked at the relief on her face. There was a kind touch in his voice as he said, "Tom is very lucky to have found someone like you." Sadness leaked into his tone.

"Though I doubt he appreciates it as much as he should."

Hermione didn't comment anything on that, but just stated, "I will return Peverell's book to you, sir. I am truly sorry I stole it."

"I would appreciate that," Dumbledore replied. "Did you find it, by the way?" as Hermione raised her eyebrows in question, he elaborated, "A way to beat the wand's power."

"No," she sighed. "No, I did not."

Dumbledore scanned her for a moment considering something, then he asked, "Do you still want to find a way to defeat Grindelwald?"

"That's difficult," Hermione replied slowly as she was thinking not about Grindelwald, but about her wish to return to her time period. "Over the past few months, I've experienced life here at Hogwarts. It's so peaceful and safe. I started to like it."

There was a kind twinkle visible in Dumbledore's otherwise hard eyes. "Maybe you should rest, Hermione. It is not your duty to fight against Grindelwald. Hogwarts is indeed a wonderful place." He paused shortly, a wistful look crossing his face. "You know, I've been a student here myself. I liked it so much, I would have preferred to stay even during holidays."

Hermione smiled at the professor and asked, "What house were you in?"

The merry twinkle in his light blue eyes intensified. Then he said mischievously, "Already caught up in our house system, aren't you? Though, I can give you a hint: Out of all four houses my house was, certainly, the best."

The smile on Hermione's face widened then she replied reproachfully, "Sir, you can ask any student, coming from any house, and they will say the exact same thing."

"That is true." The merry twinkle in his eyes was quickly stifled as a grave expression appeared on his face. Then he said, "Hermione, why don't just try to forget about the war. Leave it behind. You can stay here. It's save. You might even start to enjoy school."

A wistful smile played around Hermione's mouth. It was very tempting to just stay here in the past. Forget about the war in the future, about all the things she had seen. Just as she was lost in that pleasant dream she could suddenly see smoldering red eyes. They had found her, even here. There was no way for her to run from the hate.
She looked at Dumbledore and replied in a firm voice, "I don't think I can just let go like that."

Somehow it touched her how there was now a look of regret crossing the old professor's face as he heard her answer.

"I know that you had to live through a lot," he said in a grave voice. "It is terrible to have to face war, especially for someone so young. But despite all the horrible things that happened to you, you are still alive, Hermione. I know how one can suffer from war and despair of the darkness that sometimes steps into our lives. Now, though, you are safe here in Hogwarts. Nothing will happen to you. You can try to leave all those things behind. Try to start anew. Don't abandon hope, for there will come better times."

A sad smile danced around her lips as Hermione replied, "Maybe you are right. God, I hope so. But I think I'm not ready yet." Then the smile dropped from her face, and she stared out of the window. "Darkness is still everywhere."

"I see." Hermione's eyes wandered back to Dumbledore and found him looking at her sadly. "But you have to trust me when I say, it will get better."

She could feel a lump in her throat but she desperately tried to ignore it and smiled faintly at him.

"Thank you," she said softly, meaning it.

Then she slowly got up from her chair and walked over to the door leading out of the office. Before she could open the door Dumbledore said, "You do love him, don't you?"

Hermione turned her head and looked at the professor. She knew whom he was speaking about.

"I think so," she replied slowly, surprising herself with her answer. Then she added in a dead tone, "But it doesn't matter anymore."

Dumbledore was looking back at her unsmiling then he said in a severe voice, "Never say that, Hermione. It matters a lot, even if Tom doesn't understand it."

She scrutinized him for a moment before she said, "I'm sorry for lying to you, professor."

It was the next day, a Tuesday, that Hermione sat in her Charms class room, buried deep in her thoughts and hardly listened to professor Merrythought's explanations. She still was surprised that she had gotten away with the explanations she had given Dumbledore yesterday. There had been huge chunks missing in her story. Dumbledore surely had seen that, but the essential part he had believed her: she was no evil dark witch. Somehow, Hermione was very glad that he no longer believed her to be evil. It might help her getting the Elder Wand from him, but it also just made her feel better.

Hermione sighed softly as her thoughts involuntarily wandered from the wand to the Resurrection Stone. Her gaze slide to her seat neighbour and stopped at Tom's right hand. He still wore the golden ring and Hermione eyed its black stone. She really needed to have that. It still was a mystery to her what had gone wrong as she had talked with Dumbledore. She obviously had temporarily lost her mind. Why did she have to protect Tom again? Why did she have to play the honourable Gryffindor? Hermione rolled her eyes, then glared at Tom, who seemed to pay professor Merrythought his utmost attention. He would deserve to be chucked into that orphanage, wouldn't he? After all the things he had done to her. Hermione quickly averted her eyes from Tom as she felt a painful knot in her stomach. She sighed softly as she realised that she would probably save him again.
if given a second chance to talk with Dumbledore. Obviously, she was a sentimental idiot.

"...with those Charms you can manipulate the four elements." Professor Merrythought's voice cut into her chain of thought. "With the Unda Charm, for example, you will be able to manipulate water and change its state from frozen to liquid and to gaseous."

Hermione barely raised her head as she watched the professor performing the Unda Charm. The bowl full of water standing on professor Merrythought's desk first changed into a block of frozen ice before it turned into a cloud of steam. Hermione already knew those charms. This was basic magic, really. So she wasn't listening to professor Merrythought as she explained more about the wand movements. Actually Hermione hadn't paid any attention to the class so far. To tell the truth, she hadn't paid attention in class for the last week.

_Somehow grotesque_, she thought wryly, _Hermione Granger not trying to be best in class._

Really, she couldn't see why she should bother with school. She already knew most of the things they taught here. And she didn't need to have good grades to fulfil her mission. School work would only distract her. She needed to find a way back home and she needed to find it fast. She had to detach herself from this world. It wasn't hers. She had been caught up in it for far too long already. Her world lay somewhere else.

"Now, my dears, I want you to practice the Unda Charm." Hermione only remotely heard professor Merrythought's words.

She looked up and found bowls full of water had appeared on every table. With a quick glance to her right she made sure that Tom had his own bowl of water. She breathed out relieved. It would have been unbearable if she had been forced to work with him. Hermione flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. She frowned shortly as she noticed that her wand felt somehow different in her hand. It felt as if something had changed, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It was an unpleasant feeling. She still waved her wand in the familiar movement at the bowl of water in front of her while she whispered,

"Undovo."

She expected the water to instantly change into ice. But nothing happened. Hermione was confused. That charm wasn't very difficult so it should have worked. Maybe her wand movements had been too sloppy, she reasoned with herself. She again waved her wand, this time paying more attention.

"Undovo."

Again nothing changed. The water remained to be in its liquid state. Now Hermione was alarmed. This time she had really concentrated. The charm should have worked. What was wrong? Clearly her magic was somehow not obeying her. She closed her eyes and tried to summon it. It came to her. But Hermione shuddered as she realized that her magic had changed from a strong current of power to a weak tickle. Her eyes shot open and panic ripped at her. What had happened to her magic? It had been fine yesterday, hadn't it? Though she had to admit she hadn't used much of it lately.

Hermione ran a shaky hand through her hair. She just needed to concentrate more. Her magic surely was not gone. It was just not her day today. She again summoned her magic. It still was just a frail flicker. She tried to maintain this small trickle of magic before she decided to call the Elder Magic. It followed her call but only reluctantly. As the Elder Magic wrapped around her Hermione felt how weak it was. Something definitely was wrong with her, she thought frantically.

She tried the charm again and waved her wand. With the support of the Elder Magic she could feel
an actual charm leaving the tip of her wand. The moment the magic formed into the charm Hermione let out a soft cry of surprise. It had hurt. Not very badly but there had been a stabbing pain in her chest as the magic had left her.

There was now a layer of ice on the water in the bowl. She prodded it with one finger and quickly broke through. Under the thin layer of ice the water was still liquid and not even much colder. Her charm hadn't worked the way it should have. Not even with the help of the Elder Magic. This was basic charm work. She shouldn't have any problems with it. Hermione stared at the bowl with wide and frightened eyes. Then she saw movement in the corner of her eyes and she quickly banned all fear from her face and covered it with a mask of boredom. She glanced at Tom. Had he noticed something? There was a block of frosty white ice inside of his bowl. Hermione let out a relieved breath of air as she found Tom still ignored her. He hadn't seen her failing to do this simple charm.

For the rest of the class, Hermione was unable to follow professor Merrythought at all. She could feel her hands trembling as fear consumed her. What had happened with her magic? This certainly was not normal. As the professor finally ended the class, Hermione instantly stuffed her parchment and quill into her bag and almost fled from the class room. She didn't care about lunch or her History of Magic lesson afterwards. She hadn't even told her friends where she was going. Instead, she hastened through Hogwarts' corridors in search of solitude. In a rather secluded part of the sixth floor she finally opened a door and stepped into a dark class room.

Without further ado, she pulled her wand. Her hand shock violently as she again felt no reaction at all coming from her magic. She squeezed her eyes shut and called upon her magic. Like in the Charms class room, it was a mere trickle. There was almost nothing left of that irresistible force that normally pulsed through her. Hermione still tried to concentrate of what little she had left of her magic. Then she raised her wand and brandished it in the familiar wand movements. No curse left her wand's tip, and she could feel herself slowly breaking down in panic as there happened just nothing.

“This is not good at all.” She took in deep breaths, trying to calm herself down. She stood in the middle of the abandoned class room and had her wand in her hand while she stared at the stone wall opposite of her. Hermione again waved her wand in the same wand movements and spoke the incantation out loud,

"Reducto!"

She moaned in pain as she could feel a sharp stab in her chest. This time, her magic reacted to her curse, but it left her wand's tip as a weak, fickle light. The curse soared through the air, but soon it got slower and slower while it flickered and lost all power. Before it could even reach the wall the curse completely died down.

Not good! Hermione stared with huge eyes at the wall and now she couldn't stop the panic taking hold of her. Her magic didn't work like it was supposed to, her chest hurt and she felt slightly dizzy. She closed her eyes and forced her messy thoughts back under control. She tried to call upon the Elder Magic. But however hard she tried, that steady, powerful flow inside of her didn't want to come back. The only thing she got was another painful stab in her chest.

Hermione stuffed her wand back in its holster and hastily left the class room. She had no idea what was going on here, but she needed to find out. She rushed down the corridors of Hogwarts in direction of the one place which had always supplied her with answers. It wasn't long and she stood before the huge wooden doors that led into the library.

"Hello, Ms DeCerto." Hermione was greeted as she stepped into the library.
She blinked but then cast Ms Peters a small smile. "Good day, Ms Peter," Hermione said in a soft tone.

"Really," the librarian chastised her gently. "There are so many other things you could do than wasting away such a nice day in the library. You are here way too often. Why don't you enjoy your free time outside with your friends?"

"There's still so much work I have to do," Hermione answered.

"All right, Ms DeCerto," Ms Peters said while winking at Hermione. "But don't take too long or I'll come and personally drag you out of here."

Hermione smiled at the librarian and nodded before she entered the huge library of Hogwarts. There were not many students sitting at the tables. Probably due to the fact that classes weren't yet finished. In fact, Hermione missed her History of Magic class, but right now she couldn't care less. This was much more important, she decided as she began to search through the many sections of the library. She quickly needed to put this right. Her magic couldn't be gone.

It was several hours later that Hermione still sat in the library. She had read through many books by now, but hadn't come across anything that could help her. Fear threatened to consume her completely. She could still feel her magic as that small trickle, running through her. Instead of getting better, it seemed that by the minute the force behind her magic was diminishing. Hermione felt sick and a little dizzy. She shook her head, trying to get rid of the vertigo. Then she again concentrated on the book before her. Magical Maladies its cover read. So far, she hadn't found anything that could help her. Even in this medical standard work there was just a very small paragraph dealing with the loss of magic. Hermione reread this paragraph.

**Loss of magic:** The complete loss of a person's magic (further referred to as CLM) is a very rare occurrence. The pathogenesis of this progressive disease is insufficiently studied, though the symptoms seem to always be the same. First systemic symptoms include vertigo, appetite loss, weight loss and somnolence. A final diagnosis is not possible until the first signs of magic loss occur. In most cases these first signs are quickly followed by the gradual loss of magical power until the end stadium is reached, where the patient is unable to use any magic.

There are three primary causes known to induce CLM:

In most cases (more than 50%), CLM is a psychosomatic disorder. If CLM was initiated by a mental illness or a traumatic event, the patient should be referred to a psychologist or psychoanalyst.

Many poisons as well as pre-existing illnesses are known to cause a temporary loss of magic. These poisonings and diseases are so serious that CLM can be classified as a secondary symptom. (For a listing of CLM inducing poisons and diseases see annex B IV)

If the first two causes for CLM can be eliminated, there is the possibility of a destructive curse being the disease-causing agent. All curses that can lead to CLM are rated as Dark Magic. Due to the fact that a listing of dark curses does not exist, a therapy can be very difficult or, in some cases, completely impossible.

Hermione groaned as she read that part again. This was not helpful at all. At least she now knew that her predicament wasn't caused by some strange disease or other. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to sit her calmly in the Library, but would obviously lie in the Hospital Wing. But, according to that book, this still left two possible reasons for her lost magic. She didn't know which one was preferable. Either her magic had stopped working because she had been hit by Dark Magic or…
Hermione closed her eyes and again sighed tiredly.

...or because I'm finally growing insane.

Lately, she had had contact with a lot of Dark Magic. So, this definitely was a possibility. It was just a few days ago, that Tom had hurled quite a few very dark curses her way. Even if Tom's attempts to kill her weren't the reason for her problem, there still was the Elder Magic. Peverell's creation was dark in itself. That dark force had been inside of her for months already. Hermione shuddered as she realized that. Who knew what that evil magic had done to her. Maybe it had been slowly devouring Hermione's own magic until there was nothing left.

What if it wasn't the Elder Magic or Tom's curses, but a 'mental illness' or a 'traumatic event'? Well, there were quite a few traumatic events in her life, Hermione thought wryly. She had fought in a war, had seen people being tortured and murdered, and she had been forced to kill. In the end she had even been ripped from her own time period and had been hurled into the past.

*If that isn't a traumatic event then I don't know what is,* she thought cynically as she stared down at the book. Though, there was another incident that had had a huge impact on her emotional condition. Hermione's hands tightly grabbed the book and she pressed her mouth into a thin line as she tried to suppress her upcoming emotions.

But it was true, wasn't it? Tom had broken up with her and his rejection still hurt her very much. He hadn't just left her, but now despised her. She shuddered as she remembered that expression on his face whenever he now looked at her. He was disgusted by her. Hermione felt incredibly dirty when Tom looked at her like that. She knew he was wrong, he had no right to judge her. In her time period Hermione often had had to fight against prejudices and racism but it had never been as bad as it was now. She had never felt this worthless or ashamed as she did now. Hermione was angry with herself for feeling this way because there was no reason to be ashamed of her parentage. Maybe that was the final straw that had sent her over the edge? *Mental illness, after all?*

Hermione was thinking these gloomy thoughts as she noticed someone sitting down beside her. She looked up and to her horror found Ledo Avery sitting beside her. He was lounging leisurely in the chair and leered down at her. Hermione shuddered as she saw his gaze wander greedily over her body.

"Hello, Hermione," Avery said in his oily voice. "What are you doing? Homework?"

Hermione saw his eyes scanning the books in front of her, but he obviously was much more interested in her chest.

She shut the book in front of her with a loud thud before she said in a cold voice, "No, I'm finished."

She abruptly got up from her chair, took the book and walked away. She walked down an aisle until she reached the spot where she had found *Magical Maladies*. She put the book back on its place in the shelf and turned around. Hermione jerked as she found Avery standing behind her. He smirked down at her evilly.

"Get out of my way," Hermione hissed at him as she tried to push him away to get out of the narrow aisle.

"No need to be so unfriendly," Avery purred at her.

Hermione stiffened as he suddenly wrapped his arms around her. One of his hands quickly wandered down her back until he reached her buttocks. Then his hand grabbed her hastily. Hermione struggled
against his disgusting embrace.

"Get your dirty hands away from me!" she spat at him enraged.

Avery just laughed and pressed his body harder against hers.

"I know you like it, Hermione. I'm sure Riddle already had you," he said with a hoarse voice. Then he continued, "How about I take his place now?"

"Get off!" Hermione yelled indignantly.

She felt his hand still grabbing her, and she tried to push him away. Unfortunately, he was a lot stronger than her and didn't let go of her.

It was then that Avery whispered with a husky voice into her ear, "Now that Riddle lost interest in you, you need someone else to protect you." Hermione shied away from him as she could feel his breath on her skin. "How about you become my little pet?" he said, lust clearly lacing his voice. "I promise, I'll take good care of you."

That twisted desire in his tone made Hermione sick, and she growled at him threateningly, "Get away from me or I swear I'll curse your sorry ass off!"

Avery chuckled at her, seemingly not impressed by her threat. He pressed her tighter against his chest and whispered derisively, "As you wish."

He unwrapped his arms from her. Hermione seethed as she had to thrust past him to get out of the narrow aisle.

"If you change your mind, dear, you know where to find me." Avery's mocking laughter followed her some distance.

Hermione was scared. Right now, as Avery had grabbed her and pulled her against him, she wouldn't have been able to do anything against him. Her magic was weak, she couldn't have cursed him. Physically, Avery was way stronger than her. Without her magic she was unable to stop him. Hermione nervously bit her lip as her furious steps had slowed down. It now hit her how defenceless she was without her magic. And it wasn't particularly Avery she was afraid of now.

It was a few days later, a Friday, that Hermione stumbled blindly down a corridor. The piercing pain in her chest intensified and she could feel a ripple going through what was left of her magic. She started to panic. It felt as if her magic was dying. It was almost gone already and now it seemed the last bit that was left disappeared, too.

There was a painful stab in her chest, making Hermione whimper softly. She felt dizzy and sick as she stumbled down the corridor. Her school bag was clutched tightly in her hand and she swayed as she walked. Classes were over for today, and Hermione just wanted to lie down and wait for this vertigo to go away. The corridor was quite crowded with other students as she staggered forwards. Hermione's vision was so blurred now, she couldn't make anything out any longer. She could just
hope to be able to make it to the common room. Hermione took another step as she felt something trickling down her skin. She raised her hand to her nose, and it came back covered in blood. Obviously her nose was bleeding.

As she took another step, she tumbled over her own feet and lost her balance. She must have fallen against somebody because she could feel arms wrapped around her. Involuntarily, Hermione felt herself relax as those arms were so reassuringly slung around her. Her eyes were closed, and she leaned into the body supporting her.

She needed some time to get her ragged breathing back under control, but it was then that she noticed that those arms around her felt wrong. As if something was missing. The body she leaned against was very tense. Then Hermione took notice of a familiar scent. She stiffened. Her eyes shot open and slowly, reluctantly, she raised her head. She threw in a sharp breath of air as her gaze finally landed on a pair of grey eyes. But they were not completely grey; Hermione could see a dangerous red gleam in them. Quickly she disentangled herself from Tom and took a step away from him. He stood there in the middle of the corridor and looked as handsome as ever, and Hermione was again hit by the hate hidden behind. Tom was looking at her coldly and the aversion and disdain was written all over his face. She could see that his hands were balled into tight fists as if he tried to restrain himself from doing something. Hermione didn't have to guess to know what exactly he wanted to do. Luckily there were a lot other students in the corridor.

Tom broke eye contact with her and slowly looked down on himself. Hermione noticed with horror that there now was a dark stain on his green, sleeveless pullover where she had leaned against him. Her hand shot up at her face and she realized that her nose was still bleeding. She tried to stem the flow with her hand and looked with wide eyes back at Tom. Her breathing quickened as there was a look of revulsion on his face as he stared at her. He seemed to be utterly disgusted by the whole thing. Hermione felt like worthless scum as he looked at her in this way.

Then she heard another voice call out for her, "Hermione!"

It cost her effort to look away from Tom even though his fierce stare made her feel so painfully inferior. She turned her head and found Longbottom hurrying towards her. There was a mixture of concern and anger on his face as his gaze wandered to and fro between her and Tom. As Longbottom reached her he wrapped one arm around her shoulders and Hermione was quite thankful for that as she was still feeling very dizzy. She looked up at Longbottom and found him glaring darkly at Tom. Tom, on the other hand, had covered his face with a mask of boredom as he eyed Longbottom. Then he just turned around and walked away, without ever looking at Hermione again. She could feel her stomach clench as she watched his retreating back. It hurt so much how he was treating her.

Get a grip, Granger! she chastised herself. She only numbly noted how Longbottom was starting to lead her away. Hermione just followed him. Her hand still covered her nose, but there was now blood seeping through her fingers. Longbottom eyed her and the concern, glinting in his eyes, even intensified. Then he offered her a handkerchief which she accepted and pressed it against her bleeding nose.

"Did he hit you again?" Longbottom asked her in a soft voice.

There had been a time as Hermione would have been filled with indignation by the mere suggestion that Tom would ever hurt her. Now it just seemed to be a fair question.

"No," she whispered.

"You should go to the Hospital Wing," Longbottom told her. Hermione wasn't sure if he believed
"It's only a nosebleed." She almost shuddered as her voice was so cold. "I'll just have to lie down a little."

Hermione was sure he would object but Longbottom said, "Okay. I'll bring you back to the common room."

Then he pulled her closer to him, and Hermione was quite glad that she could lean against him. The dizziness had gotten even worse, and she could feel the last bits of her magic slowly disappearing.

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Tom stomped down the corridor, and he had trouble holding back his angry magic from lashing out at random people. He was furious. He again looked down at this abominable stain on his pullover. It disgusted him to no end, this filthy Muggle blood, contaminating him. As he had seen Hermione, walking towards him in that corridor, he had instantly noticed that something had been off with her. But he hadn't given a shit about that. Until she had suddenly collapsed into his arms. If the corridor had been less crowded, he would have just let her fall down on the stone floor. What did he care anyway? But as there had been so many witnesses, he had felt obliged to maintain his perfect façade and had caught Hermione. Which was the reason there now was this nauseating Muggle blood on him. Tom breathed in deeply to control his rising temper.

He balled his hands into tight fists as he remembered how Hermione had felt in his arms. It had been so warm and familiar as he had held her. He had even smelled a faint scent of lilac again as she had been so close to him. For a second he had enjoyed being able to embrace her.

Enjoyed holding a Mudblood!

That moment of weakness, of stupidity disgusted him now. How could he enjoy being near a Mudblood? That was preposterous. It made his blood boil with anger now. There was no way he could ever like it to touch such a filthy creature. Just as he had that thought, there was an annoying jab in his stomach which only infuriated him more. What was that dirty witch doing to him?

Suddenly, he remembered how Longbottom had turned up. He had stomped up to them and had stood right beside Hermione. That git had even wrapped his arm around her shoulders as if he took it for granted. Had Longbottom tried to protect Hermione? From him? Tom sneered disdainfully. As if that idiot could protect anyone. Tom's magic once again threatened to boil over as he remembered how Longbottom had held Hermione protectively and had pressed her against his body. How could that boor dare to touch Hermione?

Tom nearly wanted to scream out in frustration as he realized the direction his thoughts had wandered off to. What the hell did he care that Longbottom had touched this Mudblood? 'Ms DeCerto is very popular with the boys.' Slughorn's inept words came back to Tom and sent him into another frustrating fit of temper. He didn't understand why he was so strongly reacting to the situation. Right now, he would have loved to curse Longbottom into oblivion. Since Tom had broken up with Hermione, Longbottom was constantly around her. Tom had no idea why this unsettled him so strongly but it did.

His anger hadn't cooled down at all as he reached the Slytherin common room. He entered and instantly marched over to the stairs leading down to his dorm. He could see a few of the Slytherins cowering away from him. They had probably seen the dangerous scowl on his face or had felt Tom's furious magic in the air. Whatever it was, Tom didn't care. So, he walked down to his dorm. As he entered he saw Malfoy sitting on an armchair, obviously trying to do his homework. He had looked
up as he heard someone enter. Tom narrowed his eyes at Malfoy, then he hissed at him,
"Get out."

Malfoy was wise enough to immediately obey. He hastily gathered his stuff and hurried out of the
dorm. As Tom heard the door being shut again, he instantly slipped out of his green uniform
pullover. He held it up before him and glowered at that dark stain on the green material. With an
angry growl he flung the pullover away. Then he walked over to the bath room. He really needed to
wash this Muggle dirt away from him. He felt disgustingly contaminated.

Maybe a shower could also help him to get rid of that hollow sensation in his stomach that haunted
him ever since Hermione had ended the embrace between them. Tom could feel his magic give an
angry twitch as he had this particular thought. He had certainly not enjoyed it how he had held
Hermione.

This is disgusting, he decided irately as he slammed the bath room door shut behind him.

It was a while later, after he had showered and calmed considerably, that he left the dorm again and
stepped into the common room. He still felt disgusted and incensed by his previous thoughts, but he
had regained at least a little composure. It was ridiculous, really, how that stupid incident had
managed to annoy him like this. He had held that Mudblood for a few seconds, at the most, why had
that unsettled him so? Tom wondered aggravated as he had settled down on one of the black leather
couches in the common room.

"Hello, Tom," a sultry voice whispered into his ear.

Tom turned his head and immediately narrowed his eyes in anger as he found Melanie Nicolls,
sitting right beside him on the couch. This was the last thing he needed right now. Nicolls smiled at
him.

"Melanie," he acknowledged, forcing his voice to be polite.

To his increasing annoyance, she slid closer to him on the couch. Her hand ran lightly over his arm
while she looked up at him. Then she even had the nerve to cuddle against him and leaned her head
against his shoulder. Tom could smell her heavy perfume in the air and would have loved to pull his
wand and hex the hag off his arm. Nicolls, though, raised her head and smiled up at him, obviously
trying to be seductive. Tom almost shuddered as he saw the lust in her eyes while she scanned him.
Nicolls' eyes were brown. It struck him how very much this colour resembled Hermione's eyes. But
Hermione's eyes were very pretty and glinted invitingly, Nicolls' were just empty and cold.

Tom inwardly shook himself as he had that repulsive thought. That disgusting Mudblood was a lot of
things, but certainly not pretty!

"Did you hear that Diana Potter's family got robbed the other day?" Nicolls started to chatter away in
her pesky voice.

She seemed to be desperate to maintain a conversation. Tom, on the other hand, wasn't very keen on
talking with her, so he just shrugged his shoulders. He really wasn't interested in the latest gossip.

"No, I didn't," he replied bored.

Nicolls took that as an invitation to tell him more, and Tom groaned inwardly as she continued to
rattle on.

"Yes. I heard it from Daphne, you know, the Ravenclaw. She's a good friend of Lucia, a dorm mate
of Diana. Obviously, the Potters got robbed when they were here at Hogwarts, at Parents day," she said enthusiastically, smiling flirtatiously up at him. "Diana's brother has even seen the thief. And guess what? It was a woman."

Tom was contemplating on how to best get rid of her as he stared down at Nicolls. Maybe he should just curse her. Seriously, who would care?

"A woman?" he asked softly, not really seeing why this was something special.

Nicolls nodded at him, seemingly happy that he was responding to her. Tom could feel an upcoming head ache as she continued to chatter, "But she seemed to have been quite stupid. She only stole a worthless old family heirloom of the Potters."

A small spark of curiosity woke up in Tom. A family heirloom? And a female thief?

He furrowed his brow at Nicolls, then asked suspiciously, "Do you know what that heirloom might have been?"

Nicolls slid even closer to Tom and smiled up at him. "Daphne told me. Obviously, that heirloom was just an old cloak."

Tom breathed in deeply. Then he asked loftily, but there was a dangerous tint in his voice, "An old cloak? What kind of heirloom is that? Was it at least magical?"

"Yes, rather pathetic, isn't it?" Nicolls simpered inanely. "But it was magical. Hm, Daphne said it was some kind of Invisibility Cloak." She rolled her eyes and added derisively, "Pff, as if they are so valuable."

But Tom wasn't listening anymore. He clenched his jaw tightly. He could probably make a fairly good guess now as to who had stolen that cloak. He remembered how the Mudblood had obviously disapparated from Hogwarts on Parents day. Back then Tom had waited forever at the edge of the Forbidden Forest for her to come back. But as she had arrived back, she had refused to tell him anything. Could it be that Hermione then had stolen that cloak from the Potters?

_Is that cloak a Hallow?_ Tom wondered. Anger washed through him at the thought that the dirty Mudblood had managed to gain yet another of the Deathly Hallows. The anger even grew as he noticed an unpleasant feeling in his stomach. Why hadn't Hermione confided in him about the Hallows as they still had been together? She had never trusted him, had she?

"Say, Tom," Nicolls whispered to him in a low voice while her eyes glinted greedily as she looked at him. "Are you busy now? We could go outside a bit…"

Tom wasn't really listening to her pathetic attempts to seduce him. His thoughts still danced around Hermione. She had always lied to him and hadn't trusted him. That Muggle had only played around with him. There was an odd aching feeling in his chest. He had that since Hermione had collapsed into his arms. He remembered the feeling of her in his arms. It had been strangely nice.

Tom shook his head in anger. How could he, even for a second, consider her to be anything but an ugly, repellant piece of dirt? She was a god damn Mudblood! For Merlin's sake! Tom felt his magic boil in him unrelentingly. How could he have enjoyed holding that Muggle in his arms? He must be insane.

"You know…" Nicolls was rather persistent as she now grabbed his arm even tighter and cajoled. "You had to work so much lately. How about you take a break?"
Tom's eyes wandered back to Nicolls. She looked up at him and smiled flirtingly. He almost rolled his eyes in face of her obvious offer. He wondered how someone like her had managed to end up in Slytherin. Then again, Nicolls was a pureblood. Unlike Hermione... Tom pressed his mouth in a tight line as he noticed how his thoughts again threatened to wander back to the Mudblood. Why did she continue to ghost around his head? He didn't want her anywhere near him. He had broken up with her!

Tom's gaze grew dark as he stared at Nicolls, still clinging to his arm. He would prove, once and for all, that he did not feel anything for Hermione, Tom decided coldly as he glared down at Nicolls. Then slowly a smirk took form in his face. It was hard and devoid of any emotion, but Nicolls still reacted to that smirk. Her eyes lit up as she smiled up at Tom, obviously blind to that evil glint in his grey eyes.

He did not miss Hermione, Tom thought, mercilessly stifling that odd feeling in his stomach. No, it was something more carnal he missed since he had broken up with her. Yes, that's it. Nothing more.

He grabbed Nicolls' hand while still smirking down at her. His other arm snaked around her waist then he stood up from the couch, pulling Nicolls with him. Nicolls clung tightly to him and there was a triumphant smile on her face as Tom led her out of the common room.

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Hermione felt slightly dizzy again. It was about time that she ended this, she thought as she looked down at the hateful book in front of her. She had no idea why she had showed up here at all. Hermione shuddered as she once again noted the absence of that steady pulse of magic inside of her. Ever since she had collapsed into Tom's arms in that corridor, her magic was completely gone. Everything of it. Even the weak trickle was gone. She had hoped that a few hours of rest in her dorm would bring some of it back, but it hadn't helped at all. She didn't know what to do without her magic. Maybe that was the reason she had showed up here, Hermione thought as she tightly grasped the quill in her hand. She hadn't wanted to think about her lost magic anymore. Hermione closed the book with a loud thud.

Without looking up at her, Legifer who was sitting at her desk, once again grading essays inquired exasperated, annoyance tinting her voice, "What seems to be the problem now?"

"Nothing," Hermione replied innocently. "I'm just finished."

Legifer looked up at her and narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Finished?" she asked in a sceptical tone.

Hermione forced a polite smile on her face before she handed the parchment over to the professor.

"I've read every single one of those fifty-eight chapters, professor," Hermione added, a fat smile on her face.

Legifer looked down at the parchment in her hand then her gaze wandered back to Hermione. There was a sour expression on her face.

"Well, what do you want? Praise?" Legifer said snippily. "You should have been finished with that months ago."

As a response Hermione just shrugged, the smile never leaving her face. She really didn't want any applause here. She was just extremely happy that those detentions were over now. Legifer didn't seem to want to say anymore, so Hermione stuffed her quill into her bag and got up from her chair.
Then she turned around, intending to leave the office as fast as possible.

"Wait, Ms DeCerto," Legifer's sharp voice held her back.

Hermione looked up at the ceiling, silently begging Merlin to bestow her with patience, then she turned around to the professor. Legifer held the hateful book in her hand and offered it to Hermione.

"I want you to keep it," she informed in her clipped voice.

Hermione frowned at her. She was just going to open her mouth and tell the professor how she thought that book should be locked away in some dark place, as Legifer cut over her.

"I'm not at all convinced that you really took everything in," she said acridly. "I see that Mr Riddle is still refusing to take you back. Of course, I can understand him. He can easily find a replacement for you. But I told you before, that he might very well be your only chance to save yourself from a life alone. You really need to swallow your misplaced pride and finally apologize for whatever you did. Mr Riddle is a fine young man, I'm sure he will forgive you."

"And I'm not sure I want his forgiveness," Hermione replied in an icy cold voice.

Legifer continued to fix her with a glare. "Ms DeCerto, stop dreaming about things which will never come true anyway. You shouldn't run away from your duty."

Hermione couldn't help but raise her eyebrows in confusion. "My… duty?" she asked while furrowing her brow.

"Yes. Your duty as a woman," Legifer elaborated curtly. "You are supposed to marry, Ms DeCerto, and become a mother. Your duty is to support your husband and look after your family. Even if that implies that you have to give up some of your dreams."

"…duty…" Hermione whispered in a soft voice which sounded as if she were speaking to herself. Then her eyes flashed back at Legifer and she said louder voice, "I already gave up a lot of things, professor. I don't think I will sacrifice more."

Legifer huffed at her, "I have never seen you being anything but selfish. You need to learn a little humility. Especially towards Mr Riddle."

Hermione could feel her temper flaring up dangerously, and she had to pull herself back from yelling at the professor. "I think submissive servants is the one thing Tom has an ample supply of," she finally replied stiffly. "I'm sure he can do without me."

Legifer shook her head in annoyance. "Now, we finally agree in one thing," she declared. "Yes, Mr Riddle can do perfectly fine without you. He won't have a problem in finding a young lady who would be willing to become a good wife for him. But you, Ms DeCerto, you'll never find anyone if you don't change your attitude. You'll be alone."

Hermione stared at the 'professor'. She couldn't believe that she was discussing something like this. There were a lot of other problems she had to deal with. She didn't need Legifer's insanity. Still, her words stung. 'You'll be alone.'

"So, you want me to go to Tom and apologize, even though I didn't do anything wrong?" Hermione' voice became clipped. "And then what? Marry him? Have his children?"

"If you can convince him to give you another chance that would be at least one step in the right direction," Legifer replied in her strict voice.
Hermione laughed a completely humourless laugh, then she said darkly, "You have no idea how improbable that is. In many ways actually."

She felt almost a little touched as Legifer tried to smile encouragingly, completely misinterpreting her last statement. The smile failed anyway, then the professor suggested, "Just speak with Mr Riddle. He will listen to you. He might even accept your apology and forgive you."

It was comical, Hermione decided. *Forgiveness certainly is no very prominent character trait of Lord Voldemort*. She shortly wondered what would happen if she really accepted Legifer's insane advice. What would Tom say if she asked him to forgive her for being descended from 'lowly Muggles'.

*Probably: 'Crucio';* she concluded dryly.

A shiver ran down her spine as she once again realized how incredibly vulnerable she was without her magic. Hermione looked back at Legifer. She really didn't want to discuss with the woman anymore. This was leading nowhere. Even if Legifer's view of the female gender hadn't been completely twisted, she still had no idea who Tom really was. So, Hermione now just nodded at the professor.

"Thanks for your help," she managed to press out, almost chocking on her own words.

"I hope you take it at heart," was Legifer's sharp reply.

Then she again offered the horrible book to Hermione. Seeing no other way out of it, Hermione walked over to the professor and reluctantly took the hateful book from her. Then she grudgingly stuffed it into her bag, swearing she would never open it ever again. After a quickly muttered and very much lied 'Thank you', Hermione was glad to leave Legifer's office. She crossed her fingers, hoping to never have to enter that office ever again.

Hermione took off in direction of the Gryffindor tower. As she walked down the many corridors she checked her watch. It was nearly eight o'clock she noticed surprised. She hadn't realized that it was this late already, she had neatly missed dinner. Not that she would have been able to eat anything anyway, she thought. The dizziness still made her feel slightly sick. She had no idea how to deal with this situation. She needed her magic; otherwise she would never be able to get back in her own time period.

*Calm down, Granger, you've been through worse,* she tried to soothe herself. There surely was a way to get her magic back. She just hadn't found it yet. Her magic had started to dwindle four days ago. So, Hermione hadn't yet had the time to search through all books in the Library that could help her. There still was the Restricted Section. Maybe she could slip in there and search for an answer there. Hermione climbed the moving staircase, carefully avoiding the trick-step. As she reached the next floor she entered a passageway. The Gryffindor common room wasn't far away now. She was tired. Maybe she could sleep this whole problem off? Maybe tomorrow her magic would start to recover.

As she rounded the next corner, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks and stared with wide eyes at the scene in front of her. All thoughts about her lost magic were forgotten as she saw Tom standing in the corridor. But he wasn't alone. He leaned with his back against the wall. His arms were snaked around a girl, pressing her against him, while he kissed her rather fiercely.

Hermione's stomach clenched and she suddenly felt very sick. Obviously Tom had noticed that someone had entered the corridor as he stopped kissing that girl and looked up. Hermione flinched as his hard gaze hit her. His face was an impenetrable blank but his eyes were hurling his disgust and
hate undamped at her. Hermione felt herself starting to tremble as his eyes wandered unemotionally over her form. It was then that she got a glimpse of the girl in his arms. It felt like someone had kicked her in the stomach as she recognized Melanie Nicolls. She was staring at Hermione with an unbearably triumphant smirk on her face. Then Tom just bent down to Nicolls and started to kiss her again. He completely ignored Hermione. As if her existence was not worth his time.

Hermione turned around and hastened down the way she had come from. Her breathing was ragged and she bit the insides of her mouth to stop herself from sobbing. Since Tom had left her he had treated her like dirt, insulted her, hurt her and cursed her. But this! Kissing another girl. Embracing another girl. Now he had obviously torn all ties that had ever existed between them. She had run down a few corridors and her heart still hammered at a ridiculous speed, but Hermione slowed down.

You are pathetic! she told herself brusquely. Tom had left her a long time ago. This was nothing but another proof of that.

A little later, Hermione entered her dorm. She had taken a detour to avoid running in Tom again. She walked over to her bed in the dorm, sat down and drew the covers around her shut. Rose and Lucia were sitting on a bed while chatting and eating their way through a whole box of chocolate frogs. Hermione ignored their chatter but pulled her wand. Panic was mounting up inside of her as she stared down at the black wand in her hand. Since she had almost lost consciousness earlier this day and had thus fallen into Tom's arms, she hadn't tried to do any magic. She was scared. She raised the wand and waved it shakily at her pillow.

"Wingardium leviosa."

There was no reaction at all. No spell left her wand. Hermione wasn't able to feel that weak trickle of magic anymore. It was as if her magic had been ripped from her. Not even the Elder Magic wanted to come back to her. Everything was gone.

Hermione slowly removed her wand holster from her right forearm. Then she discarded both her holster and her wand under her pillow. She always slept with her wand under her pillow, but now the close proximity of her wand didn't manage to calm her anymore. Hermione was left behind completely defenceless and alone.

Unbidden, the image of Tom kissing Nicolls burned up in Hermione. She had no idea why it hurt her so much. Seeing him kissing somebody else shouldn't faze her like that. Not anymore. She trembled slightly as she curled up on her soft mattress. Her red Gryffindor quilt was wrapped around her but she still felt icy cold. Hermione closed her eyes, hoping that sleep would take her soon.

Hermione didn't know where she was. It was dark and the stone floor, she was lying on, was icy cold. She sat up and scanned her surroundings. There was nothing to be seen, except the darkness, which seemed to envelope everything. Hermione shuddered. It was so cold. She was completely alone in the darkness.

Her hand wandered to her right forearm and shock seared through her as she didn't feel her wand holster under the fabric of her blouse. She was alone and powerless. Her eyes gazed into the impenetrable darkness. Again she was met only by black void. An inexplicable fear slowly built up in her. She didn't want to be here. It was wrong. Something lurked there in the darkness, waiting for an opportune moment to attack her.

Hermione quickly scrambled to her legs. Then she hastened away. She tried to escape the darkness by fleeing into it. It didn't work. Her heart thrummed away in her chest. She dashed through the dark and sensed more than she could hear that someone was following her. Something evil hunted her.
Hermione's flight was stopped as she ran into something solid. She gasped in shock and pain as she tipped over and fell on the ground. Panic stopped all rational thought. She raised her head and looked up at what she had just now collided with. Her eyes widened and incredulity washed over her as she stared at the person, she had ran into.

"Ron?" Hermione's whisper was barely audible.

But it was him. Hermione knew that face so well. The freckles. His mouth that always looked as if a laugh played around it. His ginger hair. Everything was exactly like she remembered him. He was Ron and he was right here. Hermione's face lit up. She felt so relieved and unburdened. Ron was here! Nothing bad was going to happen to her when he was around. Joy, happiness, serenity and bliss hit her and Hermione just beamed up at him. She felt like bursting from all those feelings. She wanted to giggle.

But as she was so overwhelmed by her feelings, suddenly something odd hit her. The happy smile melted from her face as she realized that Ron hadn't reacted to her at all. He still stood there and hadn't moved to help her up. He just looked down at her. Hermione felt apprehension building up in her as she spotted a cold glimmer in his eyes. His hard gaze wandered over her. As he scanned her, the icy cold glint in his eyes only intensified. Hermione felt herself starting to tremble as his eyes locked with hers, and she could spot a distanced look on his face. Ron looked down at her and his hate-filled eyes bored into her.

"Ron?" she said, her voice trembling and weak. "What's wrong?"

He didn't reply anything but just continued to eye her, a dark and merciless expression on his face. Hermione's breathing was shallow.

"Look, something is here!" she told him in a scared, breathless voice. "You've got to help me out of here. Please!"

Still, he didn't react. Her panic and fear didn't seem to touch him at all. Then he opened his mouth and hissed at her. His voice was full of anger and hate. Hermione jerked as she could hear accusation tinting his words.

"If you need to hide behind something, why don't you use this?" Ron sneered at her.

After that he threw something at her. The object landed with an oddly muffled sound right in front of her. Hermione continued to look pleadingly up at him, but Ron just turned around and walked away. She started to tremble as she watched him abandoning her. In the blink of an eye Ron was absorbed by the darkness, and she was completely alone.

With a shaky hand she reached for the object Ron had thrown at her. She picked it up and stared at it. In her hand she held a white mask.

Times went by, April turned into May and slowly the Scottish weather got distinctly warmer. Hermione, though, didn't take any notice of this because she had a lot of problems to deal with. Since her magic had stopped to work, she had somehow fallen in a state of constant panic. She desperately tried to find a way to bring her magic back. But whatever she did, whichever book she read, she couldn't find a solution for her problem. Her magic was gone, and she could barely hide it in class. She even temporarily stopped her attempts to find the Hallows in order to get her lost magic back.
Without her magic she felt horribly vulnerable. Especially when she had to face all the hostility coming from the Slytherins. Since they had learned about her parentage, the Slytherins made her life as miserable as they could. They threw her disgusted glances whenever they saw her. When there was no teacher present, they would even hiss insults at her or forego the niceties completely and just curse her. Hermione had to constantly watch her back when she was wandering the many corridors of Hogwarts. With her magic gone, she couldn't fend off any curses and had to rely on her reflexes to dodge them.

On top of that, she still had to somehow deal with Tom's behaviour towards her. She never let it show but his aversion still hit her hard. She did know how wrong he actually was. She hated Tom for reducing her to this, but she couldn't help feeling worthless when he looked at her in that demeaning way. Hermione had always been proud of her parentage and she still was, but Tom managed to make her feel dirty. She just tried not to think about him too much. But it was difficult.

As Hermione was frantically trying to regain her magic while evading the handsome Slytherin prefect, she failed to notice that Tom seemed to have a little project of his own.

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Tom stared in disbelief at the beakers, standing in a row in front of him. Each one of them was filled to two-thirds with a dirty-green liquid, except for one. Its content was bright yellow. A sharp frown appeared between his eyebrows as Tom reached for that beaker. He picked it up and swerved the beaker as he looked in confusion at the yellow liquid.

"Hemlock?" Tom whispered in bewilderment. That didn't make any sense. He shook his head slightly before he placed the beaker back on the wooden laboratory bench. This didn't add up. At all.

Right now, Tom was in a small laboratory which was situated right beside the potions classroom. It was Slughorn's private working place. A few weeks ago, right after that damn Ortus potion had refused to work, Tom had asked the professor to let him use the laboratory. It had really irked Tom that the potion had not worked properly, so he had been quite determined to find the reason for his failure. He just didn't make mistakes, so the Ortus potion not working really annoyed him. That was the very reason why, over the last weeks, he had spent a lot of his time in this laboratory.

The Ortus potion actually consisted of thirty-four ingredients. Any one of those ingredients could have ruined the potion. So, Tom had taken the remains of the faulty potion and had tried to test it on every single one of those substances. This had proven to be quite time consuming. The complexity of the potion had made his endeavour rather frustrating, and to Tom's annoyance it hadn't supplied him with any results. He had actually considered giving up the whole thing, but, strangely, something had held him back. Something didn't sit right with him, and he wanted to find out what it was.

Why the hemlock? Tom wondered, disbelief washing over him. He again let his gaze wander over the many beakers, standing in front of him until he stopped at the one filled with yellow liquid. He actually didn't know why he had even tested the potion for hemlock, but after he hadn't come up with anything so far, he had gotten desperate. Though, he had never expected to get any results from that. The result was indisputable, though. Obviously, the reason that the Ortus potion had malfunctioned was the hemlock.

But that is impossible, Tom thought confused. How was it even possible to mess up with the hemlock? He knew that it was one of the last ingredients added, but it was an easy step. There was no special way to cut the hemlock nor anything else. It just needed to be added to the simmering potion. Not even its quantity was that important. It only got critical if there was added more than a hundred gram. Tom knew that something like that hadn't happened. He could actually picture it very well. Back then, he had been occupied with preparing the gilly weed, which was a little tricky, so he
had wanted to do it himself. In the mean while, Hermione had cut the hemlock.

At that thought, Tom's body froze and his eyes widened. Hermione had worked with the hemlock? It hadn't been him nor Malfoy. No, it had been the Mudblood. A dark look crossed Tom's face and a red sheen flamed up in his eyes as he continued to stare at the beaker with the yellow fluid. Not even a dirty Mudblood could be incompetent enough to mess up with the hemlock. It was just not possible to make any mistakes here. But still, here it was, proof that exactly this step of the potion had ruined the result. So, if this couldn't have been a mistake…

*Then it was intentional!* an icy cold voice hissed at him, and Tom could feel his magic starting to swirl through him furiously. That disgusting Mudblood had intentionally sabotaged the potion? There simply was no other explanation.

Why would she do that? It didn't make any sense. Did she hate him so much that she risked her own mark in potions, just so she could make him look like an idiot? Tom's magic danced around him furiously. The force behind that power made the beakers vibrate dangerously. Then his temper snapped, he pulled his wand and angrily waved it. Immediately, the beakers burst, so that glass shards and liquid blemished the wooden surface of the work bench.

Tom continued to darkly glare at the chaos he had created, while trying to control his temper. He glared at the shattered beakers and the remains of the failed Ortus potion before he brandished his wand. The shattered glass disappeared, as did the remains of the Ortus potion. Tom cast a last angry look at the laboratory, then he grabbed a small vial, standing on a side board and stuffed it into his bag, before he turned around and left the small room.

Shortly later, Tom entered his dormitory and furiously slammed the door shut behind him. He wasn't going to bear the company of his stupid dorm mates. If any one of them dared to enter now, Tom wouldn't hesitate to curse them. In fact, he even wished for one of them to try and enter. Then he would at least be able to release some stress.

He walked over to his side of the dorm and sat down on his bed. The anger was still cursing through him. How could it be that the Mudblood spoilt *his* potion? How dare she? Frustration flooded him as he thought about all the time he had spent brewing that potion. Why would Hermione do it? It seemed so pointless. Why addle with the potion? If that potion hadn't been a group project, Tom would have understood her actions. But they had worked on that potion as a team, so she would get a bad mark, too, if she sabotaged it. It didn't make any sense, Tom thought furiously.

*Unless…*

A thought crossed his mind, and he abruptly got up from his bed and strode over to his desk where he had deposited his satchel before. He produced the small vial out of the school bag. He had taken that vial from the potion laboratory. He held the inconspicuous looking glass vial in his hand while he looked at it pensively.

*Unless, this is a threat to her…*

He needed to make sure, Tom decided as he scanned the colourless liquid in the vial. This idea would most probably not come up with anything, but he wanted an explanation for Hermione's rash behaviour. It wasn't like her to do things without a reason.

To test his theory, though, he would need her blood. Tom's index finger tabbed absentmindedly against the vial as he tried to find a solution. It would be rather difficult to steal blood from the witch. She was, after all, surprisingly well-trained for a dirty Mudblood. Thus she would notice if he tried anything. Tom placed the vial cautiously on his desk and then started to pace around the dorm. He really needed a sample of her blood. He needed her disgusting, repulsive blood. Tom suddenly
stopped mid-step as a thought struck him. He whirled around and quickly stepped over to his trunk. He opened the lid and shuddered involuntarily as the first thing he saw was the ragged grey shirt he had to wear in the orphanage.

All of Tom's clothes and other possessions where either stored in his wardrobe or the shelf. The trunk, though, he only used to keep the things he really didn't need at all. Like this disgusting tunic, he thought as he pushed it away and rummaged through the other things. He quickly came upon a dark-green sleeveless pullover and pulled it out of the trunk.

Tom held it up and looked at that dark stain on the chest area of the pullover. He remembered the incident when it had gotten sullied. That was a few weeks ago. Hermione had staggered down one of the corridors, looking sick, while her nose had been bleeding. Somehow she had lost her balance as she had passed Tom. He had caught her. Tom shuddered disgusted as he remembered how her blood had then seeped into the material of his pullover.

He wondered why he hadn't just cast a cleaning charm on it, but somehow he hadn't wanted to wear it anymore after it had been stained by her disgusting blood. Which now proved to be a lucky coincidence. He put the pullover down on his desk. Then he pulled the stopper from the small glass vial before he drew his wand. He waved it over the stain on the pullover. Instantly the dried blood liquefied again, and with another wave of his wand, the blood came off of the material. It followed his wand movement, and Tom directed it into the small glass vial. The moment the blood made contact with the liquid in the vial, its colour changed from clear to an almost black blue. Tom closed the vial and cautiously churned it until the liquid was completely mixed with the blood. Slowly the colour changed again. The dark blue disappeared until the potion was again crystal clear. A small smile appeared on Tom's face as he watched that change of colour. It seemed the potion did work. Well, whatever one could say about Slughorn, he was quite competent at brewing potions.

Tom sat down on his chair before he pulled a piece of parchment from his satchel. He put the parchment down in front of him then he reached for the vial. He shortly glanced at the potion, swirling in the vial. A strange nervousness assailed him. He pulled himself together and warily let a few drops of the potion fall down on the parchment. As soon as the potion touched the parchment it was sucked into it, leaving nothing behind. Tom frowned down at the empty parchment. It was only after a short moment that slowly letters appeared on the parchment. Tom raised his eyebrows. This effect was quite spectacular. Maybe he should somehow use it, he thought, but then refocused on the writing on the parchment.

September 19th

It now read. Frustration washed over him. He had expected something more exciting. Why else would that witch have gone through the effort of foiling the Ortus potion? Tom just wanted to throw the parchment away in anger as more characters took slowly form. 'One' and then 'nine', obviously the year of birth, Tom realized bored. But then he drew in a sharp breath of air as the potion finally finished its magic and Hermione's year of birth was written down completely.

1979

Tom stared at the number with wide eyes and felt dizzy as his world shifted around him.
Hermione sat in her History of Magic class and listened to professor Binns' endless blether about yet another Goblin war. She stifled a yawn and tried to stay awake. She wasn't one to fall asleep in any class, but today she really had to fight to not doze off. Though however hard she tried, she could feel her eyelids dropping. She was dead tired because she had again spent the previous night reading medical books. Since her magic had left her, her situation here in the past had gotten from bad to worse. So far, she had yet to find a solution for her problem.

While the loss of magic was not something completely unheard of, seemingly it wasn't a condition that had been thoroughly researched yet. In all the books she had read, she had never stumbled across a cure. The easiest way would surely be to reveal herself to somebody else, maybe Madame Dulan or even Dumbledore. But Hermione didn't want to give up yet. Confiding in somebody else would heighten the risk of her getting exposed as a time traveller. She had already broken dozens of rules by interacting with people from the past, she didn't want to add any more transgressions. Her actions so far had probably entailed a lot of things she wasn't even able to see the full extent of. She had messed greatly with the time line. She had to avoid any more mistakes.

Hermione again had to yawn as she tried to focus on Binns through hooded eyes. He was still droning on about Rodewick the Ravening, king of yet another Goblin tribe back in the twelfth century. As tedious as Binns' lectures were, slowly his class had become her favourite. That was solely caused by the fact that Hermione wasn't supposed to do any magic during his class. Here she was safe. On top of that, it wasn't a class the Gryffindors shared with the Slytherins. So, there were no aggressive Slytherins, trying to insult her parents or herself. There were just a few Hufflepuffs, dozing off just like herself.

At least some vengeful Slytherins would have kept me awake, Hermione thought wryly as she again felt her eyes closing. It was horribly frustrating that she hadn't yet found any hint during her nightly ventures. It seemed whatever book she read, she couldn't find a thing to finally help her getting back her magic. Slowly, she was losing faith in Hogwarts' Library, something that had never happened before. Not even the Restricted Section had been able to provide her with anything useful. Though, there still were a few shelves of books she had to rake through. At that thought, Hermione had to sigh tiredly. Obviously, she wasn't going to get any decent sleep tonight either. Instead, she would fetch the old Invisibility Cloak to sneak into the Library again. Hermione was very glad that she had managed to steal the cloak before her magic had left her.

Hermione softly groaned in frustration. She really hated how vulnerable she was without her magic. She was very lucky that so far, no-one had hurled a really dangerous curse her way. The Slytherins had tried to curse her, but until now, she had always been able to dodge the curses. She had only sustained some minor injuries. A scratch here and there or a bruise. Nothing really serious. Even Tom hadn't tried to do anything to her. Actually, he pretty much ignored her. Whenever he had to sit beside her during classes, he completely ignored her presence. During meal times in the Great Hall, he would never even look her way. If they met in corridors by accident, Tom would just pass her as if she were a stranger to him. Actually, Hermione couldn't remember when he had talked to her the last time. It was now a few weeks ago, that he had left her. Still, his dismissive behaviour towards her managed to hurt her. Whenever he was close, Hermione felt incredibly insecure.

On top of that, his impassiveness was quite suspicious. After all, there were still a few things Tom wanted from her. She knew him quite well, so she was aware of the fact that he could be very persistent. As they had still been together, Tom had found out about Peverell's book. He surely hadn't forgotten that. Sooner or later, he might try to get it from her. So, Tom, ignoring her now, was
no reason for her to celebrate. On the contrary, it felt more like the calm before the storm.

Hermione was ripped from her unpleasant train of thought as she heard chatter break out around her. She blinked and looked up. The other students stuffed their parchment into their bags or already walked over to the exit. Obviously, Binns had ended the class without her noticing. Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned her head and found Longbottom smiling down at her.

"What's up?" he asked her good-humouredly. He looked down at her in mock surprise. "Don't tell me that you've been bored by that suspense filled sensation of a history class and have dozed off."

Hermione giggled softly. Then she rolled up the parchment with her rather sparse notes and put it into her school bag.

"No," she then replied, sarcasm dripping from her words. "I was so enthralled by the class, I just couldn't believe it was already over."

Longbottom chuckled amused and grinned at her. Hermione took her bag and stood up from her chair. Then the two of them walked over to Lupin and Weasley who were waiting for them at the exit.

"Oh Merlin," Longbottom exclaimed as they walked out of the class room. "That was horrible, wasn't it?"

Hermione looked up at him and couldn't suppress a grin taking form on her face. She didn't really approve of talking badly about any teacher, but she had to agree with him on this. Binns was just an awful professor, even in his still very much alive form.

"Really, Marc." Lupin threw a reproachful look Longbottom's way. "How could that class have been so terrible for you. I mean, you were reading in Quidditch Monthly the whole time."

A guilty glint appeared in Longbottom's blue eyes as he smirked at Lupin. "You really can't blame me, Amarys," the blond Gryffindor then said, not a least bit ashamed of himself. "I would have died of boredom. Do you want that?"

Lupin threw him a withering glare then he huffed at his friend, "I don't know how you managed not to have to repeat last year."

Longbottom just laughed at that, seemingly not very concerned about the whole thing.

Hermione, though, asked confused, "Is it even possible to repeat a year in Hogwarts?"

Weasley just nodded at her solemnly. Then he informed her, "Yep. In fifth year. If you don't manage to get any OWLs, you'll have to repeat the year and try again."

Longbottom grinned down at her and wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "You don't have to worry, Hermione," he consoled her good naturedly. "You are a nerd, you'll never run the risk to fail any class."

"Yeah. Unlike you," Lupin threw in, turning towards Longbottom.

Longbottom just shrugged at him lazily. The smile never left his face as he declared, "Maybe. But I still got five OWLs. Who would have thought?"

"Certainly not me," Lupin mumbled darkly.
Longbottom chose to ignore that remark and just continued in his cheerful voice, "So, this year, there are no OWLs and no NEWTs yet. That means I can lean back and concentrate on Quidditch."

Lupin just opened his mouth to, no doubt, disagree, but Hermione beat him to it.

"You can't take school so lightly, Marc," she chastised him. "Next year you'll have to take the NEWTs. How will you pass them?"

"Ah, Hermione," Longbottom said lightly. His arm was still wrapped around her shoulders while he smiled indulgently down at her. "Stop worrying. I'll think about NEWTs next year."

Hermione scowled up at him. Once again her 'bookwormish' way broke through.

"Then it'll be too late," she snubbed at him bossily. "You're not going to pass anything if you're-"

Hermione abruptly stopped her rant as she saw Tom walking down the same corridor they were in. Like he always did these days, he completely ignored her. Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line. Tom was just a few metres away from her, as suddenly his eyes snapped at her. She couldn't help but twitch slightly as his gaze landed on her. She felt horribly vulnerable as his cold eyes lazily wandered over her until he locked eyes with her. Her breathing quickened, and she felt herself starting to tremble as a disturbingly evil glint flared up in his grey eyes.

Tom's hand twitched towards his robe pocket, as if he longed to reach for his wand. Hermione tensed as she saw that movement. She forced an emotionless mask on her face but chills were darting down her spine. Hermione couldn't help but feel afraid of Tom. His hate wrapped around her, wrenched violently and brought back dark memories. Every time, she saw his hate, she was reminded of who he really was. Then, in her mind, Tom would transform into something dark and evil. Something that was able to devour her and leave her behind, broken and alone.

As her dark thoughts circled through her head, Hermione suddenly felt the arm around her shoulders tightening its grip and pressing her gently against another body. She turned her head and looked up at Longbottom. He glared angrily at Tom while he continued to hold her protectively. In the corners of her eyes, she could see that Weasley and Lupin, too, glowered at Tom darkly. Hermione really didn't want her friends to antagonize Tom, he was dangerous, but she still appreciated the gesture.

Her eyes reluctantly wandered back at Tom and still found this unbound hate, glimmering in his eyes. As she now looked at him, she could only see Lord Voldemort, hiding underneath that handsome face.

As Tom had finally passed them, Hermione released a shuddered breath of air. How strange that he had acknowledged her presence. During the last weeks, he had always avoided to even look at her, obviously too embarrassed by the fact that a 'dirty Mudblood' had ever been his girlfriend. Hermione wondered what could have managed to change his mind. Why had he now suddenly dropped his dismissive behaviour? And he had done it in a rather aggressive way. He had almost drawn his wand, actually…

Hermione couldn't find an explanation for Tom's strange conduct. Then she felt Longbottom
unwrapping his arm from her. She looked up at him and found him smiling at her.

"Are you all right?" he asked her softly.

"Yes, yes," Hermione quickly replied, trying to sound strong.

They continued their way towards their common room, but now there was a glum atmosphere hanging over the group. Hermione was angered with herself that she allowed Tom to touch her like this. It seemed, though, she was still caught in his tight grasp.

"Don't let him get to you." She heard Lupin's gentle voice.

Hermione turned her head and looked up at him. He was smiling at her encouragingly.

"Riddle, I mean," he elaborated while still looking at her kindly. "Don't let him get to you."

"I know," Hermione replied, her voice soft and not very convincing.

Lupin was right. She should just stop thinking so much about Tom. It wasn't going to lead to anything, and she would only get depressed over it.

"It's pathetic, how he is behaving towards you," Lupin continued in his warm voice. "He should at least show a little decency and not treat you like that."

Hermione smiled up at him faintly.

"Yeah," Weasley said forcefully.

Then he slightly turned his head and glowered at the direction Tom had just disappeared to. "It's despicable what he's doing," the red head continued, an uncharacteristic dark tint in his words. He turned his head to Hermione and smiled at her softly. "I really thought he was a decent fellow. But then he did all that stuff to you. Don't know how I could ever have believed him."

"Well, that's what he's always been like," Lupin interjected. "Outwardly, he is very polite and genial. A nice guy. But he's just putting up a show for everybody."

"Yeah," Longbottom concurred with his friends. "He's sucking up to the teachers, but in reality he's an evil little snake. Just like all the other Slytherins." The dark scowl left his face as he looked down at Hermione. "Just ignore him. You don't need to waste anymore time on him."

Hermione had to suppress a humourless laugh now. Longbottom didn't know how very right he was. She really had already lost more than enough time fighting Tom Riddle, hadn't she? She looked at her three friends. It was nice, how they tried to cheer her up. They didn't care about her blood status.

"I actually know quite well how Tom is," she finally admitted in a rather cold voice. Her composure wavered shortly as she continued, "I just never thought he would be like this towards me."

As he heard that insecurity in Hermione's voice, Longbottom took her hand in his and held it gently. She turned her head and smiled up at him, feeling better to know that she was not completely alone.

* * *

Tom was walking down a corridor in direction to the Slytherin common room. Just now his Herbology class had ended and he wanted to use his free time until dinner to finish that essay for McGraw. Finally, the DADA class started to be quite fun, he thought amused. They had left behind studies of dark creatures and learned more about actual dark curses. Not that the DADA professor
could teach Tom anything new about Dark Magic.

_Surely not,_ Tom sneered condescendingly. But it was still very much amusing to see those looks of shook and indignation on the other students' faces whenever McGray told them about yet another 'inhuman' curse. They were such naïve idiots. Especially the Gryffindors. Tom snickered darkly as he imagined what they would say if they knew that he had already used all those forbidden dark curses. Though, that wasn't entirely true, he thought lightly. Last class, McGray had lectured about the Carnifico spell. That one Tom hadn't used yet.

He bent into another passage way, while still pondering the benefits of the Carnifico spell. His thoughts were interrupted, though, as he noticed that he wasn't the only one in this corridor. Instantly, he recognized the other four people, and Tom could feel his magic react angrily to their presence. It slowly started building up in him as his hard eyes wandered over Hermione and her three Gryffindor friends. They hadn't noticed him yet, being rapt in their conversation. Tom eyed Hermione and had to stop himself from sending one of his darker curses her way. But he couldn't attack the Mudblood. He needed to contain himself, at least for now. Of course, sooner or later, he _had to_ somehow take action against her.

For now, though, Tom had decided to only observe Hermione. He watched her from afar, not trying to get anywhere near her. He had done that ever since he had added her blood to the Ortus potion, ever since he suspected her to be a visitor from the future. As he had uncovered that most spectacular of her secrets, Tom's first impulse had been to corner her and to beat the truth out of her. He wanted to finally put an end to her lies and deceptions. But he had decided it would be wiser to wait. He knew Hermione DeCerto quite well, after all. She was a lot of things, but above all else, she was a very good liar. Tom needed a clear head when dealing with her. That was why he had decided to just observe her. It wasn't often that this happened, but he didn't quite know how to proceed with her.

His gaze once again skimmed over the group of Gryffindors in the corridor, chatting and laughing with each other. Again Tom's magic was raging furiously inside of him, ordering him to destroy that peaceful scene. The knowledge of her supposed time travel infuriated him. It was so bad that he didn't dare go anywhere near her, in fear he would lose control of his ferocious magic and curse the girl in front of a professor. He had, in fact, almost pulled his wand earlier this day in Charms class to send a curse her way. Since he had run the Ortus potion with her dirty blood, he had to constantly work to keep his violent temper in check whenever she was in his presence.

Tom watched as Longbottom wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders and almost lost control over his dark magic as he saw that casual gesture. Hermione really had a nerve, parading around the place like this. What she should do would be hiding in some hole or other, hoping that he would never find her. Tom's eyes wandered over her body, and he could feel his furious magic ripping at him forcefully. It ordered him to be set free, to be allowed to attack the girl. Tom looked back at her face and noticed that by now she had seen him and stared back at him with an indifferent expression on her face. She stared at him without even batting an eye. Offended by her indifference, Tom could feel hate burning up in him. His hand wandering to his pocket, he really wished he could draw his wand and curse the self-satisfied look off her face. How could that chick continue to be so indifferent? How dare she? Lately, she didn't react to him at all but chose to be offensively indifferent. Was that her true face? She just didn't care?

Her pure presence was enough to make him almost lose the rigorous control he had over his dark magic. The urge to set his magic upon that girl was overwhelmingly strong now. She had lied to him, mocked him and used him. She needed to be punished. His magic was raging inside of him as he now watched her, looking at him and mocking him with her indifference. But he didn't pull his wand. He just forced his magic back and averted his eyes from the girl.
Tom passed them and stomped down the corridor while he tried to get his raging magic back under control. He really needed to get a grip on himself. He couldn't go around and hex anyone openly. Granted, Hermione was only a Mudblood, so there would be no loss if anyone cursed her, but Tom knew that a few – misguided – people would disagree with him on this.

He bent into another passage way and continued his way towards his common room. What further infuriated him, was the fact that he had to admit how Hermione's deceit had also hit him on a very different level. Of course, she was a Mudblood, and he didn't care about her at all, but at one point in time he had somehow thought her to be valuable and desirable. That she had lied to him from the start did somehow never trusted him, but had obviously enjoyed playing around with him. Probably, she had laughed behind his back whilst doing it. That worthless Mudblood really had had the nerve to mess with him.

He descended the stairs that led down to the dungeons. On his way he met a few Slytherins who all greeted him deferentially, but Tom didn't pay them any heed. Instead, he remembered that night as Hermione had told him that sob story of how she had had to fight in the war. She had seemed to be so desperate and somehow violated back then. Tom balled his hands into tight fists as he had to admit how he had then tended to believe her. But now, it was very clear that she never had to fight in the war against Grindelwald. She never had fought in any war. She had just wanted to play the victim, so he would fall even deeper into her web of lies. It was despicable how he had held her as she had cried into his chest, when all of this had been an act.

He shook his head at his own foolishness as he now entered the corridor where the entrance to his common room was situated. He stopped before the bare patch of wall and hissed the password.

"Fasces."

He entered the common room. Classes were over for today, so the room was quite crowded. Tom, though, didn't spare his house mates even a glance, but walked over to the black leather couch which stood a little isolated at the far-off side of the room. A group of seventh years were lounging on that couch, obviously preoccupied with a game of chess between two of them. Tom didn't even falter in his steps as he approached them.

Since he had entered his common room, Tom had stopped to rein in his furious magic. It crackled dangerously around him. One of the seventh years noticed that pressure of dark magic in the air and turned his head. Tom almost sniggered evilly, as he saw all colour leaving the boy's face as he spotted Tom walking towards them. He hastily whispered to his friends and they, too, threw worried glances Tom's way. Before Tom reached to couch, the seventh years grabbed their chess board and hurriedly left. Tom was almost disappointed as he sat down on the black couch. It surely would have been quite relieving to release his anger by cursing those idiots. He leaned back against the couch and could still feel his angry magic rushing through him. Since he had seen Hermione in that corridor, he hadn't been able to really get his temper back under control. Actually, his temper was on an all-time peak since he had discovered her time travel three days ago.

The whole situation with the Mudblood just made him almost burst with fury. It wouldn't do if he followed his first impulse and cursed her. He had to contain his emotions and surely needed a clear head when dealing with the Mudblood. The situation was dangerous, and he didn't yet know all the facts.

For one, he didn't know whether the Ortus potion had worked correctly. He had checked it with his own blood right after he had gotten that remarkable result with Hermione's blood. It just seemed to be so farfetched. She was seventeen now, assuming she hadn't lied about her age, which was totally probable, so if the potion had been right, that would mean she had jumped back fifty-three years. A
time jump of fifty-three years was impossible as far as Tom knew. The only means to travel through
time were time turners. Very difficult to get and even then they only enabled one to jump back a few
hours. Then again, what did he know about the inventions that would be made in the future? Maybe
they had found a way to enhance the power of time turners. In addition to that, the Mudblood had
probably stolen the Elder Wand. Maybe she had misused the wand and had been hurled back in
time. Still, it sounded just improbable. Whatever means one would use, a time jump over five
decades would still be incredibly dangerous. Why would anyone risk it?

This led him directly to the next question that greatly bothered him. If the Ortus potion had been
right, why was Hermione here? Surely, no-one would risk a jump back through time without an end
purpose to the whole thing. Was there a connection between her time travel and her suspicious
interest in the Deathly Hallows? Since that Mudblood had arrived here, she had always seemed to be
engaged in rather fishy stuff. Her every action seemed to revolve around the Hallows. Tom was very
much convinced that Hermione owned the Unbeatable Wand. In addition to that, Melanie Nicolls
had provided him with the information that Hermione might have managed to steal another Hallow,
the Invisibility Cloak. Then, there were those dubious men in the black cloaks who were apparently
after her. Maybe also people from the future, trying to get the Hallows? Was that the reason the
Mudblood had travelled back in time? To get the Deathly Hallows?

Tom shook his head. Now he was assuming the Ortus potion had worked correctly. That still was
not proven. Now, though, all the little inconsistencies came back to his mind. Hermione knew spells
and curses even Tom himself had never heard of. How would a Mudblood have gained knowledge
that he had never come across? Maybe because those spells were common knowledge where she
came from? Her behaviour had always been strange. Tom had never met a girl behaving like she did.
Again, normal where she came from? Still all those odd little details were no proof for a time travel
spanning over fifty-four years.

Now another thing that bothered him greatly sprang up in his mind. Actually, this was the main
reason he now was reluctant to take any action against her. While his knowledge concerning her
might be patchy, Hermione seemingly knew a fair amount about him. He only too well remembered
the words she had thrown his way the day she had finally revealed her nauseating parentage.

'What about your father?' she had mocked him. 'He was a Muggle, wasn't he? And that's why you
killed him.'

That dirty Mudblood really had had the audacity to mock Tom's own ancestry? How dare she? The
memory of that conversation made fury bubbling up in him, but it also managed to invoke a rather
unpleasant knot in his stomach.

How did Hermione know?

It wasn't so much the fact that she knew he was a half-blood that made this situation so tense. If
someone really wanted to, it wouldn't be difficult to find out about that disgraceful part of his family.
No, what really concerned Tom, was the fact that Hermione knew he had murdered his father. No-
one was supposed to know that. No-one could know it. Was it common knowledge where she came
from? This was very dangerous, because it would mean that sometime between now and the point in
time Hermione chose to travel back into the past, his crime had been exposed. He needed to find out
when that had happened and how, so he could prevent it.

Tom also needed to find out why Hermione had thought it necessary to actually learn all about his
history. Had she done that kind of research on everybody she would be likely to run into during her
stay in the past? Or was Tom somehow in her focus of interest? That could also explain why she had
put up the whole charade in the first place and had pretended to be his girlfriend. Was there
something she wanted from him?

He drummed with his index finger on the leather surface of the couch's arm rest and felt very much short-tempered. The whole situation was messed up. He didn't have all the facts he needed, so he couldn't act without running the risk of exposing himself. He shortly considered using Legilimency to break her mind and extract everything he was seeking for. Though, that probably wouldn't work with her. He had already tried to legilimise her and that hadn't worked out so well for him. The easy way of just forcing the information from her mind was no option. Still, Tom had plenty of other ways to make her spill her secrets.

A dangerous red sheen appeared in his eyes. A group of first years, sitting on another couch nearby, saw that baleful red glint in Tom's eyes. They stared at him, before they quickly scampered away from the scary sixth year. Tom, though, hadn't noticed their flight at all as he still wondered how he would force Hermione to tell him the truth. He was very confident that he could make her tell him everything if he used some of his darker spells on her. Being of unclean blood, Hermione would cave in very quickly. She was weak and would beg him to spare her in no time.

*Such weakness!* he thought, an evil smirk grazing his lips. *A Mudblood will never be able to resist me.*

After all, he was the Heir of Slytherin.

When he finally had her grovelling at his feet, he would make sure that she once and for all understood what a big mistake it was to mess around with him. In the end, he would be victorious. A worthless Mudblood didn't stand a chance against him. A creature like her was bound to lose when she dared to match her powers with Lord Voldemort.

The red sheen in his eyes intensified, the insidious smirk still playing around his mouth. Sure, he needed to be cautious. But when the time came, he would strike. He would easily manage to force her to tell him everything. She would lose and he was going to break her.

*Lord Voldemort always wins.*

Hermione walked down the deserted corridor. She could feel her wand against the skin of her right arm. It was stored inside her wand holster. Once that feeling had been reassuring, now it just evoked panic in Hermione. What had happened with her magic? Why wasn't it working anymore?

Right now, she was walking once again towards the library. She was still convinced the solution to her problem was written down in one of the books of the library. She rounded another corner and to her horror found herself facing a group of Slytherins. It was a group of three girls, and Hermione stiffened as she recognized two of them. There was Susan Yaxley, a sixth year. Hermione didn't like the girl at all, which was probably mutual. What really concerned her, though, was that Melanie Nicolls was part of that group. There was a rather nasty glare on her pretty face as she scanned Hermione coldly. Hermione didn't know the third girl, but she, too, was glowering at her with an evil look on her face.

"Look what we have here," Yaxley hissed in a snide tone while scanning Hermione. "A filthy Mudblood befouling this school with her mere presence."

Hermione clenched her hands into fists as she stared at Yaxley. She wanted nothing more than to pull her wand and curse these evil Slytherins. But without her magic working properly, Hermione couldn't curse them.
"Yeah, Mudblood, why are you still here?" the girl with the long black hair asked aggressively. "Why don't you go back to your worthless Muggle family?"

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line. Why did Slytherins always have to make her life miserable? Since she had set one foot into the magical world, Slytherins had hated her.

"Hey, Muggle!" Nicolls spat at her in an insulting tone.

Hermione's eyes wandered to Nicolls and she nearly groaned in frustration as she found an evil glint in the other girl's eyes.

"She asked you something," Nicolls hissed maliciously at Hermione while gesturing at the black haired girl. "How dare you not answer when a Pureblood is speaking to you?"

Hermione scanned the other girl calmly and then stated in an icy cold and completely emotionless voice, "I don't have time for your racist remarks. Keep them to yourselves and leave me alone."

Then she just continued to walk down the corridor, intending to pass the Slytherins. As Hermione was trying to walk by them, Yaxley bared her way.

"How can you talk to Melanie like that?" she yelled at Hermione. "You stole her boyfriend from her and now you have the nerve to insult her?"

Hermione looked at the anger on Yaxley's face. She really didn't want to get drawn into any fight here. This was ridiculous. So, she turned towards Nicolls and said, her voice laced with frost, "Look, if you are so desperate to get that ungrateful bastard back, then I'm certainly not stopping you."

A furious look crossed Nicolls' face, but before she could reply anything, Yaxley pulled her wand. Hermione breathed in sharply as the wand was pointed at her.

"You ugly piece of shit! You can't speak about Tom like that! Someone should show you your place!"

Hermione didn't pull her own wand. She knew it would be useless anyway. She could only watch as Yaxley brandished her wand and hissed,

"Pulsare!"

Hermione didn't manage to dodge the spell. It hit her in the chest and it felt like she was pushed hard by an invisible hand as she was thrown against the stone wall behind her. She gasped softly as she hit the wall rather painfully. The group of Slytherins in front of her just laughed cruelly as they watched Hermione leaning against the wall and trying to catch her breath. She looked up at them and glared furiously. The evil smile on Nicolls' face told Hermione that the girl utterly enjoyed this whole incident.

"I hope you now realize that Tom never really wanted you," she told Hermione, malice tinting her voice. "He was just playing around with you. If he had known that you are a disgusting Mudblood, he would have never spent any time with you."

The worst part, Hermione thought as she tried her best to glare at Nicolls, was that the girl was probably right. Images of how Tom had kissed Nicolls burned up in Hermione and a strange numbness took hold of her.

Now, Nicolls pulled her wand, turned towards the other Slytherins and drawled, "I think that's the only language those dirty Mudbloods understand." Then she waved her wand at Hermione while she
yelled, "Limus!"

Immediately, thick drops of mud rained down on Hermione. It didn't stop until she was completely plastered with the smeary slime. She tried to wipe it from her face, but inhaled some of it and had to cough. The Slytherins were laughing evilly at her distress.

"Ewww. What's wrong, Mudblood?" Yaxley queried in mock concern. Then she laughed cruelly and said, "I think it suits you very well."

Hermione didn't reply anything and just tried to wipe the mud from her burning eyes. Anger was coursing through her as she stared at the malicious glint, visible in Yaxley's eyes. Nicolls was standing beside Yaxley, but a little closer to Hermione, wand still raised. Now, though, she dropped the wand as she started to laugh at Yaxley's nasty joke.

That was when Hermione struck. She didn't think this whole situation could get any worse, so she just tried her luck. Hermione raised her still mud covered hand. A confused look crossed Nicolls face as she saw it, but Hermione didn't give her any time to react. Instead, she brought her arm down again in one sharp movement, as if to hit Nicolls. The Slytherin girl stood too far away to really get hit, but the moment of inertia was enough for the mud on Hermione's arm to be sent as a shower of drops towards Nicolls. Nicolls screamed in surprise as the mud hit her in the face. Hermione didn't stop to enjoy that rather high pitched shriek, but took a swift step towards Nicolls. Hermione grabbed the other girl's wand arm, pulled at her and twirled her, so that at the end of the movement, Nicolls stood with her back towards Hermione. Hermione grabbed her right hand and forced the girl's arm up, so that her own wand was pointed at Nicoll's throat. The Slytherin wriggled and tried to get away.

"Let go, bitch!" she yelled infuriated.

As a reaction, Hermione tightened her hold on Nicolls' hand and pressed the wand's tip into her neck.

"I advise you to shut up now," she told Nicolls in a very calm voice.

Then, over Nicolls' shoulder, she glared at the other two girls, still standing in the corridor. Yaxley had her wand raised and pointed it at Hermione, but she didn't dare fire a curse as she would have hit Nicolls too. The other girl with the long black hair just stared at Hermione in shock. She had obviously not expected this to get so out of hand. As Hermione pressed that wand against Nicolls' neck, she really wished for her magic to not be down. Then this whole thing wouldn't have been just an empty threat. Maybe those three Slytherin girls didn't know it, but Hermione was very much unable to curse Nicolls in any way.

"Now that we all had had our say," Hermione stated, still in that frighteningly calm and cold voice. "I think our little conversation doesn't need to be continued anymore and we come to a close."

Yaxley just glared at Hermione darkly but didn't lower her wand as she hissed, "Let her go."

Hermione cast the other girl a mocking smile while she tried to remember the lay-out of the corridor behind her. She was pretty sure there was a corner not far away where another passage way joined the one they were standing in right now.

Hermione didn't reply anything to Yaxley, instead she whispered into Nicolls' ear in a very collected voice, "In case you haven't noticed, you've won."

With that said, Hermione shoved Nicolls abruptly in the back, so that the girl staggered towards her
friends. Hermione saw her crashing into Yaxley, but then, without waiting for any reaction coming from the Slytherins, Hermione turned around and ran away. Not three metres away was a corner. She hastened towards it.

Then Hermione heard a voice behind her shout, "Confringo!"

Unfortunately, she was very much unable to even cast away such harmless spells, so Hermione fell into a sharp sprint, trying to reach cover before the spell would hit her. It took her only a second and she reached the corner. She hurled herself into the new corridor, moments before the Confringo spell would have hit her squarely in the back. Now the spell soared harmlessly down the other corridor while Hermione dashed down the new passage way. She never turned her head to see whether the Slytherins had chosen to follow her but continued to run away. It was only as she had run down three other corridors and entered a more crowded part of Hogwarts castle that Hermione slowed down. If she hadn't still been enraged by those Slytherin girls' attack on her, she would have laughed at the confused glances a group of seventh year Ravenclaws was throwing her way. Hermione was still covered from head to toe in sticky mud. Just for that, she had enjoyed it very much to threaten Nicolls with a wand at her throat. She raised her arm and tried to wipe the dirt away from her face, using her sleeve. It didn't really get her face clean as her sleeve was soaked in mud as well.

Stupid Nicolls! she cursed in her mind. Why did that horrible girl insist on making her life miserable? What Hermione had whispered into Nicolls' ear had been the truth after all. Hermione's heart clenched as she remembered how she had found Tom in that deserted corridor. He had been right in the process of kissing Nicolls. She had no idea what else those two had done together. But knowing Tom, he hadn't stopped with just kissing that snotty girl. Hermione shuddered as she remembered the look Tom had cast her back then. It had been so full of loathing and, even worse, disdain.

It wasn't much later that Hermione entered the Gryffindor common room. She really needed a shower to get rid of all this mud. Luckily, there weren't many people in the common room. The weather was nice, so most of them enjoyed the day outside. Though, there was a group of third years sitting on one of the sofas. They had obviously spotted Hermione, standing by the door, and started to laugh at her. Slightly embarrassed, Hermione raised her hand and again tried to wipe the mud from her face.

"Hey, shut it, you!" an angry voice suddenly shouted at those third years.

Hermione turned her head and found Longbottom, walking towards her. Right now, he glared warningly at the third years. By now they had stopped laughing, obviously daunted by Longbottom, and continued their game of exploding snaps.

"What happened to you?" Longbottom asked her as he had reached her and frowned down at her.

By now, Hermione was feeling cold as her clothes were still drenched in wet mud. She shivered slightly as she looked up at Longbottom.

"Er…" she mumbled softly. She didn't want to tell him about the Slytherins' attack.

"Wait, let me help you," Longbottom said as he pulled his wand.

He waved the wand at her and said, "Scourgify."

Instantly, Hermione could feel the mud vanishing from her. She looked down at herself and found her clothes clean and dry. Looking back up at Longbottom, she smiled at him and said relieved, "Thanks."
"Don't mention it," Longbottom grinned down at her.

Then he raised a hand and took one of Hermione's curly strands of hair, inspecting it. There still was some mud sticking to it.

"Sorry," his blue eyes wandered back to her. "Seems that charm doesn't work so well with your hair." He scanned around the common room, searching for somebody. "A pity Amarys is not here. I'm sure he'd know the right spell."

"It's okay," Hermione said softly.

Longbottom looked back at her and a concerned frown appeared on his face. Hermione nearly cringed as she saw that worried expression. He took her hand into his and pulled her over to one of the sofas.

"Now, what happened?" he asked her again.

Hermione avoided looking at him and fiddled with a strand of her hair. Then she said sheepishly, "Slytherins."

"Ah, not those evil snakes again!" Longbottom exclaimed angrily after hearing her reply.

Hermione peered up at him. Somehow, his indignation was soothing, she thought as she watched the annoyed scowl on his face. The scowl, though, disappeared instantly as he looked at her. An encouraging smile played around his mouth as he slid closer to her on the sofa and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"You know that they are complete idiots, don't you?" he whispered to her, trying to comfort her.

"Yeah," Hermione replied softly.

She did know that. And yet…

Longbottom's arm around her pulled her gently against him as he heard the hesitancy in her voice. "Bah, they are just jealous," he then said.

Hermione turned her head and looked up at him. He grinned at her.

"How come so?" she asked him.

"Now, that's simple, Hermione," he replied amused. "You get straight O's in every class. Those snakes just can't take that. And now, to get back at you, they are trying to give you a hard time because you are Muggleborn."

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line as she had to remember the malice in Tom's voice as he had called her 'Mudblood'. Longbottom was right, Tom was an idiot. Still, his words stung.

"Don't listen to what they are saying," Longbottom's gentle voice pervaded her dark thoughts.

He still smiled at her and continued, "It doesn't matter whether your parents are Muggles or not, you still are a witch." He considered her for a moment before he told her, "Actually, it doesn't even matter if somebody is magical or not. Wizard or Muggle... they would still be human, wouldn't they?"

Hermione couldn't help but feel pleasant warmth wrap around her. She smiled up at Longbottom.
"You know, my first girlfriend ever was a Muggle," Longbottom said cheerfully as he ran a hand through his blonde hair.

"Really?" she asked surprised.

"Yeah. She lived in the same village as me before she moved away. Hmmm… I wonder what she's doing now," he said pensively. Then he chuckled as he continued, "Oh, Andrea. Always thought I am crazy."

"She didn't know you were a wizard?" Hermione inquired.

"No, no. She did know," Longbottom laughed. "But she still thought I'm crazy. Didn't have anything to do with me being magical."

Hermione couldn't stop herself. She had to laugh, too. For once, her dark thoughts were forgotten, as she sat in the Gryffindor common room and just giggled.

During the rest of the week, Hermione tried her very best to avoid any Slytherins, especially Tom. It wasn't that difficult, in fact, as she buried herself in the library whenever there were no classes she had to attend. The lack of help, she got from the books in the library, though, only managed to darken her mood even further. She still had no idea how to get her lost magic back and was getting desperate. It was only a matter of time until somebody noticed the absence of her magic. Until now, she had somehow managed to muddle through all her classes. But sooner or later, she wouldn't be able to hide the fact anymore that she couldn't do any spell.

Another week passed, without her getting any step closer to solving the secret behind her lost magic. It was Friday again, as Hermione reluctantly walked over to her first class for today. Thank Merlin her detentions had ended, but she still had to attend that horrible class, Hermione thought darkly as she crept towards the Household classroom. She grudgingly entered the room and found the whole class already assembled. Fortunately, Legifer was not yet here, otherwise she would surely have given Hermione another detention. Hermione walked over to her seat and plopped down beside her dorm mates.

"You are rather late," Rose chirped into her ear.

Hermione turned her head and looked morosely at the girl. There was a nosy glint in Rose's eyes as she scanned Hermione.

"What did you do?" she asked in her shrill voice. Then she giggled softly before she asked suspiciously, "Did you meet with your new boyfriend?"

Hermione just grumbled as an answer. Before Rose could inquire more, Legifer stepped into the classroom. There was a sour look on the professor's face, and Hermione sighed tiredly. She must have sighed rather loudly as Legifer threw her a disapproving glare. Then she turned to the class and started with her lecture. Hermione, by now used to droning the professor's piercing voice out, just entertained herself with looking out of the window. Only now and then, bits of Legifer's speech managed to reach her.

Legifer's gaze glided imperiously over her class as she explained, "As you know, your future role will be to support your husband and take care of the household so he doesn't have to trouble himself with such trivialities."

Hermione dimly thought that she should get filled with indignation, but she just didn't want to bother.
This whole class was just a joke. She had decided to ignore it a long time ago. So, Hermione continued staring out of the window dreamily as Legifer started to pace in front of her class.

"Aside from those daily chores you'll have to fulfil, you should also know how to not embarrass your husband in front of business partners or other important people." Here Legifer paused shortly and her stern gaze wandered over Hermione. Evil glint in her eyes, the professor said, "Some of you might be unable to ever learn proper behaviour." Legifer's cold eyes left Hermione before she continued, "-still I have faith that most of you might be able to grasp the importance of what I am teaching you here. Let us now go over the simplest of rules of seemly behaviour."

Hermione already regretted having gotten up this morning. She should have just stayed in her warm bed. It was a good while later that Hermione felt compelled to listen to Legifer again.

"With all that said, I think it's time for a practical approach," Legifer announced in her sharp voice

Hermione's head shot up and she bit her lip nervously as she eyed Legifer. This was bad. But she shouldn't be surprised now, should she? Legifer just had a talent to make her life even more miserable. Lately, Hermione hated practical lessons. With her magic gone, she had little chance to pass them. She felt rather anxious as she watched Legifer waving her wand. Instantly, the tables in the class room, including Hermione's own, grew a bit in size, so that they now resembled proper dining tables. Another wave of Legifer's wand and several boxes soared through the air. One settled on every table.

"I suggest you work in groups on this." Legifer said in her biting voice as she put her wand away. "I expect every group to set your table in the proper way as if expecting very important guests. Use the spells we went over. You may start."

The students immediately got to work. Hermione felt a little forlorn as she watched her seat neighbours starting on the task. Diana waved her wand skilfully and instantly a white table cloth floated out of the box. Diana again brandished her wand, and the cloth softly fell down on the table. It now neatly covered the whole table, without any wrinkle on it. In the meantime, Rose swirled her wand shakily. Plates soared out of the box and arranged themselves on the table. Two of them almost crashed into one another, but Rose hastily pivoted her wand again and prevented a disaster of shards.

While her team mates set the table, Hermione didn't know what to do. This task was utterly ridiculous, but still she was required to contribute something. Unfortunately, with her magic gone, she couldn't do much. She stood awkwardly beside the table and just watched her team mates.

After a while, the table was now almost completely set, Hermione still hadn't done anything. She felt really nervous. Hopefully, no-one noticed how she didn't use any magic. Luckily, her dorm mates had just giggled at her lack of help and had insinuated that Hermione was distracted, because she had to think about her 'new boyfriend'. For the first time, Hermione was glad about her dorm mates' ridiculous gossip addiction. Lucia was putting glasses on the table, while Diana conjured up a beautiful floral arrangement. Hermione decided that she could as well do something. So, she walked over to the box Legifer had given them, bent down and retrieved the cutlery from the box. Then she arranged the silver on the table.

"Ms DeCerto, please, explain what you are doing here."

Hermione inwardly cringed, turned and found Legifer standing right beside her, a stern expression on her face. To her horror, Hermione noticed how the class had fallen silent. Everyone seemed to stare at her. Hermione looked back at Legifer, who still expected an answer.

"I… er…” Hermione stuttered now. "I was trying to…”
"Enough," Legifer cut across her. She eyed the silver fork in Hermione's hand disapprovingly, before she said, "Surely, you know the right spell to do this by magic."

Hermione stared at the professor. Of course she knew the spell. A simple levitation charm would do. But she wasn't able to perform it. That was the problem. As no answer came, Legifer said, malice oozing from her words,

"Now, Ms DeCerto. Why don't you demonstrate the spell used to arrange the cutlery on the table?"

Hermione still stared with wide eyes at Legifer and didn't know what to do. She could almost feel the gazes of all the other students on her. A heat wave hit her face. The professor continued looking at her expectantly, so Hermione felt obliged to at least do something. She flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. There was no reaction from her magic and Hermione gulped nervously. Her gaze wandered to the table in front of her. The plates were neatly arranged, the white table cloth was completely free of any wrinkles. All that was missing was some cutlery.

"We are waiting, Ms DeCerto," Legifer's piercing voice reminded Hermione maliciously.

Hermione breathed in deeply to calm herself down. She somehow had to wriggle out of this. She cast another glance at Legifer. There was a nasty smirk on the woman's face.

"It's not that difficult," Legifer almost jeered at her.

Hermione's hand tightened around her wand. She could hear stifled giggles coming from the other students. They, along with Legifer actually, probably thought she was an inept idiot. And right now, Hermione had no other choice than to prove them right. She raised her wand, knowing full well she wasn't able to perform any spell, and waved it in the familiar movements of a simple levitation spell. Of course, nothing happened. Hermione was not able to muster up any magic. The silver cutlery remained to lie innocently in the box. After that disastrous performance, she could hear even more giggles. Hermione tried to ignore her wounded pride and dared to look at Legifer. She nearly groaned in frustration as she saw an evil but all the same triumphant look on Legifer's stern face.

"Now, that was informative, Ms DeCerto," the professor said sarcastically, cruel glee tinting her voice. "I think this is five points from Gryffindor for… let's say, shocking inaptitude."

Hermione boiled inwardly, but managed to keep her face neutral as she stared back at Legifer. The woman really seemed to enjoy herself right now, Hermione noted.

"Well, while Ms DeCerto, obviously failed miserably," Legifer said, turned to the whole class. "The rest of you did fairly well."

With a small flick of her own wand, Legifer banished all the crockery so that in the end the room resembled a class room again.

"Sit down," Legifer ordered.

As the class had settled down again, the professor let her gaze wander over them. Hermione cringed as Legifer stopped at her.

"Really, Ms DeCerto, after you have messed up your relationship with Mr Riddle, I would have expected you to have learned something from your mistakes," the professor told her bitingly. "Instead, your incompetence is still as alarming as ever."

Hermione bit the inner sides of her cheek to stop herself from returning anything. Legifer sent her another nasty smirk before she turned to the whole class.
"As you can see, Ms DeCerto here is a wonderful example of how things can go wrong if you don't heed my advice," Legifer lectured them. "A fine young man courted her, but she managed to botch her chance up. She didn't know how to behave and thus embarrassed Mr Riddle. In the end, he had no other choice but to leave her."

Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as she glared at Legifer. She was beyond angry. Though there also was a painful knot in her stomach as she heard Legifer's mocking words. It hurt how the professor was partly right. Yes, Tom *was* embarrassed of her now. Hermione had to close her eyes shortly to get her composure back. He was disgusted that she had ever been his girlfriend. But had *she* botched up their relationship by telling him the truth about her parentage? Or was it Tom?

*Does it matter?* Hermione wondered numbly. Tom was judging her. Just because she was a Muggleborn, he hated her. He was wrong and had no right to do that to her. He had the problem. She was Muggleborn, and Tom couldn't deal with that. But it still was her who had to pay the price for his rejection. He made her feel worthless.

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line as she felt her breathing getting ragged now. Tom's view of Hermione was based solely on prejudices. Her parentage, her pure existence, had managed to embarrass him. In his eyes, he really had had no other choice but to leave her.

"If you don't want to end up abandoned like Ms DeCerto, you should accept your role as a woman," Legifer's sharp voice cut through Hermione's thoughts like a knife.

Hermione refocused on the professor. Legifer stood there, as impeccable as ever, and continued lecturing her class about women's inferiority in that sharp voice of hers. Hermione stared at the professor, letting the words wash over her. How wrong that woman was!

And how wrong Tom was. His discrimination against Muggles and Muggleborns could only be called wrong. Yet, his wrong convictions had formed the future and had slowly turned into terrible truth for many, many people. He was able to force the whole world to change, so it would fit into his wrong convictions. Even against her better knowledge, Tom had already managed to shake her own world. She had always been proud of her parentage. Never had she doubted herself. But then she had met him, and now here she was, feeling dirty and inferior to him.

The power of his convictions was frightening.

Hermione could feel her hands shake. She had seen Tom's convictions played out to the bitter end. He had drowned everything in his hate. However wrong he had been, there had been many who had believed him. Only a little bit more, and he would have won. Without Harry, Voldemort would have turned his lies into the truth. In the end, it wouldn't have mattered anymore that his war against Muggleborns was unjust. He would have taken this inequity and would have called it justice.

Hermione shuddered. Her eyes wandered back to Legifer. The professor was still talking about all those duties a woman supposedly had to fulfil. She was telling this room full of young women nothing but lies and untruths about men's superiority. Yet, in this time and age, those lies were the truth, lived and experienced by many.

Hermione felt sick. She couldn't take this anymore. Completely ignoring Legifer and her lecture, she stood up from her seat.

"What do you think you are doing?" the professor's sharp voice addressed her.

Hermione's eyes wandered to the professor and found Legifer glaring at her disapprovingly. She was clearly angered that Hermione had so rudely interrupted her lesson. Hermione didn't care though.
She didn't want to put up with the wrongfulness anymore. She needed to get out of here.

She gazed steadily back at the teacher before she opened her mouth and stated, "I'm leaving."

Then she took her parchment and quill, reached for her school bag and stowed everything away in her bag. After that she shouldered her bag and began to walk towards the door.

Before she reached the door Legifer's hissed at her, "And where do you think you are going?"

It was completely silent in the classroom as Hermione stood, with her back turned to Legifer, by the door. She slowly turned around to her teacher.

"This-" Hermione explained while gesturing at the classroom in general. ",is not where I'm headed."

She couldn't help but feel a soft twinge of regret as the words left her mouth, for she didn't know if she was referring only to Legifer's class or school in general. How much was she supposed to sacrifice in order to escape Tom's convictions? Hermione watched dispassionately as Legifer's mouth formed an angry, thin line as she stared at her with icy cold eyes.

"How unfortunate for you then," Legifer replied in a very controlled but also frosty voice. "As you don't have a say in this matter."

"You are right," Hermione replied numbly. "I don't have a say in this matter. Never had. Things always just happen and we can only react."

This statement did not seem to enlighten Legifer at all as she still fixed Hermione with a stern stare.

"Then I suggest that you sit down again, Ms DeCerto," she grinded out through clenched teeth. "And cease your disconcerting behaviour."

A hollow smile flitted over Hermione's face but disappeared without leaving anything behind.

"I can't," she simply answered in a soft voice.

Legifer's eyes blazed up with indignation and anger, but Hermione remained to be strangely unaffected by the woman's wrath.

"This, Ms DeCerto, is your only chance to ever lead a normal life and be recognized as a woman. This is your only way to leave this school and become a respectable member of our society," Legifer nearly yelled in anger. "Either you finally accept the expectations, or you will never achieve anything in life. You will always be shut out."

The truth behind Legifer's words cut through Hermione. But she refused to accept the pain. This pain had hit her for so long already. It was too familiar.

"Maybe you are right. Maybe you are not. I don't know," Hermione said in a quiet tone. "But either way you are too late for me." She sighed tiredly. Then she continued in a soft, whispered voice, "I can never lead a normal life. I am neither respectable nor will I ever be recognized by your society. You will always look at me, seeing something that does not belong. I cannot fulfil your expectations for they are out of my hand."

Hermione paused, wondering why she was saying all of this for she knew she was no longer talking about her role as a woman. It wasn't solely her gender that was the problem here. It was her parentage, her whole being. Exclusion and oppression were, after all, very old and cruel but frighteningly effective tools of society.
Her eyes wandered over the classroom. The other students were following this strange conversation with avid interest. Hermione couldn't blame them. Her gaze landed on a few Slytherins, including Yaxley, staring back at her with disgust shining in their eyes. Did they understand the slight shift in the meaning behind Hermione's words? Or did they just stare at her in repulsion by principle?

Hermione's eyes snapped back at Legifer who still glared at her dangerously. Then she continued in her frighteningly emotionless voice, "Even if I bend to your rules, you will never admit that I belong in this world. Maybe someday in the far off future but then, will it be worth it? All this pain and suffering, the fighting, just to finally end a conflict that had been raging for so long that it will leave behind no victors." Hermione's hand tightened around the strap of her bag which was slung over her right shoulder. "I just don't want to play along anymore when I know where it all will, eventually, lead."

She fell silent and just continued to look at her professor. Legifer's face had morphed into a mask of rage. "You foolish girl! Do you really think you will achieve anything by your act of stupid and unnecessary obstinacy? Now, you will stop disturbing my lesson and sit down again."

Hermione looked at the fury displaying on Legifer's face. Then she sighed softly and squared her shoulders. A sad smile played around her mouth as she stared at the enraged woman, then Hermione breathed,

"… yes, foolish…"

She turned around and continued her way towards the door. Legifer screamed at her to stop, but Hermione paid her no heed as her hand clasped around the door handle. She opened the door and entered the corridor behind while she could still hear Legifer's angry voice, accompanied by the students' excited chatter. Obviously, the professor would need some time to calm her class down again. This left Hermione with enough time to get away.

After she left the classroom, Hermione instantly walked towards the Library. She was going to skip Transfiguration. Hopefully, Dumbledore would be lenient with her. She just couldn't go to that class now, Hermione thought and felt still very shaky as she walked the corridors. She wouldn't be able to bear Tom's presence. She couldn't be confronted with his hate right now.

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Hermione spent the weekend raking through Hogwarts Library, burying herself in books. She didn't want to deal with the real world. After that scene during her Household class, the castle was once again buzzing with rumours about her. Hermione didn't want to hear any of them. Only Longbottom had managed to make her smile a little as he had visited her in the Library to convince her to come out for a while. He had told her that she had done the complete right thing to oppose that 'evil banshee'. While Hermione had been happy to see him, Longbottom still hadn't managed to make her leave the Library.

She also had received a letter from Dippet, who wanted to speak with her the following week. Busy as ever, the headmaster hadn't even told her exactly when she should come to his office. She wasn't very keen to meet him anyway. Surely, this was Legifer's doing. Her class was, after all, obligatory. Hermione wasn't allowed to just drop it. Dippet was probably going to tell her just that.

To not drown herself into her many problems, Hermione preferred to drown herself into books. The weekend flew by without her finding anything to get her lost magic back. Desperation tuckled at her now whenever she had to attend any classes. Luckily on Monday she once again managed to somehow muddle through Potions. Tom had gone back to ignoring her thoroughly, so he hadn't noticed her lost magic. During her next class, DADA, Hermione was lucky again. Professor McGray
had decided to have a purely theoretical class and discussed with them yet another dark curse. Hermione, for one, felt sick having to hear about that disgusting branch of magic. She couldn't concentrate on the lesson anyway. Since she had stormed out of Legifer's class at Friday, Hermione felt like in a daze. Her complete failure to perform that levitation spell during the class had frightened her greatly. Until now, Hermione had managed to hide her lost magic, but slowly she realized how parlous her situation really was. What if people found out? What if Tom found out? What would he do if he learned that her magic was gone, that she was a Muggle?

So, naturally, after classes were over for the day, Hermione had run off to the library again. She sat in there for an eternity, going through book after book. After hours, her eyes started to hurt from all the reading and she was tired. But, she couldn't stop. The answer to her problem was still elusive.

She was just reading through another huge tome as she felt someone, sitting down beside her, and a voice scolded her gently, "Now, this is enough, Hermione." She turned her head and found Longbottom frowning down at her. "You've been here the whole day again."

He reached for the book, lying on the table in front of her, and tugged it away. He closed the book with a thud as he said, "Whatever you are doing here, I'm sure it can wait 'till tomorrow."

Hermione reached for the book in his hand while she said, "I really have to read this."

Longbottom just held the book out of her reach and chided, "No. You've been in here for hours now. I'm sure the books won't disappear just because you don't read them today."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. She really needed to find a way to get her magic back. But now that she stared at Longbottom, she noticed how very tired she in fact was. Her head hurt and her eyes were watering from all the reading. She tilted her head to the side. Maybe Longbottom was right, she confessed reluctantly. After all, she surely wasn't able to find out anything if she was this exhausted. Seeing her falter, Longbottom took the initiative. He quickly waved his wand and all the books, scattered on Hermione's table, soared back to their places on the shelves. Then he took Hermione's hand and pulled her up from her seat. She didn't stop him as he led her out of the Library. She nodded at Ms Peters, the librarian, as they left. They walked through the corridors towards the Gryffindor common room. It was rather late by now, Hermione noticed surprised. The corridors were pretty much deserted.

"Say, is something bothering you?" Longbottom suddenly asked her in a quiet voice.

Hermione's head snapped to him. He was still walking beside her, but eyed her concerned.

"No…” she answered in a soft voice.

Longbottom just cocked his head to one side as he considered her. "Are you sure you are alright?"

"Of course," Hermione insisted. Though, she knew, she was anything but alright. Actually, ever since this whole thing with her magic had happened, she felt horrible.

No, that's not true, an inner voice forced her to realize. Actually, she felt so horrible ever since Tom had left her. She was deep in thought as she, suddenly, felt Longbottom taking a hold of her hand. He stopped and looked softly down at her as he said,

"No, something is wrong. You've been so strange," he whispered to her soothingly. "You can tell me."
"It's nothing. Really," Hermione answered, still looking up at Longbottom.

She didn't want him to be so concerned about her.

"There is something bothering you," Longbottom inquired, even his voice was filled with concern.

As Hermione didn't answer, he leaned a little down to her and whispered, "You are not still sad because Riddle left you, are you?"

Hermione looked at him. Was she sad that Tom had left her? The truth would be 'yes'. She felt very much forlorn now that she was alone again and she did miss him. Or maybe it was this illusion she was missing? As she had been together with Tom, she had been so carefree. She surely missed that feeling. But now she knew that it all had been a lie. Tom had never loved her. Hermione looked up at the worry on Longbottom's face and then she just lied.

"No," she whispered in a soft voice while averting her eyes.

Longbottom didn't answer anything to her statement. They stood in the corridor, while Hermione still didn't look up at him. After some time, though, she felt his hands on her shoulders and her gaze wandered up at his face. He held her gently and even pulled her towards him. One of his hands wandered up and cupped her cheek gingerly. Hermione's eyes widened as she felt his warm hand on her skin, touching her so gently. It was then that Longbottom bent down to her and Hermione's eyes fluttered shut. His lips were touching hers and then he was kissing her tenderly. He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer against him, so that she leaned into his chest. Hermione could feel his soft lips kissing her so invitingly, and she was completely lost in the moment.

It was so nice, having someone kiss her. Someone who cared about her. Someone who didn't bother that she was Muggleborn, who wasn't disgusted by her. Someone who accepted her. She didn't need to feel so alone, did she? She could feel his hand wander from her cheek to the back of her head, where it ran carefully through her hair. All the while he still kissed her so softly. She didn't need to be lost and alone. Here was someone who wanted to be with her. Longbottom wanted to be there for her. Not like Tom who had left her and now hated her with a passion. Tom would never-

Hermione tensed slightly, as she noticed where her train of thought had wandered off to.

Longbottom still kissed her so tenderly and here she was thinking of Tom. No. No, she couldn't do this. She couldn't throw herself into another relationship. Not when she still somehow wanted Tom. It would be very unfair to use Longbottom to get over her heartache. He was such a nice guy. She couldn't lead him on like this. Hermione raised her hands and pushed against Longbottom, hands on his chest. He instantly stopped and let go of her. Hermione took a step away and then looked up at him. He looked back at her in confusion, though she could see a little bit of understanding already dawning on his face.

"Marc, I… I…" she mumbled as she stared at him. "I just can't do this. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have…"

A sad expression flittered over his face as he heard her stammered explanation and fear clasped Hermione's heart. She liked him very much. Maybe not in the way he would want her to, but he was still very important to her. He was her friend and she would miss him dearly if he should decide to leave.

"I'm really sorry," she whispered in a soft, scared voice, now avoiding looking at him.

Suddenly, she felt his hand on her shoulder, and she hesitantly peered up at him. There was still sadness and disappointment shining in his blue eyes, but she could also spot a small reassuring smile on his lips.
"It's okay, Hermione," he told her in a kind voice. His eyes scanned her and then he asked gingerly, "You still miss him, don't you?"

This time Hermione didn't lie.

"Yes," she whispered, almost inaudibly.

"I see," Longbottom replied, sadness lacing his words. His hand left her shoulder and ruffled through his blond hair. Then he glanced at her and said in a soft tone, "You know, I hate him even more now." A sad smile ghosted across his lips as he looked down at her. "I told you, he's an idiot. He should have never left you. One of these days he's going to regret it."

"You… you are not angry with me?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"No, Hermione, no," he quickly reassured. Even though Hermione could still see the disappointment in his eyes, he even tried to comfort her, "After all, it's not your fault that you like sneaky Slytherins."

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Tom just passed a corridor, as he heard voices coming from that direction. He didn't pay it any attention but continued on his way. He left that corridor behind as he again heard a voice. This time, though, he recognized that voice.

"-told you. I'm okay." Tom heard Hermione's soft voice.

"No, something is wrong," a male voice answered. "You've been so strange."

Tom stopped in his tracks and tried to get nearer. He slid towards those voices, always trying to remain in the shadows. He had no idea why he wanted to eavesdrop on Hermione. He reminded himself of his plan of staying away from her until he had decided how to proceed from here on. Her mere presence was enough to raise his temper, so it would be best to stay away from her.

"You can tell me." He heard Longbottom's voice whispering gently.

Even though he knew it would be better to turn around, Tom continued to sneak towards them. As he finally reached the corner, he cautiously peered into the other corridor. As expected, he found Hermione, standing just a few metres away. She wasn't alone, though. Tom narrowed his eyes at Longbottom. He was standing pretty close to Hermione. Right now, he seemed to even hold her hand in his. Tom couldn't see her face as she had turned her back towards him, but he was sure there was a smile on her face as she looked up at the blond Gryffindor. Tom's hands balled into tight fists. He had always known it, hadn't he? Even as he had still been together with Hermione, he had always suspected it. She liked Longbottom.

"It's nothing. Really," Hermione said, still looking up at Longbottom.

Tom felt sick as there was disgusting concern visible on Longbottom's face. Who would be concerned over a Mudblood?

"There is something bothering you," Longbottom inquired, even his voice was filled with ridiculous concern.

As Hermione didn't answer, the Gryffindor leaned a little down to her and whispered, so that Tom could barely hear, "You are not still sad because Riddle left you, are you?"

Tom edged a little closer, somehow desperate to hear her answer.
"No," was Hermione's reply.

Strangely, Tom's magic was reacting quite violently to that revelation. He had to work to hold it back from swirling around him angrily. Though, he almost lost that fight as he saw a triumphant expression crossing Longbottom's face. Really, what was wrong with his magic lately? Why did it react with so much anger to this ridiculous situation? Tom narrowed his eyes at Hermione and Longbottom. He watched how the Gryffindor's hands took hold of Hermione's shoulders. Longbottom held her gently and even pulled her somewhat closer to him. His hand wandered up to Hermione's cheek and cupped it cautiously. Tom's magic now rushed so violently through him that he started to tremble slightly. He still couldn't see Hermione's face, but so far she hadn't done anything to stop that Gryffindor berk from touching her. Did she enjoy it?

As Longbottom bent down to Hermione, Tom could feel how he lost control. Strands of his dark magic left his body and started to crackle around him, longing to reach out for the other two persons in that corridor. A strangely hollow feeling suddenly overwhelmed him, as he had to watch how Longbottom kissed Hermione. The Gryffindor had his arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her against him, while he kissed her. Hermione was flushed against his body, not in the least bit trying to get away from Longbottom.

There was no way Tom would be able to hold his angry magic back any longer. In fact, he noticed how his hand had wandered to his pocket where his wand was stored. There was the irresistible urge to pull his wand and-

…and what? Tom wondered, irritated by that anger, ripping at him. Curse them? Curse Longbottom?

This was ludicrous! Tom balled his hands into tight fists and stopped reaching for his wand. He did not care what this trollop did in her free time. The dark magic, though, was still raging around him while he witnessed that kiss between Hermione and Longbottom.

No, no, he did not care!

Just to prove himself right, he turned on the spot and walked back the way he had come from. He certainly was not going to curse them. He did not care about the whole thing enough to be bothered to curse them. His angry magic, though, insisted in crackling around him furiously, while he tried to get as much distance between himself and Hermione as fast as possible.

Why should I stop that git from kissing her, anyway? Tom thought derisively as he descended the stairs in direction of the dungeons. That empty-headed blood-traitor was probably the only one still willing to kiss Hermione. Seriously, who would ever want to kiss a disgusting Mudblood? A condescending sneer twisted up Tom's face as he entered the dungeons and walked towards the Slytherin common room.

The sneer was quickly wiped off his face, as he started to wonder what those two were doing now. Unbidden, images of Hermione and Longbottom alone in a deserted classroom sprang up in his mind. Those images managed to re-kindle Tom's angry magic. Now that he angrily stomped down a corridor, only one thought unrelentingly flew through Tom's mind.

Hermione was cheating on him with that Gryffindor idiot!

This revelation sent his already riled up magic into another violent fit of temper. Tom had to stop and collect his composure to prevent his magic from crackling around him furiously. His magic was really rather strange lately, wasn't it? He tried to ignore the fact that it only reacted in strange ways when Hermione was around. But it certainly had nothing to do with that witch! The only reason he
was interested in her was because she possessed two of the Deathly Hallows and because she was a
time traveller.

…and a filthy liar!

Tom nodded sharply in confirmation of that thought. Yes, the Hallows and her time travel, that was
the reason he was interested in her. Everything else just didn't bother him at all. Tom stood before the
damp wall that was the entrance to his common room. He stared with narrowed eyes at the wall but
didn't say the password. Again, the picture of Hermione pressed against Longbottom, kissing him,
ghosted through Tom's mind.

Clearly, what made him so angry was that a worthless Mudblood was in possession of one of the
most powerful magical artefacts ever. The Unbeatable Wand was part of magical history. On top of
that, Hermione was a liar. She had hoodwinked him, and she withheld important information from
him. She had travelled through time and had lied to him since she had got here. Only Merlin knew
what she really wanted here. A sharp frown appeared between Tom's eyebrows. It was long enough
that he had watched this travesty. He should finally take action. He should show that little Mudblood
what it meant to defy him. He would get the Hallows from her and he would force her tell him all her
secrets. He wondered how he could have tolerated this for so long. A lousy Mudblood should not be
allowed to own something as valuable as the Hallows.

I will take that wand from her, he thought while his magic still raged inside of him. As that thought
brushed his mind, Tom forcefully tried to regain his cool. He took in a deep breath of air. Why did he
lose his temper like this? Hadn't he already decided not to do anything rash concerning Hermione?
While his logical side could consent with that, his magic was a completely different matter. It ran
wild inside of him, angrily demanding to be set free. He could barely control it anymore. He really
needed to calm down before he did something rash. Sure, he had to somehow wrench all her secrets
from Hermione, but he really shouldn't do that right now. There was too much unclear yet, he
couldn't attack her now.

While he had that rational thought, his resolution was broken as yet another image rushed through his
head. Pictures of Hermione in bed with Longbottom flooded his mind and Tom immediately lost
control of his magic. It left his body and bristled rabidly around him, tugging at him and ordering him
to take action. How dare she cheat on him with that disgusting Gryffindor berk? Hermione was
certainly not permitted to kiss or even sleep with anybody else. She was his. His property!

It was then, as Tom stood before the entrance to the Slytherin common room and those images
invaded his mind, that his composure finally left him. He didn't say the password to open the
entrance to the common room. Instead, he turned on the spot and walked back the way he had come
from. His magic still danced around him, crackling with fury. That disgusting Mudblood had played
around with him for long enough. He wasn't going to accept anymore of her mockery. What did he
need to make plans for anyway? Why would he need to be cautious around her? She was nothing
but a worthless Muggle. If he attacked her, she wouldn't stand a chance. She was weak, and he
would finally show her how inferior she really was.

By now, Tom had given up on trying to control his angry magic. He didn't stop it from storming
around him as a violent tempest. He was going to take the Unbeatable Wand from the Mudblood,
and then he was going to force her to finally reveal all her disgusting secrets. She was going to beg
him for mercy, but he wouldn't stop. Not before she finally acknowledged the fact that she was his
property and completely submitted to him. By breaking her, he would prove how worthless and
powerless Hermione really was. She would lie whimpering at his feet, where she belonged.

There was no way she could win against him.
The wind was ruffling up her hair, making it even more of a mess. Hermione stood on the platform of the Astronomy tower. She was in need of a refuge after what just had happened. She still felt very bad that she had had to turn down Longbottom. She knew that he liked her very much, she had known that for quite some time now. But she just didn't feel the same for him. Hopefully he would get over it. She really didn't want to lose him as a friend. She had already lost too much of them.

Longbottom had told her that he was going down to the Quidditch pitch to have an extra training. Hermione had known, though, that he just wanted to be alone. She could understand him. Because she wanted to be alone, too. That was why she now stood here on the Astronomy Tower. It always helped her calming her mind to stand on top of the highest tower and to let her gaze wander over the landscape of Hogwarts' grounds and beyond. The rough wilderness of Scotland made her feel small and insignificant. In a weird way that made her problems appear small and insignificant, too.

That kiss between her and Longbottom had painfully shown her how very much isolated she really was. She was lost. Completely and utterly lost in more than one way. She was stuck in a dead end. With her magic gone and especially without the Elder Magic, how was she supposed to ever find a way back home? Even if Dumbledore now defeated Grindelwald, gained the Elder Wand and Hermione stole it from him, how would she use the wand if there was no magic in her? Peverell's manuscript had been a dead end, too, because she was too stupid to understand it. The only way to gain all three Deathly Hallows would be to defeat Tom and steal the Resurrection Stone from him. It just seemed like she was doomed to remain stranded in this damn time period forever.

"What am I going to do now?" she whispered the question to the uncaring wilderness of Scotland.

To be condemned to stay here in the wrong time was an unbearable thought for her. Was that her punishment? For all the things she had done during the war? She would be forced to witness how the future unfolded in front of her again. She would watch how Tom Riddle abandoned the last human part of him and surrendered himself completely to the dark. He would lose so much of himself that the thing left over could only be called Lord Voldemort, not Tom anymore. Then he would throw the country into a war, kindled and maintained by nothing but hate. Images of Lord Voldemort flashed through her mind. He had covered the whole country with a campaign of hate against all people with Muggle background. Voldemort's hate had been the most terrible thing Hermione ever had to face. She had so hoped never to be confronted with that hate again. Still, his hate had found her here. It managed to scare her to death, that dark force behind his bottomless hate. Lord Voldemort was still as frightening as ever he had been. And Hermione was unable to stop him. She knew that Voldemort's hate could only be stopped by killing him. But Hermione would never be able to kill Tom. Even now that he treated her like dirt, she would never raise her wand against him to kill.

*That's assuming I will ever get my magic back*, she thought numbly. Was that it? Fate had played a cruel trick on her? *Too bad, but chin up. It could be worse.*? Not for the first time Hermione just wished she had never been hurled back in time but had just died there in the Ministry of Magic. At least then she would have been together with Harry and Ron.

As Hermione was so deeply lost in her dark thoughts, she started as she heard the door, leading on the platform, being pushed open. Students not often came here, at least not at this time of the day. She turned around and immediately stiffened as she saw Tom standing by the door. He was staring at her and his eyes radiated nothing but hate as they glimmered in a crimson red colour. Hermione's gaze involuntarily wandered over his form and she noticed with dread that he had his wand in his hand. Her eyes snapped back at his face, and she was again overwhelmed by the murderous look she found. His blood red eyes seemed to search the platform of the Astronomy Tower as if he expected
to find some-one else here. As he found no-one, he glared back at her and made a threatening step
towards her. Hermione shrank away from him. It again struck her how utterly defenceless she was.
Her magic was down, most likely never to come back. Pulling her wand would be a waste of time
because it was nothing more than a wooden stick to her. She was completely at Tom's mercy and he
was looking at her with so much malice that Hermione doubted he would show her any.

Suddenly, he waved his wand and Hermione felt herself being hurled to the floor. She collided hard
with the flagstones of the platform. Before she could catch her breath his magic hit her again and she
was thrown against the banister. She tried to dampen the impact with her hands, but she didn't quite
manage and her head hit the banister hard. Blood was starting to flow down the side of her face.
Hermione tried to shakily get up into a sitting position. Then she faced Riddle again. He had walked
over to her and stood now just a few steps away. Hermione kneeled before him and looked up into
his steel hard eyes.

"Where do you come from?" he asked her. His voice was cold and threatening but otherwise
completely devoid of any emotion.

She continued to stare at him. Her body hurt where his magic had hit her, and all she could do was
stare at him in disbelief. Why did he ask that? Riddle knew where she came from. He knew at least
the cover story she had come up with. 'Hermione DeCerto' came from France. Why did he ask? She
stared up at his enraged face and had to swallow hard as a horrible apprehension built up in her. As
she didn't answer anything, Riddle took a threatening step towards her, his eyes still glinting
dangerously in a malign red colour. Then he continued to interrogate her,

"When have you been born?" His voice was a low hiss, making the hair on the back of her neck
stand on end.

This simple question managed to make Hermione freeze in shock. She stared up at him with wide
scared eyes, not able to react in any way. His eyes were boring into hers, promising severe retaliation
if she were to disobey him and not answer. Hermione could barely breathe as fear constricted her
chest.

He knows. Hermione realised frantically. She could tell just by looking at him. He had somehow
managed to find out that she was in the wrong time period. He knew that she came from the future.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out? That I wouldn't notice your pathetic attempt to botch up the
Ortus potion?" Riddle sneered at her. Then the hard edge in his voice was back as he hissed, "How
did you manage to travel back? Did you use the Unbeatable Wand? What are you trying to do here?
You are going to tell me everything."

No, he can't know! She had done everything to prevent this. Hermione felt panic slowly taking over.
That dangerous glint in his eyes told her that he would force her to speak should she refuse to tell
him the truth. Hermione could feel her heart beating incredibly fast as she had to look at that hate,
blazing in his grey eyes. This was the thing she had always feared. Since that war had started she had
been scared. Scared that one day, she would be alone and would have to face the enemy without her
friends by her side. Hermione started feeling very faint. She was so frightened, but at the same time
she knew that she could not tell him anything. So Hermione stared up at Riddle with wide, scared
eyes and then, without saying anything, she just slowly shook her head, thus condemning herself to
whatever fate Riddle had in store for her.

As Riddle saw her reaction his face remained to be a blank mask but then he again waved his wand
and said in a soft voice, "Frigus."

Hermione fell down as his spell hit her, biting coldness ripping at her. It felt like every warmth was
leaving her body. The cold wrapped around her unpitying. It cut into her like blades, slicing away her skin. Even her breathing was now condensing when she exhaled. Her hands and her feet were slowly getting numb as the cold intensified. Just as Hermione thought she would lose her consciousness Riddle ended his curse. The unrelenting coldness left her again. A hand caressed her cheek and she opened her eyes. Riddle had crouched down in front of her and ran a hand gently over the side of her face while he looked at her softly.

Then he whispered, and his voice was suddenly suave, his tone kind and compelling, "Why are you after the Hallows? You can tell me. I know you are trying to unite them."

Hermione trembled as she felt his hand, skimming so gently over her cheek. Panic coursed through her, but she still remained silent.

Then Riddle spoke again and his voice was still as soft as silk, "Where is the cloak?"

Hermione did nothing but stare blankly back at him. She still lay on the cold stone floor, breathing hard. He knew everything! He knew about her time travel, about the wand and the Hallows. He even knew that she had stolen the cloak. How had he managed to find out so much about her secrets? Panic had a tight grip on her.

"Where is the Invisibility Cloak?" Riddle asked again in that suave tone while a disarming smile graced his features.

Hermione knew she had to keep a clear head, so she forced herself to calm down. However he had managed to learn the truth, there was no way she would ever surrender the cloak to him. She could not, would not, tell him. Not about the cloak or the future. Grim determination took hold of her and she suppressed her fear and steeled herself for whatever Riddle would do to her.

"You better tell me everything, love." Riddle shrouded his threat with a sympathetic tone.

She balled her hands, which were still icy cold, tightly into fists. Fear was coursing through her but she looked up at him defiantly.

"Fuck off," she hissed aggressively.

As he heard her reply, frightening anger twisted up Riddle's handsome face. He stood up abruptly and stared darkly down at her.

"It's time to end your pack of lies, Muggle," he hissed at her, his voice filled with cold malice.

Hermione stared up at him while fear ripped at her. That bottomless hate in his cold eyes scared her to death, but she was not going to tell him anything. As she remained silent, Riddle whirled his wand and threw the next curse at her.

"Dilaniare."

A searing pain wandered over her. It felt like an invisible force tried to wrench her very skin off her flesh. Then the pain wandered deeper into her and it felt as if that force really tried to rip her body in shreds. Hermione whimpered painfully. She wasn't able to scream, the pain didn't allow it. She squeezed her eyes shut while it felt like something from within her body ate her alive, gnawed at her flesh and mauled her. Violent coughs shook her, and she could taste blood in her mouth.

Finally, Riddle ended the curse and the pain slowly released her. Hermione remained to lie on the ground, curled up in a ball while the coughs still shook her. Her insides hurt terribly, and she felt sick from the after-effects of the pain. Tears were running down her cheeks. She hadn't even noticed...
when she had started to cry. She was still lying limply on the stone floor as she noticed how Riddle grabbed her right wrist. He forcefully rolled up the sleeve of her uniform robe and her blouse. Hermione was powerless to stop him as he pulled her wand from its holster. She just numbly thought how he didn't even have to take the trouble as her magic was gone anyway. She certainly didn't pose any threat at the moment.

"What are you trying to accomplish here?" She heard his icy cold voice saying.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see his face any longer. Though she could not blind out the soft sounds of his steps as he slowly circled her fallen form. Next Hermione felt Riddle grabbing her by her hair and yanking her up. She screamed in pain as he wrenched at her so brutally. Riddle held her by her hair tightly and forced her to look at him. She did look up at him but the only thing she could find on his face was terrible hate and a murderous sheen in his cold eyes.

"I will only ask you one more time," Riddle hissed at her in a frightening voice full of hate.

Hermione could feel more tears, running down her cheeks, as she stared at him with wide eyes. Her body was trembling uncontrollably as he looked at her, his eyes cold and uncaring. The darkness in those deep wells told her that they were not Tom Riddle's eyes any longer.

"Why did you travel back in time?" Voldemort's voice was icy cold.

His tone made it very clear that he would never tolerate any disobedience. Hermione knew what he was capable of and this knowledge made her tremble in fear. Still, there was no way she could tell him. A sharp pain came from her head where he wrenched at her hair so violently. His eyes were boring into her. Hermione couldn't say anything as she stared up at him. The hate still burned behind his eyes and had completely displaced the grey but now shone in that terrible blood red colour. Hermione could barely breathe as she looked at that ghastly flash in his eyes. He abruptly wrenched at her hair again, forcing another scream of pain from her.

"Answer me!"

Hermione threw in a shaky breath of air. She actually wanted to divulge everything - just to get away from him, from Voldemort. She wasn't ready to face him again. Her heart was hammering away in her chest and she felt sick from fear. He still wrenched achingly at her hair as he glared down at her, demanding an answer. He wanted her to tell him everything. He wanted her to give up and surrender completely to him. He was Lord Voldemort. He would stop at nothing. She had seen what he could do.

"If you don't tell me what I want to know, you will regret it," Voldemort told her. His voice was terribly calm and his eyes hard as steel as he looked pitilessly down at her.

Hermione stared at him. Suddenly she couldn't anymore see past that hate burning in his grey eyes. Everything else was gone, only he remained, Lord Voldemort. Pictures of the war were rushing through her head. She saw the remnants of her home, smoldering before her. The corpses of her parents lying somewhere under the debris of her childhood. She again witnessed the gruesome battles she had fought in. People were dying around her while she tried to stay alive. Lord Voldemort's hate was so strong it had torn a whole country apart. It had spread like a highly infectious illness and had left behind a destroyed and broken land.

How could she fight against such hate?

Even though she had known how deep his hate ran, she still had tried to fight against him. He had been a terrible enemy. Overwhelmingly strong, terrifying...
...inhuman.

Hermione could see it again, burning in his eyes, the hate. It still managed to make her tremble in fear, that bottomless hate. She was again confronted with his darkness. Since the war had started-No, since she had entered the magical world as she had been eleven, she had feared the hate.

"You will tell me, Hermione," Voldemort hissed at her, cruelty lacing his cold words. "You can speak now, or I will force the words from you. But you will speak."

Hermione trembled heavily as she looked up at him. She didn't want to fight against his hate ever again. She just wanted to give up. In the end, she had to obey him. He had won, hadn't he? She was unable to stand against his hate and cruelty. How could she defeat such darkness? She was powerless.

Hermione opened her mouth to finally submit to him. But as she looked up at the hate, raging in his eyes, she suddenly noticed something.

...something is different, she thought hesitantly as she stared up into Voldemort's red eyes. That all-consuming hate was still smoldering in those eyes. Its ferocity threatened to devour her. She could barely breathe. But still... something had changed. It was just a feeling, but it was unmistakably there. Hermione was still afraid, still scared. She was at the brim of breaking and finally surrendering herself to him. But it was now, as she was confronted with his abysmal hate so directly, that she realised, something had really changed. It wasn't his hate that was different, for it raged with the same cruelty like it always had.

No, it was something inside of her that was different. At the very moment, as she was ready to bow down before him and submit to him, Hermione found that she wasn't able to do that. It was only now, that she finally understood. She didn't really have a choice in this matter. Whether she wanted to or not, she had to fight. Whether she was alone and abandoned by everyone, she still had to fight on. She was stripped off her power and completely defenceless, but she would not give up. She missed her family, her friends, Harry, and Ron, but it was time to go on without them. They had accompanied her as far as they could go, now was her turn to stand alone. Hermione knew it would cost her a lot to oppose him, to stand against him, but she was finally ready to pay the price.

Whoever he was, enemy, friend, lover ...or monster, she was not going to let his hate touch her ever again. He thought he could destroy her with his hate? He thought he could mistreat her, break her and force her to submit to him?

No. She wouldn't let him! He had already taken so much from her. Here was where she drew the line.

Hermione didn't avoid his steel hard eyes, but met his gaze squarely. Her heart was thumbing away in fear, but she was able to stand above the fear. She could feel it, but at the same time she was able to distance herself from it. Fear was a good thing. It served to warn of dangers. But Hermione chose to face the danger, she didn't need the fear anymore. A new found resolution backed her up. Then she opened her mouth thus sealing her fate,

"I will never tell you anything."

Voldemort just hurled her at the floor. She collided hard with the flagstones and whimpered in pain. She hurt all over and remained to be lying on the floor.

"Do you think I am playing around here?" Voldemort asked in an eerily quiet voice.
Hermione remained to be silent. She knew well enough that this had stopped to be a game a very long time ago. She also knew that, she could do nothing against him. He had all the advantages on his side. Her magic was down, and he had stolen her wand anyway. He didn't even need magic to subdue her at this point in time, because physically he was the stronger one, too. She was neither able to escape him nor to beat him. Hermione knew that she had already lost this battle.

*Maybe the battle...*

It didn't mean he was going to win everything. His objective was to get her to tell him all her secrets, to make her tell him the truth. By forcing her to speak, he wanted to show her that, being a Muggleborn, she would always lose to him.

He wanted to break her.

That, she wasn't going to allow.

It was then that his next curse hit her. It hurt. She could feel his magic slowly creeping over her body until it enclosed her completely. Every contact his magic made, hurt. The magic didn't stay on the surface. Hermione gasped in pain as there were strands of dark magic invading her. It was even worse than the curse he had used before. It felt like sharp knives were mercilessly rammed into her. She had to cough. This time, though, her mouth was instantly filled with her blood. She rolled up in a tight ball and pressed her hand over her mouth as she continued to cough violently. Hot tears were running from her eyes as the pain intensified. It felt like those knives were turned inside the wounds they had inflicted. After an eternity, finally, his magic left her again. Hermione cried out in pain as the knives were ripped from her body. She didn't have time to catch her breath as she could feel a hand, grabbing her shoulder tightly, then she was brutally turned around so that she lay on her back. The hand clutched her by the collar and pushed her hard into the stone floor.

"Why are you here?" a steel hard voice hissed at her.

Hermione opened her eyes and found Voldemort looming over her. He had crouched down beside her and held her tightly by her collar. Hermione looked up into his crimson eyes. They were filled with so much malice.

*How strange*, she thought as she examined that malice with an odd detachment. Strange, how his hate didn't manage to touch her anymore. Her mind was calm as she stared up at him. His hate could not hurt her anymore. For so long she had had to fight against this hate. It had frightened her and had even followed her into her dreams. Now, though, the hate could burn and rage, but she knew it would never touch her again.

As Hermione looked up into those cold red eyes, the fear was gone. She was not going to let him break her. He was Voldemort, an unspeakable monster, who only spread devastation and fear. But he was also Tom, a boy who had feelings and was human. The monster had somehow lost its horror.

With an effort, Hermione raised her arm. It hurt, but she didn't care. Blood was staining the hand she extended towards him. Voldemort seemed to be taken aback by her actions as he didn't immediately curse her when she cupped his cheek in her hand. Only his eyes widened slightly as she made contact with his skin. Otherwise his face remained to be completely free of any emotion. Hermione could still feel the tears running from her eyes, but she knew that her face mirrored the same indifference he was exhibiting. But unlike him, she wasn't putting up a mask anymore. Then she spoke. Her voice was rasped and soft, but it was also firm and deadly calm.

"Try as you might, I will not yield."
That was it, her truth. He was not going to win. She wouldn't let him. He might be stronger now regarding magical and physical strength, but aside from that he held no power over her.

As a reaction to her declaration, he tightened his grip on her collar to the point where she could barely breathe. There was still blood trickling from her mouth as she looked up at him. They stared at each other for a long time. If he wanted to end it now, she could do nothing to stop him, but she would never tell him what he wanted to hear. He could rage all he wanted, in the end he wouldn't get what he was seeking for.

As she looked up into his crimson eyes, she could suddenly feel a soft tickle of another presence in her mind. It was his mind that now brushed against hers. He obviously tried to legilimise her. Hermione should have been concerned now. Her magic was gone and with that her Occlumency shields. She was not able to keep him from entering her mind. She should be concerned, …but she wasn't. Her mind was calm. He wouldn't be able to sort through her memories, because she had them under control. She could feel him searching in her mind, trying to find what he was seeking for. Her thoughts and memories, though, were like a vast ocean. He could plunge into them, but he wouldn't be able to get a grip of them. Whenever he reached something that could be of interest to him, Hermione calmly pushed it away from him, never disturbing the still surface of the ocean of memories, never leaving behind any tracks. Faced with her predominance, his attempts to force the essential memories from her were getting more and more violent. Her head started to hurt piercingly from his attacks as she could feel him ripping through that ocean, churning up its surface. His presence in her mind was pure hate, fury and anger as he ravaged through her memories. He was losing control over himself. Hermione, though, remained to be perfectly composed as she moved her memories calmly around him. The angrier he got, the easier it was to follow his destructive force and push the memories out of his reach. He was getting no-where.

He was losing.

As that thought – or more like, conviction – echoed through Hermione's mind, she suddenly felt his presence pulling itself completely from her mind. She blinked as she felt him retreating from her. Then she looked up at him. He was still bent over her while he grabbed her tightly by her collar. A blank mask concealed his every emotion. Only his eyes radiated off the familiar hate. It burned fiercer than ever, but its power was broken. The disdain, visible in the stare he hit her with, made her feel like burning to cinders. His hate was still overwhelming and horrible and cruel. But it did not touch her anymore. It could not disturb that peace of her mind.

She would not break.

Suddenly, he yanked her up by her collar. Hermione cried out in pain at the unexpected movement. He forced her up until her face was mere inches away from his.

"Do you really think a Mudblood could ever stand up to me?" he hissed at her in a low, dangerous voice, while the murderous glimmer never left his eyes. "You will never achieve anything. You are scum and you will always be scum. You are worth nothing."

As she locked eyes with him, Hermione couldn't stop it. It was completely out of place. But now a smile slowly curled up the corners of her mouth as she stared up at him. The smile never reached her eyes. It was cold and unconnected with any positive emotion, but it still was there, proclaiming her triumph.

She was free.

She could see his eyes widen marginally as he saw that smile on her face, but then Voldemort didn't
say anything and just threw her at the floor. Her body screamed at her in pain as she collided hard with the flagstones of the floor. She raised her head slightly and just saw how he ended some spell he had cast previously. Maybe a notice-me-not charm, judging from his wand movements. Then he walked over to the entrance into the castle, but before he opened the door he turned around to her again. His fury and hate were still hidden behind a cold mask as his eyes wandered over her fallen form.

Voldemort opened his mouth, and his voice was disturbingly normal as he spoke. Still, Hermione could hear traces of his anger, lacing his words, "I advise you to not tell anyone about our little talk."

He turned and left Hermione lying on the platform. She wondered why he had stopped his attempt of forcing the truth out of her. But she knew that he would have never found out anything anyway. Maybe he had, for once, accepted his defeat. She didn't really care.

Her breathing was laboured as she remained lying on the ground. Her whole body hurt. It felt like her insides were broken somehow and her head hurt fiercely. But she could still feel it: a smile, tugging at the corners of her mouth.

It was impossible for him to win. He could do whatever he wanted, there would be no victory for him. Lord Voldemort was the most dangerous wizard she had ever met. In her past, he had always been this dark and shadowy menace. Something terrifying. Something that they had to stop but was actually too powerful and too evil to ever be defeated. A dark figure in the background, responsible for all things evil in the world. Now, though, this abstract picture of the dark monster was gone. It was broken, as much as the power his hate had had over her. He had lost, and he would always lose. In the future, he had thrown a whole country into war, he had tried to pull them all down into the darkness where only his hate existed. In the end, though, he had been defeated. People had fought and died to overcome him. From the start, he had been doomed. Here in the past, it was the same. He might be incredibly powerful and very resourceful, but that didn't change the fact that he would never win.

Hermione tried to get up into a sitting position. Her body protested against the movement and nausea hit her as she shakily sat up. But she had decided to just ignore the pains coming from her body. She grabbed the banister and pulled herself up. And the Scottish landscape was still there, she noticed. Unaffected and beautiful.

She reached into the pocket of her robe and produced a handkerchief out of it. She used it to wipe her face clean of all the blood and tears. There seemed to be a cut at the side of her head. She pressed the handkerchief against the cut to stop the bleeding. She would need the bruise and cut ointment later. And a pain relief potion. Hopefully there still was one of those in her trunk. She didn't want to go to the Hospital Wing. Hermione leaned her aching body against the banister. She felt shaky and weak.

How had he found out? Hermione shook her head slightly as she stared vacantly in front of her. She had tried so hard to cover up her tracks, but he had seen right through her. He now knew almost everything about her. No, not the most important part! He might know that she came from the future, but he didn't know anything about his own future. He didn't know about Harry or the prophecy. And she certainly would never tell him.

She breathed in deeply, causing her insides to throb painfully. She bit her lower lip sharply. It was only now as she had escaped him that she realized how much power Tom Riddle had always had over her. Back in her time period, he had dictated her whole life. Here, in the past, he had again dominated everything. How had he been able to control her so much?

*Because I gave him that power!* she answered her own question. That was over, though. She was
not going to let his hate dictate her life any longer. He could still attack her, hurt her and maybe even kill her, but he would never break her. Maybe he had found out about her secrets, Hermione thought grimly. He did know where and when she came from, but what did that change? Nothing. The knowledge of the future was safe with her.

She again breathed in deeply. This time she ignored the sharp pain coming from her insides. Then she removed the handkerchief from the side of her head. It was soaked in blood and Hermione could feel new blood, trickling through her hair and down her temple. She folded the handkerchief anew and pressed it against the cut. Then she pushed herself away from the banister and stood unsupported. The pain still tore at her. Her whole body was sore. She staggered towards the entrance door anyway. She was going to head back for her dormitory. It was still early, if she was lucky, her dorm mates were still down in the common room or somewhere else. If she was really unlucky, then her friends would be down in the common room. They would surely ask her what had happened to her. If she hadn't lost her magic, she would have been able to just apparate into the dormitory. Then again if her magic wasn't down, she would probably not be so hurt.

Hermione walked towards her common room. Luckily the Gryffindor common room wasn't too far away from the Astronomy Tower. She didn't think she would be able to walk much longer. She limped to the common room, while trying to ignore the pain. Finally, she arrived before the portrait of the Fat Lady who seemed to be having a nap. Hermione stood before the portrait and breathed in deeply. Then she wiped with her handkerchief a last time over her temple. Hopefully there was no blood visible anymore. She cautiously knocked against the frame of the portrait. The Fat Lady opened her eyes, yawned and stretched her arms tiredly.

"Why do they always have to disturb my beauty sleep?" she complained accusingly to no-one in particular, then she looked at Hermione.

Hermione didn't reply anything but just whispered the pass word, "Nutria."

"All right, all right," the Fat Lady responded, her eyes already closed again.

The portrait sprung forward, thus admitting her in. Hermione entered the common room and was greeted by the noise of chatter. There were quite a few Gryffindors in the room. They were playing some card games, talking with their friends or just doing their homework. Hermione didn't pay them any attention but made her way towards the stairs leading to her dorm. Her body hurt all over and vertigo made her almost stumble. She just wanted to sit down and rest.

"Hermione, wait!" a voice suddenly yelled as she had almost reached the stairs.

Hermione suppressed a groan and turned towards that voice. Weasley was walking towards her.

"Hey, 'Mione," he said cheerfully as he had reached her.

"Hey," Hermione answered, trying to make her voice sound strong.

Now that she looked at the redhead in front of her, she noticed how she had problems focusing her eyes on him because she felt so dizzy.

"Did you see Marc anywhere?" Weasley asked. "We actually wanted to work on that essay for Kettleburn, but he never showed up."

"I… I think he's down… on the Quidditch pitch," Hermione answered. She couldn't prevent her voice from sounding heavy and somehow breathless. She really needed to sit down. The pain was unbearable.
"Hmm. The Quidditch pitch..." Weasley said contemplatively. Then his face lit up and he said, "That's a good idea. I think, I'll join him."

"Mhm," Hermione made. She really felt sick.

Weasley was just about to turn around as he hesitated. "Something wrong?" he asked worried. "You don't look good."

"...no," she replied and forced a reassuring smile on her face. "I've just got... got a head ache...that is all. I think I'll... lie down for a while."

"Oh. Okay," Weasley said, eyeing her still with concern shining in his eyes. "If you're sure."

"Yes, yes. Don't worry," Hermione replied.

There was blood slowly trickling from the wound on the side of her head. She quickly raised her hand and put it on her temple so Weasley wouldn't see the blood. She cast him another smile before she turned around and continued her way to the stairs. Pain ripped at her and Hermione moaned softly as she climbed the stairs. Then she finally reached her dorm and cautiously opened the door. Her dorm mates weren't here. She tumbled into the deserted room and breathed out in relief. She had made it.

With unsteady steps she limped towards her bed. Cautiously she sank down. As she bent to sit, she was instantly hit by a piercing pain which resulted into another fit of coughing. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, but that didn't stop tears of pain from running from them. She desperately tried to get her breathing back in control by taking in steady breaths of air. The pain deep inside her didn't completely vanish, but at least it eased to a more tolerable level. The coughing slowly subsided, though her breathing remained to be rattled. Hermione opened her eyes and released the murder grip she had had on the fabric of her blanket. This agony she was in scared her a bit. She had no idea what spells Tom had used on her. She hadn't recognized any of the curses he had thrown her way. It had clearly been Dark Magic, of that she was sure, but she had no idea of the extent of damage it had caused.

A sharp pain suddenly seared through her, mercilessly bringing her back to the problem at hand. She whimpered painfully and wrapped one arm around her stomach. It hurt and that still scared her, but hopefully she was already over the worst.

Maybe I should have gone to see Madam Dulan. But how would she explain her injuries? Madam Dulan would instantly know that Hermione had been hit by Dark Magic. And then what? Tell the truth? That her ex-boyfriend hated her to the point where he obviously wanted to see her dead?

Hermione swallowed hard at her bitter thoughts but there were no tears falling from her eyes. Tom had attacked her. She had been defenceless and hadn't even tried to strike back, but that hadn't stopped him in any way. Was she shocked by his cruelty? Yes. But was she surprised?

No.

In the end, he was Lord Voldemort. Of course he didn't have any scruples to hurl dark curses at another person. He wouldn't care if he injured anyone. He had attacked her. In his eyes, she was nothing more than a worthless Mudblood.

Hermione wiped with her hand over her face. She shook her head, as if to finally dispel her thoughts. It was horrible. Then again, everything he did, hurt, Hermione thought callously. She deserved something like this anyway. She should never have trusted him, and now she was paying the price
for her sentimental mistake. She should really go to the Hospital Wing and show everybody what a twisted and evil man Tom Riddle really was. Instead of getting up from the bed, she just reached for her trunk and pulled it towards her. Then she angled her first aid kit out of the trunk. She opened the wooden box and started to sort through her somehow reduced stock but all she came up with was a bottle of painrelief potion. Without being able to cast any diagnostic spells, she didn't dare take the risk of worsening her condition by drinking random potions.

A painrelief potion was all she would dare to drink. She uncorked the bottle before she downed its content. She sighed in relief as she felt the sharp pain in her stomach and chest slowly subside. Then she relaxed slightly and leaned back in her bed.

Hardly five minutes had passed as suddenly a burning pain flared up in her and Hermione cried softly out. The burning intensified and the piercing pain returned with a vengeance. The pain got worse to the point where she started to feel sick. Hermione got up from the bed and hurried, as quickly as she could manage, over to the bathroom. Her head spun and the pain had a brutally tight grasp on her as she staggered to the toilet. She sank down on the tiles of the bathroom and had to throw up. Hermione gasped for air but neither the sickness nor that horrible pain left her, so she curled up into a ball to reduce the agony she was in. It seemed she was in for a rough night.

Her whole body hurt, but she didn't feel despaired. It had taken her a long time and she had had to sacrifice a lot on the way, but in the end she had prevailed. Finally, she had been able to break down that wall of fear and hate Lord Voldemort had erected around her. His hate would never touch her again.

She was free.

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Tom sat on his bed in the Slytherin dorm and eyed the black wand in his hand suspiciously. He could feel his magic flowing pleasantly through the dark wood. It definitely was a fine wand. It felt easy in his hand and seemed to support his magic fairly well. He gave it a testing swish. His magic coursed promptly through the wand and formed into a spell. A book, lying on his desk, floated in the air. His Levitation charm worked quite good with the black wand. It almost felt as familiar as if he had used his own wand. Definitely a wand that supplemented with his magic, Tom thought as he looked at the wand, lying on the palm of his hand.

A good wand... but is it more than that? He hadn't felt anything special while using it. No boost of power, no incredible enhancement of his magic. He held the wand properly in his hand again and then summoned all his magic. The familiar angry current of power surged through him. It was so forceful that parts of his dark magic bristled viciously around his body. It was very powerful, but it was not changed at all. His magic was as it always had been.

He let the flow of magic die down as he looked annoyed at the black wand. If that stick of wood was indeed the most powerful wand ever created, then it certainly hadn't sworn allegiance to him. Why was that blasted wand serving the Mudblood but refused to work for him? Tom felt anger, bubbling up in him, and he closed his eyes to block out the sight of the wand. Now, the only thing he could see were her eyes. They were gazling at him. Pain was swimming in those brown eyes. There was more, though. Her eyes bored into him with an unbroken resolve. Even after he had beaten her, and after he had forcefully plunged into her very mind, she still refused to budge even an inch. She did not give him anything. She was never going to break. He couldn't win…

Tom's eyes flew open. That was utterly ridiculous! A Mudblood would never be able to resist him. He lowered his eyes. The black wand still lay innocently in his hand. This was so odd. He had won, hadn't he? Finally he had defeated Hermione. He had showed her that he was superior to her and had
taken the wand from her. It had been a success. He had won!

But then why was that stabbing pain still in his chest? Why wasn't he satisfied, now that the wand was in his possession? Why did he feel so dejected? This had been his aim, hadn't it? The wand. He had wanted to own it because it was valuable and powerful. Since he had found out about Hermione's Muggle parents and about her possession of the Elder Wand, that well-known avidly feeling inside of him had shifted from Hermione to the wand. Now, he had obtained the wand, but it didn't feel like a success. He didn't feel satisfied at all and he didn't understand it.

He pensively let his index finger skim over the smooth black surface of the wand in his hand. It was polished and shiny. Obviously the Mudblood had taken good care of her wand. It was grotesque, he thought. She wasn't even supposed to own a wand. Yes! It was utterly disgusting, how all those Mudbloods were allowed to run around with a wand of their own. Tom wanted to, but strangely enough he wasn't able to muster neither fury nor indignation. It really wasn't a crime, that he had taken the wand from her, was it? He had done the magical world a favour by taking the wand from someone so impure.

Still, there was no feeling of triumph as he scanned the black wand in his hand. Instead, he wondered what Hermione was doing right now. Did she manage to reach the Hospital Wing? Or was she still lying on the Astronomy Tower? Suddenly, he felt the urge to go back to the tower himself and check. He shook his head in frustration. Why should he check on her? He didn't care! All he cared about was the wand, Tom decided angrily.

Was this small piece of wood really the Deathstick, the Unbeatable Wand? If so, then it had decided not to serve Tom. He furrowed his brow as he looked down at the wand in his hand. He had been so sure that this was the secret behind Hermione's impressive magic. She could do things with her magic even he was unable to compete with. Just now, even as he had apparently been the superior one, she had again proven that she could easily outdo him. He didn't have any chance to ever wrench her secrets from her by using Legilimency. There was no way a Mudblood could be stronger than him, the Heir of Slytherin. Tom had been so sure that it was the wand. He was disgusted with himself as he felt doubt, boiling up in him.

It just had to be true! In the future she had somehow managed to gain the Elder Wand. Why didn't its power work for him, though? Tom wondered angrily as he stared at the black wand. That the wand didn't react to him, frustrated him. Or rather it should frustrate him, but somehow he couldn't really concentrate on the wand in his hand. Instead, his thoughts flew back to Hermione. Was she still lying on the Astronomy Tower? He had used some very dark spells on her. She might be in need of help…

With a hiss of anger he slammed the black wand down on his bed and then glared at it darkly. Why would he care whether the Mudblood needed help? She didn't mean anything to him. She was beneath him, a lesser being. Yes, that was why he had attacked her, to finally show her how inferior she was. And he had succeeded.

Tom narrowed his eyes at the black wand lying on his bed as if he expected any objection from it. Of course, nothing came and Tom averted his eyes from the wand. He surely had won, but the expected feeling of triumph still didn't want to well up in him. Instead, he could again see the unbroken determination in Hermione's hazel eyes as she had stared at him. He could still feel her cold presence, wrapping around him, as he had searched through her mind. But he had defeated her, hadn't he? He thought in frustration. He had wanted to get the wand from her. His eyes wandered back to the black wand lying on the green quilt of his bed. And he had gotten the wand. That's all he had tried to get from her.
Ah, but that is not entirely true, a nasty voice hissed at him. Sure, he had wanted to steal the wand from her. But his main goal had been to make her tell him her every secret. He had expected her to submit to him. He had wanted to break her and prove that she was a worthless Mudblood, unable to resist him. He had cursed her, but Hermione hadn't broken down. She had refused to tell him anything. Tom had then decided to take the information directly from her mind. Again, Hermione hadn't divulged anything. He had been allowed to search through her mind, but he still hadn't managed to find anything.

Tom's eyes wandered over the black wood of her wand and he balled his hands into tight fists as realisation hit him.

He had lost.
What Is Repentance?

The building was on fire. Flames roared threateningly as they broke out of the windows, licking hungrily at the broken building. The window glass lay in shards as it hadn't been able to withstand the heat. The façade of the building was blackened where the flames ate away from it. Not even the charms and spells, used to hide the building from curious Muggle eyes, were able to resist the heat's force. The charms flickered and slowly died, revealing the inferno to any Muggle who might pass the tragedy. Quickly a crowd of people gathered in the street, staring with wide eyes at the burning building. The picture of a destroyed house was not new to them - their country had been shaken by war for the last four years - still, it was impossible to get used to the ravage. The faces of those witnesses were pale as they watched the building burn, the flames spitting dangerously as they greedily took down everything they touched. Some witnesses hastened away, wanting to quickly alert the fire brigade even though it was obvious that any help would be too late. The remaining people watched helplessly as the strange building burned down.

They didn't know where it had so suddenly appeared from. They all were quite sure that normally an abandoned, empty factory hall stood at its place, but now there was this strangely-built, rather big house. The huge, ornamented double-winged door, leading into the building, slowly turned black as the fire from within the building scorched it. Above the door was a sign. The few witnesses, who could read it before it was devoured by the flames, were deeply mystified. 'Département des Affaires Nés-Moldu', the sign read. It didn't make any sense.

But as the appearance of this weird building and the incomprehensible sign were indeed very strange, the witnesses couldn't dwell on the obvious oddness of the whole incident. They just hoped and prayed and begged whatever God they might believe in for a miracle.

For they could all hear it: screams coming from the inside of the building.

War had already taken much from the people, but there was no getting used to such screams. Some sank down to their knees, sobbing helplessly. Some stood rooted to the spot, with stony faces as they heard those terrible death cries. A few ran up to those singed entrance doors, trying to open them. Whatever they tried, though, the doors wouldn't budge. Even though the wood was weakened by the flames, it did not give in. It was inexplicable, this resistance. It was like a strange force forbid them to open the doors. As if there was an invisible wall, cruelly stopping the rescuers.

The witnesses could not do anything. They were only able to watch as the building slowly disappeared in a furious dance of flames. It did take an eternity until the screams stopped. Then the howling of the flames drowned out everything else, but the voices of the dying people echoed loudly in the ears of everyone who heard them…

A man stood on the roof of the house opposite the burning building. He was wearing grey trousers and a washed-out dark blue shirt. Overall, his attire was not looking unlike those of the witnesses down in the street. What separated this man from the people down in the street was the grin curling up his lips and that triumphant glint dancing in his eyes as he watched the fire …as he heard the screams. His tousled golden hair was tinted red by the light of the fire. The man seemed to be fascinated by the sight of the dying house. He didn't even unfix his gaze from the roaring flames as, suddenly, seven men appeared around him. They seemed to pop out from thin air. Those seven men all wore black cloaks, olive shirts, black combat trousers and black boots. They gathered around the golden haired man. Still, the man hadn't turned around to them. His eyes seemed to be drawn to the fire, while the cold grin never left his face. The seven men did not say anything. They stood at attention as they watched their leader, readily awaiting his orders.
Finally the golden haired man detached himself from the sight of the burning building and turned around. There was a hint of pride in his eyes as they wandered over the seven men.

"At ease," said Grindelwald in a soft voice.

A warm smile lit up his features and a mischievous twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"Good work, gents," he said, his eyes sparkling in amusement. "I knew you wouldn't fail me. This mission has been a success."

Grindelwald took a step towards the men.

"This will be a heavy blow to their morale," he announced happily as his eyes swept over the men in front of him.

He then stepped over to a burly young man with flaxen coloured hair. The man tensed as Grindelwald scanned him. The twinkle, though, never left Grindelwald's eyes.

"Your wards were quite admirable, Henger," Grindelwald said, the praise evoking a look of crazed bliss on the young man's face. "They never had a chance to take them down. Nicely locked them in."

He gave the flaxen-haired man a playful slap on the shoulder. The young man had a look of utter worship on his face as he saluted before his commander. Grindelwald smiled at him then turned away and addressed all his soldiers again.

"Good job, all of you," Grindelwald chuckled serenely, "We'll see how the ministry will react now. The ball is in their court."

He ran a hand through his already mussed golden hair, a charming smile on his lips.

"You are dismissed," he said, satisfaction lacing his words. "Regroup at headquarters."

The soldiers saluted, then the men disappeared the same way they had arrived. With a soft swish of black cloaks they were gone from the roof. Only one of them stayed behind. The red-haired man stepped closer to Grindelwald who, by now, had returned to watching the building burn. The red-haired man stood beside his commander as he looked down on the street. A crowd of Muggles had gathered. The red-haired man adjusted his glasses which seemed to be out-of-place on his hard face.

"This is only the beginning, Rousseau," Grindelwald suddenly spoke again, his voice soft and barely audible over the crackling of the fire.

"Yes, commander," Rousseau swiftly answered.

Silence again fell over them. It was a while until Rousseau asked hesitantly, "Am I allowed to speak?"

"Of course, you know I value your opinion," Grindelwald replied.

"Why do we confine ourselves to the mainland?" Rousseau asked cautiously. "The English Ministry is very influential. If we can sow fear amongst them, it would put us in an advantageous position."

"You are right," Grindelwald said pensively. He turned his head and let his eyes glide over his second-in-command. "Yet, I hesitate to step on British soil."

"Why?" Rousseau dared to ask.
"Dumbledore," Grindelwald admitted freely, seemingly not offended by the other man's question. "Albus Dumbledore?" Rousseau's voice was now tinged with surprise. "Yes," the dark wizard replied in a collected voice. "He is a very powerful wizard."

Rousseau watched his commander. Then he said tentatively, "And yet, he is hiding in that school."

"Yes, he is hiding." Grindelwald whispered, a soft smile tucking at the corners of his mouth. "But not from me. He is merely avoiding me. Just like I am avoiding him."

Grindelwald's eyes then left his second-in-command to again wander over the burning building. After a while he said in the same soft voice, "Though, we both know we can't continue this game of hide-and-seek forever."

Grindelwald's hand wandered to a pocket in his trousers and pulled his wand. He contemplated the wooden stick in his hand for a while. "At least now, I have an advantage over him."

The red-haired man furrowed his brow. He remembered the mission the commander had ordered to be carried out a few weeks ago. It had had something to do with that castle in Scotland, now that he thought on it. "What do you try finding in that castle, sir?" Rousseau asked reverentially.

A twinkle appeared in Grindelwald's eyes. He put his wand away. A smirk played mischievously around his mouth as he then said, "Why, what everyone tries to gain in a school."

Rousseau raised his eyebrows in question, and the smirk on Grindelwald's face grew even wider. "Knowledge."

The next morning Hermione woke up lying, fully clothed, on the soft mattress of her four-poster. Her memories of last night were more than hazy, so she could only vaguely remember how she had crawled from the bathroom to her bed.

Hermione cautiously moved her head and found the covers of her bed drawn shut. Good. Her dorm mates had probably not noticed anything. She leaned her head back and breathed in deeply. There was a dull pain throbbing in her head and her body hurt. Still, it wasn't so bad anymore. Though it would definitely get worse when she started to move, which she now had to. After all it was Tuesday today. There were classes she had to attend.

Hermione cautiously rolled over in her bed and opened the curtains. Obviously, her dorm mates had already left and she was pretty much alone in the room. Cautiously she sat up in her bed. There was a sharp pain in her stomach and chest as she moved, and Hermione had to cough. The pain brought back haunting memories from the day before. Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin angry line as she remembered how Tom had attacked her. Mercilessly, he had hurled dark magic at her. Hermione could still feel his dark magic on her body.

Decidedly, Hermione shook her head. It didn't matter what Tom had done to her. She didn't care.
Whatever he had tried to accomplish yesterday, he had failed. It had cost her years and years, but now she had managed it. She had overcome his hate.

Cautiously as not to hurt herself, Hermione stood up from her bed. There was again a stabbing pain in her chest. She cried out softly and covered her mouth with her hand as she started to cough again. She needed a moment to get her breathing under control. Then she crept over to the bathroom. Trying to ignore the pain, Hermione washed up. There was no way she would miss classes just because of Tom, Hermione thought determinedly. She checked her watch. No time for breakfast, it seemed. Actually, she would be lucky if she managed to reach the Charms classroom on time.

As she hastened to her classroom, her head again began to throb achingly in the after effects of Tom's Legilimency attack. Luckily she had been able to ward him off. She didn't want to imagine what Tom could have done if he had been able to see her memories. They were too tightly knit with Tom's own future for him to be allowed to see them. With a jolt Hermione remembered that he already knew she was from the future.

She swallowed nervously and readjusted the string of her bag on her shoulder. How had Tom seen through her attempt to screw up the Ortus potion? What a disaster. And she had planned that out so well, too. Hermione ran a hand through her frizzy hair. On top of that, he even knew about the Invisibility Cloak. That was bad. Tom was pretty spot-on with everything. Like usual. It was an inconvenience, surely.

But nothing more, a determined voice announced firmly. Hermione nodded sharply at that thought. Tom had managed to find out a lot about her, but that wasn't going to help him in any way. The really important part of his own future was still unknown to him. A hard smile swept over her face.

Finally Hermione arrived at the Charms classroom. The door was closed, but she could hear chatter coming from the inside. Hermione breathed in slowly to calm her nerves. Charms was a Gryffindor-Slytherin class. On top of that, she had to sit directly beside Tom. This was going to be unpleasant. Hermione clenched her jaw and opened the classroom. The chatter stopped as she entered. As the students saw that it wasn't the teacher, the noise level increased immediately. Hermione slowly walked over to her seat and could see the evil glares the Slytherins sent her way. Since it had become common knowledge that she was Muggleborn, the House of the Snake had started to hate her.

Just like back in my time. What a homey feeling, Hermione thought dryly as she ignored the dark glares. She had almost reached her table as she cast the first glance at Tom. He was already sitting at the table, looking as handsome as ever as he leaned casually against the back rest of his chair. He flipped through his Charms textbook with a bored expression on his face. There was no indication that he had even noticed her presence in any way.

Hermione breathed in deeply and was punished by a stabbing pain in her chest. She suppressed the need to cough and continued her way to her seat. As she sat down, she couldn't stop a soft groan of pain from escaping her mouth. It felt like something inside of her had been ripped into pieces. Hermione knew that Tom could see the discomfort she was in, but she tried to not think about it. In fact she tried to not think about Tom at all.

Professor Merrythought entered the classroom. She smiled kindly at her class and then chirped gaily, "Good morning, class. A very nice day, indeed, to proceed with our quest to learn more about manipulating the elements."

As the lesson progressed Hermione had to admit that she couldn't really concentrate on Professor Merrythought. She stared down on her illegible notes. There were a lot of more important things she had to deal with other than paying attention in class. She really needed to get her magic back. The occurrences from yesterday had showed her quite drastically how very much she needed her magic.
Her thoughts redirected to yesterday, she wondered if she had to expect retaliation from Tom. Hermione sighed softly. Knowing Voldemort, he probably would try something again.

It surprised her how that assumption didn't manage to frighten her. Tom had attacked her violently on the Astronomy Tower yesterday but the fear which had run so deeply inside of her was gone. Although her body still hurt quite badly from the curses she had received yesterday, Hermione felt pleasantly lightened. Unburdened even.

A small smile grazed her features. While she had struggled with various problems first in her time period and then here in the past, there had always been this dark shadow looming over her every action. Lord Voldemort had dominated all. It was a liberating feeling that this dark menace was gone.

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Tom didn't look up, but he knew perfectly well that Hermione had entered the classroom. He reached for his Charms book and started to flip through the pages. It annoyed him to be forced to sit beside a Mudblood. He watched through the corner of his eyes how she walked over to him and was quite satisfied as he noticed that she did so rather reluctantly - fearfully even?

Tom's mouth curled up a bit as he heard Hermione softly groan in pain as she sat down beside him. Of course she was still in pain. The curses he had used on her were quite potent dark magic. Tom would have been surprised if Madam Dulan had managed to heal it overnight. He actually had expected the filthy Mudblood to have to stay in the Hospital Wing at least for today. Then he wouldn't have to sit right beside her. Tom's anger rose again at the thought that he, the Heir of Salazar Slytherin, was forced to sit beside a Mudblood as if she were his equal.

Merrythought entered the classroom. Tom put his Charms textbook down and shifted his attention to the Professor. He reached for his quill and started to take notes. It was tedious work. This class was boring. Why did they have to learn such useless spells anyway? Tom leaned back in his chair and suppressed a yawn. He let his gaze wander shortly over the class. Of course those idiots weren't able to do anything more advanced than this crap.

How pathetic, he thought conceitedly. His eyes finally landed on Hermione sitting beside him. It seemed she didn't pay any attention to the class. She was sitting there with a vacant look on her face. Involuntarily, Tom's eyes fell on her pink lips and he noticed how she smiled absentmindedly. Angrily he averted his eyes from her.

A while into the lesson, Tom heard Hermione starting to cough. He cast a sideway glance at her. She was bent forwards and had one arm wrapped around her abdomen. Her other hand was put over her mouth to try to muffle down the violent coughs. Her quill had fallen from her hand and rolled over to his side of the table. Seemingly, Hermione was in pain.

It is exactly what she deserves! Tom thought as his cold eyes wandered over her form. An evil smirk played around the corners of his mouth as he scanned her. Hermione was still coughing painfully and had her eyes closed tightly. Tom would have expected Madam Dulan to do a better job than this. And if she was so incompetent, she should never have released Hermione from the Hospital Wing.

Then realization hit and Tom drew in a sharp breath of air. Hermione had never gone to the Hospital Wing! He should have realized sooner. She hated having to go to the infirmary. He glanced at her. She still coughed and there was an expression of pain on her face. Well, it was her own fault if she was in pain now, Tom thought coldly.

Despite those thoughts, he still didn't manage to suppress the image that now sprang up in his mind. After he had cursed Hermione, Tom had left her on the platform of the Astronomy Tower. Before he
had slipped back into the castle, he had cast a last glance at the witch. That image of her now burned up in his mind's eye. He could see Hermione lying on the cold stone floor. She had curled up into a ball and her body trembled heavily while she whimpered softly in pain. Tom shortly closed his eyes to get his traitorous feelings back in control. She was a Mudblood! Part of the plague that overran the wizarding world. She deserved to be cursed.

*Get a grip!*

The painful knot in his stomach didn't disappear. Now that picture of her, curled up on the floor, was strangely displaced by another image. He could see himself huddled on the floor down in the cellar of the orphanage after he had received another beating from Carter. That man had always hurt Tom. Just like Tom now had-

*No!* Tom visibly cringed as he tried to suppress his last thought. That was something completely different. He was no Mudblood. That disgusting man had had no right to hit him. Tom was a descendant of one of the noblest wizarding families. He was not going to compare himself with trash. Hermione was a Mudblood and she had deserved what she got. She was weak and pathetic. An aberration of nature.

Tom had almost convinced himself as another thought involuntarily snuck up on him. If she really was so weak, then why hadn't he finally forced the whole truth out of her yesterday? It had been the perfect opportunity, hadn't it? So, why had he stopped there? Why not also take the cloak and Peverell's book?

Tom grabbed his quill so tightly that he nearly broke it. If he was honest, he knew why he hadn't been able to make her spill her secrets. After he had cursed her, he had looked into her eyes and had just known it. She would never speak. He could do whatever he wanted, Hermione would not break.

Tom noticed how Hermione's coughs had finally calmed down. She breathed in deeply before she opened her eyes. He watched how she searched for her quill. It had fallen from her hand previously and now lay clearly on Tom's side of the table. As she spotted it Tom could see how Hermione hesitated shortly. She didn't reach for her quill and she didn't ask Tom to give it to her either, she just bent down to her school bag and produced a spare quill out of it. During all of this she never even looked at Tom. There was a strange pang of regret as he saw her ignoring him so completely. Instead of feeling pleased that he had managed to drive her away from him, there was a strange emptiness inside of him.

Tom was just in the middle of this mental discussion as Merrythought's voice reached him. "Now, pair up and train the Aestuo charm. Don't forget the incantation is 'Aestus'."

"The charm in itself is not difficult," the Professor continued. "To dose the heat that is the difficult thing here. Take a bit of the wax and try to measure how much power you need to put behind the spell to make it pliable without completely melting it. Please, work together with your partner and help each other out."

Hermione almost snorted as she heard that last sentence. That was really the last thing she wanted to do now, she thought as her eyes inconspicuously wandered to Tom. He was accepting a box full of beeswax from the Slytherin sitting at the table in front of them. Tom took a piece of the wax and handed the box to the table behind him. Then he pulled his wand. Hermione just kept watching him. She had no intention of working together with him. Tom waved his wand at the wax. Of course, he was able to perform the charm perfectly. The wax didn't melt but just got soft and pliable.

Hermione let her gaze wander over the class. The other students were working in groups of two or three people. A small smile grazed her features as Hermione saw that pool of melted, completely
liquefied wax on her Gryffindor friends' table. Longbottom still had his wand raised but stared surprised at the pool in front of him. Weasley was roaring with laughter while Lupin just shook his head in exasperation. Hermione almost giggled as she saw that scene. The smile, though, immediately left her face as her eyes wandered over Longbottom and she remembered how he had kissed her yesterday. Hermione felt guilty. Since then, she hadn't spoken with him again, so that now she was afraid he wouldn't want to be friends with her anymore.

With a heavy heart, Hermione averted her eyes from her Gryffindor friends and looked back at her seat neighbour. Tom ended the charm and put his wand down on the table. Then he turned around to her. Hermione gave a jerk as his eyes suddenly landed on her. Again there was the now familiar disgust hidden in them as he scanned her. Even though his aversion did hurt her again, Hermione didn't avoid his eyes. His hate had lost its power over her.

"Do you want to practice now?" Tom asked her in a perfectly normal and even polite tone.

Hermione didn't answer but kept eyeing him. She really didn't want to converse with him in any way.

"Hmm… but that would be difficult, wouldn't it?" Tom continued, his voice contemplative. Suddenly, the polite mask melted from his face and a cruel smirk replaced it. "Very difficult indeed, without a wand."

Hermione balled her hands into fists as she heard the triumph in his voice. Still, she didn't reply anything. Her indifference was provoking a sharp frown to take shape between his eyebrows.

"Oh, what's wrong?" Tom scoffed. "Lost for words?"

"No, I just don't see any reason to interact with you," Hermione replied calmly, not taking his bait.

"Stop being insolent, Muggle," he spat at her, his voice deathly cold. "It's not like I enjoy our time together."

"No, it's not like you can enjoy anything at all," Hermione replied, composed.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tom asked, dangerous tint creeping into his voice.

"Well, just that I think that you are emotionally… let's say… disabled," Hermione replied, unperturbed by his anger. "Given that you obviously are unable to feel or act like a normal human being."

"Just because I don't skip around foolishly like all those other idiots, losing sight of what's really important?" he inquired mordantly. "Do you think I can't feel satisfaction or joy? Glee?" An evil smirk twisted up his mouth before he added, "Because yesterday, I did."

Hermione didn't react at all to his mockery. As Tom realized that she wasn't going to answer he said in an obvious attempt to hurt her,

"Or are you insinuating that I can't feel love?"

Hermione forced a small, condescending smile on her face and said in a cold voice, "No, not love, Tom. I know you don't know what that is, so, there's no point discussing it with you. But kinda revealing that that was your first assumption."

An angry look crossed Tom's features, but it disappeared instantly, leaving only his icy cold mask behind. Before he could say anything, she continued in that voice which lacked all emotion,
"I'm talking about another basic fact that defines us humans. In case you haven't noticed, we are social beings. We cannot live solitary. So, I advise you to stop your self-destructive behaviour and try to connect to other people."

"I am connecting to other people," Tom replied in a soft but dangerous voice.

"No, you are not," she retaliated, the cold tint in her voice matching his. "Not really. You like to have subjects, and you like to order them around. But you have no emotional connection with them whatsoever."

"I see," Tom jeered at her callously. "And now you want to redeem me? You want me to have an emotional attachment to you."

His demeaning conduct somehow hurt her. But Hermione wasn't going to let it touch her. She wasn't willing to deal with his scornfulness anymore.

"You are missing my point," she replied indifferently. "What I'm trying to say is that the way you are so keen on following doesn't lead to anything. You'll just end up miserable and alone."

"Oh, I doubt that very much," Tom remarked.

There was something very dark in his inflection which made chills darting down Hermione's spine. He was right, wasn't he? Lord Voldemort hadn't been alone. Maybe isolated, but not alone. That had been part of the problem actually: him, being able to convince so many people of the rightfulness of his cause. His Death Eaters had followed him blindly. Voldemort hadn't been alone, Hermione mused as she looked at that triumphant expression on Tom's face. It took a little away of his beauty. He still scanned her, obviously convinced he had won their little verbal battle.

Not alone. … but still miserable.

Hermione was suddenly overwhelmed by a great sense of pity as she stared at Tom. No-one who was happy and content with their life would be able to develop such hate like Lord Voldemort. For some reason he had been so angry and full of hate that he had pulled many innocents into his own personal misery. That hate was already visible in Tom.

Tom narrowed his eyes at Hermione while he felt his magic furiously pulsing through him. Suddenly, she looked at him so strangely. Somehow pityingly. He had half a mind of cursing her now. Suddenly, Hermione leaned towards him, still that horrible look on her face. Tom even thought he saw her hand twitch as if she wanted to take a hold of his arm. But then she seemed to remember whom she was talking with and, very wisely, stopped the movement. Tom's fury rose even further as he felt a sense of loss.

He most certainly did not want her to touch him! Just as his anger had reached a point where he could barely control himself anymore, Hermione spoke again. Her voice was composed and distanced as she said,

"You should ask yourself if your goal is worth it to sacrifice so much to it."

"Like I said: I'm not sacrificing anything," Tom countered harshly. "At least nothing important."

Here he deliberately let his eyes wander over her, a derisive sneer on his face. Once again, she just didn't seem to care.

"You are," she finally replied in her soft voice, the conviction in her tone almost making him shudder. "You will be."
The pity was still visible all over her face. That did it now. Tom could feel his temper slipping away.

"Do you really think I care about your opinion, Mudblood?" he hissed at her.

Luckily, his outburst was drowned by the chatter in the classroom. Hermione recoiled from him slightly and her eyes widened. By now her pity was almost completely covered by a look of grim acceptance. As she spoke again, there was an edge of steel in her voice.

"No. No, you wouldn't."

Without another word, Hermione just turned away from him and started to go over her notes of today's lesson. Quill in hand, she read her notes, correcting something here and there. Not once did she look at him anymore. She completely ignored him.

_No, that's not it_, Tom realized. She didn't ignore him, no, she just didn't care.

She had given up on him.

For the rest of the lesson, Hermione completely blanked Tom out. It was strangely easy actually. Merrythought started to lecture them about the theory behind the charm, and Hermione was more than glad to just listen to her. Through the corners of her eyes, she saw Tom staring at her. That dark look on his face managed to snuff any need she might have had of talking to him.

It was an hour later, that Merrythought finally announced, "Now, my dears, for homework please read chapter sixteen in your textbooks."

This was followed by the usual rustling and chatter as the students made to leave the classroom. Hermione quickly grabbed her quill and parchment and stuffed it into her bag. Then she stood up from the table and left. She could almost feel Tom's hard gaze following her through the whole classroom. Did he already plan his next step of forcing information from her? He should just give up. He wasn't going to succeed anyway. She shook her head slightly and turned towards the library. History of Magic was cancelled today. Obviously Professor Binns wasn't feeling well.

Later that same day, Tom sat in the Slytherin common room and was still frustrated. The black wand in his hand didn't manage to lighten his temper. He glared down at the Hermione's wand in annoyance. The blasted wand still didn't want to unravel its secrets. How could that be? This was supposed to be the Elder Wand. Yet it hadn't shown any great power since he had obtained it yesterday. Why?

'I will never tell you,' Hermione's words came back to him, managing to rise his already volatile temper even further. Blood had been running down the side of her face. Tracks of tears had glistened silvery on her cheeks. By all means, she should have been broken, she should have been weak. But that burning sheen in her eyes had been full of determination and even…

…strength?

Tom shook his head, trying to clear it off his ridiculous thoughts. A Mudblood being strong? Not in a million years. His gaze wandered back to her wand in his hands. If she was so weak, then why had she been able to use the Elder Wand's power when he was not? He contemplated the black wand as, suddenly, a thought coursed through him. That idea strangely made a painfully empty feeling in his chest swell up. The wand wasn't called 'Deathstick' for no reason. It had left behind hard to overlook traces in history. Obviously, every owner of that wand found an untimely end. Struck down by greedy people who wanted the wand for themselves, the owners were murdered and the wand was
taken from them to serve a new master. The sick feeling in Tom's chest intensified. Maybe that was the reason why the wand didn't work for him. He had not killed its previous owner…

"Hey, Tom," a pesky voice neatly brought him out of his thoughts. Strangely, he was almost glad to not have to follow his last thought.

Tom turned his head and found Melanie Nicolls standing right beside his armchair. A frown appeared between his eyebrows as he saw that greedy expression on her face as her brown eyes wandered over him.

"So," Nicolls purred at him as she sat down on the armrest of his seat.

She crossed her long legs and a smile appeared on her face as she leaned a little closer to him.

"How was your day?" the girl breathed into his ear.

"Rather irksome, actually," Tom answered in a rather harsh tone

Nicolls just threw him an ingratiating smile. Then he stiffened as she really had the audacity to run a hand through his hair. Tom clasped Hermione's wand even tighter as Nicolls was touching him.

"That's horrible," she simpered at him. "But I can understand you. I had a hard day myself."

Really? a sarcastic voice jeered through Tom's head. I suppose it is hard to keep track of all the T's you get. The smirk, wanting to take shape on his face, didn't have that opportunity as Nicolls again spoke.

"How about we relax a bit by taking a walk outside?" Nicolls cooed.

Tom could only arch an indignant eyebrow at her. She seriously lacked cunning. The Sorting Hat must have been drunk as it placed her in Slytherin, Tom thought as he watched the desire in Nicolls' eyes in distaste. It struck him once again how the colour of her eyes was exactly the same shade of brown as Hermione's. Though Nicolls' didn't look nearly as pretty. Tom almost shuddered as that thought danced through his mind. Pretty? Where the fuck had that come from?

In the meantime, Nicolls had leaned even closer to him, half lying on him actually. Tom edged away from her uncomfortably, he really didn't want to deal with that right now. He narrowed his eyes at her. Then he placed the black wand in his robe pocket before he decidedly pushed Nicolls away from him. A disappointed look was pasted on Nicolls' face, Tom ignored it and said curtly,

"I really don't have time right now."

Without glancing at her, he got up and left the common room.

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Once again, Hermione sat in the library, and she was feeling rather forlorn, which was very unusual in and of itself. Hermione Granger feeling frustrated while being surrounded by books?

Preposterous, she thought cynically and a small grin crept on her face. She shut the book she had been reading in and leaned back in her chair, releasing a tired sigh. By now she had searched through a whole truck-load of books, but still no answer to the problem of her lost magic. Not even the Restricted section had been helpful, Hermione thought as she threw a dark glare in direction of that repulsive part of the library. She needed her magic back.
Hermione sighed tiredly and leaned back in her seat. This movement again provoked an aching feeling in her chest. Tom's Dark Magic still affected her. Though it wasn't as painful as it had been right after he had cursed her. Hermione was very relieved that the curse he had put on her was slowly leaving her. If it weren't, she would have had to go to the Hospital Wing. What would Madam Dulan say if Hermione showed up in the infirmary?

"Whatever happened to you, deary?" the brunette woman would yell in concern the moment she saw Hermione's injuries.

"Well, it seems Tom Riddle tried to kill me." Hermione would shrug her shoulders carelessly. "Had to happen sooner or later."

"What?" Dulan would then huff in indignation. "Not harmless, innocent, charming Tom. You liar!"

Hermione chuckled softly. But then sighed tiredly as she thought back to her problem. Her magic was gone. How was she supposed to find a way back home without being able to use magic? Home. The word echoed derisively in her head. Did she want to go back home? Not really, Hermione mused. She didn't feel any more connected to her own time period than she felt to the one she was trapped in. Her home was gone, after all. Burned down, torn apart, murdered and buried. Getting back was just a mission. Nothing more.

Hermione's eyes were fixed on a shelf of books in front of her. She blinked away her depressing thoughts and for the first time read some of the titles of the books. Olde Magical Blood, Ancestry of Wizards, England's Pure Blood Lines. Hermione furrowed her brow as she took in the books' titles. Somehow all her problems came down to this, didn't they? Blood's purity. Those books proclaimed purebloods' names as if they were something to be proud of to stem of a bunch of purebloods. If the authors of these books had stopped to think, they would have noticed how irrelevant it really was. Then people wouldn't read books like that and wouldn't start to think it was something positive to be of pure blood. And then, maybe, Voldemort would have never managed to get into their minds.

Hermione's gaze wandered in disgust over more books of similar content. She wondered if Tom had gone through these books in order to find out more about his family background. Surely the Gaunts were mentioned in one of the books. The Gaunts, of course, were mentioned. Of course, there was Salazar Slytherin himself, being the founder of this illustrious family. Then there were Marvolo and Morfin Gaunt. From what Harry had told her, they had been rather unpleasant. Merope Gaunt seemed to have been a lot more likeable. But still, drugging someone to make them love her? What she had done to Tom Riddle Sr. had been a really bad idea and had ended in disaster. And Tom? How did he fit into all of this? Clearly his irrational hate against everything Muggle didn't exactly indicate a sound mind, did it? Though, was he really touched in the head? Wouldn't that be the easy way out of explaining his dark convictions? He had good reason to hate the Muggle world, after all, Hermione hesitantly admitted as her thoughts jumped back to his orphanage.

Still, why was Tom so proud of that rather dysfunctional family? Hermione wondered as she eyed in distaste all those books about pureblood families. Why was he only interested in one side of his heritage? While he had tried, with success, to wipe out the other one. Here she was, back to the pureblood issue, Hermione mused tiredly. It seemed to tear Tom apart as much as it split the whole magical world.

'Do you really think I would care about your opinion, Mudblood?' Tom's malicious words came back to her. Why did he entertain that hate? Why did he throw everything else away, just to be able to despise her parentage and with that his own? Did he hate himself so much? She didn't understand him. Normally Tom was such an intelligent person. How could he be so wrong in this aspect?
Hermione shook her head. This whole train of thought wasn't going to help her in any way. Tom and his hate didn't matter. She needed to leave it behind. She checked her watch. Nearly half past two, she noticed surprised. She had neatly missed dinner. Maybe she could drop by the kitchen and ask the house-elves if they had some left-overs. Before she got up, her eyes absentmindedly wandered over the books about purebloods. Her gaze stopped at one of them, Worried that Your Child is a Squib? Hermione furrowed her brow as she read the title and its underlying message. As if it's the end of the world when your child is not able to perform magic, she thought annoyed.

She shook her head slightly, got up from her place and strolled over to the shelf. She reached for the thin blue journal. On the cover was an old-fashioned picture of a toddler. The small child was wearing bright green rompers while it stared confused at the brown wand in his hands. On his face was the endearing and happy look of naivety only children are capable of. Thirty-Three Easy Ways To Ascertaining: It's A Wizard, the subtitle on the cover promised and thus managed to deepen the frown on Hermione's face. She opened the book and read its introduction.

Your child has passed the age when magic should manifest, but no accidental magic ever happened? –This is no reason to despair. Some children are just slow in their development. All they need is more time to finally get a hold of their inherent magical core. You should give your child all the time that is necessary. There are some cases when the first accidental magic occurred not before the age of ten. So, there is plenty of time. Should you still want to immediately have reassurance of your child's ability to perform magic, this book is the answer for you. Here are Thirty-Three easy to follow instructions to test your child's magic.

Hermione huffed in indignation as her eyes flew over the rest of the introduction. With narrowed eyes she flipped through the book. Really, had those people no other problems than to worry over their children's capability of magic? Hermione sighed tiredly and was just about to close the book shut as her eyes wandered over the page's caption.

Number Eighteen: Aperio veneficus, potion to reveal hidden magic

Hit by a wave of curiosity, Hermione's eyes danced over the page. According to the book, the Aperio veneficus potion was invented back in 1431 by one Tate Harwood. Obviously endowed with a very black sense of humour and a complete lack of decorum, Harwood had invented the potion and started to sell it to unsuspecting Muggles, promising them to finally identify all those 'ungodly witches'. The magical community had been thoroughly annoyed by Harwood's antics until, finally, an unknown witch had duelled him, had won and had taken his wand. Rumour had it that Harwood was chased out of his hometown by an angry mob of Muggles, equipped with pitchforks, and accusing him of being a charlatan. Though, according to the book, his potion did really work. It was supposed to be able to temporarily awake a wizard's hidden magic. If applied to a child, this would then lead to bursts of accidental magic.

Hermione's heart leapt as she contemplated the book in her hand. Could this be the solution to her problem? Though, the potion was only able to reveal magic in a person, not bring the magic back when lost. Still, this was the first real clue she had found in weeks. At the very least, with the help of this potion, Hermione would be able to make sure whether her magic had completely left her or not. Her eyes again wandered over the paragraph of the Aperio veneficus potion and the list of ingredients needed. The list was relatively short, the instructions simple, so the potion itself seemed to be quite easy to produce. At last, a ray of hope, Hermione thought cheerfully and copied the instructions down on a piece of parchment. Suddenly, someone rudely jerked the book from her hands. She raised her head, recognized the silver and green trimmings on the school uniform, and hissed angrily,

"Hey that's mine!"
Tom walked down an aisle in the Library in search of a book he needed for his ancient runes essay. He was just about to enter another aisle as he spotted a Mudblood, Hermione, immersed in a book so she hadn't noticed him yet. Tom's eyes wandered coldly over her form and he shortly considered pulling his wand and just cursing the witch. But no, he couldn't do that, he decided as he turned his head and looked behind him. This was the library after all, he really couldn't go around and hex people here. He looked back at Hermione. Still she hadn't noticed his presence. Tom's gaze wandered to her face. There was a strange stab in his stomach as he watched her hazel eyes while she read in the book. A content smile danced around her lips. Tom remembered the indifferent expression, she had hit him with during Charms today.

He could feel a painful lurch in his stomach, but Tom ruthlessly smothered that unbidden flush of feeling. His hands angrily balled into fists and his magic started to swirl around him. His eyes unfixed from Hermione's face and wandered over her body. It was disgusting to remember how he had held that body, kissed it and even slept with it. That body was dirty and tainted by Muggle blood.

Tom averted his eyes from her and turned around. He had just walked a few steps down the aisle as he heard Hermione's outraged voice,

"Hey, that's mine!"

His curiosity wakened, Tom peered into the aisle. He found Hermione still standing before the shelf but she was not alone anymore. Nott was looming over her. He held the book Hermione had been reading in. By the look of anger on her face, Tom assumed that Nott had ripped the book from her by force. An evil smile played around his mouth as Tom watched the dispute. Nott was still holding the book and smirked triumphantly down at the witch. For a while now, Tom had considered to invite him to join his Knights. Maybe he should really do it, Tom mused as he scanned that cruel amusement on Nott's face.

"Give it back!" Hermione said in a sharp tone.

Nott just snickered at her evilly, "I don't see why I should. It would be a waste to give it to you anyway, Mudblood."

Hermione angrily reached for the book in Nott's hands. But he was faster and dragged it out of her reach.

"Don't touch me!" he spat at her maliciously. "They shouldn't allow people like you to attend Hogwarts. You are taking away the place for real wizards, Muggle-whore!"

"Please, don't flatter yourself," Hermione retorted sardonically. "If there's only place for real wizards, then I wonder what you are still doing here."

Tom was surprised as he felt something like gratification as he saw the annoyed look on Nott's face after Hermione's come-back. Nott didn't say anything but just raised his wand at Hermione. Tom breathed in sharply. A strange feeling bubbled up in him as he saw Nott threatening Hermione. Her eyes widened a little and she shied away. Tom knew that she was magically superior to Nott. But she didn't have a wand right now, did she? Just as Nott was about to hex her, a loudly chattering group of girls walked by the other end of the aisle, and Nott quickly lowered his arm again. Fury appeared on his face and he hissed venomously.

"Ugly abomination!"
Then he shoved Hermione violently into the shelf behind her. As her back hit the shelf hard, books rained down on her. One of the books hit her shoulder and Tom could see her wince in pain.

"Dirty Mudblood!" Nott spat at Hermione and threw the book he had stolen from her at her feet.

After that he turned and walked away. Hermione still stood where he had shoved her against the shelf while books lay scattered around her feet. She had her head bent so Tom couldn't see her face. Her shoulders shook slightly as she had to cough. Tom furrowed his brow as he watched her. An unknown emotion hit, but he didn't want to dive into it further and just brushed it away. As Hermione's violent coughs had died down, she slowly bent to retrieve the books to put them back on the shelf. Tom stiffened involuntarily as he saw that emotionless look on her face. Then Hermione walked away in the opposite direction Nott had disappeared to, which meant she was headed towards Tom.

Hermione had nearly reached him when she finally noticed his presence. She faltered in her steps but this remained to be the only indication that she was in any way affected by his presence. Her brown eyes darted towards him and locked with his. Tom glowered at her. If the Mudblood was going to speak to him, he was prepared to curse her. She didn't, though. Looking at him, her face shut down completely until it was a mask, indifferent, distanced and icy cold.

Her gaze left Tom again and she ignored him as she passed him in the aisle. Just as if he wasn't there at all. Tom turned his head and watched her walking towards the exit of the Library whilst rubbing her shoulder where the book had hit her. Fury boiled up in him as he realized that he had wanted her to speak with him. This was disgusting.

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After her little adventure in the library and having snuck a bite to eat from the kitchens, Hermione wandered the castle, not really wanting to return to her common room. She felt a bit restless. That potion she had discovered sounded really promising. So, she planned to talk with Slughorn to get his permission of using the potions lab. She just had to tell him some made-up story as to why she needed the lab.

Hermione currently walked down a corridor on the first floor, not very far from the Entrance Hall. As she passed a window, she looked outside. The sun was shining brightly down on Hogwarts’ grounds. It was the middle of May and the weather had gotten distinctly warmer. The time had flown by it seemed, Hermione thought as she averted her gaze from the beautiful day outside.

With a grin, she remembered how she had arrived here in the past. She had crashed down on that meadow in the middle of nowhere, had managed to break her arm and hadn't had a clue what had happened. Now, more than six months had passed, and she basically still didn't know anything. Though, in the meantime, a lot of things had happened. The grin melted from her face. She decided against delving into those memories. It was a waste of time, she thought numbly.

It was then that Hermione saw her Gryffindor friends and Stella Lovegood sauntering down the same corridor in direction of the Entrance Hall. Longbottom and Weasley had brooms in their hands. Hermione hesitated to join them. She hadn't really spoken with Longbottom since yesterday. Maybe he didn't want her around anymore. Hermione gulped as she watched him. There was a grin on his face as he joked with Weasley.

"Hey, Mione," Weasley said enthusiastically as he finally spotted her. "What are you up to?"

"Just wanted to take a walk."
"Don't you wanna come with us to the Quidditch pitch?" Lupin now asked her hopefully.

Hermione smirked at him. She had no idea how his friends had been able to convince him to accompany them. She knew that Lupin rather disliked Quidditch. A short glance at Stella's excited face told her that maybe she had persuaded Lupin to come along. Normally, Hermione would have considered accompanying them but as she cast a glance at Longbottom she wasn't so sure anymore. He stood beside Weasley and stared at her. The ever-present grin was completely missing on his face. Hermione looked up at him timidly and her heart clenched painfully. He probably didn't want her to join them.

"Um… I… I…" she stuttered sheepishly.

"Aww, come on, Mione," Weasley pleaded. "You have to come, too. You might not know but we have loads of school brooms you could borrow."

Hermione looked up at him but didn't point out how she actually did know about those brooms. A while ago she had even stolen one of them to flee Tom and his lackeys.

"Nah, I'm not very fond of flying," she finally replied. "I'm rather afraid of heights, you know. And I'm not feeling so well today."

That wasn't even a lie, Hermione thought dryly. After all, she still hurt from Tom's curses. Weasley looked disappointed. Hermione chanced another glance at Longbottom. He mustered her with a furrowed brow, making Hermione swallow nervously. He really didn't want her to be around him anymore, did he? She grabbed the strap of her school bag tighter as she looked at him timidly.

"Have fun," she mumbled in a small voice as she made to leave her friends.

She just passed them as she felt an arm being wrapped around her. Hermione's eyes widened, then she turned her head. Confusion hit her as she found Longbottom smiling down at her.

"You're missing out," he told her in a gentle voice.

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him in utter bewilderment. The blond Gryffindor chuckled, then he said genially, "How about you watch from the stands? I swear after a minute of seeing Amarys' disastrous flying skills, you'll want to join us and show him how it's done."

Lupin looked a bit offended at that, but in the end he just shrugged his shoulders.

"He's kinda right," he admitted freely. "Come on, you really can't be worse than me."

Hermione stared up at Longbottom's smiling blue eyes, feeling suddenly very much relieved. A small smile now tugged at her lips.

"Well, okay."

"Good decision," Longbottom grinned.

It really had been a good decision, Hermione decided not much later as she stood in the stands of the Quidditch pitch. In the end, she hadn't wanted to fly herself, but it was immensely funny to watch her friends. Lupin hadn't been lying, though, he really was even worse at flying than her. Though Stella was quite good, Hermione thought as she watched the blonde-haired girl doing a loop in the air. Stella laughed serenely as she caught that pale look on Lupin's face after her stunt. Hermione giggled softly as she watched them.
"So? Enjoying yourself?"

Hermione turned her head and found Longbottom, hovering on his broom right beside the balustrade where she was standing.

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, it's quite fun."

"Should have grabbed a broom yourself," Longbottom told her while he grinned at her.

Weasley's roaring laughter then interrupted their conversation. Hermione craned her neck and had to giggle herself as she saw how the handle of Lupin's broom seemed to have gotten stuck in the wooden panelling of the stands. He now hung there, ten metres off the ground, unable to move. While Weasley just laughed at him, Stella, at least, tried to free his broom. Though, there was a grin on her face, too.

"He'll never learn it," Longbottom laughed.

Hermione turned towards him again. A grin still tucked at the corners of his mouth and his blue eyes smiled down at her. Hermione felt insecure as she stared up at him. Did that mean it was okay with him if she was around? Or was he just putting up with her presence? The blond Gryffindor seemed to have noticed her insecurity.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" he asked warmly. Then he winked at her. "After yesterday, one would think it should be me feeling awkward. Not you."

Hermione blushed a little. "No…" She hesitated before she continued uncomfortably, "I just thought that …you know… you wouldn't want me around anymore."

A serious look crossed his normally so cheerful face. Then he said in a gentle tone, "I told you yesterday, didn't I? I'm not angry with you. And I certainly don't want you to feel awkward when around me. Everything's okay. Really."

At his words, Hermione couldn't help but feel reassured. She smiled at him as she said in relief, "Okay."

Longbottom nodded at her satisfied. He just wanted to say some more as a voice interrupted him.

"Hey, Marc!" Weasley yelled over the pitch. "Don't sit there and chitchat, we have a situation here."

Hermione turned her head and the smile on her face turned into a grin. Lupin's broom was still stuck. Stella now wrenched at the tail of the broom and Weasley tried to loosen it where it was wedged. All the while, Lupin clung to the broom and looked rather green as he stared down at the ground, ten metres below.

Longbottom chuckled, then he said amused, turned to Hermione, "Looks like they can't manage without me, even for a second."

Hermione grinned back at him. The blond Gryffindor turned his broom and soared over to his friends.

Later, Hermione was on her way back towards the castle. She had waved a goodbye to her Gryffindor friends who had wanted to stay a bit longer. Though Lupin had seemed a tad unenthusiastic about that prospect. Stella had managed to persuade him to stay, though. The poor
guy. Hermione grinned as she sauntered back to the castle alone.

Hermione was in a good mood. First she had found that potion, which could help her bring back her lost magic, and then she had talked with Longbottom. He really seemed to be his old self again. Maybe he was still a little disappointed, but at least he obviously didn't plan to drop their friendship. A smile worked itself on Hermione's face. The weather was really nice today, she thought as she looked up at the warm sun. She decided to make a little detour which would bring her a little closer to the Forbidden Forest to then bend left towards the castle.

As she sauntered along the path, she could see a few figures, standing not far away at the edge of the forest. A scowl took form on Hermione's face as she finally recognized them. She shouldn't really be surprised to meet them here, right by the *Forbidden* Forest, she thought dryly. A few metres ahead, Hermione could see Tom, standing with a group of Slytherins. He seemed to have noticed her, too, as he now gestured to the other boys to go. As usual they were more than willing to obey him. Hermione shook her head slightly at their submissiveness as she watched them now hurrying away towards the castle. That didn't make the situation any more pleasant, Hermione decided as she now was very much alone with Tom. Not that she really cared. Hermione just continued her way towards Hogwarts. Unfortunately, she had to pass Tom if she wanted to go to the castle. He was now staring at her, but she wasn't returning that look. As she passed Tom, she reluctantly threw him a glance. Of course he was still scanning her suspiciously.

"Hello, Tom," Hermione greeted indifferently. "No harm done in being polite," she thought cynically as she scanned the angry look on Tom's face. Obviously he didn't like it how a lowly Muggleborn dared to talk to him. She rolled her eyes but then turned away from him and continued her way towards the castle. It wasn't long and Tom fell in step beside her. Hermione determinedly ignored him while she wished they were just a little closer to the castle. After a while of silence, Tom suddenly spoke. His voice was deathly cold as he inquired harshly, "Why do you try to collect the Deathly Hallows?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him and scorned, "Whatever happened to your Slytherin cunning?"

A nasty glare appeared on Tom's face. He grabbed her arm and forced her to stop. Hermione's hand immediately shot to his hand on her arm and she tried to loosen his grip. It didn't work. He even tightened his hold on her and pulled her closer to him. Obviously, he had chosen this opportunity to attack her again. After he had failed to get the truth from her on the Astronomy Tower, Hermione had expected some sort of reaction, coming from him.

"How did you manage to jump back in time?" he inquired aggressively.

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him, but she couldn't say that she was really surprised by his demanding behaviour.

"Do you think I'm going to just tell you?" she finally said in a still composed voice.

"So, you admit that you are from the future?" A dangerous red glint danced by now through his grey eyes.

Hermione eyed him coldly. He already knew that she was from a different time period. There was no use denying it any longer.

"Yes," was her terse reply.
At her answer, she could feel his grip on her tighten. Then he hissed, malice oozing out of his voice, "Did you use the Hallows to jump back in time? Is that why you search for them? What are you trying to do here?"

Hermione remained silent, so Tom shook her gruffly. She had to suppress a painful moan as her chest began to hurt and she again felt the need to cough.

"Where is the cloak?" he asked in a low and dangerous voice.

His grip on her arm was painfully tight as Hermione stared up at that vicious red sheen in his eyes. His hate once again boiled over and seemed to leave him in dark, menacing waves. It didn't hit her, though. Didn't take her breath away nor made her want to flee and hide. It might still be something dangerous she had to deal with cautiously, but it had lost its indescribable horror. As she didn't reply anything, Tom again shook her by her arm and spat at her, his eyes blazing with anger, "Where did you hide it?"

Hermione locked her eyes with him and said in a calm voice, "When you attacked me on the Astronomy Tower, I didn't divulge anything. What makes you think you could make me crack now?"

"What I did back then was only a glimpse of what I can do to you," Tom threatened her, his voice steel hard and merciless. "If you don't tell me everything, I will make you regret you ever defied me."

Hermione looked up at his icy cold eyes and then she chuckled softly, "Believe me, you can't do anything to me that hasn't already been done."

His eyes now burned up in that ghastly red colour and Hermione could feel chills darting down her spine. She watched how his hand slowly wandered to his robe pocket. He obviously wanted to pull his wand. Why couldn't he just stay away from her?

"Okay," she sighed tiredly as he reached into his pocket to retrieve his wand. "I didn't want to do this, but you are leaving me no other choice."

His cold eyes were fixed on her, something like triumph flickering in them. If he thought she was going to tell him everything now, he was in for a big surprise. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him then she raised her hand and grabbed him by his collar, her fingers clasping around his green Slytherin tie.

"Listen, Voldemort," Hermione hissed his chosen name like an insult. Her voice was cold and completely devoid of any emotion. "You might remember that I saved your sorry neck a while ago."

Tom clenched his jaw and stared down at her furiously. Then he growled angrily, "What?"

Hermione could see that he was barely able to hold himself back now, but she really didn't care, so she continued in her sharp voice, "Well, Dumbledore found out that you left your orphanage during the break, and consecutively he wanted to expel you. I really don't know what drove me back then, but I convinced him to let you stay."

Her hand tightened around Tom's tie, crumbling it completely. She forcefully pulled his head down and said in a deathly cold tone, enunciating every word very clearly,

"If you don't leave me alone, I will make sure that Dumbledore will pull through with his plan."

She watched how Tom's eyes widened. Then he let go of her arm while she continued to hold him
tightly by his collar. Anger twisted up his beautiful face as he hissed at her irately, though Hermione could hear underlying doubt,

"You can't do that."

"Rest assured, I can," she responded calmly.

Then she released her grip on him and took a step away. His eyes were shining malevolently as he said, a murderous tint in his voice,

"You can't threaten me. If you tell Dumbledore and if you don't reveal all about your time travel, I will curse you, Hermione. And this time I won't be so lenient as I've been on the Astronomy Tower."

Hermione felt her stomach give a painful lurch as she saw that baleful glint in his eyes. She knew very well that he was capable of a lot of things, but she wasn't going to let him talk with her like this.

"No, you won't do that," she said confidently. Her voice sounded lofty and unfazed by that threat of his. "Because I am the only thing that protects you from being tucked into that orphanage. So, if you hurt me in any way, I'll tell Dumbledore and you'll be expelled. If you think about getting rid of me completely, Dumbledore will know it was you and he'll expel you. And if you don't stop bothering me about the Hallows, I will tell Dumbledore and…” Hermione paused shortly, savouring that incredulous look on his face. "Well, I think you got my drift," she ended, grinning at him mockingly.

Tom just continued to stare at her, and Hermione could see that he was losing his temper. But she also noticed in satisfaction how he didn't start to curse her. Was there even a glint of fear in his eyes?

"As you see, there's not much room for you to react, Voldemort. It's best you stay away from me. What I do or don't do is none of your business," Hermione informed him in a cold voice while ignoring the murderous glint in his eyes. "I don't see why you are so interested in my actions anyway, seeing that I am a 'lowly Mudblood'."

His temper was slipping away, Hermione could tell, but there was also something like surprise in his eyes. He hadn't expected her to stand up to him, had he?

"Of course," Hermione scoffed. "So, they would be better off with you then? Mr Pureblood?"

After that insult of his blood's purity, Hermione could see him balling his hands into tight fists.

"You know, Voldemort, not all of us have daddy issues. Why don't you solve your own problems and leave me out of it?"

"Don't think you'll get away with this, Mudblood," Tom grinded out, his face looking livid.

Hermione ignored his threat but jeered at him, "You, trying to divide people into worthy and unworthy, is just one thing."

Hermione paused and let her gaze lazily wander over Tom. As she had reached his eyes again, an offending smile took form on her face and she hissed darkly, asperity tinting her voice,

"-pathetic."

The angry red colour in his eyes intensified, and a furious scowl twisted up his face. Then Tom
raised his hand and tried to slap her in the face. Without batting an eye, Hermione caught his hand before he could hit her. Her gaze was still locked with his. The angry red colour fleet ed through Tom's eyes while his face was twisted in fury. She let go of his hand and it fell to his side. Hermione didn't let her indifferent mask slip but just looked at him, cool and composed, completely ignoring the fact that he had just now tried to hit her. She didn't really care. It was something she had expected anyway.

Then she informed him blasé, "Well, I'm going back to the castle and I suggest that you keep away from me from now on. Because I won't be lenient again either."

Without another word, she turned away from him and continued her way towards Hogwarts' castle.

Tom stared at Hermione as she sauntered – almost skipped – away towards the castle. His furious magic rushed through him and his hands trembled from the suppressed anger. He should pull his wand and send a curse right at her back. But he didn't. He just stood there and watched her walking away.

'If you don't leave me alone, I will make sure that Dumbledore will pull through with his plan.' Her cold words still danced around Tom's mind. How dare that hussy blackmail him? Did she really think she could order him around? That thought alone was enough to send his magic into another fit of rage. As incensed as he was right now, Tom couldn't help but notice that strange feeling inside of him. It might be almost completely drowned by his rage, but it was still there. It got even worse as he her emotionless face spooked through his mind.

Would Hermione really do it? he wondered uncomfortably. Would she make sure that he had to go back to the orphanage? Unpleasant chills ran down his spine as he thought of that place. Hermione knew how he was treated there. Would she really stand back and watch while Dumbledore forced him to return there? Tom felt slightly sick as he remembered the last time he had been there. He had to swallow nervously as he remembered how Carter had beaten him. Once again, Tom had been disgustingly weak. He hadn't been able to stop that man.

*But Hermione has,* he thought reluctantly and felt his enraged magic dying down as an unpleasant knot took form in his stomach. He watched Hermione disappearing behind a bend as she walked towards the castle. Tom shook his head, attempting to get rid of this strange feeling that overwhelmed him. He didn't even know why he had started the conversation between them. Obviously Hermione would have been content with just ignoring him, and he had known he wouldn't be able to make her break so easily. But as he had seen her, he had somehow wanted to talk with her. Tom didn't know why, but her indifference towards him irked him a great deal. Though he was pretty sure that he didn't want her attention either. This conflict was gnawing at him ever since he had seen her kissing Longbottom. As Tom had witnessed that kiss, he had known that Hermione had finally left him. Before that, she had still been his. Not that he ever wanted her back. Certainly not! She was a Mudblood.

…but he had always known that she wanted him back which had been quite reassuring. Now though, Tom couldn't see anything in her eyes anymore when they fell on him.

Tom quickly unfixed his eyes from the bend behind which Hermione had disappeared. The sun shone brightly down at him. Birds were merrily twittering nearby. Somehow this bright day collided quite spectacularly with Tom's mood. Though he couldn't tell why he was feeling so glum. As he stood there, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, unbidden, Slughorn's words came back to Tom.

'She won't wait forever for you to change your mind.' Slughorn had told him. After this threat Hermione had just thrown at him, she had obviously stopped waiting. 'Stay away from me', 'Leave me alone' that were the words she had hurled at him. While he would have liked to do just that, Tom
found it almost impossible to pull himself away from her. He thought about all the curses he had thrown at her on the Astronomy Tower. He knew that he had hurt her. Why should she not pull through with her threat? She had no reason to protect him any longer. Tom had no idea how Hermione had managed to convince Dumbledore to let him stay at Hogwarts in the first place. She had never told him. So, it was very probable that she was able to take her words back again.

Hermione muttered darkly to herself as she angrily stomped down the corridor towards the headmaster's office. As she reached the entrance, she narrowed her eyes at the two stone gargoyles guarding the door.

"Speciosus," she hissed the password, she had learned from the letter Dippet had sent to her.

Upon hearing it, the two gargoyles jumped out of her way. Hermione reluctantly climbed the stairs leading to Dippet's office to then knock at his door. The door sprang forward and admitted her in. Hermione's eyes quickly swept over the room. The office was still as annoyingly tidy as it always had been. Her gaze wandered to the two people in the room. One was the headmaster himself, sitting behind his imposing desk and looking as self-important as ever, the other was Legifer, who had a nasty scowl on her face as she scanned Hermione. Dippet eyed Hermione

Then he said in his pompous voice, "Miss…" He hesitated and looked on a slip of parchment before he continued, "Miss DeCerto."

*Dear headmaster still doesn't know my name*, Hermione thought in exasperation. This was going to be tedious.

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied, trying to keep her voice polite, though it was a challenge.

"Professor Legifer," Dippet inclined his head towards the sour looking woman, "Came to me with a complaint about you."

"I see," Hermione pressed out.

"I am sure you know that Professor Legifer's class is obligatory for all female students."

"I do know that, sir," she replied. "I am very sorry that I have left her class so abruptly. I didn't want to appear as rude, but I just felt unable to further visit Professor Legifer's class."

Hermione paused and chanced a glance at Legifer. There was an unmistakably angry frown on her brow. Hermione looked back at Dippet.

"I don't want to cause any trouble, sir," Hermione said politely. "But I do hope we can find a solution for this problem as I do not wish to continue the Household Charms and Spells class."

Dippet scrutinized her with the usual stern glint in his grey eyes. Hermione had to stop herself from squirming uncomfortably in her chair.

"Ms DeCerto," he started, impatience clearly tinging his voice. He obviously couldn't be bothered to deal this. "Why do you want to drop the class? Where seems to be a problem?" Dippet continued in his very own self-absorbed way.

Hermione pursed her lips, shortly considering telling him that Legifer was just an evil crow that wasn't fit to teach trolls. In the end, she decided that that would be counterproductive.
"Sir, there is no other obligatory class in Hogwarts. For every other class you can choose if you want to continue until N.E.W.T.s."

Hermione cast a glance at Legifer and found the woman glaring at her darkly. Hermione couldn't stop herself to throw a mockingly polite smile her way, then she continued, turned towards Dippet, "I don't see why I should cut short my time for subjects I really want to do, just to go to a class which I never wanted to take in the first place."

By now, Hermione could see a very impatient shimmer in Dippet's frosty grey eyes. The index finger of his right hand tapped annoyingly on the dark wood of his desk. Obviously he wanted to go back to his incredibly important headmaster business. As if dealing with his students wasn't part of that, Hermione thought sardonically. Before the headmaster could get a word in, though, Legifer hissed angrily,

"This is ridiculous," the professor exclaimed indignantly. "Ms DeCerto seriously lacks insight and talent of my subject. Allowing her to quit would be more than inappropriate." The woman threw Hermione a nasty look before she clamoured on, "In fact, I've never met a girl who is so inept at doing even the simplest of things."

Inwardly, Hermione seethed, but she forced an innocent expression on her face as she told Legifer, slight asperity hidden in her tone, "Well, you don't want me to be in this class anyway, so why do you insist?"

The sharp frown on Legifer's brow intensified as she answered in a clipped voice, "This is not about what I want, Ms DeCerto, this is about your educational needs."

The innocent mask melted from Hermione's face. She was unable to maintain it as she said mordantly, "I think I'm old enough to decide myself what is important and irrelevant for my education."

"Ms DeCerto," Legifer rebutted in an annoyingly patronizing tone. "Your performance during my class is sad example that you need all the help you can get. Personally, I think that you are even a little immature for your age."

Hermione blinked a few times at the Professor while she tried to control her violent temper. As she thought she had regained her composure, she countered glacially,

"You know the ability of the student directly mirrors the teacher's capability to teach."

With satisfaction Hermione watched an angry purple colour rushing to Legifer's stern face. The Professor's eyes were narrowed into slits as she opened her mouth to, no doubt, snap something biting at Hermione. She was interrupted, though, as someone cleaned his throat. Hermione unfixed her eyes from Legifer and turned towards the headmaster. Dippet had a stack of documents in his hands. He now tapped them on the desk, until the edges were exactly aligned. Then he put the stack of paper down before him on the table. His grey eyes wandered to the two women. The impatience was now clear on his stern face. He looked as if he desperately tried to find a quick and – on his part – trouble-free way out of the whole thing.

He leaned forward in his seat, then said in his pompous voice, "As I always say; to talk about a problem is the first step to solve it."

Hermione scowled at the man, fairly sure that he had never said something like that. He was too enamoured with his own voice to be able to listen to other people. And she was right, Dippet ploughed on without waiting for any reply,
"It seems you are more than willing to take that first step. You just need a little more time to find an acceptable solution for both parties. Obviously, there is the need to talk this through. I deeply encourage you to do so. The best way to do that is surely in a private manner, not in the headmaster's office." He threw a glance at the papers, now lying in a neat stack on his desk. Then he continued distractedly, "With all this said, I'm sure this incident is now resolved."

Hermione nearly rolled her eyes. Nothing was resolved as of now. The angry glint in Legifer's eyes told her that, for once, they agreed on something. Dippet obviously just didn't want to bother with the whole incident anymore. He got up from his seat, before he ushered the two women out of his office.

"I'm very glad to have been of help," he said in his self-centred voice, before he shut the door in their faces.

For a moment, Hermione just stared at the closed door as she contemplated how Dippet had ever managed to get the position as headmaster. Then she just shrugged and made her way down the stairs and then passed the stone gargoyles to enter the corridor. All the while she was very conscious of that dark glare Legifer was still throwing at her. As the Professor, too, stepped into the corridor, she snapped at Hermione,

"I do expect to see you next class, Ms DeCerto"

Hermione forced a polite smile on her face, then she said calmly, "I don't think so, Professor."

After that retort Legifer just gaped at her, seemingly lost for words. Fury prevented her from forming them anyway. Hermione suppressed a smirk and said,

"Goodnight."

Then she just turned around and walked away from the fuming woman. She had taken a few steps as she heard Legifer's cutting voice hiss at her,

"This is not over yet, Ms DeCerto."

Hermione chose not to answer anything but continued to walk down the corridor. As far as she was concerned this topic was over. She was certainly never going to visit that stupid class. Ever. It was even worse than Divination and Trelawney's insane babbling.

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Tom swiftly walked through Hogwarts' corridors in direction of his common room. After the meeting with his knights he had decided to spend the rest of the day in the library. He still had had to write that essay for Professor Nota. Unfortunately, he hadn't managed to finish the essay, even though it shouldn't have taken him that long. It wasn't a difficult essay, either. Tom grinded his teeth in anger as he thought back to the fruitless hours spent in the library today. Now it was almost nine and the essay for Professor Nota was still only half finished. Tom hadn't been able to concentrate on school work as his temper had been boiling over the whole day.

'I suggest that you keep away from me from now on. Because I won't be lenient again either,' Hermione's mocking words came back to him and a new flash of anger coursed through him. How dare Hermione try to threaten him? Tom thought irately. She made it sound as if he really wanted to be in her presence. Tom sneered disdainfully. The only reason he might want to be near her was when he finally made her spill her secrets. That was the only thing he wanted from her; her knowledge of the future, and maybe about the Deathly Hallows. Surely, nothing else.

Tom angrily stomped down another corridor in direction to the staircase. He really needed to
somehow vent all that pent up anger. How irrational of him to get so aggravated over one insignificant Mudblood. Then again, he supposed that her insolent disrespect towards him was quite insulting. After all, he was the Heir of Slytherin and someone like her really dared to blackmail him? That surely was a reason for one's temper to fly out of the roof.

Tom reached the staircase. It was completely deserted, most of the students were probably already in their common rooms. The last rays of the dying sun shone half-heartedly through the many windows flanking the stairs. Aside from that, the stairs were dived in semi-darkness. Tom stepped smartly on the nearest of the moving stairs and descended. While he walked down, the flight of stairs turned on its own axis. Tom didn't pay attention to the charmed stairs' movement. As he reached the last step, the whole staircase just docked to a corridor entrance a floor below from where he had started. Tom deftly stepped off the stairs and entered the new floor.

He turned to the next flight of stairs to descend further, but instantly stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes immediately turned into angry slits as he watched the girl, climbing up the stairs he had just wanted to take down. She hadn't noticed him yet. Her bushy hair flipped loftily as she climbed the stairs and there was a disgruntled expression on her face. It was only as she reached the floor Tom was standing on that Hermione finally became aware of her surroundings. She blinked surprised as she spotted him. Tom's hands were by now balled tightly into fists. Her mere presence had managed to worsen his already foul temper even further. As Hermione looked at Tom, the surprise dropped from her face. Once again, Hermione's features became completely expressionless. She shortly stopped, readjusted the bag over her shoulder and let her gaze wander unenthusiastically over him. Nothing gave away that she had even recognized him. Her nonchalance was enough to send Tom into another violent fit of temper.

Hermione continued her way as if nothing had happened. She walked towards the next flight of stairs to ascend further, probably aiming for Gryffindor tower. As she passed him, Tom caught a whiff of lilac. The scent managed to send a shiver down his spine. This reaction, she could force from him, finally managed to make him snap. He had had enough of her indifference. Tom growled angrily as he turned around to her. He reached for her and grabbed her wrist before he wrenched at her, twirling her around. He could hear her gasp softly in surprise as he grabbed her shoulders tightly and then pushed her into the wall of the corridor. His anger peaked and his hands clenched around her harder, not caring if he would hurt her. He saw that Hermione's gaze was still infuriatingly blasé as she looked up at him. There was not even a spark of fear in her eyes.

"What do you want now, Voldemort?" Hermione asked him in a calm, almost impatient, voice.

Tom could feel the anger burning up in him at this casual use of his chosen name. He suspected that she was only using that name to infuriate him in the first place. He tightened his grip on her shoulder, knowing that she would probably bruise, but still Hermione stared at him unwavering.

"You can't run away from me forever," Tom hissed harshly.

He frowned as a strange look crossed her face. It was gone before he could have identified the emotion.

"I know," Hermione said softly, though there was unmistakably an edge of steel in her tone. "But I'm not running away anymore."

"Why did you travel back in time?" Tom demanded forcefully.

Hermione didn't immediately answer. She continued looking at him. Her gaze was penetrating. It almost made Tom shift nervously, and he had to pull himself together. Then she spoke in that voice which was lacking all emotion.
"Maybe you want to reconsider that question." She laid one of her hands on top of his which still grabbed her shoulder tightly. "And you should step back from me."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her and felt fury pulsing through him. He pushed her brutally into the wall and then leaned down to her to whisper in her ear.

"Why would I do that?" he hissed at her, a dark tint in his voice.

Hermione removed her hand from his on her shoulder and laid it on his chest to lightly push him away.

"I already told you why you should stay away from me, Voldemort."

Her voice was still calm and level. Tom realised that not even his close proximity could unbalance her. He clenched his teeth in irritation and glowered at her. Then he released her and took a step away from her. Still, he continued glaring at her darkly. As he only found her looking back at him calmly, Tom could feel his self-control flying out of the window. How could she be so indifferent? Did she not care at all anymore?

"Don't dare to threaten me, Hermione," he said slowly, his voice barely controlled.

"This is not a threat," Hermione replied in her collected voice. "I am merely reacting to your behaviour."

Tom wasn't able to control his magic anymore and it started to dance around him forcefully. Hermione's only reaction to that was that she raised her eyebrows slightly. Her response lacked emotion and this managed to incense him even further. Tom could see that she wasn't acting right now. Her distanced and indifferent behaviour towards him wasn't a façade she put up. It only stirred up Tom's violent temper more as he realized that he didn't want her to ignore him. How come Hermione didn't care about him anymore? Was it because she now only cared about Longbottom?

Like a flash, the image of her kissing that guy flew around Tom's mind. He balled his hands into tight fists in an attempt to calm himself down. But the image of her together with that Gryffindor pig was ever persistent.

She was not allowed to do that!

Tom's eyes flashed in a dangerous red colour as he, once again, lost his self-control. He furiously glared at a still indifferent Hermione. Without saying anything, Tom took a step towards Hermione and again grabbed her shoulders quite roughly. His magic was still bristling around him angrily. Tom couldn't stop himself as he leaned down to her. He crashed his lips over hers and started to kiss her greedily. Hermione tensed as he kissed her so angrily. His lips were claiming her demandingly while he pushed her harshly into place. He leaned on her, crushing her hard against the wall, while his hands left her shoulders and skimmed down the sides of her body. She didn't try to get away from him as he kissed her forcefully. Then again, she didn't respond to him either. But right now, Tom didn't really care what she was doing anyway. He was much too distracted by the taste of her lips as he consumed them. He needed more, though. His tongue brushed hungrily along her upper lip, ordering her to open her mouth so he could deepen the kiss.

That was the moment he could feel her slightly withdrawing from him. Then there were two hands on his chest, decidedly pushing him away. Tom reluctantly ended the kiss and took a step away from her. During their kiss, his irate magic had never calmed down. It still swirled around him rabidly. He narrowed his eyes as he scanned Hermione. His actions had finally managed to invoke some kind of emotion in her. But it was only curiosity that now glinted in her pretty eyes. She raised a hand and
skimmed with her fingers softly over her lips. A frown appeared between her eyebrows, and she looked up at Tom in confusion. There was a twinge in his chest as he saw that insufficient reaction. Before he could stop himself, Tom snarled at her in a threatening tone,

"You kissed Longbottom!"

His angry outburst only managed to deepen that frown on Hermione's face. Then she asked him perplexed,

"Why do you care?"

Tom pressed his mouth in a thin line as he glared back at her. He couldn't answer her question, because he didn't know why he cared. Really, he shouldn't. She was a dirty Mudblood! Whatever she was, though, Hermione was not allowed to go around and kiss other people. As no answer came, Hermione cocked her head to one side and kept looking at him inquiringly. Then she just stated,

"You kissed Nicolls."

Tom's fury flared up again and his dark magic ripped angrily at his mind. Hermione surely wasn't allowed to pry into his doings!

"None of your business!"

"I see," she returned in her infuriatingly level voice. She paused shortly, before she continued, "If that's all you wanted, I'm off then."

Hermione pushed herself away from the wall, obviously intending to leave him standing here. This was enough. Tom wasn't willing to take her indifference anymore. He pulled his wand. His magic bristled around him, endorsing his actions as it hungrily ran through the wood of his wand. He could see Hermione's eyes widen. Her gaze skimmed over the wand in his hand before it flashed back to his face. Tom could tell that she was nervous now that he threatened her with his wand, but still she wasn't afraid. Even when faced with his wrath, Hermione remained to be indifferent. His eyes flashed dangerously as he brandished his wand.

"Livor."

Tom could see indignation taking form in Hermione's eyes, as she stared at him. Obviously, she knew this dark spell. She tried to sidestep the curse but it managed to graze her arm. Hermione gasped softly in pain, her arm probably bruised now. Tom angrily waved his wand again. Before he could finish the wand movement, though, a voice rang through the corridor,

"That is enough!"

Tom's eyes widened as he recognized the voice. He breathed in deeply before he turned around. Sure enough, he found Dumbledore standing just a few metres away. There was a sharp glint in the Professor's eyes as they wandered over Tom. Had it been any other teacher, Tom would have tried to play his role of the innocent student and wriggle out of this situation. Without a doubt he would have gotten away with it, too. But certainly not with Dumbledore, he thought numbly as he stared at the older wizard. How could he have lost control like this? Tom wondered frantically. He had just now used Dark Magic, without making sure that no-one would see it. This was bad.

There still was that hard glint in Dumbledore's gaze as he eyed Tom. Tom noticed how Hermione stepped beside him and he chanced a glance at her. He was surprised to find a small smile on her face as she looked at the Professor. Was she going to surrender him to Dumbledore now? Tom wondered nervously. He balled his hands tightly into fists to stop them from shaking. A kind twinkle
appeared in Dumbledore's eyes as they wandered from Tom to Hermione.

"Are you hurt, Hermione?"

Tom noticed the use of her first name, and this familiarity made him even more nervous. The last few weeks since Tom had learned about Hermione's parentage, he had tried to ignore her existence. Obviously, he had overlooked that change in the relationship between Hermione and the Transfiguration Professor. Wasn't Dumbledore supposed to dislike her? Tom wondered unsettled. But there was this expression of kindness on Dumbledore's face as he eyed Hermione.

"No, sir," she finally replied while the smile still tugged at her mouth.

Dumbledore looked back at Tom and the Professor's eyes grew hard again as he scanned him.

"Tom, you know that we do not tolerate this kind of magic in Hogwarts."

"Yes, sir," Tom replied with fake contrition.

It did nothing to dispel the harsh glint in the Professor's eyes.

"I warned you again and again, not to delve into that branch of magic," Dumbledore replied coldly. "I gave you many chances to change, but it seems you don't want to heed my advice. Now you even attack the one person who tries to help you. This is poor repayment for what Hermione has done for you."

Tom could hardly stop his eyebrows rising in surprise, but he couldn't answer anything as Dumbledore eyed him piercingly. The Professor sighed and said severely,

"Follow me. I want to speak with you in my office."

Tom had to swallow hard as he heard that order. Was Dumbledore going to expel him now?

"Professor, wait," a soft voice interfered.

Tom turned his head to Hermione. She didn't pay him any attention but concentrated on Dumbledore as she continued in her pleasant voice,

"I told you about Tom's situation. You are going to take that into consideration when you decide how to punish him, won't you?"

Tom clenched his teeth as he heard her. What situation? he wondered as he glanced at her through the corners of his eyes. Her face, though, was still frustratingly unreadable. Tom was now very worried. Hermione knew a great deal of things about him. What had she told Dumbledore?

Tom's eyes darted back to the Professor who answered Hermione in a grave voice, "Tom used Dark Magic on a fellow student. Of course, this alone is no reason to expel any student. I know young people can sometimes get carried away. But in Tom's case, it was not the first time."

"Yes," Hermione said in her soft voice. "But he didn't hit me with the curse. No-one got hurt. We don't need to make an issue of it."

Tom couldn't help but stare at Hermione now. What was she doing? He had actually expected her to use this opportunity to get rid of him.

"Hermione you have done enough to aid Tom. It might be better if you let me deal with this now," Dumbledore told her kindly.
The graceful smile never left her face as Hermione said, "You are probably right."

Tom could see her throwing a quick glance at him. And he stiffened slightly as he saw doubt in her hazel eyes as they wandered over him. Then she turned to the Professor and continued,

"But still, I would like to ask you to treat this incident with leniency."

Dumbledore didn't immediately answer. Instead, he eyed Tom pensively. Tom had to fight to maintain the blank mask on his face. He didn't know why Hermione was trying to help him. It didn't make any sense.

"Very well, Hermione," the Professor finally said. He considered Hermione for a moment before he said, "I am indeed very proud that someone like you ended up in my house."

Then his eyes left Hermione, who had blushed slightly, and snapped to Tom. The kind twinkle instantly left them as the Professor stared at Tom coldly.

"You are lucky Hermione is willing to drop this incident," he told Tom in a sharp voice. "While I do not completely concur with her, I do understand her, and, therefore, will respect her wishes. So, this is thirty points from Slytherin, Tom. And you will be serving detention with me."

"Yes, sir," was all Tom could mumble in reply. He still didn't understand what Hermione was doing here.

Dumbledore threw him a last stern glance, before he turned to Hermione and asked gently, "Do you want to join me for a cup of tea? I would really like to discuss your last essay with you. You do have some very interesting ideas."

"With pleasure," Hermione replied, her hazel eyes sparkling merrily.

That merry sheen in her eyes immediately disappeared as she turned her head and threw Tom a glance.

"You owe me, Riddle," she hissed at him in a very low voice so that Dumbledore wouldn't be able to hear it.

Without sparing Tom another glance, she followed Dumbledore down the corridor, and left him standing there in utter confusion.

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It was not until Friday the same week that Hermione managed to catch Slughorn. She still needed to ask him if she could use the potions classroom. After all, she really had to brew that Veneficus potion. It was about time that she did something to get her lost magic back. It was already late afternoon as Hermione stood before Slughorn's office. She raised her hand and knocked.

"Come in," Slughorn's voice boomed through the door.

Hermione entered his office and found Slughorn sitting on a fluffy winged armchair, his small feet resting on a velvet pouffe. On a small mahogany table beside his armchair sat a bottle of cognac and a glass. Now that Slughorn had seen who had entered he got up from his seat and exclaimed happily,

"Ms DeCerto, whatever brought you to my humble office?"

Hermione smiled at him. "I just have a little request, sir."
"Of course, of course," Slughorn said briskly. Then he gestured to a seat, standing nearby. "Please, Ms DeCerto, sit down."

Hermione complied and sank down on the seat while Slughorn sat back on his armchair. He reached for his bottle of cognac and asked,

"May I tempt you?"

Hermione stared at him, then said perplexed, "Should you be offering me alcohol, Professor?"

"My dear, I know you are off age already," he smiled at her in amusement.

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. Slughorn beamed at her before he reached for his wand and waved it. A second glass appeared out of thin air. The Professor poured cognac into the glass and handed it Hermione.

"Thanks."

Slughorn raised his glass slightly. "Cheers," he said before taking a sip. Hermione copied him. Then she put the glass on the small side table.

"Now, Ms DeCerto, what request do you have for me?" Slughorn asked in his booming voice.

"Er… yes," Hermione mumbled. "I was actually wondering if I could use the potions classroom. You see, there's this Invisibility solution you mentioned last class. I just wanted to test it."

The smile on Slughorn's face grew even wider as he heard that.

"Surely you are one of my best students," he said fondly. "What with the amount of extra work you put into everything." He reached for his cognac glass and took another swig. Then he said happily, "Of course, I'll help you. Actually, you can use my potions lab. It's situated right beside the classroom. The password is venenum."

"Thank you very much," Hermione said in relief.

"Not at all, not at all," he replied, still smiling at her. "I'm glad to help you. Why, it is just a few weeks ago that Tom asked me the very same thing. He actually wanted to work on the Ortus potions. That boy is a perfectionist, I tell you. Well, it was the first time he didn't manage a potion in my class. Did come as a shock for the both of us, I suppose…"

Slughorn continued to chatter and Hermione felt a little lost as he talked about Tom. It was after a while that she noticed how Slughorn scanned her pensively.

"Tom hasn't spoken with you, has he?" the Professor asked gingerly.

"About what?" Hermione said warily.

"I actually hoped he would try to make up whatever it was that happened between you two. You are such a perfect couple."

Hermione just shook her head at him. "We are not necessarily on speaking terms," she told him, then she reached for her glass of cognac and took a sip.

"Oh well, I guess Tom is very stubborn, too," Slughorn concluded. "Maybe you should take the first step?"
"I don't think that's gonna happen," Hermione told him, determined.

"Did you break up because of something Tom did?" Slughorn asked gently.

"You could say that," Hermione replied bitterly as she put her glass back on the side table.

Slughorn eyed her pensively while he held his glass of cognac and swirled it absentmindedly. After a while he sighed and then said, "Even if it was Tom's fault, maybe you can find it in yourself to make the first step," he suggested, a hopeful tinge in his inflection. Before Hermione could protest he continued, "I think you have a good influence on him."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise. Hadn't Slughorn always thought Tom was some kind of saint? That is, until he found out that Tom was actually Lord Voldemort.

"You think he needs some kind of good influence?" Hermione asked perplexed.

"Aww, Ms DeCerto, don't take me wrong," Slughorn responded quickly. "Tom is the best student I've ever had. I'm sure he'll go very far. And I've never been wrong about something like that." His eyes wandered to the glass in his hand and he hesitated before he continued in a quieter voice, "But as he is so intelligent, he gets bored very quickly. That might cause him to delve further into parts of magic which are better left untouched."

Hermione scowled at him. She was quite surprised actually. So, Slughorn did know that Tom had the potential to become dark. Well, he was very much right. Still, that didn't mean this was a problem she had to solve. If Tom wanted to be a dark wizard, then she certainly wouldn't be able to pull him back. She had tried and failed. How stupid of her! Hermione thought angrily. She grabbed her glass of cognac and downed it in one go, causing Slughorn to raise his eyebrows at her.

Hermione put the glass down again then she declared, "Professor, it's rather late already. I better get back to my common room," she stood up from her seat. "And thank you again for your help. It will certainly help me to be able to use your lab."

Slughorn smiled at her fondly, "No problem at all, Ms DeCerto."

"Good night, sir," Hermione said politely before she left his office.

Her thoughts still furiously danced around the topic of their conversation as she stomped back towards Gryffindor Tower. It was almost funny, she decided, how Slughorn had suggested she took the first step to make up with Tom.

Like that would work, a sarcastic voice sneered in her mind. Tom was too prejudiced to ever be able to see something else in her than a 'lowly' Muggleborn. Hermione huffed as she entered the next corridor which led to a staircase. Actually, Hermione still wondered why she had protected Tom as he had hexed her with Dark Magic a few days ago. Dumbledore had seen it, and Hermione was pretty sure he would have expelled Tom if she hadn't stepped in. She was brought out of her reverie as she heard an oily voice coming from behind her.

"Look at that," the voice sneered. "Ms DeCerto all on her own in this deserted corridor."

Slowly she turned around and she found what she had dreaded. Not far away she could see Avery leaning casually against the wall. A sleazy smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth and his eyes wandered greedily over her body. He pushed away from the wall and sauntered over to her. Hermione couldn't help but tense as she saw that predatory glint in his eyes.

"What a pleasant surprise," Avery purred at her as he stopped directly in front of her.
"Not really," Hermione said in a steady voice. She scanned him coldly before she continued, "If you excuse me, I'm rather in a hurry."

With that said she tried to continue her way down the corridor, but as she tried to pass Avery he shot out an arm and leaned it against the stone wall so she wasn't able to walk by.

"Must you always be so impolite?" Avery asked while the smirk still grazed his features.

He took a step towards her and Hermione shied away. Then he raised his hand and reached for a strand of her hair, curling it around his finger. Hermione just slapped his hand away.

"Oh, feisty. I like that," Avery sniggered at her. Then he said, a disturbing hunger in his voice, "So, Hermione, did you think about my offer? I gave you plenty of time, after all, to wrap your pretty head around it."

"What are you talking about?" she hissed sharply.

"I want you to become my girlfriend," he answered in his oily voice, putting much suggestive emphasis on the last word.

Hermione shuddered slightly as she saw his lewd smirk growing even wider.

"My answer still is the same: No!" she snarled at him.

"This wasn't really a question," Avery sneered.

Before he could do anything more, though, another male voice rang through the corridor, "Avery, that's just disgusting."

Hermione turned her head slightly to be able to look over Avery's shoulder. Her heart sank as she saw Lestrange standing just a few metres away. Avery rolled his eyes and turned around to Lestrange. He then drawled at the other Slytherin,

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I know you are kinda twisted," Lestrange said in his hard voice. "But this is just a little too kinky, even for you." His eyes left Avery and wandered to Hermione, disgust flaming up in them. "Merlin, that's a dirty Mudblood you are trying to get into your bed."

Avery just shrugged at that. "Well, I don't want to marry her or something like that. You have to admit, though, she's quite the looker."

Hermione had enough now. She really didn't need to listen to their disgusting prejudices. She turned on the spot and walked back the way she had come from.

"Honey," Avery called after her. "We're not finished yet."

"Yes, we are," Hermione replied scathingly without turning around.

But then she heard Lestrange yell at her aggressively, "Hey Muggle, how dare you turn your back when a pureblood is talking to you?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide as she heard a rustling behind her. The hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She had learned to trust her instincts, so Hermione whirled around. A bright jet of light was flying through the darkened corridor. Lestrange had his wand in his hand and a dangerous scowl on his face. Hermione only just managed to dodge the incoming curse by hurling herself to the side.
The air hissed angrily as the curse missed her by mere inches and crashed into a suit of armour standing right beside her. The suit was destroyed and with loud noise the pieces of metal pelted down on the stone floor. Hermione raised her arms, trying to protect her head. She gasped in pain as she felt her left forearm being cut by one of the pieces.

"You insolent Mudblood!" Lestrange's voice scoffed at her.

She looked back at him. He was standing beside Avery and glared at her darkly. Avery, on the other hand, seemed to follow the whole thing with dark amusement. Hermione briefly wondered why they were not in the least bit bewildered by her complete lack of counter attack. They had seen her do magic before after all. But obviously they didn't seem to care or they just thought that last time had been a lucky chance and that she was a defenceless girl after all. Which, right now, she was. She was huddled against the stone wall of the corridor and she felt her blood slowly seeping through the sleeve of her uniform robe from the cut in her arm.

"Enough with this playing around," Lestrange blustered. "That Mudblood is in for it now!"

Then Hermione saw him waving his wand again. She stiffened as she recognized the curse by the movements. It was a cutting hex and an especially potent one at that. Hermione wondered if she would be able to dodge this curse as the bright light left Lestrange wand. It was fast. Too fast. Hermione knew she wouldn't be able to evade the curse. She closed her eyes and then waited for the inevitable pain from that curse.

Instead of the pain she heard a voice yell, "Patrocinor!"

Her eyes shot open and she could see a lime green shield protecting her. Hermione's eyes widened as she looked at that pulsing green wall in front of her. She knew that shielding spell. It was incredibly powerful. She herself had never managed to really learn it. Hermione's gaze wandered to Avery and Lestrange. They still stood there just a few metres away but now there were looks of surprise and confusion on their faces. Then Hermione heard the sound of steps echoing from the corridor walls. She turned her head and saw a dark figure walking towards where she was still huddled against the wall. As the figure reached her Hermione gaped at the person in complete surprise and confusion.

"That is twenty points from each of you from Slytherin house. And I will speak with Professor Slughorn about your behaviour," Legifer hissed at Avery and Lestrange in her sharp voice.

Obviously the two boys were too surprised to reply anything.

"You would do best to now return to your common room," Legifer advised them in a dangerous tone.

"Yes, Professor," mumbled Avery before both of them turned around and quickly walked away.

In the meantime Hermione was still staring up at Legifer with wide eyes. Here she was, her least favourite teacher, her attire was still impeccable with not one wrinkle in her immaculate white blouse, her black witches robe was stainless and her grey skirt squeaky clean. There was not one strand of the black hair out of place in her perfect hairstyle. Her dark eyes were narrowed as she glared down at Hermione. Then she put her wand away before she bent down to Hermione and clutched her by her upper arm.

"Get up," Legifer ordered in her cold voice.

Hermione was still too confused by the recent events to object. So she just obeyed and got up from her position on the floor. She stood before Legifer while she pressed her painfully throbbing arm
against her body. There was blood trickling through her fingers as she pressed her other hand against the cut in her left forearm.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Legifer finally stated in a emotionless tone. "For being out of bed after hours."

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at the Professor. She was still too shocked by her sudden appearance and by the fact that Legifer had just now rescued her. And with an impossibly powerful spell as well, Hermione thought in amazement.

"Follow me," Hermione was brought out of her shock by Legifer's curt voice.

Legifer had already started to walk away so there was no other option for Hermione than to obey her. So Hermione followed Legifer through the dark corridors of Hogwarts castle. They walked in silence for some time. Hermione wondered where the Professor was leading her to. Finally Legifer stopped before a door. Hermione recognized it. She had spent too much time inside the office behind the door not to know. Legifer opened the door and entered her office. Hermione still followed her.

"Sit down." Legifer gestured at the sofa standing in one corner of the room.

Hermione walked over there and sat down on the soft brown leather couch which was as clean as everything else in the room. She just hoped she wasn't going to get any blood on the leather. She had no intention of infuriating Legifer. She watched with huge eyes how Legifer walked over to her and sat down right beside her before the Professor pulled her wand.

"Let me see your arm," Legifer said in her usual sharp tone.

Without thinking Hermione extended her left arm towards Legifer who took it in her hand and rolled up the sleeve of Hermione's uniform robe and the blouse underneath. Hermione could see a nasty cut on her forearm where the piece of the suit of armour had hit her. The cut was still bleeding and looked rather deep. Legifer just tsked disapprovingly as she looked at the wound. Hermione didn't know whether the woman was annoyed that she had to waste her time with Hermione's deficiency or was just peeved by the incident in a whole.

Legifer waved her wand in a complicated pattern while she whispered under her breath. Instantly a blue light left the tip of her wand and then wound itself slowly around Hermione's forearm. It trickled and felt strangely warm but not unpleasantly so. With growing amazement Hermione watched how the blue light intensified around the area where the skin was sliced open. The injured skin felt rather hot but simultaneously the pain subsided. Then the skin slowly merged back together and the deep cut simply disappeared. Hermione stared at her now completely healed arm in wonder. There was not even a scar left. Nothing indicated that just moments before there had been a rather deep cut in her arm, aside from the blood which still stuck to her skin. This was very advanced healing magic. It took a great amount of skill and experience to be able to perform such magic. Hermione for one had never got the hang of it. Her eyes wandered from her arm back to Legifer who frowned rather displeased down at Hermione's arm. Then the Professor waved her wand again. The blood disappeared from Hermione's skin and from the fabric of her blouse and robe. Another wave of Legifer's wand and the cut in her sleeve was mended as well. Then the sleeve rolled itself down again and covered Hermione's arm. It now looked as if she had never been hit by that piece of metal. If anything the sleeve now looked cleaner than the rest of her black robe.

"Thank you," Hermione stuttered confused.

Legifer just inclined her head slightly. An awkward pause followed in which Hermione stared at her healed arm in wonder. She really never would have expected Legifer, of all people, to help her. And
then with such advanced magic, too. She had actually never considered the probability that the Professor could do more than just her stupid cleaning spells. This came as a surprise, Hermione decided as she looked from her arm back up at Legifer. The woman eyed her with her usual sharp, almost disapproving look. Before Hermione could stop herself, she blurted out,

"Where did you learn those spells?"

She quickly glanced at Legifer. Surely the Professor was angry with Hermione's nosiness and would throw her out of the office. Instead Legifer just answered her in a clipped voice, giving Hermione the surprise of her life,

"In the Auror Academy."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at her. What? Legifer an Auror? That so didn't fit together. Legifer misunderstood the bewilderment on Hermione's face and said,

"Of course, women are normally not permitted to become Aurors."

Hermione frowned. They were not? She hadn't known that. But it made sense now that she thought on it. She was still in the forties. So no women rights. But then, how had Legifer managed to enter the Auror Academy?

"How- Why did you quit?" Hermione asked in a rather breathless voice.

Legifer's eyes narrowed for the briefest of moments before her face transformed back into her normal stern glare.

"I married," was her rather curt answer.

And with that, obviously, Legifer seemed to think that everything was explained.

"But… but you could still have been an Auror," Hermione insisted, confusion seeping through her voice.

She stiffened as there was now anger in Legifer's cold eyes. Though Hermione didn't know at whom that anger was directed at as Legifer answered in a tight voice,

"My husband didn't want me to pursue this career."

Hermione's eyes now dropped to her own forearm which had been healed so expertly. Then she looked at the Professor's sharp features again.

Before she could stop herself Hermione asked, "Are you still married?"

Legifer's eyes narrowed dangerously and Hermione was pretty sure she had crossed the line. But the woman surprised her again and answered cuttlingly, "I don't see why that should be any of your business, but yes, I am still married."

Hermione was treading on thin ice here, she knew, but she still wanted to know, "What is your husband doing?"

If possible, Legifer's eyes narrowed even more and her mouth was now pressed into a thin line. She was clearly more than a little annoyed by Hermione's pesky questions. But she replied, asperity tinting her voice,

"He's an Auror."
Hermione stared at her. Then after some time, she asked, "Do you ever regret it?"

"Regret what, Ms DeCerto?" Legifer asked in exasperation.

"That you left the Academy," Hermione elaborated cautiously. "You could have stayed."

Legifer narrowed her eyes at Hermione as if she thought the question was more than stupid. "Then I wouldn't be married right now." Her sharp eyes wandered over Hermione, before she said in a hard voice, "Sometimes love requires sacrifices. That is something you need to learn."

"I know that. Believe me," Hermione said quietly. This was completely surreal. "I just think that it shouldn't always be the same side sacrificing something."

Legifer scanned Hermione for a moment. Hermione was almost convinced that the Professor now contemplated which silencing spell to put on her, but she was yet again surprised. Legifer replied in a low voice,

"I don't regret having listened to my husband. If I hadn't obeyed him and quit my career as an Auror, I would never have had my daughter."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. She hadn't known that Legifer had children. Actually, she didn't know anything about the Professor. Legifer put her wand away again. She then looked back at Hermione through her steely eyes.

"Now, Ms DeCerto, it is time for you to return to your dormitory," Legifer said in her strict tone. She narrowed her eyes at her sternly before she continued, "And I expect to see you in my class next Friday. I won't tolerate any more of your unseemly behaviour."

Hermione raised her eyebrows slightly. That woman was rather obstinate, wasn't she? Strangely enough, though, Legifer's behaviour didn't rise Hermione's temper. She just stared at the Professor's sharp features. This was all very unexpected.

"You know I am a hopeless case," Hermione finally said in a soft voice. "And I don't really want that to change. You surely don't want to teach me at all."

An angry frown took form between Legifer's eyebrows, and she huffed at Hermione, "With that kind of attitude you'll never achieve anything."

Hermione didn't want to, but a small smile crept on her face as she stared at Legifer.

"Probably not," she replied quietly. "But there's not much left I want to achieve anyway."

Legifer just shook her head annoyed. "That's nonsense," she then snapped at Hermione in her strict voice. "You're way too young to be able to afford precocious talk like that."

As Hermione didn't reply anything Legifer hit her with a withering look and informed her snippily, "I have already invested too much work into you to allow you to give up like that."

Hermione couldn't stop to chuckle softly. Legifer was clearly annoyed, but strangely Hermione felt comforted by the Professor's sharp words. Whether Legifer had meant it as such or not didn't matter.

"You're aware that if I should attend your class again, I'll be my usual insufferable self?" Hermione asked softly.

"Don't worry, Ms DeCerto," the Professor told her in her sharp voice. "I'll find a way to stop that
insubordinate behaviour of yours."

Hermione's mouth was still curled up into a small smile. "Okay," she conceded before she got up from the sofa.

She walked over to the exit of the office. Before she grabbed the door handle she once again turned around to Legifer. The Professor still sat on the leather sofa and glared at Hermione through narrowed eyes.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered.

It was surprisingly easy to say those words. Then she grabbed the door handle, and she stood in the dark corridor outside.

It didn't take Hermione long to reach the portrait of the Fat Lady. It was pretty late already and the common room was deserted. Soon, Hermione climbed the stairs to her dorm. As she entered she found the room dived in darkness. Obviously her dorm mates were already asleep. She slowly walked over to her bed, trying to not stumble over anything and wake the other girls. She quickly shed her clothes to then put on her nighty. After that Hermione sat tiredly down on her bed. The moon shone silvery through the window. Hermione's gaze wandered to her left forearm. It still looked perfectly normal. Not even a graze was left from the deep gash that had cut open her skin. A smile stole back on her face as she eyed the unblemished skin.

*Who would have thought?* she mused. *Legifer, an Auror?*

It was a shame, Hermione decided, how the woman had to stop pursuing her career. Probably, she would have been a fine Auror. She then imagined Legifer in an Auror's uniform – squeaky clean of course. Hermione chuckled softly. Mr Legifer surely was an idiot. *What a strange world,* she sighed as she still scanned her arm.

Hermione turned her arm slightly and found a huge, ugly scar marring the inside of her forearm. The amusement dropped from her face as her eyes wandered over the white scar. It ran over the whole length of her forearm and Hermione knew there was a matching one on her other arm. A deep feeling of loneliness suddenly hit her as she looked at the scar. There were many scars on Hermione's body, but this was one of those that hurt the most. It was Tom who had done this. Right after Hermione had stolen the Invisibility Cloak from the Potter's, Tom had attacked her.

Hermione ran a finger slowly over the scar on her forearm. The sensation was strange. As if the nerves hadn't healed properly after the cut had closed. It felt just as strange as that hollow feeling inside of her. Hermione breathed in sharply and removed her finger from the scar. Then she drew the covers shut around her four-poster before she curled up on her bed. It was just a stupid scar, nothing to worry about, she told herself angrily. There really was no reason to waste time by contemplating Tom. Hermione turned angrily around in her bed. She wondered what Harry would say if he could see her now. Probably, "told you so". She sighed softly.

_Bah, I don't need to worry so much,* she thought defiantly. There was, after all, a ray of hope. She would brew that potion which, if she was lucky, could bring back her magic. On top of that, she already had managed to collect one Hallow and it was only a matter of time that Dumbledore would fight Grindelwald and gain the Elder Wand. After Hermione had managed to get her magic back, she would finally get that blasted stone from Tom. Then all her problems were finally solved. Yes, everything was going to be alright, she told herself as she snuggled deeper into her soft pillow and closed her eyes.

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Tom’s hand tightened around Hermione’s upper arm to the point where she winced in pain. He paid her discomfort no heed and continued to wrench her after him. She stumbled as she tried to follow him and would have surely fallen if it weren't for the vice-like grip he had on her. He pulled her into the shabby entrance hall and towards the well-known staircase leading down to the cellar.

"Don't do this," Hermione pleaded with him in a soft, broken voice.

Tom didn't even falter in his steps as he heard her plea. Instead he continued to brutally drag her after him while never looking at her. He descended the stairs and Hermione had no other option than to follow him. The stairs were made of bare concrete and there were cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. Puddles of stagnant water and the nasty smell of mildew greeted them as Tom hauled her down the dark passage and towards the ominous metal door.

"No," Hermione whispered panicky as they had nearly reached the metal door.

Then she bucked against his hold with the full weight of her body. Tom just wrenched violently at her arm, and she gasped in pain as she was forced to stagger forwards. They finally reached the door, and Tom flung it open. Then he hurled Hermione into the room behind. She lost her balance and impacted hard with the damp floor. Tom stepped into the chamber and closed the door behind him while Hermione moaned softly in pain as she tried to sit up.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked in a soft, shaky voice while she looked up at him with huge eyes.

A malicious sneer appeared on Tom's face as he walked over to her kneeling form.

"Because you deserve it, Mudblood," he replied in a low, dangerous voice.

Hermione started to tremble slightly as she heard his answer, then tears flowed down her face.

"I thought you loved me," she finally whispered, almost inaudibly.

Tom heard it and instantly a murderous fury twisted up his face. He raised his hand and slapped her hard in the face. Hermione yelled in pain as she was brutally thrown to the floor. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth as she raised her head to look at him again. Tom was glaring down at her mercilessly.

"No-one could love something disgusting like you, freak!" he hissed at her in a threatening tone while he scanned Hermione with cold eyes. "I will teach you, never to speak to me like that."

She was looking back at him in fear as he slowly removed his belt and wrapped one end of it around his right hand-

"No, don't!" Tom gasped as he bolted upright in his bed. His breathing was ragged and he ran a shaky hand through his dark hair.

What the fuck was that? This was getting ridiculous. He had left her! So why was she pestering his dreams now? He was still disgusted with the strange regret he felt because Hermione now so utterly ignored his presence. But now this? Tom sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. He could feel that his pulse was still quickened from the nightmare he just had. His mind was playing tricks on him it seemed. He had had no problems in recognizing the settings of this dream of his. The orphanage, of course. It had been a perfect replica of this repellent place, from the squalid entrance hall and the disgusting tang of must in the cellar down to the ominous metal door and the room behind.
Tom swallowed hard as he had to think of the last time he had been in that chamber for real. Everything had been just like he remembered from that place. But what had he been doing in this dream? No, it couldn't have been him! He was always the one being wrenched down those stairs and thrown into that chamber. He was the one huddled on the floor in pain. Not the one causing the pain.

He couldn't suppress that shudder, running through him, as he remembered the tears on her face. He raised his right hand and numbly looked at his palm. That was the hand he had slapped her with. Not only in that dream but also in reality. Back then there had been the same expression on her face. An expression of incredulity, hurt, disappointment and...

...defeat.

Now when she looked at him there was nothing. As if his doings didn't interest her at all. As if he didn't interest her at all. In a fit of rage Tom kicked at his trunk.

"Whasat?" a sleep muddled voice came from behind the room-divider.

"Shut up!" Tom hissed furiously as he felt his dark magic awaken.

In an attempt to calm his over-boiling temper he stood up and paced around. It didn't help at all. So he threw on some clothes and stomped out of the Slytherin domain. Before he took off down the corridor he cast a notice-me-not charm on himself so Barnes, the caretaker, wouldn't spot him wandering the castle at night. Then Tom took off in direction to the first floor.

He still felt rather shaky after this nightmare he had had, and that alone made his blood boil in anger. Why did that stupid dream affect him so much?

With purposeful steps, Tom arrived at the first floor and then walked towards a secluded corridor in the west wing. He needed fresh air, but he was not so careless as to leave the castle through the front door. With a new wave of anger he realized that the lousy Mudblood wouldn't have to go through so much trouble. She would be able to just apparate out of the castle. A few steps later he remembered that he had stolen the Elder Wand from her. But that hadn't provided him with her unusual talent. He was not the master of the Elder Wand.

I should have cursed her with her own wand back on the Astronomy Tower, Tom thought enraged as he finally entered the corridor he had been searching for. He stopped before an old and rusted suit of armour which stood here like it had been abandoned centuries ago. He looked up at the suit. Its visor was broken, rusted off its hinges, and hang pathetically from the helmet. Tom just pulled his wand and waved it angrily at the suit of armour. Immediately, it sprang to life. It inclined its head at Tom before it climbed off its pedestal thus unblocking the entrance to a secret passage. He stepped on the pedestal and climbed into the dark passage. The passage was very narrow so that Tom had to walk with a stoop. Its walls were made of rough stone, century old dust lay inch deep on the floor. He lit his wand to see where he stepped in this darkness. After a few minutes Tom was relieved to finally reach the exit. He again waved his wand as he reached the dead-end of the passage. The stone obeyed him and slid to the side, opening the exit. Tom left the passage and then stretched his body as he stood before what was the west outer-wall of Hogwarts. The fresh air quickly made him feel better. He slipped his wand back in his robe pocket and then took off. He walked away from the castle and passed a small hill. Finally he was out of sight from the castle. No-one would spot him here, hidden behind the slope of the landscape and a small grove of young oaks.

A wall, built of mossy stones loosely piled up on the ground, meandered through the small grove and beyond. Tom sat down on the wall that had been built by some unknown pagan priests long before Hogwarts' founders had been born. He breathed in deeply, revelling in the silence that engulfed him, and finally he was able to discard the depressed feeling he had had since that nightmare. It was
pathetic how that Mudblood had managed to crawl under his skin.

Like a bolt the picture of her, lying at his feet, while there was blood trickling from her mouth, seared through him. Unpleasant shivers run down his spine, but he ascribed that to the rather chilly nightly air. Though he could not shut out the fact that the nightmare had somehow disturbed him. Why did it affect him at all? Hermione meant nothing to him. Not anymore…

_Filthy Muggle!_ Tom wrinkled his nose in disgust. He jumped up from the low wall and started to pace furiously around. Honestly, he should have just enjoyed that dream. The image of her huddled on the concrete floor flashed around his mind. Tom growled in frustration and continued his angry pacing.

_How dare that Mudblood infest my sleep?_

That dirty girl had played with him for long enough. Tom balled his hands tightly into fists so that the nails dug deep into his skin. Then he raised his head and stared up at the innumerable stars blinking down at him. Everybody had a weak spot. Everybody would break, eventually. Even Hermione. Back on the Astronomy Tower, he shouldn't have stopped. Tom's magic was by now bristling in the air, enforced by his fury.

_Lord Voldemort does not bow before Mudbloods!_

He should have stayed, and showed her what he was capable of. Hermione had no idea what he could do. She was convinced that she would never yield? Then he should show her how very much mistaken she was. All he needed to do was to push her over the edge. To find the point where she would break. He would make her hurt so much, that she would never even think again about opposing him.

The stabbing pain was still in his stomach, but Tom chose to ignore it, and to sink in the blissful and cleansing wrath his magic was providing.

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Grindelwald attacks Department of French Ministry

Tuesday this week another attack took place in Paris, France. Target of the attack was the Département des Affaires Nées-Moldu (Department of Muggleborn Affairs), a part of the French Ministry dealing mainly with Muggleborns and their families. Early morning on Tuesday, May 17th, the Ministry building was attacked. According to Muggle witnesses, who have later been obliviated by Aurors following the rules of secrecy, the building's wards broke down at 8:30 a.m. and thus the department became visible to the Muggle world. By the time the wards fell the building itself was already on fire. Muggle first aiders were unable to extinguish the fire for heavy shielding magic was previously put in place by the attackers. Those shields also stopped the victims from leaving the building, using the Floo Network or alert the Aurors in any way. Our French correspondent confirmed that during this atrocious attack at least twenty people died. The exact number of the victims is not known at the time, because not all bodies have yet been recovered from the remains of the building. Among the victims are employees of the Ministry as well as Muggleborns who were present at the time of the attack.

Twenty four hours after the attack, a claim of responsibility reached the French Auror department. On Saturday the Auror department disclosed the contents of that claim to the public. According to the Auror spokesman, Étienne Nicolas, the extremist group around the dark wizard Grindelwald is responsible for the attack and the resulting deaths of the victims. (For more information see pg. 7 and 8)

Tom raised a lazy eyebrow as his gaze wandered over the article. Grindelwald was finally active again, it seemed. Tom hadn't heard of any attacks since October last year which was pretty regrettable really. Grindelwald did some nice work over there in France, didn't he? Tom thought as his grey eyes again skimmed over the article. At last someone dared to take action and didn't just talk. A smirk curled up the corners of Tom's mouth as he folded the newspaper and put it down on the table. He then leaned back in his seat and let his eyes sweep over the Great Hall. Despite it being a Sunday morning the Great Hall was quite crowded.

Hogsmeade weekend, Tom thought condescendingly as he looked at all those happy and excited faces. If he hadn't had a plan for this day, Tom would have happily slept in until all those idiots had already left the castle. But he couldn't do that, he thought, his cold eyes narrowing as he looked at the Gryffindor table. Hermione was sitting there, surrounded by her moronic friends, smiling happily while she ate breakfast. She was seemingly in high spirits as she chatted animatedly with the other Gryffindors. She looked like she had no concern in the world and her jauntiness managed to spark off bitter irritation in Tom. He didn't like it one bit that she seemed to enjoy herself so much. Even without him.

Though, there was no need to get aggravated over the little Mudblood. A vile smirk began to dance around Tom's mouth. He would see to it that she stopped her unbearably insolent behaviour. She deserved to be taught a lesson, didn't she? After all, she really had the nerve to blackmail him. Tom also needed to put a stop to her continuous lies and secrets. He would see to it that Hermione finally accepted her place. And that was where all Mudbloods belonged: grovelling in the dirt before his feet.

A dark, malicious expression swept over Tom's face as he continued to scan Hermione. To pull through with his plan, he had decided to trail the Mudblood today. Sooner or later an opportunity would arise where he could catch her on her own. Today's Hogsmeade trip only helped his plan of
cornering her, Tom thought as a rather feral smile took form on his face. He was pretty sure that Hermione would want to visit the village together with her friends. After all, he knew how very much she liked the hot chocolate they sold at the Three Broomsticks. She had always used every opportunity to go there. More often than not, she had dragged Tom along. They had sat there in the café the whole day, she drinking her hot chocolate while they had chatted. The smile on his face faltered as Tom felt an unpleasant twinge in his chest. He wondered whether today Hermione would go with Longbottom to the Three Broomsticks. Instantly, Tom's gaze left the bushy haired witch and he wrinkled his nose in distaste as he now eyed Longbottom. He sat right beside Hermione and smiled down at her brightly while telling her something that obviously was funny enough to make her laugh. Tom could feel anger boiling up in him as he saw Hermione smiling back at the blond Gryffindor. Why was she always hanging around the git? Was that jerk her boyfriend or what? Tom glared at the Gryffindor in question.

Anyway, new …boyfriend …or not, back to the plan, he thought but still continued to furiously observe that smile on Hermione's face. Yes, Tom would trail her today. It was a good thing Hogsmeade was a distance away from Hogwarts, so he wouldn't have to worry about getting caught by Dumbledore, of all people. Tom really couldn't risk a repeat of last time he had met that old codger. His performance had gotten him right into detention with Dumbledore. Tom shuddered in disgust. That detention surely was going to be unpleasant. He still felt somehow bewildered by Hermione's behaviour back then. Why had she helped him? Without her, Dumbledore might have expelled him. Yet again, she had stopped the old fool from doing so. Tom had no idea why she had done it. Though, it wouldn't stop him from finally teaching that Mudblood her place. Tom shuddered in disgust. That detention surely was going to be unpleasant. He still felt somehow bewildered by Hermione's behaviour back then. Why had she helped him? Without her, Dumbledore might have expelled him. Yet again, she had stopped the old fool from doing so. Tom had no idea why she had done it. Though, it wouldn't stop him from finally teaching that Mudblood her place. The smirk was back in place as Tom's steely grey eyes wandered over Hermione. He only had to wait for her and her friends to take off to the village. Surely on their way Tom would find an opportunity to get Hermione on her own. If need be, he would just confound her friends. Then he had all the time in the world to deal with the Mudblood. No-one would miss her for hours. Tom enjoyed indulging into his dark thoughts as someone sat down beside him. He turned his head slightly and found Avery in the seat beside him.

"Riddle," Avery nodded at him reverently.

Tom didn't reply, instead he continued eyeing Hermione with a dark grin on his face. Longbottom still seemed to chatter sillily with her. He should definitely curse Longbottom, too, Tom decided annoyed.

"Ah, the little Mudblood," he was brought out of his reverie by Avery's voice.

Tom slowly turned his head to then glare at the other Slytherin. There was a strange hungry sheen in Avery's eyes as he looked at Hermione.

"Who would have thought that some filthy Muggles could produce litter that's so easy on the eye," Avery said while he still stared at Hermione.

Strangely enough, Tom was by now pretty irritated by the other Slytherin's presence.

"What do you want?" he snapped at Avery in annoyance.

Avery immediately cowered away from Tom as he heard the other's tone. "I… just…" he stammered pathetically. "We wondered if there's a meeting today."

Tom leaned a little towards Avery, an evil smile dancing around his mouth. Then he said in a deadly calm voice, "Do you really think I have nothing better to do than to babysit you all day?"

"N- no," Avery quickly amended. "We were just curious… if you don't have time… that's really
"not..." his voice faded as he eyed Tom, frightened by the other's cold exterior.

Tom just sneered at him then he got up from his seat. A glance at the Gryffindor table told him that Hermione was still there. He would just need to wait for her to leave the castle. Then he would strike.

"-and we definitely have to go to Zonko's," Longbottom said, his eyes mischievously glinting down at Hermione. "I'm out of cheating quills. And you know, there's this History test ahead of us."

Immediately, Hermione frowned at him. "Marc, you can't go and cheat in tests," she scolded him.

"But it's just Binns," Longbottom grinned down at her. "He'll never notice anything. It's not like I'm going to use the quill during a Transfiguration exam or something like that."

That didn't manage to dispel the reproachful look on Hermione's face. "It still is cheating," she scowled at him. "It's wrong."

Longbottom threw up his arms and exclaimed in exasperation, "Whatever do you expect from me? That I fail yet another test."

"Or," Hermione replied dryly. "you could just study for the test."

Longbottom just stared down at her in disbelief as if she had just suggested he jumped off the Astronomy Tower. "You know, I prefer my plan," he finally admitted lightly while the grin worked its way back on his face.

Before Hermione had the chance to scold him again, he turned towards Lupin, who sat opposite Hermione at the table. "Hey, what about you and Stella?" Longbottom asked him, expertly changing the topic. "Wanna join us for Hogsmeade?"

Hermione had to suppress a giggle as she then saw a suspicious blush taking form on Lupin's face. "Er... no," he stuttered. "I...uhm... we wanted to... that is..."

A teasing grin appeared on Longbottom's face as he heard his friend's awkward reply. The blond Gryffindor smirked at Lupin's distress. "Ah, come on, Amarys," Longbottom then drawled at the other Gryffindor. "We are old friends. If you need some alone time with your girlfriend, you just have to tell us."

As the blush on Lupin's face now grew even fiercer Hermione couldn't hold herself back anymore and she giggled in amusement. Weasley who sat right beside her reached for another piece of toast. He left teasing Lupin to Longbottom and instead asked Hermione,

"You are coming with us, though, aren't you?"

Hermione turned to him and found him hitting her with the puppy-dog-eyes. Longbottom immediately joined him. She smiled at the both of them. The situation between her and Longbottom still was a bit awkward, but the blond Gryffindor really dealt well with it. At least better than you are, a dry voice didn't hesitate to inform her.

"Sure," Hermione finally answered. "Though, I've something to do before that. How about I'll join you in Hogsmeade then?"

"What do you have to do?" Weasley asked.
Hermione turned to her ginger haired friend and considered him for a moment. Actually, she planned to finish the veneficus potion today. She had spent the whole day yesterday to brew that potion. Now, Hermione was quite anxious to test it. If she was lucky this was her way to regain her magic. If not, then she didn't know what else to try to get her magic back to working. Though she couldn't tell her friends any of this, she thought as she still looked at Weasley.

"Something homework related," she finally answered his question. Then she asked, "Wanna join me?"

As expected Weasley immediately frowned at her and just shook his head. "Merlin, Mione," he instead stated indignant. "It's Sunday!"

Hermione chuckled at him. The prospect of any additional homework was enough to drive her friends away from her secrets. Luckily, Lupin was planning to meet with his girlfriend, otherwise he might have really wanted to join her, she thought amused as she eyed the Gryffindor in question. Then the smile dropped from her face as she reminded herself that there still was something to do before she could try the potion. Hermione turned to Longbottom who right now gulped down an entire glass of pumpkin juice in one go. He had clearly dropped out of the conversation as soon as it began to circle around homework.

"Er… Marc?" Hermione said in a small voice, trying to muster up her courage.

He put down the glass on the table and smiled down at her. "Yeah?"

"Um… can I ask you a favour?" she asked hesitantly.

"Sure," he replied lightly. "Whatever you want."

Hermione bit her lip nervously. She was going to ask a lot, but then again, she really needed to test her magic. That wasn't really possible without…

"Er… somehow I… I…" she mumbled sheepishly. Then she breathed in deeply and said in a rushed voice, "I kinda lost my wand."

Longbottom immediately rose his eyebrows at her in surprise. But then it was Lupin who asked in disbelief, "You lost what?"

"My wand," Hermione admitted meekly.

"How was that possible?" Longbottom now inquired concern in his voice.

Hermione suppressed the need to throw a nasty glare in direction of the Slytherin table. That surely would have told her friends that Tom had something to do with her predicament.

"I must have somehow misplaced it yesterday," she replied instead. "Don't worry," she hastily continued as she saw the worry on her friends' faces. "I'm sure I'll find it sooner or later."

"Hermione," Lupin told her reproachfully. "You really should be more responsible when handling your wand. You can't just lose it."

"I know," she responded feebly.

"Don't be so hard on her, Amarys," Longbottom threw in. "Everybody can make a mistake." Then he turned to Hermione and smiled down at her gently. "If you don't find it, you could still order a new one from Ollivander. That's no problem."
Hermione nodded at him. Maybe she would really have to do that. Tom surely wouldn't give it back to her.

"But you wanted to ask me something?" Longbottom's voice pulled Hermione's thoughts away from Tom and back to the problem at hand.

"Yeah," she said awkwardly. "You see, I still need to do my homework. And…I kinda need a wand to do that."

Understanding dawned on Longbottom's face as he eyed her. "Do you want to borrow my wand?" he asked genially.

Hermione nodded again, feeling very uncomfortable. "If you don't want to, I would understand," she quickly assured.

Longbottom just shrugged his shoulders. "That's okay. I certainly didn't intend to do any homework today. So, there's no problem. It's not like you asked for something impossible," he then beamed down at her before he informed her, "Now, my broom on the other hand I would never lend out."

"You really think your broom is more important than your wand?" Lupin stared at the blond Gryffindor in disbelief.

Longbottom just shook his head sadly, then he said in quite the patronizing tone, "Of course, you wouldn't understand," the mischievous grin worked itself back on his face and his eyes sparkled as he continued, "But it's a Comet 190! You wouldn't know how difficult it was to get. They released it just last year. I mean the 180 was good, too. But nothing compared to the 190. Now, my dad said the Cleansweep Four would have been the better choice. But I disagree here. The Cleansweep's acceleration is just slightly delayed right after turning manoeuvres, so--"

Lupin just cleared his throat loudly to interrupt his friend's flood of words. "Well, that's really interesting," he said, not really trying to hide the sarcasm. "Back to topic, though…"

"Ah, yes," Longbottom said as he turned to Hermione again. He reached into his robe pocket and produced his wand out of it. Then he offered the wand to Hermione. She hesitated shortly but then took the wand from him.

"Are you sure?" she asked him softly.

"Bah, don't make such a big deal out of it," Longbottom grinned down at her.

"Thanks," Hermione said gratefully.

She eyed the wand in her hand. It was slightly longer than her own and was light brown in colour. The sealing of the wood seemed to have flaked off at a few places and there was a dark stain marring the handle of the wand, but Hermione was immensely happy as she smiled down at the wand. Then her eyes wandered back to Longbottom.

"Thank you. I'll give it back to you when we meet in Hogsmeade."

Hermione waited impatiently for the potion to cool down. Right now, she was standing in Slughorn's private little potions lab. As soon as he had allowed her to use it, Hermione had started to brew the veneficus potion here. Luckily, it had been surprisingly easy to brew. It had only cost her a few hours yesterday. After the preparation of the ingredients and mixing them together, the dark-violet
potion had just needed to simmer innocently in the cauldron for half a day. Then the only thing that was left to do was to wait for it to cool down. Now, it seemed to be ready, Hermione decided as she scanned the violet liquid in the cauldron. Her heart raced and she felt very tense as she reached for the small cup she had prepared beforehand. Her hands shook with anticipation as she then lowered the cup into the cauldron and dipped it into the potion. As she removed the cup it was now filled with the violet liquid. Hermione stared at the potion for a moment. Her heart still beat rapidly. She prayed to whatever entity which would have pity on her that this potion could restore her magic.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered, her voice shaking slightly with nervousness.

Then she raised the cup to her lips and drank a mouthful. The horrible taste of the potion made her gag. She forced it down her throat while wrinkling her nose in disgust. Then she put the cup down on the table and waited for the potion to take effect. She actually wasn't at all sure what to expect, the potion books hadn't been very precise with that. Though, she could feel her stomach starting to burn now. Hermione furrowed her brow as she stood there in the lab, waiting for anything more to happen. The burning feeling slowly diminished again. She waited for another five minutes but the strange feeling in her stomach disappeared completely. Nothing changed at all. Hermione was flooded by dread. The potion didn't work, did it? Another dead end, it seemed.

The thought had barely formed in her mind as suddenly the burning feeling in her stomach returned and even intensified. It spread through her whole body, like a wave of heat. The heat was followed by another sensation. Hermione gasped out in surprise as suddenly magic wrapped itself around her. The force bristled and thundered around her body. It wrenched at her wildly and Hermione was temporarily overwhelmed by the feeling of her magic rushing back at her. She stumbled back against the working bench and had to grab the edge of it to steady herself. The force behind her magic made her weak in the knees. Hermione laughed out loud as she felt the magic around her, inside of her, completely infusing her. She hadn't realized how much she had missed that power. It engulfed her and forcefully danced around her. Her hands shook slightly and she still leaned against the table. Her magic was back! It pulsed through her. The potion had really worked. There was still hope for her after all. Not all was lost. With her magic back, nothing seemed to be impossible. Hermione closed her eyes, a smile still tugged at her mouth and she just lost herself in the feeling of that force swirling around her. How much she had missed it!

As she continued to let her magic flow around her, though, she realized that something was off. Normally she had always been able to separate her own magic from the Elder Wand's magic which had infested her ever since she had broken that wand in two. Now, though, she wasn't really able to tell the two forces apart anymore. It seemed as if the Elder Magic was completely mingled with her own magic. It was impossible to tell where her magic ended and the Elder Magic began. It seemed to be just one force as the magic crackled around her angrily. Hermione opened her eyes again and furrowed her brow. That surely was strange. She didn't like that change in the magic at all. The magic somehow felt like a cloak which was too large for her - it didn't really fit. It definitely didn't feel like it had before she had lost it.

Still, Hermione was immensely relieved that she felt her magic at all. It wasn't lost, like she had feared. It was still here. It might be more difficult to reach, but it was not lost forever. With that encouraging thought in her mind, Hermione tried to cautiously draw upon the magic. She grabbed Longbottom's wand tightly, closed her eyes and summoned the magic towards her. It obeyed, though, it did so only reluctantly. It was very difficult to direct its power. It didn't really want to comply with her. Hermione gulped nervously but then guided a bit of the magic through her wand and willed it to form into a spell.

"Wingardium leviosa," she said as she flicked the wand cautiously.
She could have cried with joy as she then saw the potions book on the table softly gliding up in the air. This was the best day of her life, Hermione thought happily, almost hopping up and down with excitement. Though, that charm had been rather easy. She should try something more difficult. Hermione grabbed the wand now with more confidence. Maybe she should try one of her more special talents. So, she instantly went through the familiar preparations and twirled on the spot. An ecstatic chuckle left her lips as she was pulled into the dark pressure of apparition. She reappeared only a metre from her original position, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter how large the distance was. The procedure was still the same and it had worked. Hermione smiled broadly as she looked down at the wand in her hand. The reassuring feeling of magic around her was still there. It might be changed, but it was magic all the same.

Hermione stepped over to the table. The cauldron with the veneficus potion still stood there innocently. She grinned down at the violet potion satisfied. That potion surely was a godsend. She didn't know whether the effect of the potion was temporary. Maybe she would lose her magic again as the potion wore off. Of course, she would prefer it if she never lost her magic again, but even if it would disappear again, at the very least she now knew that her magic was still there. She hadn't lost it completely and irrevocably.

Hermione intended to practice her magic some more now. See what had changed, because it definitely was harder to control than ever before. She needed to get used to it again. Then she would go to Hogsmeade to meet her friends. She looked down at the wand in her hand. She still had to return the wand to Longbottom. It was, after all, his. Then again, she might even be able to purchase a new wand in Hogsmeade. She needed to replace her lost wand anyway.

Tom stood in the Entrance Hall a little off the side, hidden in the shadow behind a column. From his position he could perfectly see the students passing through the Entrance Hall, while he himself couldn't be seen. He had observed the entrance to Hogwarts castle for quite some time now. He had seen students come and go. Most of them had taken off towards Hogsmeade. It must have been almost half an hour ago as he had seen Hermione's stupid Gryffindor friends leaving while Hermione herself hadn't been among them. It had annoyed him utterly. Surely, Hermione didn't plan to stay in the castle the whole day? Hopefully, she had just wanted to join them a little later. To catch her outside the castle would be extremely beneficial to his plans. No teachers would be around and if Hermione really decided to walk to the village on her own, that would be even better, Tom thought as a grim expression appeared on his face. He was determined. Hermione had messed around with him for long enough. It was time that he showed that Mudblood her place. He would make her regret she had ever crossed his path.

The dark expression on his face turned into an evil smile as he spotted Hermione, walking down the Entrance Hall. There was a cheerful smile on her face as she stepped towards the exit. He would really enjoy it to wipe that happy smile off her face, Tom thought viciously as he watched Hermione leaving the castle. His hands balled into tight fists as suddenly a painful knot formed in his stomach. Hopefully, he would be rid of that guilty feeling, too, after he had straightened things out.

Wait! Guilty…?

He scowled darkly as the bushy haired witch left through the gates. No, he wasn't feeling guilty. Surely! Hermione just was so good in spinning lies that he needed some time to free himself off her deceitful web. That unpleasant feeling was nothing more than the remnant her ruthless deception had left behind. But now, after so many months, his mind was clear again. He had been able to recognise that vile witch for what she was: a worthless Mudblood. Now was the time to make her admit to the fact that she was inferior to him. He would crush her under his heel.
By now Hermione had left. Tom decided to wait a moment until he would follow her. He didn't want her to notice anything, he decided while his cold grey eyes glistened maliciously.

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It was half an hour later that Hermione left the castle in direction to Hogsmeade. A fat smile tucked at the corners of her mouth. The steady pulse of her magic still accompanied her. She just couldn't believe that it was really back. She had tried some more spells. Admittedly, her magic was now more difficult to control, but she had still managed to complete every spell she had tried. Maybe she needed to concentrate more on a spell to finish it, but that fact didn't manage to diminish her good mood. It seemed that after such a long time she could finally breathe freely again. It was such a reassuring feeling to know that she could use her magic again. That horrible feeling of vulnerability had finally left her. Hermione hated nothing more than to be helpless. She had spent more than enough time being helpless. In her time period, she had been faced so many times with situations where she had been unable to do anything. She didn't want to feel so weak ever again, Hermione decided as her fingers skimmed over Longbottom's wand which was stored in her robe pocket. Gratitude swelled up in her. She was so thankful that she had managed to find such good friends here in the past. She didn't ever want to be weak again, or alone.

Hermione walked away from Hogwarts and towards Hogsmeade. As she strolled down the path she adjusted the strip of her bag on her shoulder. The Invisibility Cloak was stuffed in her bag. This had become habit ever since she had lost her magic. Another measure to stop her from feeling vulnerable. Though, she wouldn't need it anymore, Hermione thought, a smile playing around her mouth, because her magic was finally back. She turned to the path leading to Hogsmeade as her eyes wandered to the Great Lake. The sun was shining mildly and was mirrored serenely on the surface of the lake. Hermione suddenly wanted to walk around the peaceful looking lake. The return of her magic had made her feel giddy and euphoric. It wouldn't hurt if she met her friends a little while later, would it? After all, they hadn't really arranged a meeting time. Maybe she could try a little more magic. Then she would return the wand to Longbottom. After that, she would buy a new wand for herself as soon as possible.

So, Hermione walked towards the Great Lake. She didn't meet any other students on her way and was silently glad for it. She didn't want company right now. As she arrived at the shore of the lake she paused for a moment, looked over the water and breathed in deeply. It was now almost noon and the sun shone brightly down on the Scottish land. The sun rays were reflected on the small waves of the lake making the water glisten invitingly. A little distance away Hermione could see some coots swimming on the lake's surface. The peaceful scenery was nicely mirroring her own state of mind. After such a long time she finally felt whole again. She hadn't wanted to admit how much she had missed her magic, but it had greatly distressed her to be cut off from that force. The magic, though, still flowed pleasantly through her. Hermione sighed satisfied as she continued her way around the lake. She could see the giant squid swimming directly under the surface of the lake. Hermione smiled and just enjoyed the incredible feeling of her magic pulsing through her. It wasn't long and she had walked a good distance and the castle and its inhabitants were conveniently far away. Her way led her through a grove and Hermione breathed in the spicy scent of wood, moss and decaying leaves. She felt herself relax as she strolled through the grove.

Her peace of mind however vanished abruptly and Hermione stiffened as she heard a soft rustling. It sounded as if someone was walking nearby. She turned around and scanned the environment. There was no-one to be seen. Hermione shook her head slightly. Was she becoming now paranoid on top of everything? It wouldn't be a surprise, she reasoned dryly. She resumed her way wandering the small path around the lake. After a while though she could hear it again, a soft crunch as if someone stepped on a twig. She was now pretty sure that someone was nearby. Hermione again checked her surroundings, this time a little less conspicuous though. Again there was no-one in sight, but she
could definitely hear steps. Who was following her, *stalking* her? The sad thing was that she could immediately picture a few people who actually would do that. The whole house of Slytherin for example. And not one of them would have good intentions on their minds while doing such. Hermione shuddered and took a quick glance at the castle. Now the distance between her and the safety of Hogwarts wasn't so comfortable. Suddenly, she couldn't appreciate the secludedness anymore.

There was no need to panic, though, she told herself. Her magic was back. If anything happened, at least, she wasn't defenceless anymore. Hermione quickened her step but she could still hear her pursuer behind her. She considered apparating away, but she didn't know who her follower was. Her ability to break down Hogwarts' warts was still a secret. *It's probably nothing. Maybe just a stray red cap,* Hermione tried to convince herself. She was pretty close to the Forbidden Forest after all. She didn't manage to calm herself down though. Her instincts were telling her it was something dangerous following her.

She still followed the small path that now made a bend around more trees and shrub. As she had rounded the bend Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. A few metres away on the small path stood a figure. Panic bubbled up in her as her gaze wandered over the man standing there on the path. He wasn't wearing the expected Hogwarts uniform robe and yet his style of clothing wasn't unfamiliar to her. She had seen those black cloaks before.

*Grindelwald's soldiers!* was the only thought that coursed through her head like a bolt as Hermione stared wide-eyed at the man. He was still standing on the path, staring at her. He was a burly, flaxen-haired man and she was surprised to see how young he was, barely older than herself. Maybe in his early twenties. A fat smirk was plastered all over his face and Hermione could see that he had drawn his wand. This realization finally drew her from her stupor. They had again cornered her! Hermione was thinking fast now. There were at least two of them. One in front and the one in her back she had heard following her earlier. To her right hand was the lake. They had again cornered her pretty well. The only way out was through the thick coppice to her left.

"I suggest you surrender, little girl!" the man in front of her informed her lazily.

Hermione's gaze shot back at him. The evil smirk was still on his face as he looked at her triumphantly. Surrender, though, was surely not an option for her. She knew what they wanted from her: the book. Hermione didn't understand Peverell's work, but she still wasn't going to give it to Grindelwald. Even if she did, the disturbing glint in that blond man's eyes told her that they would never let her go. Like a bolt realisation seared through her. Right now, the Invisibility Cloak was stored in her bag. She could not surrender the cloak to Grindelwald. So Hermione made her decision.

Without replying anything to the man's threat, she reached for the wand in her pocket while simultaneously flinging herself into the undergrowth to her left. A curse detonated behind her but she didn't turn around and went on running. Branches and thorns from blackberry bushes were scratching her arms and face but she didn't even notice as she rushed on. She could hear the men behind her now. They were chasing her while yelling curses. A red curse shot by her, missing her by mere inches. While still running, Hermione waved Longbottom's wand.

"*Fulgur!*" she hissed while pointing the tip of the wand at the ground.

A flash of magic left the wand and then shot through the ground, searching for the next person standing on the ground. It was going to hit that person with a surge of electric energy. Unfortunately, she never heard the painful cry which would have indicated that her curse had hit its aim. Instead there was a dull gong and she knew that her pursuers had managed to put up a shield. Her attack had been useless. Hermione didn't stop running. Her breathing was ragged now but she still darted
through the coppice as fast as she could. The vegetation was now thinning out, the trees were standing farther away from each other and she could speed up her flight. As she raced down the soft forest floor, she chanced a glance back. Dread flooded her as she saw the two men sprinting after her. They slowly caught up with her. Hermione waved her wand and sent another curse back at them. She didn't see if her curse had hit its aim as she continued to race through the forest, but she heard a rather satisfying yelp coming from behind her. They quickly retaliated, though. She sensed a powerful curse rushing towards her and Hermione flung herself behind the next tree. A yellow light impacted with the forest floor right beside her sending bits of dirt everywhere. Hermione quickly picked herself up. Her fingers clenched painfully tight around the wood of the wand and she felt her heart thundering away in her chest. There was no use in running away, she realized. Adrenalin rushed through her as Hermione decided to fight. Her magic was back, so she would use it. She got up from her position crouched behind the tree. Her hand was still clenched around Longbottom's wand as she stepped away from the tree's cover to face her enemies. She saw the two men standing a few metres away, wands in hand and ready to attack. Without waiting for them to make the next move, Hermione twirled her wand in a quick and practiced movement.

Tonituum, she thought as she stabbed her wand in the direction of her followers.

A violently crackling curse left the tip of her wand and immediately sped towards her attackers. The two men stared at the curse in surprise, clearly not having expected such a strong counterattack. Then they both waved their wands to erect shields. Hermione's curse violently crashed into the shields. Her curse's power was broken, but the impact was still so strong that both men were pushed away. Unfortunately, they managed to remain standing. The flaxen haired man glared darkly at her. The other man was older, had dark hair and a gaunt face with blearily blue eyes. He just stared at her apathetically while he pointed his wand at her. Hermione didn't have more time to consider them as both men now waved their wands. Two furiously crackling curses instantly hurtled towards her. Hermione swallowed nervously. This was obviously no child's play. This was very dark magic. Grindelwald's soldiers were well trained and certainly didn't hesitate to use dark curses. She would need all her skill to drive them away. Hermione quickly crossed her arms, then she spread them to her sides, summoning one of her stronger shields.

Subsisto!

A thick, yellow shield appeared in front of her. The curses of her attackers now thundered into her shield, turning its colour from yellow to orange and then to a light red. Hermione could feel the impacts of the curses tugging at her magic. Pearls of sweat appeared on her forehead, but she would sustain. She just had to. Losing was not an option, she thought grimly as she saw the rage on the blond man's face. He again brandished his wand and sent another curse her way. It smashed violently into her shield and turned its colour into an alarming dark red.

Can't go on like this, Hermione thought wildly. Shields were all nice and good but they had two severe disadvantages. First, with a shield up, counterattacks were impossible. Shields worked both ways. If she wanted to attack, she had to lower the shield first. Second, shields needed a huge amount of magic to be maintained. Hermione already felt the Subsisto spell drawing heavily on her power.

Without hesitating more, Hermione abruptly dropped her arms to her sides. That gesture ended the shield, which now evaporated into thin air. Grindelwald's men had waited for that and now attacked her with new vigour. It didn't matter, though, Hermione had counted on that. So, as new curses came dashing her way, Hermione pointed her want at the forest floor in between her and her enemies. She summoned her magic, before she directed it into the ground. As she then brought her wand up in one smooth movement the earth of the forest floor followed her. It rose in the air and now built a solid wall between her and Grindelwald's soldiers. Hermione smirked as she heard the curses crashing into
her wall of dirt. She had to correct herself. *Magical* shields had two disadvantages, but there was nothing to be said about good old physical walls. Hermione still channelled part of her magic into the dirt wall to hold it up. She knew it wouldn't hold her enemies up much longer, but it didn't have to. Hermione swirled her wand again.

*Aduleo!*

It was dark magic she was using right now, but she didn't think her enemies deserved to be handled with restraint. If she needed to use dark magic to overcome them, she was prepared to do so. Still, it made her stomach churn uncomfortably as she felt the dark spell break away from her wand's tip. The air started to flicker with heat as flames burst from the wand. They burned with an eerie bluish shine as they rushed towards her opponents. Of course, they hadn't yet seen Hermione's new attack as the wall of earth still covered her actions. They probably assumed she was huddled behind the wall, using up all her magic to maintain the shield. Her fire curse spit forebodingly as it hissed through the air. Hermione withdrew her magic from the wall of earth seconds before her curse crashed into it. The fire curse easily burst through the collapsing wall and continued its way towards Grindelwald's soldiers. With the wall gone, Hermione could see her enemies again. Obviously, they hadn't expected a counter attack. Now alarm flashed over their faces. They had probably recognized her curse. Hermione's attack was very powerful and not easy to ward off. Especially as Grindelwald's soldiers had only seconds to come up with a defence. Hermione still pointed her wand at her opponents to maintain her fire curse while she felt – almost enjoyed – her magic rushing angrily through her.

Both men stepped now closer to each other. Hermione watched with narrowed eyes as the blond man waved his wand to erect a strong shield that surrounded both of her enemies. The shield shook dangerously as her curse furiously thundered against it, but it still held. She could still feel it through her magic, though; slowly the shield was breaking down under her onslaught. It was only a matter of time. Still, it didn't fill Hermione with satisfaction, as with each passing moment she could feel the flames of her curse diminishing. It was constantly losing power.

Her eyes swept over her attackers. The blond still had his wand raised to maintain the shield. In the meantime, the other man swirled his wand in a small movement, while muttering an incantation under his breath. He was breaking her dark curse, Hermione realized angrily. Grindelwald's men, she once again had to admit, were good at working together. It didn't take long, to her frustration, for her fire curse to completely break down. A sneer appeared on the blond man's face as he lowered his wand and the shield around him and his companion disappeared.

"Impressive," he drawled at her, a mocking smirk accompanying his words, "but not good enough."

Hermione clenched her teeth in anger. Those men were strong opponents. Obviously Grindelwald didn't just take anyone into the ranks of his followers. His soldiers were powerful wizards and especially dangerous as they were trained well in cooperating with each other. But it didn't matter, Hermione thought fiercely. There was no way she would give up. She couldn't lose here. Determination flooded her as she glared darkly at her opponents. She wouldn't let them win. She couldn't.

Hermione didn't answer anything to the blond's scorn, instead she summoned her magic. Her last curse had been quite demanding and had depleted her magic drastically, but it didn't mean she was finished already. She would show them she wasn't a weak witch either. She still had a few aces up her sleeve. Hermione then swirled her wand in a complicated movement.

*Decicere!* she thought, and a bright red curse left her wand, bolting angrily towards her enemies. The blond took a step back as he was confronted with another dangerously powerful curse. His dark
haired companion had already started to hastily wave his wand. Hermione, though, didn't notice any of that. She cried out in shock as the curse left her wand. There was a painful stab in her chest as the magic left her and her left hand shot up to her aching chest. The curse leaving her had induced a horribly familiar pain in her chest. Hermione's breathing quickened in fear and cold panic flooded her. She knew that pain. She had felt this way as her magic had started to leave her the first time.

*Not now!* a panicky voice screamed in her head while she stood petrified with fear.

In the meantime, her curse dashed towards the black cloaked men, leaves and dirt of the forest floor whirled up in its wake. Hermione still fought with the stabbing pain in her chest as she watched the dark haired man, brandishing his wand in a complicated pattern. Then he jabbed the wand towards her curse, before he waved it in a sharp movement to his side. Her curse was instantly hurled off its trajectory and missed its target. Hermione didn't hesitate now. Her chest still hurting, she immediately tried to apparate away. She couldn't win this fight if her magic started to desert her again. Her only chance now was to flee them. So she concentrated hard on her destination, Slughorn's small potion lab, and then swirled on the spot. Hermione again cried out in pain as she drew upon her magic - the feeling of apparition, though, didn't follow. It hadn't worked! Hermione held her aching chest and breathed hard. But she had no time to get over the shock of her failed apparition as another barrage of curses angrily soared towards her. Hermione quickly raised her wand and waved it.

"Protego!" she yelled, desperately hoping it would work.

Again the stabbing pain in her chest intensified and then a feeble, bluish shield took form in front of her. Even though it was a basic spell and she had said the incantation out loud, it hadn't worked perfectly. The curses hit the shield hard, and Hermione instantly felt that it was no good. She would need a much stronger shield than a Protego to ward those men's magic off. The shield shattered as a greenish curse connected with it. Hermione just managed to hurl herself behind the tree before she would have been hit.

*Shit!*  

She was huddled behind the tree as more and more curses crashed into its trunk. Bits of bark and dirt rained down on her as the curses continued to hit relentlessly. She needed to get away from here. Fast! Hermione grabbed the wand tightly as she felt her heart thumping away in panic. She could now almost feel her magic breaking down. It was only a matter of minutes and she would be without any power over her magic. She trembled slightly as the magic left her body.

This was hopeless. She didn't even have any of the veneficus potion with her right now. It wouldn't have been of help anyway, Hermione realized desperately. The potion had taken five minutes until it took effect. Five minutes was an eternity! Curses pelted brutally down on the tree she was hidden behind. It was only a matter of seconds and she would be hit, Hermione thought frantically. How could she flee those men without her magic? She was fucked. There was no way out. Those men would get her. They were going to kill her. Hermione felt the panic now completely taking over and her breathing was getting erratic. She trembled and could feel her head swirl with fear.

*Stop!* an angry voice, which sounded suspiciously like Harry's, thundered at her. *Focus! Get out of here!*  

Hermione breathed in deeply, trying to calm herself down. The curses still crashed down around her, but she forced her mind to think again. There had to be something she could do. She had to, at least, try. Nothing was lost yet. Magic or not, she could still run. If she reached Hogwarts castle, she would be safe. If she just managed to leave the forest, people would see her. Maybe some teachers would help her. She had to try!
Hermione summoned every bit of magic she could still reach. Her efforts were instantly punished by pain searing through her, but she ignored it. There still was some magic left. Hermione gulped nervously. It was almost nothing. Still, enough to be formed into one last spell. With difficulty she forced that trickle of magic through her wand. She waved the wand in a sharp downward movement before she brought it up again and vaguely pointed it at her attackers from behind the tree.

*Occaeco!*

It wasn't an offensive spell that now left her wand, her magic wouldn't have been strong enough for that. What she had done was more of a diversionary tactic. The Occaeco spell created an incredibly bright flash of light which temporarily blinded everybody present except the caster of the spell. So, as Hermione's magic left her wand, a painfully and dazzling bright light suffused the forest. Her attackers were unable to make out anything anymore while Hermione perceived the flash only as a dull, white light. The men stopped their attack as they were not longer able to see. Hermione used their confusion. She knew there were only seconds before the men would regain their sight. She left the protection of the tree and ran away. Quickly, she could feel her heart hammering away in her chest from the exertion, but Hermione did not stop. If those men again caught her, there was no hope for escape. After her last spell had left her, Hermione had felt her magic breaking completely down. It was gone again. It had abandoned her when she needed it most. Her only chance now was to somehow reach the safety of Hogwarts.

As she raced away from her attackers, soon a steep slope bared her way. Hermione cursed her bad luck and scampered up the dirty slope. Her heart continued to hammer away in her ears, but it almost stopped beating as she then heard noise behind her. Grindelwald's soldiers had made up leeway. In her panic Hermione tripped over a root and fell on her knees. Completely ignoring the pain she jumped up and hastened on. She was gasping for breath as she passed the steep slope, but she didn't slow down. She couldn't be caught, Hermione thought desperately as she ran through the forest. The noises of the men behind her were getting louder and louder. Then, after she had run another few metres, Hermione could hear one of the men yell another curse. Somehow, before it happened, she knew that this time she wouldn't be able to dodge it.

"Crucio!" bellowed the man.

Hermione was still running as suddenly pain erupted in her body. The agony was so intense that she stopped her flight in mid-step and then crumbled limply to the ground. It felt like someone had poured petrol all over her and had now set fire to her. Hermione screamed in pain as she twitched uncontrollably on the ground. Everything else vanished, and her world suddenly only consisted of pain.

After an eternity, which could not have been more than a minute, the pain was lifted from her. Hermione remained lying on the ground while gasping for breath. She slowly opened her eyes and found the two dark cloaked men looming over her. The blond smirked evilly down at her, while the other, dark haired man eyed her indifferently. Hermione breathed in sharply as she spotted her wand and her bag in the wizard's hands. She was unarmed now, and the Invisibility Cloak was inside that bag!

"Now, I think you should be a little more cooperative," the blond sneered at her, a harsh accent accompanying his words. Hermione's frightened eyes shot back at him. "Quite the performance you put up for us."

The man reached out for her, grabbed her by her collar and hauled her up. Hermione hissed in pain as he slammed her against a tree trunk.

"Where's the book?" the blond inquired in a sharp tone, still with that accent she couldn't quite place.
Hermione just stared at him but remained to be silent. "Hmmm…" made the blond, then he turned around to his comrade and said derisively, "We have a defiant little Mudblood here, Anton."

Hermione stiffened even more as she heard him using that word. How did they know? She stared at the man with scared eyes. How did they know that she was Muggleborn?

The dark haired man, 'Anton', answered in a Russian lilted voice, "Hurry up, Henger, we are just to get the book. You know the orders."

"Yeah, I know," answered the blond, Henger, lazily. Then he turned around to Hermione again and his gaze wandered greedily over her body. "But I'm sure the commander wouldn't mind if we had a little fun on the way."

"Whatever," replied dark haired man uninterested. "As long as we get the job done, I don't care."

The blond turned away from his comrade to again leer down at Hermione.

"Didn't know you were such a fine specimen," Henger purred at her in an oily voice and Hermione shuddered as he scanned her audaciously. "Now, why don't you just tell us where that book is and I promise nothing will happen to you," he tried to reassure her but the desire in his gaze was betraying his words.

Hermione was utterly afraid now. Her magic was going haywire and was no help anymore, while this man pinned her unrelentingly against the tree. There was no way out for her. He was at least a head taller than her and obviously had an athletic body. There was no way she could escape him. Even if she could, there still was the Russian guy. She stared fearfully up at the man. The lust in the blond's eyes was more than just unsettling as his gaze raked over her body. Hermione struggled against his hold but couldn't break free as he was way stronger than her. The man now grabbed her by her upper arms tightly and pressed her even harder against the tree.

"Give us the book!" the blond, Henger, yelled demandingly.

"I don't have it anymore," Hermione lied in a surprisingly strong voice.

As he heard her answer an evil grin took form on Henger's face. He towered over her and a mad glint appeared in his eyes.

"Hmmm… seems you need a little bit more persuasion, oder?" the blond said tauntingly, his weird accent slipping in again. "It will be my pleasure to make you spill your secrets," he said contently.

Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she heard the insinuation in his words. She again tried to break free but it was to no avail.

"Let me go!" she yelled angrily.

Henger just sniggered at her then he leaned down to her and whispered chidingly in her ear, "Why so dismissive? Who knows? You might even be able to enjoy it yourself."

The man stepped even nearer to her so that he was pressed against her. Hermione could smell his disgusting aftershave. She again tried to shove him away but he just chuckled at her attempts to break free.

"You should be grateful that I want to spend some quality time with you, Mudblood," he whispered
huskily in her ear. Then he gestured at the dark haired man who was currently scanning the surroundings. "The old Russian there would just curse you again."

Hermione shuddered as she felt his breath against her skin. She tried to cringe away from him but he didn't allow her much freedom. Then Henger let go of her arm and began to stroke her hair, the greedy sheen never leaving his eyes.

"Get off me!" Hermione yelled.

Henger just laughed again and pressed his body harder against hers.

"I'm sure you like it," he said with a hoarse voice. "I know you Muggle whores spread your legs for everyone."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she felt his hand gliding down from her hair and roaming her body hastily. Henger leaned into her and pressed his lips over her mouth. His tongue was forcefully demanding entry but she refused, biting down her teeth. He then started to suck on her lip achingly. Hermione could feel her head swirling and her whole body trembled in fear. Henger stopped abusing her mouth, his breathing was ragged now. He looked at her face and Hermione saw the lust in his cold eyes. Anger and fear were ripping at her. She felt so helpless, it was disgusting.

"Get away from me!" she hissed at him before she spat in his face.

Hermione gasped in pain as Henger slapped her hard in the face. There were black dots dancing in her vision as she stared back at him. He just smiled sickeningly down at her before he bent her head away and started to kiss her neck. Hermione shuddered in disgust as she felt his tongue on her skin. She screamed out in pain as he bit her, breaking her skin. Henger leaned into her and pressed his lips over her mouth. His tongue was forcefully demanding entry but she refused, biting down her teeth. He then started to suck on her lip achingly. Hermione could feel her head swirling and her whole body trembled in fear. Henger stopped abusing her mouth, his breathing was ragged now. He looked at her face and Hermione saw the lust in his cold eyes. Anger and fear were ripping at her. She felt so helpless, it was disgusting.

"You should feel honoured that a pureblood is willing to fuck you," he said huskily.

Hermione inhaled shaky breaths of air as she heard him say that. She didn't want that. Henger had no concern in the world as he continued to nibble at her neck, his hand never leaving her breasts. His other hand skimmed down the side of her body until it found the bare skin of her leg where her skirt no longer covered it. Hermione tensed as she felt his hand now sliding up her inner thigh. Her whole body shook in fear and she tried to wriggle away, to somehow make him stop. Her panic-stricken mind then did the only thing it could think of. She forcefully brought her knee up and somehow managed to hit him where it would hurt most. Henger howled in pain and staggered away from her. She had managed to run a few steps as she felt pain erupt in her right leg. She couldn't move any
longer, lost her balance and fell down. She looked at her leg and saw a bluish luminescent rope being wrapped tightly around her lower leg up to her knee. It cut through her stocking and into her skin. The other end of the rope originated from Henger's wand. Unfortunately, he seemed to have recovered faster than she had wished for and had been able to cast a curse. Hermione tried to hastily unwind the rope from her leg but only managed to cut her hands. Henger, seeing her attempts to break free, pulled aggressively at the rope. Hermione cried out in pain as his curse now cut deeper into her flesh but she still tried to resist being dragged towards him. It was useless, though, and she soon was lying at the man's feet.

"I told you to stop playing around, Henger," a bored, Russian lilted voice came from somewhere behind her.

Rage had erupted on Henger's face as he now stared down at Hermione. Then she could feel the brutal pain releasing her leg and she knew he had ended the spell. Hermione ignored her throbbing leg and immediately tried to scamper away. Henger managed to catch her wrist and twirled her around aggressively. Then the only thing Hermione could see was his fist rushing towards her. It collided brutally with the left side of her head and Hermione was hurled to the ground. Her head throbbed and she could feel blood flowing from her nose.

"Lousy piece of shit!" Henger spat at her.

Hermione was huddled at his feet. Her head hurt fiercely as she tried to get back up again. She glanced at Henger's form towering over her. His face was an angry shade of purple. Then he kicked her hard in her side. The air was knocked out of her and she fell down again. Henger continued to kick her and Hermione rolled up into a ball to avoid his foot. Abruptly his kicks stopped. Hermione's breathing was laboured and she was in so much pain that she felt slightly nauseous from it but she looked up at him.

"You are going to regret this!" he yelled at her furiously.

Then he again kicked her brutally and Hermione moaned in pain as she was flung to the floor.

"I'll make you pay for this one," Henger hissed at her. She could see him whirling his wand again and she squeezed her eyes shut as he spoke the incantation, "Crucio."

The unbearable pain from the torture curse ripped at her again. Hermione screamed as she was racked by agony. It coursed through her nerves like fire. Her thoughts again vanished until nothing remained but the wish for the pain to go away or for death to take her. As the agony finally left her again, Hermione lay on the forest floor and her whole body trembled. She felt sick and dizzy from the aftermath of the pain. Over her misery she was still able to hear Henger's spiteful snigger. Then he crouched down beside her and grabbed her hair before he wrenched at her violently. Hermione gasped in pain as Henger forced her to look up at him. She found him smiling at her evilly.

"You know, I even like it better this way," he whispered to her with a disturbing glint in his eyes. Then he looked pensively and said, "Hmmm... we haven't arranged any code word yet, have we? Okay, our code word shall be 'book!'," he grinned at her insanely. "Any time you want me to stop, just say the word."

"You disgusting bastard!" Hermione hissed at him but her voice was shaking with fear.

Her whole body hurt but she tried to lash out at him anyway. Before she could hit him, though, Henger caught her fist and stopped her without any effort. He sniggered at her scornfully. Then he grabbed her jaw painfully tight before he placed a kiss on her mouth.
As he released her again he mocked her cruelly, again in that language she couldn't understand, "Aber aber, Liebchen. Du bist hier der einzige Bastard."

She felt nothing but revulsion and hate as she glared up at the sick delight on his face. But there was also fear for she knew that she was not strong enough to stop him from doing whatever he wanted to do to her. She cried out in pain as his fist again collided with her face and Hermione was slung to the ground. Her head spun and her lip throbbed painfully where it had burst open. She could hear Henger's mocking laughter. Then she tensed as she again felt his abominable hand on her skin. It skimmed up her leg, under her skirt and then grabbed her buttock.

"Nice ass you've got there," Henger whispered maliciously. "I think I'm going to take that, too."

Hermione wriggled away from his revolting touch, though her body screamed at her in protest as every movement hurt.

"You know, I was rather pissed as the commander sent me to run after a Mudblooded school girl to get some book," Henger purred at her disgustingly while his hand still groped her. "But now I'm rather glad he did."

Then his hand left her and he stood up. Hermione managed to look up at him and found him smirking down at her evily, obviously enjoying the pain he had invoked. He kicked her again and Hermione was too weak to protect her body in any way. His foot again hit her hard and she softly moaned in pain.

"You don't deserve any better, dreckiges Schlammblut!" she heard him scoff at her. "The only way animals like you can be of any use is by serving purebloods."

Hermione was in pain, but she still managed to glance up at Henger. He now leered down at her and pointed his wand at her while there was a malicious smile on his face.

"I can't believe that they allow something like you to go to a wizard's school. It's a disgrace!" he sneered while there was hate dripping from his words. "After my commander has taken over, be sure that we'll correct this abnormal society. You and all that lousy Muggle dirt will be put to your place."

Hermione's body hurt all over, but as she heard that speech, filled with cruel hate, anger started to consume her. She had seen what happened if someone tried to lead a war against Muggleborns and Muggles. She had seen the misery and pain it would create. Hermione pulled together any ounce of strength that she had left. Henger still looked down at her disdainfully and then he started to wave his wand. He clearly wanted to curse her again. But this time, Hermione didn't let him. Before Henger could utter the incantation, she rammed her left heel with all the force she could muster into the man's kneecap. Henger howled in pain, but Hermione didn't wait to see his reaction. She quickly tried to scramble to her feet and then limped away as fast as she could. Adrenalin rushed through her, making her momentarily forget how hurt her body really was. If she could make it to that tree over there, she would be able to take cover. And then… and then she could run – away from those men, towards Hogwarts.

Just run! With that thought in her dizzy mind Hermione staggered away. Obviously, the Russian guy was too surprised by her escape plan as he didn't immediately curse her into oblivion.

Hermione had very nearly reached the cover of that huge oak tree, but then she heard Henger's voice behind her yell, "Avada Kedavra!"

Her blood turned cold as she heard the incantation, and she didn't hesitate to react. Hermione knew that curse so very well. It was dark. The darkest of all spells. There was a swishing sound in the air,
and she flung herself to the side. A gasp of pain escaped her as she impacted hard with the forest floor. The swish, accompanied by a ghostly green light, rushed over her, and she could almost feel the coldness of the curse as it missed her by mere inches. Hermione still lay on the ground, her body throbbing in pain. Then she raised her head and looked at the oak tree, which stood just two metres away from her. There was a dark, dead-looking spot on its trunk, right where that curse had hit it. The bark was blackened and smoked angrily. Hermione could barely breathe. If that curse had hit her, she would be dead now.

As she stared with wide eyes at the trunk, Hermione heard a Russian lilted voice scream infuriated, "We need her alive, fool!"

"No, we don't!" Hermione heard Henger's voice roar back, uncontrolled fury lacing his words. "We'll find the book without her!"

Hermione's head shot back at the men. The Russian guy was farther away from her. He now seemed to rush to Henger, who still had his wand pointed at Hermione. Cold shivers ran down her spine as she saw that hate, twisting up the blond man's face. Then she helplessly watched him brandishing his wand, again in the same wand movements. Hermione's breathing hitched and she desperately tried to get up, but her body refused to work. A sharp pain seared through her right leg and the rest of her body just didn't want to react to her.

Henger now brought his wand down in one sharp movement while yelling, "Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of light left his wand's tip. It hissed through the air, emitting that spectrally green light which seemed to suck the life out of its surroundings. Henger's aim was true. It would hit her directly in the chest. Time seemed to slow down, and Hermione was able to watch the whole scene, somehow oddly detached. She knew that she would never be able to dodge the curse. There was no way out of this one. She was going to get hit. She was going to die.

"Point me," Tom mumbled softly.

His wand, lying on the palm of his hand, suddenly started to spin like the needle of a compass. It wasn't long and it stopped spinning and pointed in one direction. Tom took off, following that direction. Up until now he had been walking on a small path which went around the Great Lake, always following its shore, but now Tom left this path and stepped into the coppice. He shortly wondered why Hermione hadn't walked to Hogsmeade like he had expected, but he didn't really care. Actually, it was even better this way. He turned his head and looked back the way he had come from. The castle was a fair distance away now. No-one was anywhere in the vicinity. A vile smirk took form on his face as he realized how utterly isolated this place was. This was just perfect, wasn't it? How very stupid of Hermione, having wandered so far away from the protecting nearness of the castle and its inhabitants.

Tom left the undergrowth and walked through what seemed to be the first trees, belonging to the Forbidden Forest. The forest floor was soft and absorbed the noise of his steps. Birds were chirping nearby. It really was strange how Hermione seemed to have wandered so far away from any trail. Tom furrowed his brow and wondered if she had done that to find a save spot for apparition. After all, she knew how to break down Hogwarts' wards. If she had strayed from the path to disapparate from Hogwarts' grounds that would be rather annoying. Though, he still had her wand, Tom mused as he continued his way through the forest. She wouldn't be able to disapparated without the Elder Wand. She was a useless Mudblood. Without the Elder Wand, she wouldn't be able to do much at all.
And it's about time, I show her how worthless she really is, Tom decided snidely. Her lofty behavior towards him irked him a great deal. So he would finally make sure that she really understood who was the one in command. Tom enjoyed the pressure of his upcoming anger as he passed another tree. His gaze wandered over the tree's trunk and the forest floor. The bark of the tree was almost completely destroyed at one side and there was a crater in the ground beside the tree, just as if something had hit the earth with full force. It seemed as if both events had occurred very recently. Tom frowned down at the crater as he suddenly heard voices, coming from somewhere nearby. He turned his head in the direction the noise was coming from. Obviously, there was someone in close proximity. Did Hermione come here to meet with someone?

Tom cautiously slid towards those voices. He had to climb a small slope, but then he could see people, standing just a few metres away. He quickly hid behind a tree then he let his eyes wander over the group of people. There was a man, wand in hand, obviously scanning the surroundings. Another man was crouched on the floor while looming over a third person, lying on the floor. Tom could see a mob of bushy hair and he stiffened as he realized that it was Hermione. That man was bent over her, and he was threatening her with his wand. It was then that Tom noticed how those two men wore black cloaks. He had seen this style of clothing before. People, clothed like that, had attacked Hermione, first in London and then in Hogsmeade.

Before Tom could wonder how they had managed to enter Hogwarts' grounds, the man crouched before Hermione stood up. Tom's eyes widened as now his gaze wasn't blocked by the man anymore and he could fully see her. He was flooded by a strange feeling of shock as his eyes wandered over Hermione. She was lying on the ground at this man's feet, and there was blood everywhere. She was bleeding heavily from several wounds on her leg. Tom's eyes wandered to her face. She was defiantly looking up at the man in front of her. Tom's body froze as he saw those bruises on her face. Blood flowed freely from her nose and a cut in her lip. Had those men beaten her? At that thought Tom could feel his magic awaken, and it now rushed through him angrily. His eyes again wandered over Hermione, and he saw how she shook slightly, and how it obviously cost her a lot of effort to even raise her body a little bit to be able to look at that man. Suddenly, the man kicked Hermione brutally in the side. Tom heard a soft painful moan, coming from her, as she was hurled to the ground. She now lay, curled into a ball, on the ground and trembled heavily. It was then that the man scoffed at her,

"You don't deserve any better, dreckiges Schlammblut! The only way animals like you can be of any use is by serving Purebloods."

Tom could feel his stomach clench with a strange unknown feeling as he heard those cold words, being hurled at Hermione. Then that man in the black cloak pointed his wand at her.

"I can't believe that they allow something like you to go to a wizard's school. It's a disgrace!" he sneered at Hermione. "After my commander has taken over, be sure that we'll correct this abnormal society. You and all that lousy Muggle dirt will be put to your place."

Tom didn't know what to think. That man was right. It was the truth. Yet, Tom felt his furious magic rushing through him, urging him to attack that disgusting man. Why was there suddenly concern mingled with all his anger? Why didn't he just leave? Obviously, those black cloaked men knew how to treat Mudbloods. Hermione would finally get what she deserved. Still, Tom stood there, rooted to the spot, while his mind strangely seemed to be clouded by fear. Before he could decide what to do, Hermione suddenly kicked the man forcefully in the knee. The blond man howled in pain while she got up from the floor and then tried to limp away. Tom could see, though, that her attempt to escape was futile. There was no way she could be fast enough. So, as she stumbled away, Tom watched how the blond man waved his wand angrily at her to then yell,
"Avada Kedavra!"

Tom's blood froze over, and he could feel how fear consumed him completely as he saw that jet of green light rushing towards Hermione. Mere seconds before the curse would have hit her in the back, Hermione threw herself to the side. The curse missed her and hit a tree standing nearby. Tom was caught in an odd stupor as he stared with wide eyes at Hermione lying on the floor. He could barely breathe as his chest seemed to be constricted. She had been nearly hit. If that curse had hit her, she would have died.

*She would've been dead!*

Tom continued to just stare at her with wide, scared eyes. His heart was clenching painfully. He only remotely heard how the two men seemed to yell at each other. Hermione tried to get back up on her feet, but it seemed she was too weak to do so. She just whimpered in pain and didn't manage to stand up.

It was then that Tom heard the man yelling the same incantation again, "Avada Kedavra!"

Tom's eyes shot to the man, just to see another green jet of light, leaving his wand. It now hissed through the air, and Tom knew that, this time, Hermione wouldn't be able to dodge it. The curse would hit her, and she would surely die. As he saw that lethal curse, hurling Hermione's way, Tom was instantly ripped from that strange stupor he had fallen into. Without thinking, he pulled his wand and quickly waved it at Hermione.

"Nutas!" he hissed, hoping beyond hope that he would be fast enough.

Hermione watched that green light rushing towards her. It was going to hit her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She clenched her hands and just waited for the impact. She wondered if it would hurt, dying. Then, not even a second before that curse would have hit its target, she felt a strange pull taking a hold of her body. A strong force seemed to grab her and yank her away.

Hermione whimpered as that force hurled her away. She landed on the forest floor a few metres to the right and couldn't suppress that cry of pain as she made hard contact with the ground. But... but she was still alive, Hermione's pain clouded mind could at least comprehend that. She tried to sit up on the ground. Then she blinked a few times in confusion. She was still alive. How? Her gaze wandered to Grindelwald's soldiers. They were standing a distance away from her. The Russian guy seemed to look at something behind Hermione and had his wand in hand. Henger glared at the same spot somewhere behind her and had a dangerous scowl on his face. Hermione now turned to see what they had spotted. Her eyes widened in surprise as, a few metres away, she could see Tom. He had his wand in his hand and the look on his face was murderous. What was he doing here?

"Grab the girl!" the Russian suddenly ordered Henger while he pointed his wand threateningly at Tom.

Hermione could see that Henger had by now fallen into a duelling stance. She breathed in sharply as his gaze snapped at her. Hermione stiffened as she saw anger on his face. He seemed to be very infuriated that he hadn't managed to kill her. Henger walked over to her, obviously intending to grab her. Hermione quickly tried to get up to flee him, but it was useless. Her injured leg couldn't support her weight. Before Henger had reached her, though, Hermione heard Tom's smooth voice.

"Salus," he said, completely composed.

A greenish, pulsating barrier appeared around Hermione. Henger still tried to obey the Russian's order, but as he stepped closer to Hermione the greenish shield stopped him. As Henger made contact with the shield, it sent a painful jolt of energy through him.
"Damn!" he yelped.

Then Henger pointed his wand at the shield to destroy it. He brandished his wand in a slashing movement while he cried, "Abeo!"

The greenish shield flickered dangerously, but it still held and remained to surround her protectively. Hermione stared numbly at that shield in front of her. She couldn't believe her eyes. What was going on here?

In the meantime the Russian guy had sent an angrily crackling curse Tom's way. The coldness never left Tom's eyes as he brandished his wand in a small, casual movement. The incoming curse immediately flickered and died down before it had any chance of causing harm. Tom's retaliation was fast and very violent. He slashed his wand in one angry movement and a powerful dark curse dashed towards the Russian. Grindelwald's man was barely able to raise a shield in time. Tom's curse was so powerful that, as it crashed into the shield, it managed to hurl the Russian away. He impacted heavily with the forest floor a few metres away. The Russian instantly jumped to his feet again, but Hermione saw that his breathing was laboured by now.

As Henger saw his companion struggling to fight that unknown wizard, he abandoned his attempts to get to Hermione but joined the fight against Tom. The duel between the two other wizards continued while Henger rounded the battleground and slipped towards a place where he would be standing in Tom's back. The Russian saw Henger's plan and immediately tried to distract Tom. He twirled his wand in a circular movement, and a bright light, bristling with raw energy, originated from the centre of this circle and spread towards Tom. The Russian continued to move his wand, thus maintaining the stream of energy. Tom quickly brandished his own wand. No visible shield appeared, but before the stream of magic could reach him, it hit an invisible but solid wall. Still, the Russian continued his onslaught and hit Tom's defence hard. Hermione noticed how the greenish shield around herself flickered as Tom was attacked.

By that time, Henger had finally reached a position where he stood behind Tom. Instantly he waved his wand to release an angry orange sickle of light. It rushed towards Tom who was still engaged in the fight with the Russian guy. He had to maintain his shield to protect himself against the Russian's heavy attack, though now, Henger's curse rushed towards his back. Hermione saw a sickeningly triumphant smirk on Henger's face as he watched his curse flying towards Tom's back. Hermione, too, watched with bated breath how the orange curse flew towards Tom. Had he noticed the attack? If not, the curse would hit him in the back. If he had noticed the attack, there still wasn't much room for him to react. Should he drop his shield to fend off Henger's curse, Tom would be hit by the Russian's attack.

Before Henger's curse could reach him, Tom suddenly moved. He sidestepped slightly and extended his left arm towards the orange curse. His right hand still pointed his wand towards the Russian guy so that he could maintain his shield. The hand of Tom's left arm was balled into a fist, but now he abruptly opened his hand and spread his fingers wide, the palm of his hand was turned towards the orange curse. Instantly the curse stopped and hung suspended in mid-air. An expression of surprise and shock flooded Henger's face as he saw this example of wandless magic from Tom.

Tom now stood edgeways, his right arm was extended towards the Russian to ward off the attack while his left arm was extended towards the orange curse Henger had sent at him. Before either of the two black cloaked men could do anything, Tom suddenly turned his left wrist slightly so that the palm of his hand was now turned upwards. He again balled his hand into a fist. Then he moved his body in one fluid movement as if he was hurling something with his left arm towards the Russian.

Henger's orange curse seemed to obey Tom. It suddenly burned up in a bright light, followed his
lead, accelerated and dashed towards the Russian. The dark haired man had no chance to protect himself as the orange curse crashed into his side. He lost his wand as he was sent flying a few meters until he slammed hard into a tree trunk. He moaned in pain and slid down the trunk before he ended up crumpled on the ground. Hermione saw dark blood flowing from the man's mouth as he reached with a trembling hand into his dark cloak. Something glinted silvery in his hand as he then whispered under his breath. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as the Russian man then just disappeared.

*Portkey*, she realized shocked.

She didn't have the time to dwell on it longer as her gaze shot back to Tom and Henger. Tom had by now turned around so he could face the other man. Even from a distance away Hermione could see Tom's eyes flashing with a blood-red colour. The expression on his face was murderous as he stared at Henger menacingly. Hermione swallowed hard as she saw the wrath in Tom's eyes. She wasn't able to feel his dark magic in the air as she was still protected by the shield, but she could see Grindelwald's man taking a step backwards. There still was this deathly expression on his face as Tom stared unwaveringly at the man in front of him. Henger shakily pointed his wand at Tom. Then he swirlled the wand in an erratic movement, thus releasing another curse.

The murderous glint never left Tom's eyes as he continued to glare at the other wizard. He never even glanced once at the curse, rushing towards him. Before the curse could crash into him, Tom flicked his wand in one small, casual movement. The curse was deflected from him and impacted violently with the forest floor. It left behind a considerable crater in the ground, but Tom still just glowered at the other man, not in the slightest impressed by that attack. His arms now hung by his sides so that the wand's tip pointed to the ground. Neither of the two wizards moved. Henger held his wand tightly while his eyes flickered nervously over Tom, searching for an opening. Tom just glared at the other, pure hate smouldering in his eyes. The air around him seemed to flicker with his magic.

Suddenly, the leaves lying on the forest floor around Tom blackened and smoked slightly as if hit by a great heat. Then green flames flared up around a tree standing not far from Tom. The flames angrily licked at the bark, charring it. Hermione could see that Henger's clothes began to smoke as well. Flames erupted around him. Henger groaned in pain, but then he waved his wand. A silver shimmer left his wand's tip and sailed down to the flames to distinguish them. Tom just sneered at him unimpressed. Then he waved his wand and a bright curse rushed with an impossible speed towards Henger. Still, Grindelwald's man managed to put up a flimsy shield. Tom's curse didn't disappear as it made contact with the shield. Instead, the bright light changed into a darkish, gooey mass which seemed to slowly engulf the shield, trying to find a weak spot, trying to enter and attack. Hermione saw Henger's hand tremble with exertion as he waved it at the dark mass. The force behind Henger's spell threw Tom's curse away from the shield. As it crashed into the floor, though, it didn't disappear. The black gooey mass just burst into many clumps which then again wobbled towards Henger. The man stared in disbelief as the fragments of the curse started to attack him again. One of the dark clumps leached itself upon Henger's boot. Like acid it ate through the material and Henger screamed in pain as it made contact with his skin. A furious scowl appeared on his face as he brandished his wand in a complicated pattern. Instantly, the pieces of the dark curse abruptly stopped oozing towards him before they evaporated with a hissing sound.

As he saw Tom's curse defeated, Henger quickly waved his wand at Tom himself. Hermione could see that the forest floor on which Tom stood changed. It seemed to turn into a swamp which slowly started to pull him down. Tom just raised a lazy eyebrow at Henger as if to ask when he would stop playing around. Then he swished his pale wand in a small elegant movement. Instantly, the morass around Tom turned into solid ground again. Hermione saw an angry shade of purple taking form on Henger's face as he saw Tom's mockery. Tom, though, seemed to be totally unaffected by the other's rage. His eyes flashed in an aggressive red and a vile smirk started to tuck at his mouth.
Henger then seemed to lose his cool. His face was livid as he waved his wand enraged. A purple curse rushed towards Tom. The deathly cold look never left Tom's face as he casually moved his wand. Instantly, the purple curse lost momentum until it completely stopped in mid-air. Tom's wand was still pointed at the curse, stopping it from moving. Hermione noticed that the greenish shield around her again flickered slightly. But then it returned to full strength as Tom waved his wand and the purple curse disappeared with a loud crack.

There was a look of shock on Henger's face as he saw his curse so easily defeated. He took a shaky step away from Tom while grasping his wand desperately. Tom just stood a few metres away from Henger. His posture was nonchalant, his face an unfathomable mask and he seemed to be completely poised while emanating an air of superiority. His eyes were unpitying and hard as steel as they slowly wandered over his opponent's form. Seeing Tom's cold confidence, Henger took another unsteady step back. He obviously wasn't quite sure how to deal with his new opponent. Then suddenly Tom tightened the grip on his wand and Hermione saw his eyes again flaring up with that malign crimson colour. Without ever breaking eye contact with the other man, Tom abruptly raised his wand and slashed it angrily in front of him, forming an 'X' with the movement, while he hissed, "Laniatus."

Hermione knew this curse. It was dark, very dark. A powerful cutting hex which inflicted barely curable wounds. She was lucky enough never to be hit by this curse. But she had seen people slowly and painfully die from its cursed wounds.

The dark curse, crackling with raw power, now left Tom's wand and dashed towards Henger. He waved his wand and formed a shield. But Tom's curse just cut through Henger's defence and then hit the man. Henger screamed in pain as Tom's magic cut deep into him. Hermione saw blood flowing heavily from gashes in Henger's chest and arms. There was something white visible through the cuts in the sleeve of his cloak and Hermione felt sick as she realized that it was bone. Henger fell to the ground while still screaming in pain. Hermione watched Tom walking unperturbed towards Henger's twitching form. An eerie smile twisted up Tom's mouth as he looked down at his victim. He was totally unaffected by Henger's painful sobs.

Hermione averted her eyes from Tom. She felt sick and her whole body hurt unbearably. Through all her pain she wondered what Tom wanted here. But right now she had only one objective, and that was to get away from here as quickly as possible. She winced in pain as she tried to get up. Her whole body was sore and her head throbbed agonizingly. She staggered as she tried to get to her feet. While she fought to get up she saw from the corners of her eyes how Tom again pointed his wand at the man, lying in front of him. She finally managed to get up and now staggered towards a nearby tree for some support. As her body touched the greenish shield it immediately let her pass without hurting her in any way.

"Who sent you?" Tom hissed threateningly at Henger.

Henger didn't answer but just coughed painfully. Blood was flowing from his mouth. Tom sniggered down at him and flicked his wand. Henger's wand, which lay on the ground beside the wizard, combusted with a bright flame.

"Why do you want the book?" Tom inquired in a quiet voice but there was barely controlled anger underlying it.

Henger still didn't answer. As he didn't get any reply, Tom snapped. He brandished his wand. His eyes were ice cold as he whispered the incantation.

"Crucio."
Instantly, Henger's screams filled the air. He twitched and thrashed on the ground. More and more blood gushed from the wounds as his body convulsed in pain. Tom just observed him. Indifferent, uncaring. Then he again moved his wand, Henger's screams stopped and turned into sobs.

"Who sent you?" Tom inquired again in his calm and cold voice.

Henger lay on the ground before him, dark blood was seeping into the forest floor around him and the man breathed heavily.

"You should speak," Tom told him in a soft voice. "Or you will die."

Henger stared up at Tom. He was white as a sheet, his face twisted up in pain and his body shook with the after effects of the Crucius Curse.

"Who are you?" Henger managed to grind out.

An eerie smirk appeared on Tom's face as he stared down at his victim. Without saying anything, he swirled his wand again. Henger yelled in pain as a brutal force crushed down on his right leg. With a resounding crack the bones of his lower leg and foot broke while the invisible force squashed the leg into a bloody pulp.

"I am asking the questions here," Tom informed the sobbing man while the vicious smirk still played around his mouth. "Now, tell me," he continued in his horribly composed voice. "Who sent you?"

Henger still howled in pain, seemingly not able to answer. Tom just waved his wand again, but before he could finish the incantation, Henger suddenly grabbed a small silvery pendant which hung on a chain around his neck. Then he rattled,

"Abort."

The pendant and the chain flickered in a blue light. Henger disappeared into thin air before the curse from Tom's wand could hit him. Instead the curse impacted harmlessly with the forest floor. Tom hissed in frustration as he saw his enemy had managed to escape. Then he glanced over to where Hermione was. She had managed to get back up, had passed the greenish shield and was now trying to walk away.

Hermione had noticed Henger's flight but she didn't really care. She just wanted to get away from here. With Tom present instead of Grindelwald's men, her situation hadn't improved at all. So she struggled forwards, away from the trees and towards the castle. Right now, she was very much unable to stand up against Tom in any way. Blood was still flowing from her nose and her cut lip. She raised her arm and wiped it away with her sleeve. There was a piercing pain in the side of her head where Henger had hit her. The rest of her body wasn't any better. Henger had kicked her ruthlessly and that was how her body felt right now. The after-effects of the Crucius curse, though, were the worst. She could still feel echoes of the ineffable pain in her every nerve. All the pain made her now feel dizzy and faint while black dots danced in her vision. She tried to ignore the agony she was in and stumbled forwards. With each step she took, more blood flowed from the wounds on her right leg where Henger's curse had cut her.

How had they been able to find her? Shock still seemed to numb her thoughts. She had managed to walk a few metres as she felt a hand, clutching her arm gently. She looked to her side. Tom had walked up to her and was now holding onto her arm, trying to support her. Hermione could see him looking at her worried, but she didn't understand his concern. Shouldn't he be ecstatic that she was in so much pain? What did he want from her? Hermione didn't know why he had appeared here, but she knew he was up to something. Her train of thought was interrupted as she again had to use her
right leg. It hurt. She shortly closed her eyes, trying to control the pain which ripped at her body mercilessly. It was to no avail, unconsciousness still threatened to overwhelm her. Pain and blood loss were taking their toll, and Hermione knew how very vulnerable she now was. With Tom Riddle present this was a dangerous situation. He was still clutching her arm gently. Hermione was hit by a feeling of trepidation as she felt him touching her. She couldn't stand it. So, she forcefully pulled her arm away from him and yelled,

"Don't you touch me!"

She staggered away from him but lost her balance and tripped over. A painful whimper left her mouth as she fell on her knees. This was not good. She needed to get away from here, Hermione thought desperately, but could feel that her body was already pushed to its limits. With how hurt she was, this was the perfect opportunity for Tom to attack her. He crouched down beside her and gently clutched her shoulder to steady her. Hermione wriggled away from his hand. She didn't want him anywhere near her.

"Stay away from me!" she yelled sharply at him.

"Please, calm down, Hermione," Tom said soothingly in his deep, smooth voice.

Hermione looked up at him. He was crouched down in front of her and had one hand extended towards her as if to hold her but didn't touch her. She looked at his face. There was a frown between his eyebrows. His eyes were back to grey as he scanned her concerned. His gaze stopped at her painfully swollen lip and an angry expression crossed his face. Hermione knew that her lip was cut open where Henger had hit her. Then she saw Tom's gaze proceeding to wander over her body checking for more injuries. His eyes widened in shock as he saw that horrible bite mark on her neck, and the state her blouse was in. Henger had torn the blouse open, ripping off nearly all the buttons, so that it couldn't cover the bare skin underneath anymore.

"What did they do to you?" Tom asked her, barely able to conceal his fury anymore.

He extended a hand towards the sad rest of her blouse, but Hermione cringed away from him.

"What do you care, Voldemort?" she spat at him, deliberately using his chosen name again.

Tom recoiled a little bit from her. He was clearly surprised by the hate in her voice. But he tried to calm her anyway, "Hermione, I–"

"I'm a 'Mudblood', remember? Whatever he did to me, don't you think I deserve it?" Hermione cut across him angrily. "And don't worry he was a Pureblood. So he had every right to do whatever he wanted with me, hadn't he?"

She could see Tom pale at her declaration, then he again tried to say something in a soft voice, "No. Please, I–"

"Don't deny it!" Hermione yelled at him furiously.

She tried to skid away from him. Her movement, though, was immediately punished by a sharp jab in her side. A soft groan of pain left her lips as she held her achingly throbbing side. The world seemed to spin around her, and Hermione would have gladly given in to the blackness which seemed to grasp at her mind but she couldn't allow that while in Tom's presence. Still, she felt horrible and she knew that she didn't have herself under control anymore. She was in no condition to deal with Tom Riddle right now. Her eyes wandered back to Tom. There was still that absurd look of worry on his face as he scanned her. If only she were able to get up and run away from him. Desperate
thoughts of escaping flew through her dizzy mind while Tom still scanned her worried. Hermione wondered what he wanted from her, and, more importantly, how he intended to get what he wanted. She needed to make him leave.

"I know what you think about me! You think I'm dirt...you're disgusted by me," she managed to hiss at him venomously. "I don't care! I told you to stay away from me!"

As she stared at him it was as if she looked through a shroud, her eyes unable to focus on anything. Though, the out-of-place concern was still glinting in Tom's grey eyes. What did he want?

"I know you hate me," Hermione spat at him sharply, desperately trying to make him leave. "There's no need for you to be here."

What the hell did he want? Gloatiing over her pain? Hermione wondered. Then her thoughts were stopped by another wave of pain, coming from her severely injured leg. She threw in a shaky breath of air and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Why don't you just leave me alone?" she managed to grind out between clenched teeth.

Hermione could feel her body trembling, her head swirled and pain ripped at her mercilessly, making her feel faint. On top of the pain, she still could almost feel the greedy hands of Grindelwald's soldier on her skin. Hermione shuddered helplessly as she felt painfully weak. Anger hit her as she was unable to hide her weakness in front of Tom.

"I don't hate you, Hermione," Tom's quiet voice cut through her misery.

His words, though, didn't mean anything to her. She didn't look up at him. Why should she? She knew he was lying. What really surprised her was that he took the trouble to lie to her. Her body still screamed at her in pain and Hermione knew she was very close to fainting now. Why didn't Tom just leave? Did he have to mock her even now? As if he cared one bit about her! Probably he was now going to use her vulnerable state to force more information out of her. Her thoughts were interrupted as she, suddenly, felt strong arms embrace her. Hermione tensed and tried to wriggle away from the touch.

"Let go!" she yelled at him aggressively.

"I don't hate you," she heard Tom whisper softly in her ear.

There was no way she would listen to him mocking her. Hermione tried to pull away from him. It was impossible, though. She was in no shape to put up a fight against Tom. Every movement hurt.

"Leave me alone!" she ordered him, though the edge in her voice was dimmed by how shaky and frail it sounded.

Tom didn't let go of her. He still hugged her gently. Hermione stopped struggling against him but was breathing heavily as she felt his arms around her.

"Please..." she whispered. "...just leave me alone!"

"I could never hate you," Tom told her in a soft, hesitant voice. "...I love you."

Hermione tensed in his arms. Her breathing was still uneasy and she trembled heavily. Then slowly she looked up at him. Tom was gazing at her through narrowed eyes and a frown had appeared between his eyebrows. He was looking as if he had surprised himself with his last statement. His arms, though, were still wrapped around her. Why was he lying like that now? Hermione didn't
understand his motives. Did he think she would fall for his transparent lie? Hermione tried to find an explanation for his strange act and a way out of this mess, but she had to admit that she wasn't able to think straight. The wounds everywhere on her body throbbed achingly. This was just too much. Tremors shock her body as she remembered how Henger had touched her …where he had touched her. A soft whimper escaped her mouth as she had to remember how that man had groped her and stroked her. Hermione's whole body shook uncontrollably as she pressed her eyes tightly shut. Tom readjusted his arms around her and pulled her even tighter against him, one hand rubbed soothing circles on her back.

"Everything's going to be alright, Hermione," his soft voice crooned to her reassuringly.

Hermione fought to get her ragged breathing back under control. Flashes of Grindelwald's soldiers shot across her mind. She could see the evil, lustful glint in that man's eyes as he had leered down at her.

It took some time until she composed herself and her body relaxed slightly as the tremors stopped. Hermione jerked as she then felt Tom place a soft kiss on her forehead. He ended the embrace. She could feel one of his hands still holding her shoulder reassuringly as she looked up, confusion swimming in her eyes. She met his gaze and found him smiling down at her. There was no trace of the disgust left he had shown the last few weeks whenever he had looked at her. Hermione didn't understand why he was being so nice to her. His gentleness, though, only managed to make her very tense and even scared. She knew that he was planning something. She quickly needed to find a way to get away from him, but pain and dizziness slowed her mind down.

Tom gently skimmed with his fingers over her cheek as he said, "Let's bring you back to the castle, okay?"

Hermione continued to stare at him with wide eyes. She didn't reply anything as she didn't trust her voice. She wouldn't have known what to say anyway. Tom didn't wait for her answer. He got up and then arranged an arm under her shoulder before he gently pulled her up while he steadied her with his other hand. Hermione whimpered softly in pain as she stood up. The side of her head throbbed piercingly. As she stood up everything started to spin around her and she felt very sick. She fought against the need to throw up as she weakly sagged against the body beside her. If Tom hadn't still held her she would have surely collapsed on the ground. She felt him rearranging his arm around her and then he walked forwards. Hermione's world still spun but she tried to take an unsteady step. Immediately a sharp pain flashed through her as she put her weight on her injured right leg. She completely lost her balance and Tom had to tighten his arm around her to secure her.

"That's not working," he said in a gentle voice.

He held Hermione a little bit firmer around her waist and arranged his other arm under the hollows of her knees before he lifted her up. She stiffened as he now held her gingerly. Why was he doing this? Her breathing was shallow. She wanted to buck against his hold on her, but her head throbbed fiercely, everything hurt. All she could do, was fight against unconsciousness. It was awkward, but her aching head tiredly leaned against his chest.

"Don't worry," Tom whispered to her in his reassuring tone of voice. "you'll be alright."

He carried her back to the castle. While Hermione didn't feel up to walking back to the castle herself, she still would have preferred it if Tom would just dump her on the way and leave her.

As they reached the Entrance Gate, Tom said, "It's best I bring you to the infirmary."

Her head shot up at him and she was instantly hit by a wave of nausea.
"No, not the infirmary!" Hermione managed to say. She didn't need more publicity. And lying in the infirmary because Grindelwald's followers had attacked her wouldn't exactly help her to keep a low profile.

Tom looked down at her with his grey eyes, and Hermione could see the concern shining in them as he softly said, "You are hurt. I really think it would be best to bring you to the hospital wing."

Hermione started to wriggle in his arms in an attempt to get down. She definitely didn't want to go to the infirmary. Tom held her steady and said in a soothing voice,

"Okay. Not the infirmary then. Calm down."

He readjusted his grip on her and then they entered the castle. Hermione was relieved that there seemed to be no students in the Entrance Hall. She guessed that most of them were still in Hogsmeade, enjoying their day. Tom had obviously thought of a place to go as he quickly walked down the corridors, using many secret passageways. It wasn't long and Tom stopped. Hermione recognized the corridor they were in now, and sure enough Tom walked three times past a wall where Hermione knew the Room of Requirement was hidden behind. A huge wooden door appeared where moments before had only been bare wall. Tom opened the door and stepped through the entrance. Behind the door was an inviting room with a huge window on one wall, letting in the warm rays of the sun. Tom carried Hermione over to the bed, standing at one side of the room. Then he put her gently down on the soft mattress.

"I have to go fetch a few things. Can I leave you alone for a moment?" he asked her softly while he tucked a wisp of her hair out of her face.

Hermione nodded at him and instantly regretted that action as her head began to achingly throb again. Tom threw one last concerned glance at her before he left the room. The instant he left, Hermione tried to get up from the bed. She really shouldn't stay here. Why had he saved her? Whatever Tom tried to do, it certainly wasn't anything good. She needed to get away from here as fast as possible.

As Hermione tried to get up another wave of nausea hit her. She softly whimpered in pain as she rolled over in the bed. Then she tried to hoist herself up with her arms. That throbbing pain in her head intensified and Hermione felt really sick now. But she couldn't stop. She needed to get away from here before Tom returned. So, she clenched her teeth and pushed herself up. She ended up in a sitting position on the bed. Everything seemed to become blurred before her eyes and black dots now danced in her vision. Hermione wasn't going to give up, though. She might be feeling terrible right now, but if she was still here when Tom returned, he would make her feel even worse.

Hermione took in a deep breath of air and then tried to slide off the bed. A strangled sob left her as the weight of her body now partly rested on her injured right leg. Instantly, the leg gave way under her and Hermione crumbled helplessly down on the floor. She managed to take a hold of the bed and now leaned her upper body against it, while a sharp pain seared through her. Hermione's breathing was shallow, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her shaky hands clutched the blanket, lying on the bed, while she waited for the pain to ease up a little. She knew that she needed to leave here, but there was no way she would manage to get up again, let alone walk over there to the door and run away from Tom. She now groaned in frustration as she leaned her throbbing head down on the soft mattress of the bed. Right now, she didn't dare to move more as every part of her body seemed to scream at her in pain. She closed her eyes and tried to even her ragged breathing out and to suppress the sickness.

After some time, she heard the door open again. Hermione's heart sank as she heard that sound. Tom had returned, hadn't he? She rose her head, ignoring the sharp pain, looked over to the entrance and
saw Tom with a leather bag in his hand as he just closed the door behind him. Hermione swallowed hard as she realized that no-one knew about the Room-of-Requirements. Whatever Tom had planned for her, no-one would be coming to her aid.

She could see his eyes widen as he saw her fallen form, barely able to hold herself upright, and he instantly rushed over to her. Hermione just turned her head away from him, bracing herself for whatever he would do to her. For now, though, he just gingerly wrapped an arm around her waist and then carefully hoisted her up. Instantly, a wave of vertigo hit Hermione hard. Next thing she was aware of, was a soft pressure against her back, and she knew Tom had laid her down on the bed again. Vertigo and the feeling of sickness slowly reduced to a more tolerable level, and Hermione dared to open her eyes again. She found Tom, looking down at her. There was an odd flicker in his grey eyes as they wandered over her form. He looked strange, and Hermione took that as a bad sign. She just wished she had been able to leave the room before he had returned. Tom turned away from her and picked up the leather bag he had been carrying before. He had obviously discarded it on the floor as he had helped her up. Now he opened the bag.

"I needed to get some potions," he told her in a soft voice while he took several bottles out of the bag and put them down on the small bedside table.

Why? To drug me? Hermione stared at him suspiciously.

Now Tom sat down on the bed beside Hermione and looked down at her. "Let me have a look at those wounds," he said gently.

Hermione tensed as he pulled his wand out of his pocket. He then brandished it slowly over her head while he whispered some incantations she didn't know. Hermione waited for any malign curse to manifest in her, but nothing happened. After some time, there was an angry scowl, flitting over Tom's face, before he put his wand away again.

"As I thought," he said in a soft voice. "You have a brain concussion. But don't worry I've brought the right potion."

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. Was that a diagnostic spell he had just now used on her? Tom reached for a small, red potion bottle he had previously discarded on the side table. He removed the stopper of the bottle and then handed it to Hermione.

"You've got to drink all of it," he told her.

She eyed the small bottle, but didn't drink from it. She looked back up at Tom. He had to think she was stupid if he expected her to drink this now. If he wanted to poison her, he would have to force that potion down her throat.

"It's okay," Tom tried to assure her.

She could see honesty in his eyes, but still she didn't drink. Tom sighed and took the bottle from her hand. Then he raised it and took a small sip from it. After that he offered her the bottle again.

"See? It's nothing dangerous," he told her gently.

Hermione eyed him suspiciously. It had really looked like he had drunk a bit of the potion, and yet he still seemed to be okay. She wasn't completely convinced, but that terrible throbbing pain in her head prompted her to accept the bottle from him. Then she raised it to her lips and downed its contents. It tasted horribly of spoiled milk, but after she had drunk it, Hermione instantly felt the nausea leave her and the throbbing in her head ebbed away a little. It hadn't been poison after all.
"Feeling better?" Tom asked her while he eyed her concerned.

"Yes," she replied softly, a touch of surprise in her voice.

He smiled down at her before he said in a gentle voice, "Now, I need to look at your other injuries. Can you sit up?"

Tom put a hand behind her back and gingerly helped her to sit up. Hermione moaned softly in pain, but she managed to sit up and now dangled her legs off the bed. Tom crouched down on the floor in front of her and inspected her injured leg. Henger's curse had cut deep into her flesh, so that now dark blood flowed from the gashes all over her lower leg and dripped steadily on the floor. She tensed as Tom took her foot gently in his hands. He removed her shoe to then wave his wand over her leg, so that her blood-soaked stocking disappeared. There were deep cuts spiralling over her lower leg where Henger's curse had coiled around her. The wounds looked rather deep and a lot of blood poured out, but Hermione was right now more concerned about that hand which still held her leg. It made her uncomfortable that Tom was touching her. If she had been less tired and dizzy from all the blood loss and pain, she would have recoiled from him. Actually, if she hadn't been so hurt right now, she would have shoved him away and would have tried a dash for the door.

As it was, she was feeling rather faint and her mind wasn't able to think coherently, so she remained sitting where she was and just stared down at Tom. She couldn't see his face as he still bent over her leg, but he had drawn his wand. The sight of his pale wand made her hands ball tightly around the white cotton fabric of the bedcover. Tom didn't notice her anxious reaction but just waved his wand over her leg. The sharp pain of the gashes lessened considerably and was replaced by a tingling feeling. She watched as the deep wounds stopped to bleed. Then, as if time was sped up, the dark blood clotted first before it crusted over the wounds. Hermione was deeply mystified by Tom's behaviour. It seemed as if he wanted to heal her, but why should he do that?

Tom examined her leg, and Hermione's gaze once again wandered to his hand on her foot. She stiffened as she saw that some of her blood had stained the sleeve of his white shirt. Immediately she was reminded of that disgusted look on his face as her blood had soiled him the last time. But Tom obviously hadn't yet noticed the blood or he didn't care. He just seemed to be satisfied with his work as he waved his wand again, and a white bandage wrapped itself around Hermione's leg. Then he got up from his crouched position on the floor and sat down beside her on the bed. He ran a hand comfortingly over her back before he cautiously removed the remnants of her blouse and put them down on the bed. Hermione looked down at herself and saw that there was a huge haematoma now covering her right side where Henger's first kick had hit her. The rest of her skin was covered with bruises and abrasions. No wonder she hurt so much, Hermione thought. She looked back at Tom and found his gaze wandering over her bruised skin. There was a murderous expression on his face. Then he hesitantly extended one hand towards her. His fingers skimmed gently over the part of her breast that was not covered by her bra. There were dark bruises where Henger had grabbed her breasts so ruthlessly. Hermione saw a dangerous crimson colour, tainting Tom's eyes, as he looked at the bruises on her skin.

"Hermione," he said in a low and barely controlled voice. "that guy… he didn't… do more, did he?"

Tom looked at her and the crimson colour was leaving his eyes again as they searched her face.

"No," Hermione whispered softly, wondering why he would care. "He tried though."

Hermione saw how his hands were balled into fists, his knuckles turning white, then, suddenly, Tom's magic began to crackle around him furiously, which she felt as a painful pressure on her body. There was a fearsome glint in his eyes, and she subconsciously shifted away from him on the bed. As he felt her move, he looked back at her and the violent magic instantly died down around him. He
breathed in deeply, seemingly trying to regain his composure, then he smiled at her reassuringly before he reached for one of the bottles, standing on the side table. Tom began to apply the potion to the bruised spots of her skin. The potion felt pleasantly cool on her abused skin and eased the pain a little bit. Hermione shuddered as he touched the painful bite mark that marred the skin of her neck. The eerie red sheen was re-entering Tom's eyes as he cautiously applied the potion to that aching mark Henger had left behind. After he was finished with tending to her injuries, he pulled his wand again and waved it. With a soft puff, a white blouse appeared out of thin air. Tom caught the blouse in his other hand and then offered it to Hermione.

"Thank you," Hermione said softly as she accepted the clothing from him.

Carefully, as not to disturb her injuries again, she slipped into the white blouse. As she was finished with putting on the blouse, Tom handed her another vial of potion.

"Here, drink that, too," he said in his smooth voice.

Hermione hesitated again. But he hadn't poisoned her before, why should he try it now? So, she took the vial, inwardly crossed her fingers, and drank the potion. She recognized the taste of the potion. It was a Calming Draught. Again, no poison, and Hermione was surprised.

"You should sleep a little bit," Tom said softly as he took the empty bottle from her. "I'll bring you back to your common room later."

Hermione nodded at him. Tom removed her other shoe and then helped her to lie down. She felt a sudden tiredness, taking hold of her, as her head touched the invitingly soft pillow. She was already too tired to open her eyes as she felt Tom covering her with a light blanket. The thought that it was very dangerous to fall asleep with Tom Riddle close by did flicker through her tired brain, but she was too exhausted to try to get away from him. Sleep already pulled at her mind as she felt a weight sitting down beside her on the bed. Then a pleasantly warm hand wrapped around her own and held it gently.

After what felt like minutes Hermione woke up again. At first she couldn't remember what had happened, and the only thing she was aware off was the pain her body was in. She moaned softly and rolled over on her side. What had happened? Then it hit her. Memories flashed through her. Grindelwald's soldiers had once again found her and had assaulted her. One of them had even molested her. Hermione shuddered disgusted as she remembered the lust in Henger's cold eyes, his vile tongue on her skin and his hands grabbing her breasts greedily. How he had touched…

She had been so defenceless. He had been way stronger than her, and her magic had deserted her once again. This was unacceptable. Hermione drew up her knees so that she lay curled into a ball on the bed. Her whole body hurt badly and she whimpered softly in pain. At least the bed was comfortable and soft.

At her last thought, she caught her breath. More memories clashed down at her, rippling through her like icy cold water, finally waking her up. Grindelwald's soldiers had tortured her, but then, suddenly, Tom had shown up. He had fought them off and then he had abducted her. Dread flooded her so completely that it almost physically hurt. She was still here in the Room of Requirements, wasn't she? …with Tom nearby. Hermione's body tensed and she took in a sharp breath of air. There was a painful stab in her right side as she inhaled. And Hermione couldn't stop that moan of pain escaping her lips. Then there was a weight shifting by her side and she felt a warm hand reassuringly on her forehead.
"Hermione?" she heard Tom's melodious voice ask cautiously.

Her eyes flew open and her gaze shot to the person, sitting beside her on the soft bed. She stared at him wide-eyed. Tom was sitting there with his back propped up against the wall. He was looking down at her with his beautiful grey eyes and seemed to smile at her with fake – affection? – while his hand still stroked gently over her head. Hermione's heart was beating fast as she stared at him. She was frozen to the spot and didn't dare to move. What had he planned for her? she wondered frantically as she stared at him through narrowed eyes. Tom, though, still sat on the bed and looked at her with concern, glimmering in his eyes. Hermione felt her whole body stiffen as she was hit by his gaze, and it didn't allay her fear at all that there was suddenly this softness back in his eyes.

What does he want?

Hermione shakily sat up on the bed whilst ignoring the pains of protest, coming from her body. She still stared at Tom, and her body was very tense, expecting him to attack her any second now. Then her eyes quickly darted from him to the door, leading out of this room. Her heart sank as she found it at the other end of the room. Hermione doubted very much she could make it there. Her body hurt all over, she would be too slow. And to top it off her magic was still gone. Surely Tom would have no problems to subdue her. Her gaze went back to him. He was still sitting there on the bed while he looked at her. Hermione was confused as she still saw that look of concern on his face. Her tenseness never left her, though, for she knew how good Tom was in hiding behind his many masks.

Suddenly, he moved towards her. Hermione wanted to shy away, but she found that her body didn't obey her. She expected him to grab her, slap her or even curse her, so when he wrapped his arms around her, she was completely taken off guard. But now she could really feel Tom's arms slung around her gingerly while he pressed her carefully against his chest. She was so close to him that she could feel the warmth of his body through her clothes and could even smell his pleasant scent. One of his hands was rubbing gently over her back in a reassuring gesture, but Hermione's arms were limply hanging down. She was not returning his embrace. Her breathing was a little quickened, and there was a painful twitch, going through her chest, as she felt Tom so near. Then she slowly raised her head and looked up at him. He was smiling down at her.

"Let me bring you to your common room," he offered gently.

Hermione found herself nodding at him. She didn't know what drove her to communicate with him now. She needed to get away from him as fast as possible. Tom let go of her and got up from the bed before he gingerly grasped her upper arm and helped her to stand up. Hermione softly moaned in pain as she got up. The potions had helped, but she still hurt all over. She could glimpse a look of worry, crossing Tom's face as he saw her discomfort. Then he wrapped an arm around her waist, thus steadying her. Hermione again grew stiff as he was touching her, but she still felt too weak to throw him off. He led her away, and she was relieved to notice that she was able to walk alone again, though her right leg hurt fiercely. She followed Tom out of the room and then through Hogwarts' corridors as he slowly led her to the Gryffindor common room. As they finally reached the entrance, Hermione saw the Fat Lady looking at her suspiciously. But her face brightened as her eyes wandered to Tom.

"Oh, hello, my dear. What can I do for you?" the Fat Lady said in quite the seductive voice.

"We need to go into the common room, please," Tom replied smoothly.

"Of course," the Fat Lady answered, not in the slightest bit suspicious by Tom being a Slytherin. "I need the password though."

Before Hermione could say anything, Tom said, turned to the Fat Lady, "It's 'Abalone.'"
Hermione cast a quick glance at Tom but didn't ask where exactly he got the Gryffindor password. The Fat Lady winked at Tom and then opened to admit them into the common room.

"Always a pleasure!" she piped after Tom.

Hermione stepped in the common room and was greeted by the noise of her fellow students. Most of the older Gryffindors still were in Hogsmeade, but a few of the younger ones were sitting in their common room, chatting with each other or doing some last-minute homework. Tom didn't pay any heed to the other students but continued to lead Hermione through the common room and towards the stairs that led to Hermione's dormitory. Hermione felt a little uncomfortable as she noticed the chatter die down somewhat, and she felt many eyes, following her through the room. She was glad that Longbottom, Lupin and Weasley were obviously not in the common room right now.

As they reached the stairs, leading to her dormitory, Tom stopped and pulled his wand. He waved it while muttering an incantation under his breath. Then he put his wand away again and started to climb the stairs. Hermione guessed that he had disabled the wards which prevented any male from entering the girls' dormitory. When they finally entered the dormitory Hermione was relieved to find it abandoned. She didn't need the prying eyes of her roommates. They walked over to her bed and Hermione sat down gratefully. Her body was so sore, and she didn't want to walk any longer. Tom sat down beside her and wrapped an arm reassuringly around her. Hermione shuddered as she felt him touching her again. His touch was making her feel uncomfortable. His arm was looped gently around her and he even pressed her slightly against him. But Hermione knew his gentleness was treacherous. Why was he doing this? She was sure he wasn't suddenly being nice to her again without a reason behind his actions. Tom was leading her on.

Hermione was so incredibly tired. She could barely keep her eyes open even though she had just slept. She didn't want to do it, as it was wrong, but she was just too exhausted to stop herself. Against her will, her body leaned tiredly into Tom, her head sagging against his chest. She closed her eyes and breathed in his pleasant scent as she felt his hand caressing her cheek gently.

"Hermione?" he said softly after some time, and she looked up at him through hooded eyes. "You should go to sleep now."

She nodded at him. Tom unwrapped himself from her and pulled his wand. He waved it and transfigured her clothes into something more comfortable. Hermione then slipped under the blanket of her four-poster bed. She watched as Tom produced a potion vial out of his pocket and held it out for her.

"Here, drink that."

Hermione accepted the potion from him. She knew it was Dreamless Sleep potion as she tasted it, and she instantly felt its effect as she sank back on the bed.

"I'm going to tell the professors that you are sick tomorrow," Tom said as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"No," Hermione's voice was now thick with sleep. "I'm going to class."

Tom frowned at her but didn't contradict her. "Okay, I'll be waiting for you in the common room then tomorrow."

"Mhm."

Hermione was half-asleep as she felt Tom getting up from the bed.
"Thank you," she mumbled in her half-asleep state, temporarily forgetting whom she was speaking with.

After a moment she could feel Tom's hand, stroking over her head, and he said quietly, "You shouldn't thank me."

Hermione was already asleep as he left the dormitory.

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Tom stepped out of the Gryffindor common room. The corridor was completely deserted so he was finally able to release that furious magic that had been building up inside of him since he had seen the wounds on Hermione's body. His magic swirled and crackled around him viciously as he took off in the direction of the Slytherin common room. He could still see it before his mind's eye. How that man had kicked Hermione. The last words he had spoken to Hermione still echoed through Tom's mind. Words that had once been coldly hurled at himself.

'You know that you don't deserve any better, don't you?'

Hermione had been lying at the feet of that man, bleeding heavily. That bastard had hurt her, and he had touched her at places where only Tom was allowed to touch her. Tom's anger peaked as he remembered the dark purple marks on Hermione's soft skin where the man had dared to grab her. He had even bitten her. Only Merlin knew what else he had done to her. The remains of the torture curse had still been lingering on her body as Tom had examined her.

He visibly flinched as he then remembered the green curse, rushing towards Hermione. She had been lying on the ground, unable to defend herself in any way, and that curse had soared towards her. If that fatal curse had hit her…

Tom balled his hands into fists and felt the force behind his magic intensify. The glass of a window gnashed and cracks appeared on it as he passed by. Why had he stepped in? He didn't understand it at all. He didn't care; wasn't supposed to care. Tom's angry magic crackled all over the place. She was worthless, a Mudblood!

I do not care!

The flash of green again spooked through his mind. If it had hit her, she would have died. Tom shuddered involuntarily at that thought. That green curse had made things a lot more difficult. It had unhinged everything – everything he had ever believed in – or had it finally cleared things up? Tom didn't understand any of it. The only thing he knew was that the green curse had changed everything.
Tom's Request

Hermione woke the next morning to the chatter and noise of her four roommates. She rolled over on the bed and was instantly punished by a piercing pain in her side. She couldn't suppress a soft moan of pain, but at least now she was wide awake. Cautiously, as to avoid more pain, she slowly sat up in her bed. A wave of dizziness hit her, making her vision blurry, and she had to wait for it to subside. Waking up and feeling like hell had slowly become a pattern for her, Hermione thought wryly as she opened the curtains of her four-poster. She felt like death warmed up.

"Oh, good morning, Hermione." Rose, who was rummaging through her trunk, looked over her shoulder and smiled at her cheerfully.

"Morning," Hermione mumbled in a hoarse voice, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in her head. Now that she had sat up, she really felt a bit sick. Maybe she should just lie down again and sleep it off.

Rose foiled Hermione's plans to get more rest as she now turned around and yelled, "She's awake!"

To Hermione's annoyance her other roommates now began to assemble around her bed. Rose was sitting down on her closed trunk, staring at Hermione expectantly. Lucia hopped on the bed beside Hermione and giggled foolishly while she smiled at Hermione. Viola and Diana stood a little further away but they too looked at her curiously. Hermione groaned softly. She wasn't in the right mood for one of her dorm mates' gossip sessions.

She raised her eyebrows at the excited faces and asked, a little bit peeved, "Is something the matter?"

"Of course," Lucia whined as if she were dying to receive some vital news. "We've seen you yesterday."

Hermione blinked and stared at her blankly. Yesterday a lot of things happened. What had her dorm mates seen? she wondered nervously.

As Hermione didn't react, Lucia whispered as if telling them a huge secret, "With Tom Riddle."

"I love you." Unbidden, his gently-spoken words flew through her head and Hermione felt her stomach twist. Yesterday Tom had saved her life… Abruptly she stood up from her bed, temporarily forgetting her many injuries. As a result, she very nearly keeled over as a sharp pain erupted in her leg and spread through her whole body. Hermione managed to compose herself, though; only an almost inaudible groan left her lips. Her dorm mates were still staring at her expectantly, oblivious to Hermione's pain.
"Aww, why must you always be so secretive?" Rose complained in a nagging tone.

Hermione ignored her, turned away from the girls and grabbed some clothes from her trunk before she limped over to the bathroom.

"How did you get hurt?" Diana asked her softly as Hermione passed. She was now staring at Hermione's split lip.

Hermione glanced at Diana's worried green eyes and smiled at her kindly. A flush of gratitude hit her. Diana Potter was in so many ways like Harry. Always concerned about others.

"Don't worry. Just an accident," she whispered to Diana.

Hermione averted her eyes from her dorm mate, trying hard to shove the guilt away which seemed to bubble up in her. Her jaw was set tightly as she remembered what she had lost yesterday: her stupidity had cost her the Invisibility Cloak. That cloak belonged to Diana's family and ultimately to Harry. She quickly limped over to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Instantly, the other girls started to chat excitedly again. Hermione tried to block their voices out.

_How could I lose the cloak? _she balled her hands into tight fists. _How could she have paraded around the place with that cloak in her bag? Completely unprotected? _She gulped and bent her head, staring down at the tiled floor. _Really, what was wrong with her? Grindelwald had attacked her before. His men even knew her name. It had only been a matter of time until they found her again. Hadn't she learned during the war never to let her guard down?_

_Stupid! _she hissed at herself. As her thoughts wandered back to Grindelwald, inevitably images of his soldiers sprang up in her mind. It made unpleasant chills running up and down her spine and she had to squeeze her eyes shut. She could still see the lewd look on that man's face while he had run his disgusting hands over her body.

Hermione breathed in as a shaky hand wandered up to her chest and clenched tightly around the fabric of her top. Then she quickly shed her clothes and stepped into the shower. The warm water felt pleasant on her skin. She looked down and her eyes fell on all the bruises which marred her skin. Her whole body was covered with dark purple bruises and painful abrasions. She slowly bent down and removed the bandage from her right leg. The deep cuts all over her lower leg where still plainly visible. It hurt every time she put any weight on the leg. The wounds were still bleeding, turning the water slightly pink. As she stared down at her hurt leg, Tom's words again swirled around her head. _I love you._ She slightly shuddered even though the water was pleasantly warm. With a shaky hand she reached for the taps to turn them off before she stepped out of the shower cabin. A trickle of blood was still running from the wounds on her leg.

It wasn't much later that Hermione left the bathroom, now fully clothed in her uniform, though she had left the stockings off to not disturb her injured leg. With relief she noticed that her dorm mates had already left for breakfast. As Hermione limped over to her side of the dormitory, her eyes contemplatively wandered over her white bed sheet.

_That could do, _she decided and then just grabbed the white sheet and pulled it off the bed. Hermione sat down and began to rip a two-inch-wide strip from the sheet and used it to bandage her injured leg with. As she was finished, she took her stocking and put it on, completely pulling it over the bandage so that it couldn't be seen anymore. As she stood up from her bed a wave of dizziness hit her. She felt shaky, but she would have to put up with it. School bag in hand, she was just about to leave the dorm as another memory from yesterday came to mind. Hermione groaned softly as realization hit her. She had been half asleep, but she still remembered that Tom had told her he would be waiting for her in the common room the next day.
She had no idea why Tom had helped her yesterday. He actually was the last person she would have expected to do that. Of course, there were several reasons why Tom didn't want her dead. After all he still needed information from her. He wanted to know about the Hallows and, of course, force information of the future from her. That was an explanation for his strange acts yesterday. She knew that, still his softly spoken words ghosted through her mind.

'I love you.' Like sweet poison they infested her.

Hermione shook her head as if to try and rid herself off the confusion his ruthless deception had left behind. Then she grabbed the door handle and left her dorm. She descended the stairs and soon entered the common room. Her eyes hesitantly swept over the room and found the usual turmoil of the Gryffindors getting ready for a new school day. Soon, her gaze fell on Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin, sitting on one of the sofas not far from the portrait hole. Each of them wore an expression of anger and distrust on their faces as they scowled at someone, sitting on another sofa. Hermione breathed in sharply as she saw whom they were glaring at so irately. Tom Riddle was sitting elegantly on the sofa, twirling his wand nonchalantly through his fingers and looking totally at ease. He completely ignored the three Gryffindor boys, glaring darkly at him, but was sitting there obviously waiting for her.

Now he turned in her direction, and his grey eyes quickly found her standing by the stairs. Tom flashed her a smile then got up from the sofa and walked over to her which made Hermione stiffen. As he reached her, she hesitantly looked up at him. How was she supposed to react now? Yell at him? Thank him? She didn't know, but her breathing was quickened as Tom's grey eyes sparkled down at her. Then he put his hands on her waist and pulled her closer to him. Hermione shuddered as she could feel his hands on her body. She just didn't know what to make of his attention.

Then Tom whispered with his smooth voice into her ear, "Good morning, Hermione," before he straightened up again.

Hermione still just stared at him.

"Do you feel better?" he asked her.

As if he cares, a cold voice scoffed inside her mind.

"Yes," she answered softly.

Tom nodded satisfied.

"Let me accompany you to the Great Hall," he said.

He took her hand in his and pulled her towards the door. Hermione felt insecure as his hand clasped hers, and she didn't return his grip. Before they reached the door Hermione's three Gryffindor friends stopped them by standing in their way. She noticed that they still glared at Tom darkly while they threw worried glances her way. Tom eyed the three boys standing before him and a conceited smirk was taking form on his face.

"What do you want?" he sneered at Longbottom.

"I want you to leave her alone!" Longbottom snarled at Tom.

The smirk on Tom's face widened, he sniggered darkly and then said in an arrogant tone, "I'm afraid that's not possible."

Tom had said it in such a derisive way, but his words still struck Hermione. He wasn't going to leave
her alone again? A promise? …or a threat? Anyway, she had to suppress a tremble as she heard his words. Her eyes wandered back to her three Gryffindor friends. They were glaring at Tom angrily. She was too confused to deal with that right now. So, she looked pleadingly at the three boys standing in front of her.

"I'm sorry I stood you up yesterday," she told them in a soft voice. "Please, can we discuss this later?"

Longbottom opened his mouth to, no doubt, disagree with her, but Lupin put a hand on Longbottom's arm.

"Okay," he said in his calm and collected voice. "But we will have to speak with you."

Hermione quickly nodded at that and flashed Lupin a small smile. Tom who seemed to be really bored by this conversation by now threw a rather conceited look Longbottom's way before he continued his way confidently towards the entrance of the common room. He held to Hermione's hand and dragged her after him.

"Why did you let them go?" She heard Longbottom's enraged voice say before the portrait to the common room shut closed and cut the conversation off.

Tom took off in direction of the Great Hall and Hermione just followed him. All the time she was very conscious of his warm hand, holding her gently. It filled her with trepidation. She needed to say something, but somehow his presence stopped her from doing anything.

Shortly before they arrived at the Great Hall, Hermione felt his hand tightening around hers, then Tom abruptly stopped. He let go of her hand and turned around to her. She involuntarily stiffened as she looked up at his face. His expression was unreadable but there was a sharp frown between his eyebrows as his steely hard eyes swept over her body. Without saying anything Tom's hand then wandered to his robe pocket and Hermione took a nervous step away from him. She slightly turned her head and checked her surroundings but her heart sank as she found the corridor to be deserted. No-one was around. Her gaze went back to Tom and she saw him producing a wand out of his pocket. Hermione's heart started to race even more now. She definitely needed to get away from him. She was just contemplating whether she would be able to escape him with her injured leg, as Hermione noticed that Tom wasn't threatening her with the wand. Instead he was holding the wand in his hand and looked pensively, almost longingly, down at it. She stared at him in bewilderment, temporarily forgetting to get away from him. It was then that Tom's gaze snapped back at her. The impenetrable mask was again covering his every emotion, though his eyes still seemed to be icy cold. Then he just offered the wand to Hermione and said in his smooth voice,

"Here, I guess you will need that."

She stared with wide eyes at the black wand in his hand. Now she could recognize it. It was undoubtedly her own wand. Tom had taken it from her as he had attacked her on the Astronomy Tower. Her wary eyes flashed from the black wand to his face before she hesitantly reached for the wand and accepted it.

"Thank you," Hermione mumbled in a soft voice.

"Is something wrong?" Tom asked her as his grey eyes scanned her.

Yes, there's obviously something very wrong with you, Voldemort, Hermione thought in suspicion as she continued to scan him. But then she replied,
"No."

To her relief he decided against questioning her further, but just took her hand in his and continued to lead her to the Great Hall. Hermione followed him. She had no idea why she allowed him to touch her now.

*He is trying to deceive me.* Hermione repeated the words like a mantra and her blank eyes dropped down to his hand, which still held her so gently. Her own hand was numb inside of his although his grip was so gentle, reassuring, warm, pleasant... *Utter lie!* a voice screamed in her mind.

Hermione had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed that they had arrived at the Great Hall already. She now found herself standing before the Gryffindor table. Tom was still holding her hand and now stared down at her. Hermione furrowed her brow. Did he really think a few well-placed lies, a gentle hug here and there would make her forget the disgust and the hate?

"Are you sure you are alright?" he asked her quietly.

Hermione looked up into his grey eyes and wondered for how long they were going to look at her so softly. How long before he would drop his mask again?

"Yes," she answered Tom. And just like him, she was lying.

Tom didn't seem to believe her, but he didn't comment either.

"We need to speak later," he told her.

Then he walked over to his own House table. Hermione watched his retreating back. She turned around and suddenly noticed that nearly all Gryffindors were watching her curiously. Hermione saw her dorm mates, Rose, Lucia and Diana, sitting at the table and smiling or waving at her suggestively. Hermione didn't want to talk with them right now so she sat down a distance away from the other students. Just to occupy herself with something she reached for the plate of sandwiches in front of her, took one and began to nibble at it. As she continued to ignore her House mates, the other students seemed to lose interest in her. So the chatter at Gryffindor table started again.

Now that she had sat down, Hermione could feel that throbbing pain in her leg again. It hurt rather badly. There were chills darting down her spine as she remembered how that dark curse had wrapped around her leg and how she had been unable to do anything as that man had then pulled her over to him. Hermione put the sandwich down on her plate. She didn't feel hungry at all. Images popped up in her head. It made her sick to remember how that man had grabbed her and kissed her. She shuddered in disgust and hastily tried to push those thoughts away. Her gaze slowly, reluctantly, wandered to Tom. She found him, sitting at his usual place at the Slytherin table. Her body stiffened as she realized that he was looking right back at her.

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*Are you crazy?* A voice in Tom's head hissed at him as he stared at Hermione. Why did he give her the wand? It had taken him a lot of trouble to get the Elder Wand from her. Why did he now give it back?

...Why did he save her yesterday?

'*I love you,*' his words came back to him. Yesterday, those words had suddenly left his mouth as he had held Hermione. Now, Tom didn't understand how that could have happened. He had never before uttered those words. He knew that for most people that confession would hold a lot of
meaning, but for him there was nothing behind the words. They were empty, unsubstantial. Yet, he had used those exact words yesterday, knowing that they would mean something to her. He was pretty sure that they still didn't mean anything to him, but the fact that he had used them in front of Hermione was confusing.

*What's really confusing is that I surrendered the Elder Wand to a Mudblood,* Tom thought frustrated as his eyes wandered back to the witch in question. By now her Gryffindor friends had arrived and sat down beside her. Tom ignored them but continued to stare at Hermione. His eyes narrowed in anger as he was hit by a protective feeling while watching her. The same feeling had so suddenly seized him yesterday as he had seen her lying there on the ground, hurt, while the Killing Curse rushed towards her. It was disgusting, actually. Why would he want to protect a Mudblood? Though even from the Slytherin table, he could still see that crust of blood on her lip, could see a dark bruise at her left temple. It was almost completely hidden behind her curly hair, but it was unmistakably there, reminding Tom of that image of Hermione lying on the forest floor while the dark cloaked man brutally kicked her. Tom had to close his eyes as he could almost hear her stifled moan of pain. Once again, he was overwhelmed by a wave of protectiveness. And it confused the hell out of him.

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Hermione noticed someone sitting down beside her. She looked up and found Longbottom on the seat beside her. Lupin and Weasley had sat down near her, too. And they all wore the same look of concern on their faces. Hermione felt guilty as she saw those serious expressions on her friends' faces. Since she had arrived here in the past she had brought them nothing but trouble. Lupin drew his wand and waved it while he whispered,

"*Muffliato.*"

Instantly the chatter going on around them died away until it was nothing more than a low murmur. Obviously her friends wanted to discuss something important with her, and Hermione didn't have to guess to know what that could be.

"What did he do to you?" she heard Longbottom's voice ask her softly.

She looked up at him and predictably found him staring angrily at Tom who still sat at the Slytherin table. Then his stare wandered from Tom to her, and it grew even darker as he inspected her painfully swollen and cut lip.

"Nothing," Hermione replied in a small voice.

She really didn't want to talk about how she had gotten so hurt. She didn't want to think about this incident from yesterday at all.

"Hermione, you are not going back to him, are you?" Lupin looked at her, and she could see the worry all over his face.

Hermione's head shot at him and her eyes widened. *No, of course not,* she thought feverishly. Why in Merlin's name would she do that? As she didn't immediately deny Lupin's query, an angry scowl appeared on Longbottom's face.

"That's ridiculous," he snapped at her, "Look at you. Look what he did to you."

"That wasn't Tom," Hermione said quietly, wondering why she was taking the trouble to actually defend Tom.

"Why are you always taking Riddle's side?" Weasley threw in tentatively.
"Are you really going to run back to him?" Longbottom suddenly yelled, and Hermione stiffened. Then there was an insulting touch in his voice as he continued, "Do you like it how he hurts you?"

"Marc, calm down," Lupin reprimanded him. Then he turned to Hermione and said in his gentle voice, "You have to understand how this looks to us. Riddle hit you, and then he left you because you are a Muggleborn. But suddenly you forgive him everything."

Hermione looked at his concerned face. Of course she could understand them. They were quite right. Tom had treated her like dirt before he suddenly decided to save her. Actually, what had she expected? Hermione frowned at her own stupidity. That she could just go and trust Lord Voldemort not to hurt her? Trust him to… what? Love her, like he had confessed? Her eyes shot back at Tom who still sat at the Slytherin table. As he saw that she looked at him, his grey eyes immediately softened. Hermione clenched her jaw as she scanned him. No, Lord Voldemort was not able to love. Dumbledore had been right. Tom might be very good in simulating emotions when it benefit whatever plan he concocted. But to actually feel love? Hermione quickly averted her eyes from him again. He is lying, she thought appalled.

Weasley's voice brought her out of her reverie, "Is he threatening you?"

"No," Hermione whispered. …not yet, that last part though she left unspoken. 

"Then why?" Longbottom burst out exasperated. "Why do you always let him get away with so much?"

She hesitated. What had actually unsettled her so? Hermione shook her head, trying to clear it off those dizzying thoughts. What had disturbed her?

She stared at Longbottom, who still waited for his answer. She opened her mouth and told them which lie had managed to unsettle her so, "He told me that he loves me."

There was a pause following her last statement. She raised her head and dared to look at her three friends. They were all staring at her in bewilderment. Longbottom even shook his head as he frowned down at her.

After a while of tense silence he asked incredulously, "And you believe him?"

"No," Hermione replied slowly. To her own frustration that sounded very much unconvinced.

"He's lying!" Longbottom yelled at her as he heard her shaky answer.

Yes, that was what Tom Riddle was best at. Still, why? Why such a cheap and easy-to-see-through lie? Then again, Hermione had to admit grudgingly, his gentleness yesterday had managed to mess with her mind more than she would care to admit.

"Can't you see what he's doing to you?" Longbottom now asked and Hermione flinched as she heard that anger in his voice. As she didn't reply anything Longbottom continued furiously, "He doesn't like you," he spat at her rather cruelly. "He uses you. Maybe he got bored and that's why he came back to you. Or he just needs someone to slap around."

"He didn't hit me," Hermione interjected quietly, obviously intent on defending Tom, who neither needed nor deserved any sort of defending. After all, what Longbottom had just said, it probably was the truth.

"Yeah? Who was it then?" Longbottom looked at her challenging.
She remained to be silent. She wasn't going to tell them about Grindelwald's men. That was disgusting enough as it was. There was something more important she had to confess anyway. Hermione remembered guiltily as she looked up at the blond's angry face.

"I… I'm sorry, Marc," she then mumbled weakly. Longbottom raised his eyebrows at her in confusion. "Your wand… I… lost it…" Hermione admitted feeling horribly disappointed in herself. "I am so sorry."

"What?" Longbottom stammered in confusion, just as if his missing wand had been the last thing on his mind.

"I- I'm going to pay for a new one," Hermione hurried on. "I understand if you are angry now. I am very sorry."

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This is ridiculous. She is a Mudblood, a snaky voice hissed at Tom indignantly. He furrowed his brow as he observed Hermione, leaving the Great Hall, closely followed by her Gryffindor friends. She looked alarmingly pale, and Tom could see that she was limping. But didn't Hermione deserve such harsh treatment? Unwanted, she had trespassed into the wizarding world, infecting it with her Muggle filth. Hadn't those men done the wizarding world a favour by attacking her yesterday? Mudbloods were an illness which slowly corrupted this pure world. They had to be wiped out so they wouldn't be able to soil everything with their dirty presence, Tom thought while his grey eyes still followed Hermione as if they were glued to her.

Unwanted… worthless… dirty… The words spun around his head, and he couldn't squash the memories now infesting him. He remembered how he had lain on cold concrete floor, doubled over in pain, as those exact same words had been spat at him. No! He was the Heir of Slytherin. Descendant of one of the oldest pureblood lines. He was related to one of the greatest wizards ever, whereas Hermione was related to nothing but dirt. While there might be certain similar experiences they had made in life, Tom was still the Heir of Slytherin while she was… trash!

He was annoyed as he felt a guilty stab in his stomach at his last thought. As if to shake off his misplaced feelings, he abruptly got up from his place at the Slytherin table and started to walk towards the exit of the Great Hall. Why would he feel guilty? And why would he want to protect her? Fury rushed through him. This was wrong and disgusting! Hermione was just an abomination. She wasn't worth anything! But now he remembered the feeling of her warm body as he had pressed her against him yesterday. It had felt so comfortable and just… nice.

He wrinkled his nose. How could this be nice? Tom shouldn't hug Mudbloods. What he should be doing is cursing them. With that thought, unbidden, an image of Hermione burned up in him. She was sitting on the bed in the Come-And-Go room and there were countless bruises on her skin. Those dark cloaked men cursed Hermione. But instead of feeling satisfied Tom felt fury boiling up in him. She had been hurt badly – she still was – and that fact infuriated him to no end. Tom had no idea what else those men had done to her and how far they had gone. He hated to think what had happened before he had arrived. Those disgusting men had hit her, abused her, touched her…

Tom left the Great Hall and sauntered to the Potions class room while frowning at how his last train of thought managed to freak him out. Why did he care? Whatever drove him yesterday, it remained to be fact that she was a Mudblood while Tom was the Heir of Slytherin. With her parentage she was clearly beneath him. Actually, nobody in this school was worthy enough to even lick the dirt off his boots. Compared to him they were all filth. And being a Mudblood, Hermione was one of the lowest among them.
Unfortunately, that knowledge didn't change this urge that was almost overwhelming. Mudblood or not, he wanted to embrace her and feel her warmth against his body. He groaned in frustration as he hesitantly admitted to that wish. A few first years that just passed him looked with wide eyes at the Slytherin prefect. Tom ignored them and balled his hands into tight fists as he finally dared to formulate what had been on his mind since he had found Hermione being attacked by those men.

*I want her back.*

He breathed in deeply and shortly looked up as if he hoped to find a solution to his problem written on the ceiling. It still irked him that she was a Mudblood, but that wasn't enough to stop him from wanting her. He knew he was actually lowering himself by wanting to associate with a Mudblood, but it still didn't stash away this burning desire. Tom wanted Hermione. He just needed her. It was… an obsession, maybe? He had to admit, that since that girl had appeared in Hogwarts all those months ago, he had been obsessed with her… *slightly.* She was worthless and dirty and really just a waste of space and yet, here he was, wanting her back.

The alternative was unacceptable after all; *not* having her. Losing her, that was not an option. A chill ran down his spine as he remembered that green curse, rushing towards Hermione. Losing her would be unacceptable.

He wrinkled his nose as he tried to wrap his head around this new concept. Lusting after a Mudblood? How wrong. But then again, Mudblood or not, Hermione was his *property.* It was only understandable that he wouldn't like it when other people tried to stain what was his. He had never really lost her, had he? He had just stopped to associate with her for a while, but that hadn't changed the fact that she still belonged to him. But now, after this episode in the Forbidden Forest, he had to reconsider his strategy. Maybe distance wasn't the best option after all?

Once again he remembered the feeling of her in his arms. Despite her being of unclean blood, Tom had to admit that he had enjoyed it. So why should he hesitate? Hermione was his; he could do with her whatever he pleased. If he wanted her to be near him again, that wasn't anything reprehensible. Sure she still was a Mudblood, but it wasn't like the thing was contagious. On top of that, Hermione was quite the powerful witch, he reassured himself. He would just ignore the fact that she descended from Muggles.

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Hermione limped down the corridor in direction of the Potions class room. She was hurt, dizzy, and felt sore. On top of that her right leg throbbed achingly. From the corner of her eye she could see her friends eyeing her with concern. They had obviously noticed that she had problems with walking. She tried to ignore the worry written on their faces and continued to stumble on. A bunch of first years came hurrying down the corridor. One of them accidentally tumbled into Hermione, mumbled a short "Sorry!" and ran after his friends. Hermione moaned in pain as he had collided with her injured right side. She leaned against the stone wall for support while holding her painfully throbbing side. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the pain to subside again. Suddenly Hermione felt an arm being wrapped around her waist, thus steadying her. She opened her eyes and found Longbottom staring down at her in concern.

"You are really hurt," he said in alarm while scanning her worried. "I should bring you to the infirmary."

"No," Hermione tried to appease him. "It's not so bad. I don't need to go to the Hospital Wing."

Instantly a frown appeared on his face. She noticed that Weasley and Lupin had stepped closer to her, too, and were looking rather upset as they scanned her for more injuries.
"Hermione, this is crazy," Weasley said concerned. "Why don't you just see Madam Dulan?"

She shook her head decidedly. Her friends were throwing troubled glances at each other, but Hermione tried to ignore it. She gently pushed Longbottom away and continued her way towards the class room.

"I would so like to curse that bastard!" Longbottom growled irately as he followed her.

Hermione didn't say anything to this. There was no point in discussing with him if he was this enraged and she really didn't know if she actually wanted to defend Tom. Maybe it wasn't him who had hurt her this time, but his reasons for helping her were more than suspicious. He surely hadn't helped a 'Mudblood' out of the goodness of his heart.

*That would be a first*, she thought wryly.

Hermione was very glad as they finally reached the Potions classroom. Whatever she had told her friends, she knew very well that she really belonged in the Hospital Wing. As she entered the room she automatically turned towards her table standing under one of the huge windows. But before she could walk over there, she was stopped by a warm hand on her shoulder. She turned and found Lupin smiling down at her.

"Why don't you go and sit with Marc?" he asked her in a kind voice.

Hermione instantly knew what he was trying to do here. He obviously didn't want her to have to sit right beside Tom. He might do it on wrong assumptions, but Hermione nodded at him. She followed Longbottom to the last row in the back of the classroom and sat down beside him.

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*I'll just tell her to come back to me*, Tom thought confidently. Hermione would be relieved to know that he was willing to take her back. After all, he was the *Heir of Slytherin*. It was very generous of him to spend any time with a lowly Mudblood. Hermione would surely appreciate it. They didn't need to ever talk about her heritage ever again. He would just ignore that part of her.

A small smile ghosted around his lips as he entered the Potions classroom. Upon entering, his eyes instantly went to his table where he expected to find Hermione. But instead of an eagerly waiting witch, he found one of her Gryffindor friends, Lupin, sitting at the table. Tom's brow furrowed in confusion as he stared at the boy who was glaring darkly back at him.

Where was Hermione?

Tom unfixed his eyes from the angry boy and let his gaze sweep over the class. It didn't take him long to find Hermione. She was sitting at a table in the last row beside Longbottom. Tom didn't understand why they had switched places. He tried to catch her eye, but she was obviously avoiding him. She stubbornly looked down at the table and ignored his attempts to communicate with her. What did she try to achieve here? Tom wondered annoyed as he glared at Longbottom beside her.

Suddenly he became aware of all the curious stares being directed at him as he still stood rooted to the ground in the doorway so he quickly continued his way towards his seat. What was wrong with Hermione? Tom sat down on his usual place while completely ignoring the Gryffindor boy, sitting in Hermione's seat, and it seemed Lupin was glad to do just the same. A little while later, Slughorn entered the room. As he started his lesson Tom quickly noticed that he was unable to follow anything the professor was lecturing about. He slightly turned his head to glimpse at Hermione. She was still completely ignoring him and Tom was deeply mystified by her behaviour.
Hermione could feel Tom's gaze on her, but she resisted the urge to look up. Now she was rather
glad that Lupin had switched places with her. Tom's sudden interest in her was more than peculiar.
She had to admit his new strategy was very dangerous. His cruelty and aversion she had learned to
live with, his fake affection though was something entirely else. His gentleness raised long buried
feelings in her. But in the end, it wasn't really Tom who she wanted. She was obviously still smitten
with that image she had made up of him. Back then, as she had been together with him, she had felt
so happy, secure and protected. Tom had been her anchor. He had saved her from her nightmares,
and she had loved him for it. So, of course, there now was this glowing hope, burning in her ever
since he had saved her yesterday, but she knew not to follow that hope. Hadn't Tom severed all ties
with her? How likely was it that he suddenly accepted her Muggle background? Not very high.

Bordering on zero, actually.

Hermione knew him far too well to be convinced by this sudden change in his actions. She knew
how good he was in manipulating people and making them think exactly what he wanted them to
think.

Her gaze now wandered from Slughorn down to the still empty parchment in front of her and a self-
ironic smile tugged grimly at her mouth. Even if Tom was not play-acting, but being brutally honest,
did that really change so much? Would she want him back? In face of how he had treated her since
she had told him about the identity of her parents, would she ever be able to trust him again?

Tom didn't hear a word from Slughorn's lecture. He was completely preoccupied with staring at
Hermione. They were half way through the class and still she hadn't even once looked at him. She
just sat there, beside that Gryffindor guy, and listened to the professor. Why didn't she look at him?
Tom couldn't understand her actions. His grey eyes wandered over her face. She had bent her head
slightly as she wrote on her parchment, taking notes of Slughorn's lecture. Her quill danced over the
parchment and strands of her curly hair fell into her face. Tom continued to study her face. She still
was awfully pale, like she was somewhat ill, and that cut in her lip looked swollen and painful.

Tom closed his eyes, trying to master his angry magic which slowly mounted up in him, but as he
opened them again, they immediately wandered back to Hermione. He couldn't do anything about it.
Why didn't she look at him? He had been disgusted by the mere thought that he had once touched
her. But now, he almost trembled in anger when he remembered those bruises on her skin, where
that man had dared to grab her body. Tom did not want anyone else than him touching her. No-one
else was allowed to do that.

She had to come back to him. She didn't have a choice in this matter.

It was another hour later that Slughorn finally finished the class. Tom gathered up his things and
stuffed them in his satchel. Then he quickly turned to look at Hermione. She was rolling up her
parchment and then bent down to retrieve her school bag. Tom noticed how stiff her body seemed to
be. She obviously was still in pain; someone really needed to look after her wounds. He doubted she
would go to the infirmary. The other students had slowly filed out of the class room as Hermione
finally stood up from her seat. Her two Gryffindor friends were still hovering around her like
watchdogs but Tom walked slowly towards her. The expressions on the two boys' faces grew dark
as they noticed him approaching them. Tom didn't pay any attention to them, as his eyes were fixed
on Hermione. She, too, had now seen him. Tom could see shock and distrust on her face before she
managed to school her features. There was a hard glint in her pretty eyes as they wandered over him.
"Hermione, I need to speak with you," Tom told her in a soft voice, confused by her dismissive behaviour.

"Stay away from her, Riddle," Longbottom now growled at him angrily.

Tom's eyes reluctantly left Hermione and wandered to the blond Gryffindor standing beside her.

"This has nothing to do with you. I just want to talk with her," Tom told him while trying to reign in his temper.

"So you can hurt her again? While no-one witnesses it?" Longbottom now positively seethed as he yelled.

The Gryffindor was glaring at Tom infuriated. Tom had to work very hard to keep his own temper from boiling over. One glance at Hermione's stony face, though, told him that violence would be the wrong way here.

"All I'm asking is a few minutes of your time." So, I can tell you to stop this stupid charade.

He nearly shuddered as he was met by a veneer of detachment that seemed so out-of-place on Hermione's face. Otherwise she didn't react to him at all. Maybe he should just grab her and pull her away from her bothersome friends, Tom wondered frustrated.

"I think it's better if you leave now," he heard the cool and composed voice of Lupin.

Tom didn't look at him but continued to stare at Hermione. Why was she so dismissive?

"Yeah, because she doesn't want to talk with someone like you," Longbottom spat at Tom, his voice thick with contempt.

Tom didn't pay them any attention but kept his eyes fixed on Hermione. She stared back at him. The look on her face telling him of an emotional detachment he had never seen in her. She sighed softly before she finally spoke to him.

"I don't think there is anything we need to discuss, Tom," she finally said, her voice lacked that warmth he normally would associate with her.

Hermione looked at him with her pretty hazel eyes and Tom could see no emotion in them. It was as if she had shut them down completely.

"Hermione," he whispered. "All I want is to talk with you."

"Do you remember the day after you broke up with me?" she said softly. And yet there was a steely tint in her voice as she continued, "I wanted to speak with you. But you never gave me the chance to explain anything."

Tom couldn't understand her behaviour. This was just ridiculous.

"You just turned your back on me," her tone was level and controlled as she continued, "You decided that I am not worth your time and you left me."

Slowly, Tom could feel irritation bubbling up in him.

"You should at least tell me what happened yesterday," he demanded to know, not bothering to hide the anger from his voice.
Hermione just slightly shook her head in disapproval before she took a step towards him. A dark sheen danced mercilessly in her eyes, shrouding them so that he could barely recognize them.

As she spoke next her voice was a mere whisper, but the sharpness hidden in her words made him stiffen, "Before I arrived here, I lost everything."

She closed her eyes shortly and as she opened them, Tom could see a haunted streak in them.

A deadly cold tone leaked through her words as she said, "I don't owe you anything."

Then Hermione just turned around and left the class room, followed by her Gryffindor friends. How was this possible? Tom stared at her retreating back, his magic was again starting to pulse through him furiously. Had she just… had she just rejected him? A Mudblood actually rejecting him? Him?

After classes were over for the day, Hermione hurriedly walked through the dungeons in direction of Slughorn's potions lab. She still needed to retrieve the rest of the veneficus potion. Without that potion she was unbearably vulnerable. As she finally reached the potions lab she quickly entered the small room and immediately went over to the black cauldron. Fortunately, the lilac potion was still there. She took an empty glass vial from the shelf and started to pour the potion inside it. There wasn't much left. She would have to make more, it seemed. Hopefully it wasn't harmful when taken over a longer period of time. After all, the potion was designed to be taken just once. Hermione sighed softly as she still stared at the potion. Obviously, she would just have to take the risk.

"Hermione?" she heard a voice coming from behind.

Hermione almost jumped in fright and nearly dropped the vial. She managed to compose herself, though, and slipped the bottle into her bag before she turned around to the voice. Tom was standing in the door of the small potions lab and had a look of genuine surprise on his face. Hermione, though, just narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. She hadn't talked with him since Potions and she actually didn't want to change that fact.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at him, not bothering to hide the irritation from her voice.

"I… I…" Tom muttered while frowning at her. "Slughorn asked me to help him sort his potions store."

Hermione nearly rolled her eyes. Sure this was just a coincidence, she thought sarcastically. Obviously Tom planned to pry information out of her again. How very unpleasant, Hermione thought as she eyed Tom in distaste.

Tom had to take in a sharp breath of air as he saw that look on Hermione's pretty face. She eyed him coldly, her face a mask of hostility. Actually, she looked quite defensive. Her dismissive behaviour was starting to grate on his nerves, Tom thought as he scanned her annoyed. What did she expect him to do? Maybe he hadn't treated her very nicely the last few weeks, but she was a Mudblood, for Merlin's sake. Surely she didn't expect him to apologize. It was generous enough of him to ignore her questionable parentage.

It was then that Hermione shouldered her bag and went to leave the room without saying anything to him. Again she was ignoring him and Tom felt his dark magic buck violently in face of her dismissive behaviour.

Before she could leave the room he hissed at her through gritted teeth, "Wait, we still need to speak."
Hermione stopped but didn't say anything to that and just continued to fix him with a glare.

"How's your leg?" Tom asked in a tense voice.

She didn't seem to want to deign to answer anything which only managed to raise his temper even further. Why was she making this so difficult?

"Who are those black cloaked men?" he then asked rather forcefully.

Hermione raised her eyebrows indignantly at him.

"You think I'll tell you?" she asked challengingly. "What are you going to do if I don't tell you, Voldemort? Curse me?"

"No," Tom replied. "I wouldn't. I just-

"I told you to stay away from me," Hermione hissed at him darkly. "Do you think I won't pull through with my threat? That I won't go to Dumbledore? If I were you, I wouldn't risk it."

"I just wanted to talk to you. Is that so bad?" Tom snarled, finally losing his temper.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, then she said in a low voice, "In fact, that is rather unpleasant."

Tom had a hard time trying to reign in his temper. He should just tell her now. She was his. When he told her to come back to him, she had no choice but to do it. He eyed her again. There certainly was a sharp frown on Hermione's face. She seemed to be annoyed by him.

Tom opened his mouth and said in a controlled voice, "Look, Hermione, I know that being a Muggle you are-

He stopped as the glare on Hermione's face grew even darker. He didn't understand why. So, he continued,

"Anyway, your parentage is very unfortunate," he could almost swear he could hear her growl angrily. "I know it's not your fault. You can't change that you are related to those… those Muggles," Tom shuddered in disgust as he spoke the last word. "And really, it's-

He again hesitated, but he had to pull through with it now. Though, the words did hurt as he had to speak them.

"It's okay," he managed to grind out. "It's okay that you are a Muggle you are-

He now looked at her and expected to find a happy smile on her face. Instead there was just a dark glare. Tom was a little confused by it. Didn't she understand? He was trying to tell her that he wanted her back. Maybe he had to be more straightforward.

"I've been thinking for a while," he continued. "The fact that you are Muggleborn is disturbing, but I think I can manage to live with it. So, I thought that, under the circumstances, it would be good if you came back to me."

He still looked at her expectantly. Was that direct enough for her? But now he spotted a very angry look on her face. And she had balled her hands into tight fists. Tom raised an eyebrow at her. She seemed to be enraged. Why would she be angry? He didn't get it. Shouldn't she be happy now?

"This is… this..." Hermione stammered. Her voice was strangely shaky as if she tried to somehow restrain herself. "That's just..."
Why did she hesitate? *What she should be doing is thanking me,* a very cold voice echoed through Tom's mind. Though Hermione did no such thing. She threw him one last enraged glare, then without finishing her sentence she broke eye contact and walked out of the small potions laboratory. Tom stood there, rooted to the ground. What had just happened? How had this gone so wrong? Tom turned on the spot and hastily followed her. He left the potions lab and could see Hermione angrily stomping down the corridor. He instantly followed her.

"Hermione, wait," Tom called after her.

Hermione didn't want to spend any more time in his presence, so she just continued down the corridor. It wasn't very long, though, before she heard hurried footsteps following her. Then a hand grasped her wrist. An unpleasant tingle crept up her arm where his hand made contact with her skin. Hermione stopped half way down the corridor. She couldn't stand the contact, so she forcefully wrenched her arm away from him and whirled around. She narrowed her eyes and hissed,

"Don't touch me!"

She was almost sure that she could see him taking a step away from her. His grey eyes were widened slightly as he looked at her. He seemed to be genuinely surprised by her less-than-friendly behaviour.

"Why did you just leave?" Tom finally asked quietly.

Hermione could hear honest confusion in his voice and that infuriated her even further. He really didn't get it, did he? He had just now insulted her in the worst possible way, and he didn't even understand it. Or was he just acting again? Did he try to infuriate her with his act of ignorance?

"I thought our conversation was over," she replied, frost lacing her words.

"Um… no, it wasn't," Tom said as he scanned Hermione.

She looked angry. He had told her that he was willing to take her back, and here she was being obviously infuriated by him. How was that possible? This was not at all going the way he had expected it to, Tom thought as his gaze wandered over the furious witch in front of him. Why was she being so difficult? She was acting as if he bothered her. Her irrational behaviour annoyed him greatly.

"Hermione, this is stupid," Tom finally snubbed at her. Then he continued in a sharp voice, "I just told you that I am willing to overlook your more than disagreeable parentage. I thought you would take that with a little more gratitude."

Hermione couldn't help but just stare at him. She didn't understand what Tom was trying to accomplish here. As she didn't react to his last statement at all, he took a step towards her and narrowed his eyes angrily at her. Then he said in a commanding voice,

"I want you to come back to me."

It wasn't a suggestion, it was an order. Hermione scanned him for a while. What was he doing? Did he try to finally crush her sanity?

"Er… no? Thank you?" she replied.

She had no idea how to deal with him. He glared at her, his grey eyes glinting with ire, and an angry frown had appeared between his eyebrows. What did he expect her to do? Run back into his waiting arms? …or more like clutches? *Surely not!*
Tom suddenly took another threatening step towards her and now towered menacingly over her while he still glared at her expectantly as if he could force her to change her mind. Hermione, though, wasn't willing to let him intimidate her. She stood her ground and stared back at him unblinking. As he realized she wasn't cowering down, he raised his hand and grabbed her upper arm tightly. Hermione suppressed an unpleasant tremble as Tom touched her.

"Listen," he snarled at her, his temper short. "We both know that you want to come back to me. Why do you buck against it?"

Hermione didn't listen to his nonsense. Her right hand had shot to where he grabbed her left arm, and she feverishly tried to make him let go. He wasn't allowed to touch her. She couldn't stand it. His grip on her was very tight, though, and Hermione didn't manage to make him release her. Instead she now pulled away from him, using the full weight of her body. Surprised by her forcefulness, Tom let go of her arm so that Hermione staggered away from him. Unfortunately, she hadn't considered her injured leg. As she tried to regain her lost balance, Hermione put her weight on her right leg. Immediately, a piercing pain shot from her leg through her whole body. She squeezed her eyes shut and gasped in pain while she swayed dangerously. Before she managed to completely lose her balance and fall down, an arm gingerly snaked around her waist, steadying her.

"Hermione?" a gentle voice whispered to her, worry having replaced all signs of anger. "What's wrong? Is it your leg?"

Hermione's breathing was quickened and she still tried to suppress the pain, but she opened her eyes and looked up. She found Tom scanning her wide-eyed, while his arm was wrapped around her waist, pressing her against him. That look of concern on his face, though, only managed to again rise her own temper to the boiling point. She pushed violently against him, both her hands on his chest, while hissing,

"Get away from me!"

Surprisingly, Tom let go of her and stepped back. Breathing heavily, Hermione glared up at him. Her leg still hurt.

"Are you satisfied now?" she shot at him, cold venom dripping from her voice. "Is it fun, hurting me?"

As he heard her sharp words, shock washed over Tom's face. Hermione nearly growled in anger as she saw worry fluttering in his soft grey eyes.

"No… I didn't want to…" Tom stuttered weakly. Then he scanned her for a while before he quietly asked, "Wouldn't you come back to me?"

"Because I don't want to, Voldemort," Hermione hissed the name like an insult.

He cringed slightly then he said, "Please, don't call me that."

She just raised her eyebrows while the cold look never left her face.

"Why?" she asked bitingly. "You think a lowly Muggleborn has no right to speak that name? What would you want me to call you then? My Lord? Master?"

He didn't immediately answer but then he said in a quiet voice, "No. It's Tom. Just Tom."

"Well then, Voldemort, it's gotten quite late," Hermione said, completely ignoring him. "I think we should leave it at that."
She was incredibly relieved as she suddenly heard a well-known voice coming from behind.

"What are you doing, Riddle?" the voice bellowed angrily.

She slightly turned her head and saw Longbottom storming towards her. Weasley was hot in his heels. As they reached her Longbottom stepped in front of her protectively.

"What did you do to her?" he blustered irately at Tom.

Hermione was surprised as Tom didn't react with anger to Longbottom's aggressive behaviour. Instead he just continued to look at her with concern in his eyes. Fake concern! an angry voice corrected. Then he turned around and walked away. Longbottom just glared at Tom's retreating back. He looked like he wanted to run after Tom and punch him. In the end, he seemed to deside against it. The blond Gryffindor instead let lose a string of insults before he turned to Hermione and gently took her arm.

"Let's go back to the common room," he told her.

With the veneficus potion now safely stowed away in her bag, Hermione didn't have reason to stay any longer here in the dungeons, so she gladly followed Longbottom in direction of the Gryffindor tower. As they silently walked through Hogwarts' many corridors, Hermione felt her leg throb achingly. Longbottom's gaze grew darker and darker as he saw her limping heavily and he grabbed her arm tighter to support her.

Hermione was glad as they finally reached the common room. The room was pretty much deserted. After all it was a bright day, the other students were probably outside, enjoying the warm weather. Still, Hermione spotted Lupin sitting on an armchair with a heavy book in his hands. A smile flittered over her face and she limped over to him, still followed by Longbottom and Weasley. Gratefully, she plopped down on the sofa beside Lupin's armchair. He looked up from his book and smiled as he recognized her.

"I can't believe that creepy bastard cornered you again," Longbottom huffed in anger as he sat down beside Hermione.

Weasley sat down beside him and said, "What did he want from you anyway?"

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. She didn't really want to discuss Tom. Though that furrow on Lupin's brow told her that she wasn't going to get out of this one so easy. Sure enough, Lupin now asked,

"What happened?"

Longbottom snorted ill-tempered, "Snake-boy bothered Hermione again."

"Riddle?" Lupin raised his eyebrows.

"Who else?" Longbottom blustered irately.

Lupin scowled as he heard the answer then he turned to Hermione. She nearly groaned as she saw that worry on his face.

"Hermione," Lupin said as he looked at her seriously, "you have to tell us. What does he want from you all of a sudden? Really, this is getting out of hand."

"It's nothing," Hermione replied evasively. "You don't have to wor-"
Longbottom cut over her heatedly, "Don't tell us we don't need to worry. Suddenly, Riddle seems to swarm around you again, although he ignored you ever since you broke up. On top of that, you are obviously hurt," he eyed her gravely before he continued in a serious voice, "Do you think we can't put two and two together? What happened yesterday?"

"Nothing," Hermione tried to reassure him.

"No," Lupin now interjected while he scanned her sternly. "This time we can't just ignore the whole thing. You are seriously injured."

"We should have never agreed to go along with all this," Weasley threw in cautiously his eyes obviously stuck on her painfully cut lip.

"Yeah, this time he's gone too far," Longbottom blustered in barely suppressed fury. "You were limping around the whole day."

"It wasn't Tom," Hermione said in a soft voice.

"That's not working anymore," Lupin told her gently, though there was severity now tinting his voice. "Either you tell us what supposedly happened or we will have to assume that it was Riddle."

"I can't tell-" Hermione.

"When are you going to admit it?" Longbottom burst out in exasperation. "This can't go on like that. That bastard hurts you."

She just looked at him, not knowing what to answer. It didn't sit right with her to not tell them the truth. On the other hand, she didn't want to pull them even further into her problems. Her fight with Grindelwald's soldiers was definitely one of those things she didn't want to burden them with.

As she wasn't replying anything Lupin said in his calm soothing voice, "Riddle's abusing you, Hermione. We can't ignore that."

"Tom didn't hurt me," Hermione repeated.

"Then why's he suddenly after you again?" Longbottom questioned demandingly. "First this morning in the common room and now he's cornered you again. You can't tell me this is just coincidence."

"He attacked you yesterday," Lupin said gingerly. "What is it he wants from you?" He laid a reassuring hand on her leg before he cautiously asked, "Is he trying to force you to return to him? Is that why he hit you this time?"

"No, it wasn't Tom," Hermione insisted. "Can we just stop talking about it?"

"Where's my wand?" Longbottom asked abruptly.

She looked at him and was hit by a wave of guilt.

"I told you I'm sorry I lost-" Hermione stammered but Longbottom again interrupted her.

"I am not angry because you lost my wand. That's not the problem," he told her gently. As he continued, though, there was a hard look on his face, "The problem is where that wand now is."

Hermione stared at him but didn't say anything.
"I'm pretty sure that if I wanted to get my wand back, I just had to go and ask Riddle," Longbottom stated. "Because he's the one who took it from you. He just can't handle that you are such a strong witch. That's why he stole the wand and that's why he treats you like dirt."

"It's not at all like how you are making it out to be," Hermione insisted, now feeling a bit frustrated in face of the situation. "I'm telling you, Tom did not attack me yesterday."

"Hermione," Lupin's controlled voice said. She turned to him and found him eyeing her seriously. Then he asked, "Can you honestly say that Riddle never hurt you?"

Hermione looked him in the eyes, then she said in an emotionless voice, "No."

"That's all we need to know," Lupin told her.

The grave expression was still on his face but he now smiled at her encouragingly. Then he turned to Longbottom and nodded at him. As he saw that, the blond Gryffindor got up from the couch they were sitting on.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked confused.

Longbottom looked down at her, an uncharacteristic look of sobriety on his face, though it was Lupin who answered her question.

"We promised you once to leave Riddle alone, but only if he wouldn't hurt you again," he said.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in shock then her gaze flew back at Longbottom.

"You… you can't just go after Tom and start a duel," she exclaimed.

Longbottom shook his head slightly then he said in a soft voice, "I'm not going to go after Riddle."

"Then what are you doing?"

"The one thing I should have done the very first time we found you with a bruise on your face," he stated. "I am going to Dumbledore."

"What?" she asked weakly.

"Professor Dumbledore will deal with this," Lupin told her gently. "You don't have to worry. Nothing's going to happen to you. Dumbledore's just going to talk with you and then he's going to talk with Riddle. He will resolve the whole thing. Okay? You don't need to be scared in any way. Dumbledore will see to it that you won't get harmed again."

Hermione stared at her friends with wide eyes. They seemed to be very serious in the matter. She bit her lower lip nervously. She couldn't let them pull through with their plan.

"Sit down," she told Longbottom. As he didn't move she added, her voice now rather firm, "If you want to take action, I guess I will have to tell you the whole story."

There was surprise on Longbottom's face as he heard her tone of voice. Then he sat down beside her. Hermione looked at her friends. Each of them was staring at her with concern on their faces. There was a warm feeling in her stomach as she realized how much they cared about her. She was going to be as honest with them as she could. They deserved it.

"First of all," she continued in her controlled voice. "Tom really hurt me."
Longbottom balled his hands into fists and an angry scowl appeared on his face. Before he could have said anything, though, Hermione continued,

"He hurt me a great deal," she said. As she saw that sheen of barely controlled anger in Longbottom's eyes she quickly continued, "You have to understand that I certainly don't want to defend his behaviour."

She shifted slightly on the sofa and her eyes narrowed in anger as she remembered all the insults Tom had thrown at her. Then he had cursed her and had just let here lie there on the Astronomy Tower. How could he now dare to treat her nicely again? Did he think she would forget what he had done to her? Hermione shook her head in anger, but then tried to refocus on her friends.

She continued in a calm tone, "Tom did not have any right to hit me and I'm not in the least bit ready to forgive him. But he didn't hurt me on the regular basis you seem to assume. He actually never hurt me as we've still been together."

At that point Longbottom couldn't keep silent anymore and said indignantly, "But that's just not true. As we've seen you with him in Hogsmeade, he's been a complete ass. Then the next day you had a bruise on your cheek and that bastard outright admitted that it was him."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"He was lying because he wanted to rile you up."

"How did you get the bruise then?" Weasley asked cautiously.

Hermione sighed tiredly. "The same way I got so hurt yesterday."

"And what might that be?" Lupin asked curiously.

Hermione swallowed nervously. This was not going to go down well. She really wasn't sure if telling them was a good idea. Would it endanger them? She could just pray it wouldn't.

She closed her eyes shortly, then she breathed, "Grindelwald,"

All three boys stared at her as if she had suddenly sprouted an extra head. Weasley had completely grown stiff, still staring at her. Longbottom was gaping at her while his mouth opened and closed as if he wanted to say something but no tone left his lips. Lupin was the first to snap out of it, but he wasn't his usual calm self as he breathlessly asked,

"What?"

"Well, you see," Hermione mumbled insecurely, "Grindelwald is after me. He… there is something he wants from me. That's why he sent his men after me."

"Grindelwald?" Longbottom asked weakly, his face ashen.

Hermione nodded.

"Then… then…" the blond Gryffindor stumbled. He reached for Hermione and grabbed her hand as he asked in a shaky voice, "Back then in Hogsmeade…?"

"His soldiers found me. They attacked me," Hermione replied, fighting for calm.

"Yesterday?" Weasley asked, his voice wobbled with panic.
"I was walking to Hogsmeade to meet you," Hermione said in her soft voice. "I took a detour around the lake. His soldiers used Portkeys to breach Hogwarts' wards."

"What? I... I don't get it. Grindelwald is after you? Why?" Lupin stammered, shock clearly audible in his voice. "What does he want from you?"

"Can't tell you," Hermione said evasively.

"Why not?" Longbottom inquired, while he still held her hand tightly.

"I don't want to endanger you."

"But that's insane," Lupin stared at her with wide eyes. "You've got to tell someone. You've gotta tell at least Dumbledore."

"He knows," Hermione told him quietly.

"Did you tell him about yesterday, too?" Lupin asked urgently. "Because if they managed to break the wards, that's really dangerous for you."

"No," she said.

"You have to," Lupin continued. "That's something he really needs to know. This is endangering everybody living here. I mean, Grindelwald himself could pop up here at any given minute."

Hermione stared at him. He was right. She should have considered this sooner.

"Okay, I'll tell Dumbledore."

Lupin leaned back in his chair and continued to scan her anxiously, looking very shaken. Hermione still felt Longbottom's grip on her hand. It was so tight it almost hurt. For a long while no-one said anything.

It was Longbottom who spoke next. His voice was unusually quiet as he said, "Merlin. Now, I actually wish it had just been Riddle. Shit. Grindelwald?"

"Is that why you had to flee from France?" Weasley asked her cautiously. "Because of Grindelwald?"

"Er... partly," Hermione replied in an awkward voice.

"This is terrible! He made you abandon your home and now he's found you again," Longbottom exclaimed. His eyes snapped back at her. Then he frown appeared on his brow, "Actually, how did you manage to escape them yesterday?"

"That was a pretty close call actually," Hermione replied softly. "They had me cornered."

She had to close her eyes as she remembered how that man had grabbed her. His hand on her skin had been so disgusting. Hermione started to tremble slightly. Then that man had hurled the Killing Curse at her. Suddenly, she felt an arm being wrapped around her shoulders. She opened her eyes and looked up at Longbottom. He had slid closer to her on the sofa and now held her gently.

"I wouldn't have been able to escape," Hermione whispered, still staring up at his blue eyes. "But then, Tom showed up."

Predictably, she could see Longbottom's eyebrows raising.
"Riddle?" he asked confused.

"Yeah. He fought them off," she told him quietly. "Then he brought me back to the castle."

"Riddle helped you?" the blond Gryffindor asked incredulously.

"Seems like it," Hermione said while still looking up at his confused expression.

"Then he knows all this?" Lupin's voice asked her.

Hermione turned her head and looked at him.

"Since the Christmas break he's known that someone is trying to get to me," Hermione told her friends. "As I've been attacked in Hogsmeade he saved me, too. Now, he's saved me again. But I don't know why."

"Wow, I would never have expected this," Lupin sighed as he still eyed her in concern. "Gindelwald is after you. And now, Riddle actually saved you. That's just... well, unexpected. And, as much as I dislike Riddle," Lupin continued, having regained some of his usual calm, "I can't stop but feel very grateful that he helped you."

Hermione stared at him and then said bitterly, "He probably just did it because he's after the same thing Grindelwald is." Then she sneered in a very cold and emotionless tone, "Can't have me dying when there's still something he needs from me."

Lupin threw her a small smile before he said, "I don't know, Hermione. Maybe Riddle really had an ulterior motive, but somehow I can't bring myself to care much. He saved you that alone makes me want to just thank him."

Hermione felt Longbottom's arm around her tightening and he pulled her against him.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "As much as I hate that bastard if he really helped you... that's... well... I'm very glad you are okay."

Hermione raised her eyebrows while staring up at him. That was the closest Longbottom had ever gotten to say something nice about Tom.

Later that day, Hermione sat in the Library, working on the Potions essay Slughorn had asked them to write. It was quite the miracle that her friends had allowed her to come here unescorted, Hermione thought amused. A warm feeling of affection flooded her as she thought about her three Gryffindor friends. They had been really concerned ever since she had told them about her little Grindelwald problem. At first Longbottom had refused to go to his Quidditch practice so that he could accompany her to the Library. Hermione had declined. She didn't want him to cut short his training on her behalf. Besides, there wasn't much he would be able to do to help anyway. Grindelwald's soldiers were quite the strong opponents after all.

Subconsciously, Hermione's hand wandered to her robe pocket where she had stored the vial with the veneficus potions. Lupin had been right. Tomorrow, she would have to talk with Dumbledore. He really needed to know about Grindelwald's ability to breach Hogwarts' wards.

Hermione's train of thought was interrupted as someone whispered into her ear,

"Hello, darling."
She turned her head and to her immense disgust found Avery standing beside her chair. His eyes wandered over the parchment with her Potions essay then he smirked at her.

"Ever the diligent student," he purred in his slimy voice.

Hermione didn't answer but just rolled up the parchment and stuffed it into her bag. She really wasn't in the mood to deal with Avery right now. She got up from her seat, grabbed her bag and just walked away. Of course, he followed her. Hermione felt infuriated.

"Don't worry," Avery drawled at her. "I don't mind intelligent women."

"How interesting," Hermione's replied frostily.

She nodded at the librarian, Ms. Peters, as she left the Library, still followed by Avery. Her irritation rose a few notches. Maybe she should just get a sip of the veneficus potion and then curse the hell out of him. A small smirk curled up her mouth as she pondered that option, but she knew she couldn't waste the potion on something so trivial.

Though as Avery spoke next, she really reconsidered that decision.

"You know, hun," he told her in his oily voice as he followed Hermione down the corridor. "You shouldn't wait for Riddle to come back to you. He's not interested in people like you."

*People like me?*

"But you are?" she hissed at him through gritted teeth.

"Sure," Avery snickered at her.

"Well, how unfortunate then," Hermione said acridly. "Because I'm not interested in *Slytherins."

Avery just smiled at her, sending shivers of disgust down her spine.

"Touchy."

By now Hermione had had enough of this. She stopped, turned around to him and snapped angrily, "Listen, I don't want to even talk with you. So why don't you just give up and leave me alone?"

A malicious look crossed Avery's face, then he suddenly grabbed her upper arms tightly and pushed her against the wall. Hermione glared up at him defiantly.

"What do you want?" she hissed at him forcefully, while she tried to wriggle away from his grasp.

As a reaction Avery tightened his grip on her while there now appeared a dubious glint in his eyes. Then his gaze wandered from her face downwards and stopped at her chest. As he looked at her face again, the lecherous sheen in his eyes was obvious.

"You know what I've always wanted," Avery finally answered tauntingly. A twisted smile now curled up his mouth, before he leaned in and spoke into her ear. Hermione shuddered in disgust as she could hear his husky whisper, "*You of course.*"

Then Avery bent up and let his eyes again rake over her body hungrily. She pressed her mouth into a thin line as she glared at him.

"My offer still stands," he purred at her, making unpleasant chills dart down her spine.
One of his hands released her arm and wandered up to the back of her head where he started to play with her curly hair. Hermione shuddered as she felt him touching her so intimately. Images of how Grindelwald's men had molested her boiled up in her.

"You're beautiful," Avery breathed out, desire clear in his voice.

Hermione felt sick as she stared up at him. It was then that he stepped even closer to her and his hand stopped fondling her hair to slide down her back. He now touched her waist, greedily searching for the seam of her blouse.

As she felt him touching her so avidly, Hermione finally sprang into action. Magic or not she wasn't going to let him do that to her, so, she now took hold of his shoulders. Avery didn't stop her, misinterpreting her actions, but continued to grope her. Hermione clenched her teeth and temporarily shifted her full weight on her right, injured leg. Instantly a sharp pain seared through her, but she ignored it for now. Her hands tightened on his shoulders then she rammed her left knee into his guts. Avery groaned painfully and took a step away from her. Hermione's right leg now hurt badly and she could feel blood again flowing from her wounds, but a satisfied smirk broke out on her face as she watched Avery moaning painfully. Before she could slip away, though, he seemed to have regained at least some control. He stared at her and the greedy look had now left his face, to be replaced by a furious glare.

"You ungrateful Mudblood!" he snarled at her aggressively.

He then took a step towards her and grabbed her arm tightly. There was so much hate and, even worse, conviction behind his words. Hermione didn't really care what someone like Avery thought about her, but she was tired of having to face that hate. She was just about to open her mouth and scoff something in return as another voice rang through the corridor.

"Let her go," that icy cold voice ordered Avery.

Hermione looked at the direction the voice had been coming from. A few metres away she could see Tom. He was wearing his emotionless mask on his face but his eyes were shining with anger as he stalked over to Avery. There was a frightening glint of red glowing in his otherwise grey eyes. Hermione looked away from him. Maybe he had even ordered Avery to attack her. Who knew?

"I said, let her go," Tom repeated, his voice a mere whisper, but nonetheless it transported authority.

Hermione could feel the grip Avery still had on her upper arm tighten. Then he wrenched at her brutally, pulling her so that she had to face Tom. She hissed in pain as she had to use her hurt leg.

"You know what she is, Riddle," Avery spat angrily while still holding Hermione, presenting her to Tom.

She felt his grip on her arm tighten again. Tom was scanning her and chills darted down her spine as she saw that vicious crimson colour seeping through his grey eyes. Then his eyes wandered back to Avery. Anger still twisted up Avery's face but he now seemed to search Tom, trying to get approval from his leader. He was only met by Tom's blank mask.

Then Avery shook Hermione while he hissed, turned towards Tom, "She's just a worthless Muggle-slut! No-one gives a damn about her!"

Tom didn't answer anything. The red colour in his eyes intensified until it completely banished the soft grey. Then he just pulled his wand and swirled it casually.

"Noceo," Tom said, a dark inflection in his voice.
Instantly, bright green strands of magic left his wand's tip and flew towards Avery. His hand immediately let go of Hermione's arm as those strands of magic wound themselves around his body. Avery fell down on his knees and he moaned in pain while the veins of magic angrily snaked over his body. Hermione stared with wide eyes down at him then her gaze wandered to Tom. He still maintained the curse while that furious red colour danced in his eyes. The last thing she needed was getting pulled into a fight between them, so Hermione cautiously slipped away from the two Slytherins. She nearly groaned in pain as she had to use her right leg. By now, blood seemed to have seeped through the bandage, making it feel wet against her skin. As she left, she could hear Tom ending the curse then he hissed at Avery threateningly,

"What do you think you are doing, Avery?"

"I… I was merely showing the Mudblood her place," Avery replied, struggling and failing to keep his voice from trembling in fear.

"Didn't I order you to let her go?" Tom inquired in a soft but dangerous voice.

"Y… yes," Avery answered, fear now unmistakable in his voice.

He still knelt on the floor, his breathing laboured now.

"In fact, didn't I tell you to stay away from her a long time ago?" Tom continued in a quiet voice but there was barely controlled anger underlying it.

"But… but… that was before you found out that she's a Mudblood," Avery mumbled fearfully, confusion visible on his face.

"Yes, but she is still mine!" Tom hissed at him, before he glanced over to where Hermione was. She had walked away by now.

"Leave now, Avery. I will deal with you later," he said, his icy cold eyes boring into Avery's, promising him severe punishment.

Avery cowered away from him but Tom didn't pay him any heed any more. Instead he followed Hermione. Even though she was still hurt, she had somehow managed to walk quite the distance away from him. He had to hasten down two corridors until he finally caught up with her. She was standing in front of a huge window which showed a view of the Great Lake and the Forbidden Forest behind. Hermione's hands grabbed the window sill so tightly that her knuckles turned white. But there was again that strange indifferent expression on her face. In the past, Hermione had always been so full of emotion, but now he didn't spot anything of her hot temper. As she heard his steps, she slowly turned her head and looked at him.

Hermione was furious as she found Tom in the corridor. He stood there and looked at her with anger still shining in his eyes. She wondered why he hadn't joined Avery in mocking her. That's what he liked to do after all.

"What did he want from you?" he now inquired in a low, dangerous voice.

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him lazily.

"The same thing he's wanted for weeks now," she informed him in a clipped voice. Seeing as Tom didn't reply with anything but an arched eyebrow at her, she added, with a cold smile on her face, "To shag me."

As he heard that, a murderous look washed over his features and Hermione could feel traces of his
angry magic on her body. She didn't want to deal with his temper, so she turned her head away from him and again stared out of the window. Hopefully Tom would take the hint and leave her alone.

"He won't bother you again," he promised and the dark tone in his voice sent chills down her spine.

Hermione didn't turn around to face him. She just shrugged her shoulders. "I would be happy if you stopped bothering me, actually."

For a while Tom didn't say anything and Hermione steeled herself for him attacking her. In the end, though, he didn't try to curse her, he just asked in a soft voice,

"Did you go to the Hospital Wing?"

A frown appeared between her eyebrows and she turned to him again.

"Those wounds on your leg are rather serious," Tom continued in a soothing voice, as if he was trying to talk some sense into her.

*What is he playing at?* Hermione certainly didn't need him to tell her how grave those gashes in her leg really were. The pain was hint enough, actually. Her injury was the only reason she still stood here in the corridor instead of running away from him. Her stocking had by now surely turned a red colour. How she would get back to her common room now, without raising a commotion with all the blood, she didn't know. She tensed as Tom took a step towards her. He was standing way too near now, not even two metres away.

"How about I look after them?" he then asked cautiously. His eyes shortly wandered to her painfully throbbing leg then he tried to persuade her again, "You are bleeding. I'm sure you don't want to walk around the castle like this."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at his apparent nervousness. He was good, really good. If she didn't know him so well, she would have believed in his honesty. But as it was, she did know his con games. So, she just limped a step away from him. Concern flooded his eyes as he looked at her. Then determination dispelled the concern and Tom pulled his wand out. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as she saw his pale wand. She staggered another step away from him, desperately searching for a way out of this. Finding no escape route, Hermione's eyes shot back at Tom. She clenched her teeth and awaited whatever he would throw at her. She was completely put off balance as Tom didn't curse her but just offered her his wand, handle first. With wide eyes, Hermione stared at the white wand in his hand before her gaze wandered back to his face.

"You can hold onto that while I have a look at your leg," he explained as he saw the confusion on her face.

What was he trying to achieve? Hermione was deeply mystified by his strange behaviour.

"This way you can be sure I won't curse you." A reassuring smile curled up his mouth as he continued, "And if I do anything you don't like, you can just hex me."

Yes, but right now she couldn't use magic. He would easily be able to overpower her, even without having to use any magic. Did he already know that her magic was gone? She tensed at that thought.

*What to do now?* Hermione wondered as she stared up into his grey eyes. The softness was back again. His eyes seemed to glisten with sincerity, but she knew how good of an actor he was. She was not going to fall for his lies. Despite her doubts, though, Hermione found herself reaching for the wand reluctantly. She wanted to know. She needed to see it! ...him dropping his mask. It was time to finally snuff that unwanted hope which crept up on her ever since he had saved her yesterday. She
was surprised she could see a relieved look crossing his face as she took the wand from him.

Tom then stepped over to a nearby door, opened it and entered the room. Hermione hesitated but then followed him. There was no denying that she was worried now. It felt like walking into a trap as she now stepped into the room. If only her magic wasn't down right now.

Tom held his breath as Hermione scanned him thoroughly. Her eyes were narrowed and a cold mask covered her every emotion as her gaze wandered slowly over him. He still offered her his wand. He didn't understand her dismissive behaviour, but he somehow knew that she would never allow him to get anywhere near her while holding a wand. Why was she so distrustful? He had to get her talking to him, Tom thought as he studied her. He would surely be able to convince her to come back to him.

It was then that Hermione moved. There was insecurity flashing through her mask of detachment as she slowly reached for his wand. Tom could see that her hand shook slightly as it clasped around his wand. He smiled down at her before he gestured at one of the doors in the corridor. He knew it led to an old, mostly unused, classroom. He was glad that Hermione followed him as he walked over to the door. He entered the room and she still followed him, though rather reluctantly now. She closed the door behind her but didn't walk any further into the room. Tom went over to one of the many tables in the room. He took hold of a chair and drew it out from under the table.

"Please, sit down," he said in what he hoped was a confidence-inspiring way.

He could see the distrust in Hermione's hazel eyes even though she still stood a little away by the door. She seemed to make a decision and then tentatively limped over to him. After she had sat down on the chair, Tom crouched down in front of her. He cautiously took her foot in his hand and she tensed as he touched her. He felt frustrated by her dismissive behaviour. His magic tugged at him furiously, but Tom didn't allow the magic to crackle around him. With violence he wasn't going to achieve anything.

Tom removed her shoe before he gingerly pulled her stocking down and discarded it on the floor. A tight bandage was wrapped around Hermione's lower leg. He pressed his lips into a thin line and anger washed over him as he saw the many blood red stains on the white bandage. He swallowed down his upcoming rage and started to remove the bandage from her leg. Its material was strange and Tom shortly wondered why she hadn't simply conjured up a better one.

Removing it without hurting her was impossible. The blood had clotted at places and stuck to the material of the bandage. So, as he now removed the bandage, the clotted blood was ripped away from her wounds, making them bleed even more. Hermione jerked each time it happened, but she never said anything. Finally, Tom had removed the bandage and now looked at the damage of her leg. Long, deep gashes spiralled around her leg. Once again he wondered what spell this bastard had used on Hermione to hurt her so. He reached for his bag and pulled a small pot out of it. It was an ointment used to disinfect wounds and to quicken their healing process. He had put it in his bag this morning. Back then he hadn't known how difficult it would be to convince Hermione to let him help her.

Now, he reached for the bandage he had discarded on the floor. With a flick of his fingers, he dared to send a little of his magic onto the blood-stained material. Instantly, the blood disappeared, leaving a perfectly white bandage behind. Tom noticed how Hermione stiffened as she saw that display of wandless magic. She shuffled in her seat and he knew that, right now, she was considering running away. He cautiously ripped the bandage in two, then opened the pod with the healing ointment and put some of the ointment on the smaller part of the bandage. Fortunately, Hermione was still sitting in
front of him and hadn't fled, so he now began to dab the gaping wounds with the ointment. He knew
that it must be hurting quite badly, but she still didn't say anything. As he was finished, the white
material was again stained by her blood.

"I still think it would be better if you just went to the Hospital Wing," he told her quietly, preventing
his voice from sounding commanding. "A healer should look at this."

Tom now reached for the other part of the bandage and began to wrap it cautiously around her leg.
The moment he was finished tending to her leg, Hermione practically sprang up from her seat and
started to limp away from him.

"Hermione," he called after her, desperate to make her stop before she would leave the room.
Hermione hesitated with her hand hovering over the door handle. She turned her head slightly and
looked at him. Again there was a cold and distanced expression on her face, but Tom was glad that
she had stopped. He needed her to speak with him. Why didn't she want to come back to him? If
only she would speak with him, he could surely convince her that she belonged with him.

"Hermione," he repeated softly. "Please, can we talk?"

The hard look never left her face as her hazel eyes wandered over him.

"What do you want to talk about?" she then asked sharply, rejection already audible in her voice.

"I… I wanted to talk about us," Tom replied.

He was feeling strangely self-conscious as she now narrowed her eyes at him rather angrily.

"'Us'?" she asked with a touch of asperity. Then she continued in a colourless voice, "There is no
'us'. You've put a lot of effort into ensuring that, Voldemort."

Tom cringed at her tone. That name was supposed to sow fear and horror in the hearts of his enemies
as well as his followers. But now that Hermione angrily hissed it at him, it sounded more like an
insult than anything else.

"I don't know what you are playing at," she continued in that same harsh tone. "But you can stop
now, it's not going to work."

"I'm not trying to trick you!" Tom quickly assured, taking a step towards her. As a reaction
Hermione just opened the door.

"Do you really think I would like to talk with you?" Hermione said, her voice cold and emotionless.
"I haven't even received any form of apology."

Tom stopped and just stared at her. An apology? For what?

Hermione eyed him coldly then she said, "You haven't even considered doing it, have you?"

Tom was shocked by that harsh coldness in her tone. He now walked over to her while he started to
say in a soothing voice, "Hermione, please-"

"No!" she yelled at him angrily. "You stay right where you are."

Tom stopped and again eyed her. She seemed to be really infuriated by him. He was surprised that
she managed to somehow hold her magic back from crackling around her.
He opened his mouth, trying to somehow calm her upcoming temper, "Listen, I know you are-

"Stop!" She yelled at him and Tom cringed as he was hit by her rage.

Her eyes were blazing with fury as they now wandered over him, appraising him. Judging by that angry scowl, appearing on her face, she obviously didn't like what she found.

She then narrowed her eyes at him before she hissed mordantly, "What do you want from me?"

Tom raised an eyebrow in confusion, "What do you mean?

The worry in his tone only managed to make her gaze grow even fiercer. She seemed to be boiling with rage as she now said in a glacial tone,

"Obviously you didn't save me just because you like me so much. I just came in here because I thought you would finally be honest. But you weren't. So, what is it you want?"

"I… I didn't want anything," he assured quickly, desperately trying to somehow calm her down.

Unfortunately, his answer only managed to aggravate her even more. She glowered at him darkly.

Tom couldn't help but jerk as she then yelled at him again.

"Don't lie to me! What do you want from me? What is it this time? The cloak? The book? What?"

Tom couldn't reply anything as she continued to rage at him, "Why not try an open request for once? What do you want?"

"Nothing," Tom replied cautiously. The glare didn't leave her face so he added in a soft voice, "I just want you back."

As she heard his confession, Hermione started to laugh hysterically. And finally Tom had to admit that this conversation wasn't going at all like he had planned it. Why was she this hostile?

As she spoke again, all laughter was gone from her sharp voice. "You've got to be kidding me."

Tom again jerked at her tone. But she surely couldn't refuse him without a reason. So he asked cautiously, "Are you together with Longbottom then?"

Hermione just stared at him incredulously. "Not that it's any of your business," she hissed at him mordantly. "But no, Marc's not my boyfriend."

Tom felt himself relax a little, but then he caught that dark glint in Hermione's eyes. She had obviously seen that relief on his face and now narrowed her eyes at him before she spat,

"It doesn't matter whether I'm together with anybody or not. Either way, I certainly don't want you back. You are even worse than Avery. He thinks I'm some sort of worthless subhuman, too. But at least he's making no secret of it," Hermione scanned him in obvious distaste, "Whatever makes you think that I would want someone like you to be anywhere near me? Not after how you've treated me."

Tom almost winced as he heard that demeaning streak in her tone. Hermione didn't seem to notice his awkwardness or she just didn't care, because she continued in the same cold voice, "Do you remember what you called me?" Without giving him time to reply or to explain himself, she spat at him, "'Disgusting', that's what you called me! Unclean, trash, a slut, Muggle-whore. And, oh yeah, I forgot your favourite: Mudblood."
Tom swallowed hard as he heard her accusations. He didn't know what to say, because she was right. He really had called her all those things. Did she expect an apology for that? he wondered while Hermione still stared at him, hate flaring in her eyes. He didn't understand her aversion but he wanted her back. So Tom mumbled softly,

"I… I'm sorry."

He could see Hermione shaking her head in disbelief. Then she again hissed at him furiously, "Even if I could forgive you for insulting me, which I by the way can't, you still attacked me physically, too. You slapped me and then you cursed me."

Tom flinched as he saw that icy cold sheen in her hazel eyes. Hermione again didn't care, but continued while cruel sarcasm seeped into her voice.

"Did you think I would just forget about that? That I would say; oh, it wasn't that bad, I'm sure you are sorry and won't try to KILL me again."

Hermione was breathing hard as she glared at him. She seemed to be beyond herself. He had in fact never seen her this angry. It was a mystery that she had still enough self-control to hold her magic back. She just balled her hands into tight fists, probably wishing to hit him in the face, and now barked at him irately,

"It's a joke! After all you've done, you suddenly change your mind? First you throw the Haz curse at me and then you declare your love for me." Hermione paused, but then continued in a belittling tone, "Doesn't that sound a little schizophrenic to you? To me, it sure does."

"I never hurled the Haz curse at you," Tom answered weakly. "I tried, but it didn't work. Because I never hate-"

"Oh, the curse didn't work," Hermione cut across him, her voice thick with mock concern. Then she continued throwing cruel sarcasm at him, "Now, that's changing everything, of course. Your precious Haz curse didn't work. It's not like you didn't throw a lot of other curses at me after you failed to perform the Haz curse."

With that she rolled up the left sleeve of her black school robe and her blouse underneath. Tom stiffened as he could see a huge and ugly scar, running over the full length of her forearm. All colour was draining from his face as he stared at that scar on Hermione's arm. Why was she showing him this? Had he done that?

"See that?" she snapped at him. "That doesn't look like you care very much for my well-being."

Yes, it had been him, Tom realized shocked. He now remembered how he had thrown that cutting hex at her. That had been just moments before he had tried to use the Haz curse on her. A shuddered breath escaped his lips as his gaze wandered over the large white scar on her arm. Then his eyes again shot at her.

"Hermione, I-"

Again, she didn't let him finish. "I don't want to hear your flimsy excuses. What is going on in your head? Do you think I'm stupid? That I would just buy your act of remorse?"

"I'm not lying," Tom instantly replied now feeling desperate in face of her anger.

"That's even worse," Hermione snapped. "Because then you are delusional."
Then she eyed him coldly. Tom gazed back at her pleadingly. But Hermione didn't care, she looked away from him just as if she couldn't be bothered to waste any more time on him. And as she spoke next, her voice was low and icy cold,

"I don't want you anywhere near me. I've seen your true face. And you know what? It's disgusting."

Hermione shuddered as she could see a silent apology crossing Tom's face. Her anger died down as she saw that expression on his face, and she suddenly felt incredibly exhausted. Why was he doing this to her? She couldn't bear that softness in his eyes; it was fake. She broke eye contact and pretended to scan the room while she replied, trying to ban all insecurity from her voice,

"I don't want you anywhere near me. I've seen your true face. And you know what? It's disgusting."

Tom didn't say anything to that, but then Hermione's head snapped back to him as she could feel his hand on her shoulder. He had walked over to her and now stood way too close. She immediately took a step away from him. A strangely sombre look crossed his face as he saw her recoiling from him.

"I want you to stop following me around," she told him in a hollow voice.

"Hermione, please, come back to me," Tom strangely appeared to be unsure of himself.

Hermione frowned at him confused. "Why would you want me back? Did you forget what I am?"

She shortly closed her eyes before she continued. She should leave now because she didn't have herself under control anymore. If she pushed him too far, Tom would surely attack her again.

"Nothing changed," she finally whispered. "I am still Muggleborn. And you still hate me."

"No!" Tom replied hastily. "I don't hate y-"

"Why are you lying?" Hermione cut across him heatedly.

She stiffened as then a look of frustration crossed his face, and she took another step towards the door. Though she knew, should Tom decide to attack, she wouldn't be able to be fast enough. He might not have his wand, but she couldn't use any magic either. Without magic, it was pretty obvious who was the stronger one of the two of them.

Obviously Tom had seen her movement and had interpreted it correctly as he now said in a soothing voice, "I'm not going to do anything to you."

"Yes," Hermione replied mockingly. "Whyever would Lord Voldemort want to hurt a Muggleborn?"

Tom looked like he wanted to object, but she felt her temper slipping away.

"Let's not fool ourselves. You've made it very clear during the last weeks what you think about me. Since I told you that my parents were Muggles, you've treated me like dirt."

By now there had appeared a look of regret on Tom's face as he scanned her intently. Hermione had to close her eyes. She didn't want to see his acting.

"I think it's safe to assume that you hate me. So it's best if we avoid each other," she finished her speech in a firm voice.
Tom was looking at her with that well-known softness shining in his grey eyes. He didn't seem to be angered by her impudence but looked more crestfallen.

"You assumed wrong," he said quietly. Then he ran a hand in a very uncharacteristic gesture through his hair. "I know I've reacted poorly to the information about your parentage. And I did some horrible things to you."

Tom stopped. He seemed to ponder something. Actually, right now he looked very much out of his depth. He furrowed his brow in confusion but then he said slowly,

"Hermione, I am sorry over how I treated you," Hermione felt mesmerised by the sincerity behind his incredibly grey eyes as he continued in a grave tone. "Can you forgive me?"

She continued to stare at his expectant face as many different thoughts spun through her head. The conclusion, though, was always the same. Whether he was telling the truth or not didn't matter; if she stayed with Tom for too long, he was bound to hurt her again.

She took another step away from him before she whispered shakily, avoiding his question, "Why did you help me?"

It was the one question that had bothered her since Tom had protected her from Grindelwald's men. There were reasons as to why he would help her, but she wanted to hear it from him. *The truth or more lies…*

"Because I don't want anyone hurting you," he said in soft-spoken words.

…*lies then.*

"You hurt me," Hermione hissed in a sharp voice as she scanned scrutinized him numbly.

"I know," he said hesitantly. "I am sorry."

Hermione just shook her head at him.

"I don't believe you," she whispered slowly.

Tom still stared at her but now there was desperation slowly breaking through his mask. Hermione averted her eyes then she said in a dead tone, "So you don't like it if others are hurting me? Is that because you think that you are the only one who has the right to do that?"

"No," he exclaimed vehemently but Hermione had noticed the short silence before his reply.

"Come back to me," Tom implored. "Let me prove to you that I'm serious about this."

"How do you plan to prove that? How can I trust you again?" Hermione asked him softly. "I don't understand you. First you start to hate me to the point where you throw dark curses at me. But now, suddenly, you want to be my boyfriend again?" Hermione inquired weakly.

Tom's grey eyes found hers and she could see a mixture of desperation and confusion.

"Do you want me back?" he asked quietly.

Hermione demurred but then, "No."

"Can't you give me a chance?" He made his request while his grey eyes sparkled softly down at her.
"You really expect me to forgive you?" she asked. "And then what? Throw myself into another abusive relationship?"

She watched his eyes widen and he seemed to be quite shaken.

"I won't hurt you again. I swear," Tom whispered softly.

"That's what you say now," Hermione replied coolly.

She scanned him. There was desperation on his face. And honesty. As if this whole thing wasn't just a big lie. Hermione's gaze was unwavering and level as she looked at him.

"I don't see how it could ever work again; us being together," she finally said. "What if we had a quarrel again? What if I disagreed with you on something? Would I need to be afraid that you would hit me?" She could see him taking a step back. It didn't stop her, "Or that you curse me? Cruciate me?"

"N… no," he quickly avowed, sincerity lacing his words. "I wouldn't… I would never do that. Believe me. Please, I… I know, I made mistakes …I hurt you. But I would never do it again …I swear… whatever happened, I would never try to hurt you again."

After his rushed confession, Hermione considered him for a while. Tom continued staring at her, his grey eyes glinting softly, pleadingly at her.

Truth? Or more lies?

After a while Hermione addressed him again. "You don't really understand what you did to me, do you?" she asked him calmly as she stared into his grey eyes. It was a rhetoric question and she continued without waiting for an answer, "Do you have any idea how many people already called me worthless or dirty? …Impure?"

Again she didn't let him say anything but answered her own question, still in that soft but steady voice,

"I can tell you, you weren't the first. There have been a few already. They insulted me and despised me. They hated me and would have liked to see me dead. They didn't consider me to be a human being. So they didn't think it was a crime to beat me – to curse me and to try to kill me." Hermione could see Tom's eyes widen slightly. "I could never understand them or their hate. But I knew they were not allowed to judge me. I knew that I am neither worthless nor inferior due to my parentage. I knew they were wrong."

A grim smile now played around her lips as she looked at Tom. It never reached her eyes and it certainly was unconnected with any positive emotion. "And then…you came."

Tom still stared at her and the smile dropped from her face as she continued, "I knew that you were wrong, too, just like the other ones. But you managed what they never could," she said in her soft and completely emotionless voice, "You made me waver and doubt. You made me feel worthless and dirty and inferior. You turned me into a Mudblood."

Hermione was surprised as she could now see pain, seeping into Tom's eyes, as he looked at her.

"I… I…" he stammered weakly. He seemed to want to make a step towards her but then hesitated. "I'm sorry. Please, Hermione, give me another chance."

Hermione scanned him for a while. It was more lies. He wanted something from her. She was painfully aware of the fact that she did want to give him a chance. But why should she delude herself? Tom surely didn't really want to spend any time with a Muggleborn. And even if he was not
lying, his remorse didn't take away the things he had done to her. He had been merciless and cruel towards her and Hermione was not able to forgive him. So she didn't answer him. She broke eye contact and turned around to the exit of the classroom. She reached for the handle and opened the door. But a hand banged it shut again and Hermione's heart missed a beat. Her breathing was quickened. Then Tom spoke again and she was surprised as it was not the expected outburst of fury.

"Hermione?" he said in an insecure voice. "I… I just want one chance. Please."

Her gaze shortly lingered on her hand which still grasped the door handle but then she slowly turned around and her eyes hesitantly wandered to Tom, who was standing way too near her.

"Just one chance," he repeated his request in a soft voice while looking at her intently.

She looked up at him and then said in a quiet but all the same firm almost callous voice, "Do you know what I just thought as you stopped me from leaving? I thought: 'Now, I've gone too far' 'Now, he's snapped again.' I wondered about the lay-out of this very room and if there are any other exits I may use in case you stopped me from using the door."

Her statement was followed by silence. Tom just stared at her, not really knowing how to handle the situation. Hermione gazed back at him, calm and composed, maybe even a little expectant.

Finally, he cautiously said, "I see that I ruined a lot with my previous behaviour. I realize that you can't just forget the things I did to you," his soft-spoken words made her almost shudder. "But I beg you to give me a chance to regain your trust. I promise I will never betray that trust ever again."

Hermione just raised her hand and he stopped talking.

"Tom, while I am thankful that you saved me yesterday," she said in a soft voice, "I still don't trust you. I don't believe you and I think there is very little you can do to ever change that fact."

She could see Tom flinch as she made that declaration but not even the panic flooding his eyes could make her stop now.

"I won't come back to you," Hermione told him, a strange sadness filling her. "What you did to me is unforgivable."

Tom broke eye contact with her, seemingly unable to look at her any longer. His eyes were downcast and Hermione could see his hands tremble slightly before he balled them into fists. She furrowed her brow as she was suddenly hit by a feeling of regret.

"Please," Tom finally whispered, still averting his eyes.

Hermione released a shuddered breath in face of his desperation. She could feel her resolve crumble, but that was something she couldn't allow. She knew Tom Riddle too well. He was definitely capable of pulling this perfectly believable act.

"I have to go," she said softly as her hand searched for the handle behind her back. As she found it she grabbed the handle of the door, opened it, and slipped out.

For a second, Tom just stared at the spot where she had been. Then he sprang into action and followed Hermione. As he exited the room, he could just see her turning around a corner into another corridor. His wand was lying on the sill of a window nearby. Tom took the wand and then stared at the corner she had just disappeared around. He was feeling slightly light-headed as his emotions were running wild inside of him. He had been so sure that Hermione would come back to him that he just had to tell her, and she would do whatever he wanted. Incredulity washed over him as he
continued to stare at that corner.

How could she just leave him like that? Why wouldn't she trust him? He was not going to hurt her again. Why couldn't she understand how serious he was?

He felt offended by her lack of trust. Suddenly, there was anger churning up his dark magic and Tom was glad that no-one could witness how that magic bristled furiously around him. It tugged at him wrathfully and ordered him to go after Hermione and force her to change her mind, to see the truth and accept him. She was his and had no right to refuse him!

He needed her back!

Tom took a step towards the direction she had disappeared to, intending to follow Hermione. But just as he was going to give in to this inner urge to chase after her, an image flickered through his mind. He stopped mid-step as his body froze. Dread flooded him and he tried to ignore that image, which now flashed through his mind.

But it was useless…

He could see himself, cursing Hermione on the Astronomy Tower. Her black wand had been safely stowed away in his robe pocket. Hermione had been utterly defenceless but that hadn't stopped him from using very dark and very harmful magic on her to extract information from her and just to make her hurt.

Did he really want to run after her and force her to return to him?

The upcoming anger at her abruptly left Tom again and the violent magic died down around him. Then he stumbled back to the door and entered the classroom again. He felt slightly sick so he slumped down on the chair Hermione had occupied just a few minutes before. Something heavy constricted his chest, making breathing difficult, while his thoughts still danced around the incident from the Astronomy Tower.

He had hurt Hermione, just to get information from her. He had tortured her… Not even all the blood and her painful whimpers had managed to make him stop. He had been ruthless, a heartless bastard, but Hermione hadn't broken down. She had endured all his cruelty without divulging anything. She had never wavered in her decisions.

Even after this display of her strength, he had still dared to abase her. 'You are scum and you will always be scum. You are worth nothing.' Those were the words he had brutally hissed at her. Again, she had taken his insults with a stoic calm, just as if his cruelty was something she had always expected. Back then, Tom had seen it in her eyes: pain, sorrow and disappointment. She had been desperate in face of his atrocious behaviour, but neither had she been angry nor surprised. At the time, Tom hadn't been able to understand the consequences his actions would entail. He had been blinded by his anger and this vicious urge to break her. Hermione, though, had seen the consequences. She had understood that he had made his decision against her and she had accepted that. Her pretty hazel eyes had been swimming with sadness as she had stared up at him after he had cursed her. However hard he had tried, though, she had never given in to him.

And now, he wanted to force her to come back to him? How was that going to work?

His stomach clenched painfully. From the start of their acquaintance, he had treated her terribly. He had even used the Crucius Curse on her, but still Hermione had forgiven him. Despite all the things he had done to her, she hadn't held it against him but had instead helped him. She had rescued him from the orphanage and had looked after him. She had even ignored her personal affection and
respect towards Dumbledore and, instead, had protected Tom. In fact, she had continuously given up things in order to help him, placate him or just be with him, while she had asked for very little in return. Hermione had always accepted him, even his darker side. No-one, aside from her, had ever looked underneath his amiable mask and had still liked him. Now, though she seemed to have changed her mind. Tom hadn't thought that could ever happen. Granted he hadn't cared much about it either since he had learned she was Muggleborn, but still he had assumed she was his. Surely, Hermione DeCerto was his, but what if she saw it differently now? How was he supposed to get her to return to him?

He couldn't blackmail her, nor somehow trick her to come back to him. She would see through his plans like she always had. He couldn't use violence either. That had never worked with Hermione – it would make things even worse.

Tom groaned in frustration and hid his face in his hands. As he had cursed her on the Astronomy Tower, he had thought that Hermione was at his mercy. Now, he realized that it had been, and still was, the other way around. He was at her mercy. Had always been. She had the upper hand in this, because he wanted her back; because he needed her. Hermione, though, certainly didn't need him. Maybe she was the only person who would ever care for him but Hermione didn't need him in her life to receive affection.

'How can you expect me to ever trust you again?' Hermione had asked him.

{{{+}}}
"Crucio."

Avery lay on the ground, convulsing in pain. Tom's steely eyes wandered over him and there was no emotion showing on his face, aside from a twisted smile ghosting around his mouth. Tom observed Avery, twitching in pain, and he enjoyed it. He enjoyed the magic rushing through his wand, he enjoyed the feeling of utter power he held over the other and he enjoyed that he could inflict such pain. The magic flowing through him; it somehow managed to cleanse him. Tom didn't know why he would need purging, yet the darkness radiating off his spell cleared his thoughts. The dark magic cut through his very being with icy cold might. It helped him put order in things; find sense in them. It made him feel…

Better, Tom thought maliciously as he observed the tears of pain running down Avery's face. With a swish of his wand, the curse was ended.

"Please, Riddle," Avery begged. "No more."

"'Riddle'?

He waved his wand in a small movement and Avery was brutally flung on his back. He groaned in pain. Tom bent a little over so he could look down at him.

A grotesque smile played around his lips as he told Avery in a suave voice, "I think you know how to address me properly."

Avery tried to sit up on the stone floor, tremors still shaking his body.

"Y- yes, Master," he mumbled hastily, bowing his head low. "Please, I wasn't disrespecting you. I… she's a Mudblood… I didn't think you…" Avery gulped nervously. "I didn't realize you still needed her. I would have never…"

Mudblood? Hate fiercely burned up in Tom. How dare he-

Just then Hermione's accusing voice cut through his thoughts like a knife. 'You turned me into a Mudblood.'

Yes, she was one of them. So dirty, so impure. Undesirable… Tom could feel his dark magic crackling around him forcefully. It angrily demanded to be set free. Why it was so incensed, he didn't know.

'You made me feel worthless.'

Tom's eyes were blazing with ire as they wandered over Avery's cowering form. How dare that speck of grime call Hermione a Mudblood? How dare he speak about her like she was a worthless thing? …How dare he touch her? As Tom glared down at Avery his dark magic started to whisper strange things to him. Things that he should do. Things that he wanted to do…

"Please, Master, let me atone for my mistake," Avery blurted out fearfully, trying to appease Tom. "I could… If there's still something you want from DeCerto, I can go and make her speak. I promise I'll deal with her. You won't have to go anywhere near the Mudblood ever again."

As Tom heard the words, a ripple went through his magic and he was no longer able to restrain it.
That dark force left him in waves. It rushed around him so that the air bristled dangerously as if charged with electricity. He saw Avery wincing in pain as he was hit by that force. But that only managed to invoke a sadistic smile on Tom's face. More magic built up until that feral power flooded the whole room. In the corner of his eyes Tom could see his other followers shifting nervously as they were hit by this raw power. They never tried to help Avery, though. On some faces, Tom could even spot glee as they watched Avery's punishment. He didn't care. Locked away in the Come-And-Go room, no-one could stop him. There was no restraint.

'You are even worse than Avery.' Her cold words had been spoken with such aversion. 'I don't believe you... I don't trust you...unforgiveable...you are disgusting...'

Tom tried to fight that strange feeling which slowly overtook him. The accusation in her voice, the anger; it had hit him. Hard. Never had he thought Hermione would reject him. But she had and it made him feel so strange. He didn't appreciate it at all!

Tom's gaze darkened as he glared down at Avery. A tiny flick of his wand and he gave his angry magic direction. It rushed towards Avery and wrapped tightly around him. He gave a strangled yelp and Tom snickered darkly. Then he walked over to Avery. The other was still kneeling on the floor, not being able to move a muscle and he stared at Tom in utter terror.

"You will make her speak?" Tom asked, his light voice a harsh contrast to the vicious glint in his eyes. "You will deal with her?"

Another step and he stood directly in front of Avery who would have been trembling in fear if he hadn't still been held imprisoned by Tom's magic. Tom chuckled maliciously as he could see the fear in the other's eyes.

"Tell me," there was a charming yet dangerous smile on Tom's face. "Did I tell you to take care of her?"

Avery's eyes widened in panic, but he wasn't able to answer. Tom's gaze flashed at the other boys standing in a semi-circle around him.

"Did I order you to corner Hermione DeCerto and to wrest her secrets from her?" he addressed his followers, a dark tint in his commanding words. "Or did I tell you to keep away from her?"

He stared at each of the Slytherins in turn, but not one dared to look him in the eyes. The evil smile on Tom's face widened and his hard eyes wandered back to Avery.

"No-one seems to have misunderstood my order," he said. A red sheen seeped into his grey eyes as he added quietly, "Aside from you."

A disgustingly out-of-place look of indulgence crossed Tom's features as he bent down a little.

"Don't worry," he whispered into Avery's ear. "I'll see to it that even you will understand my orders."

A cruel chuckle left his mouth as he heard Avery's panicking whimper. Then Tom bent up again. A flick of his wand and Avery was released from the binding spell. Then Tom brandished the wand in a more complicated pattern. Instantly, an enormous snake appeared out of thin air. Dark green scales shimmered in the dim light as the snake observed the room with unfathomable eyes.

"Catch him," Tom hissed in Parseltongue.

The snake's huge head turned to him.
"Snake-Speaker," she said in her bizarre language which only Tom understood.

His followers shifted nervously as they heard that conversation between the snake and the Slytherin. Tom just smiled his cruel smile while he regarded the snake, then he inclined his head. The snake turned away from him and her attention fell on Avery. Her huge body uncoiled and she slithered towards him. Avery yelled in fright. Startlingly fast for something so huge, the snake moved and began to wrap herself around Avery's body. Quickly, he was unable to move and even his yells were muffled as the snake started to constrict. Her head wandered up Avery's body until it rested threateningly on his shoulder. A forked tongue flickered over Avery's cheek. Then the snake turned her head to Tom and scanned him.

"Hungry," she hissed.

Tom considered it. His furious magic pushed him and wrenched at him, still singing its cruel tune. But no, Tom thought reluctantly. That would be too much. Too much risk, too much work to lie his way out of it.

Tom looked at the snake and hissed, "Just bite him!"

He could almost see disappointment in the creature's deep eyes. Then the snake's head snapped back to Avery. Her huge body was still tightly coiled around him as she opened her mouth. Countless razor sharp teeth were visible before they sunk into Avery's shoulder. He howled in pain as the teeth were rammed into him. Tom watched it in morbid fascination. He stepped over to Avery and looked down at him. Tears were running down Avery's face. Tom extended a hand and ran his fingers over the snake's scales. It felt smooth and warm. He could feel her powerful muscles working beneath the skin.

"That is enough," he said softly.

The snake released Avery from her bite and looked up at Tom. Blood slowly dripped from her mouth as she scanned him. Tom's eyes were shining in a crimson colour as they wandered from the snake to Avery. Vile satisfaction burned up in him as he enjoyed the painful sobs coming from the other Slytherin. Though, he wasn't yet finished, was he? No, that would be too easy. After all, Avery had dared to disregard Tom's orders and he had managed to offend Hermione.

'YOU hurt me!'

Tom had to close his eyes shortly as her sharp voice swirled through his head. He shuddered but then his eyes hardened as they fell on Avery.

"Let's see if I can manage to let my order sink in," he said with a dark smile in his voice. Terror filled Avery's eyes and he tried to shy away from Tom.

"Please," Avery choked out. "I won't do it again."

"Let me repeat myself," Tom said, completely ignoring Avery's panic. "I do not want you to go anywhere near Hermione."

Then he looked back at the snake.

"Hold him still," Tom ordered.

The snake's huge body coiled even tighter around her victim. One loop of her body was wrapped around his neck so that Avery could hardly breathe. Tom's hand wandered to an inside pocket of his black robes and he produced a silver dagger from it. The blade glinted menacingly as he brought the
dagger down to Avery's face. Perverse amusement appeared on Tom's face as the blade readily sunk into the skin right below Avery's right eye. He thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of the knife cutting through flesh as he brought the blade slowly down, slicing deep into the tissue. A grinding sound could be heard as the blade severed the cheek completely and met the teeth. Blood flowed down Avery's face but Tom didn't stop. He slowly, meticulously completed the cut all the way down to the jaw line. Then he removed the knife, wiped the blade clean on Avery's clothes before he stepped back. The dark smile still marred Tom's features as he looked down at Avery in amusement. The room was filled with Avery's stifled sobs.

An infernal smile played around Tom's mouth as he said, "I hope you now understand my order."


Tom waved his wand in a small gesture. "Eunectes Evanesca."

With that the snake instantly vanished into thin air. Tom's gaze again wandered over Avery. He was lying on the floor, sobbing pathetically, while blood seeped from his wounds, slowly soaking his white uniform shirt. Tom grinned down at him maliciously. Then he turned his attention towards the other boys standing in the room.

"Let this be a lesson to all of you," he told them, amusement tinting his voice. "I don't tolerate disobedience."

His followers hastily nodded, afraid to draw his wrath upon them. Tom chuckled sinisterly. Then he stowed his wand away in his pocket. Without paying any attention to Avery's trembling body, Tom stepped around him and turned to the exit of the room.

"Do get rid of the mess," he loftily told his followers over his shoulder. "I don't appreciate blood-soiling the floor."

His cold laughter still rang from the room's stone walls as he had already left.

Hermione raised her hand and hesitantly knocked at the door.

"Come in," a voice answered.

She swallowed nervously, almost having hoped that he wouldn't be here. But she now cautiously opened the door and entered the room behind it. Like always, books upon books and delicate shiny instruments were lying hither and thither - spread out on shelves, small side tables, and even on the window sills - seemingly without any order. The chaos, though, managed to exude a merry, homey feeling. Professor Dumbledore was sitting behind his huge desk, which was also covered in books. He gazed at her over his half-mood spectacles, a kind twinkle in his clear blue eyes, as he smiled at her.

"Hermione," he greeted her genially. "To what do I owe this early a visit?"

"Um…" she stuttered. "I needed to… to talk with you."

"Of course," he replied. "Please, sit down."

Hermione cast him a nervous smile before she walked over to a chair in front of his desk and sat down.
"Now tell me," Dumbledore said while his eyes twinkled merrily at her. "What is important enough that it would cause you to miss your Charms class?"

Hermione felt her heart speed up as she heard the question. She didn't really want to be here but Lupin had been right, Hermione decided as she looked at the old professor in front of her. She needed to tell him.

"Um… You know… the last time we spoke, I told you about Grindelwald. And that he's… he's trying to get to me," she said hesitantly.

The smile on Dumbledore's face dimmed as he heard that preamble.

"I do remember and I was very troubled to hear it," he said.

Hermione shifted in her seat before she confessed, "He… the day before yesterday, he did it again."

As she said it she could watch the merry twinkle completely disappearing from Dumbledore's clear blue eyes.

"They attacked you again?" he asked gently.

Hermione nodded and tried to suppress the unsettling memories of that attack. Without saying anymore Dumbledore got up from his chair and walked over to her. He waved the wand and Hermione felt sudden warmth hitting her body.

"You are injured," Dumbledore said.

"I'm fine."

He scanned her with his piercing eyes.

"After we have discussed this," he told her firmly while sitting down on his chair. "You are going to the Hospital Wing."

"Really, it's not that bad," she insisted.

Dumbledore shook his head. "It certainly is bad enough to warrant a stay in the infirmary, Hermione," he said, his voice carrying traces of sternness.

Hermione looked at him but didn't reply. The professor sighed and continued gingerly, "Tell me about this incident. Where did you get attacked?"

Hermione swallowed hard as memories of Grindelwald's soldiers again flooded her.

"I was by the Great Lake near the Forbidden Forest as they caught me."

"Well within the castle's boundaries," Dumbledore mused as he scanned her pensively. "How would they have gotten in?"

"I think they used Portkeys," Hermione whispered and could see the professor raise his eyebrows.

"Very much impossible," Dumbledore supplied. "Hogwarts' castle and the grounds surrounding it are protected by ancient spells."

He leaned back in his chair and still scanned her, obviously deep in thought. After a while he said, "To break those wards is very difficult but I admit not impossible. There are ways around every
"Er... they cornered me as I was alone," Hermione continued her story. "I wasn't able to defeat them. After they caught me they demanded Peverell's book from me."

"Peverell again," Dumbledore sighed. "Of course you couldn't provide them with the book as you gave it back to me."

Hermione nodded. Then she threw in a deep breath as she stared at Dumbledore. There was no way around it. She had to tell him.

She looked down at her hands lying in her lap as she whispered almost inaudibly, "But they managed to... to steal the cloak from me."

Not very surprisingly there now was a sharp tint in Dumbledore's voice as he inquired, "Which cloak?"

Hermione hesitantly raised her head at him and stared into his penetrating eyes.

"The Invisibility Cloak," she breathed timidly. She felt horrible as his sharp gaze rested on her.

After a while Dumbledore asked in a grave tone, "So, you managed to find the Invisibility Cloak?"

"Yes," Hermione replied in a small voice.

"Where?"

"The Potters."

"It was you then; the burglary," the professor said calmly. His fingers brushed in contemplation over his long beard as he gazed at her. "I never would have guessed the cloak to be this near. The Potters; who would have thought."

"You didn't know they had the cloak?"

She knew that Dumbledore asked James Potter to lend him the cloak. So, she had assumed he already knew about the Potters' possession of the cloak.

"No, I did not," he sighed. "How did you know, though?"

Hermione tensed. He was scanning her sharply. What to tell him? Obviously not that she had the information from the future.

"Er..." she stammered. "I found out that they are very distantly related to Peverell. So, I looked into it."

Dumbledore merely nodded his head, seemingly deep in thought.

"But now, Gellert has it," he said, his tone suddenly numb, almost defeated.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered softly.

"Why did you steal it?" he asked. "Are you trying to unite the Hallows?"

She couldn't answer as she stared back at him.
"You know about the cloak and the wand," Dumbledore continued. "Do you also know where the stone is?"

Again Hermione didn't answer. Still, the old professor must have seen something on her face as he went on,

"Uniting the Hallows is useless, Hermione," he told her and his penetrating gaze again hit her. "Many men have already been misled by that myth. Do not fall victim to the lure behind the Hallows. They are nothing but smoke and mirrors. Death is something we all have to embrace, sooner or later. Running from it will do no-one any good."

"I know," Hermione replied meekly. But then she added in a firmer voice, "I am not interested in immortality."

"What then are you trying to achieve?"

"I can't tell you," she said with finality in her tone. But then added hastily, "But I swear, I don't want to use them to gain immortality or to get more power. They just are… very important to me."

Hermione shuddered as his sharp eyes scrutinized her. He surely wouldn't believe her. She had constantly lied to him. Even now, she still didn't tell the whole truth.

"Hermione," Dumbledore finally said. "I believe you."

She breathed out in relief. It meant a lot, Hermione realized as she looked at Dumbledore. She didn't want him to be suspicious of her.

"Thank you."

He smiled at her before his expression grew serious again. "This still leaves you with the problem that Gellert is after you."

"Yes," she said shakily.

His eyes wandered over her, something akin to regret shining in them. Then he told her gently, "I cannot give him the book, Hermione."

"I know," she said softly. "I don't expect you to."

"While I cannot give him the book, I still will try everything I can to keep you safe," Dumbledore promised. "I will see to it that the wards around Hogwarts get strengthened. And I advise you to not leave the castle without escort."

"I'll try," Hermione smiled softly.

"I am very sorry," the professor told her in his kind voice. "You shouldn't be drawn into this conflict at all." He suddenly looked very tired as he added, "I think my hiding away in this castle slowly comes to a close."

He looked at her for a moment just as if he contemplated something. After a while he continued, grief tinting his voice, "There is a connection between me and Gellert Grindelwald. It seems that it is time for me to pay the price for that. I can't promise anything, Hermione. But I will try to find Gellert. Maybe I will be able to stop him."

"Thank you."
He smiled at her reassuringly before he asked, "How did you manage to escape them? I know Grindelwald quite well, so I do realize that escaping his grasp is a very difficult feat."

"Well, I couldn't do much. They had me cornered and interrogated me."

Hermione breathed in sharply as she remembered the hands of that disgusting man on her skin. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"What did they do as they saw your lack of cooperation?" Dumbledore's gentle voice cut through her memories.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at his kind face. Then she said in a small voice, "They got angry. They cursed me… they… one of them used the… the Killing Curse."

Dumbledore's eyes widened but while he looked very much shaken and concerned, Hermione did not see surprise.

"You still managed to escape?"

"Yes," she said. "Before that curse could reach me, Tom showed up. He pulled me out of the curse's way and fought against those men."

Now earnest surprise flickered over Dumbledore's face and he eyed her pensively. Then he worded slowly, "Tom Riddle really decided to help you. While I am very glad he did, I must confess that it also confuses me. To picture Tom in the role of the rescuer is quite unexpected."

"Tell me about it," Hermione muttered darkly.

"Does this mean that you accommodated your differences?" Dumbledore said, an endearing touch of hope in his voice.

"No," she said softly. "Not really."

"But still, he saved you." By now the kind twinkle had found its way back into the professor's eyes.

"That he did," Hermione said, but then bitterness crept into her voice as she continued, "But I'm quite sure he only did it because he knows about the Hallows and that I can give him information about them. He wants my knowledge, that's the only reason he helped me."

"I see," Dumbledore mused pensively.

He removed the half-moon spectacles from his nose and placed them on the desk before him. Hermione shifted in her seat as his piercing gaze slowly wandered over her. Though, she then saw a small smile taking form on his face before he asked, in an innocent voice,

"Did you ever consider giving Tom a second chance?"

"I already gave him a second chance." Hermione replied bitterly. "He took it and threw it at my feet."

"That is very unfortunate," he said calmly. "Do you remember the last time we discussed Tom?"

"Yes." Hermione replied, remembering well the occasion.

Back then, she had, against better knowledge, tried to convince Dumbledore not to expel Tom. That had been after Tom had left her but she had stupidly insisted on helping him. She had even given up
on Peverell's book in order to help Tom.

"Then you also remember the last question I asked you before you left my office?"

Hermione silently stared at Dumbledore's clear blue eyes. His last question? Yes, she remembered very well. 'Do you love him?'

"Is it still true?" the professor asked her quietly.

Did she still love Tom? Honestly, she didn't know. Every fibre of her mind, her logic, was telling her: No, she did not love him anymore. She had never loved him in the first place. She had merely loved the image she had conjured up of him, but not Tom himself, not Voldemort. Never. While her logic screamed that at her though, Hermione still remembered that warm feeling as Tom had embraced her after he had rescued her.

She was unable to reply anything. Dumbledore smiled at her before he said, "Love is a strange thing. It is a force that we are unable to control. Very powerful and, once set free, unrestrained."

Hermione didn't know what to answer to that, so she remained to be silent. The professor scanned her.

"There are already so many things in this world we have to fight against," he said. "We should never add love to that list."

Hermione furrowed her brow before she inquired, "You think I should forgive him?"

"I don't know what he did to you, so it is not my place to make that decision," Dumbledore smiled at her. "I know Tom, so I know what he is capable of. If you think his offence is unforgivable, then you should not force yourself to grant him condonation."

He paused and Hermione saw his clear blue eyes shimmer in a strange emotion. Then he continued, "There are sins that don't deserve forgiveness."

Hermione stared at him, suddenly feeling numb. Dumbledore looked so worn now, so tired. The twinkle in his clear blue eyes was completely missing. Instead she could spot regret. Did he think he had committed sins that did not deserve to be forgiven? Hermione wondered. Convinced of Grindelwald's dark ideology, Dumbledore had once followed him down the same path.

"If one really seeks forgiveness," Hermione said in a soft voice. "Then it should always be granted."

Dumbledore's eyes swept back at her. He blinked and the distant look left them again, as if he was brushing away his memories. A smile tugged at his mouth as he scrutinized her for a while. Then he asked her,

"Does Tom seek forgiveness?"

Hermione averted her eyes from him and looked down at her hands folded in her lap.

"I don't know," she replied meekly. "At the very least, he pretends to."

"And you are, at the very least, considering that he is being truthful?" Dumbledore asked amused.

Hermione closed her eyes shortly as if in pain. Then she slowly raised her head and met his steady gaze.

"I am," she admitted softly. "But does it really matter? This is just…"
"Difficult?" he supplied gently.

Hermione laughed softly, curtly.

"Yes, you could say that," she said. "Either he's trying to deceive me or he is being honest, which still doesn't make his previous actions go away. He hurt me very much."

Dumbledore merely continued looking at her with his calm gaze, smiling kindly.

"Even if I could find it in me to forgive and to believe his repentance is honest, I am still afraid that he will hurt me again. That at the next opportunity he will betray my trust," Hermione ended, her voice a mere whisper now.

He sighed softly while he still scanned her. "Hermione, I wish I could give you a simple answer, a simple solution to your problem, but I fear there is none. This is why love is such a wonderful and at the same time terrible force. Sometimes, it rips at us and pulls us into directions we never wanted to go."

"Yes," Hermione said darkly. "It is horrible. Especially when it decides to leave us."

"Maybe you shouldn't give up on Tom so easily," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling at her. "For the time being, you could give him the benefit of the doubt."

A small smile stole on Hermione's face as she watched the professor. He was incurable, always believing in the good side of people. She wished she could be just like him. But Hermione didn't know if she could believe in Tom's good side anymore.

"Whatever you decide, though," Dumbledore said confidently, "I am sure it will be the right thing."

"I wish I had your faith in my ability to make decisions," Hermione said softly.

Dumbledore chuckled.

"Maybe you can better ponder your options after you return from the Hospital Wing," he said suggestively. "You need to rest. How does the saying go again? Sound mind in a sound body?"

Hermione sighed in exasperation as she watched the expectant look on his face. Still, a small smile curled up the corners of her mouth.

"Okay, okay, you win," she said. "I'll go to the Hospital Wing."

The smile on Dumbledore's face widened.

Hermione sleepily opened her eyes. The sterile-looking, white ceiling of the hospital wing greeted her. She blinked a few times to finally wake up. All these potions were making her incredibly drowsy, she thought and yawned. She really didn't like to lie here in the infirmary. There were a lot of more important things she had to do. Though, she had to admit that her leg did feel loads better now that Healer Perry had looked after it. Strange character, that Perry, Hermione decided as she thought of the school's ancient-looking healer. He didn't seem to be interested in his patients at all. A complete contrast to Madam Dulan.

Well, it's just for the better, Hermione thought. After all, Perry's lack of interest in his patients had stopped him from doing more than was absolutely necessary. Thus, he hadn't noticed anything of her
lost magic.

Hermione again yawned as she turned her head. Her whole body tensed as she found the chair, standing right beside her bed, to be occupied. Tom lounged nonchalantly in the chair, his legs spread out in front of him. As he saw that she was awake he straightened up and looked at her attentively. Hermione could even see a small smile flickering over his face.

"Hey," he whispered in his smooth voice. "How are you?"

She continued to eye him as she slowly sat up in her bed and leaned against the headboard.

"Fine," she answered. Then she narrowed her eyes at him and asked in suspicion, "How did you get in here?"

"Um… Madam Dulan let me in," Tom said hesitantly. As an afterthought he added, "I brought you flowers."

Obviously he was trying to somehow justify his presence. Hermione cast a glance at the side table. There was a box of Berty Bott's and some Chocolate Frogs she had gotten from her Gryffindor friends as well as a few get-well cards. Aside from that Hermione spotted a bouquet of flowers. She furrowed her brow and looked back at Tom.

As she didn't reply a thing, he continued, "So… how long do you have to stay here?"

Hermione hesitated to answer. Why was he even here? He surely didn't want to small talk with her, did he?

"Two days, maybe," she finally told him in a soft but terse voice.

"And your leg's going to be okay?" Tom asked her and again Hermione was surprised by that gentle touch in his voice.

She nodded slightly before she elaborated uncomfortably, "The cuts are pretty deep but luckily they are not cursed."

"That's good," he said. Then a small hesitant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and he remarked tentatively, "I really don't like it how you seem to collect scars."

A dark look crossed Hermione's face as she heard him. When she answered her voice was tight and laced with ice, "Then I wonder why you added a few."

With that she broke eye contact with him and stared out of the window. She could see the blue summer sky and the green trees of the Forbidden Forest. It was a bright day, though it didn't manage to lift her mood at all. Hopefully, Tom would leave now. But she realized that she wasn't going to get rid of him so easily as she suddenly felt him grabbing her hand.

"I shouldn't have assaulted you." His voice was calm and steady as he said it.

Hermione bit her lower lip as she felt his hand holding hers so gently. With a light tug she pulled it away from him.

"I've seen Avery yesterday," she said in a colourless voice.

"Really?" Tom asked. Then a dangerous look seeped into his eyes as he inquired, "He didn't bother you again, did he?"
"No," Hermione replied, frowning at him. "He was hardly in the condition to do much at all. Actually, Lestrange and Black had to carry him in here. He claimed some creature from the Forbidden Forest attacked him."

"Is that so?" Tom said in his silky voice, an evil smile working its way on his face.

Hermione didn't like it at all. Her eyes were now icy cold as they wandered over him, still sitting in that chair as if he was really on a sick bed visit. As if he cared one bit.

As she spoke next, her voice was completely emotionless, "Incidentally, is that what you've planned for me, too?"

Tom quirked a questioning eyebrow.

"If your new tactic of wooing me into submission doesn't work, are you going to curse me just like you cursed Avery?" Hermione asked in a glacial tone.

The smile immediately dropped from his face as he heard her question. He sat a little straighter in his chair and stared at her.

"This is no tactic," he then said hesitantly. "I wouldn't… wouldn't hurt you."

"Don't think, even for a second, that you could hurt me!" she hissed at him angrily. "If you try anything, Tom, I swear I'll have you thrown out of Hogwarts quicker than you can say 'crucio'."

"I…I…" he stammered, clearly affected by her hostility. Then he said quietly, "You don't need to threaten me. I won't do anything to you."

Hermione just stared at him unbelievingly. She didn't reply anything because, honestly, she was tired of listening to his lies. No-one spoke for a while and Hermione tried her best to ignore Tom's presence altogether.

After some time, he spoke again, "Hermione…?"

Reluctantly she looked back at him. She raised her eyebrows as she saw something like nervousness flitting over his handsome features.

"If you are going to be released soon," he said softly. "Er… there's another of Slughorn's parties next Monday… and I wondered… maybe we could, you know… go together?"

Hermione furrowed her brow at him. She had completely forgotten about the Slug Club meeting. She had gotten the owl yesterday. As she scanned Tom there now was a hopeful sheen in his grey eyes. Was he serious?

"No," she said gruffly, decidedly.

Had he really expected her to say 'yes'? Hermione wondered annoyed as she saw a dejected look crossing his face. Hadn't he listened as she had told him, repeatedly, that she didn't want anything to do with him? Again the conversation fizzled out and Hermione stared out of the window. Where was Madam Dulan anyway, she wondered with frustration. Sadly, the nurse was nowhere to be seen and Hermione was quite alone with her visitor.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Tom's soft voice, "As you were attacked, did those guys actually get what they wanted?"
"You mean Peverell's book?" she almost shuddered as she heard that completely emotionless tone in her voice.

"Yes," Tom replied cautiously.

So, that was why he was here. He was only concerned about the whereabouts of that book. Strangely, Hermione felt her stomach flop as she now looked at Tom.

She sighed then said acridly, "No, they did not manage to steal the book from me. But don't get your hopes up. I actually don't have it anymore. I gave it back to Dumbledore."

"I don't want the book," Tom assured. Hermione couldn't help but snort at that lie. He ignored it and continued, "But if they didn't manage to get it from you that means those guys could attack you again."

Hermione almost shuddered as she saw something akin to worry in his eyes.

"Probably," she said venomously.

Tom suddenly leaned towards her on his seat, a serious expression on his face. As a reaction Hermione skidded a bit away from him.

"What are you going to do if they attack again?" he demanded to know and suddenly there was a sharp edge in his voice.

"What's it to you?" Hermione managed to keep her voice from trembling, though Tom did manage to make her nervous again. "Unless, of course, you are worried that they get the book before you can have it."

Tom slowly leaned back in his chair, giving her more space, though he kept staring at her with his penetrating eyes.

"I told you," he finally said in a completely controlled voice. "I'm not worried about the book."

Hermione breathed in as she held his gaze. There was something twitching in her stomach as she stared at those hypnotizing eyes. Her fingers grasped around her white blanket in a silent resolve and she released a shuddered breath. Then she opened her mouth and she was surprised as she managed to keep her confused emotions off her voice, only harsh sarcasm oozed from her words,

"Of course, you are only worried about my wellbeing. Not the book. Because, surely, you think my filthy Muggleborn hide is worth more than Peverell's work."

Tom's eyes darkened with some unknown emotion as he scanned her. There were chills darting down her spine as Hermione saw that hard glint in his eyes. She couldn't help but avoid his piercing gaze. If there had been traces of his angry dark magic in the air, Hermione wouldn't have been surprised. She really needed to have a word with Madam Dulan. The nurse couldn't allow him into the infirmary.

It was awhile until Tom spoke again. Surprisingly his voice was not the expected angry hiss as he said, "Don't you want to tell me who those guys are? I could help."

Hermione's eyes shot back at him. There was a seemingly honest expression on his face, but she could only shake her head at him.

"I told you already, didn't I?" Now her voice was the angry hiss. "I do not trust you."
Did he just twitch at her tone of voice? Hermione wondered as she scanned him. He suddenly
looked so subdued. It was strange.

"Okay," Tom finally sighed. "But maybe you'll change your mind."

Then he reached out for her and again put his hand on top of hers. He ignored how Hermione tensed
at the contact. With more force than necessary she pulled her hand away from him, desperate to end
that contact between them. Tom stood up from his seat and his eyes glistened softly as he looked
down at her.

"I'll come visit you again," he smiled down at her.

"Please don't."

In the end, Hermione had to stay in the infirmary until Friday. In retrospect, she would have liked to
stay a day longer. Then she might have been able to avoid classes, she thought darkly as she stood
before her Household classroom. Her chatty dorm mates were there, too, and Hermione found
herself in a very bad mood. Of course, she was happy to be able to leave the Hospital Wing, if only
to escape Tom's presence. Like he had promised, he had visited her again. It had been rather
awkward actually, Hermione decided while trying to ignore Rose's shrill voice. Why was she going
to this class again? she wondered annoyed. Hadn't she sworn to never enter that particular class room
ever again? Though, now that Legifer had actually helped her and had stopped Lestrange and Avery
from harassing her, Hermione felt obliged to attend her class again. The woman's behaviour was
quite surprising and admittedly rather aggravating.

Her sense of duty, though, didn't prevent her from sighing in irritation as the professor arrived.
Legifer's appearance was immaculate as ever, with her spotless robe and her perfect hairstyle. As she
reached the class room her sharp eyes skimmed over Hermione. A disapproving frown appeared
between Legifer's eyebrows as she scanned her bushy, untameable hair.

"Ms DeCerto," Legifer said sharply. "A sensible decision not quitting my class."

As Hermione heard that smug and condescending tone in the professor's voice, she just wanted to
turn around and walk away. What had she been thinking showing up here? That the professor would
suddenly be nice to her? That they would get along?

Not in a million years, Hermione thought wryly as she followed the other students into the
classroom. She settled down at her usual table beside her dorm mates. Legifer didn't waste any time,
but started her lecture. It didn't take Hermione more than five minutes to completely drop out. It was
still the same as usual: 'Your most important goal, as girls, is to marry… be a good wife… always
listen to your husband… blah blah blah…' Hermione rolled her eyes. Be nice and obedient and
Merlin forbid you ever use your brain.

How could that be? she wondered as she stared at Legifer. That woman once wanted to become an
Auror. Hermione knew becoming an Auror wasn't exactly easy. And it would be extra difficult for a
woman here in the forties to get where Legifer obviously once had been. What had happened to her
ambitious plans? Of course, being a teacher at Hogwarts was a respectable profession, too.
Unfortunately, though, Legifer was a downright nasty teacher.

She groaned softly as Legifer now started to write something on the black board. Slowly, Hermione
regretted that the professor had saved her back then. If Legifer hadn't done it, Hermione could have
just left this stupid class again. As it was, though, she remained sitting where she was and just tried to
ignore Legifer's horribly twisted view of the world. *Whatever,* she thought irritated. She could still daydream this horrible excuse for a class away.

A while later, Hermione's daydreams were interrupted by Legifer's sharp voice, "Now, I want you to practice the spells."

The professor waved her wand and to Hermione's bewilderment a heap of clothes appeared on each table. She had no idea what this was about. Her eyes darted to the black board. Legifer had written down a few spells. Hermione raised eyebrows in surprise.

*That has to be a first.*

For once, she knew how to do the spells. Those were spells to iron clothes by magic and to fold them neatly. Hermione knew them since first year. They were rather useful if one had to live out of the trunk the whole year. Hermione would have never said it out loud, but actually she did agree with Legifer in thinking adequate care towards the Hogwarts uniform was something important. Sure the professor was completely out of proportion, but a well-cared for uniform was something the students owed Hogwarts.

A smile tugged at her lips as Hermione reached for her bag. This time, she was not going to fail this class, she decided as she pulled the vial with the veneficus potion out of her bag. Legifer was going to have a heart attack from the surprise and Hermione wanted to test the potion again anyway. So she raised the vial to her lips.

Barely five minutes later, the wonderful, spectacular feeling of her magic rushed back to her. The smile on Hermione's face widened. How she missed that feeling. She needed to restore her magic permanently. Though she had an uncomfortable feeling that she might need the Elder Wand to do that. After all, that blasted wand was the origin of all her problems.

*I would so like to curse Peverell,* Hermione thought vindictively while she enjoyed the feeling of her magic rushing through her.

She failed to realize that Legifer had started to walk through the rows of tables to grade the work of her students. Hermione only noticed her as the professor stood directly before her. A sharp frown appeared on Legifer's face as she regarded Hermione's smile.

*Not this time around,* Hermione thought amused as she watched the angry glint in Legifer's eyes. She didn't say anything to Legifer but just waved her wand over the pile of clothes in front of her.

"*Plico.*"

As if lifted by an invisible hand the clothes rose up in the air. Then the wrinkles disappeared and the pieces of clothing folded themselves neatly, so that they ended up as a tidy stack. Legifer's eyebrows almost rose under her hairline as she stared at Hermione's success.

"That… is actually not so bad," Legifer said, a surprised touch in her voice.

Hermione on the other hand was so startled by the professor's actual praise that she twitched and accidentally waved her wand. Immediately, the folded clothes burst into flames. They burned until there was nothing left but a small pile of ashes. Hermione stared at the sad remnants then she slowly looked up at Legifer. It seemed she just couldn't pass this class even if she tried. Sure enough, the professor's lips were pressed into a thin angry line and she glared down at Hermione. Merlin, that woman was going to ridicule her again, Hermione thought tiredly. But very surprisingly Legifer didn't start to insult her. She just reached for her notepad and wrote a big fat 'P' down beside
"Well, it's better than a 'T', I guess," Hermione said, unable to hide all surprise from her otherwise calm voice.

Legifer's glare was hard as steel as she looked down at Hermione disapprovingly.

"Still a lot room to improve, Ms DeCerto," the professor snapped at her, asperity leaking through her words.

Despite Legifer's glacial tone, Hermione smiled up at her. "I told you I'm a hopeless case."

Annoyance was clearly visible on the professor's face.

"And I believe I told you you're not going to achieve anything with that attitude."

Without waiting for any reply, Legifer turned away from Hermione and continued grading the students’ work. Hermione stared at her back. Legifer's behaviour was as irritating as ever. Her views were so old-fashioned it hurt to just listen to her. It made Hermione's inner voice of justice yelp every time the professor lectured. Strangely though, Hermione didn't feel as enraged by the woman as she always had.

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Later that same day, Hermione sat at a library table, parchment and books spread out in front of her, and worked on her Ancient Runes essay. She had missed a couple of days of school after all. She was absorbed in her work as someone sat down in the seat opposite her. She raised her head and an annoyed sigh left her as she found Tom, staring back at her. She averted her eyes and looked back at her essay. It was very difficult to continue working when she could feel his gaze on her, but Hermione tried to ignore him. It soon proved to be impossible. Tom hadn't said anything yet, but his presence alone was unnerving.

"What do you want, Voldemort?" Hermione finally asked irritated without looking up at him.

"Nothing. Just wanted to see how you are doing," Tom replied in his smooth voice, ignoring her use of his chosen name.

Hermione still looked down at her Ancient Runes essay, determined to be as dismissive as she could.

"I told you already, I don't want anything to do with you," came her terse reply. "Why are you still bothering me?"

As he didn't answer anything, Hermione raised her head. Tom was scanning her and she could see his hands grabbing the edge of the table tightly.

"What can I do to make you forgive me?" His voice almost sounded beseeching.

Hermione just raised a lazy eyebrow at him.

"Nothing," she answered callously.

"But you can't just throw this away. I know there is still something between us."

Hermione scrutinized him for a moment, a deep frown appearing on her forehead. After a while she said quietly, "You are right. There certainly is something." At her words a spark of hope flared up in Tom's eyes. Hermione ignored it and continued, "Since I arrived here, there always has been
something between us. At first it was dislike. Then… affection. And after that utter hate." She broke eye contact with him and said in a tight voice, "But now, I don't want this anymore. It's over."

"No, it's not," Tom said, now a commanding touch in his tone. "I know you are angry and disappointed with me, but it's not over."

Her eyes flashed back to him and she glared. Then she said frostily, "Whatever that was between us, I give up. Actually, I should have done that a long time ago."

"I can't accept that," he said firmly.

"This is not your decision," Hermione's tone was cold. "Since I arrived here, we've always been crashing into one another. Academically, physically, and even emotionally, we've been battling it out. I'm tired of it and it really isn't my responsibility to fight you. I'm not here to prove anything to you. Competing with you is just pointless. I don't even know why I started that constant struggle between us. The outcome never was of importance. I was a fool not to have realized this sooner. It's futile, so I give up."

Tom's eyes softened as he heard her. Then he cautiously threw in, "We didn't always fight."

"Yes, we did. Always," Hermione insisted. "Even as we've been together. You were trying to control me. And I was always fighting against your need to dominate and own me."

"I… I…" he stuttered, well aware that she was partly right. "Okay. But it doesn't have to be like that."

Hermione looked at him, but then shook her head. "You know that's not true."

"It is," Tom assured. "I really don't want to subdue you."

Hermione just frowned at him.

"But that's what you've always wanted, isn't it?" she asked, her voice level. "To make me surrender, to force me to reveal all my secrets."

"No!" he insisted.

Hermione just shook her head at him. Then she admitted freely, "You know, Voldemort, I've always known that you are stronger than me."

Tom's eyes widened at her declaration. And she continued, "I had to fight in a war, so I'm not exactly a weak witch myself. I gained my knowledge of magic by studying and practising hard. It wasn't easy to achieve what I now am."

Hermione leaned back in her chair as she considered him. "You, though, you are different."

"What are you?-" Tom tried to say but she cut him off.

"I'm sure you like to hear that, don't you? That you are different," she mocked him, a brittle smile curling up her mouth.

She expected him to either rage at her or agree, but Tom just continued to eye her perplexed. Hermione sighed and said, "To you everything comes without any effort. As a wizard, you are brilliant. I can't keep up with that. When you are at the height of your power, Voldemort, I think there is no-one who could beat you in a wizard's duel."
Her eyes flashed at him, a dangerous glint in them. "That doesn't mean I'm going to bow down to you. I won't suddenly divulge all my secrets to you. After all, raw power isn't everything. It just means I'm done fighting."

Tom stared at her, seemingly lost for words.

Hermione spent the rest of the weekend cloistering herself away in the common room. She had no desire to meet Tom again. He was making her uncomfortable. She almost wished he would go back to his hostile behaviour towards her. Then she would at least be able to know what he was up to.

It was not before Monday that she saw him again. During Potions she again sat beside Longbottom and was very proud of herself for being able to completely ignore Tom despite his efforts to catch her eye. Her luck, though, finally ran out with her next class: Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Hermione stepped into the DADA class room and walked over to her table.

"Hey, Mione," Weasley grinned at her.

Hermione smiled at him and at Longbottom and Lupin who sat beside the red haired Gryffindor. Then she took place right beside them and started to get her parchment and quill from her bag.

"Oh, I don't think you'll need that," Longbottom told her happily.

Hermione looked up from her bag and found Longbottom smiling broadly down at her. He seemed to be in a very good mood.

"And why wouldn't I need my writing stuff?" Hermione asked while frowning at him. Then she continued with mock-conceit, "We can't all fail this class like you."

The grin on Longbottom's face just widened and he didn't seem to be offended at all.

"My dear Hermione," he began in quite the patronizing voice. "I so happen to know more than you."

The frown on her face deepened and she looked in confusion at Longbottom. But then Lupin seemed to have mercy on her and said, "Don't mind him. We just met McGray on our way here. He told us it's a practical lesson today. We'll do some duelling."

Hermione's face fell. *Just my luck*, she thought wryly.

"Yeah," Longbottom exclaimed enthusiastic. "Isn't that great? No horrible theory about some nasty dark creature or other. We'll just hex each other. That's going to be fun."

"Sure is," Weasley laughed. Then the two boys high-fived while Lupin sat beside them and shook his head dignified.

"Good thing I got my new wand already, isn't it?" Longbottom smiled as he pulled a dark brown wand from his pocket.

"I want to pay for that," Hermione said softly as she eyed the new wand.

Longbottom just grinned down at her.

"Don't you worry, Hermione," he told her. "My mom was very enthusiastic to buy the new wand. She thought my old one had a bad influence on me. Pff, I don't think that's even possible."
"Still, I lost your wand," Hermione insisted, guilt burning up in her.

"Come on," Longbottom said gently, concern suddenly glinting in his eyes. "We all know it wasn't your fault."

Hermione averted her eyes and looked down at her hands. Since she had told them the truth about Grindelwald, her friends hadn't brought up the topic again. But she could tell that they were all immensely worried about her.

Their conversation came to an end as Professor McGray entered the class room. He greeted the class and then started with his lesson. As Hermione listened to McGray she reached for her bag and searched for a vial of veneficus potion. If she wanted to duel she needed that potion. She found the vial, pulled it from the bag and opened it.

"What's that?" Longbottom whispered.

"Er… some potion," Hermione replied uncomfortably.

"But Madam Dulan released you from the Hospital Wing. I thought you were okay," Longbottom commented worried.

"I am perfectly fine," she assured. "Just have to take this."

With that she swallowed some of the veneficus potion. Then she put the vial back in her bag. With the help of the veneficus potion this was going to be okay, Hermione told herself. She took her quill and started to write down what McGray lectured about.

It was a good solid fifteen minutes later that Hermione felt panic slowly consuming her. The effect of the potion hadn't kicked in yet. She put her quill down on the table and closed her eyes. Even when concentrating hard she didn't find even an ounce of magic. Her eyes snapped open again and she bit her lower lip nervously.

Shit!

It wasn't working anymore! Why wasn't her magic back? During Household it had worked perfectly, why had it stopped now? Cold panic flooded her completely and her mind was clouded by fear.

"- so that I decided it's about time to train your practical abilities again."

Hermione's head shot up and she stared at Professor McGray.

"After a long time this will be a duelling lesson again." McGray's last sentence was drowned by the excited shouts of joy coming from the class.

"Silence," the professor exclaimed while holding up his hands. "All of you who want to participate in the duelling please go into the training hall."

A rustling and scraping of chairs on the floor followed his statement. Hermione, though, remained where she was and watched McGray walking towards the table beside her where Diana, Lucia, Rose and Viola sat. He was probably going to give them some assignment or other as the girls never participated in the duelling. Sure enough he handed sheets of parchments to the girls sitting beside her.

"I…I-" Hermione stuttered helplessly and cursed herself for being so obvious. "Professor? Can I have an assignment, too?"
A frown was taking form on the young professor's face as he looked down at her in confusion.

"Ms DeCerto, I was of the opinion you wanted to participate in the duelling lessons," he said bewildered. Then he continued, obviously trying to convince her to change her mind. "And you are really good. You shouldn't quit."

"Yeah, Hermione," Longbottom meddled unhelpfully into the conversation. Hermione wished he wouldn't be so loud by doing that. "You are the best dueller we have. You can't quit."

Hermione stared at them both, trying hard to come up with an explanation. She couldn't stop her eyes darting to Tom. And she noticed with dread that he was following this conversation and stared back at her inquisitively. Hermione quickly averted her eyes from him again. She looked up at professor McGray and said in a soft voice,

"Sir, I'm just not feeling well today. I think it's better I don't duel."

"Don't worry," McGray replied. "I know you've been sick last week, but I've asked Madam Dulan whether you are able to participate. She said it shouldn't be a problem."

Hermione just stared up at him in panic.

"You can try," Longbottom again cut into the conversation.

The enthusiastic touch in his voice was rather annoying, Hermione thought while still trying to find a way out of it. To her utter displeasure she saw that Tom still watched her. Right at this moment they could see, through the opened door to the adjacent duelling room, that someone had fired a spell. Professor McGray, too, saw the red light of a Stunner. Before he turned around and walked over to the other students to establish order he said,

"Ms DeCerto, why don't you try duelling. If you still don't feel better you may go to the Hospital Wing."

He didn't leave her any time to reply, but hastily went over to those overeager students. Hermione groaned in frustration as she watched his retreating back. Longbottom now grabbed her arm and started to tug her over to the door, following McGray.

"Come on," he said to her over his shoulder. "After you've fired a curse or two, you'll immediately feel better."

*I kinda doubt that,* Hermione thought dryly as she had no other choice but to follow him. As they then entered the huge duelling room, Hermione could see professor McGray chiding Lestrange. He was the one who had hurled that Stunner. The students were not permitted to start duelling without McGray present.

"What's wrong?" a soft voice whispered into Hermione's ear.

She involuntarily stiffened and then turned her head and found Tom standing right beside her. He looked down at her with one eyebrow arched questioningly while completely ignoring the death glares Longbottom was sending him.

"Now, please, everybody find yourselves a partner," McGray declared.

As Tom heard that, a small smile appeared on his face and he looked at Hermione. She could feel her heart stabbing her chest, because she knew what Tom would say next.
And sure enough he asked, "Do you want to duel with me?"

Panic clouded her thoughts. If she really had to duel with him, he would find out about her missing magic in no time. Before she could decline, Longbottom huffed at Tom angrily.

"Certainly not!" he snarled and pulled Hermione over to him. "You are not going to curse her!"

For once, Hermione was glad for Longbottom's hostility towards the Slytherin. She really couldn't duel with Tom. Just in that moment, McGray walked by.

"Ah, no no, Mr Longbottom," the teacher said. "Ms DeCerto is not feeling fit today, she needs a partner who can control the strength of his curses." Hermione's stomach flopped as he now turned towards Tom and said, "Mr Riddle, would you kindly partner up with Ms DeCerto."

"Of course, sir," Tom replied blandly.

Hermione groaned softly. This was just not her day.

"But no dangerous curses, understood? I don't want a repetition of last time you two duelled," McGray said in a stern voice while looking at Tom and Hermione.

Tom very convincingly arranged his face into a contrite expression.

"No, sir," he mumbled, seemingly embarrassed.

McGray was obviously satisfied with that as he now left them and continued walking through the room, correcting some students or rebuking when somebody got over-enthusiastic and used a dangerous curse. While Hermione watched McGray, hoping that she could still come up with something to escape this disaster, Longbottom stepped towards Tom.

"Listen here, Riddle," the Gryffindor hissed at Tom, barely suppressed rage tinting his voice. "If you do anything to Hermione, I'll make sure you regret it."

Hermione was more than surprised when Tom didn't react at all to Longbottom's threat. Normally, he would have retaliated in some way if anybody spoke to him like that. Now, though, he just peered at Hermione, then he said in a perfectly calm tone,

"Shall we begin?"

_No, no, no, no, no, no!_

"... yes," Hermione replied meekly.

Tom stepped away from Longbottom and over to a free spot. Longbottom's face was still purple from rage as he stared after Tom. But he managed to contain himself. He looked at Hermione and cast her a reassuring smile, before he turned around and strolled over to Lupin and Weasley. Hermione followed Tom. Her steps were hesitant as she walked over to him. How was she supposed to get out of this mess? Her mind was running at a hundred miles per hour, but she just couldn't come up with anything and her heart still hammered away in her chest. Tom had already pulled his wand and twirled it nonchalantly though his fingers. Hermione gulped nervously as she stood in a perfect duelling distance away from him. A small smile played around Tom's lip as he looked at her. Hermione felt like running away.

"Are you okay?" Tom asked her.
"S- sure."

Then she flicked her wrist and her wand landed in her hand. She closed her fingers tightly around the wood and fought against the feeling of desolation as she there wasn't any response coming from her magic. She stared back at Tom. He was fixing her with his grey eyes, a bewildered expression on his face. Great, Hermione thought. He had noticed something was wrong even before they had even started.

"This is just training, nothing serious," Tom said in a reassuring sounding voice.

As she didn't replied anything, he said, "Are you ready?"

There was no other option, so Hermione nodded.

Her hand still grabbed her wand tightly as she bowed towards Tom. Maybe the best way out of this was to get hit by his very first curse. Then she wouldn't have to return any magic herself. As Tom had straightened up again, he waved his wand. A red light left his wand's tip and hurled towards Hermione. It was a simple Stunner. In the past, such a spell would have made her laugh, but now she couldn't defend herself at all. Hermione grinded her teeth in anger. Tom's aim was unerring, as always. The spell would hit her right in her chest. Before it could touch her, thought, Hermione plunged to the side. She rolled over her shoulder and ended up crouched on the floor. She was on one knee and both her hands as she now stared up at Tom. There was a deep frown between his eyebrows as he looked at her.

Damn reflexes! Hermione cursed inwardly as she realized that she could have let herself getting hit by that spell. That would have been her ticket out of it. Shit!

She slowly got up from her crouched position and again faced Tom. He seemed to be really confused by her unorthodoxy method to evade a simple Stunner and now waited for her to do something. Hermione felt stupid as she pointed her wand at Tom, knowing full well that she wouldn't be able to cast any curse. He still waited for her to take action. Maybe she should just throw her wand at him, she thought dryly. At the moment that seemed to be the most promising way to defeat him. She might even manage to hit him in the head. Hermione nearly snorted at that thought.

It was then, that Tom chose to attack again. He whirled his wand elegantly and another spell sped towards Hermione. She recognized it. It was a harmless binding spell. To deflect it, she wouldn't even have to raise any shield that was if her magic was still working. Hermione waited until the spell had nearly reached her, then she sidestepped it. Just as she was taking the step to her side, her breath hitched as she spotted a sharp glint in Tom's grey eyes. He swirled his wand again to send another curse her way. He obviously wanted her to finally use some magic. Again, he had aimed perfectly. His spell came rushing exactly towards the spot where she would end up after having evaded the binding spell. Hermione quickly tried to avoid this other spell, too. She twirled around to be able to get out of the spell's course. Unfortunately, Tom had timed his attack very precisely. So, as Hermione tried to evade his second spell, she wasn't fast enough. She could feel it hitting her elbow. The power of the impact was enough to get her off balance. She was thrown off her feet and gasped softly as she crashed on the floor. There was a nasty sting in her arm where the curse had hit.

Well, at least I managed to get hit. The duel was over.

Hermione tried to sit up. Then she could feel a hand on her shoulder and she looked up. Tom had rushed over to her and now crouched beside her.

"I thought you would put up a shield," he said breathlessly. "I didn't want to really hit you with that curse."
"It's okay," Hermione whispered.

She now rubbed her arm cautiously where his spell had hit her. It had obviously been a stinging hex for there still was an unpleasant prickling sensation in her arm.

"What happened here?" Hermione could hear another voice.

She looked up and found professor McGray standing right beside Tom and her. Tom took hold of her unhurt arm and helped her to stand up.

He turned to the professor and said, "My Stinging hex hit her, sir."

McGray narrowed his eyes at Hermione who was still rubbing her sore arm.

"Let me see," he said while he pulled his own wand.

Hermione obeyed and held out her arm. McGray took her hand gently in his, then he waved his wand over her arm. After a moment, he looked back at her and stated in a reassuring voice,

"It's nothing serious. But I still want you to go to the Infirmary. Ask Madam Dulan to give you something against the stinging."

Hermione nodded at him.

"I'm going to accompany her," she heard Tom beside her say.

"In your dreams, Riddle!" an angry voice thundered at Tom.

Hermione turned her head and nearly groaned as she saw Longbottom. He had obviously seen that she had gotten hit and had stormed over to them. He was now rapidly losing his temper as he glowered darkly at Tom. His wand was in his hand and it was obvious that he would have cursed Tom on the spot if McGray hadn't been present.

"You cursed her!" Longbottom now barked at Tom furiously.

"Now now," McGray said, a stern tint in his voice. "Mr Riddle didn't want to hurt Ms DeCerto. This was an accident."

"No, that evil git did it on purpose!" Longbottom hissed while still glaring daggers at Tom.

"That is five points from Gryffindor." McGray's voice was very sharp. He frowned at Longbottom, then he said, "You can't insult your peers like that."

"I'm sorry, sir," Longbottom now pressed out, clearly not conceding at all.

McGray turned to Hermione and said, his voice now gentle again,

"Why don't you go to the Hospital Wing? I'm sure Madam Dulan can get rid of that sting in no time," then he said to Tom, "You may accompany her, Mr Riddle."

Hermione thought she could hear an angry growl, coming from Longbottom, but she chose to ignore it. She really had a lot of other problems, she decided as she looked at Tom. By now there was suspicion clearly radiating from his eyes. That couldn't be a good thing.

She walked towards the exit of the duelling room while Tom followed her. They passed the door and stepped into the DADA class room. Tom still hadn't said anything to her. His silence actually made her nervous as it meant that he was contemplating something. After that disaster of a duel, Hermione
was pretty sure that it wouldn't take him long to put things together. The silence still stretched
between them as they walked through the corridors of Hogwarts castle. She was very relieved as
they then reached the Hospital Wing. Tom knocked and it didn't take long and Madam Dulan
opened the door.

As she spotted Hermione, she cried out, "Oh no, it's you again. Whatever happened to you now,
dear?"

Madam Dulan reached out for her, put a hand gently on Hermione's shoulders and led her into the
Hospital Wing.

"A stray hex during DADA," Hermione replied.

The brunette nurse made her sit down on one of the Hospital beds while she exclaimed, "I always
tell Vallo that his classes are too dangerous." Madam Dulan said in exasperation. "But does he listen
to me? No, of course not."

Vallo? Hermione frowned at Madame Dulan. Was the woman talking about professor McGray? It
was then that Hermione spotted a suspiciously glassy look in the nurse's eyes as she continued to
enthusiastically talk about 'Vallo'. A small smile appeared on Hermione's face. Madame Dulan rolled
up the sleeve of Hermione's uniform robe and the blouse underneath. There was a red spot on her
elbow where Tom's hex had hit. The nurse clicked her tongue disapprovingly as she eyed the arm.
She then reached for a small flask, standing on nearby shelf.

"Don't worry, dear," she then told Hermione. "This is not going to hurt at all."

She poured a bit of the flask's contents on a dabber before she started to apply it to Hermione's sore
arm. Hermione almost sighed in relief as the stinging pain in her arm immediately lessened.

"Feeling better?" Madame Dulan asked as she put the dabber away.

"Yes. Thanks," Hermione smiled at her.

The brunette returned the smile then she said, "I think it's best you return to your common room. I'll
tell Vallo… er… that is, Professor McGray, you are all right. I'm sure your boyfriend won't mind
bringing you to your common room."

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. Then she turned her head and found Tom still standing beside her.
She had somehow completely forgotten that he was still there.

Repressed, more like it, she thought dryly.

"That is no problem," Tom answered smoothly.

"N- no," Hermione spluttered out, provoking a confused frown from Madam Dulan. "I… eh… I
don't want Tom to miss even more of his class."

Hermione tried to block out that suspicious expression on Tom's face as she stared at Dulan. The
nurse just shook her head decidedly.

"No, no," Dulan said sternly. "I don't want you to wander about alone."

Hermione swallowed nervously. There was no way she could be left alone with Tom right now. She
threw a furtive glance at him. That look on his face… He was staring at her with his grey eyes
piercing into her and a scary frown had appeared between his eyebrows. Her heart started to thumb
frantically in her chest.

He knows! Hermione thought panicky. He was going to curse her the moment they were alone. She was defenceless and he knew it. Lord Voldemort had no reason to hide any longer.

She looked at Dulan pleadingly and said, "I'm sure I can manage on my own. Tom doesn't need to-"

"You were in the infirmary almost all last week," Dulan cut over her. She smiled at Hermione indulgently as she said, "I don't want to take any risks with you, dear." Then she turned to Tom. "Can I count on you to return her safely to her common room?"

Hermione stared wide-eyed at Tom as he smiled at the nurse charmingly and said in his silky voice, "Of course. I'll take care of her."

Oh my God! Hermione thought horrified. He was going to take care of her? Her breathing was shallow and fast. She knew from experience what it meant when Tom Riddle took care of something.

He is going to murder me!

Panic now rushed through her and memories of how Tom had cursed her on the Astronomy Tower flashed through her mind. On that day, Tom and Voldemort had melted again. They were now inseparably connected in her mind. From that day on, she hadn't been able to look at Tom without seeing Voldemort. He was going to do it again; he was going to hurt her. She tensed as she felt a hand grasping her upper arm. As she turned her head she found Tom, looking down at her. Hermione almost winced as she saw that scrutinizing touch in his grey eyes as they wandered over her.

A mask of blandness covered everything up as he turned to Madam Dulan and said, "Thank you for healing her."

Then Tom started to lead her towards the door. Hermione had no other option than to follow. She tried to get her erratic breathing under control as they left the Hospital Wing.

Calm down!

They stepped into the corridor and he still held her tightly. Her hands were balled into tight fists. She wasn't going to give him any information. This was the reason he had saved her from Grindelwald's soldiers, so he could finish her off himself. With him knowing about her lost magic, there was no reason for him to hold back anymore. But she would never bow down. Back on the Astronomy Tower, he had lost. Hermione would make sure that he would lose again. She was ready. She would defend the knowledge about the future. Her friends' secrets were safe with her.

His hand still grasped her arm, preventing her from running away, as he now led her away from the safety of the Hospital Wing. Hermione felt like being led to her own execution. Tom still hadn't said anything. Before they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, he turned left into another corridor. Hermione felt her pulse racing now. They had walked a fair distance and were in a relatively secluded part of the castle as Tom stopped. He turned her around, so that she had to face him. His steely grey eyes gave nothing away as he looked down at her.

Then he asked while eyeing her in suspicion, "What is wrong with your magic?"

Hermione couldn't help but stiffen. She forced all fear from her voice as she replied firmly, "Nothing."
Tom's eyes were narrowing at her. "Then why didn't you defend yourself during the duel?"

She couldn't make out any emotion in his sharp voice and tried to wriggle out of his grasp. As that didn't work she hissed at him,

"Let go!"

Tom didn't comply. His hands still clasped her upper arms tightly. Hermione took in a sharp breath of air as suddenly the pressure of his magic wandered over her body. The sensation wasn't exactly painful but she still started to tremble. As his magic left her body again, Tom continued to stare down at her. Hermione averted her eyes from him. For a while neither of them said anything and her heart hammered away in her chest.

Then Tom asked in an expressionless tone, "It is gone, isn't it?"

Hermione's gaze shot at him. There was something dark lurking behind his eyes. She needed to get away from him! Quickly! She wouldn't go down without a fight. Tom wanted to force the truth from her? She wasn't going to give in. He just opened his mouth to, no doubt, threaten her, as Hermione jumped into action. She forcefully kicked him in the shin. He groaned in pain and released her arms. Hermione didn't hesitate, turned around and ran away from him.

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Tom ignored the shooting pain coming from his leg, and immediately raced after Hermione. She had managed to dart down the whole corridor as he finally caught up with her. He grabbed her wrist and twirled her around. She gasped softly as he pressed her into the corridor wall so she wouldn't attempt to escape him again. She tried to wriggle away, but he wouldn't allow her to. Tom's eyes slowly wandered over the girl. His grip on her arm tightened considerably as he was hit by a sudden rush of anger. His magic again skimmed over her body and again he couldn't feel anything. There was no response coming from her. But he should be able feel something. His grey eyes hardened as he stared down at her.

"Your magic is gone," Tom stated darkly.

Her hazel eyes found his and the defiance glowing in them enraged him even further. She again tried to pull away from him but he wouldn't let her.

"You stay away from me!" she hissed sharply, though the fear hidden underneath was obvious.

"What happened to your magic?" he asked dangerously.

Hermione didn't answer and Tom glared down at her. He felt his anger peak as he mustered her. Had she really lost her magic? She was a Mudblood and now he couldn't feel even an ounce of magic in her. She was…

_A Muggle! She's a filthy, useless Muggle_, a voice hissed at him maliciously.

Yes, she was nothing but a dirty _Muggle_. This was just one thing: disgusting. Tom's dark magic was swelling up in him. It already ripped at him and curled around his mind. It was an ice cold force – cold, but angry, very angry. His magic thundered through him, so strong that strands left his body and swirled furiously around him. He could see her shying away from him and that was a gratification to him. Though, it wasn't enough. His enraged magic didn't die down. He could feel it reaching out for her.

She had always lied to him. _Always!_
Hermione trembled slightly as his magic brutally ripped at her and she averted her eyes from him. Tom didn't stop; he wasn't able to call his magic back. She deserved this, didn't she? For constantly lying to him, for rejecting him…

_For being a Mudblood and now a Muggle!_

His magic still tugged at her relentlessly as Hermione raised her head and looked up at him. As he saw the expression on her face, Tom tensed involuntarily and quickly released her arms as if he had been burned. Her eyes were devoid of any emotion as they regarded him and there was a horribly familiar impenetrable mask on her face. His magic still tried to reach out for her but Tom now forced it back.

"Is that the moment you finally drop your act?" Hermione said and while her voice was quite it was also deathly cold and carried an edge of steel. There was no warmth in that voice.

Aversion and mindless anger had threatened to consume Tom but as he now looked at her it was all gone. Unbidden, her words rushed back to him.

'I've seen your true face. And you know what? It's disgusting.'

Tom had to swallow hard as he could finally spot an emotion on Hermione's face. Her hard eyes wandered over him, there was a frown on her brow and she wrinkled her nose slightly. Tom breathed in deeply as he was hit by her disgust.

He was unable to say anything so Hermione sneered at him, "Lost for words? Or are you still deciding which curse to use on me?"

Tom stared at her with wide eyes, then he shook his head. He wouldn't curse her. He shouldn't have let his magic run lose like that. He had nearly attacked her! Again!

"I didn't mean for that to happen," Tom hastily tried to explain himself.

Hermione just frowned at him. Then she said, cruel venom lacing her words, "Now that your favourite Mudblood is stranded with no magic you don't have to play the repentant boyfriend anymore. That surely is a field day for you, isn't it?"

Fury seeped into her hazel eyes and Tom was shaken by that sharp edge in her voice. He needed to somehow show her that he wasn't going to hurt her.

But she is a MUDBLOOD! a furious voice screamed at him as he took a step towards her.

Tom didn't listen to that voice but raised his hand and gently put it down on her shoulder. Immediately Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously. But Tom didn't notice as his gaze was magically drawn to her rosy lips. He took another step towards her. He was so close that his chest now brushed hers. The hand on her shoulder wandered to the back of her neck and then ran through her soft curly hair. He could even smell that faint scent of lilac. Tom slowly bent down to her. There was a twinge going through his chest as he pressed his mouth over hers. The angry voice still yelled at him to stop but somehow it was muffled and he didn't want to listen anyway. The feeling of her body pressed against him was way too distracting. His hand was buried in her long curly hair while his other hand wandered to the small of her back so that he could pull her flush against him while he kissed her soft lips. He never wanted it to stop, Tom decided as he gingerly nibbled at her lower lip.

He couldn't understand how she had disgusted him just moments before. It felt wonderful kissing her. It had been too long. This was right.

Unfortunately, Hermione saw things differently. She raised her hands and decidedly pushed him
away. With that Tom was abruptly ripped from his dreamy state. He stumbled away from her and looked at her in confusion.

"What are you playing at?" Hermione yelled at him furiously.

She wiped with her hand over her mouth, just as if she tried to wipe him away.

"Er… I… I…" Tom stuttered.

That kiss had been mind-blowing, hadn't she felt it, too? Hermione though just glared at him darkly. Obviously, she hadn't enjoyed it, Tom realized and his heart sank.

"I told you to stay away from me," she continued to yell at him. "What was there to mistake?"

Tom breathed in deeply, then he said commandingly, "And I told you that I want you back."

He only managed to rile her up even more. Ire glinted in her eyes as she now thundered, "It's always about you, isn't it? Did you ever consider what I want? Or is that irrelevant because the opinion of a 'Mudblood' is worthless anyway?"

Tom stared down at her. She was seething with anger and all of it was directed at him. He wanted to yell at her, 'Yes, it is irrelevant!' He wanted her back! He would have liked to pull his wand now and… and…

He clenched his teeth, trying to master his churned up emotions. This was not a problem he could solve by cursing her. He wished it were. Tom didn't reply to her inquiry because he strongly assumed that his answer would have enraged her even more.

*But no! Not worthless. Never that.*

Instead he asked cautiously as not to invoke more wrath, "Why's your magic gone?"

The angry glint didn't leave her eyes and she just shrugged.

"Maybe it's connected with… you know, the Elder Wand?" Tom said, hoping he didn't step over the line again.

Predictably, her sharp eyes now shot back at him. A dark glare bristled in them as she hissed, "Whatever you do, I won't tell you anything."

"I wasn't trying to force anything from you," he assured hastily.

Hermione just snorted disbelievingly.

Tom tried to ignore her suspicion. "Since when did your magic stop to work?" he asked her instead.

He was surprised as she now averted her eyes from him. The anger seemed to drop from her and she looked down at her shoes while a hand fiddled nervously with a strand of her curly hair.

It was a while until she answered in a soft voice while never looking up, "That was a week after … a week after you left me."

Tom's eyes widened as he stared at her. Hermione still averted her eyes and didn't look up at him. Was it really weeks and weeks ago that her magic was gone? Actually when was the last time he had seen her do any magic? He had ignored her for so long, he couldn't remember. Tom's eyes wandered over her. Hermione leaned into the corridor wall behind her, obviously to get more distance between
the two of them, and Tom could see how her hands trembled slightly. She was incredibly tense. Did she expect him to attack her? With that another thought sprang up in his mind. Merlin, if it really was all those weeks ago that she had lost her magic. Then…

Shit!

Tom almost didn't want to pose his next question. But he had to, so he asked in a hoarse voice, "You… you couldn't have defended yourself? The day I… when I attacked you on the Astronomy Tower?"

He cringed as her gaze fell on him. The icy cold touch in her hazel eyes was back as she answered callously, "No, I couldn't have."

Then she turned and just walked away. This time he didn't chase after her.

As Hermione walked down the corridor she was sure a curse would hit her in the back any second now. Still, her steps were steady and unhurried. She wasn't running away from him. No, she thought grimly, she was done running. As she rounded the corner she could barely believe that he had let her go like that. A glance over her shoulder told her that he wasn't stalking after her.

How strange.

Hermione was confused by Tom's behaviour. After her revelation she had expected him to immediately take advantage of her vulnerable state. Why hadn't he attacked her? She subconsciously raised a hand and her fingers ghosted over her lips. She could still feel the lingering tingle his mouth had left behind. He had been so gentle, so… so caring? And almost – almost! – she hadn't been able to push him away. That kiss had been like before. Before he had dropped his mask and had transformed into Voldemort.

What was he doing to her?

Hermione ran a shaky hand through her hair. Why had he kissed her? This didn't make any sense. He should have realized by now that seducing her into telling him her secrets wouldn't work. Besides Lord Voldemort surely wouldn't touch a Muggleborn so intimately. And yet here he was, having embraced her with so much need. Like he really cared, like he really wanted her back.

Hermione bit her lip to finally get rid of that tingling sensation.

Yes, that kiss had been wonderful and she had wanted to respond to it, but in the end, she hadn't done it. She couldn't. There was a strange knot in her stomach. She couldn't kiss him, because shortly before he had done it she had looked up at him, her hands balled, and she had braced herself for him slapping her. She had insulted him and mocked him and for that she had fully expected him to make her suffer. How could she kiss him? Every time he was around she was on edge. Tom was dangerous. Maybe she could hold him at bay with her threat of getting him expelled, but that wasn't going to stop him forever. Especially now that he knew her magic was gone.

Tom was menacing and she would do well to stay away from him. That pull she felt every time he was around needed to be suppressed. Tom was like a dangerous beast. There was no knowing what he planned or when he would strike.

Beautiful and deadly.
After that conversation with Tom, Hermione hid herself away in Slughorn's private potions lab. She brewed more of the veneficus potion, thinking that she had made a mistake. After her fifth attempt, she had to admit that the problem wasn't the potion but something with her. As she finally gave up, she felt extremely frustrated. Why was her magic still gone? She just had no idea what else to try and it scared her a great deal.

It was rather late as she finally left the lab. As she strolled down the dark corridor Hermione suddenly heard music coming from one of the doors. It was Slughorn's office, she realized.

Ah, yes. The Slug Club.

She just shrugged her shoulders and went on. But then she hesitated. Somehow she didn't want to go back to her dorm and lie down. She would just toss and turn sleeplessly in bed, plagued by her worries.

Hermione turned and looked at Slughorn's office. Maybe she should just go in? Merlin knew, she needed to relax a bit. Hesitantly, she stepped over to the door and opened it. Instantly, she was met by loud music and the chatter of many people. The potions professor had magically enlarged the room, so that it now provided enough space for his many guests. The room was packed with people, actually. Some were students from Hogwarts but a lot were obviously other guests. Probably celebrities of some kind.

Not far away Hermione spotted Stella Lovegood and Lupin. Lupin had his arms wrapped around her waist and kissed her gently. Hermione smiled as she saw it. Those two really were made for each other. She still grinned as the pair broke apart. Lupin then spotted her standing by the entrance and Hermione had to giggle as he was hit by a fierce blush. She waved at them and his blush got even worse. Stella, on the other hand, had a dreamy look on her face and waved happily back at Hermione.

She decided to not disturb the pair, instead Hermione made her way through the mass of people aiming for the buffet table. She hadn't eaten much today and was rather hungry. She had nearly reached the table as she accidentally bumped into someone.

"Oh, sorry," she apologised.

The girl she had run into turned around and Hermione nearly groaned in frustration as she realized it was Melanie Nicolls. Just the one she needed right now. Nicolls sneered at her arrogantly and looked annoyingly pretty in her dark red dress.

"I didn't know you were a member of the Slug Club," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice level. Nicolls just eyed her conceitedly. Then she informed Hermione smugly, "I got invited, actually."

"Good for you," Hermione replied stiffly.

She just wanted to step away as now a nasty smirk took form on Nicolls face. Then the girl said snootily, "I would think so. It was rather nice of Tom to have invited me."

Hermione's irritation rose as she felt a painful stab in her stomach. There was a triumphant expression on Nicolls' face.

"What's wrong?" the girl inquired in false pity. "Aww, don't tell me you still think Tom would take you back."

Hermione forced a blank look on her face. She surely wasn't going to let Nicolls, of all people, get to
"I told you before, didn't I?" she said dismissively. "You can have him. I don't care."

Nicolls just rolled her eyes at that statement.

"Sure you don't," she snickered sarcastically. Then the expression of mock sympathy was back on her face as she continued, "You should be glad Tom dumped you. If you had stayed with him, you'd have only embarrassed him. After all, who wants to be seen with a dense Mudblood? It's not like you can keep up with any Pureblood. Seriously, you people just can't reach the same intellectual level." Here she cast Hermione a sweet smile, "No offense."

By now, Hermione couldn't deny that anger which seemed to mount up in her. So, she snapped at Nicolls venomously, "If that's the case, then I don't want to disturb you any longer with my poor intellect."

Nicolls smirked at her evilly and shrugged her shoulders. "I had to get used to the eye sore a while ago."

Hermione didn't retort anything but just turned around and stomped away. Hot anger rushed through her.

'Dense Mudblood'? she thought, fury burning up in her.

As she reached the buffet table she decided to forego the food and directly went for a glass of red wine. What did Nicolls think who she was? Just because her parents were able to do magic didn't mean she was somehow better than Hermione. Or more intelligent! Preposterous! Angrily she gulped down the wine and instantly took a new glass. Seriously, as if the girl was in any way superior to Hermione. Hadn't those Pureblood bigots noticed that magical talent wasn't determined by your parents' abilities? She furiously choked down her second glass of wine and angrily slammed it down on the table to get a new one. The wine, though, wasn't at all helpful to calm down her violent fit of temper. On the contrary, Hermione got angrier and angrier the more she thought about Nicolls. The darker her thoughts got, the more she drank.

A while later, the music was playing loudly, Hermione still stood by the buffet table and now scowled angrily. She had long since stopped to count how many glasses she had drunk, and preferred it to just indulge into sweet thoughts of revenge. Maybe she should punch Nicolls in her arrogant face.

I'll show that stupid Pureblood the Muggle way of fighting! Seriously, lack of intellect?

She was just in the middle of her, rather violent, daydreams as a melodious voice whispered into her ear, "I thought you didn't want to come."

Hermione turned her head and found Tom standing right beside her, smiling down at her. She narrowed her eyes at him. Then she took a step towards him, causing him to raise a surprised eyebrow.

Hermione bored her index finger accusingly into his chest while she gritted at him, "You! What makes you think I want to talk with you?" Tom furrowed his brow as he heard her slurred voice. "What? You think I can't reach your level of intelligence?" She continued to poking her finger into his chest while she glared at him. "Loads of people would be thrilled to talk with me. They don't care
that I'm Muggleborn."

Tom's calm grey eyes wandered over her, stopping at the half-empty glass of wine in her hand, before he inquired, "How much did you actually drink?"

"Oh, so now you also want to decide how much I'm allowed to drink?" Hermione snapped furiously.

"No," Tom tried to soothe her. He scanned her concerned as she was swaying slightly. "How about we sit down somewhere and discuss this?"

Hermione snorted at him dismissively.

"Sure, you want to discuss," sarcasm oozed from her words. "Like you wanted to discuss things back on the Astronomy Tower."

"I told you, I regret it," Tom said.

Hermione wasn't listening to him but just rushed on, her intoxicated brain not longer able to filter what she was saying.

"Why don't you go and have your discussion-" she enclosed the last word with air quotes. "-with Nicolls. I'm sure she would be ecstatic." Her slightly glassy eyes wandered lazily over him before she added meanly, "...or not. Depends on your performance, I guess."

She sneered at him before she turned away, aiming for a dramatic exit. Unfortunately, she had swirled around a little too enthusiastically, so that her head started to spin and she swayed dangerously. A hand grabbed her upper arm tightly, preventing her to make an unpleasant acquaintance with the floor. Tom scowled down at her while he steadied her. He took the glass of wine from her as he said,

"That's it. You've had enough."

Hermione growled and tried to regain her glass from him.

"It's none of your business how much I drink!" she hissed, though she now leaned rather heavily into him.

"Obviously, you don't know when to stop," he told her, a sharp tint in his voice. "Someone has to keep an eye on you."

She snorted at him while still trying to angle the glass out of his hand. Tom just flicked his wrist and the glass vanished into thin air. Hermione glared up at him.

"Pff, like you really care," she spat. "You just don't want to waste expensive wine on a worthless Muggle like me."

As he heard her, Tom's gaze softened immediately. "You are not worthless," he whispered quietly.

Hermione opened her mouth to snap a retort and call him a filthy liar, but another voice cut in. "Ah, what do I see?" Slughorn proclaimed loudly. "I knew you would manage to settle your differences sooner or later."

He winked at Hermione who still leaned into Tom's side. She blinked and tried to focus her eyes on the professor. It didn't quite work. The whole room seemed to spin happily around her. Her hand, which had tried to wrest the glass from Tom, now clenched tightly around the fabric of his sleeve.
"You had me worried there," Slughorn said in his booming voice, while wagging his finger at them. "You've been made for each other. It would have been such a shame…"

Now Hermione started to feel sick. She looked up at the professor and found a proud look on his face as he grinned at Tom.

"Er… no, professor. You misunderstand-" Tom started to say, but Hermione cut over him.

"Yeah," she said loudly, the slur in her voice not able to hide the sarcasm. "I know Tom's the right one."

Slughorn's, who seemed to be immune to sarcasm, nodded at her happily. "I assure you Tom is quite the catch."

Hermione smiled sweetly at him, then she said innocently, "You are right. I didn't believe it at first but then it just hit me one day-" here she turned her gaze from the professor to Tom before she said icily, "-like someone slapped me in the face."

Again Slughorn was ignorant to Hermione's innuendo, but Tom stiffened as he heard her.

"Ah, young love," Slughorn said happily. "There's no better feeling than falling in love."

Hermione giggled at that uncontrollably. She had to steady herself by tightening her grip on Tom's sleeve. As she had calmed down she said,

"Tell me about it. It's as if someone threw a *devastating* curse at me. Feels like something's gnawing at my insides."

"Ah," Slughorn said knowingly. "Butterflies in your stomach?"

She grinned at him. "Not quite."

Then she again broke down in giggles. This time Tom had to readjust his hold on her or she would have fallen on the floor.

"Are you all right?" Slughorn eyed her concerned.

As Hermione was unable to answer, Tom said in a calm voice, "Hermione's not feeling so well."

The professor's eyes lit up with understanding.

"I see, poor dear. Had a little too much to drink, did you?" he asked compassionately but a traitorous grin tugged at his mouth.

"No, actually I hadn't," Hermione replied while she looked accusingly up at Tom.

"Why don't you bring her to the guest rooms?" Slughorn suggested, turned to Tom. "I don't think she'll make it up the Gryffindor Tower."

"Yes, sir."

"The password's 'colubra'," Slughorn said. Then he again eyed Hermione who still leaned into Tom, giggling to herself. "Oh, and don't tell Dumbledore about this, m'boy. Wouldn't be amused at all…"

"Of course, sir," Tom promised.
With that Slughorn took a glass of wine from the table before he disappeared into the crowd. Hermione didn't notice his departure as she was again hit by a wave of dizziness. Her head was swirling so badly that she didn't even care as Tom started to lead her out of the room. They entered the dark dungeon corridor as the conversation with Nicolls shot through Hermione's head.

"Isn't your date going to miss you?" she asked Tom snarkily.

He didn't look down at her but just answered, "I came alone."

Hermione didn't contradict him as she now had to concentrate on walking. She still managed to stumble and Tom had to tighten his grip on her. He snaked an arm around her waist and pressed her against him. Fortunately, they didn't have to walk far to reach their destination. Hermione was glad as Tom stopped before a door.

"Colubra," he said and there was a soft click coming from the door.

He opened it and guided Hermione into the room behind. They stepped into what seemed to be a living room, completely with couch, a small table and a green carpet on the dark wood of the floor. Though, she didn't notice any of that as she felt her stomach clench unpleasantly.

"I'm sick," she managed to grind out.

Quickly, Tom led her over to a door. He opened it and they stepped into a bathroom. Hermione staggered to the toilet, sank down on the floor and then had to throw up. She felt a hand supporting her so that she didn't end up lying on the tiled floor.

"I'm never going to drink again," she mumbled incoherently while still hanging over the toilet.

"Sure," a calm voice answered.

Hermione stayed there on the floor, trying to calm her stomach down. She was very glad that the hand still steadied her.

After a while the calm voice spoke again, "Okay, you think that was it?"

"Hmm," she made.

A pair of hands grabbed her under her shoulders and hoisted her up. Immediately sickness hit her again, but it wasn't so bad any more. Then someone gingerly wiped her face with a towel before she was led out of the bathroom. They passed the living room and entered another room. Hermione was very relieved to find a soft bed in this room. She plopped down on the bed. The world was spinning around her even worse as she lay down and closed her eyes.

She fought the spinning sensation as she inquired disinterestedly, "Are you going to curse me now?"

It was a while until Tom answered. "No," he said in a quiet tone.

"It would be a good opportunity," she told him, too tired to open her eyes. "Only Slughorn knows I'm here and he won't check on me."

"Do you want me to hex you?" Tom tried to joke with her.

"Na," she mumbled into her pillow. "But that never held you back."

He didn't reply anything. There were some swishing noises before Tom whispered in a low voice, "Aguamenti."
Hermione could hear water being poured into some kind of jar.

"I put some water here," Tom told her softly. "You need to drink a bit or you'll have a headache tomorrow."

"Mmm," made Hermione tiredly.

Then she felt him sitting down at the edge of the bed. For a while no-one said anything and Hermione tried to get that spinning of her head under control. It didn't work.

"You know what Nicolls told me?" she whispered. "That I'm a dense Mudblood." Hermione curled into a tight ball on the bed. "One should think I'd have gotten used to it by now."

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Tom sat beside her on the bed. She couldn't see his face as it was dived in darkness.

"Mal- Draco was the first who ever called me that," she continued in a soft voice, not knowing why she told him.

"Who's Draco?" Tom asked her.

"Someone I knew. He was an idiot." Hermione contemplated him for a moment before she added, 
"… actually he was a lot like you." He didn't comment on that so she just went on, "I was twelve when he called me 'Mudblood' for the first time. Back then I didn't even know what it meant." She paused before she added dryly, "Mind you, I found out very quickly."

Hermione breathed in deeply. Why was she telling him all this? Tom surely wasn't interested in her life story. But somehow, she couldn't stop herself to rattle on,

"'Filthy little Mudblood' that's what he called me." Strangely, she could feel Tom tense slightly as he heard it. "Creativity never was his thing," Hermione snorted. "It's embarrassing that I remember it verbatim, isn't it?"

"Did you curse him?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said.

"Maybe you should have cursed him."

Hermione couldn't help but smile slightly at his suggestion. So typical.

"That'd be useless, there are too many of them."

Tom looked down at the witch lying on the bed. She had curled up on the mattress, the blanket wrapped tightly around her. Her bushy hair was a mess of curls as it was spread out on the green pillow. He felt the urge to run his fingers through that hair. It looked so soft. But he resisted. With a twitch in his stomach he remembered that a few weeks ago, he could have just given in to that urge.

"It's just… It destroyed a lot, you know?" she said.

His gaze wandered back to her face.

"What do you mean?" he asked.
"The magical world…" Hermione said softly. "When I entered it for the first time it was so incredible. It was like a dream world. Fantastic, unreal and wonderful." A happy smile appeared on her face. "It was a world with absolutely no boundaries."

Tom watched as the smile melted from her face. It left behind a blank mask. Though he glimpsed terrible sorrow and grief in her brown eyes before she closed them.

"But then, suddenly, this insult appeared. And that world wasn't innocent anymore. It was dirty and harsh and not at all fantastic or dreamlike. It was ruined …at least for me."

Tom could see her shuddering slightly and she wrapped the blanket even tighter around herself. She opened her eyes again and they wandered up to him. Her sorrow screamed at him through her eyes. Mixed in with the sorrow, though, Tom could also spot accusation as she scanned him. Then she sighed softly and averted her eyes again.

"You know, sometimes I regret that I got the letter from H- …that I found out I'm a witch," she said. "Could have stayed in the Muggle world. Maybe I would have been a dentist like my parents. Who knows."

He couldn't resist the urge any longer and now ran a hand hesitantly over her shoulder. He shuddered at the thought that she might have never turned up in Hogwarts. It would have been awful if she had been born with no magic at all. Though, it was disgusting, wasn't it? Muggles, giving birth to children with flimsy control over magic. Mudbloods were even worse than Muggles because they infiltrated the magical world with their revolting Muggle customs. And Hermione was both now that she had lost her magic. It was an abomination.

But she… she needed to be here. Here with him.

The hand on her shoulder got more possessive and he said tentatively, tasting the words on his tongue, "It would have been very dull if you hadn't turned up here. I'm glad you are a witch."

Hermione just curled into a tighter ball, then she mumbled faintly, "I thought I was just 'posing as a witch'."

Then she closed her eyes. Tom wanted to say more, but somehow he couldn't. Her breathing evened out and he knew she had fallen asleep. His hand still fondled her and now ran through her soft, curly hair. He didn't want to let go. This was the only way he could touch her without her yelling at him again.

How pathetic, he thought. The only time I can touch her is when she is drunk or unconscious. He sighed and withdrew his hand from her.

As he now looked down at her he imagined some big-headed kid calling twelve-year-old Hermione a filthy Mudblood. Burning hot anger seeped up in him. It was the truth, though, wasn't it – what that kid had said? Still, Tom wished he had been there. Then he would have cursed the kid. Draco?

His grey eyes contemplatively wandered over Hermione's body. There was no way he could have cursed that other kid. After all, wasn't she from the future? She had admitted it herself. She was from a time decades in the future.

All those months, Tom mused as he looked down at her sleeping face, and she still is a mystery. Even more so than ever before.

He got up from the bed and reluctantly left the room.
Tom entered the huge drawing room. Men with pale skin and dark hair were shown on the many portraits hanging on the walls. But they were silent and immobile as their lifeless grey eyes observed how Tom strode over to the sitting area. Hermione sat, reading in a book, on one of the lush sofas. As she heard him approaching her, she looked up. Her eyes widened in fear as she recognized Tom and the book fell from her hands. He stopped in front of her and glared down at her.

"Did you think I wouldn't find you here?" he hissed and Hermione winced at the sharpness of his voice.

He grabbed her wrist and violently hauled her up from the sofa.

"Of course you would hide in a Muggle domicile," he sneered as his eyes wandered over the room in distaste.

Hermione tried to pull away from his grasp.

"Don't touch me!" she choked out panicky.

Tom just raised his hand and backhanded her. Hermione moaned in pain as she was thrown back on the sofa.

Tom's eyes wandered mercilessly over her trembling form as he told her icily, "You are mine. Never forget that."

Her eyes were swimming with fear as she looked up at him. Tom ignored it and bent down to her. She was shrinking away from him, but soon was trapped as the weight of his body pushed her down on the sofa. His hand wandered to her blouse and Hermione gasped as he forcefully ripped it open.

"No! Please, don't!" she pleaded with him.

He silenced her as his lips crashed down on hers. She struggled to get away from him, but he held her steady. Her hands pushed desperately against his chest. Tom ended it as he grabbed her wrists and forced them above her head. He bunched her wrists together with one hand while his other ran demandingly over her trembling body. Hermione whimpered as he bit down hard on her lip. Soon, blood was running down her chin. Tom released her lips and glared maliciously down at her.

"I won't tolerate any disobedience from a filthy little Mudblood."

She gasped in fright as he brutally grabbed her left leg and moved it so he could position himself between her thighs.

"Tom, stop! Please!" she begged while tears rolled down her cheeks.

He harshly redoubled his grip on her wrists causing a sharp intake of breath from her.

"The only way something unworthy like you can be of any use is by serving me," he said, cold threat edging his voice.

Her skirt had ridden up as he had moved between her legs. As one of his hands now wandered to her knickers, Hermione started to sob faintly. He grabbed the fabric, yanked hard and the material was ripped from her body, so that he-
With a start Tom jerked up from his position leaned against the huge window frame. His heart was racing away in his chest and he was shivering heavily. His gaze frantically wandered over his surroundings. But the sofa was gone and so was that drawing room. He was sitting on a huge window sill in the back end of the library. Warm sun rays fell through the window, but Tom felt icy cold. He raised a shaky hand and ran it over his face. His heart was still stabbing his chest and he felt horrible. Tom weakly leaned his back against the window frame and tried to even his breathing out. His stomach constricted painfully and he felt nauseated as the images continued to dance around his mind.

Why did he need to dream something like this?

He would never do that to Hermione. Her soft sobs still echoed through his head and it made him feel sick. He wouldn't do that. Ever. Sure he wanted her back and she rightfully belonged to him, but that didn't mean he would treat her like that. He wouldn't force her to-

He shook his head, trying to get rid of that strange feeling in his chest. No! He would never do this to her. He wouldn't hit her nor- he hesitated. Hadn't he already done at least that? Unease washed over him. He had slapped her and had called her a lot of horrible things.

Maybe, but I wouldn't touch her against her will!

Trepidation washed over him as he vacantly stared at the bookshelves in front of him. He would never violate Hermione like he had in that nightmare. But…

…but others had done it. With dread he realized that this black-cloaked man had probably done something similar to Hermione. He had hurt her and touched her. During all this, she had been completely helpless because her magic was gone.

'You don't deserve any better,' that bastard had hissed at her. Hermione was Muggleborn and now she had even lost her magic, so she really didn't deserve a better treatment, did she?

Still, there was hot fury boiling up in Tom as he pictured Hermione, being groped by that vile man while she was powerless to stop him. That man had treated her like some sort of plaything. Tom balled his hands into tight fists while he tried to control his furious magic. He should have hurled the Killing Curse at the bastard!

Suddenly a malicious voice cut through his thoughts, So a Mudblood got treated a bit roughly? Is that really so bad?

That voice only enraged him even more. He shuddered slightly as he remembered the horrible bruises he had found on Hermione's body after that guy had attacked her. Tom didn't want her to ever be in such a situation again. No-one was allowed to hurt Hermione.

Not even Tom himself.

…but she is a Mudblood.

No, No! NO! Hermione was not a Mudblood. She was not! Not one of them. She was more. Tom furrowed his brow at that thought. Sure, her parentage still slightly disturbed him but that defect dropped into the back ground. He should be disgusted by her but somehow, he couldn't be bothered. What really disturbed him was the fact that she still didn't want him anywhere near her. She actually treated him like she would treat that monster from his dream. He needed to stop that.

But how? All his plots and schemes had never worked with her. That was what had always set her apart, wasn't it? She had managed to look underneath the mask of lies. She knew how he really was
and she still liked him.

…well, had liked him. But he was working on that.

Maybe he should find out what had happened to her magic? If he brought it back, that would surely restore her trust in him. And it would stop her being so dreadfully Muggle-like…

Yes, Tom thought as he straightened up a bit. He would try to get her magic back to working. Surely, it couldn't be that difficult? To do that, though, he needed more information. A lot more information. And the only source he had was Hermione herself. But how to make her speak?

Tom wrinkled his nose in disgust. No, he wouldn't 'make her speak'. That wasn't going to work and he actually didn't want to do it. Force was the wrong way when Hermione was concerned. Tom sighed in frustration. Forcing people into doing what he wanted them to do had always been easy for him.

Hermione, though… whenever she was involved, things stopped being easy.
Doubt

Hermione breathed out in relief as she left the Arithmancy class room. It hadn't been that bad. At least no-one expected any displays of magic during Arithmancy. Actually, Professor Gauß was always more than happy to ignore the only girl in his class altogether. Over time Hermione had gotten used to his derogatory behaviour towards her; it seemed to be symptomatic for this time period anyway.

She strolled down the corridor wondering what she should do with the rest of the day. She had half a mind of going to the Gryffindor common room, though it promised to be rather stuffy and hot there with the sun having heated up Gryffindor tower the whole day. On the plus side, she would be able to eschew Tom. Since that disastrous Slug Club she hadn't spoken with him. Now that Tom knew about her lack of magic she had to expect some repercussions coming from him. She was rather surprised that he hadn't acted yet. Was his strange passivity just a part of his evil machination?

'I wouldn't hurt you.' Tom's soft words came back to her and made Hermione snort. Oh, he was good - really good. There had been so much honesty in his voice. If it had been anyone but him, she would have felt inclined to believe them.

But it was rather strange that Tom hadn't yet used his advantage. Why hadn't he tried anything during the Slug Club? Though, Hermione couldn't be so sure about that. She couldn't remember much of what had happened after her conversation with Nicolls. She shouldn't have drunk so much wine - it made her memory more than hazy.

Or Tom Obliviated me. She wouldn't put it past him. Suspicion boiled up in her.

Hermione just turned to the staircase leading up to Gryffindor tower as she changed her mind. Right now, she needed a bit of fresh air. So she turned left and walked down the corridor to then enter a narrow, circular staircase. She climbed up until she came upon a door. Hermione pushed the door open and stepped on the platform of the Astronomy Tower. The sun shone brightly down from the azure sky which was only interrupted by a few cotton wool clouds. She breathed in the fresh air before she walked over to the balustrade. The day was exceptionally hot for Scotland, but up here on the tower a refreshing breeze skimmed over Hermione. She sat down on the massive stone balustrade, leaned her back against one of the stone gargoyles, and drew her knees up to her body. As she looked down at the grounds of Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest behind, her heart leapt uncomfortably and her fear of heights bubbled up. Hermione chose to ignore the panic, though.

That's what I'm really good at, she thought disdainfully, ignoring things. Ignoring my past, ignoring my conscience, and ignoring common sense altogether.

At least the Astronomy Tower made a good temporary hide-away. It was almost funny how she had avoided this place ever since Tom had attacked her here. Now, just a few weeks later, she sat here and contemplated how everything had gone down the drain. Peverell's manuscript had been a dead-end because she was too stupid to understand it; the Elder Wand was unreachable at the moment as it was with Grindelwald, and now the cloak was, too, thanks to her… And she didn't even want to start to think about the stone.

It was a long shot to begin with.

Hermione slung her arms around her legs and put her forehead down on her knees. Maybe she should just give up, get a job in the Muggle world, and live her life in the forties. A hollow laugh escaped her lips at that thought.
Yeah, why not return to the Muggle world? she wondered sarcastically. The Second World War is raging, but hey, no problem, I've survived one war already. Why not another one?

But maybe she should seriously consider leaving, Hermione thought reluctantly as she stared down at Hogwarts' grounds. A lot of students were outside enjoying the warm day. The sun, though, wasn't able to dispel her bad mood.

Her reasons to enter Hogwarts had been to get near Dumbledore so that she could get the Elder Wand from him as soon as he fought Grindelwald. But without her magic, she wouldn't be able to get home even if she had all three Hallows. What was the point in staying? On top of that, she now had Tom on her tracks. He knew decidedly too much. The only sensible decision would be to leave. Leave before Tom could do anything to her. One mistake and she risked him learning about the future, and that would mean destroying all she had fought for in the last two years. It would mean her friends had died in vain. It was irresponsible, actually, to stay here. If Tom ever got access to her memories, it meant Lord Voldemort in the future would be unbeatable.

Leaving Hogwarts was her only viable option right now, wasn't it? To be honest, she had gotten side-tracked for long enough. She should just leave Hogwarts, settle down somewhere, and work on her lost magic. If she managed to get her magic back, she could still try to find the Hallows. Yes, maybe that would be the best thing to do.

…but if it weren't for Grindelwald. Hermione groaned as she thought of the dark wizard. His soldiers had attacked her three times by now, and they had an uncanny ability to track her down. With her magic lost, she really couldn't risk letting them attack her again. Hogwarts, and especially Dumbledore, offered her protection.

It was a Catch-22; either she stayed and risked changing the future or she fled and risked changing the present. In the end, it came down to this: Who did she think was the less dangerous enemy? Tom or Grindelwald?

Not an easy decision.

Actually, the thought of Tom made her stomach flop. She had no idea what he was up to. Sure he had helped her against Grindelwald's soldiers, but she couldn't be expected to forgive him everything just because he had helped her that one time.

'Did you ever consider giving Tom a second chance?' Dumbledore had asked. His words forced a tired sigh from Hermione. Hadn't she given Tom already more than he deserved? Still, Dumbledore's question would have been a hell of a lot easier to answer if Tom hadn't suddenly decided to abandon his hostile behaviour. Involuntarily, Hermione's thoughts wandered back to when Tom had kissed her in the hallway. She was angry with herself as she had to admit that she had enjoyed it a tiny bit. Her rational side knew that he must have been acting, but she couldn't completely suppress those feelings coming up in her. It had felt so good to be held and kissed by him and Hermione had missed his nearness and his caress very much. But it was all fake, wasn't it? Tom was a very convincing actor after all. She knew that part of her wanted to trust him - was thirsting to trust - but how could she?

It was just wrong to even consider his offer. He wanted her back? Hermione snorted. An image of Lord Voldemort popped up in her mind: crimson eyed and dark cloaked with a lipless mouth twisted into a cruel smirk. To imagine him being nice to Muggleborns was just absurd. She should finally get used to it that Tom wasn't in any way better than Him. She wondered if he had been disgusted as he had kissed her in the corridor. Probably, yes.

Hermione's head leaned against her knees, but it shot up as she heard the sound of soft steps. She
stiffened as she spotted Tom walking towards her. She remained seated on the balustrade as she watched him approaching her. His expression was unreadable and she shuddered as she saw that calculating touch in his grey eyes as he mustered her. He walked over to the balustrade and casually leaned against it, a mere metre away from Hermione's position. She felt the need to run for the door. Instead she drew her legs even tighter against herself and watched him suspiciously. She felt even more vulnerable in his presence now that he knew about her lost magic. Tom just continued to eye her with a nonchalant air around him.

"How's your day?" he finally asked in his velvety voice. "Haven't seen much of you lately."

*I had a nice day until you showed up,* Hermione thought. In the end, though, she just shrugged her shoulders at him. Her insufficient reply only invoked an arched eyebrow from Tom. His presence disturbed Hermione a great deal. She had no idea what to expect from him. Ultimately, though, she knew that the friendly show he put on was no more than a disguise. Sooner or later he would tire of it.

As she didn't say anything, Tom continued in a light voice, "I had a rather straining day. History of Magic almost bored me to tears. And after that I had a prefect meeting to attend to."

Hermione glanced at him surreptitiously, but immediately looked away as she found his soft grey eyes scanning her.

"You are lucky you're not a prefect," he informed her in a conversational tone. "It's boring as hell having to go to those meetings - they talk away for hours with no conclusions in sight. I'm glad that's over."

Hermione did not comment and didn't look up at him. For a while no-one said anything, though she could feel Tom's penetrating gaze on her. She started to wonder if she should just go. But then he spoke again, abruptly changing the topic.

"Why's your magic gone?" Tom inquired.

Hermione wasn't really surprised by his question nor by the demanding tone he used. She raised her head at him. He was staring at her and the softness had left his grey eyes by now.

"I don't know," she said firmly, cursing that defensive touch in her own voice.

Unsurprisingly, Tom narrowed his eyes at her. He didn't believe a word she had just said. "Did you try getting it back?" he finally asked gruffly.

Angered by his tone of voice, Hermione snapped at him, "What do you think? That I'm stupid? Of course I tried."

His steely hard eyes kept her imprisoned. "But it didn't work," he stated emotionlessly.

Finally fed up by him, she hissed, "Obviously not!"

Not waiting for his reply, Hermione hopped down from the balustrade and turned towards the door. She certainly wasn't going to talk with him anymore. Before she could walk over to the door Tom's hand stopped her.

"Wait!" he ordered.

Hermione pressed her mouth into an angry thin line as she turned around to him.
"What?" she blustered.

Tom glared at her then he extended a hand towards her and said, "I want you to take this."

She frowned as her gaze wandered from his face to his hand. There was a piece of jewellery lying on his palm. Her gaze wandered back to his face. Tom just raised an eyebrow expectantly. Hesitantly, Hermione reached for his hand and picked up the necklace. She furrowed her brow as she inspected it. The chain was made of dull coppery metal and there was a strange pendant hanging at the chain. It was a small, black, irregular stone trimmed with the same coppery metal. Hermione touched the stone. It felt surprisingly warm, almost as if it were alive. As she looked closer she could see an eerie red glimmer pulsating in the middle of the stone. Hermione looked up at Tom questioningly.

"You will always wear it," he ordered, a commanding touch in his voice. "I created that stone. It encases a powerful spell. If someone should attack you again, that spell will alert me."

"Why?" Hermione asked in confusion as her gaze wandered back to the necklace in her hand.

"So that I can find you and help you."

"No, I mean, why do you want to protect me?" She looked back at Tom. Then she stated in a colourless tone. "I am still Muggleborn."

Tom stared at her and Hermione was not able to tell what he was thinking. Then, after a while, he said in a rather cold tone, "I know."

"And it doesn't bother you that I am Muggleborn?" Hermione asked him, her voice level, though there was a strange stab in her stomach.

"I can tolerate it," Tom said in the same cold tone.

She continued staring at him. Then she said softly, "You know, 'to tolerate' comes from the Latin word 'tolero' which means 'endure' or 'bear'."

She then put the necklace down on the balustrade between them. A numb feeling engulfed her suddenly. She shouldered her bag and glanced up at Tom.

"I don't want you to have to endure my presence," she told him in a clipped tone.

Then, without looking at him again, she turned around and walked away. Hermione had just taken a few steps as she felt him grabbing her arm. She stopped and turned around to face Tom. He clutched her upper arm with one hand and the copper necklace was in his other. She tilted her head and looked at his hand on her arm before flicking her eyes back up to his face.

"Let go of me," she told him in a calm but all the same very harsh tone.

As he heard that, Tom immediately let go of her arm. She could see his eyes widen slightly as he continued staring down at her. But Hermione didn't try to look behind that blank mask of his. She didn't want to know. There was a painful twinge going through her chest. It unsettled her that Tom's behaviour could evoke such an emotion in her. Obviously, it still somehow affected her that he thought so deprecatory about her parentage. Anger mounted up in her. She raised her hand and grabbed his wrist, tugging at it and trying to make him let go of her.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed at him, her tone sharp and aggressive.

As he heard that, Tom immediately let go of her arm. She could see his eyes widen slightly as he took in the furious expression on her face. Hermione just turned around and tried to walk away
again. It wasn't long and Tom fell in step beside her. Hermione did her best to just ignore him. There was nothing she wanted to discuss with him right now. Tom still despised her for being a Muggleborn. Why was she so unsettled by that?

Hermione angrily threw open the door and left the Astronomy platform.

"I didn't want to hurt you," Tom said after a while as they walked down the stairs.

Hermione's eyes shot at him and clenched her jaw irately. Then she sneered, "Don't worry, you didn't. You just disappointed me."

He opened his mouth to say something but Hermione didn't want to hear his excuses. "I really don't understand why you are still following me around," she said disparagingly. "If my parentage is such a bother, maybe you should just stay away from me."

"It's not," Tom said cautiously. "You know I like you, Hermione."

Hermione didn't answer anything to that. She looked away from him and left the staircase to enter a corridor.

"It's just… you can't expect me to change overnight."

"I don't expect anything from you, Voldemort," Hermione replied in a controlled voice, never looking at him.

"Hermione, I…" Tom began, strange insecurity ridging his voice. "I just don't like the Muggle world. It's… it's never been kind to me…"

Hermione stopped walking then - finally - turned toward him. Tom looked down at her, and she nearly shuddered as she saw that soft glint in his grey eyes.

"So, you've been treated badly. Is that it?" her voice was clipped, gaze unwavering. Hermione continued to stare at him. Then she said impatiently, "Why do I have to pay for it?"

"What?"

"I never tried to hurt you," she replied calmly. "And yet you are punishing me for things I had no influence on."

"I am not punishing you," Tom assured quickly.

"Funny, I really thought you slapped me and cursed me. Must have been my imagination then," she said flippantly.

"That was… I wasn't punishing…" Tom stuttered. "You know I'm sorry I did that." Here Hermione just raised her eyebrows doubtingly at him. He still continued to justify himself, "Muggles just don't fit into the wizarding world. They wouldn't understand. If they knew about it, they would try to destroy it. Muggleborns are a security risk."

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line and really had to work to stop herself from yelling at him. Security risk? Was he serious? She didn't reply anything but just turned around and walked down the corridor.

"So, I'm a security risk?" she finally snapped.

"No," Tom quickly assured. "No, you're not. You are not like them."
Hermione felt anger taking a hold of her as she heard that shudder of disgust in his voice as he spoke the last word.

"Not like them." she tasted his words on her own tongue. It made her wrinkle her nose. "So, I've been moved up, have I? From 'filthy Mudblood' to 'not a security risk anymore'."

Tom didn't answer, which might have been a good idea. So far everything he had said had managed to infuriate her even further.

"You know, I have as much reason to hate the wizarding world as you have to hate the Muggle world," Hermione told him curtly. She turned into another corridor and felt rather frustrated that Tom was still following her. "And yet, I'm not running around and try to curse them all."

Before he had the chance to say anything she ploughed on, "Hmm, maybe hate is not the right word, after all. Disdain fits better, huh?"

Hermione glanced at him. He was looking back at her, his impenetrable mask in place. It only aggravated her more. "No, wait, how did you phrase it? You put so much graphic detail into it, too… ah yes, now I remember. You said that my parents and I are worth 'less than the muck, sticking under your boots'."

"No," Tom said. "I didn't mean it that way. I was angry back then. I was trying to hurt you."

"Oh, now I feel better," came Hermione's sarcastic reply. "But I don't believe you. Don't you still think that I am a worthless Mudblood?"

"I never thought you were worthless," Tom said quietly.

"Lie," was all Hermione replied.

She threw another glance at him and found softness glinting in his grey eyes as he scanned her with something akin to worry flitting over his face. She stopped moving down the corridor. Tom stopped, too. Hermione didn't want to have to put up with his lies anymore. His gentleness was making her stomach twist painfully as it reminded her of the time before he had revealed his true face. This façade of his hurt and she was going to take it down, Hermione then decided. She preferred his cruelty. At least it was honest.

"All this prejudice, coming from you, is really quite comical," she said in a deliberately haughty voice. "I mean, considering who your father was."

Not very surprisingly, Tom stiffened at the mention of his father.

"You don't know anything about my father," he grinded out, and Hermione heard the anger slowly seeping into his voice.

"Neither do you," she shot back, equally aggressive. Then she scanned him coldly before she asked, "What did you do? Found out that he was a Muggle and immediately decided that you should 'get rid of him'? What a bother. Imagine the shame if someone found out that The Great Tom Riddle is related to a lowly Muggle."

She suppressed a shudder as she discovered a red sheen in Tom's eyes. This time she was pretty sure it was no trick of the light. He now glared down at her menacingly. Obviously, it wasn't that difficult to take down his amiable mask after all. Hermione was oddly pleased by it. She even felt the first signs of his angry magic on her body.
"I mean your other side of the family is so much better," she continued, letting cruel sarcasm seep through her voice. Counting with her fingers, she went on, "A couple of sottish lunatics, an insanely naïve mother and, of course, the great and noble and amazing Salazar Slytherin. As if he wasn't dead for a thousand years. As if anybody could still remember anything about him." Here she forced a mocking smirk on her face as she added, "Maybe he was just an idiot."

Tom took a step towards her, increasing the pressure of his magic on her body.

"How do you know I'm related to him?" he hissed at her dangerously.

Yes, this was what she wanted, Hermione thought as she looked up at his enraged face. This was the truth; not his friendly façade from before. This was Voldemort. She tried to steadily breathe in and out to calm her racing pulse down. Then she forced a sneer on her face and jeered at him, "All the things I know about you, Voldemort, and now you are surprised that I also know about your heritage?" She shook her head at him pityingly. "I'm actually surprised you don't scream it out loud for everybody to hear. Merlin knows how much you like attention."

As she ended that sentence Hermione closed her eyes shortly. She felt the force of his magic increase even more. It now wrenched at her painfully. She caught her breath as she then saw Tom's hand wandering to his robe pocket. He was going to pull his wand. Well, this was what she had wanted, wasn't it? she thought numbly as she surveyed that murderous glimmer in his now slightly crimson eyes. Finally, he was going to put an end to his charade. Hermione balled her hands into tight fists. The sneer was still pasted all over her face as she stared back at him and wondered what he might do to her.

_._._._._.

"I'm actually surprised you don't scream it out loud for everybody to hear. Merlin knows how much you like attention." Hermione sneered at Tom mockingly.

As he stared down at that scornful look on her face, Tom could feel his control slipping away. That tint in her voice – that derisive inflection – it managed to break his self-restraint. He stared down at her and could still see the scorn in her hazel eyes. Tom clenched his teeth, his hand was already wandering to his robe pocket where he knew his wand to be.

How dare she mock my ancestors?

Those things she had said about his family - about him - he wouldn't let her talk with him like that. He wouldn't allow her to badmouth his ancestors. Rage ripped at him fiercely, ordering him to take action. He could even feel himself trembling slightly from this insatiable fury. Tom's hand slipped into his robe pocket and towards his wand. His cold gaze once again wandered over her face. She looked up at him, her chin raised a little in defiance and the glint in her eyes was still silently mocking him.

Yes, Tom thought incensed as his hand clenched around the smooth wood of his wand, I'll teach that Mudblood never to speak to me like this.

As soon as that thought touched his mind, an image rushed through him. He could see Hermione, she was huddled on the ground before him. There was blood running down her temple, while a look of shock and disbelief was pasted on her face as she scanned him. That had been a second after he had cursed her and had nearly thrown her off the Astronomy Tower.

Tom felt his stomach twist painfully but then an angry thought cut through his mind, It's what she
There was an icy coldness coiling around his mind, threatening to stifle everything else. Sinister conviction invaded him and urged him to get his revenge. He was just about to pull his wand as another memory seared through him.

Enticing hazel eyes were smiling up at him. A hand was caressing his cheek affectionately. Then two arms were wrapped around his neck, a body snuggled against him and soft warm lips were pressed against his own.

Tom hesitated to pull his wand but he did not let go of it. The anger still rushed uncontrollably through him. It was then that another memory disturbed his mind.

The same hazel eyes looked up at him, but this time not smiling, not laughing at him. This time the eyes were empty and drained of all emotion, as they observed him indifferently. No recognition sparked up in those eyes, instead there was only cold hate.

There was an almost painful pressure in his chest and Tom abruptly let go of his wand. His angry magic still raged at him, ordering him to attack, but he did not comply. He just stared at the witch in front of him. There was still a taunting expression on her face which had accompanied her ridiculing words, but as he looked closer, he could suddenly see more. There was an alert, almost defensive touch in her hazel eyes. He hadn't noticed that before. Her jaw was clenched, her hands balled into tight fists as if in a silent resolve to steel herself against something. With shock Tom realized that she was expecting him to attack her. Had she started this whole argument just to see his reaction?

Tom blinked a few times, needing a moment to completely calm down again. He really had to keep his temper in check when around her. Then he noticed that his left hand was still grabbing the necklace he had wanted to give her. Merlin, his plan had been to give her the necklace to be able to protect her better. And what had he done? He had almost cursed her himself.

Blank astonishment washed over her face as she gaped at him. Tom nearly chuckled at the sight, though he didn't, because her surprise showed him that she had really expected him to hurt her again.

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"O… okay," she then said timidly, confusion still audible in her voice. "I… er… I'll just go then… back to the common room…"

"Of course." Tom inclined his head at her.

Hermione threw him one last bewildered glance then she turned around and walked away. That didn't go too badly, Tom decided. If one ignored the fact that she had insulted him and he had nearly attacked her, it had been a success actually. Hopefully, Hermione would really wear that necklace. Now he only had to get her to tell him more about her lost magic. He furrowed his brow as he watched Hermione hurriedly walking down the corridor. Maybe he should have asked her now? Tom shook his head. No, he would leave her some time to cool down, then he would try again. Sooner or later, though, she would cave in.

It was the next day that Hermione stepped out of Hogwarts searching for a bit of solitude. Subconsciously her hand wandered to her chest and clasped the pendant Tom had given her. She did that a lot since he had given her the necklace yesterday. Why did she even wear it? It probably contained a malevolent curse. How was she supposed to know? Without her magic she couldn't run any tests on the necklace. By all means she should get rid of it. But the vile thing still dangled off her neck and glinted coppery in the warm summer sun. Hermione took the pendant and hid it under her blouse.

_I should throw it into the Great Lake!_

She sighed and continued to meander over the soft grass. Other students were enjoying the bright day. There was a group of first years running around, playing with what seemed to be a broken snitch. Some distance away she spotted Rose and Lucia sitting in the shade of a willow. Quickly Hermione turned and strolled off in the other direction and continued her way. It wasn't long and she found herself standing in front of the Quidditch pitch. There were players in the air, zooming around and passing the Quaffle to each other. They were so fast Hermione felt dizzy just from watching. She could see a blur of green as the players sped by.

_Slytherin, huh? Just my luck_, she thought dryly.

She craned her neck and tried to see who was playing. Avery was captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, wasn't he? Hermione shuddered in displeasure. She really didn't want to run into him. Yet another Slytherin she tried to avoid, she thought exasperatedly. Though, the last time she had seen Avery he had been in a rather bad shape, hadn't he? That had been in the Hospital Wing and he had been bleeding profusely from several wounds. Hermione wrinkled her nose as she remembered that nasty cut in his face. She knew Tom had done that and Hermione wondered if he had enjoyed hurting Avery.

_Of course he would!_

Though the question was why he had felt the need to punish Avery. Because Avery had harassed her? Hermione shook her head. She threw a last glance at the Quidditch players before she turned around. She just wanted to walk away from the Slytherins as she heard a voice near-by.

"Psst, Hermione!"

Startled she turned around but saw no-one. Her brow was furrowed as she scanned the surrounding.

"Down here," the voice said.
Her gaze wandered to the empty stands. There down on the ground she could see a hand waving at her from behind the scaffold of the stands. Hermione cautiously walked over. The confused frown didn't leave her face as she found Longbottom sitting there, hidden behind the wooden beams of the stands.

"What are you-" she tried to say but was interrupted by him.

"Quickly come down here," he whispered. "Before they see you."

Hermione bent down and she crawled beside him.

"Now what the hell are you doing?" she asked after she had crouched down beside him.

Longbottom just eyed her as if she had posed a completely absurd question. Then his eyes wandered back to the Quidditch players and he admitted freely, "I'm spying."

"What…?"

His blue eyes wandered back at her and he grinned mischievously. "Just because we beat Slytherin last time, doesn't mean we can lean back now, does it?" he explained.

Hermione sighed and leaned against one of the wooden beams to sit more comfortably.

"Doesn't that clash with your Gryffindor sense of fairness?" she asked in amusement.

"Aww, no no," he replied in a suspiciously innocent voice. "It's part of the game. Totally acceptable."

"Uh-huh," she made doubtingly.

"I tell ya," he insisted, but couldn't hide the grin anymore. "It's not as if they don't do the same."

"Maybe," Hermione said. "But they are Slytherins."

Longbottom shrugged his shoulders not looking in the least bit ashamed.

"You know," she added lazily. "Maybe the Sorting Hat put you in the wrong house and you should actually be up there with them." She gestured at the Slytherin players. Indignation seeped into Longbottom's face, making Hermione giggle in amusement.

"Really," he pouted. "That's not funny."

It only made her laugh even harder. Soon, the expression of faux hurt melted from his face and Longbottom joined in to her laughter. Still chuckling, he reached for a small bag lying on the ground right beside him and handed it to Hermione. She accepted it and upon closer inspection found a few slices of pumpkin pie inside.

"You're pretty well prepared, aren't you," she remarked as she took a slice of the sweet pie.

"Yep," Longbottom grinned at her and helped himself to some pie.

Hermione nibbled amused at her own slice as she watched him inhaling his.

"So, what are you up to?" he asked, once finished with his pie. Then he nudged her playfully in the side. "You leaving the Library? What has this world come to?"
Immediately her reason for leaving the castle, namely to avoid Tom, popped up in her mind and the smile on Hermione's face died down. Longbottom seemed to have noticed her change of mood as he now eyed her in concern.

"Anything wrong?" he asked gingerly.

Hermione averted her eyes from him. Talking with him about Tom somehow felt wrong. So she just answered with a soft,

"No."

At that Longbottom shifted a bit closer to her before he said, "We are friends, aren't we?"

Hermione looked up at him. "Of course."

"Then you can tell me if something's bothering you."

She sighed before she slowly admitted, "It's Tom."

Not very surprisingly anger washed over Longbottom's face upon hearing the name.

"Is Riddle bothering you?" he asked, ire tinting his voice.

"No," Hermione hastily said. Then she hesitated. "...yes... I don't know."

Now it was Longbottom's turn to sigh. "What did he do this time?"

"It's just... he's always following me around these days."

Longbottom furrowed his brow as he asked cautiously, "And that is scaring you?"

Hermione shook her head. "It makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what he's up to. I mean, sure, he saved my life back then as Grindelwald's soldiers attacked me." A look of worry crossed Longbottom's face. Hermione didn't notice but continued in frustration, "And now he's really nice to me..."

"And that's making you so upset?" Longbottom tried to joke with her, a half-smile tugging at his mouth.

Hermione snickered softly. "Yeah, it's still better than him hitting me, isn't it?"

The half-smile immediately dropped from his face and Longbottom scowled. "For that he'd deserve to be expelled," he grinded out.

"That's just it," she replied. "Why the sudden change of heart? Why's he suddenly going from cold hate to this civil behaviour? I just don't get it."

Longbottom removed his hand from her arm and leaned beside her against the wooden beam.

"I know that he's a slimy Slytherin," he said with a good amount of disgust in his voice, "and those snakes are a dishonest and scheming lot, but don't you think you are reading too much into it?"

"How so?"

"Hermione, I hate to say this, seeing as I think the bastard should be locked away in Azkaban," Longbottom told her seriously. "But it's pretty obvious what he wants from you."
At that she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Is it?"

"Pretty much," Longbottom said reluctantly. Then he reached for the bag and took another slice of pumpkin pie before he continued, "I told you, didn't I? That sooner or later Riddle would regret that he left you."

Hermione stared at him in shock. She hadn't expected something like this from him.

"You think he wants me back?" she asked in disbelief.

He took another bite from his pie and nodded. "Took the evil git long enough to figure it out."

Hermione, still quite shaken, looked up at the green and silver blurs flying high up in the sky. Did Tom really want her back? He was rather clingy lately, wasn't he? But also still very much disgusted with the fact that she was Muggleborn. Hermione knew him and she knew his future. Even considering that he might be honest was a waste of her time. But if he truly felt sorry-

"He doesn't deserve you, Hermione," Longbottom's voice cut through her thoughts.

She turned her head and looked up at his face. There was a small reassuring smile playing around his mouth.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "I'm not saying this because I hate him or because I might like you a little too much."

Here Hermione couldn't help but blush slightly. Longbottom just grinned down at her then he was serious again as he continued,

"I've known Riddle since we started at Hogwarts. In first year, he was really strange – even for a Slytherin. Back then, we've all been silly kids, playing around and not taking anything serious. Not Riddle, though. He didn't have friends at all and he didn't care about it either. No-one liked him. Not even his own housemates. Can't remember a time I ever saw him laughing or anything like that. But I do remember those strange accidents. If anybody annoyed Riddle, you could bet that person was going to get hurt. It was never traced back to him, but it was quite obvious who was responsible."

Longbottom leaned his head back against the wooden beam and ran a hand through his blond hair. Then his blue eyes snapped back at her and he continued in a soft voice,

"As time went by those accidents stopped and Riddle seemed to loosen up. He started interacting with other people; he was being nice and made many friends in his house and in the others, too. Over time, people forgot how he was so strange in first year. If you looked closer, though, Riddle was still the same - closed up and twisted. I mean, you just need to look at his 'best friends'. Avery? He's the biggest asshole I've ever met. Lestrange? He's the worst bully in Hogwarts. And then you have Malfoy, Black, and all those other arrogant snobs."

Worry seeped into Longbottom's gaze as he looked down at her. Then he said, still in that uncharacteristically serious voice, "After Riddle's transformation from freak to most popular guy in the school, the accidents started again. Only worse. People got seriously hurt; cursed with dark magic. And I don't even want to start with that incident with Myrtle last year..." He shifted uncomfortably in his position. Then he muttered softly, "Well, there was no proof, but Riddle's circle of friends was in the focus of suspicion. This time, though, no-one suspected Riddle himself."

"My point is, Hermione," Longbottom said gravely. "That the only difference between that freaky first-year-Riddle and the popular version is that he got better at hiding his crimes. I really think you should stay away from him. I don't hate him because he's a Slytherin and I'm a Gryffindor and we..."
are bound to dislike each other. No, Riddle's dangerous and he would stop at nothing to get what he wants.” Here he eyed her ominously. "And now it seems he wants you."

Hermione plunged into the cool water and swam a few strokes underwater before she surfaced again. Coldness gripped her and stung like a thousand needles on her skin, but it somehow felt good. It cleared her head. She turned on her back and floated in the water. Shortly she wondered how big the Giant Squid was by now. Hopefully not big enough to pull her down.

*Or at least not hungry enough,* she thought and smiled.

She looked up at the blue sky as she floated in the cold water of the Great Lake. Far away, a lone buzzard was gliding over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. The conversation she just had had with Longbottom was still at the forefront of her mind. It somehow bugged her, though she couldn't tell why. He hadn't told her anything new. But with one thing Longbottom had been rather terribly wrong: Tom certainly did *not* want her back.

She didn't know what he wanted but it certainly wasn't his ex-girlfriend.

Hermione started shivering and decided to swim back to the shore. In a few strokes she reached it, climbed out of the water and lay down in the soft grass. Her spot was hidden behind a few bushes and Hermione enjoyed the solitude. The sun shone brightly down on her and she sighed contently. It had been a good idea to pull her bikini out from the old beaded bag and go for a swim.

She was just dozing off as she felt someone sitting down beside her. Her eyes shot open and she turned her head. She found Tom, sitting beside her on the soft grass. He gazed down at her and a frown appeared on his forehead.

"Hullo, Voldemort," Hermione said, while leaning back and closing her eyes again.

Somehow she wasn't really surprised to see him here.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" she heard his voice ask quietly.

"I don't want to forget again," she said lightly, her eyes still closed.

Tom didn't reply anything and Hermione remained lying in the grass. The sun was shining brightly down at her, birds were singing nearby, and she felt sleepy.

After some time, Tom spoke again. He asked, his inflection a little reproachful, "What are you doing here?"

Hermione yawned tiredly. Then she said lazily, "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm just relaxing a bit."

As Tom answered, his voice was sharp. He hissed at her commandingly, "Yes, but certainly not here."

The gruff tone he was using made Hermione open her eyes and look up at him. He was scowling down at her and anger smouldered in his eyes. In face of this outburst of fury Hermione sighed, then she sat up.

"What's the problem?" she asked him coldly.

"The problem is that you are far away from the castle. Alone," Tom snarled at her harshly. "Do you
know how vulnerable you are? Did you forget how those men attacked you?"

"No, I didn't," Hermione responded, her voice was calm but very distanced now. "I'm not going to hide away in the castle for the rest of my days."

Tom pressed his mouth in a thin line and now glared at her darkly with an angry frown between his eyebrows. Suddenly, he reached out for her and grabbed her right forearm. Then he hissed at her enraged,

"You are not wearing your wand holster anymore. You are vulnerable like this."

Hermione had stiffened as Tom had grabbed her. Now she forcefully wrenched her arm away while narrowing her eyes at him. He instantly let go of her as he saw the dark, angry look on her face. Hermione shuffled a little away from him, still glaring at him in suspicion. As he saw her reaction, Tom averted his eyes, looking rather dejected now. Then he mumbled, all anger gone from his voice,

"Sorry."

After a moment Hermione replied stiffly, "It's fine."

Tom peered at her. He hesitated, but then said, now very cautious to not raise his voice again, "But you are really being irresponsible. Those men were able to breach Hogwarts' wards. They had portkeys. It's dangerous for you."

"Maybe," she replied. Then she glanced at him and said, "But I'm not going to let fear rule my life ever again."

"How can you be so reckless?" he chided her.

"Well," Hermione sighed. "It's not exactly a new situation for me, where people try to kill me."

Tom stared at her for a moment, an impenetrable blank mask covering his emotions.

"Who wanted to kill you?" he inquired calmly, though Hermione heard the hints of his upcoming temper.

_You, for one_, she thought, but then just shrugged her shoulders, not caring about his well concealed rage. As she wasn't going to answer anything, he continued to glare at her. Hermione ignored his ire. But then, suddenly, the angry glint left his eyes, and a warm smile appeared on his face. If anything it sparked anxiousness to mount up in her.

The reassuring smile still in place, Tom inquired, his voice an example of innocence, "You didn't have to fight in the war in France, did you?"

Hermione tried to hide her tension as she eyed him suspiciously. A simple enough question, it seemed, but also very loaded. Did she fight in the war against Grindelwald? No, of course not. Though, her cover story said otherwise. But Tom knew her cover story was a big lie, and he knew about her time travel. Well, it had only been a matter of time until he would bring up this little problem, Hermione thought while she continued to scan him.

Then she replied guardedly, "I didn't."

"Well," Hermione said. "It's not exactly a new situation for me, where people try to kill me."
At her answer Tom felt his magic give a violent budge.

"Who wanted to kill you?" He was surprised himself as he managed to ban all fury from his calm voice.

Because in reality he wanted to grab Hermione and shake her until she told him who exactly had threatened to kill her. Then he would hunt them down and see to it that they found an untimely end. His eyes narrowed as she only shrugged her shoulders in reply. His churned up magic rushed through him and the rage spiralled up even further. He needed answers and running into her defensive walls was more than frustrating. If only he could pull his wand. His his magic howled in approval to that thought, Tom breathed in deeply. Cursing her was certainly no option. He couldn't slip up again like he had as he gave her the necklace. Losing his temper around Hermione would only make things worse. He was working on regaining her trust, not making her run away from him. No, he wasn't going to use violence to get what he wanted. He hadn't ended up in Slytherin for nothing after all.

He pasted an innocent expression on his face as he asked, "You didn't have to fight in the war in France, did you?"

Hermione surveyed him sharply, suspicion clearly visible in her eyes. But Tom had expected her to react this way, so he just eyed her patiently waiting for her reply.

"I didn't," she said finally, hesitantly.

Tom scanned Hermione through the corner of his eyes. He was a bit surprised that she easily admitted to her lie. But then again she had already confirmed that she was from the future. Tom remembered to occasion well. During that conversation she had also threatened to get him expelled and had called him pathetic.

He looked over the Great Lake as he inquired casually, "So, you really are from the future?"

"You used my blood with the Ortus Potion, you tell me," came her terse reply.

Tom suppressed a smirk. So, she wanted to play? All the better.

"The potion said you were born in 1979," Tom said airily, almost bored.

"That's right," she all but hissed at him.

The small smirk now grazed his features as he looked at her.

"A time jump over fifty three years," he mused lightly. "That's quite the feat."

Hermione stared at him and he nearly chuckled as he saw the distrust on her face. Then she seemed to recover and said calmly, "Fifty four."

Tom cocked a questioning eyebrow. Hermione sighed and leaned back on her elbows. She looked up at him as she elaborated, "I'm actually eighteen. I came from 1997."

"I see," Tom mused pensively.

His eyes roamed over her body. Hermione was only wearing that strange ...thing which was entirely too revealing to be worn out here where other people might see her. Tom didn't like it at all. His gaze proceeded to wander over her and finally stopped at her right lower leg. The deep wounds had by now turned into white scars which spiralled over her soft skin; a constant reminder of her attack.
Tom's furious magic was almost consuming him completely as he took in the many other scars on her body. He didn't like the fact that others had dared to attack her. He banned the anger from his face as he looked back into her hazel eyes. Hermione had her eyebrows quirked at him. Obviously she had noticed him mustering her body. Tom just smirked at her which provoked a frown to take form on her face.

"Why did you do it?" he finally asked her, now smiling at her. "Why travelling back more than five decades?"

Hermione considered him for a while. Then she stated calmly, "It was an accident."

Tom was surprised that she had actually replied anything, but he was even more mystified by her answer. An accident? He had assumed she had come here to accomplish something; like gathering the Hallows.

"An accident?" he asked, his voice giving nothing away from his inner astonishment. "And what led to this accident?"

Hermione's hazel eyes fell on him and he felt very much frustrated as he found a veneer of detachment on her face. Then she said decidedly, "You've run into a dead end."

Disappointment washed over Tom, but he mastered himself. He had to accept her refusal to tell him anymore. He couldn't do anything about it. Pressure was always the wrong way when dealing with Hermione.

Instead he asked, "How did you do it then? You couldn't have used a time turner. They work in a timeframe of hours; days at the most."

"Again, something I'm not going to tell you," Hermione said curtly. "In fact, I'm not going to tell you anything about the future or my time travel."

Maybe it was time to get a bit more aggressive, Tom decided as he looked at her closed up expression.

"If you don't tell me, then let me guess." Hermione just narrowed her eyes at him. He smiled at her and continued, "You used the Elder Wand."

She still tried to cover up her emotions, but Tom saw her eyes widen slightly. So, he had been right about the wand.

"What… what makes you think that?" she asked, her voice firm, though Tom could hear it shaking ever so slightly.

"Because you were using that wand since you've been here," he replied, his tone perfectly composed.

A calculating glint entered her eyes as she scanned him. "So you think my wand's the Elder Wand?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you stole the wand from me?" she accused sharply.

Tom considered lying, but one glance at her enraged face told him it would be unwise. So, he looked at her guiltily and said, "Yes. I'm sorry."
It really had been a grave mistake as he had attacked her on the Astronomy Tower, Tom thought. He had completely destroyed her trust in him. And restoring it was a lot more difficult.

"Well I hate to inform you that your efforts have been in vain," she said him snippily. "My wand is certainly not the Elder Wand!"

Tom furrowed his brow and stared at her. She appeared to be telling the truth. But he had been so sure. Since he'd met her she had done extraordinary magic and sometimes he had even felt an alien presence mingled in her magic. That disturbance in her magic, it was caused by her using the Elder Wand, wasn't it? On top of that she had just admitted that she did use the Elder Wand to travel back in time. So, she was the owner of that wand. Why did she lie now? As he scanned her face, he couldn't find any traces of a lie there, which confused him even further.

Suddenly, a conversation he had had with Hermione some time ago popped up in his mind. 'This power jumped me and then I woke up here,' she had said. Back then he hadn't known it but with 'here' she had meant the past. 'It changed my magic and never left me again.'

Tom felt excitement flooding him as he could practically see the pieces fall into place. Hermione had used the Elder Wand to travel back in time. During that process, though, something happened that caused her magic to 'change' drastically. Somehow, a strange 'power' had altered her magic. Obviously that power had been the Elder Wand. Peverell's creation had been strong enough to somehow interact with Hermione's own magic during her time travel and had ultimately changed it. The result was that she had incredibly potent magic at her command which even enabled her to break through Hogwarts' wards. Tom guessed that this change of her magic was also the reason that she had lost her magic in the end.

Tom threw a glance at Hermione. She was staring out on the lake, obviously trying to ignore him. A smirk tugged at his mouth. So it was the Elder Wand which had brought about her changed magic and had then stolen her magic? Somehow it hurt his pride that she had been able to hide it from him for so long. Though he needed confirmation. After all, he planned to get her lost magic back. To tamper with a person's magic was dangerous enough on its own. Doing so without knowing all the facts would be downright stupid.

"So, after you used the Elder Wand to travel back in time," he began innocently. "what happened with the wand?"

Her eyes shot at him and widened as she stared at him.

"What do you mean 'what happened with the wand'?" she asked with an endearing touch of panic in her voice.

He smiled at her reassuringly. "You used the wand to get here but you don't have it anymore. I'm just wondering what happened to it."

She shifted uncomfortably as she scanned him, obviously searching for a way out of this. Then she said meekly, "Um... it got left behind?"

"Really?" Tom asked, deliberately letting doubt seep in his voice.

"Really?" he asked and Hermione hated that mocking smirk on his face while he said it.

That exited sheen in his eyes... he didn't know anything, did he? she wondered and felt panic bubbling up in her. Tom already knew almost everything. He knew about her time travel, her lost
magic and her involvement with the Deathly Hallows. She couldn't afford him to know anymore. It already was a mystery why he didn't just crucio her and get it over with. She peered at him and almost cursed as she still saw that self-satisfied smirk on his face. He was obviously on to something. She knew that excited glint in his eyes all too well.

Sure enough he now leaned a bit towards her and whispered in her ear making her shiver. "You know what I think?"

He leaned back and mustered her nonchalantly. Hermione couldn't help but stare at him with wide eyes. Then she just shook her head.

The smirk on his face even widened. Then he said in his smooth voice, "You can't deny that you performed some exceptional magic since you've arrived in the past. Not to say impossible magic."

His smile grew even wider and Hermione felt herself panic. "I think you had a little help from the Elder Wand after all."

Subconsciously, Hermione shied away from him. "I- I told you, I don't have the wand anymore."

The smile on his face transformed into a rather predatory smirk as he said, "Never said you needed the wand to do it."

"What exactly are you insinuating?" she asked, trying and failing to make her voice sound even.

"I am not insinuating anything here," he said. "I am merely saying that whatever power Peverell's wand possessed was strong enough to actually change your magic."

Hermione threw in a breath of air as she heard him. She fervently tried to hide her panic from her face, but the conceited smirk curling up his mouth told her that she was failing miserably. She averted her eyes from him. Well, she shouldn't be so surprised, Hermione thought while trying to ease her quickened breathing. She should have expected Tom to make these connections sooner or later. But now what? Hermione bit down hard on her tongue. Now that he knew almost everything was he going to force the rest from her, too? Her eyes shot back at him, and she found him eyeing her wolfishly.

"What do you intend to do now?" she hissed at him, a cutting edge in her voice.

She wasn't going to let him walk all over her. The smug expression melted from Tom's face as she glared at him challengingly.

"I don't intend to do anything," he said in a startlingly soothing voice.

He extended a hand towards her which made Hermione tense, but he didn't touch her. He just gently poked the coppery pendant, hanging around her neck.

"I told you, I don't want to harm you."

She still stared at him guardedly but she felt how her body involuntarily relaxed at his words.

'Riddle's dangerous,' Longbottom's voice hissed at her. She shouldn't let her guard down in Tom's presence. Longbottom was right after all. Tom was evil and dark.

And a liar, Hermione thought as she looked up at that soft glint in Tom's eyes. It made a shiver run down her spine so she avoided his eyes and again stared out at the Great Lake.

For a while, neither of them said anything. It was Hermione who broke the silence as she asked,
"What happened to Myrtle last year?"

She had no idea why she had posed that question, but through the corner of her eyes she could see Tom stiffen slightly. She turned her head and considered him. By now an impenetrable mask covered his every emotion as he met her gaze. His grey eyes were sealed up and there was no telling what was going on behind them. At this moment he just looked cold and unapproachable.

Nothing new, Hermione sighed inwardly. The impression got even worse as a sinister smirk started to tug at Tom's mouth.

"Who told you about that incident?" he asked in his milky voice.

"Marc," Hermione replied brusquely. She couldn't keep all accusation from her face as she stared at him. "What happened to Myrtle?"

"Hmm," he made. Then he cocked his head to the side and said, seemingly unruffled by her question, "Why do I get the impression that you already know?"

Hermione just narrowed her eyes at him and threw caution to the wind as she asked, "Did you kill her?"

If he was surprised by her question, it certainly wasn't mirrored on his calm face.

"No."

His lie sparked an unpleasant feeling in her. She didn't think it was disappointment, because she didn't expect anything from Tom anymore. Still, that feeling of desolation, she couldn't quite explain. She was just dismissing this whole conversation as a lapse in her decision to never again talk with Tom as he spoke again.

"I didn't kill her," he said unemotionally. "But I didn't save her either. She simply was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Hermione stared at him, pondering his answer. It was quite startling how absolutely cruel and unfeeling he was when he spoke of that person he had caused to die.

"Maybe you didn't plan to kill her," she finally replied in a soft voice. "But it is certainly your fault that she is dead." She hesitated only shortly before she asked, "Do you regret that she lost her life because of you?"

Tom looked at her, not answering anything. There still was not even a speck of emotion visible in his eyes or on his face and Hermione started to wonder if it really was a mask. Maybe this was his true self. No regret? No remorse?

"No."

Hermione stared at him for a long time, not knowing how to react. His voice had been so uncaring, so devoid of anything warm. But this, she realized, was probably the most honest conversation she ever had with him. She didn't know if that was a good thing or just sad. But he was honest…

"Why did you do it?" she asked cautiously. "Was she a Muggleborn?"

Tom just shrugged his shoulders. "No idea."

Hermione was taken aback. "You don't know?"
"No," he admitted lightly. "She was already dead why should I investigate?"

"I see," she breathed.

Tom didn't add anything and Hermione didn't feel the need to pursue the matter anymore. She was lost in her thoughts, mulling over what she had gotten from him and how much she had given away in return.

It came as a shock that Tom had really been honest. There hadn't been a lie twisting up his words. Hermione knew, because she knew about his ventures into the Chamber of Secrets and about Myrtle's death which had resulted from it. It would have been easy for him to have lied. He wouldn't even have to lie actually. He could have simply refrained from saying anything. He had given her the truth instead. Why? She didn't know. But there now was an inexplicable feeling of relief swelling inside her and she was hit by a swoop of giddiness. Had his words invoked this?

Hermione was startled out of her reverie by Tom's voice. She was surprised by the demanding streak in his tone, "So you were speaking with Longbottom about Myrtle?"

He glared at her, obviously not at all content with the fact that she discussed such things with her Gryffindor friend.

"Well, he is my friend," she said, not knowing why she needed to explain herself.

An angry frown appeared between Tom's eyebrows.

Then he demanded to know, "What else did you discuss?"

"Lots of things, actually," Hermione responded, slightly put off balance by his sudden forcefulness.

"Pff, friend!" he hissed in barely suppressed anger. "What else did he say? Did he warn you away from me?"

Hermione eyed his enraged face and felt strangely assuaged by it. The giddiness was back as she grinned at him.

"I don't need him to know that you are trouble."

Tom didn't seem to like her answer at all, judging by that annoyed glint in his eyes. Hermione didn't care, though. She just stretched her arms, yawned and then laid down on the grass. The sun shone warmly down at her. It wasn't long, and she felt very tired again. Strange how his presence didn't keep her more on edge. But it was so comfortable lying here on the grass and soon Hermione was dozing off.

"Hermione?" Tom's voice called her back.

"Yes?" she said, while looking at him confused.
Tom seemed to scan her bikini, and Hermione saw a disapproving frown on his face.

"What if someone had seen you?" he then asked reproachfully.

It was all so strange that Hermione giggled softly as she saw that scandalised expression on his face. This was something that had bugged him since he had seen her lying in the grass, wasn't it?

"I know, it's none of my business," Tom conceded. Then his eyes again wandered over her bikini, and he couldn't hold himself back. "But you are almost naked," he chided her. "What if somebody walked by? It's not that improbable. I mean, I walked by."

"Maybe," Hermione said amused. "But you've been searching for me, haven't you?"

A guilty look crossed his face, but it wasn't able to dispel his scandalised expression.

"You can't walk around wearing almost nothing," he blurted out.

Hermione couldn't hold herself back any longer and laughed. A sour look crossed Tom's face.

"This is not lingerie," she informed him while still giggling. "It's a bikini."

Tom sceptically furrowed his brow and Hermione sighed.

"I thought they've come into fashion already," she mused, then shrugged her shoulders and said, "I might be wrong, but I'm pretty sure it was sometime during the forties. Maybe they haven't yet reached Europe."

Tom looked confused, but he still eyed her turquoise bikini with a disapproving frown. Hermione had to chuckle again.

"They let you wear something like that in the future? In public?" he asked indignantly while glaring at her bikini.

"No-one lets me wear anything. I choose my clothes myself, thank you very much," she told him, still amused by the indignation on his face.

Tom stared at her, obviously not at all thinking she would make a good decision.

"I wonder how you will handle the sixties," she whispered teasingly.

Then she reached for her uniform, lying on the grass. She slipped into her blouse while telling Tom, "It's rather late anyway. I'm going back to the castle."

She got up and moved into her skirt. Tom watched her while she got dressed, then he asked softly, "Can I accompany you back?"

Hermione turned around to him again. He was still sitting in the grass and now scanned her intently. She didn't know what to say. She still didn't trust him at all. Now that he knew even more about her he was making her downright scared actually. She should just yell an angry 'NO!' at him and then run away. To her own frustration she found herself shrugging at him instead. Tom obviously took it as a 'yes' as he now smiled at her and got up from his place to stand beside her.

Later that day, Hermione sat in the library, working over her Herbology essay. The essay, though, wasn't due in about a week's time and she knew very well that it was nothing more than a distraction.
She tried very hard to keep her thoughts away from a certain Slytherin. It was pointless, as usual…

It made her stomach twist uncomfortably every time she remembered how much Tom now knew about her. Now he even had suspicions about the Elder Magic. While she pondered his possible plans and how his ill intends could involve her she felt another feeling stealing over her. She tried to drown it in her homework, she tried to ignore it and push it away, even pondering Tom's evil plans was better than admitting to this feeling. In the back of her mind, though, she had to concede that the feeling existed and she was very afraid of it.

It was doubt.

Like a slow-acting poison it infected her thoughts. Hermione felt her own resolution falter and this weakness scared her. Since Tom had saved her from Grindelwald's soldiers. He had ceased his cruel behaviour towards her. Hermione had been convinced that his change of heart wasn't at all honest. She still was. But now, ever so slowly, she couldn't help but feel misplaced doubt growing inside of her. It got worse and worse with every conversation she had with Tom. It angered her as much as it scared her. She couldn't allow herself to again get entangled in his lies.

Her hand wandered hesitantly to her chest and her fingers clasped the pendant that hung on a coppery chain from her neck. Why was she wearing that? Every part of her screamed at her to get rid of Tom's present. Yet, something stayed her hand.

_Maybe he put a confusion enchantment on the necklace_, Hermione thought disgruntled. Though she knew that wasn't the case. She knew enough about mind-altering charms to be able to tell as much. Still she wished, because Hermione had no idea how to treat Tom if he wasn't lying…

She growled as that thought touched her mind, grabbed her quill and forcibly pulled her thoughts away from Tom and back to her Herbology essay. Just as she managed to lose herself in the different uses of darnel a pesky voice interrupted her rudely.

"Why do you waste time learning?"

Hermione scowled and looked up, just to find Melanie Nicolls standing before her desk. Just the one she needed right about now, Hermione thought sarcastically.

Nicolls eyed her with unveiled distaste on her face. Then she drawled, "It's not like you can ever achieve anything with your family background. So why waste your time learning?"

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "No-one else to annoy?"

Suddenly ire glittered in Nicolls' pretty eyes and she snarled, "What did you do with Tom at the Slug Club? Why did you two disappear?"

Hermione suppressed a groan. Nicolls was rather tiresome. So, Hermione just smiled up at her, knowing that it would enrage the other girl even more.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she finally jeered.

Hermione could instantly see that this was going to push Nicolls over the edge. The other girl glared daggers at her, her eyes narrowed to slits, and she practically quivered in anger. She even reached for her wand. Hermione sighed tiredly and dropped the mocking smile. She didn't have the nerve to deal with Nicolls' misguided jealousy.

"Sit down," she instead ordered.
Nicolls' anger didn't abate but the severity in Hermione's voice at least dampened her temper tantrum and she plopped down on the chair, still glowering darkly. Hermione laid her quill down on the table before she mustered the other girl.

"What do you actually want from me?" she finally asked calmly. This time no mock accompanied her words.

Of course Nicolls' reply wasn't as polite and she snapped furiously, "I want you to keep away from Tom."

Hermione released a frustrated puff of air.

"That much is clear," she remarked composed. "But why in Merlin's name are you so hell-bent on getting Riddle?"

Nicolls seethed as she stared at Hermione. Then she replied scathingly, "Because a Mudblood like you doesn't deserve him. We both know he wants me."

Hermione ran a frustrated hand through her curly hair as she looked at the livid girl in front of her.

"Listen, Nicolls. I don't really like you," Hermione said in a tightly controlled voice. "Nevertheless, I want to give you some advice: Just forget Tom." She ignored the indignation on the other girl's face and continued, "I know you are not completely stupid and you are a halfway talented witch, so why don't you go and search for another boyfriend? I'm sure there are a fair bunch of Purebloods in Slytherin who would be willing to overlook your character."

"You think I'm not good enough for Tom?" Nicolls spat angrily.

"No," Hermione eyed the other girl calmly. "I'm just saying you can save yourself a lot of trouble if you stay clear off him."

"So you can have him for yourself?" the Slytherin blustered in indignation.

Hermione rolled her eyes and said impatiently, "This isn't about me. I am merely telling you that it might be better for you to give up on him."

"Are you stupid?" Nicolls leaned a bit forward in her chair and glared at Hermione darkly. "Do you think I'll fall for this?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" Slowly Hermione was getting angry herself. "Tom is not interested in you. He is just playing around and using you. I've never seen him do anything else but that. You really don't want someone like him as a boyfriend. You can do better."

Hermione felt her temper bubbling up. In frustration she noted that her anger wasn't really directed at Nicolls. It was directed at Tom and at her own irresponsible emotions. Tom was manipulative and a liar! And Nicolls was completely wrapped up in his lies, just like Hermione herself had been.

*I am not going to fall for it again!*

"Listen here, Mudblood," Nicolls hissed. "I won't say this again. You stay away from Tom."

Hermione snorted at that poor excuse for a threat. "Do you really think Tom needs you to protect him?" she asked wryly.

"Tom's way too polite to tell you how much you annoy him," Nicolls said haughtily.
Hermione couldn't hold back anymore and had to snigger at the delusional girl.

"You don't know him at all, do you?"

Nicolls narrowed her eyes at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders disinterestedly. "Just that I don't think Tom even knows how to write politeness."

With that Nicolls' face turned purple.

"Stop insulting him, you ugly bitch!" she thundered at Hermione. "Why are you still creeping around Tom like a stray dog searching for a new master?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows in indignation. "I am searching for a lot of things," she finally answered in a controlled voice. "But certainly not for a master."

Nicolls completely ignored her and hissed aggressively. "You've been nothing but a short amusement for him. No-one in their right mind would want to spend time with you." A haughty sneer appeared on her face as she leaned in to Hermione and whispered. "Tom doesn't need a dirty little slut drooling all over him."

Hermione didn't reply anything. She just reached for her quill and the parchment with her Herbology essay, calmly rolled it up and stowed everything away in her bag then she got up from her chair. Before she walked away she looked down at Nicolls.

"Okay, do whatever you want," Hermione told the girl in a collected voice. "But you can't say I didn't warn you."

Anger twisted up Nicolls' pretty face as she heard it, but Hermione didn't see it. She turned around and walked out of the library.

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Seriously, Tom had no idea what had gotten into him. A blank mask covered his face, but underneath he was scowling darkly. This is going to end badly, he thought irritated as he watched that annoying twinkle in his transfiguration professor's eyes.

"And what makes you think I even have that book?" Dumbledore asked in a decidedly too innocent voice.

Tom suppressed an angry growl, but answered in a relatively polite voice, "Hermione told me, sir."

"I see," the professor replied airily.

Then he just stared out of the window, whistling a serene tune. Tom breathed in slowly to get his raging magic under control again. If only he could draw his wand. He bit on his tongue to stop himself from screaming a few colourful insults at the older wizard.

"So, do you still have the book," Tom finally hissed so sharply that he wondered if he had reverted back to Parseltongue.

Obviously not, as the annoying smile on Dumbledore's face widened.

"As a matter of fact said book indeed remains to be in my possession," he informed Tom cheerfully. "But I am surprised Hermione told you. I had the impression you two didn't get along very well
anymore."

Meddlesome old fool!

"Whatever gave you that impression?" Tom smiled right back at him.

"The last time I saw you two out of class, you were trying to curse Ms. DeCerto," came Dumbledore's answer, mirth twisting his voice unbearably.

The smile on Tom's face started to hurt and he knew Dumbledore could look right through it.

"We got over our differences."

"Hmm," the older man made as he eyed Tom interested. "Hermione told me something entirely different the last time I spoke with her."

"We are right in the middle of reconciliation," Tom offered as explanation. It wasn't even a complete lie. More of a half-truth, actually. At least he wanted to reconcile.

"I see," Dumbledore sounded not very much convinced. "Dare I ask why you need Peverell's assistance to apologize?"

"I need the book to help Hermione," Tom replied stiffly.

Dumbledore's hand skimmed over his beard as he considered Tom over his half-moon spectacles. If only I could curse that old coot! The professor opened a drawer in his desk and removed a brown leather book from it. Tom's eyes narrowed hungrily at the small book.

"You know that Hermione got attacked because that book had been in her possession, don't you Tom?" Dumbledore said.

"It didn't escape my notice," he replied curtly.

"So, you want me to give this book to you, a student, and risk you getting attacked, too?"

Tom nearly rolled his eyes. Sure, he thought sarcastically, Dumbledore is worried about my well-being.

"Somehow I don't think you would lose any sleep over it." Tom smiled coolly.

A strangely sad look appeared on Dumbledore's face and the twinkle left his eyes. Tom had to suppress the need to gag at this disgusting display of emotion.

"I deeply regret that our relationship seemed to be tarnished from the very beginning," the professor said gravely. "These differences stem from mistakes on both sides."

No, just on your part, Tom thought irritated but didn't voice it loud.

"Why not mark the change of our relationship by giving me that book?" he suggested.

Tom nearly raised a surprised eyebrow as Dumbledore now stared at him as if really considering giving him the book. The older wizard leaned back in his chair and eyed Tom for a while. Then he said, his tone suddenly business-like,

"If you expect me to trust you with that book, you have to offer me something in return."
Tom pressed his lips into a thin line as he considered Dumbledore uncomfortably.

"What do you want?" Tom asked slowly, warily.

A smile appeared on Dumbledore's face which made Tom want to pull his wand.

"Let's talk about the Chamber of Secrets."

That made Tom nearly jump to his feet and run out of the office. He composed himself, though, and stayed.

"Why should I know anything about the Chamber, sir," Tom said in his best innocent-orphan voice.

"Please Tom, don't insult my intelligence by denying you had anything to do with that incident last year." Dumbledore eyed him sternly. "I know that you opened the Chamber and that you are responsible for Myrtle's death."

Again that stupid girl - the second time this day, Tom thought miffed. There was no way he would admit to anything. If he did, it would give the old coot a lot of leverage. After all, Tom had killed Myrtle. If that wasn't worth a one-way ticket to Azkaban, then nothing was.

"Of course we don't have to talk about it," Dumbledore offered loftily.

Tom felt sick as he saw amusement shining in the other wizard's eyes. Anger ripped at him as he glared at Dumbledore. He couldn't give in here. He would be delivering himself on a silver platter if he did.

As Dumbledore was only met by tense silence he said, "If there's nothing to discuss, I suggest you return to your common room, Tom."

Tom clenched his teeth as he felt his magic now furiously rushing through him, searching for a way out to attack the other wizard. He breathed in deeply to suppress his violent temper. Then he said in a composed, but frosty voice,

"I still need that book, professor."

"I see," Dumbledore smiled at him indulgently and cocked his head expectantly to the side.

Tom didn't reply anything he just glared at Dumbledore darkly. The professor on the other hand continued to smile unconcerned. Tom knew if he didn't make any concessions Dumbledore would never give him the book and he wouldn't be able to help Hermione without the book.

"Supposing it was me opening the Chamber," Tom said cautiously. "what would you do?"

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and eyed him cautiously. "what would you do?"

"Well, as I wouldn't have any proof, aside from your confession, there wouldn't be much I could do," he said innocently.

The innocent act, Tom didn't buy. Dumbledore was a lot of things, but a harmless old man was not among them. He already knew too much about Tom. With admitting the Chamber incident Tom risked expulsion or even a life in prison. On second thought, Azkaban might even be better than having to return to the orphanage, Tom thought wryly as he eyed Dumbledore in distaste. This time around, Hermione certainly wouldn't save Tom from having to return there. But he needed the book. The Elder Wand had changed Hermione's magic. This was obviously the reason her magic was now...
gone. He needed Peverell's manuscript to learn more about the Elder Wand.

"You spoke about something in return for the book." Tom asked slowly. "What might that be?"

"The truth." The damn man still smiled at Tom. Tom breathed in deeply, then he said, "The truth is only a point of view."

"How Slytherin of you," Dumbledore returned unaffected. Tom's hands clenched tightly around the armrests of his chair as he saw a calculating look crossing the professor's face.

"Indeed, just a point of view," the teacher mused. "You know, in my point of view opening the Chamber of Secrets has been a grave mistake. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course, sir," Tom pressed out. He just wanted to yell at Dumbledore now. Grab him by his shoulders and smash his face into the table in front of him. Repeatedly. Opening the Chamber certainly had not been a mistake! It had been a great achievement. Maybe that little girl had died. Whatever.

Dumbledore then spoke again, "Shouldn't we do everything in our power to prevent it from being opened again?"

"Yes, sir," Tom said, fighting for composure. Dumbledore again smiled at him and Tom could only pray he wouldn't lose control over his furious magic.

"But we have digressed," the professor said. "If it's not the truth you can provide me with in return for the book, then I want something else."

"What do you want?" Tom inquired.

"A promise."

"What promise?"

"I want you to promise that you will never again enter the Chamber of Secrets," Dumbledore said, all jocoseness left from his voice. "You will never in any way use the Chamber's power."

Tom stared at the professor. "I never entered the Chamber. It would-"

"Then you lose nothing through that pledge," Dumbledore cut over him.

Tom couldn't give up on the Chamber. It was Slytherin's legacy. There still were so many mysteries hidden there. He had planned to open it again, maybe in his seventh and last year. And what about the Basilisk? That was a very powerful familiar. Tom didn't want to relinquish the power of the snake. It was a centuries old, deeply magical creature and it was bound to Tom. The Chamber of Secrets was rightfully his. It had taken him an eternity to open it. Why should he promise to never use it again? As if on cue, an image of Hermione rushed through Tom's mind. He needed the book to understand what had happened to her magic.

"Give me that promise," he heard Dumbledore's irritatively patronizing voice. "and I will lend that book to you."
"For how long?" Tom asked and knew as soon as he posed the question that he would yield.

The triumphant glint in Dumbledore's eyes told him that the professor knew as well.

"I give you until Sunday, Tom."

Tom's eyes widened. "That is not enough," he complained.

"Until Sunday," Dumbledore insisted. "And don't try to make a copy. I will know if you do."

Tom's eyes glistened with fury as he stared at the professor. Four days to read that book, in exchange for the Chamber?

"Do you promise?" Dumbledore asked innocently.

Tom glanced at him. There was an infuriating smile on the professor's face. He really didn't want to give up on the Chamber. It was one of the few tangible links he had to his family. It was imbued with Slytherin's power and belonged to Tom. His gaze reluctantly wandered to the small book. It was ridiculous, what the professor proposed. The power of Slytherin for that tiny book?

Tom shortly closed his eyes. And then he said in a quiet voice, "I promise."

Instantly, he could feel traces of Dumbledore's magic touching his body. The magic prickled uncomfortably on his skin. Tom recognized it. It was old magic; a powerful curse. He shuddered as the feeling lingered on his skin. Breaking that oath was possible, but not easy and certainly not advisable. The amusement was twinkling in Dumbledore's eyes and Tom could barely restrain himself now. He longed to reach for his wand.

Dumbledore could surely see those murderous thoughts mirrored on Tom's face but he didn't comment. He just took that small book, lying on the table in front of him, and offered it to Tom. Tom accepted it and then stared at the insignificant-looking book in his hands. He opened it to the first page.

*I, Ignatius Peverell, devote this work to my two brethren Evander and Oleander.*

The next few days passed without any occurrences. Hermione still thought about leaving Hogwarts. She didn't really want to go, as the castle somehow was a connection to her life in the future, but she didn't know what else to do. Her lost magic was now almost impossible to hide. It was a miracle no-one else than Tom had noticed yet. Though, she had seen Lupin stare at her suspiciously during their last Transfiguration class. What added to her already nervous mood was the fact that she hadn't seen Tom at all since she had spoken with him by the Great Lake. He hadn't even shown up to his classes. In fact, he seemed to have completely disappeared and even missed mealtimes in the Great Hall. His absence made her quite anxious. She was convinced it had something to do with her. He probably planned something to finally bring her down. This was another reason for her to leave Hogwarts as fast as possible, but she somehow couldn't bring herself to really do it. Instead she decided to hide away in the Gryffindor common room. It was already Sunday as Hermione sat in the common room with her friends.

Right now she was sitting on a soft couch beside Longbottom. Lupin and Weasley were sitting on armchairs nearby with a table and a board of wizard's chess between them. Weasley had his brow furrowed in concentration as he contemplated the chess board. Lupin leaned back in his chair and waited for his friend's next move.
"So," Lupin said turned to Hermione. "Did you speak with Dumbledore again?"

Hermione's gaze wandered to him and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She knew quite well what exactly Lupin wanted to know. Her friends had been very concerned ever since they found out about Grindelwald's interest in her.

"Yeah," Hermione told him. "We talked after Transfiguration."

"What did he come up with?" Longbottom inquired.

"Obviously he's strengthened the wards," she told them. "And all incoming Portkeys are blocked. He told me that Dippet wasn't at all content with that."

"So, old Dumbledore outvoted the Headmaster once again," Weasley grinned.

"Yup," Hermione nodded now smiling herself.

"Then you're not in danger anymore?" Longbottom asked concerned.

"I'm not so sure," she replied. "Grindelwald seems to be kinda inventive, doesn't he?"

"Yes. You should be very cautious, Hermione," Lupin reminded gravely.

She threw him a small smile. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll definitely-"

She stopped abruptly as her eyes were drawn to the entrance to the common room. Tom had just now entered the room and was walking over to her. Hermione noticed the whispers starting around her as the other students recognized him.

"What's he doing here?" Longbottom hissed angrily.

"No idea," Hermione said distractedly while she still stared at Tom.

She furrowed her brow as she took in his appearance. He looked terrible. His normally so perfect hair was standing at odd angles from his head and looked like he hadn't brushed it in a week. Obviously he hadn't shaved either. And his eyes were red, though not in the scary crimson red but rather in the no-sleep-in-days red. There were even dark bags under his eyes. His clothes were a mess, too. His white shirt was rumpled and not tucked in. His green and silver tie hung loosely around his neck and he hadn't even bothered to put on his green sleeveless pullover nor his black robes which were both part of the uniform. As he finally stopped in front of her, Hermione blinked up at him in confusion. He looked dead on his feet and she wondered what exactly he'd been up to.

"Hermione," he said and even his voice sounded tired. "Do you have time? I need to speak with you."

She still stared up at him in bewilderment.

"Er..." was all she could say right now.

Fortunately Longbottom cut in for her as he blustered at Tom, "Hermione doesn't want to talk to people like you!"

Tom turned to the Gryffindor before he snapped tartly, "That's not for you to decide!"

Oh, touchy, Hermione thought as she heard the aggressive tone of his voice. He really seemed to be in a rather foul mood. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alone with him right now.
Tom turned to her again and said in a perfectly nice tone, "Please, it's really important."

…and bipolar. Hermione frowned at him. Then she again took in his more than messy appearance. Whatever happened to him? Her curiosity peaked, she nodded at him.

"Okay."

"Hermione!" Longbottom protested indignantly.

She glanced at his enraged face.

"I'll be fine," she soothed. "Don't worry."

Then she got up from the sofa and looked expectantly at Tom. He seemed to be relieved that she had agreed to accompany him and now made a movement as if to grab her hand. In the last moment he reconsidered and his arm dropped back to his side. Then he turned and walked over to the exit. Still bewildered, Hermione followed him. He led her out of the common room and a few corridors away. Then he entered a room. Hermione hesitated shortly but then followed behind. The room was rather small and stuffy with only one window.

In the meantime Tom had walked over to an old sofa and tiredly plopped down on it. Again, Hermione hesitated, but in the end her Gryffindor bravery won out and she cautiously walked over to him. She didn't sit down on the sofa beside him, but chose the moth-bitten armchair opposite from him. A small side table separated them.

"So?" she asked while eying him suspiciously. "What's this all about?"

Tom's tired eyes blinked at her. He put a strained smile on his face as he replied, "I've been wondering about your missing magic."

Hermione stiffened as she heard that. Of course, she had known he would want to know more about her magic, but it still made her incredibly nervous.

"Oh?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I racked my brain as to how that's possible."

She longingly glanced back at the exit of the room, not really liking the topic of their conversation.

"The loss of a person's magic is a very rare occurrence to begin with," Tom continued. "If a person is born with magic, then that magic is part of their being. Separating those parts is very difficult and takes a great deal of power."

"In your case there are a lot of events that could have caused it," he smiled at her. "There's your use of the Elder Wand, the subsequent change of your magic and of course your time travelling."

Hermione breathed in to calm down her racing pulse. Then she asked, opting for a firm voice, "What do you actually want from me?"

Tom chuckled tiredly. "Always so impatient." Then his face grew serious and he said, "I want to get your magic back."

Hermione stared at him with huge eyes.

"You… what?"
"Well, your magic is gone," Tom smirked at her. "So I want to help you regain it."

She continued staring at him owlishly.

"Why?"

Here Tom sighed. A rather rueful expression crossed his face as he said, "Because it's partly my fault you lost it."

"You?" she said incredulous. Before she could stop herself she blurted out, "But I thought the Elder Wand..."

"Well, the Elder Wand is certainly part of the reason," he said.

Tom then reached for his pant pocket and pulled a book out of it. Hermione couldn't believe her eyes as she recognized that book.

Tom flipped through the small book as he said, "As I didn't know much about the Elder Wand, I had to read this first."

"Peverell's manuscript?" Hermione asked still put off balance. Then an accusing streak entered her voice as she continued, "How'd you get that? I gave it back to Dumbledore."

Tom peered at her and smirked as he saw her angry face.

"Yes, and I got it from him. But never mind that."

"You stole it from him?"

His smirk widened as he heard that shocked tone in her voice.

"Not very high expectations you have in me, Hermione." As she only answered with a glare he supplied, "I actually asked him to give it to me."

"And what did you have to give him in return?" she asked suspiciously.

Tom furrowed his brow as if he was angered by the question. But then he answered, "Nothing you have to bother yourself with."

He comfortably leaned back on the sofa and flashed her a smile.

"Now that that's cleared up, let's get back to your magic."

Hermione didn't reply. He didn't seem to be offended by it but just continued, "As I understood it, your magic somehow changed as you used the Elder Wand. Is that true?"

He eyed her inquisitively. She just nodded at him. With that Tom continued,

"I thought that is rather impossible. I've never heard of a wand changing its owner's magic."

His fingers absentmindedly drummed on Peverell's book which lay in his lap as he seemed to ponder something. Then his eyes snapped back at her and he asked, "Did you read the part where he writes about the binding spells he used on the wand?"

"I... I read it," Hermione said, somehow it still hurt her pride that she hadn't understood Peverell's manuscript. "But I kinda didn't get what he was saying."
A smirk now took form on Tom's face and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. But then he said, "It's no wonder you couldn't understand. Because Peverell is one self-important jerk." Tom took the book and waved it at Hermione angrily while saying, "I mean, in every second sentence he's just writing about how brilliant he is and how he is so superior to everybody else."

He snorted dismissively as he threw the book down on the table between them.

"If he would have stopped to be such a vain prick and had written down the real important stuff, then you wouldn't have to guess half the time what he is talking about."

Tom sighed and leaned back on the couch. Then his eyes wandered from the book on the table back to Hermione.

"The creation of the Elder Wand was divided into three steps. First, Peverell created a magical object by transferring parts of his own magic into a piece of wood. In the next stage, he cast several binding spells unto the wood to amplify the connection between magic and wood. That is something he didn't really describe," Tom cast a dark glare at the book lying on the table before he looked back at Hermione and continued, "So, I'm not completely sure what binding spells he used. However, as a result his magic was now deeply embedded into the wood."

"In his third step, Peverell used this wood and turned it into a wand. That is actually something that shouldn't have worked. And it's something he, again, didn't really explain in his book. Theoretically, it is impossible for a wand to have magic of its own. That's just against the nature of a wand, which should only direct and concentrate magic. I have no idea how Peverell did it," Tom sighed a little in frustration.

Then he continued rather condescendingly, "But as he didn't describe it in his book and usually likes to brag about his feats, I think that Peverell didn't really understand it either. My theory is that his binding spells were so strong that they completely altered the properties of the wood. If his magic had been less tightly connected with the wood, the whole thing would have been unstable and wouldn't have been able to take all the spells necessary to create a wand."

"It still was pure chance that everything worked out and Peverell didn't just blow himself up. However lucky he was, though, the product was a wand with magic of its own. Something like a cross between magical object and wand. The only downside was that the many binding spells made the wand hard to handle. As a result the wand only serves one master. Peverell accepted that by-product only, because he never intended to let anyone but himself use his wand."

Tom's eyes focused on Hermione and she jumped as a rather predatory smirk took form on his face.

"Now we're getting to the interesting part," he purred at her. "Although the symbiosis of magic and wand is the heart of the Elder Wand's power, I think that you somehow managed to break that connection. You freed Peverell's magic from the wand. Then his magic entered you and changed your own magic."

He cocked an expectant eyebrow at her. Hermione just stared back at him.

"I guess it was the whole time travel incident that triggered it. Am I right?" he asked, obviously amused by her mounting panic.

"Actually, I broke the wand in two," Hermione finally admitted meekly. "And that started the whole thing."

Tom stared at her perplexed, but then he chuckled. "That's even more impossible. You broke the
Unbeatable Wand. It's almost funny."

Hermione glared at him. Tom still grinned amused as he continued, "So, you broke the wand, set Peverell's magic free and then absorbed it into your body."

He paused, the grin melted from his face and he eyed her strangely. For the first time during this conversation he looked unsure of himself.

After a while he said hesitantly, "You remember as we- er… as I attacked you on parents' day?"

Hermione nodded, a dark look on her face. That was the day she had stolen the Invisibility cloak from the Potters. As she had apparated back to Hogwarts, Tom had ambushed her. They had duelled.

"Then you also remember that during that duel I temporarily separated your magic from your body?" Tom asked while eyeing her warily, just as if he expected her to snap at him any moment now.

Hermione considered doing just that but then she again nodded at him curtly.

"Back then you broke my spells and pulled your own magic back to your body. I didn't know it back then but now I assume you used Peverell's magic to be able to do it."

"Yes," Hermione said frostily. "How is this whole thing connected with my lost magic?"

"The problem occurred as Peverell's magic clashed with your own magic outside your body. At that point in time, your magic wasn't bound to you, as I had temporarily disrupted that connection, and Peverell's magic has never really been bound to you in the first place. Those two forces collided, fused together and formed something new while being unconnected with you. It is not really surprising that this new power refuses to work for you."

"My magic fused with the Elder Magic?" There was a sinking feeling in Hermione's stomach. "So, I'll never be able to use magic again?"

"No no," Tom quickly assuaged. "I think I can fix it. All I need to do is create a link between the new magic and your body."

"Really?" Hermione scanned him doubtfully. "You think you can do it?"

"Yes," Tom said hesitantly. "It should work."

As she saw his insecurity she asked, "Is there something wrong."

"I'm not sure," Tom said slowly. But then he admitted, "I don't know how Peverell's magic is going to react to my manipulations. Even though his magic melted with yours, Peverell's binding spells are still in use and linked to the wand. I wouldn't dare to overcome the binding spells, they're the only thing holding Peverell's magic together and making it controllable."

Hermione now stared at him with wide eyes. This didn't sound good at all. It actually sounded like she would never get her magic back.

"Don't worry," Tom reassured as he saw Hermione's expression. "I have a plan. Though there might be a problem."

"What?"

"The problem lies in the nature of the binding spells," Tom said cautiously. "They are wrapped
around Peverell's magic and their purpose is to connect the magic to a medium. Previously it was the Elder Wand now I'll try to link those spells to you. Problem is Peverell's magic can only be connected to one medium. So, if it's bound to you and you try to handle that magic by using another wand, it might not work."

"But... but then, how am I supposed to do magic?" Hermione asked.

"That's the catch," Tom said. "I don't know."

Hermione stared at him anxiously.

"Tom, I..." she whispered softly. "I... why are you doing this? Why do you want to help me?"

He tilted his head to one side as he scanned her.

"I think you know why," he replied in an equally soft voice.

Then he reached for the small book lying on the table and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Before we try getting your magic back," he said, his voice strong and confident again. "I need to return the book to the old codger."

He yawned before he added, "And I need to get a few hours of sleep. How about we meet at nine before the Come-And-Go room?"

He caught that unsure expression on her face and rolled his eyes.

"Before you ask, no, I am not going to try to hurt you. You'll be perfectly safe."

Without waiting for her reply he got up from the sofa and yawned again as he shuffled over to the door.

"Don't forget," he said over his shoulder. "We meet at nine."

Then he exited the room and left Hermione to her confused thoughts.

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This is totally insane.

The thought stubbornly swirled through Hermione's head as she left the common room. It was already a quarter past nine and Hermione had spent the last few hours sitting in the common room and convincing herself that she didn't want to trust Tom. Still, she found herself slowly walking towards the Room of Requirements. This whole change in Tom's behaviour, his sudden gentleness, maybe he had planned for this culmination of events right from the very start. Maybe he had wanted to lure her into the Room of Requirements all along. Hermione swallowed nervously as she turned into another hallway which would bring her closer to exactly that room. Every instinct was screaming at her to turn back, but she didn't. She didn't know what held her back. It could be that small grain of doubt she could feel growing inside of her, though she doubted it. Maybe she just wanted to prove to herself once and for all that Tom couldn't be trusted. By running into his trap, she would finally be able to bury the treacherous doubt.

Hermione could feel her heart stabbing her chest as she entered the corridor where the Room of Requirements was situated. She faltered in her steps as she saw Tom. He was casually leaning against the wall. She noticed that his hair wasn't so messy anymore and he had obviously found the time to shave in the meantime. His clothes were in better shape too. He looked rather handsome in his sleek uniform. As he heard her steps he looked up. A smile immediately grazed his features as he
recognized her and he pushed away from the wall.

"I thought you stood me up," he smirked at her.

Hermione peeked up at him timidly. Then her eyes shot at the bare patch of wall where she knew the entrance to the Room of Requirements was situated.

"What's happening now?" she asked sheepishly.

Tom grinned down at her, then he draped an arm around her waist. Hermione tensed as she felt him so near. He noticed it and removed his arm from her. The grin though stayed on his face. Then he walked to and fro in front of the bare stone wall. As he had passed the same spot for the third time a huge wooden door appeared.

"First we are going in there," Tom gestured at entrance to the Room of Requirements. "Then we are going to weave a little bit of magic."

*It's a mistake!* A voice sounding like Harry's screamed a warning at Hermione.

"I…" she stuttered. "Maybe I shouldn't have…"

"Tut tut, Hermione," Tom teased gently. "No turning back now."

He reached for her and took her hand in his. Again Hermione stiffened but this time he didn't let go of her. Gingerly he pulled her over to the entrance. Alarm bells rang loudly in her head, but Hermione followed Tom into the room.

*Turn back!* The same voice, maybe her voice of reason, screamed at her.

The room had changed into a huge hall. Her steps echoed eerily from the black flagstones of the floor. The walls of the room appeared to be made of rough stone. There were huge windows set into the stone walls, but their glass seemed to be strangely opaque as if they never were meant to let in the light. So, the whole room was dived into a semi-darkness, which made creepy shadows dancing on the floor and walls. As she followed Tom towards the middle of the room, Hermione wondered if this scary atmosphere was really necessary or if it was just his weird taste. A huge platform, carved from dark granite, marked the centre of the room. Tom stepped on the platform and Hermione hesitantly followed him.

While she inspected her surroundings, Tom unpacked the bag he had been carrying. Black candles, a ball of string, chalk, a small basin made of stone and a silver dagger now lay innocently on the stone floor. Hermione swallowed as she recognized the dagger.

In a feeble attempt to dispel the tense silence she said, opting for dry humour, "You don't expect me to, you know, slip into a virginally white dress and lay down on some sort of sacrificial altar so you can run a knife right through my heart, do you?"

Tom looked up at her and a small smirk grazed his features.

"Now, Hermione, that would be counterproductive, don't you think?" he said calmly. Then the smirk on his face widened and he deadpanned, "Surely, a black dress would be the better choice."

He got up from the floor and walked over to her. The smirk had left his face by now and he smiled reassuringly down at her.

"There's no need to worry," he soothed her. "This is going to work out fine."
He then picked up the chalk and string and started to draw on the black flagstone they were standing on.

"After all," he said haughtily. "It was me who came up with this ritual. So, there can't possibly go anything wrong."

Hermione frowned at him while he used the chalk and string to draw on the floor.

"You are a modest one, aren't you?" she just asked wryly.

Tom turned his head and smiled at her in a rather arrogant way. "Yes, it's one of my many admirable character traits."

Hermione just rolled her eyes at him but wasn't able to completely suppress that smile from taking form on her face.

After a while Tom seemed to be satisfied with his work and he got up again. By now there was a huge pentagram drawn on the floor. Its edges were connected by a circle, surrounding the whole thing. Runes followed that outer ring. Tom now retrieved the small stone basin and the dagger from where he had discarded them on the floor. Then he walked over to where she stood. Hermione couldn't help but eye the silver dagger in his hand suspiciously.

"Okay," Tom said hesitantly. "…er… I need a little of your blood to do this."

Her eyes widened and now shot nervously from the dagger in his hand back to the pentagram on the floor.

*Mistake?* the voice of reason again piped up. Hermione didn't know what to do. Whatever had gotten into her? This was Tom Riddle and he wanted a sample of her blood for whatever the hell this ritual was about.

"That… " she stuttered weakly. "This is not a dark ritual, is it?" she finally asked cautiously.

"No," Tom replied slowly which made her frown at him. Then he added evasively, "I can assure you we are not going to use any dark magic."

Hermione noticed how he avoided her eyes now.

"Tom?" she said sharply, prompting him to tell the truth.

His eyes wandered back to her, but were only met by her hard gaze. Hermione didn't say anything but continued to glare at him. After a while he seemed to cave in.

"Well, okay," he said exasperatedly. "I did use a dark ritual as basic structure for this," here he gestured at the pentagram on the floor. "But I changed it. It's not dark anymore. I'm going to use completely different runes."

Hermione stared at the stone basin in his hands. Then she stated, "But you still need my blood to write with."

"Yes," he admitted.

"Which ritual did you choose?"

"The Seal of Charon," Tom admitted reluctantly while still looking at her cautiously.
"Charon's Seal?" Hermione cried shocked and took a step away from him. "Tom, I'm not some dead body you wanna turn into an Inferius."

"I know, I know," Tom exclaimed hurriedly, sensing her insecurity. "I told you, I've changed the runes. It's completely different now."

Hermione sighed loudly as she again stared at the ominous pentagram on the floor. Slowly she regretted having come here.

"I'm not so sure about this."

"I promise, nothing's going to happen to you." Tom quickly assured her. Then he went on as she didn't immediately refuse, "I'm only concentrating on the ability of the seal to bind magic to something."

"Yes, and normally that 'something' is a corpse," Hermione clarified stiffly.

Tom just looked at her, his eyes glinting softly down at her. She had to sigh again.

"Do you really think it's going to work," she finally asked.

"Yes."

"And I'm not turning into a mindless zombie?"

"No," Tom said.

Hermione looked up at his grey eyes. She didn't want to do this. She didn't trust him at all. As she stared at his eyes, she noticed something. She wasn't sure if it was really there. Back as she had talked with him by the Great Lake, she had seen the same in him. Honesty. Still, Hermione wasn't convinced. But then again, she thought numbly as she looked down at the white pentagram, this will show me what he's up to.

"Okay," Hermione exhaled nervously. "What do you want me to do?"

Relief flooded his face and he smiled brightly down at her.

"You just have to stand there in the middle of the pentagram," he explained. "I'll do the rest."

Hermione nodded jerkily.

Tom reached for her left arm and Hermione let him roll up the sleeve of her blouse exposing her skin. Her heart raced away in her chest as he now raised the silver dagger to her forearm. She shuddered as the cold blade touched her skin. Then there was a sharp pain and soon blood flowed from a small cut. Tom carefully collected her blood in the small stone basin. He didn't need much and soon he waved his wand over the still bleeding cut. Instantly the blood crusted over the wound. He smiled down at her reassuringly before he tugged her over to the pentagram.

"You have to stand exactly in the middle," he told her.

Hermione cautiously stepped over the chalk markings on the floor and positioned herself in the middle of the pentagram. Tom crouched down on the floor and whispered an incantation under his breath while he poured her blood on the markings. Hermione watched with apprehension as the white chalk seemed to suck up the blood so that it completely disappeared. For a moment nothing happened, though Tom did continue with his enchantment.
Suddenly the white lines on the floor shone in a bright light. As the light faded the white of the chalk had turned a blood red. Hermione felt a pressure around her body and she knew that now she wouldn't be able to leave the pentagram even if she wanted to. It was too late for her to turn back.

Tom straightened up. Hermione gulped as she stared at him. No smile tugged at his mouth anymore and he eyed her with an unreadable expression on his face. Her breathing quickened as she saw that cold glint in his eyes. In her panic she tried to shirk away from him. The magic, which was thick in the air, did not allow her to move even an inch. Hermione remained standing there in the middle of the pentagram not able to run away.

Helplessly she watched as Tom pulled his wand. His hard gaze wandered over her then it left her and he brandished his wand in a complicated pattern. Hermione felt the pressure on her body intensify. Tom started to circle around her, never touching the markings on the floor, while he continued to wave his wand. With each step he took, the pressure around her got worse. Soon Hermione gasped for air, but the painful pressure stopped her from breathing. The edges of her vision started to blur and she felt light-headed. She couldn't take it anymore and unconsciousness already tugged at her mind as Tom arrived at the spot where he had started his journey around the pentagram. Hermione stared at him with watery eyes, unable to voice anything.

His steely hard eyes rested on her for a second and Hermione shuddered as she watched him. Then Tom brought his wand down in one sharp movement. The pressure on her got even worse and Hermione was sure it was going to crush her body. The pressure increased more and more until it reached a breaking point. It now ripped at her violently and Hermione couldn't do anything but open her mouth and scream in pain.
The pressure ripped mercilessly at her body. Hermione was sure she was going to die. There was no way out of this. She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed in pain. The pressure never stopped its onslaught on her body. Soon she felt something break and the force behind the pressure invaded her body. The pain intensified and Hermione felt hot tears running down her cheeks while she still screamed. Whatever that force was it ran through her body, leaving nothing but pain in its wake. It felt like every nerve ending was on fire. It felt like her skin was peeled from her body. The only thing Hermione could do was sob and scream in pain. More and more of that power mercilessly gushed into her. It seemed to pervade everything. Her body trembled helplessly.

What was happening to her?

This was something twisted, something odd and wrong. Yet, above all that agony, the pain, realization sprang up in her. At first nothing made sense but the more of that power flowed into her the clearer it got. She had felt this before. This power was familiar. It was more aggressive, yes, more concentrated but it was familiar.

It was magic!

As she finally dared to draw that conclusion it was suddenly quite apparent. It was magic that forcefully clashed over her, wave after wave. Magic that threatened to tear her apart.

Just as Hermione thought she would black out from the pain, the influx of magic stopped. Limply she collapsed and squeezed her eyes shut as she remained lying helplessly on the cold stone floor. Her throat was sore from all the screaming, her whole body ached dully and her breathing was quickened. Her head swirled, making her feel nauseous. The magic, though, still raged through her just as furiously as before. It filled her whole body, even oozing out of her. It stormed around her and tingled on her skin demandingly.

As the magic inflated around her Hermione was hit by an intense feeling of awareness. Whatever the magic touched, she could feel it. Without opening her eyes she could tell exactly where the chalk lines of the pentagram were situated. Remnants of the ritual still permeated them, making them glow in the dark. But this wasn't all. The magic poured out around her and as it flooded the whole room, Hermione was able to see through that magic. There was a complex web of spells and incantations which seemed to hold together the room. It suffused everything, the walls, the glass of the windows and even the stone floor she was lying on. Months ago, she had felt the same magic for the first time as she had returned from the Christmas break. Now, she understood. This was the founders' magic. That pulse came from the spells the founders of Hogwarts had used to create the Room of Requirement. Like a protective sheet they covered the whole castle of Hogwarts and shone in a bluish light, providing the castle with a pulse like a living being.

Still lying on the floor, Hermione was overwhelmed by all of it. The force of the magic filling her up made her feel dizzy. But then she spotted something else. In contrast to the pleasant warm power of the founders' magic, there was more in this very room. Hermione furrowed her brow as she noticed that dark presence. The founders' magic was interrupted by a dark spot. It was like a whirlwind of raw power. This magic was strange, somehow twisted. It felt angry, aggressive and just unpleasant, leaving behind a bad after taste.

Hermione stiffened as that dark presence moved towards her. She wanted to shy away from it as suddenly she felt a hand gently grabbing her shoulder. Then she was gingerly turned around so that she lay on her back.
"Hermione?" a soft voice whispered to her.

Slowly Hermione cracked her eyes open. She blinked and there was a face swimming into focus above her.

"How do you feel?" the same soft voice asked. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Hermione blinked again and now stared up at Tom. He was crouched beside her, a worried look on his face. That picture of him though was blurred and overlapped by the dark presence she could still feel. Hermione realized that this was Tom's magic. It swirled around him, angry and dark. This was the very being - the essence - of Tom's magic. Something aggressive, something dangerous. Darkness.

"Hermione?" Tom called her again. "Say something. Did it work? I can feel your magic again. I think at least something worked."

Hermione just breathed in deeply as she stared up at him. His magic still bristled agitatedly around him, and still it was dark. There was an unpleasant feeling where his magic clashed with her body. Yet she could see concern glinting in Tom's grey eyes as he looked down at her.

NO! No, this isn't right!

He was Tom Riddle, he was Voldemort. It couldn't be. He had told her he would get her magic back but that had been a LIE! Whenever he opened his mouth he lied. Hermione knew that. She had always known it. But then why could she feel doubt boiling up in her? There was no room for doubt! This was unacceptable. Her feelings were misplaced. How could she be so naïve?

He is Voldemort! she screamed at herself.

She felt frustrated with her own traitorous emotions. Frustration quickly turned into white hot fury and her new-found magic reacted quite violently to her upcoming wrath. The magic readily sucked up her anger, twisted it and bent it until it was amplified so much that rational thought ceased to be possible. Hermione's eyes narrowed to slits as she glared at Tom.

As he saw her dark expression he asked cautiously, "Are you alright?"

He looked at her in concern but Hermione didn't care. The magic rushed forcefully through her, incited by her own rage. For weeks she hadn't been able to feel any magic at all. Now it was back, more powerful than ever before. It clouded her mind. The vengeful magic was slowly consuming her and her anger at Tom intensified.

He was dark …evil. The worry on his face? Fake!

She stared up at Tom's grey eyes but the only thing she could see was a murderous crimson colour. She remembered how he had attacked her back in the Ministry of Magic. Right after he had killed the Minister himself he had ruthlessly fought against her and her friends. He had killed them, hadn't he? Harry and Ron.

A new surge of anger hit her hard and Hermione abruptly sat up on the stone floor while still glaring at Tom. Her gaze turned to ice as her brown eyes wandered over him. The sight of him was enough to make the hot rage boiling over. The magic still rushing through her fed off that rage and Hermione lost control. Magic crackled furiously around her and she could not restrain it anymore. Like fuel to the flames his cold, mocking words popped up in her mind.

'Your precious saviour failed. I killed him… He is gone and you will follow him… Do you really
think you can stop me? A Mudblood?'

Her eyes flared up in anger as she glared at Tom. He had raised one eyebrow in confusion. Hermione, though, was blind to his worry. The only thing she could see was the dark magic he radiated.

"Just tell me what's wrong," Tom said, his voice ridged by concern.

Hermione didn't answer. Instead she embraced that unforgiving magic, swirling around her, and formed it into a spell. For weeks she hadn't done any magic. Now it came to her naturally. She didn't even consider pulling her wand. There was no need for it. She just pointed her index finger at Tom's chest.

"Afflicto," she whispered the incantation.

She could see Tom's eyes widen. He was unprepared for this attack. Hermione felt the magic obeying her command readily. It freely rushed through her hand and finger and left her as a spell. Tom was hit by the force of her spell. She could hear him gasping softly in surprise as he was flung away from her. Hermione stood up from her position sitting on the floor and let the magic completely take her. It ran up and down her body, wrenching at her hungrily, demandingly. Her eyes wandered to Tom. There was a look of confusion on his face as he slowly got up from the floor where she had pushed him to.

"Hermione?" he said cautiously.

Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as she continued to glare at him darkly.

"Did you think you could get away with it?" she growled at him, barely controlled fury shaking her voice.

"With what?" he looked at her bewildered. "What did I do?"

"'What did you do?' Hermione stared at him, trembling with anger. "Do you really have to ask? YOU RUINED EVERYTHING!" Her last words were accompanied by a furious rush of magic.

She raised her hand over her head, pointing with her index and middle finger to the ceiling. Then she brought her arm down in a sharp, diagonal movement. A bluish curse resulted from Hermione's arm movement and it now dashed towards Tom. Before the angrily crackling curse could smash into him Tom sidestepped it so that it impacted with the stone floor instead. Hermione's magic budged violently as she saw her curse had been useless.

"What are you-" Tom started to say in a shaky voice, but Hermione didn't want to listen to him anymore.

"I know you worked hard on this nice set-up," she hissed at him. "But I've seen through your depravity a long while ago."

She pushed the magic through her right arm and let it gather in her hand. Then she balled her hand in a tight fist. Rays of green light were radiating from between her fingers. As enough magic had accumulated, Hermione opened her hand and a ball of green light appeared, hovering inches above her palm. With a small flick of her wrist she ordered the curse to rush towards Tom,

"Impetum facere!"

Tom again tried to dodge the curse, but this time he wasn't fast enough. The green curse grazed his
left leg and he gasped in pain as the curse cut into him. With cold eyes Hermione watched how he sagged down on his knees. It didn't allay her wrath at all that she had managed to hurt him. The magic still swirled around her. Its power had completely taken her over but right now she didn't care. She was too furious to ponder her options.

*Why isn't he fighting back?* Hermione wondered irately as she scanned Tom. His hand had wandered to the cut in his leg and she could see dark blood seeping through his fingers while he stared at her. He still hadn't done anything to attack her. But she could still see that dark magic radiating from him.

"Fight back!" she screamed at him.

Tom raised his hands, one stained with blood, in an obvious attempt to appease her.

"Calm down. The ritual is still affecting you. You were exposed to a great amount of magic. Let it settle down," he said in a soothing voice.

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin angry line, her face twisted up into a mask of hate. Then she raised her hand and moved it as if to slap someone. The magic reacted instantly. It rushed towards Tom and crashed into him. He was flung to the side where he made hard contact with the floor. He skidded until he came to rest a few metres away, sprawled on the floor.

"Fight back, coward!" Hermione hissed at him as Tom shakily tried to sit up. "Pull your wand!"

His grey eyes wandered back to her. "You need to control the magic," he told her softly. "The connection needs to be solidified."

Hermione wasn't listening. *He is a liar!*

"I'm not going to put up with you anymore!" she screamed at him.

"Hermione, this is not you," Tom said.

As a reply Hermione sent another wave of her furious magic at him. It hit him and again hurled him violently away.

"Don't hold yourself back," she jeered at him harshly. "I know you want to do it."

Tom struggled to get up. As he again stood he looked at her steadily, expectantly. Hermione continued to glare at him. Tom broke eye contact with her and then reached for his pocket. A cold smile appeared on her face as she watched him pulling his wand. She almost growled as she saw that pale wand in his hands. Tom's eyes snapped from the wand in his hand back to Hermione. His face was a blank mask, impossible to read. But Hermione was prepared. Whatever curse he would hurl at her, she wouldn't let it touch her.

But then Tom completely took her by surprise as he just threw his wand away. With a loud clacking sound it hit the stone floor just a few steps away from Hermione. Then it rolled on the floor until it came to rest lying at her feet. With wide eyes Hermione stared down at the pale wand. Then her gaze wandered back to Tom.

"I don't want to fight with you," he said. His voice was calm and just as unreadable as the expression on his face.

That incredibly powerful flow of magic still raged through Hermione. It took her breath away. She was so angry. She was beyond anger. She should attack Tom, punish him for all the things he had done to her. Summoning the magic Hermione raised her hand to hurl another curse at Tom. But then
her eyes darted back to his wand on the floor. She hesitated to finish her attack. He was unarmed. She eyed Tom and still found that blank look on his face.

Why should she hold back?

He had never shown mercy. *Never.* Hermione felt the dangerous curse building up in her. Its power pricked over the skin of her arm and intensified to a longing pull right at her fingertips. She wanted to throw it at Tom. She wanted to hurt him. Insatiable rage coursed through her. The curse still hung at the tips of her fingers. Just a twitch of her hand and she could hurl it at Tom. It would definitely hurt him – a lot. Hermione swallowed hard as she felt the hate behind that magic.

'*This is not you.*'

No! No, she *really* wanted to use that curse on him. He deserved it. He was… He…

Hermione growled angrily as she felt the murderous longing behind her curse. She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her jaws. The magic ripped at her, begged her to throw that curse. It was the right thing! With deep steady breaths Hermione tried to calm her breathing down.

This was...

The dangerous curse still hung at the tips of her fingers.

It was…

…too much? Wrong?

She didn't know. Fed by her dark feelings the magic told her otherwise. But Hermione somehow knew she couldn't use that curse. Her hands trembled as she pulled the magic back. It cost her a lot of concentration. The curse had been on the brim of detaching from her fingers but she managed to hold it back. She slowly opened her eyes again. Tom was still standing a few metres away from her. The magic howled furiously as it had been deprived of its vengeance. Hermione trembled as she walked over to Tom. He stiffened slightly as he saw her approaching him. She stopped right in front of him and glared up at him.

Then she said slowly, never breaking eye contact with him, "You liar."

She didn't give him time to reply anything but twirled on the spot and with a loud crack she disapparated from Hogwarts castle. Many miles away, she reappeared, standing on a soft green lawn. Rose bushes in full bloom were standing nearby, exuding a sweet scent. The light of the day was slowly fading and long, spidery shadows were already reaching for her feet.

Hermione didn't take in anything of her surroundings. The only thing she needed to know was that no-one was around. No-one was going to get hurt if she now gave in to her magic. She released her hold on it and the furious magic left her body and rushed around her forcefully. It gained in momentum and raged around her as a violent tempest. Its strength made the air around her flicker and almost burn. The soft green grass turned yellow and withered where it was touched by the magic. Even the rose bushes a few metres away got hit. Rose pedals got blown away and helplessly swirled around the air until they caught fire and burned. Hermione felt the angry magic ripping at her clothes and rumpling up her hair. The power made her dizzy and wobbly on her feet.

How should she be able to handle this fierce power? But she knew she somehow had to. So, Hermione closed her eyes, tried to calm her breathing and concentrated on the magic. She didn't try to control it, she just looked at it closely. The angry torrent rushed around her but now she could also see that the torrent was connected to her. This magic belonged to her? Hermione touched the
connection, tested it. It was tight, unshakable. This magic, feral and aggressive as it might be, seemed to be bound to her.

It truly belonged to her.

She finally understood. The magic was hers. Hermione smiled. It was bound tightly to her, deeply embedded into her very being. They were one. There was no need to fear it. Still smiling, she reached out for the magic and accepted it for what it was, a part of her. It was so different, a far cry from the magic she remembered, but still Hermione accepted it as her own. Her magic reacted to her acceptance. It calmed down. The storm around her lessened until it completely settled down and was a steady flow running quietly through her body. Hermione breathed in deeply and opened her eyes again. The smile still curled up her lips. Suddenly it felt wonderful, her magic. Not at all threatening anymore. No, she liked it. It felt right. Never before had she felt so connected with her magic. Every cell of her body hummed with her magic. For the first time she could really feel the magic. It was in sync with her.

Still smiling, Hermione raised her head and for the first time took in her surroundings. Where was she? Her eyes widened in surprise. She recognized it. Why had she apparated here? How odd. Slowly Hermione walked over to a gravel path not far away from her. It was bordered by flower beds in full bloom which smelled sweetly. Hermione followed the path slightly up a hill. It didn't take long and she stood before a grand manor house.

Why had her magic led her here? She had been here only once before. Back then Harry and Ron had been with her. They had searched this very manor high and low for a trace of his darkness. They hadn't found anything, for this house had never meant anything to the Dark Lord. Why should he have hidden a piece of his soul here when he himself had never been welcome?

Now the house was empty. It wasn't as run down as she remembered it. Tiles had been missing on the roof and some of the windows had been boarded-up. The house before her still stood proudly and elegantly. The decay of abandonment was barely visible on its face, the owners gone for not even a year. Hermione turned her head. Down in the valley, a distance away, she could see houses huddled up against a small church. A graveyard was situated right beside the church. Numbness engulfed her as her gaze wandered over the tomb stones. Hermione breathed out and looked back up at the manor. The house was empty because its owners now resided down there right beside the church.

What strange people, she mused.

Living here in this manor house they had, one day, received a gift. But in their foolishness they had decided to refuse it. Hermione shook her head in sadness. Why hadn't they accepted it? Had their prejudices held them back? Why hadn't they tried for tolerance? Maybe they could have stopped everything before it had gone down a very wrong path. Hermione swallowed and a hollow feeling gripped her heart as her gaze wandered over the house. She wrapped her dark robe tighter around herself. Because its owners had been so shortsighted, the manor was now dead and empty.

Death. It was all that ever stayed behind in His wake.

As that thought touched her mind, Hermione hesitantly shook her head. It wasn't true. It wasn't death dancing around herself, it was life. Her magic was with her again. He had promised to get it back and he had kept his promise.

Her magic had been a present…

Deeply confused, Hermione twirled on the spot. She left Riddle manor behind and gladly stepped
into the dark pressure of appartition. She reappeared at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and instantly walked towards Hogwarts. The now familiar bluish shine still surrounded the castle. As Hermione walked towards the castle she enjoyed the feeling of magic around her. Strands of her own magic reached out to the blue shine, teasing it, playing and dancing with it. Hermione wandered back to the castle, completely lost in the feeling of the magic around her and she smiled. She smiled as she entered the castle and walked the many corridors towards her common room.

As she entered Gryffindor domain she heard her friends calling out for her. Hermione beamed at them and waved a hand. Then she climbed up the stairs to her dorm. Tiredly she fell down on her soft bed and closed her eyes. She could still feel her magic inside of her. It made her feel protected. Hermione rolled onto her side and, still with a smile on her face, she fell asleep.

After a deep, peaceful sleep Hermione woke up the next morning. The first thing greeting her was the feeling of her magic around her. Instantly the smile was back on her face. She had missed her magic so much. Curious, she reached for her wand which lay innocently on her bedside table. The moment she touched the wood of her wand she knew it was no good. The wand in her hand felt wrong. Her magic avoided it, as if displeased by its pure presence. Still Hermione waved the wand in the familiar movements of the Summoning Charm.

"Accio," she said.

Nothing happened. The book, she had aimed the charm at, still lay undisturbed on her table. Hermione put her wand away and now just extended her hand towards the table.

"Accio," she repeated.

This time she felt her magic obeying her. It flushed through her and readily formed into the charm. The book instantly soared through the air and landed in her hand. Hermione smiled happily down at the book in her hand. Worried That Your Child Is a Squib? read the book's title. Weeks ago she had found the veneficus potion in that book. Now she wouldn't need the potion anymore to be able to use magic. Her new magic was so tightly bound to her, she did not even need a wand as a mediator anymore.

A little later, Hermione climbed down to the common room, still in high spirits. She met her three Gryffindor friends and together they walked to the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione felt like singing in joy. Everything seemed so much brighter with her magic back. They sat down at the Gryffindor table and Hermione piled food on her plate. She felt incredibly hungry. She didn't pay any attention to her friends but just enjoyed her food, the noisy atmosphere at Gryffindor table and the feeling of her magic rushing through her.

After a while Longbottom's voice reached her, "What happened to him?"

Hermione looked up from her scrambled eggs. Longbottom was staring at something at the doors of the Great Hall. She furrowed her brow and then followed his gaze. Her eyes widened as she found the cause of Longbottom's confusion. Tom had just now entered the Great Hall. He was limping heavily and even from her position at the Gryffindor table she could see a very pronounced bruise on his left cheek and temple. Hermione shifted uneasily in her seat as she watched Tom slowly limping over to his seat at the Slytherin table. Countless eyes followed him. Hermione could see that many of the Slytherins started to whisper as they inconspicuously eyed Tom. Hermione gazed back at him. By now he had sat down and poured himself a cup of coffee, indifferent to all those nosy stares. She grimaced as her eyes again wandered over that dark bruise on his face. A suspiciously guilty feeling crept over her and Hermione quickly averted her eyes from him.
Had she done this? She had been so overwhelmed with happiness at having her magic back, she had completely forgotten about Tom. Merlin, she had really lost it back in the Room of Requirement. Hermione didn't know how she felt about the whole incident. To her own frustration there was embarrassment stealing over her as she eyed the bruise on Tom's face.

"Wow, he looks like the Hogwarts Express ran over him," Longbottom informed his friends gleefully. Then he added contemplatively, "Twice."

"Yeah," Weasley agreed as he, too, stared at Tom. "He looks horrible. Wonder what happened to him."

"Really strange." Hermione heard Lupin's calm voice. "He looks like someone beat him up. But that's rather impossible, isn't it? I mean considering that he's the biggest bully around here." He looked back at his friends. "I wonder who did it."

"Maybe he just had an accident," Weasley shrugged as he piled more bacon on his plate.

"Probably botched up some dark magic or other," Longbottom said, a fat grin still on his face.

You could say that, Hermione thought dryly while she still tried to stay out of this conversation. Though Tom didn't botch it up. It had gone relatively smooth after all.

"Well, whatever it was," Longbottom continued. "Serves him right. Don't you think, Hermione?"

Here he nudged her in the side. Hermione almost dropped the glass of milk she had tried to drink from.

"Er… um…" she stammered nervously. "Yeah… I guess…"

Longbottom didn't notice the fierce blush on her face. Lupin, though, narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion.


Hermione raised her head and looked at Tom. He sat at the Slytherin table, read in the Daily Prophet and drank from his cup of coffee. Hermione saw a white bandage around his hand. Again guilt twisted up her stomach and she averted her gaze in annoyance. She didn't need to feel guilty, she huffed in her mind.

"-wish it was me. I could have given him a nice punch in the face." She was brought out of her thoughts by Longbottom's cheery voice.

"Yeah, I would have done it, too. If he asked me politely." Weasley snorted pumpkin juice all over his blond-haired friend as he laughed.

"Ewww, Richard," Longbottom griped as he tried to wipe the juice off his uniform shirt. Though, there still was the fat grin on his face. Then his eyes glinted mischievously as he theorized, "Maybe he got lost in the Forbidden Forest and a pack of trolls beat him up."

A pack of trolls? Hermione thought a bit indignantly and she could feel heat hitting her face.

"Do you know anything about it?" Lupin asked in his composed voice.

Hermione looked at him and found him eyeing her suspiciously.
"No… no," she stammered. "Why should I know?"

She didn't really want to tell them about this little episode from yesterday. She felt very uncomfortable as her friends seemed to focus on her now. The smile had left Longbottom's face and he mustered her in concern.

"This wasn't anything about you, was it?" he asked her gently. "It's not-" He hesitated to go on and turned his head as if to see if anybody listened in on the conversation. "It's not you-know-who, is it?"

Hermione's eyebrows shot up in bewilderment. "What?"

"Riddle saved you from you-know-who before," Longbottom whispered, a conspiratorial frown on his face.

Tom Riddle saving me from You-Know-Who? Hermione wondered perplexed as she blinked at Longbottom stupidly. As she didn't answer anything Lupin sighed and then leaned towards her to whisper in her ear,

"He's talking about Grindelwald."

"Oh," Hermione said, understanding dawning on her. "Er… no, nothing like that." Her friends looked at her expectantly, so she said, "Well, it's pretty late, don't you think? We still have Charms you know."

They got up from the table. As they were leaving the Great Hall, Hermione cast another look at Tom. He was still sitting at his place, though by now Melanie Nicolls was sitting in the seat beside him. There was a look of worry on her pretty face and she seemed to whisper to Tom while her hand was running through his dark hair. Hermione averted her eyes from them. She had to admit that she didn't like it very much how close Nicolls seemed to be to Tom. But why should she care? Deep in thought, Hermione left the Great Hall. To her immense displeasure, her friends insisted on speculating about Tom's mishap on their way to the Charms class room.

"Maybe he finally pissed off one of the girls and she hexed him," Weasley suggested while grinning amused.

Longbottom laughed at that but Lupin furrowed his brow.

"Come on, guys," he said in his collected tone. "You know how strong a wizard Riddle is-" Here Longbottom snorted wryly but Lupin ignored him and continued, "He wouldn't just let himself getting hexed like that."

Hermione determinedly stared in another direction and tried to blind out the conversation.

"Well, then what do you think happened?" Longbottom said flippantly turned to Lupin

Lupin just shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know. And I don't care what he's doing either."

"Maybe Dumbledore finally lost his temper with him," Weasley wondered contemplatively.

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione now said. "Dumbledore would never do something like that."

"Yeah," Longbottom agreed. "He wouldn't curse Riddle. Even though the bastard deserves it." He ran a hand through his blond hair as he said, "I still would like to know who did it. Then I could congratulate them."
Another few steps down the corridor and Hermione suddenly felt a source of dark magic behind her. Unfortunately, it was a familiar source of dark magic. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her friends stopped, too, and looked at her questioningly. Hermione didn't explain anything but just turned around. Sure enough, she could see Tom limping down the same corridor. His face was an unreadable mask as he slowly walked towards her. Out of the corners of her eyes she could see her friends stiffen as they recognized Tom. Longbottom even stepped a little closer to her. Tom's eyes, though, were only fixed on her. He stopped in front of her and looked down at her with his incredibly grey eyes. Hermione's gaze wandered to the dark bruise on his cheek and she again felt a stab of guilt in her stomach. Tom's eyes raked over her body, which made Longbottom beside her shuffle angrily.

Then Tom said in his velvety voice, "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Hermione replied curtly, not knowing how to handle the situation.

"You just disappeared yesterday. I couldn't find you anywhere," he said, a hint of accusation tinting his inflection.

He stepped a little closer to her and Hermione shied away. His presence was making her uncomfortable.

As she didn't want to reply anything, Tom asked in a low voice, "Is it still working?"

Of course Hermione knew what he was talking about. The ritual yesterday had been a success. Her magic was still back. So, she nodded at him which caused a triumphant look to cross his face. As Hermione scanned his face, her eyes once again skimmed over that dark bruise. It really looked painful. She was unpleasantly reminded of the last time she had seen him with bruises all over his face. She stared up at him then said in a distanced voice,

"Look, Tom, I've somehow lost control yesterday. I'm-" Hermione interrupted herself. "Well… are you okay?"

He arched an eyebrow at her elegantly and Hermione could see his left hand wander to the bandage on his other hand. He skimmed over it subconsciously as he replied quietly,

"Of course."

To her own frustration Hermione felt a heat wave hitting her face as she looked up at Tom.

"I had no right to attack you," she replied stiffly.

At that statement she could hear a sharp intake of breath coming from the side where her friends stood but she tried to ignore them.

A small smirk ghosted across Tom's face as he took in her fierce blush. Then he said, "It's okay. I'll survive." He laid a warm hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, I think we should-"

Tom was interrupted as Nicolls suddenly appeared. Obviously, she had followed him.

"Tom," she chippered at him. Hermione rolled her eyes as she heard exaggerated worry oozing from the girl's voice. "Why did you suddenly disappear. You really need to go to the Hospital Wing."

Tom just looked down at her and Hermione could feel his dark magic giving an angry budge.

"What are you doing here?" Nicolls voice suddenly didn't sound concerned anymore.
Hermione looked at the girl and found Nicolls glaring at her. She now looped an arm around Tom's and to her own surprise Hermione could feel a stab of anger in her stomach. She ignored it, though.

"I'm on my way to my Charms class," she informed Nicolls in a composed voice,

"Is that so?" Nicolls hissed at her cuttingly. "Then why are you bothering Tom with your dirty presence?"

Hermione felt her right hand twitch as angry magic suddenly seemed to flow in that direction. But she wasn't going to start a fight with Nicolls, of all people. So, instead of cursing the girl, Hermione just shrugged her shoulders and said in a cold, mocking tone,

"Well, I don't want to force my presence on anyone."

Then she turned away from them. There was a disappointed look in Tom's grey eyes, but Hermione didn't care. She continued her way towards the class room. Soon her friends fell in step beside her. Hermione glanced at them. Sure enough, all three stared at her with wide eyes. Actually, Longbottom's jaw had dropped open as he now scanned her, disbelief all over his face.

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked in a level voice.

Longbottom continued to just gape at her while Weasley opened and closed his mouth without any words coming out. Finally, it was Lupin who found his voice.

"Does that… what you just said…" he stuttered. "Hermione, did you do that to Riddle?"

Hermione scanned them for a moment, then she said in a cautious, almost defensive, voice, "Like I said, I lost control. I wasn't in my right mind."

"But… that…" Longbottom was still staring at her incredulously. "You cursed him? How'd you do it? I would have never thought…"

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. Thinking back, it wasn't anything to be proud of actually. She then noticed that Lupin was scanning her with a touch of concern flickering in his eyes.

"Why did you curse Riddle?" Lupin now asked gently. "You didn't do it out of… you know… self-defence, did you?"

With Lupin's question the proud, almost gleeful, look left Longbottom's face and he now furrowed his brow as her.

"Wait," he said, anger and worry leaking from his words. "Riddle didn't try to hurt you again, did he?"

"No, no," Hermione quickly assured. "Nothing of the sort."

"But then why did you curse him?" Weasley asked her confused.

"Er…" she mumbled in a small voice. "Because… because he annoyed me?"

"What?" Lupin gasped in outrage.

Hermione blinked at him stupidly. Lupin frowned. Then he inquired, "You were annoyed by him? What exactly happened? Why did you curse him?"

"Well, we were alone…" Hermione struggled to explain. Frankly she didn't understand it herself.
"And then… I don't know… he just got to me and I ended up cursing him."

Longbottom eyed her in concern. "Did you have an argument? Did he yell at you?"

Hermione shook her head.

"But he must have done something," Lupin insisted.

She looked down at her feet. "No."

"I don't get it then," Lupin fixed her with a reproving look. "Why did you attack him?"

"Pff," Longbottom threw in while he rolled his eyes. "I don't think you need to have an actual reason to curse Riddle."

Lupin just glared at him before his gaze wandered back to Hermione, demanding an answer. She fidgeted under his firm gaze.

"You must have used some pretty nasty curses on him," he provided as she didn't reply anything. "Considering the state of him. Did you really do that because he annoyed you?"

"Well… well…" she mumbled, desperately searching for a justification. Then she just blurted out weakly, "He was asking for it."

Lupin just continued to look at her reproachfully. Hermione averted her eyes, feeling guilty under Lupin's gaze.

"I know that you have a lot of problems with Riddle," he said sternly. "But that doesn't give you the right to curse him, regardless of how much he might deserve it."

With a sinking feeling in her stomach Hermione heard the disappointment in the other's voice. She hesitantly looked up at Lupin. There was a deep frown on his face and Hermione bit her lip.

"I…" she stuttered but was interrupted as an arm was draped around her shoulders.

"Come on," Longbottom said, turned to Lupin. "Don't be so hard on her." Hermione looked up at him. She could see a poorly hidden grin on his face. "You can't be angry with her for cursing Riddle," Longbottom continued, now glee oozing out of his voice. "That snake deserves it."

Lupin eyed him before he shook his head as if the other Gryffindor was a lost case.

"Okay, let me summarise this," Lupin said while he rubbed the bridge of his nose irritated. "You talked with Riddle and he didn't do anything to provoke you in any way which apparently annoyed you to the point where you cursed him. Is that right?"

Hermione just stared at him. It was actually even worse. Tom hadn't done anything to provoke her and had actually helped her but she had still cursed him.

Lupin shook his head at her. Then he sighed tiredly, "You know that you have quite the screwed up relationship with Riddle, don't you?"

"She doesn't have a relationship with the bastard!" Longbottom protested.

He was only met by Lupin's doubtful gaze.

"How did he actually react?" Weasley piped up.
"Now that's a story I'd like to hear," Lupin muttered under his breath.

"Hmm," Hermione made nervously. "He kinda said that he didn't want to fight with me."

As she didn't continue Lupin raised an expectant eyebrow at her. "And then you did what?"

"I cursed him," she admitted meekly.

That caused Longbottom to break down in a heap of laughter, soon joined by Weasley. Lupin just stared at her blankly.

"And you think that was the best cause of action?" he finally asked wryly.

Hermione didn't reply but he obviously didn't expect her to anyway.

"You know," Lupin supplied. "If Riddle annoys you so much, maybe you shouldn't talk with him."

"Yeah," Longbottom was quick to agree, laughter gone from his voice. "Just stay away from him. He's not worth your time. If you continue to talk to him, he might get the wrong impression. He might think you actually want to go back to him."

As he said the last part Hermione could glimpse a horribly knowing look crossing Lupin's face. He didn't voice anything out loud though. She was very glad as they then reached the Charms class room. She didn't want to continue this conversation at all. As she entered and her friends took off to the back of the room, Hermione suddenly remembered who her seat neighbour was. Her stomach flopped and she hesitantly walked over to Tom. She tried very hard not to look at him as she sat down and pulled her parchment and quill out of her bag. She arranged it on the table, all the while trying to ignore her seat neighbour. Soon professor Merrythought entered the class room. She greeted the class and then started her lecture.

"Now, my dears, settle down, settle down," Merrythought exclaimed in her kind voice. She smiled at her class and continued, "Last class, we talked about heat-creating charms. Today, I will tell you about charms with which you will be able to control actual fire." She beamed kindly at her students and then asked, "Who knows any spells that control fire?"

Lupin raised his hand and Merrythought nodded at him. "Ignis," the Gryffindor said.

"Yes that is very right," the professor exclaimed. "Take five points for Gryffindor. Anyone else?"

She nodded at a Slytherin who answered, "Fiendfyre?"

"Hm," Merrythought made. "Quite the dark spell that one." Then she added in an uncharacteristically sombre voice, "And I would not suggest to ever use such a spell. You see, the spell only creates the Fiendfyre but controlling it is utterly impossible. It will devour anything in its way."

With a wave of her hand she dismissed the gloomy atmosphere and again smiled at her class. "Now let's go deeper into the charm you'll actually learn today."

With that she started her lecture and Hermione reached for her quill to take notes. Though, she actually wondered why she even took the trouble because she already knew all of the charms Merrythought was talking about right now. Obviously, she just couldn't sit in any class and not pay attention. Some things never changed, she thought as a small smile tugged at her mouth. It was then that Hermione risked a glance at her seat neighbour. Tom was lounging elegantly in his seat, his right arm hung nonchalantly over the back of his chair and he seemed to pay utmost attention to
Merrythought. In a way, Hermione thought as she scanned him amused, he is an even worse know-it-all than me.

As she so scanned him, something struck Hermione. Even though Tom listened to Merrythought's lecture attentively, he didn't take any notes as would have been customary for him. It was then that Hermione's gaze wandered to his right hand and she once again spotted that white bandage. It was wrapped tightly around his hand, leaving his fingers free, until it disappeared under the sleeve of his robe. Maybe he couldn't write anything with his hand hurt like that. Once again, Hermione was flooded by a traitorous feeling of guilt. She shouldn't have attacked him yesterday. Now he was obviously hurt.

Yeah? So what? an angry voice hissed at her indignantly. He deserves a lot worse!

Maybe, Hermione mused as she stared back down at her parchment. But did she really want to be his judge and executioner?

"Please, practise the charm in pairs. Help each other out if there's a problem," Merrythought's voice cut through Hermione's thoughts. The professor waved her wand and on every table a bowl, made of iron, appeared. Small flames danced in every bowl. "Try to control the fire with the charm."

Still deep in thought, Hermione slightly turned her head and looked at Tom. The bruise on his face looked swollen and painful. Why had she cursed him like that? Hermione bit her lip as she scanned him. Why curse him when he was for once helping her? Hermione stiffened as suddenly grey eyes flashed at her. She was feeling awkward and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Tom on the other hand just scanned her, an unreadable expression on his face. Hermione couldn't take it anymore and averted her eyes.

"Did I hurt you badly?" she asked timidly.

"Don't worry," Tom replied.

His voice hadn't been cold but it certainly hadn't been cordial either. Hermione looked down at her hands in her lap. She felt strangely self-conscious as Tom continued to scan her. He then leaned over to her and Hermione stiffened.

"You weren't the first who wanted to beat the 'depravity' out of me," he whispered into her ear. A wave of guilt crashed upon her and memories of the Christmas break and Tom's orphanage burned up in her.

"I… I wasn't trying to…" she stuttered. "I… don't know what got into me…"

As he didn't say anything Hermione threw him a furtive glance. She didn't find the expected accusation but silent amusement pasted all over his face. Why wasn't he angry with her? Hermione wondered as she watched a playful smirk appearing on his face. He was obviously very amused by her awkwardness and cocked an eyebrow teasingly at her.

"Well, obviously it didn't work, did it?" Hermione tried to joke weakly.

As he heard it the smirk grew even wider. There was a haughty expression on his face as he replied, "No, it's not that easy to change me."

"If only it were," Hermione then sighed tiredly.

Tom chuckled softly. Then he reached for the cast-iron bowl. The small fire still burned in the bowl.
He deposited it right in front of Hermione and then scanned her contemplatively.

"After you tried to rip my head off, using quite the impressive arsenal of spells, did you try any more magic?" he asked in an innocent tone.

Hermione looked at him and could feel her face heating up. She averted her eyes from him and looked down at the fire, burning merrily in the bowl. Then she said timidly,

"I… er… I apparated… and I tried some more spells."

"Interesting," Tom said in his smooth voice. "Did you run into any problems?"

Hermione raised her head at him. He didn't seem to be angry at all. She had actually expected him to be at least a little peeved that she had attacked him yesterday.

"No," she whispered while looking into his calm eyes.

Tom tapped with his index finger on the table while he continued to scan her like she was being an especially interesting puzzle he had to solve.

"What about your wand?" he finally asked.

"It doesn't work," Hermione whispered. "When I use it, I can't do any magic."

A triumphant smile curled up Tom's mouth and there was a conceited glint in his eyes as he replied, "I knew it wouldn't work for you anymore." He leaned leisurely back in his chair. "It collides with Peverell's magic."

His eyes wandered again over her but this time Hermione could see a greedy sheen in them.

"Exceptional," he muttered. Then said, a little louder, "So, you don't need a wand at all?"

Hermione shook her head and the smirk on his face even widened. Tom leaned a little towards her and whispered in her ear,

"Show me."

Hermione furrowed her brow as she heard that commanding touch in his tone but she chose to overlook it. So, she turned towards the bowl. She just raised her hand to send a charm at the fire as Tom stopped her by grabbing her wrist. She turned her head and looked at him questioningly.

"You don't want to reveal your talent to them," he said while his gaze wandered over the other students in the class room.

He reached into his robe pocket and produced a wand out of it. It was a black wand and Hermione was surprised to see that it looked exactly like her own.

"This," Tom explained. "Is a fake wand. It looks like your old wand, but it's basically just a piece of wood. I suggest you use this from now on."

"Thanks," Hermione said awkwardly as she took the wand from his hand.

She waved the fake wand at the small fire in front of her. Her magic was happy to oblige her command. It rushed through her arm and hand, leaving behind a tingling feeling. It completely ignored the wooden wand, swirled around it, and formed into the charm. It latched onto the fire and Hermione felt the familiar feeling of being able to manipulate it now. She willed the flames to form
into a ball. This ball of fire floated out of the bowl and now hovered in mid-air, still crackling merrily. Hermione smiled slightly at her success. Oh, how she had missed doing magic. Another wave of her hand and she released her hold on the fire. It plopped back into the bowl. Hermione turned her head and looked at Tom. He had observed the whole process with interest. Now there was a smirk twisting up his face as he scanned her. The greedy glint in his grey eyes had intensified as they slowly wandered over her body.

"You are fascinating," he purred at her.

Hermione breathed out in relief as she closed the door behind her. Merlin, Slughorn was rather talkative wasn't he? She grabbed her bag tighter and walked down the corridor. She wanted to leave the dungeons as fast as possible. They had always been rather unappealing to her. How the Slytherins could live down here was a mystery to her. Hermione hurried around the next corner and ran head-first into somebody.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, an apologetic smile on her face.

As she raised her head at the person the smile died on her face. Ledo Avery was staring down at her. She almost shied away as she saw that hard look he gave her. Hermione swallowed as she spotted a murderous glimmer in his eyes. Her pure presence seemed to infuriate him, although he tried to hide it. As she scanned his face she noticed a faint, but clearly visible scar. It reached from his jaw all the way up over his cheek. Hermione swallowed nervously, not knowing what to do. She just wanted to turn around and get away from the angry Slytherin as a voice cut in.

"What's that?" the voice sneered.

Hermione now noticed that there were more Slytherins standing behind Avery. Nott and Lestrange were amongst them, the other boys she didn't know. Though she knew that they were all part of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Maybe they planned to have a training session. Just her luck to run into them. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Oh, it's the Mudblood," Nott jeered at her, disgust twisting his words.

In the corner of her eyes Hermione saw Avery stiffen at Nott's last word. Obviously Tom's intimidation still worked, did it? Well, whatever this was, Hermione thought miffed as her eyes wandered over the Slytherins, she was not in the mood to deal with them.

"Excuse me," she said coolly and then stepped around Avery to continue her way down the corridor.

Before she could pass them Nott stood in her way and sneered down at her. "Not so fast."

Hermione tensed even more. Subconsciously she fell into her duelling stance. She was lucky she still had the fake wand Tom had given her. At least she wouldn't blow her cover that way.

"What do you want?" she hissed right back at the Slytherin boy.

"From you?" Nott sneered at her. "Nothing."

The other boys sniggered evilly at that and Hermione just rolled her eyes. Another boy, who was at least a head taller than her, stepped closer. A scornful smirk on his face, he told her,

"We want you to get lost. This is Slytherin territory. We don't want filthy Mudbloods to defile it."
Hermione felt anger mounting up in her. Why did those Slytherins always need to be so horrible? Was that the premise to be sorted into that house? She glared up at the boy while she wondered what to do now. Maybe she should just turn around and walk back the way she had come from. She had no desire to fight those boys. *Least of all Avery,* she thought and shivered unpleasantly.

Suddenly someone took a hold of her hand. Hermione tensed. She turned her head and to her surprise found Tom standing right beside her. He gently held her hand in his while he smiled pleasantly at the Slytherins in front of him. Hermione nearly shuddered as she saw that empty smile on his face. There was a dark glare hidden behind his friendly exterior.

"What seems to be the problem?" Tom asked lightly, nevertheless there was a tint of malice hidden in his voice.

Avery's eyes widened in fear and he hastily assured, "Nothing. We just wanted to go to the pitch."

"Hmm," made Tom while his steel hard eyes wandered over the group in front of him. "Then why, may I ask, did you decide to stop and deter Ms DeCerto from her business?"

Maybe he was oblivious to the murderous touch in Tom's voice but the tall boy, who had just insulted Hermione, foolishly spoke up.

"A Mudblood doesn't have any business down here."

"Is that so, Mulciber?" Tom asked lightly. But as he continued his words were laced by a murderous edge, "I should like to inform you that Hermione DeCerto is a friend of mine."

A nasty smirk twisted up Tom's face as Mulciber's blanched. Still smiling his twisted smile Tom said in a commanding voice,

"I thought you wanted to go to the pitch. Now, get lost!"

The other Slytherins obeyed him without question and hastily walked away. They nodded reverentially at Tom as they passed him and then disappeared around the next corner. Tom ignored them, his attention having shifted back to Hermione. The murderous glint left his grey eyes as he looked down at her.

A smirk grazed his features as he taunted, "So tell me, what *is* an innocent Gryffindor girl doing down here in the dark dungeons?"

"I had to see Slughorn," Hermione replied distracted. She had just noticed that Tom still held her hand. It was making her quite nervous.

"I see," he replied in his velvety voice. Then he inquired demandingly, "What are you planning to do now?"

"Library," Hermione replied meekly.

"Of course," he smirked down at her. "I'll come with you."

With that he tightened his grip on her hand, as if he feared she would try to run away, and led her down the corridor. Hermione just followed him. As they walked through the maze of the dungeons, she once again noticed how Tom limped. Her gaze wandered to his leg and a wave of heat hit her face as she remembered how she had thrown that cutting hex at him yesterday. She quickly averted her eyes and looked the other way. She didn't know how to deal with Tom. Shouldn't he be angry with her? Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line and looked away from him. They reached the
staircase and she couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out without looking up at Tom.

There was a short pause. His incredibly grey eyes flashed at her and he inquired curiously, "What about?"

"I'm sorry I cursed you," she said in a small voice while peering up at him.

His smirk was back in place and she felt him grabbing her hand tighter.

"I told you not to worry about it," he said rather smugly.

"Yes," Hermione sighed softly. She hesitated but then added stiffly, "I guess I should also thank you-" There was a triumphant glint in his eyes, but Hermione tried to ignore it. "-for bringing back my magic. I-…Thank you, Tom."

She had mumbled the last part rather inarticulately, still Tom had heard it and a feral smile appeared on his face as he pulled her closer to him. He leaned down to her and whispered in her ear,

"It was a pleasure."

There was tingling sensation where she could feel his hot breath on her skin and Hermione faltered in her steps. A self-satisfied expression appeared on Tom's face as he noticed her flustered state. He never let go of her hand on their way to the library.

Ms Peters smiled at Hermione as they entered. Tom still led her by the hand until they reached a table at the back of the library. She sat down and he sat opposite her. Hermione felt jumpy in his presence. She didn't know what to do and nervously stared down at her hands.

After some time Tom inquired in a soft voice, "Can I ask you something?"

Hermione peered up at him. "Okay," she said softly.

Tom smiled at her warmly, which only made her even more nervous.

"Then tell me," he said and raised an eyebrow at her. "Did you know me in the future?"

Hermione coughed and turned very pale. As she had calmed down again she glanced at him and asked cautiously, "What makes you think that?"

"Hmm. I don't know," he said in false ignorance. Then the smile on his face grew dark as he added, "Maybe all the things you know about me were a hint."

Hermione stared at his expectant face for a while then she whispered softly, "No, I haven't heard of you."

Tom frowned at her and Hermione panicked.

"Strange," he said suspiciously. "How did you know about my father then? No-one knows what happened to him. Except you."

She started to nervously fidget with a strand of her curly hair. "Maybe I just googled you," she mumbled defiantly.

"What?" Tom raised his eyebrows at her.
"Never mind."

He scanned her through narrowed eyes. "The first time we met, you were quite hostile towards me. Then there is your uncanny knowledge of my chosen name. While I admit you could have learned that from one of my followers, it is absolutely impossible that you know about the fate of my father." He leaned towards her over the table and said demandingly, "I ask again. Have we met in the future?"

Hermione shook her head, unable to say anything. She could tell just by looking at him, he didn't believe her.

Tom opened his mouth to say some more as out of no-where Melanie Nicolls suddenly plopped in the seat beside Tom. She threw Hermione a withering glare before she peered up at Tom. Hermione had never been happier to see the girl.

"I've been searching for you," Nicolls chippered at Tom while fluttering her eyelashes.

"Is that so?" Tom replied, his voice an example of indifference.

Nicolls nodded at him enthusiastically. "Yes, I thought we could spend some time together." Here she looked at Hermione rather nastily. "Without any unwanted guests."

Hermione only raised her eyebrows at the other, though she did ponder to just leave. She stared at the Slytherin girl sitting so close to Tom. To her own frustration Hermione found herself unable to get up from the seat.

"Actually," Tom said languidly, turned to Nicolls. "I asked Hermione if I could accompany her here."

Strangely, Hermione felt assuaged by the mixture of surprise and indignation crossing Nicolls' face.

"Why would you do that?" Nicolls asked, shock making her voice shake.

Tom just shrugged his shoulders. "Because I wanted to."

Now the shock on her face turned into apprehension and Nicolls skidded a bit closer to Tom, causing Hermione to glare at the girl.

"You don't consider taking her back, do you?" Nicolls asked frantically.

Tom didn't answer but instead started to smile at Hermione, sending shivers down her spine.

Seeing this, Nicolls whined, "But, Tom, you can't do that. You don't know what she says about you behind your back."

Smile gone, Tom quirked an inquisitive eyebrow at Hermione. She just looked back at him stoically. An evil look crossed Nicolls' pretty face as she smirked at Hermione triumphantly.

"And what, pray tell, does she say about me?" Tom asked the Slytherin girl placidly.

Nicolls' gaze wandered from Hermione to Tom and she smiled up at him sanctimoniously.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe," she said readily. She paused for dramatic effect and then revealed, voice laced with malice, "She said that you are a horrible boyfriend."

"Indeed?" said Tom in a composed voice.
For once Hermione was unaffected by his inquisition. She just shrugged her shoulders and said, "Well, it's the truth, isn't it?"

It was almost comic how utter shock washed over Nicolls features as Hermione admitted to it so easily. Tom, on the other hand, just smirked at Hermione.

"Fair enough," he admitted lightly.

"Tom." Nicolls looked at him indignantly. "You don't have to put up with her insults."

"On the contrary," he replied calmly as he continued to muster Hermione. The nasty smirk even widened as he said, "I think I have to put up with everything she throws at me."

Hermione stared at him and felt her face heating up, turning into a fierce blush. Merlin and Morgana, if only she hadn't cursed him in the Room of Requirement.

Seeing Hermione's front of indifference falter Tom turned to Nicolls and said impatiently, "Melanie, could you leave us alone? I need to speak with my girlfriend."

Nicolls just gaped at him while Hermione corrected caustically, "Ex-girlfriend."

Tom's grey eyes wandered to her, amusement dancing in them. "I'm sorry. Slipped my mind. You sure about that?"

She didn't deign that with an answer. Meanwhile Nicolls got up from her seat. Shock and hurt were still on her face but as she turned her gaze to Hermione it quickly turned to hate.

"She's not good enough for you," were Nicolls' last words to Tom before she stalked away, head held high.

Tom's eyes only followed her for a second before he completely lost interest in the Slytherin girl and turned his attention back to Hermione. Irritation was quickly swelling up in her as she stared back at him. Finally she asked reprovingly,

"Why don't you just tell her that she annoys the hell out of you?"

"The Nicolls family is very influential." Was all Tom offered as explanation.

Hermione stared at him for a moment, her nose crinkled in disgust. Then she said in a cold tone, "You know there's a name for the stuff you do, don't you?"

Keeping a straight face Tom only raised one lazy eyebrow.

She smiled at him sweetly as she said, "It's called prostitution."

The nasty smirk taking shape on his face was the only answer she got. Hermione huffed at him before she asked waspishly, "So, why do you keep running after me if you have Nicolls?"

A smug smirk tugged at his lips. "Jealous?" he asked insidiously.

"No," Hermione hissed back.

"Good. Then let's get back to topic." A calculating glint entered his eyes as he said, "I wanted to know how you met me in the future."

Hermione fixed him with a glare. "I told you I never knew you."
"Yes," Tom replied airily as he leaned back in his seat. "But that was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Are you calling me a liar?" Hermione growled at him.

He smiled at her with fake charm as he replied politely, "What goes around comes around."

Hermione's gaze grew cold then she informed him in a clipped tone, "Using my bad conscience won't get you anywhere."

The fake smile drained away leaving nothing but a blank mask on his face. "So you have a bad conscience?"

Hermione found that his penetrating gaze was quite difficult to stomach. She felt quite flustered under his scrutiny and that angered her so she snubbed at him venomously,

"Yes, I am sorry I cursed you. It was a mistake. But it doesn't change anything between us."

Tom looked at her, an inscrutable expression on his face. Then he got up from the table, stepped around it and slipped into the seat beside her. Hermione stiffened as he was so near her and she glared at him suspiciously. Tom seemed to be unaffected by her dismissive behaviour. He raised an arm and draped it over the back of her chair so he could lean over to her. Hermione bit her lip hard as she felt a tingle running down her spine. Though she was sure it was not caused by his close proximity! Breathing in his pleasant scent she felt him bend down to her. She didn't move a muscle as he whispered into her ear, his lips so near they almost touched her.

"Come on," Tom purred to her. "I'm really trying. Can't you at least give me a chance?"

Hermione swallowed hard, unable to answer anything. Tom bent a bit away from her and she felt herself being able to breathe again. She slightly turned her head and looked up at him. Tom's grey eyes were gazing steadily back at her. There was a suspiciously fluttery sensation in her stomach. Hermione was hit by a swoop of fear as she felt it. This wasn't right. Quickly she averted her eyes, still fighting against that tingle in her stomach. Even her magic danced around her agitatedly. It reached out to Tom as if drawn to him. She needed to get out of this.

"Did you sleep with Nicolls?" Hermione heard herself ask. "After you broke up with me, I mean."

As he didn't reply she looked up and found Tom staring at her. His face was schooled into a blank mask, but she could spot something akin to guilt flickering in his grey eyes. Hermione sighed softly and broke eye contact with him.

"I see," she whispered in a colourless voice, frightened by that numb feeling threatening to take over.

Her feelings were in turmoil and her inner chaos confused her. With a trembling hand, she reached for her schoolbag while her gaze wandered to the big grandfather clock standing not far away.

"It's late," she declared, glad that her voice was free of emotion. Though she did avoid to look at Tom again. "I wanted to meet with my friends."

Then she got up from the table and started to make her way to the exit of the Library. She had just taken a few steps as she felt someone clasping her upper arm, thus stopping her.

"Wait," Tom said in a slightly breathless voice.

Slowly Hermione turned around to him. She could still feel his hand clutching her arm and that brief contact unsettled her even more.
"Look, I- I'm sorry," he finally whispered.

Hermione scanned him for a moment then she replied in a cold voice, "Why? It's not like we are still together."

The regret that now filled his eyes made her almost flinch.

"You know I want you back," Tom said in a severe tone.

She just shrugged her shoulders, turned around and walked away.

A day later, classes were over and Hermione entered her dormitory and sank down on her soft bed. She took her pillow and stuffed it behind her back so she could prop up against the headboard. She tucked a wisp of her curly hair behind her ear as she leaned back. It was rather hot and stuffy in the dormitory as the summer sun had shone on Gryffindor tower the whole day. But at least she had managed to escape Tom yet again. Since that conversation they had had in the library yesterday she hadn't talked with him again. She had been aloof and indifferent towards him.

If only that wasn't just a mask she put on.

Hermione rolled on her side and hugged her pillow tightly against her. She was scared. Feelings boiled up in her. Feelings she had buried a long time ago. She couldn't even enjoy her new magic anymore. This was just wrong wrong wrong!

Why did she feel so confused? Why did she even speak with Tom again? Okay he had returned her magic and treated her nicely, but she still hadn't forgiven him. After all he still thought Muggleborns were worthless beings, he still loved dark magic and he still was a manipulative, sneaky, soulless, evil jerk. She should stay away from him, but no, she sat with him in the library, chatting with him as if they were friends.

And then I freak out because he slept with Nicolls, she thought, disgusted with herself.

Hermione sighed and she could feel a headache beginning to throb behind her temples. It was really unbearably hot here in the dorm. Maybe she should go outside and have a bit of fresh air. She shook her head slightly to get rid of that fuzzy feeling. Maybe she was just exhausted. The ritual of getting her magic back had put quite the strain on her body. Maybe all she needed to do was getting rest. Hopefully that would get rid of her confusion, too. She really couldn't afford to let Tom back into her life. With that humble hope in mind, Hermione curled up on her bed and closed her eyes.

She was shaken from her slumber by a knock on the door. Still sleep muddled, Hermione raised her head. She could see the sun had wandered quite the distance over her window. Merlin, how long had she been out? There was another knock on the door and Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. Who could that be? Obviously, not one of her dorm mates as they wouldn't knock.

"Yes?"

The door was opened and Tom entered the dormitory. Hermione groaned softly in frustration. She should have known it would be him. There was no escaping him, was there?

"What do you want?" she asked rather harshly, not bothering to be polite.
Tom still stood by the door, an unreadable expression on his face. She noticed that he had a plate with some sandwiches in his hand.

"You've missed dinner. I thought you might be hungry," he said, unaffected by that angry scowl on her face.

Hermione still glared at him but was only met by his stony face. Tom put the plate down on the small cabinet, standing by the door. She squeezed her eyes shut as she was once again hit by an odd stab in her chest. What was it that pulled her to him? Why did he need to torment her? He should go and bother Nicolls. Hermione's glare darkened at that thought. She abruptly got up from the bed. Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise as she now walked over to him, other than that he didn't react.

Hermione didn't want to ponder that attraction she obviously felt towards him. She was tired of acting, of having to carefully consider her every step and of dancing with Riddle in that stupid game of ploys and manipulations.

_"I'm a goddamn Gryffindor not a Slytherin!"_ she thought enraged.

Hermione stopped, standing right before Tom. She felt her heart beating faster as she was so near him. He still just stared at her. Aside from mild surprise in his eyes he looked poised and collected. His nonchalance made her hot temper spiral up even more. Hermione reached up, grabbed his tie and pulled rather violently. Tom's eyes widened at her rough actions. He had to bend down to her. Hermione didn't hesitate anymore. Self-restraint having flown out of the window, she crashed her lips against his. She held his head in place with a hand at the back of his neck and kissed him fiercely. Tom wasn't reacting to her at all, as he still seemed to be taken by surprise by her sudden actions. Hermione didn't give him the time to adapt as she now plunged her tongue into his mouth. She didn't care that she was being rather aggressive as she explored his mouth with her tongue. It was only as he started to respond to her kiss that Hermione pulled back.

She retreated a bit from him and then raised her head and glared up at him. She noticed that Tom's lips were now red and rather swollen. He looked down at her and the confusion was still visible in his grey eyes. Though now that he cocked his head a little to the side, she could also see a touch of hope on his face. Hermione wanted to step back, away from him, but she didn't. Something drove her on.

So, instead of retreating she took a step towards him, raised her hands and now grabbed the fronts of his black uniform robe. In one swift movement she slipped the robe over his shoulders and it fell down on the floor. But Hermione didn't stop there, she started to hastily undo the buttons of his shirt to gruffly open it, exposing his chest. She admired his perfect skin as her hands greedily wandered over his broad chest to then slid around him. Her hands ran over the skin of his back as she started to trace kisses on his collarbone. She could hear Tom moaning in pleasure. But as she continued to kiss his skin it was more because she wanted to taste him, not because she wanted to make him feel good.

It was then that she felt his hands gently grabbing her shoulders. They slid down her arms and wandered to her chest. Hermione felt his hands skimming over her breasts, leaving behind an exciting tingle on her skin. But as his fingers reached the buttons of her blouse, she stiffened. She stopped kissing his hot skin and removed her hands from his back. Instead, she now grabbed his wrists, forcing him to stop. Tom immediately ceased from opening her blouse but Hermione still tightened her grip on his wrists harshly. Then she forcefully brought his hands down. She didn't release his wrists again as she now resumed to nibble at the skin of his neck, running her tongue over him. She could feel him shuddering under her ministrations.

Hermione stopped and raised her head to look up at him. She found Tom staring down at her and now there was desire clearly burning in his eyes. That feral look on his face managed to intensify her
own lust. She released one of his wrists but redoubled her hold on the other. Then she stepped away from Tom, turned around and started to drag him over to her bed. As they reached the bed, Hermione pushed him down while she simultaneously ripped his shirt from his body.

She sat on his stomach with her legs on either side of him. Her hands ran greedily up and down the perfectly toned muscles of his chest and sides as she captured his lips in another ferocious kiss, not leaving him any time for breath. She felt his hands cautiously skimming up her sides. Then they wandered again to the buttons of her blouse. Hermione stiffened slightly as Tom started to open her blouse, but this time she didn't push him away. He gingerly opened each button before he slipped the blouse over her shoulders. Still maintaining their kiss and one arm wrapped tightly around her waist, Tom sat up on the bed. His lips left her mouth and wandered down to her neck. Hermione tensed involuntarily as she felt him nibbling at the skin of her neck. Terrible memories threatened to break through from the last time a man had kissed her there. But Tom's lips on her skin were gentle and soft. He didn't bite her. His kisses didn't leave behind pain but a pleasant tingling sensation on her skin. Hermione felt herself relax. The memories disappeared and she was again caught up in the moment. Tom's hand on her back slid up until it found her bra. He undid the clasp while still tracing kisses on the skin of her neck. Hermione ran a hand roughly through his dark hair as Tom's head wandered down. She gasped softly as he started to fondle her breasts. This was going too far but even if she had wanted to stop Tom, she wouldn't have been able to do so anymore. Hermione was swept away by a wave of desire.

With a slick move Tom flipped her around so that she ended up lying on her back. His lips were immediately on her own, capturing her in another passionate kiss. His tongue was invading her mouth and his hands running down her body. It barely registered with her how he opened her skirt and slipped it from her body. His hands were everywhere on her. Caressing her, teasing her, always invoking an almost painful desire for more.

Hermione moaned as she felt him so near her. By now they were both naked. How had that happened? She did not know. But it was wonderful feeling him so near, their bare skin touching. There was a nagging voice at the back of her head telling her to stop but she couldn't. She could neither stop herself nor Tom. He now half lay on her, propped up by his arms on either side of her head, while he kissed her fiercely.

His tongue was demandingly playing with her own as she felt how he insinuated himself between her legs. Ruled by desire Hermione was unable to stop him. A gasp tore from her mouth, as he thrust into her. He wasn't being gentle. But she didn't seek gentleness anyway. She desperately clung to him. Moans left her as she felt him moving in and out of her. Her fingers on his back tensed and her nails dug into his skin. A burning need built up until it consumed her completely. She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his back. Tom's head hung by hers and she heard his ragged breathing. All thoughts had long since left her mind. The only thing she registered was the nearness between them. It was the only thing she needed right now. She was panting heavily, desperate to finally satisfy that burning ache inside of her.

She could feel his body tense, Hermione squeezed her legs tighter around him and arched into him. The next time he entered her, the burning ache suddenly burst and turned into waves of pleasure running up and down her whole body. Hermione's fingernails dug even deep into his skin as she screamed out.

She needed time to calm down again. Her body still shivered and Hermione leaned back into the bed. Her breathing evened out again. But as the pleasant feeling slowly subsided Hermione's eyes widened in horror and she stared up at him. It slowly registered what exactly she had just now done. With him. What had gotten into her?
His eyes were softly sparkling down at her and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Hermione just narrowed her eyes at him. This had been a mistake! Tom leaned down to her, obviously to kiss her. Hermione knew that she couldn't do that. So, she rolled over on her side, her back now facing him. She felt Tom hesitating shortly but then his hand gently skimmed over her arm.

"Hermione?" he whispered softly to her.

She didn't answer but just curled up in a tight ball and squeezed her eyes shut. What in Merlin's name had she been thinking? He was moving on the bed, then she stiffened as she felt him placing a soft kiss on her shoulder. Fortunately, he didn't try more. He pulled the light blanket over her, then Hermione felt him settling down on the bed beside her.

Hermione was lying on her side with her head propped up on her hand while she was looking at Tom. He lay asleep beside her and right now Hermione was scanning him intently. There were a few scratches on his well-toned upper arms where her fingernails had broken his skin. Hermione knew that there were quite a few more on his back. Her eyes wandered up to his head. His dark hair was tousled and had no resemblance with that immaculate hairstyle he normally sported. She extended a hand and gently ran it through his dark silky hair. Tom stirred in his sleep but didn't wake up. Hermione quickly withdrew her hand, only now realizing what she had done.

Her gaze wandered over his face. His pale skin was flawless and Hermione adored the way his jet-black hair was contrasting with the colour of his skin. His cheekbones were high and seemed to enhance his attractive features even more. As she so scanned his face, Hermione once again had to admit how handsome Tom really was. Now that he was sleeping, he even looked somehow innocent. Hermione shook her head slightly. Tom was a lot of things, but certainly not innocent.

She sighed softly as her eyes continued to wander over him. He still was fast asleep, his chest slightly moving up and down with his breathing. His body was lithe but still muscular. Again, very handsome, Hermione thought as she scanned him. His lower body was covered by the blanket which he had tangled around his legs in his sleep. Still, she knew that he was naked under that blanket.

How had that happened? This was completely wrong. She should have never slept with him. What had gotten into her? He was dark, and evil, and very dangerous, wasn't he? Hermione laid her hand gingerly on his stomach. Then she leaned down to him and whispered in his ear,

"Even your looks are deceiving."

Tom was still asleep as she bent up again. Hermione unfixed her gaze from him. Then she cautiously, as not to wake Tom, got up from the bed and pulled the covers shut around the bed. She didn't really care but she would prefer it if her dorm mates didn't find Tom Riddle naked in her bed when they returned from wherever they were. Luckily they hadn't burst in earlier. Hopefully, Tom would display some presence of mind and would cast an invisibility spell on himself before he got up.

Hermione quickly slipped into some clothes and then walked over to the exit of the dorm. Lying by the door, she spotted a black robe. She picked it up. The trimmings of the robe were unmistakably in the green and silver Slytherin colours. Hermione sighed softly as she looked down at Tom's robe. She really shouldn't have ripped it off his body, should she? She had no idea what had come over her so suddenly. Hermione noticed a hard object in the pocket of the robe. She reached for it and produced Tom's wand out of it. The pale wand lay in her hand and she looked down at it pensively.
She suddenly had the urge to snap that wand in two. She let out a long breath before she stuffed it back into the robe pocket. It was irrational, she decided as she cautiously stepped back to her bed. Irrational, wanting to destroy the wand. After all, she mused as she laid Tom's robes over the back of her chair, it wasn't the wand that was evil.

It was an hour later that Tom woke up. He yawned tiredly before he rolled on his side. As he slowly opened his eyes he found himself surrounded by obnoxious red and gold colours. Unfortunately, this over-exposure to Gryffindor colours wasn't even brightened by Hermione's presence. The space beside Tom was very much abandoned and he lay quite alone in Hermione's four-poster. Tom sighed disappointed as he let his fingers skim over the soft bed sheet where Hermione was supposed to lie. His thoughts wandered back to the previous events. He couldn't quite believe that it had really happened. His eyes wandered over the scratches on his arms and a smirk took form on his face. It really had happened. As he had climbed up to the Gryffindor tower to talk with Hermione, he would have never guessed in what this could result. He actually had expected her to throw him out or at least yell at him furiously. Instead, she had very unexpectedly started to kiss him. That had only been the beginning, Tom thought satisfied as he rolled over on his back. Hermione had been so aggressive, so fierce. Very demanding. The corners of his mouth curled up even more at that thought, and Tom found himself hit by a hot wave of longing. It was disappointing that Hermione had already left.

His thoughts redirected to her absence, Tom started to wonder why she had left. His elevated mood evaporated as he speculated. She had slept with him. Surely, that meant she had forgiven him, didn't it? Though why wasn't she here? Could it be that she had just used him? He shook his head. No, Hermione wouldn't be able to ever use somebody. That was more his style actually. Tom had never been at the receiving end of such deceit and now realized that it wouldn't be amusing at all. But no, Hermione couldn't do that to him. Never. They were bound to each other.

Through blood and magic.

Tom laid his arm over his eyes. Still, maybe Hermione regretted the whole thing. He remembered her reaction right after they had slept with each other. She had been so unapproachable. She hadn't wanted him to touch her. Tom had noticed how she had stiffened uncomfortably as he had kissed her on the shoulder. He sighed in frustration as he felt the urge to go and search for Hermione. He wanted her to tell him that she didn't think this had been a mistake. Unfortunately, he had learned a long while ago that confronting Hermione DeCerto when she didn't want to speak with him wasn't going to lead to success. If she didn't want to see him, it would be wiser to wait until she changed her mind. Still shaken by a feeling of restlessness Tom sat up in the bed. Maybe it was best if he just returned to his own common room. Of course, on the way back he could check the library. Maybe Hermione had hidden away there. Tom ignored that he completely disregarded his previous resolve to not bother Hermione. He reached for the red curtains of the four-poster and pushed them away, then he hopped out of the bed…

…just to be met by an ear-splittingly high, girlish scream. Tom blinked confused while trying to regain his sense of hearing. His eyes widened slightly as his gaze wandered over the scene in front of him. There were two girls sitting on the bed right beside Hermione's. They had obviously been reading in some magazines. Though now, the magazines had fallen from their hands and they gaped at his sudden appearance, eyes wide as saucers. It was as Tom saw that bright red blush on the blonde's face that he finally noticed that he wasn't wearing anything, but stood very much naked in front of the girls. Maybe it would have been a good idea to check if the coast was clear before he jumped out of the bed, Tom thought contemplatively as he took in the scandalized expressions on the girls' faces. The dirty-blond girl was still staring at him, obviously caught in shock while her mouth
opened and closed tonelessly. Tom had to suppress a chuckle as he saw an appreciative look seeping into the brunette's eyes as they wandered over his form. He couldn't completely pull himself together so a slight smirk started to ghost around his mouth. That made the fierce blush on the blonde's face even darker. It was then that Tom glimpsed his uniform robe lying over the back of Hermione's chair. He reached for the robe and produced his wand out of one of its pockets. He brandished it in an elegant movement. Instantly, his clothes appeared on his body. It didn't take more than a few seconds and Tom was perfectly dressed in his uniform. Amusement danced in his eyes as he looked back at Hermione's dorm mates. They still hadn't said anything at all, but only gawked at him. Tom arranged his face in an embarrassed but yet charming expression. Then he said,

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize someone was here," he smiled at them apologetically. "Otherwise I wouldn't have forced my presence on two so lovely ladies."

The glassy look on both of the girls' faces confirmed that his acting was still quite convincing.

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A burst of green flames and Nicolas Flamel stepped out of the fireplace and into his old friend's office. A smile tugged at his lips as he quickly took in his surroundings. Such a brilliant mind, he thought in amusement as he scanned the books and all the delicate silver objects lying hither and tither in the office. Sadly no conception of order at all.

"Nicolas, there you are," a voice acknowledged him.

Flamel turned and found Dumbledore sitting comfortably in a plushy arm chair, sipping a cup of tea and smiling at him.

"Please, sit down. Make yourself comfortable," he said offered genially.

Flamel stepped over to him and took place in the other arm chair, facing his friend.

"Tea?" Dumbledore asked.

"Please," Flamel inclined his head.

Dumbledore waved his wand and soon Flamel enjoyed a hot cup of Peppermint tea while he leaned back in the soft arm chair. Dumbledore glanced at him, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Couldn't wait any longer, could you?" he asked teasingly.

Flamel smiled at him. "You know me. I like a fascinating read."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That Peverell doubtlessly is," he said. He gestured with his hand at his desk where a small, leather bound book lay. "And he's already waiting for you."

"I am relieved you managed to get it back, Albus," Flamel said as his eyes skimmed over the small book. Then he gazed back at his friend. "I felt horrible after it got stolen while in my possession."

"Don't blame yourself, Nicolas," replied Dumbledore. "I apologize again that I can't let the book leave Hogwarts again. It would be too dangerous."

"So he is really after the book?" Flamel inquired, concern wrapped around his words.

Dumbledore scanned him, suddenly looking very tired. "Most definitely," he sighed.

With worry Flamel noted the weariness surrounding his friend. It always did whenever they touched
the subject of Dumbledore's old acquaintance.

"Whatever you might think, Albus, you don't have to fight him," Flamel said quietly. "It is not your duty."

Dumbledore looked at him then he replied, a sombre tinge in his voice, "I am the only one who can stop him."

"That you don't know," Flamel returned gingerly.

"I helped create him," Dumbledore insisted.

"Now that is plain wrong, Albus, and you know it," Flamel said, his voice more forceful now. "It were his own choices that made Grindelwald the man he now is."

A sad smile ghosted around Dumbledore's face as he answered, "Without Gellert, I would be nothing. As well as Gellert would not have gained what he now has without me."

Flamel breathed in deeply, troubled by that wan sheen in the other's eyes. "You make mistakes, Albus, like every other man," he said firmly. "Accept them, learn from them but do not let them rule you."

"The blood of each and every one of his victims stains my hands," Dumbledore replied softly. "Yet I am unable to face him and bring him to justice. But soon I will be forced to act."

"What do you mean?" Flamel inquired alarmed.

"For years now Gellert and I have been avoiding each other. He doesn't want to risk fighting me and I am too afraid of the truth," Dumbledore admitted. "But now Gellert has stepped over our invisible boundary. He has entered Hogwarts."

Flamel rose his eyebrow in surprise. "Did he want to challenge you?"

"No, I do not presume so," Dumbledore sighed. "But he certainly attached more importance to his new goal than to our unspoken covenant to avoid each other."

"What goal might that be?" Flamel queried.

"A student of mine."

Flamel mused over that for a moment. Then he asked, "Are we perchance talking about the thief of Peverell's book?"

A true smile lid up Dumbledore's face as he replied, "Perceptive as ever."

"Well, I am the older one of us two," Flamel returned the light taunt.

"Indeed. Indeed," the other chuckled.

"That thief, is he after the Hallows as well?" Flamel asked cautiously.

Dumbledore focused on him and his smile widened a bit. "Yes, she seems to try to collect them."

Scanning the smile on his friend's face Flamel inquired, "And you are not alarmed by that?"

Once again his friend showed his annoying habit of answering a question with a question. "Do you
understand the lure behind the Hallows?"

"Every man does, Albus," Flamel replied quietly.

"Still, the Hallows are nothing but a chimera," Dumbledore said gravely. His eyes began to twinkle though as he continued, "Yet I find myself wishing that she will succeed in uniting them and managing to unlock their mystery."

Flamel blinked at him in surprise. "Truly?"

"Yes," he smiled. "She is exceptional. She found light where I have long since abandoned all hope."

"You have to introduce me to that mysterious girl." Flamel smiled back at him.

"You would certainly take to her." Dumbledore eyes were twinkling. Then the merry twinkle left his eyes and he said, "If only Gellert weren't distracting me so, I would be able to help her find whatever she's searching for."

"You still insist that Gellert is your problem?" Flamel commented reproachfully.

"Believe me I tried to convince myself for years that he is not," Dumbledore sighed tiredly. "But I cannot escape him."

"Do you think you could beat Grindelwald?" Flamel asked cautiously.

"I am not sure," the other replied wearily. "But I think magically I am a bit stronger than him."

Flamel breathed out in relief. Dumbledore just smiled at him sadly as he continued, "The thing is, Nicolas, no-one is unbeatable. We are all vulnerable in our own ways."

Hermione tried. She really tried. She would scamper from the common room directly to the Great Hall, wolf down something as quickly as possible to then dart to her class rooms. She tried not to look up as she sat in the Great Hall. She tried to leave fast so he wouldn't be able to catch her. Every class Gryffindor didn't share with Slytherin was a relief for her. Then she at least wouldn't have to endure his silent stares. His questioning eyes. She couldn't talk with him. No! Even though he wanted. She hadn't spoken with him since… that day. What would she tell him? That… incident… had been a mistake. It had been wrong. The traitorous doubt was still tormenting her. Worse than ever before. Now accompanied by fluttery sensation in her stomach whenever she saw him. But her mind was telling her to stay away from him. She had always listened to her mind, hadn't she? Not to her feelings. Feelings were deceptive. Hadn't he taught her that? He had unburied her hope. He had mended her and she had believe him. Believed her feelings over her mind. Then without batting an eye he had cruelly stamped those feelings. Traitorous, that's what they were. And that was what he was.

But then why? Why was she creeping around the castle like a thief just so he wouldn't catch her? Why did she avoid him and was afraid to talk to him? She should square her shoulders, walk up to him and tell him right in the face that it had been a mistake. That she didn't want him anywhere near her and that there would never be a repetition of those… events. But she didn't do that. She preferred to evade him. Three days she had managed. Three days of trying to escape Tom Riddle.

Well, before I came to the past I managed two years, she told herself wryly. So things are looking up.
She suppressed a sarcastic snort as she hurriedly stuffed her roll or parchment into her bag. Classes were over for today and thank Merlin for that. First Household which had almost made Hermione hurl a curse at Legifer and her insufferable dorm mates. Rose and Lucia broke down in giggles every time they looked at Hermione. She had no idea what had gotten into them.

Transfiguration hadn’t been any better. After all Tom was sitting at the table right behind her. That was the reason she now so frantically stuffed her things in her bag. She needed to escape. She only needed to get away from him once more. Then she would barricade herself away in the common room for the weekend.

Hermione grabbed her bag and very nearly ran from the room. As quickly as she could she made her way through the corridors which were crammed with students. The coppery necklace he had given her still hung around her neck. With every step she took it bounced against her chest. Just as if it wanted to remind her that it was still there. Her shame. Her weakness. She should rip it off her neck and throw it away. She jogged up the moving staircase, always in direction of the common room. She just passed the fifth floor and wanted to enter the next flight of stairs as a hand on her shoulder stopped her. The same hand now turned her around and Hermione gulped as she stared up into a pair of grey eyes.

Three days? Congratulations…

"I want to speak with you," Tom said cuttingly without any preamble. It wasn’t a question either. His eyes blazed demandingly down at her.

Hermione just stared at him stupidly, unable to react. Tom didn’t hesitate. He grabbed her hand decidedly, turned around and tugged her after him. Hermione let her head hang in defeat and just followed him. He led her away from the other students and then pulled her into an unused classroom. Hermione didn’t try to get away from him. She heard him close the door after she had entered but she didn’t look up at him, preferring it to stare at her own feet.

"Hermione?" she heard his sharp, angry voice. He stood directly in front of her. "Can you at least look at me?"

She didn’t think she could. But then she felt a hand on her chin and her face was forced up. As she raised her eyes at him she found a stormy expression on his face. He glared at her angrily as he snapped irritably,

"Why are you doing this to me? Are you trying to punish me?"

Hermione remained to be silent but just stared up at him with wide eyes. He was still holding her head in place with his hand grabbing her jaw. Met with her silence, she could feel his grip getting painfully tight. Then he leaned down to her. His face was only inches from hers as he hissed darkly,

"Why did you sleep with me?"

His anger danced in his eyes as a blood-red sheen and Hermione trembled as she heard the menacing touch in his voice. His dark magic was swirling around him balefully.

Hermione stuttered, unable to form a coherent sentence, "I… er… it was a…"

Mistake? An inner voice offered, but Hermione was unable to speak it out loud.

At her pathetic reply Tom’s temper seemed to flare up even more. He abruptly let go of her and Hermione staggered as she was released from his grip. Then he started to pace to and fro in front of her. Now and then he threw her a dark glance. A hand ran in irritation through his hair as he tried to
get his temper back in control. He stopped his pacing, but his glare had lost nothing of its former fury.

"I don't know how to treat you," he finally snapped at her. "First you hate me. Then we start talking again. After that you suddenly kiss me and sleep with me. And now you just ignore me."

His grey eyes were boring into her and Tom took a step towards her. There was a cold glint in his eyes as he whispered menacingly, "You can't ignore me, Hermione."

She took a step away from him and hissed heatedly, "Are you threatening me?"

Tom took in a breath of air as he heard her tone. He shortly closed his eyes as if he tried to calm himself down. Then he said, "No. I am not threatening you. I just don't know how to get through to you."

"Hence you try to intimidate me?" Hermione replied fiercely. "First you grab me and force me into this room and now you launch threats at me!"

Tom glanced at her, clearly pondering how best to proceed. Crimson red still flickered in his eyes and Hermione was suspicious.

"I just want to talk," he finally pressed out, his voice tightly controlled. "I won't harm you."

Hermione snorted at that disbelievingly. Tom sighed, seemingly fighting for composure. Then he said through gritted teeth, "I apologized. I swore to never hurt you again. I gave you time. I even helped you with your magic." There was a hint of desperation in his voice as he continued, "What else do you want?"

Hermione didn't reply anything. He was still a liar, wasn't he? She was not going to trust her feelings again. Tom was lying! Her eyes stopped at the golden ring on his right hand, and an idea took form in her mind. This was the way to finally force Tom to show his true colours. He would never abandon the ring. Hermione extended a hand towards Tom. She could see his eyes widen in surprise. She skimmed her finger over his ring while she said in an emotionless tone,

"I want that."

Simple, straightforward, no way to squirm out of it. He would surely drop his mask now. That ring meant a lot to Tom. It was meant to be a future vessel for his soul. Voldemort would never relinquish the Gaunts' ring. He would prefer to drop his mask.

"That… that ring is very important to me," Tom stuttered while he eyed her in confusion.

Hermione continued to stare at him steadily. She had known it, hadn't she? Now she would see his true face again.

"You said you want me back?" Hermione asked harshly. "Then give me the ring."

"This is a family heirloom," Tom said, obviously trying to find a way out of this. Then he added weakly, "The only one I have."

"Yes?" Hermione said coldly while raising her eyebrows, silently asking him why she should care. "I still want it."

Tom was staring at her. Hermione could feel her breathing hitch. She had wanted to see him being honest for once, but now she was afraid. She realized that she didn't want to see that derisive look on
his face again, the hate blazing in his eyes, but she would have to face it again. Suddenly, Tom broke eye contact with her. His gaze wandered to the ring at his hand. He looked at the ring contemplatively.

*Maybe wondering what curse to use on me...* Hermione guessed, her stomach flopping.

He then took her completely by surprise as he slowly removed the ring from his finger. He held the ring in his left hand and still stared at it. Then his eyes snapped up at her. Hermione twitched as his gaze hit her. Tom didn't break eye contact with her again but he extended his hand, offering the ring to her. Hermione's eyes grew wide, then they wandered to the gold ring, lying on the palm of his hand. Disbelief washed over her.

*What is he doing?* He wasn't supposed to comply with her! He was lying. *Lying!*

Hermione started to tremble while she still stared at the ring with huge eyes. Then slowly, warily, she reached for the ring. Her hand shook as she extended it towards Tom. She still expected him to do something, anything to prevent her from getting the ring. But then her fingers touched the warm metal and he let go of it. Hermione now stared at the ring in her hand. She didn't understand. Why had he parted with it so easily? Her huge eyes wandered back at Tom. He was lying … wasn't he? Hermione shook her head slightly. Shock was paralysing her thoughts. Abruptly, she closed her hand around the ring. Then, without saying a word, she hurried to the door and left.

Hermione stumbled out of the class room, the ring still in her hand. She walked away and quickly entered the crowded stair case, always expecting a hand grabbing her shoulder. Surely, Tom would come after her and demand that ring back. He was going to force it back from her. Hermione shuddered and almost tripped over herself in her haste. Her heart was beating so fast, she could hear it throbbing loudly in her ears. Her hand tightened around the ring, making the metal bore painfully into her skin. She had planned to make Tom's façade of kindness crumble. It hadn't.

*He is lying. He hates me!*

Yes, he hated her. Since he had found out about her parents, Tom had despised her and hated her. He had cursed her and hurt her.

But then why give up his ring?

*It's fake!* a voice inside of her hissed sharply. Hermione stopped in mid-step. Trepidation run through her like icy cold water. She had to find out. She turned and now hurried down the stairs. It wasn't long and she reached the fourth floor. With quick steps, she walked to and fro in front of a bare patch of wall. A door appeared out of nowhere. Hermione opened the door and entered the Room of Requirement. Behind the door was a huge hall. Its floor, walls and ceiling were made of white, polished marble. There were no windows anywhere in this rooms, still it was brightly lit. Hermione stepped further in and heard a soft click as the door closed behind her. She walked a distance into the hall then she stopped and sat down on the floor, cross legged. With a trembling hand she put down the ring in front of her.

*It is a fake,* she thought numbly as she looked at the golden ring and its black stone. A fake, just like Tom. Her stomach gave a lurch and Hermione sniffed softly as she looked at the ring. Her breathing was laboured and she was feeling so sick, but she had to find out. She needed to know if that ring was a Hallow. There was one way to find the truth. Only one. Hermione gulped as she continued looking at the ring. She forced herself to reach for it but her body refused to work. As she looked at the black stone on the ring, she felt emotions flooding her. Emotions she didn't really want to come back to her.

The ever present guilt gnawed at her. Guilt for having survived where her friends hadn't. Guilt, because she had failed them and had not saved them. And guilt for having betrayed them. But here it was, the Resurrection Stone. One of the three Hallows. This stone was one step more towards getting home. So, she had to make sure it was real.

That much, she owed her friends.

Hermione released a shuddered breath of air and clenched her teeth as she slowly extended a shaking hand towards the ring. Fear ripped at her, but she still closed her fingers around the ring. Then she enclosed the ring with her other hand, too, and brought it up to her lips. She tightly closed her eyes, then she slowly turned the ring over in her hands. She had barely turned it for the third time as she heard a soft rustling in front of her. A shiver went through her, then she was trembling in fear.

Slowly, reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Her breath hitched and hot tears threatened to fall from her eyes, making her vision blurry. A young man was standing in front of her. It was immediately apparent that he was not really here, not truly flesh, but he didn't look like a ghost either. He was somehow translucent but more solid than a ghost. It almost looked like he was standing behind a veil which strangely obscured the sight of him. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. His clothes looked ragged and dirty. A large blotch of dried blood soiled the fabric of his shirt at his right side.

Hermione's breathing was laboured as she finally dared to look up at his face. His black hair was a mess, standing up in every direction. His face was pale. His strange form of being somehow dimmed all the colour on him, but the colour of his eyes was standing out. The tears that had stung in her eyes finally fell, as she stared at the vibrant green of his eyes. With jerky movements, Hermione stumbled hastily up to her feet. Her eyes never left the young man in front of her.

"Harry," she breathed, her voice raw with emotion.

Harry looked at her, sadness visible on his face. His eyes were dull, grief having finally snuffed that bright glint in them.

"Harry, I… " Hermione whispered softly.

More tears run from her eyes.

"I missed you," she said as she stared at Harry, still not able to believe that he was really here. "I missed you so very much."

Harry didn't reply anything. He just continued looking at her with that horrible sadness in his eyes. Hermione shuddered as she stared at him. She wanted to run to him, to hug him. But she didn't. There was so much sorrow on Harry's face. And… was that…

Disappointment?

Panic started to override her and she trembled uncontrollably. The tears fell freely from her eyes, falling down on her blouse, soaking it. As she was slowly breaking down, Harry still looked at her sadly.

"I- I'm so sorry," she managed to choke out between her sobs. "I didn't mean to kill you. I'm sorry."

As Hermione sobbed, Harry just looked at her in sadness. Was there still disappointment in his eyes? Hermione was convinced of it. A new sob shook her body. Here Harry was standing, right in front of her. But she couldn't touch him. She would never reach him. He was gone, dead. Was he really disappointed with her? If so, he had every right to be. A new tremor shook her body.
"Forgive me…" Hermione whispered.

Though, she knew what she had done didn't deserve any forgiveness. Tears streamed from her eyes as she looked at Harry. He still hadn't said a word. Maybe he wasn't even able to talk. He was just standing there, looking at her sadly. Then his green eyes left her face and wandered to the ring she still held it in her hand. As he looked back at her, he slightly, barely notably, shook his head at her. Hermione just continued to sob. She wanted him back. She desperately wanted him to be here with her. Suddenly, her head started to hurt piercingly. Hermione closed her eyes in pain. But now she could see images, playing out in front of her.

She was raising her wand at Harry. Then she whispered the words, 'Avada Kedavra.' An unsavoury green light left her wand and crashed violently into Harry's chest.

"No!" Hermione cried out desperately, her hands clutching her head and she crumbled down on the floor.

But the images didn't stop.

The green curse hit Harry. And Hermione could watch the light leaving his eyes. It was like his very life was being forcefully ripped from him. Then his body crumbled to the floor. He remained lying there, his eyes open and lifeless and his skin grey and waxy.

"Don't leave me," Hermione sobbed.

She opened her eyes and looked up at Harry. She was huddled on the floor, trembled heavily and tears were running down her face. Harry still stared at her, a sombre look on his face. Was he angry with her? A new sob shook her.

Then she whispered in a soft, hurt voice, "Please."

Harry remained to be silent. Was he unable to talk. …or didn't he want to? Hermione's body shook as she cried. She wanted him back. She missed him so much. Now that he stood before her, now that she could see him, his loss hit her again as painfully as it had when she had knelt beside his body back in the Ministry of Magic.

Her head hurt so much. It felt like it would burst open any second now. Through her sobs she only managed to gulp in unsteady breaths of air. She felt like suffocating and everything swirled around her. But she couldn't calm down. She had completely lost control over her body.

She was standing there, in the office of the Minister of Magic. No-one was around. She was completely alone. Dead bodies were her only company. Her wand was still in her hand. Surreal that she was standing here, still breathing, her heart still thumping in her chest, still alive, when everyone else was dead. She had used that curse. She shouldn't be standing here as if nothing had happened. Harry was lying there, just a few steps away. Lying there on the floor. One glance at his body was enough. Enough to know that he was not really there. He was gone. Dead. And it had been her fault. She had murdered him. Her eyes left Harry and wandered over the whole room. As if magically drawn to him, Hermione stared at Ron. He looked so peaceful. Asleep. But through that peacefulness he was screaming at her.

"Why did you do it?"

Hermione spun around.

She stared at Harry, he still looked dead and gone. But this time he was standing there. His body a washed-out black and white image.
"I didn't mean to!" she screamed desperately.

Harry though was mute again. Just his green eyes bored into her, speaking to her, accusing her. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut.

*And again she saw only dead bodies around her, in the Ministry. Harry was standing there immobile and dead.*

"Why did you kill me?"

"I didn't- I didn't mean to!" Hermione choked.

"And yet, I am dead," said Harry.

*She tried to breathe in, but Hermione found she was unable to. The piercing pain was still cutting through her head and she felt sick.*

"You killed me," Harry said. "You killed Ron and Neville. You let Ginny die, and Luna. You didn't even save your own parents. Why?"

*Hermione shook her head, not able to answer him. Sobs wrecked her whole body and tears flowed from her swollen eyes.*

She opened her eyes again. The Ministry office was gone. But Harry was still there, looking at her. He was mute and hidden behind a veil. Hermione felt her body shaking uncontrollably. She was kneeling on the floor. Even if she had wanted to, she was unable to get up.

"I didn't mean to kill you!" she sobbed weakly.

Harry wasn't speaking to her. Maybe he couldn't, maybe he didn't want to.

"Please," she said and looked up at him through her tears.

*His green eyes were surveying her. He looked so incredibly sad. And that was her fault. Everything.*

Suddenly, Hermione heard the door behind her open. She was so startled by that sound that the golden ring slipped from her hand. As the ring fell from her limp fingers, Harry's form flickered. Her eyes widened as she watched him disappear.

"No!"

She screamed in desperation, raising her arm and reaching for him. But in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

"No…” Hermione sobbed, unwilling to accept that he had left her again.

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"No!"

Hermione screamed in desperation, raising her arm and reaching for the ghostly form of Harry. But in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

"No…" she sobbed, unwilling to accept that he had left her again.

She felt weak and her head hurt so much. She wanted Harry to come back. Why did he leave her? Was he angry? Did he blame everything on her? No, she didn't want him to come back. He would surely blame her. But… but she missed him…

Hermione buried her face in her hands and continued to cry desperately. Suddenly, she felt strong arms being wrapped around her and she was pressed against another body. Her eyes were still closed and her face buried in her hands, but Hermione recognized that smell. Pleasant and familiar. She should pull away but found herself unable to. So, she allowed those arms to hug her gently while she still cried. A hand was rubbing her back soothingly. After some time, a soft voice asked,

"The stone on the ring is the Resurrection Stone?"

Hermione nodded, unable to answer. The hand ran gingerly through her hair.

"And you used it just now?" the melodious voice inquired.

She again nodded. The arms around her tightened, pressing her firmer against the body.

"Who was that? Ron?" the voice asked cautiously.

This time Hermione replied, her voice hoarse from all the crying. "No. My best friend," she managed to say in between her sobs. "More like a brother."

The arms continued to embrace her comfortably while images of Harry still flickered through her mind. She could see him laughing merrily at her. Then the image changed and he suddenly seemed to be riven by grief, all cheerfulness had left his eyes. A new sob shook her as she saw the next picture. Harry was dead, his eyes open but unseeing. Why did you kill me?"

"You shouldn't have used the stone," the voice whispered to her.

Hermione let her hands sink from her face. Then she slowly raised her head. She found Tom Riddle looking down at her. Her eyes were almost swollen shut from all the crying, but she held his gaze. Memories pelted down at her. Horrible memories of dead bodies, war and pain. But those grey eyes, she could hold onto them even through her memories. She could let them pull her out.

But… but he was supposed to be lying! He was supposed to not care. Her headache intensified and new tears ran down her face. Hermione felt sick. His arms were still steadying her but she now pushed him away from her. Tom let immediately go of her. She scrambled away from him on the white marble floor, still not able to get up. Her eyes were fixed on him as grief turned into anger.

"Everything is your fault!" she hissed.

With her outburst, though, she only managed to intensify the concern in those soft grey eyes. No! No, no! It wasn't concern. It wasn't really worry she saw there. It was a lie! Everything was a lie.
Because everything was her fault. Hermione opened her mouth, drowning her last thought in a scream,

"It's your fault!"

She needed to leave here. Quickly. As she closed her eyes, Harry's face was there again, ghostly and pale. There was grief and sorrow on that face. And disappointment. She was sure it was disappointment. Accusation? Her eyes snapped open again and she struggled to her feet.

"I want to go," she whispered in a broken voice.

She wasn't sure she was talking with herself here or telling Tom. Whatever it was, Hermione's gaze now wandered to the ring on the floor. She took an unsteady step towards the ring. Just as she bent down to retrieve it, she realized that she couldn't touch it again. What if Harry came back? Hermione bent up again. She didn't want to touch the ring. Her eyes wandered helplessly to Tom. As he saw that forlorn look on her face he was instantly by her side. Tom picked up the ring and slid it in his robe pocket, then he wrapped an arm reassuringly around her waist thus steadying her. Hermione still shook from head to toe and the headache was getting worse to the point where she felt sick. She wanted to push Tom away again but she didn't. Instead, she slid her arms around him and clung to his side while she buried her face into the fabric of his uniform shirt.

"… common room…" was the only thing she managed to say, her voice sounding raspy.

She wanted to leave here. This sterile room made her sick. It was so horribly empty since Harry had disappeared. Her hands grasped the material of Tom's clothes tighter as she felt him moving. His arm was slung around her shoulders, supporting her, as he half carried her out of the room. Hermione followed him as they stepped out on the corridor, though she could hardly see anything with her face buried into his shirt. Silent tears were still running from her eyes, slowly soaking Tom's shirt. She didn't know where he would bring her to. Maybe he wanted to curse her. She didn't care. She would have deserved it anyway.

Tom wrapped his arm tighter around Hermione as he felt her shivering. She buried her face into his shirt and clasped him tightly. He should have never given her the ring, Tom thought, angry with himself. As Hermione had demanded that ring from him, he had known that she was up to something. But he had never expected this outcome. He had had no idea that the stone on the Gaunts' ring was actually one of the Deathly Hallows. He should have drawn that connection. Hermione had always been after the Hallows. Now she had used the stone.

Tom steadied Hermione as he led her up the stairs towards the Gryffindor common room. She still clung to him tightly just as if she was afraid that, should she let go of him, she would break down completely. He shouldn't have given her the ring.

He was glad that he had decided to follow her. Not much later he had found her with that man, or ghost or whatever he had been. Tom had never seen something like that. He hadn't seen the face of the man but it still had been strange. Then the ghost had just vanished, leaving Hermione behind in this stage. Tom glanced down at the witch pressed against him. She was completely beside herself. He shuddered as he remembered that expression on her face as she had looked at him. He had seen that before in her. Sorrow, grief and pain. He needed to know what had caused that grief in her. What had happened to break her so? Who had dared to hurt her?

Slowly his trepidation turned into fury and Tom felt his magic beginning to pulse through him angrily, demanding to track down the perpetrators and hurt them in return. He would enjoy it to rip them apart. Make them pay for harming Hermione. No-one was allowed to lay a hand on her. She was his! No-one would touch her, no-one get near her. He was going to make sure of that, Tom
thought fiercely as he hugged her possessively against him. Everyone who got in his way would pay, *dearly!*

*She is mine, bound to me!*

His enraged magic had turned into a furious torrent that surged through him, impatiently demanding to be set free. As a result Hermione whimpered softly and hugged him even tighter. She had obviously sensed his magic's agitation. Tom breathed in deeply to calm himself down. He didn't need to upset her even further. He could already feel her distraught magic everywhere on his body. It seemed to pour out of her, subconsciously reaching out for him for guidance. The magic was completely unrestrained as it desperately swirled around Hermione. It felt horribly empty that magic, and hopeless. Tom pulled her flush against his body as he channelled his own magic so it wrapped around both of them, trying to soothe her. He was relieved as they finally reached the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

"Elephant shrew," Tom whispered the password to the portrait, guarding the entrance.

The portrait sprung forward, thus admitting them in. Upon entering, Tom's eyes quickly swept over the room. Just a few Gryffindors occupied their common room, chatting with their friends or doing their homework. They hadn't yet noticed Tom but that was only a matter of time. His eyes shortly wandered to Hermione. She was still clinging to him, her face buried in his shirt. Tom cursed under his breath. He would have preferred an empty common room. Hermione surely didn't need a crowd of noisy Gryffindors asking what was wrong with her. But maybe he was lucky? Tom hoped as his gaze wandered to the stairs on the other end of the room. He pressed Hermione protectively against him and started to walk over to the stairs leading up to her dorm. Unfortunately, it wasn't long and his luck ran out.

"Stop!" an angry voice yelled at him sharply.

Tom slightly turned his head and frustration washed over him as he saw Longbottom hurrying towards him. Predictably, an angry purple colour appeared on the Gryffindor's face. His dark expression only intensified as he recognized Hermione in Tom's arms.

"What did you do to her?" Longbottom thundered at Tom, barely suppressed rage making his voice tremble.

"Nothing," Tom replied calmly.

He could feel Hermione clutching him tighter, clearly unsettled by the screaming. Tom ran a hand reassuringly over her back. Then he said, turned to Longbottom,

"Hermione is not feeling well. I'll just bring her to her dorm."

"Yeah, sure," the blond Gryffindor replied, sarcasm dripping from his voice. Then he barked angrily, "Let go of her, you monster!"

He took a hold of Hermione's arm and tried to pull her away, but she now held to Tom even tighter. Tom could hear her sniffing softly, making him want to curse Longbottom.

Before he would finally lose his cool a composed voice cut in, "Stop it, Marc."

Tom's eyes left the enraged Longbottom and landed on Lupin.

"...but, Amarys," Longbottom whined. "He's hurt her again."
Lupin didn't answer but bent a little down to Hermione. Her face was still buried into Tom's chest, but Lupin gently brushed her curly hair away, tugging it behind her ear.

"Hermione?" he asked cautiously. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Tom could feel her shaking her head slightly. Lupin ran a hand gingerly over her head, then he bent up again and looked at Tom.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice now distinctly colder.

Tom still felt angered by Longbottom's behaviour, but he also wanted to bring Hermione away from here as fast as possible. Starting a fight with those idiotic boys wouldn't help in that endeavour. So he answered, trying to ban all anger from his voice,

"She's had a run in with her past."

A knowing look crossed Lupin's face as he gazed down at Hermione, clinging to Tom.

"Okay," he said seriously, as his eyes flashed at Tom again. "Bring her to her dorm."

"Amarys!" Longbottom cried out in indignation. "You can't allow him to be alone with Hermione."

Lupin looked at his friend and said calmly, "I'm not. We are going with them." As Longbottom stared at him surprised, he continued sharply, "But, for Merlin's sake, keep the drama down."

By now Tom had had enough. He could feel Hermione tremble as she still clasped him. He tightened his arm around her, then he took off towards the stairs. He could hear Longbottom and Lupin following him, but he paid them no heed. As they reached the stairs Tom pulled his wand and shortly waved it, thus disabling the century old warding magic. Then he climbed the stairs leading to the girls' dorms. As he reached the sixth year girls' dorm he hissed at the boys over his shoulder,

"Check if someone's inside."

If these annoying Gryffindors needed to tag along, they could at least make themselves useful. Surprisingly, Longbottom didn't object. He just cast Tom a sour look, then he knocked at the door.

"Hey, Diana! You there?" he yelled.

They could hear soft shuffling coming from the room, then steps and the door was opened a crack. A girl with long black hair peered at them, an annoyed look on her face.

"What?" she inquired irritably. "What are you doing up here?"

"Hermione's not feeling well," Longbottom told her.

Immediately, concern appeared on the girl's face. Her eyes wandered from Longbottom to Tom and then to Hermione.

"Oh, no," the black-haired girl exclaimed, concern tinting her voice. "Can I do anything?"

"No, thank you. But could you leave us alone?" Longbottom asked. "Just for a moment."

"Sure," the girl replied, worry flooding her green eyes. "Wait."

Then she turned around, closed the door and seemed to talk to someone in the room. Just a few moments later, the door opened again. The dark-haired girl left the room, followed by another girl.
Tom recognized her. He had met her in the dorm a few days ago. Anger boiled up in him as he saw the girl eyeing Hermione with offending curiosity glinting in her eyes. Tom adjusted his arm around Hermione and glared at the girl. Then he entered the dorm, followed by the two Gryffindor boys. Tom's gaze swiftly wandered over the empty room then he led Hermione over to her bed. As he reached her bed he took the red quilt and folded it back, exposing the soft mattress underneath. He slightly leaned down to Hermione and whispered to her,

"You are safe. Why don't you lie down a bit?"

His hand was still running comfortingly over her back. As Tom was so near her, he couldn't hold himself back. There was the lovely and familiar smell of lilac coming from her. It was intoxicating, so he placed a kiss on her forehead. To his dismay he felt how she tensed in his arms. In the corner of his eyes he could see Longbottom taking an angry step towards him. Not wanting to upset Hermione further, Tom tried to untangle himself from her. He felt crestfallen as she immediately let go of him and didn't even once look up at him as she slid into her bed where she curled up into a miserable ball. A soft sigh left him, then Tom turned around and walked over to her trunk. As he opened it Longbottom hissed at him,

"Stay away from Hermione's things!"

Tom ignored him but reached for a small wooden box and pulled it out of the trunk. He opened it and found several potion bottles. He quickly sorted through the vials and pots until he found a small bottle of Calming Draught. He took it and returned to Hermione. Cautiously as not to startle her he sat down beside her on the bed. Longbottom's eyes narrowed as he saw it and only Lupin's hand on his arm stopped him from drawing his wand.

"What are you doing?" the blond Gryffindor asked in suspicion as he eyed the vial in Tom's hand.

Tom threw him a cold glare. If only he could pull his wand and hurl a curse at Longbottom for his insolence. Tom mastered his temper, though, and replied icily,

"I'm trying to help her."

Disbelief flooded the Gryffindor's face, but at least he didn't say anymore. Tom looked away from Longbottom and focused on Hermione.

"Hermione?" he said while he gingerly ran a hand over her shaking shoulder. "Can you drink this?"

He handed her the potion vial. Without saying anything, Hermione accepted it and drank it. Then she again curled into a tight ball. Tom ran a hand over her head. He really couldn't leave her alone in this state.

"Okay, I think that's our cue to leave," a collected voice said.

Tom raised his head, having completely forgotten about the two Gryffindors. Lupin had grabbed Longbottom's upper arm and tried to drag him over to the door.

"Are you out of your mind!" Longbottom clamoured indignantly.

"No," Lupin replied patiently. "Hermione needs rest now."

"Not with him around," Longbottom hissed stormily.

Lupin's sharp eyes fell on Tom as he answered, "He's not so stupid as to hurt her when we would know it was him." Then he again tried to pull the other Gryffindor over to the door. "Now let's go."
Grudgingly Longbottom seemed to consent as he now left the dorm together with Lupin. Tom didn't really care what they were up to. His attention had shifted back to Hermione. She still lay curled into a ball on her bed. Her eyes were squeezed shut but Tom saw a steady flow of tears fall from them. He raised his hand and laid it on her shoulder. She flinched slightly as he touched her but otherwise she didn't react at all. It seemed she was completely lost in her detrimental state. Tom had no idea who that ghostly man had been but he knew enough about Hermione's past to be able to guess. Maybe her stories had always been traced with lies but amongst all her untruths there had been one consistency: in her past she had faced war and she had lost her family and friends to that fight.

Now she had buried herself in her memories, Tom realized worried as he looked down at her. He didn't hesitate any longer but slipped under the blanket and drew the curtains shut around her bed before he laid down beside her. She still hadn't reacted at all. Tom rolled on his side so he was facing her then he slid closer to her. Hermione was still tightly curled in a ball but he extended a hand and cautiously skimmed over her cheeks, wiping away the tears. Hermione tensed as he touched her.

"It's okay," Tom soothed her. "You don't need to be scared."

As she heard his voice, Hermione slowly opened her eyes and raised them at him. Her pretty hazel eyes were puffy and red from crying as she looked at him. Tom could see so much pain in them, and desperation. He didn't like it at all and his magic was reacting quite violently. It rushed through him, urging him to find whoever had caused her grief and to just hurt them. But Tom knew better than to release his vengeful magic. Hermione still stared at him with that horrible expression on her face.

"I'm not scared," she whispered in a hurt voice. "I am… It's…"

Her voice broke and she was unable to continue. Her eyes lost focus and new tears flowed down her cheeks. Tom couldn't stand it any longer. He looped an arm around her and pulled her against him. She didn't resist him, being lost in a prison of memories again. Tom felt her trembling as he pressed her against him.

"It's my fault they are dead," Hermione breathed weakly.

Tom hesitated shortly but then he said, "We've been through this before, haven't we? It is not your fault."

He could feel a shiver running through her as he said it. Then Hermione slowly raised her face at him. Tear tracks were running over her cheeks but she asked in a steady, almost cold, voice,

"How would you know?"

Tom smiled softly down at her. "Because I know you and I know you would never intentionally hurt your friends."

Hermione stared at him. Tom was surprised as she then raised a hand and traced with her index finger over his left cheek.

"I hurt you," she stated in her emotionless voice.

A smirk crept on Tom's face then he said, light taunt in his voice, "I am not your friend."

Hermione eyed him for a while. Then she said in an unreadable voice, "No, I guess you are not."

Her eyes left him but then her body uncurled and Tom could feel how she pressed herself against him. Her hands even grabbed the fabric of his shirt as she hid her face in his chest. She had stopped to cry but just lay there nestled against him while he ran a hand over her back.
"Why is everything so fucked up?" Came her muffled voice. "Why am I so fucked up?"

Tom's hand on her back stopped its movement then he whispered, "There is nothing wrong with you, Hermione."

She barked out a laugh that actually sounded more like a sob. "If there's nothing wrong with me, then why do I hang around you?"

It certainly wasn't a compliment but the desperation in her voice told him that it hadn't been meant as an insult either. She was genuinely concerned. Tom wrapped both arms around her and rested his head on top of hers.

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm glad that you do."

Loud chatter slowly penetrated her dreams. Hermione pressed her eyes shut even tighter as she buried her face into her pillow. She didn't want to wake up. Here in her bed, curtains drawn, she felt protected. She didn't want to get up, leave this shelter and face the world. Mercilessly her dorm mates' chatter didn't leave her alone. Finally drawn from her slumber, Hermione cracked her eyes open. She was greeted by the soothingly red and gold Gryffindor colours of her four-poster. She rolled on her side. Aside from her, the bed was empty. Tom had been here yesterday, hadn't he?

Now he was gone.

Hermione rubbed her eyes as she slowly sat up. The events from yesterday now felt like a bad dream. A tremble ran over her body as she remembered the ghostly form of Harry. His eyes so empty and void of any emotion, a blotch of blood at his side, Harry had been the embodiment of her fears. A phantom pulled out of her nightmares. She didn't want to remember him like that. Empty and … dead.

'It's not your fault.' Tom's words rang through her head.

Well, you hurled the Killing Curse at him, so it probably is your fault, a nasty voice informed her mercilessly. Hermione ran a trembling hand through her bushy hair as she tried to get rid of the ice cold feeling which grabbed at her heart. She didn't want to think about Harry anymore. It was then that her gaze landed on the ring which innocently lay on the mattress right beside her. Hermione's whole body froze in shock as she recognized that golden ring. It just lay there on her bed, turned so that its black stone faced the mattress.

Why is it here?

Hermione could hear her pulse hammering away in her ears as she stared at the ring. She had lost it in the Room of Requirement. It had slipped from her hand. Unable to touch it again, Tom had picked it up for her. He had taken it back. Why was it here? Her hand trembled violently as she extended it towards the ring. With two fingers she warily took it, cautious as to not turn it in her hand. Had Tom lost it here? He had lain with her on the bed. Maybe it had slipped out of his pocket?

Hermione shook her head while never taking her eyes off the ring. Tom now knew that it was a Hallow. He would never lose something so special. Then had he… had he left the ring for her?

Why would he give her the ring? Didn't he think she was undeserving of having something so important? Wasn't he still convinced that she was a worthless being? But why did he leave the ring then? Hermione hesitated. There could be an explanation to his strange behaviour…
...but no, it was impossible.

She firmly shook her head. Then she removed the necklace, Tom had given her, and slid the chain through the Gaunts' ring so that it fell against the coppery pendant. She closed the chain around her neck again, feeling the pendant and the ring fall against the bare skin of her chest. The close proximity of the ring unsettled her greatly. She was afraid to accidentally turn it and call Harry. But she needed the ring. This was a step in the right direction. Now she only had to wait for Dumbledore to fight Grindelwald. Dumbledore would win, thus gaining the Elder Wand and the Invisibility Cloak. After that Hermione needed to get those two remaining Hallows from Dumbledore and then she would finally be able to get... to get...

...home...?

Hermione gulped down an odd gloomy feeling and drew the curtains open around her bed before she stood up.

"Hermione," she was greeted by Rose's shrill voice. "There you are. Slept well?"

She just blinked stupidly at the other girl. Lucia, clad in a red dressing gown, stepped over to her and draped a comforting arm over Hermione's shoulders.

"Are you feeling better?" the blonde asked while she eyed Hermione inquisitively, eager to catch any new gossip.

"Er... yes," Hermione mumbled. "I'm sorry. Had a bad day yesterday."

"Are you sure?" Diana asked quietly.

Hermione turned her head and found the other girl mustering her concerned. She smiled at Diana. She was probably the only one genuinely worried about Hermione's well-being. Diana's unobtrusive concern reminded her a lot of Harry. Hermione gulped and then said softly, smiling at the other girl,

"Yes, don't worry about me."

Diana smiled back at her.

"Did you have a quarrel with Riddle?" Rose asked nosily as she sat down on Lucia's bed and eyed Hermione.

Feeling flustered by the sudden change of topic, Hermione stuttered, "What... what makes you think that?"

Rose giggled at that sillily. Lucia joined in as she hopped down on the bed beside Rose. Ignoring Hermione's embarrassment Lucia said,

"But he made it up to you, didn't he?" She grinned at Hermione. "After all he brought you to your bed."

Both girls broke down in giggles again. Hermione wondered if she should just go to the bathroom and ignore this bizarre conversation.

"You know, Hermione," Rose said after she had calmed a little down. "You shouldn't do that with Riddle."

Lucia nodded importantly. "Yeah. Even though he's your boyfriend. Legifer always says it's best to
wait till after the marriage."

A blush hitting her face hard, Hermione frowned. She really didn't want to discuss stuff like this with them. They weren't even friends for Merlin's sake. Least of all she wanted to hear Legifer's old fashioned beliefs.

Of all the things she could have said, Hermione opened her mouth and insisted, "He's not my boyfriend."

Lucia's mouth formed a little 'o' as she gaped at Hermione while Rose fixed her with a stare worth of Legifer.

"What? Not your boyfriend?" Rose screamed scandalized. "What are you doing? Last week he lay in your bed, n- naked!"

Now all colour left Hermione's face. They had seen Tom? Oh Morgana, she shouldn't have slept with him. It hadn't made things easier. Now she had her dorm mates staring at her as if she were a little slut. Hermione ran a hand over her face. She didn't want to discuss Tom right now.

"Listen," she said in a firm voice while fixing the two girls with a glare. "That's something between Tom and me. I don't want to talk about it."

She then abruptly turned away from them and walked over to the bath room. She just wanted to enter as she heard Rose's voice. Surprisingly all indignation had left it and she teased,

"Aha, so there is something between you two? You just wanna keep it secret?"

Hermione turned her head and looked at the girl over her shoulder. There was an elated grin on Rose's face and she grabbed Lucia's arm tightly. Lucia had the same glassy look in her eyes and she giggled softly.

"Ooh, a secret romance. That's so heart-breaking," Lucia chortled happily.

Hermione just rolled her eyes at them.

"Don't worry we won't tell anybody," Rose said cheerfully. "And Riddle can come visit you here whenever he wants."

Hermione frowned as she saw that glassy look in the other girl's eyes. Before she could reply anything, though, Lucia squeaked in a high-pitched voice,

"Merlin, what are you doing if you are now… you know…"

"No, I don't know," Hermione sighed irritated.

To her surprise Lucia blushed slightly and mumbled, "Well… if you are… er… now that Riddle and you… you might be… hm… expecting."

At that Rose nodded impressively while eyeing Hermione's stomach. Hermione just stared at them indignantly.

"I am most certainly not pregnant," she claimed firmly. "I had 'the talk' with my parents some time ago."

Both girls looked at her doubtingly. Rose still fixed Hermione's stomach with a stare as if expecting a baby would appear any second now. Hermione then just gave up. She shrugged her shoulders,
turned and entered the bathroom. As she closed the door behind herself, the two girls began to chatter excitedly. Hermione shook her head. The bookworm that she was, she had actually looked up all about contraceptive magic at the end of her sixth year as she had finally gotten together with Ron. Hogwarts library was conveniently well equipped. Though maybe that didn't apply to the forties, Hermione mused as she imagined Legifer finding her in the library bent over a book on contraceptive methods. She could almost hear the professor's scandalised voice. *Ms DeCerto, that is indecent!*

"You want more toast?" Longbottom asked. Hermione smiled and shook her head. "An apple? Or maybe a nice cup o' coffee?"

Since she had entered the Great Hall for breakfast her blond Gryffindor friend was almost drowning her in his solicitude.

"I'm alright. Really," she told him, still smiling.

Longbottom looked at her, his concern poorly hidden on his face. Hermione was angry with herself for having scared him so - all of her friends actually. She really was nothing than a bother to them. Lupin and Weasley sat opposite her and they, too, watched her with concern. Hermione sighed softly as she looked at her upset friends.

"Look," she said softly. "I'm sorry I startled you yesterday. But I'm better now. You don't need to worry."

"What happened?" Lupin asked her gingerly.

Longbottom skidded closer to her and laid a reassuring hand on her forearm. Hermione smiled up at him then she looked back at Lupin and answered,

"Nothing really bad. I just…" She hesitated. It was kind of difficult talking about it. She swallowed but then continued, "Something reminded me of Harry… you know… the friend I had in France."

Lupin threw her a sympathetic glance and she felt Longbottom squeezing her arm in a comforting gesture.

"I'm sorry you had to go through so much," Weasley told her sadly.

"Thanks," she replied in a small voice.

Then she breathed in deeply, turned her head and smiled up at Longbottom. She didn't want this gloomy atmosphere to hang over their group anymore.

"Now what about that coffee you promised me?"

Longbottom grinned down at her, then reached for the coffee pot.

"Right away, my dear."

As she sipped from her coffee, Hermione asked her friends, "So, what are you up to today?" Longbottom leaned back in his seat languidly and grinned at her. "Quidditch," he said.

Hermione frowned at him. "But it's Saturday. I thought you had training on Mondays."

"Sweet clueless Hermione," he tsked down at her teasingly. "We have extra sessions. We play
Ravenclaw next week."

"Oh," she made, having had no idea.

"You didn't know that, did you?" Weasley chided her.

Hermione peered at him. Then she lied, fluttering her eyelashes at him innocently, "Of course I knew."

Seeing through her lie, the red-head grinned at her as he teased, "Where's your school spirit?"

Hermione pouted playfully until Lupin cut in, "You are obsessed with that sport. That's the actual problem."

Longbottom leaned a bit over the table, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "Talking about obsession. What are you doing today again?" he asked, false ignorance in his voice.

Hermione noted amused how Lupin blushed deeply. Then he mumbled something under his breath. The only thing audible was 'Hogsmeade'. Longbottom's looked at him triumphantly.

"Oh, you are going to Hogsmeade? I didn't know that," the blond said innocently. "With whom?"

Lupin again mumbled something, the blush on his face getting deeper. Longbottom grinned. Then he cupped his ear with his hand and said,

"Sorry, didn't catch that. What?"

"Stella," Lupin stuttered, face red, as he snuck a glance at Ravenclaw table.

Upon seeing his look, Stella Lovegood smiled at her boyfriend and waved. With glassy eyes, Lupin smiled back at her. Hermione chuckled softly.

"Man, you need to get your act together," Longbottom laughed at his friend.

"What's your plan for today?" Weasley asked, turned to Hermione.

"I don't know yet," she said truthfully. "Maybe going to the library."

Longbottom groaned at that. Then he laid an arm over her shoulders and said, "You can't spend the weekend in the library." He grinned at her. "That's just something you don't do. I'm sure you can find something else to distract you with."

Having recovered from his blush, Lupin looked at something behind Hermione. Then his eyes wandered to her and he said, "Yeah. Or someone."

As Hermione raised her eyebrows at him in question Lupin added, "Seems like Riddle wants to talk with you."

She stiffened and then cautiously turned her head. True enough, Tom was walking towards her. His face expressionless as he scanned her.

"Good morning," he said in a blank voice as he reached her.

"Morning," she replied meekly.

Tom was standing right behind her and his presence sent shivers up and down her spine. His grey
eyes left her and a red gleam flared up in them as he glared at the arm which Longbottom had still wrapped around Hermione's shoulders. She could see how Tom's jaws clenched in annoyance. He didn't comment, though and his eyes flicked back at her.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked in a completely controlled voice.

Hermione felt Longbottom grabbing her tighter as he angrily narrowed his eyes at Tom. Then he opened his mouth and blustered,

"No, she doesn't hav-"

Lupin cut over him as he said decidedly, "Say, Marc, didn't you want to go to your Quidditch training?"

Slowly Longbottom turned from Tom to Lupin but the anger didn't leave his face. Lupin didn't seem to be fazed by his friend's foul temper in any way. He just raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Okay, I get it," Longbottom said bitingly. Then he looked down at Hermione and asked in a more gentle tone, "Are you going to be alright with him?"

She smiled up at him softly and said, "Don't you worry about me."

Longbottom sighed at her reply. He unwrapped his arm from her before he stood up from the table.

"Let's get going," he told Weasley.

Longbottom threw one last nasty glare at Tom before he and Weasley left Gryffindor table. A smirk grazed Tom's face as his gaze followed the two Gryffindors.

"He really hates me, doesn't he?" he said, dark amusement twisting his voice.

Lupin put his napkin down on his empty plate.

"Well, it's not like Marc doesn't have reason to do so," he told Tom calmly, a certain amount of coldness underlying his voice.

Then Lupin stood up from the table and threw Hermione a small smile. "If you excuse me, I have to go see my girlfriend."

"Sure," said Hermione.

Lupin's eyes snapped back to Tom and he said sharply, "You still remember what I said yesterday?"

Tom elegantly raised an eyebrow. A polite expression masked his face as he replied blandly, "You said that I wouldn't be so stupid as to hurt Hermione when you would know it was me."

Lupin nodded at him curtly. "I hope that assumption still applies." Then he turned and walked over to the Ravenclaw table.

"Another fan of me," Tom whispered sarcastically as he watched Lupin. His eyes then focused on Hermione and he inquired cautiously, "Could you spare a moment?"

"Actually, no," she said caustically.

Without looking at him, she got up from her seat and started to walk to the exit of the Great Hall. To her frustration Tom followed her.
"It won't take long," he assured.

Hermione sighed irritated. She really didn't want to speak with Tom. Alone. That sounded like a bad idea. He would probably demand the ring back.

He left the ring with you, an ineptly perceptive voice scoffed at her. Why would he now want it back? Hermione scowled at her own inner voice. Just to prove it wrong, she peered up at Tom and said,

"Okay."

What the fuck is he doing?" Avery snapped in annoyance.

"Who?" Black asked disinterestedly while he poured himself a cup of tea.

"Riddle," Avery hissed short tempered.

Alba, who sat across from Avery, asked, "What are you talking about?"

Avery just glared at the other darkly before he grinded out, "I am talking about the fact that Riddle is fucking around with that Mudblood."

"The DeCerto girl?" Black inquired lightly while sipping from his tea.

Avery's eyes narrowed as they were fixed on the girl in question. "Yes," he hissed angrily.

DeCerto walked through the Great Hall in direction to the entrance. Riddle was walking right beside her, smiling down at he, obviously with the intend to seduce her.

"I don't see why you are pissed by that," Alba noted while he, too, watched the couple. "I mean didn't you try to get her into your bed, too?"

"That girl's a piece of art," Avery scoffed at the other Slytherin. "Come on, who wouldn't want to fuck her?"

"So? Where's your problem?" Black shrugged his shoulders.

At this point, Lestrange cut into the conversation. "Are you dumb?" he shot at Black, fury tinting his voice. "The slag's a Mudblood! What Riddle's doing is disgusting."

Malfoy had decided to stay out of this conversation but now he raised his eyebrows. "Riddle tried to get closer to her before," he remarked quietly. "Maybe there is information he needs from her."

"Yes," Avery blustered while never taking his eyes from DeCerto. "But does he need to seduce her like that? It's just plain kinky."

"Yeah," Lestrange agreed, anger on his face as he eyed the girl and Riddle in distaste. "He should just force the information from her if he needs it so urgently."

"You were present the last time he tried that, weren't you?" Malfoy replied coolly. "Riddle used the Cruciatus Curse on her and that girl didn't spill anything."

"He could try again," Avery griped frustrated. "Merlin knows Riddle can break anyone."
Subconsciously his fingers ran over the faint scar on his cheek. A habit he had developed just recently.

"You are just jealous, Avery," Black mocked him. "Cause now you've got competition. I hazard a guess that you'll be losing against Riddle."

"Shut up!" Avery snapped.

Alba leaned back into his seat. "Maybe it's not information Riddle wants," he said with a smirk. "After all, she does look doable… if you ignore she's a filthy Mudblood."

"If he needs a good fuck, why her?" Lestrange hissed short tempered. "Riddle could have any girl in this castle. Why should he settle for that dirty whore?"

_._._._._

"How did you know the stone on my ring was the Resurrection stone?"

Hermione avoided to look at Tom as his question washed over her. She even took a step away from him until the backs of her thighs bumped into a table, standing in this abandoned class room. He compensated for her retreat as he took a step forwards.

"You never even held that ring before," Tom continued sharply. "How did you know?"

As if drawn to him Hermione's gaze wandered up to Tom. His features were schooled perfectly. Only the demanding red glint in his eyes gave him away. She still managed to answer in a calm voice,

"I don't have to tell you anything."

As Tom heard her reply the red sheen in his eyes intensified and Hermione stiffened. *He is Voldemort! Don't be surprised if he now curses you, silly girl!* an angry voice hissed at her.

"I think I have a right to know," Tom said, dark threat twisted into his voice. "After all you wheedled that ring out of me."

As she heard his resentful voice, subconsciously Hermione's hand wandered up to her chest where the ring rested against her skin. So he did want the ring back, did he? Hermione cursed herself for being so stupid as to believe he would really relinquish a Hallow to her. Supressing a sinking feeling in her stomach, she glared up at Tom.

"So, that's it, is it? You want the ring back," she said in a clipped tone.

Tom raised his eyebrows. "What?" The red colour left his eyes. "No. I gave it to you."

"Yeah." Harsh sarcasm oozed from Hermione' voice. "Because Lord Voldemort is okay with giving one of the Hallows to a 'Muggle'."

"Actually, I am," he said cautiously.

"So, it suddenly doesn't matter anymore?" Hermione sneered. "That I'm Muggleborn, I mean."

Tom did not reply anything, though his silence was answer enough. Hermione felt her throat tie up. Why was she this tense? It wasn't like she needed Tom to accept her. As she now looked up at him, though, she realized that this was not entirely true and that insight scared the hell out of her.
I don't need to do this to me, she thought numbly. Her feelings towards him were gone. She didn’t love him anymore. She couldn't. She needed to leave. Hermione pushed away from the table and started to walk over to the door.

"Where are you going?" she heard Tom's sharp voice.

Hermione stopped but didn't turn around to him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"To the common room," she replied, her voice was steady, almost indifferent, just as if this whole thing didn't faze her at all.

And it shouldn't disturb you! an angry voice screamed at her. Hermione heard a tint of desperation in this voice though.

She stiffened as she felt a hand on her shoulder and Tom said in a commanding tone, "You can't just go like this."

Finally her temper snapped and Hermione whipped around to him, a furious scowl on her face.

"And you think you could stop me?" she thundered at him aggressively.

Tom scanned the angry witch standing before him while he wondered how the situation had suddenly turned so drastically. Fury flared up in Hermione's eyes and her magic started to bristle around her.

"I don't want to stop you," he tried to placate her. "I just thought we could talk some more."

"Oh, so you want to talk with me?" she spit at him. As she continued her voice was thick with sarcasm, "Maybe we should get tea and then we sit down and Lord Voldemort can talk with a Muggleborn. Because that's his favourite thing to do."

Tom clenched his jaw as her mocking sarcasm washed over him. This thing was going to hunt him forever, wasn't it? Sure, it was quite unfortunate that she was a Mudblood but he would never hurt her again because of it. Couldn't she see the truth? In a way, her heritage didn't even matter anymore. He had made sure of that. She was so much more now. Hermione had no idea how special she really was – and she was his. She would always be his because no-one else would ever be able to gain her allegiance. Now he only had to convince her that her place was by his side.

Tom flashed her a charming smile as he assured, "I do enjoy talking with you."

"Sure," Hermione just snorted at him. "Now if you excuse me."

She turned around to the door but he stopped her as he gapped her arm.

"Don't go," he told her.

Instantly, her angry magic lashed out at him and hit him painfully. Tom let go of her arm and took a step away from the furious witch. There was no way to reason with her when she was this angry. Hermione glared at him, looking ready to explode. He needed to somehow calm her. Tom cautiously took a step towards her and reached for her, intending to cup her cheek in his hand. The moment he raised his hand, though, Hermione flinched away from him as if she expected him to hit her. Her reaction made Tom freeze, troubled by her defensiveness. Maybe he had assessed the situation incorrectly. Was it really anger that drove her right now? Or something else? Tom scanned her face intently. Sure enough, once he looked underneath her fury he could see more. There was guardedness, distrust and…
…Fear?

Was she afraid of him? He couldn't have that.

"Hermione?" he said in a gentle tone. "I promise I won't do anything to you."

Somehow this had been the wrong thing for him to say, as Hermione now took a step away from him. A hard glint seeped into her eyes then she thundered at him,

"It's not like you could do anything to me, Voldemort! I won't let you!"

"I know," he said cautiously.

Hermione glowered at him and as she opened her mouth next, venom was lacing her ice cold words,

"I hate you!"

Tom sucked in a sharp breath of air as he heard her words. An unpleasant knot formed in his stomach but he chose to ignore it. Instead he tried to concentrate on that tinge of doubt he had heard amongst all her animosity. Tom took a step towards her. Instantly, she balled her hands into fists and her magic crackled furiously around her. It ripped at him violently but he didn't let himself getting disheartened by her hostile behaviour. Instead, he cautiously wrapped an arm around her waist. She completely tensed up at the contact but he didn't retreat again. He gently pulled her over to him. Then he took hold of her chin with his other hand and raised her head. She was now forced to look at him. Her hazel eyes were blazing with anger as they bored into him. Underneath the fury, though, he could still see fear.

Hermione was scared. She didn't want to look into Tom's eyes. She didn't want to be overwhelmed by her feelings. She felt them smouldering under the surface, threatening to break through. She couldn't allowed them to ever come back. Tom would take them and use them to hurt her. She hated him! She had to!

"I don't care about you being a Muggleborn," Tom whispered in his smooth voice.

Without saying anymore he leaned down to her and gently brushed his lips against hers. Hermione closed her eyes as she felt him kissing her but she didn't respond to him at all. A fluttery feeling twisted up her stomach and with all the force she could muster, Hermione tried to smother that feeling. Tom didn't really want her and she didn't want someone like him. He was dark and evil. He would never change but would always be a monster.

A dangerous beast.

He was still kissing her. Desperately Hermione tried to deny the burning, prickling sensation his lips evoked in her. Tom's lips were daring her, ordering her and begging her, all at the same time. But Hermione couldn't give in here. She needed to fight him. She had had to fight against him for so long - against His hate. It had hurt a lot but she hadn't given in. He had never defeated her. Now, she again struggled and fought. This time, though, against her love. This time, she felt herself losing.

Hermione trembled in Tom's arms. She desperately tried to pull back, but it was hopeless. Slowly and tentatively her arms slid around him. Tom stiffened slightly as he felt her arms being wrapped around his waist. Then he pulled her even tighter against him while his lips were still pressed over her own, tempting her to return the kiss. Hermione couldn't resist him anymore, ever so hesitantly she responded to his kiss. She stopped to fight, and finally her emotions flooded her completely. Huddling against Tom, she kissed him. An electric tingle went through her whole body as she felt his tongue tracing along her upper lip. She didn't want to but her lips moved apart, letting him enter. One
of Tom's hands wandered to the back of her head and his other was still tightly snaked around her waist while his tongue explored her mouth. To her own surprise she found herself responding to him.

Hermione didn't know how much time had passed but when Tom ended the kiss she squeezed her eyes shut and laid her forehead against his chest. She didn't want to open her eyes and find the scorn on his face. Though, she knew she had to. Reluctantly she opened her eyes and looked up at him, expecting to find an evil smirk twisting up his mouth. Surely, he had been playing around with her. She had given in and had let her feelings get the better of her. Tom was going to use her weakness. Like he always did.

But now that she stared up at his startlingly grey eyes, she couldn't find any derision in them. Instead, Tom was smiling down at her.

"Can you trust me now?" he asked her in a gentle voice while his arms were still wrapped around her.

She looked up at him and whispered, "I... I don't know..."

Tom smirked down at her faintly as he said, "That is better than a 'no'."

Then he again pulled her against him. Hermione felt very tense as he was so near her. But her arms were still wrapped around him and she held to him even tighter. It felt so nice, so alluring. She closed her eyes and leaned against Tom.

He softly kissed her forehead, then he whispered to her, "I won't hurt you."

Hermione breathed in deeply, smelling his pleasant scent. Then she unwrapped her arms from him and took a step back. With her head raised slightly, she looked into his eyes. She didn't know what she could see, or should see in him. A frown appeared between her eyebrows as she was appraising him. Hermione knew he still was that dangerous beast but she didn't know how much she cared.

Without saying anything, she abruptly turned away from Tom and left the class room. She had barely taken a few steps down the corridor, as Tom caught up with her. He fell in step right beside her and followed her silently. It didn't take them long and they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady. Hermione muttered the password and the portrait sprung forward, admitting her in. Without looking at Tom or saying anything, she stepped into the common room. Then she hesitated. Before the entrance hole could close again, she turned around. Tom was still standing in the corridor and was scanning her with his grey eyes. Hermione bit her lip nervously but then she made a decision and asked hesitantly,

"Do you want to come in?"

She could see how his eyes lit up, then he nodded. Tom quickly entered the common room and stepped beside her.

The Gryffindor common room was very much deserted. The other students obviously where outside, enjoying the nice weather. Hermione walked over to one of the couches, standing under a window. The summer sun shone through the window glass, bathing everything in a pleasant light. She sat down on the couch and Tom sat down beside her. She couldn't look at him, he was making her nervous. So, she stared out of the window and let her gaze wander over the roofs of Hogwarts’ many towers and turrets. Hermione was desperately searching for anything to say as suddenly Tom leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her. She gasped softly in surprise as he pulled her against him and held her tightly. Hermione pressed her eyes shut, her whole body was so tense it almost hurt. Still, she didn't throw Tom off. She allowed him to embrace her.
It was then that she heard the portrait hole being opened. Hastily Hermione pushed away from Tom, turned her head to the entrance of the common room and saw her dorm mates, Rose and Lucia, staring at her blatantly. She could hear their inane giggling even from over here. Still, Hermione was relieved to see them. Tom had gotten a little too close for comfort. She didn't know how to react to him.

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend," he whispered into her ear. "We could go together. You know, to talk."

She peered up at him. Maybe he was right. Maybe talking was a good idea.

"Okay," Hermione breathed shyly.

Tom smiled at her. "Let's meet in the entrance hall. In an hour?"

She nodded at him.

An hour later, Hermione left the common room. She was feeling incredibly nervous. Meeting Tom and going with him to Hogsmeade just seemed to be a very stupid idea. She was full of bad ideas lately, she decided, thinking back to the kiss. Obviously she didn't have her emotions under control. She never had when Tom was involved. Hermione felt like standing at the edge of a cliff. She knew falling down would break her, but she still edged closer and closer to the abyss. Now, after that kiss between them, Tom had finally pushed her over.

She was falling, wondering about the impact.

Taking in a shuddered breath of air, Hermione walked down the corridor. A group of five girls came her way. They were Ravenclaws and probably in fourth or fifth year. Hermione didn't notice how all five girls stared at her nosily. She was only ripped from her contemplation as the girls broke into wild giggles after they turned around the next corner, leaving Hermione alone.

"That was her, wasn't it?" one of the girls asked excited.

"Yes," another answered. "Hermione DeCerto."

By now Hermione had stopped her way down the corridor and listened in to their conversation. Obviously those girls had also stopped their way and now stood just around that corner, laughing inanely.

"Really?" one of them giggled. "Isn't she kinda plain?" Hermione furrowed her brow as she heard that. The girl continued, "I mean he was together with Melanie Nicolls before, wasn't he?"

"Yep."

"But Nicolls is just beautiful," the girl insisted. "Why would Riddle leave someone like Nicolls for that mousy thing?"

By now Hermione seriously considered sending a surge of her magic at the silly girl.

"Hm, I don't know," one of them replied. "She's nothing like Nicolls but still she isn't ugly or something like that. Maybe Riddle just fancies her."

"You got it all wrong," a gleeful girl's voice said.

"What do you mean, Eva?"
"Oh my, didn't you hear?" the gleeful voice answered. Then it turned into a whisper as it said, "I just heard it from Sandra, the Hufflepuff. I had to promise her to not tell anyone but you'll keep it secret, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Well," the gleeful voice rushed on. "During the last Slug Club, DeCerto had a little too much to drink. Riddle ended up bringing her to that guest room in the dungeons. As he wanted to leave again, DeCerto charmed the door shut, forcing him to stay and... spend the night with her."

A few excited gasps echoed through the corridor. Delighted with her eager audience the girl continued, "So now she's pregnant."

"Merlin! Really?"

"Yes, I tell you. After DeCerto found out, she went to Riddle crying all over him and begging him to stay with her and the baby."

As she heard that, Hermione rubbed the bridge of her nose, feeling an upcoming headache. She had a nagging suspicion as to who had spread that particular rumour. Slightly piqued, Hermione resumed her way down the corridor. The girls' giggles accompanied her a fair distance. She knew the whole story was just childish but she still felt mortified. Hermione reached the moving staircase and quickly descended. Maybe it was just her imagination but all the students she met seemed to stare at her. She should seriously consider cursing her chatty dorm mates, Hermione thought annoyed.

*Spreading such rumours. Really!*

Keeping her head low, she walked down the stairs. She had almost reached the ground floor as she ran head first into a person. Raising her head, all colour left her face. Merlin, she wasn't spared from anything today, was she? Hermione sighed inwardly.

"And where are you going to on this fine day, Ms DeCerto?" Legifer asked in her usual sharp voice.

"Hogsmeade," Hermione answered curtly.

"I see." The professor's eyes wandered over her outfit. Then she inquired unconvinced, "Did someone ask you out?"

Hermione frowned at her but still answered the question, "Tom did."

"Mr Riddle?" Legifer's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "How very surprising."

Her eyes again wandered over Hermione now paying closer attention. She nodded satisfied and said, "I must say I am rather glad you finally try to make an effort. Even your performance in my class has improved. Not much, mind you, but it's a start."

Hermione felt the annoyance, that had been evoked by her dorm mates' silly conduct, mounting up even more. Still, this seemed to be some kind of praise and Hermione was not one to refuse a teacher's praise so she said,

"Thank you, professor."

"If Mr Riddle asked you out, then that means you apologized to him?" Legifer inquired briskly.

Her temper slipping away, Hermione managed to restrain herself and said slowly, "No, I did not. I
didn't do anything wrong."

Legifer just raised her thin eyebrows at her, a stern expression on her face. "You really need to cast off your obstinacy. Mr Riddle will never take you back or even marry you later if you insist on that impudence. He chose to break up with you, so it is very clear that you indeed did something wrong."

"Tom did," Hermione insisted curtly, her patience had come to an end and she had trouble not just yelling at the woman.

Legifer just shook her head as she said reproachfully, "Blaming others won't help you at all. Instead you should seize this second chance. Show Mr Riddle a bit deference, show him that you have changed."

Hermione just stared at the woman. What was she supposed to answer to that? Maybe a curse would serve better?

As Hermione didn't react in any way Legifer continued, "Don't forget, you have to prove to him that you can be a good wife. You need to convince him that you are capable of managing a household. He won't consider a marriage if he's not sure that he can leave you alone with the house and probably even the children. He can't be burdened with those worries; he has to pursue his career after all."

Just to spite the professor Hermione asked in a saccharine voice, "What about my career?"

"Well, you can have your own job if Mr Riddle is okay with that," she conceded mordantly. "You could work part-time. Still, your main focus lies on creating a home. Earning money is Mr Riddle's job."

"Part-time, hm?" Hermione asked. Then she narrowed her eyes at the woman and sassed, "How come you work as a professor anyway? Aren't you married, too? Shouldn't you be at home? Shouldn't you be out there? Hermione thought as she scanned Legifer. Catching criminals, being an Auror?"

Irritation now twisting up Legifer's face, she hissed tartly, "I already fulfilled my duty, Ms DeCerto. But now my daughter is grown up and doesn't need my full attention anymore."

"I see," Hermione said. Finally fed up by this conversation, she checked her watch and said, "Well, I'm kinda late. If you don't mind, I'll just go."

Legifer's sharp eyes bored into her. "Yes, Ms DeCerto. You better not let Mr Riddle wait for you any longer."

Hermione just nodded at the woman, then turned and hurried away as fast as possible. Not much later she arrived at the entrance hall. A lot of other students were here, obviously leaving in direction to Hogsmeade. Ignoring quite a few prying eyes, Hermione looked around searching for any trace of Tom. She finally spotted him right beside the doors. He wasn't wearing his Hogwarts uniform but a dark blue shirt and black trousers. He leaned nonchalantly against the wall while his grey eyes wandered imperiously over the hall. He looked very much like the evil villain, here to steal the souls of innocent school children. Still, it was undeniable that he also looked devilishly handsome. By now he had spotted her among the other students. A smirk curled his lips and his grey eyes flashed at her.

"Hi," Hermione breathed as she reached him.

"Hey," he replied in his deep voice.
Tom offered her his arm and with a short hesitation she took it. Hermione decidedly ignored the nosy looks the other students around them threw their way. Tom seemed to be oblivious to them and led her out of the castle. The sun burned on them as they walked over to the carriages. Hermione felt self-conscious as Tom held her arm. She was almost glad as they reached the carriages but as he let go of her she strangely felt lost. While they waited for a free carriage Hermione glanced at the Threstrals harnessed in front of them. The other students around her were totally unaware of the creatures' presence.

"They are kinda ugly, no?" a voice whispered in her ear,

She smiled up at Tom. "Yes," she said. Then her gaze wandered back to the horse-reptile creatures and she added, "I still like them."

"They creep me out," he said, false apprehension lacing his words.

"Well, then you are easily scared, aren't you?" she taunted him.

Tom chuckled at that. Finally, a free carriage reached them and he opened the door for her. Hermione climbed in and sat down. Tom chose the seat opposite her. He sat down elegantly and scanned her intently. Feeling a bit nervous, Hermione broke eye contact and looked out of the window. The trees of the Forbidden Forest were gliding by in a blur of greens and blacks.

"I met Legifer on my way," she said, never averting her eyes from the forest outside.

"Did you?" Tom answered. Then he taunted lightly, "Is she still your favourite teacher?"

A small smile on her face, Hermione turned her head and looked at him. "Certainly. She gave me loads of good advice on how to become the perfect wife. First thing I need to do is getting rid of my free will. It's only hindering, you know?"

Tom chuckled at that. "I can totally see that happening."

Hermione wrinkled her brow as she scanned him. Finally she informed him, "You have no idea how annoying this decade can be."

Tom peered at her, amusement in his grey eyes as he asked, "No Household classes in the 90s then?"

"How silly of you. Of course we have Household." Hermione grinned at him. "But only for the guys."

Tom furrowed his brow in surprise. "Really?"

Hermione giggled softly. "No."

-.-.-.-.-

"So, what do you want to do first?" Tom asked as they finally got out of the carriage and into Hogsmeade.

Hermione let her gaze wander over the hordes of students filling the streets. She looked back up at Tom.

"Tomes and Scrolls?" she asked.

"I knew you would say that." He smirked down at her.
Then he took her hand and steered her through the crowd. Hermione was surprised by how nice it felt having Tom by her side. His hand was holding hers gently as he led her towards the book shop. A misplaced feeling of being protected overwhelmed her.

Is it really misplaced though?

She knitted her brow in confusion. Where had that come from? Still deep in thought she followed Tom into the shop. Upon seeing all the books and smelling the parchment, Hermione instantly forgot her nervousness. Books always had a calming effect on her. She stepped over to the Defence Against the Dark Arts section, grabbed a heavy tome and opened it. While she absentmindedly flipped through the book, Tom bent over her shoulder looking down at the book.

"Hm, the Patronus Charm," he mused as he read the page she had opened. "Can you produce one?"

Hermione nodded, a bit unsettled by his close proximity.

"Quite the difficult charm," he said.

She turned her head slightly as she asked, "Can you do it?"

Tom chuckled softly before he drawled haughtily, "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Hermione smiled as she heard that arrogance in his voice. Then she turned around to him. She pasted a sceptical look on her face as she glanced up at him.

"Because – as you said – it is rather difficult," she answered patronizingly.

Tom ignored her light taunt and just smirked down at her as he took the book from her.

"What form does your patronus take?" he asked lightly while his eyes wandered over the paragraph in the book.

"An otter," she said.

His grey eyes flashed at her. "Really?" he asked, quirking an inquiring brow.

Hermione frowned. "Yes. What's wrong with an otter?"

"Oh, nothing," he replied airily. He looked at her innocently as he continued, "I had just expected something more ferocious."

He tapped his chin contemplatively as his eyes wandered over her body. Then a nasty smirk curled up his mouth as he concluded,

"A shark maybe?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, then she said snippily, "Let me guess. Yours is a sneaky snake, isn't it?"

Tom chuckled. "No," he informed her placidly as he closed the book and put it back in the shelf. "Did you ever read Slinkhard's essay on how the wielder's amount of magical power can influence the shape of the Patronus?"

She furrowed her brow in contemplation. "When did he write it?"

"41."
"Ah, yes, I remember," she said. "But I didn't read it. I couldn't get my hands on it." She nudged him in the side playfully. "Too old, you know."

Then she turned her head to check if anyone was close-by before she whispered in a conspiratorial voice, "He's wrong anyway."

Tom raised his eyebrows as he heard it. "Should you be giving away such information?"

"Maybe it's just my personal conviction." She grinned up at him.

And with that they started a whole discussion about the Patronus Charm. Strangely enough, Hermione felt quite comfortable talking with Tom. Then again it had always been invigorating talking with him about magic. His knowledge was very deep and Tom was an eloquent speaker. For the moment, Hermione was glad they stayed within the boundaries of a strictly academic conversation. She knew he was putting up a show for her, avoiding the topic he really wanted to discuss, and she was grateful for that.

It was some time later that Tom suggested they go to the Three Broomsticks for something to drink. Hermione agreed and together they left the book shop and meandered towards the pub. Tom held open the door for Hermione as they entered. The bar was packed with people and she didn't see any free space. Tom solved the problem by glaring menacingly at a group of third year Slytherins sitting at a table. They didn't question his authority and quickly scampered out of the bar. Hermione didn't comment on Tom's intimidation techniques and just sat down at the table. He chose the seat right beside her instead of the one opposite her. Strangely, Hermione didn't mind it so much.

Soon each of them had an ice cold butterbeer in front of them. Hermione sipped from her glass. She felt uncomfortable and didn't know how to break the silence which had fallen between them. She didn't think she was ready to discuss what they had come here for. Tom threw her a smile and leaned back in his chair while he scanned her.

"When was the first time you used magic?" he asked in his smooth voice.

Hermione blinked at him confused. Still taken off guard by the question she mumbled, "You mean accidental magic?"

"Yes."

She threw him a quizzical glance. "You really want to hear that?"

"Why not?"

"Because I was living in the Muggle world back then," she said in a cold voice.

Tom reached for her hand, which lay on the table, and took it in his. Hermione's gaze wandered up to him. He smiled at her as he said,

"I really want to hear."

She swallowed nervously as she felt his hand holding her so gently.

"Okay," she whispered softly and began her story. "Back then I was still in elementary school. Third grade. One day my best friend walked in on class wearing a horribly pink dress." Hermione chuckled and her initial nervousness left her. Still smiling she glanced at Tom. "Well, being a girl and all that, I seriously wanted that dress, too. So, after school I went home and told my parents about it. I think Dad would have bought it for me just to get rid of my incessant begging. Mom, though, was
not so compliant. She was all about how I shouldn't let myself getting influenced by my friends. And that she wouldn't allow 'my young mind to be pressed in that gender role society had spawned for the last hundreds of years.' Hermione again giggled as she remembered her mother's feminist side. "In the end I didn't get any dress and went to bed rather grumpy that day. Next morning when Mom stepped into my room she was greeted by pink. Wallpapers, curtains, bedcovers, carpet, everything. She couldn't find out how I did it. Though I assured her I didn't do any of it. It was a mystery. Mom even suspected Dad at some point." Hermione leaned back in her seat. "It was only years later as I got the invitation to… as we found out I was a witch that we understood what had happened."

Still giggling gaily Hermione peered up at Tom. He eyed her contemplatively. Without saying anything he pulled his wand and poked it at her skirt. Instantly her dark blue skirt changed into a bright pink. Hermione frowned and Tom smirked at her.

"Looks nice on you," he informed her mockingly.

Hermione grinned at him toothily while she let a bit of her magic gather in her right hand. Snipping her fingers, she formed the magic into a charm and sent it at Tom. His dark blue shirt changed and adopted the same loud pink. Hermione broke down in giggles as Tom stoically mustered his new shirt.

"Suits you, too," she managed to say between her laughter.

Tom looked up at her and Hermione raised her eyebrows as now his lips were curved into a smug smile. He leaned back in his chair nonchalantly.

"Ah well," he drawled at her vainly. "I guess I can wear about anything and still look good." He winked at her and the infamous smirk was still in place as he added, "You know, we should wear matching clothes more often."

Hermione stiffened as his hand then skimmed over her thigh. She pushed his hand away and then waved her own irritably, thus changing the colour of their clothes back to normal. Tom continued to smirk at her, looking rather self-satisfied. Hermione ignored it and reached for her butterbeer. She took another sip then she inquired,

"What about you? When was your first accidental magic?"

The conceited smirk left Tom's face. "I don't remember," he said in a colourless voice.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "You don't? I thought something like that would stick out a bit."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's always been with me, magic. As long as I can remember."

Hermione tabbed her chin with a finger as she eyed him with the air of a mathematician trying to solve an elusive equation.

"Maybe you had your first accidental magic at a very early age. That's why you can't remember."

"Probably."

"Then when was the first time you used magic consciously?" she asked.

"I've always used magic. Though I do remember the incident when I could finally control my magic." He hesitated before he said, "But I don't think you want to hear that."

"Well, then you are wrong," she said. "Because I want to hear it very much."
Tom glanced at her ominously. "Okay, but I warned you."

"I'm not so sure how old I was back then," he said. "But I wasn't yet in school so I guess I wasn't older than five. It was winter. I remember it to be quite cold. I was sitting in the common room near the heater, reading a book."

Hermione frowned at him. "Reading? I thought it was before you went to school."

Tom looked at her, put a hand on her shoulder and said pitifully, "We can't all be slow learners."

Hermione huffed and he smiled haughtily. Then he continued his story, "So, I was sitting there, reading my book, as Eric Whalley walked up to me and snatched the book from me. I tried to get it back but he was a few years older and just pushed me to the ground. He laughed at me and then walked away with my book. I got really angry then."

"Uh-oh," made Hermione.

Tom ignored her. "Eric left the room and I followed him. I wanted to get back at him but I knew I wasn't strong enough to force him to return the book. That made me even angrier. As I watched him with my book, I imagined me walking up to him and pushing him, just like he pushed me. I could almost feel my hands on his shoulders as I shoved him. I had this picture in my head. He would lose balance and fall."

"What happened then?" Hermione had to suppress a shudder as she saw twisted satisfaction on his face.

Tom looked at her, strange glint in his eyes. "It got even better than my imagination." An eerie smile played around his mouth as he looked down at his hands. "Without touching him, I could really feel my hands on him. Only it weren't my hands. I didn't understand what it was but I knew I had power over him."

"Then I shoved him," Tom said in an emotionless voice. His cold eyes snapped at her and he added, "Down the stairs."

Hermione just stared at him with wide eyes as she remembered the narrow and steep flight of stairs she had seen in his orphanage. "You didn't mention any stairs until now," she croaked weakly.

Tom looked at her calmly. There was a terribly detached expression on his face which was only interrupted by vicious amusement glinting in his eyes.

"I told you you wouldn't like it."

She took in a shuddered breath and almost didn't dare to ask the next question, "What happened to the boy?"

"Got lucky, I suppose," he replied coolly.

Hermione blinked at him flabbergasted. "Lucky?"

"Well, at least he didn't break his neck, did he?" Tom said carelessly, obviously unfazed by the memory.

She groaned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Anyone blamed you?" she asked tonelessly.

"How could they?" he said, fake innocence twisting his voice. "After all I was standing at the foot of
the stairs. How could I have pushed him?" He snickered coldly as he added, "Of course that also granted me a front seat to witness the whole spectacle."

Hermione turned her head and scanned him. Aside from nasty amusement there still wasn't any emotion on his face.

"That's just sick, you know that?"

Tom sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, that's me."

Hermione glared at him. "Remember when you told me how they threatened to chuck you in an asylum?"

Tom just arched an elegant eyebrow at her. "Yes?"

"I think the idea had merit," she said dryly.

He chuckled at that, flashed her one of his most charming smiles and said, "I'm hurt that you would even think that. After all I'm a respectable prefect. Model student. Top of the year."

"Yeah, yeah," Hermione said dismissively, waving it away with a movement of her hand. "I'll never understand how you manage to seduce them all into believing you."

In a matter of seconds his charming smile turned into one of his insidious smirks. "Practice," he snickered darkly.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and took another sip from her butterbeer. She placed the now empty glass in front of her as Tom beckoned over the waitress to pay. It was still slightly odd for Hermione not to see Madame Rosmerta serving the guests, but the woman was probably not even born yet. Tom paid for the butterbeers and Hermione shortly wondered where he got the money from. Maybe blackmailed it out of some poor soul? Then again he might have pressed it out of Avery and she wouldn't lose any sleep over that.

They left the Three Broomsticks and again Tom took Hermione's hand in his. This time she didn't even consider pulling away from him. She didn't return his grip but still liked the feeling of his hand holding hers.

"How about we get away from the crowd?" he asked.

Immediately the nervousness rushed back to Hermione. She swallowed but then nodded her head without looking up at him. Feeling horribly jittery, she followed Tom through Hogsmeade's streets until they left the village. They took down a small path. Young birch trees surrounded them and soon Hogsmeade disappeared from their sight.

"Let's move up there," Tom said after a while, obviously not having any problems with taking the lead.

They left the path and walked up a slight hill, covered by soft grass. Finding a nice spot, Tom stopped and they sat down in the shade of a birch. It was then that Hermione finally recognized the hill. This was actually the place where the Shrieking Shack would be built in a few years' time.

"Wow, that's strange," she muttered softly.

"What?" Tom asked.
Hermione turned her head at him, not having noticed how she spoke out loud. Then she explained, "Well, I've been here before. Up there-" She gestured at the hill top. "-will be standing a house."

Tom didn't say anything and Hermione again looked up at the place where the shack would be built.

"You never told me you've been to Hogsmeade before." Tom's suspicious voice brought her out of her memories.

Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she realized her slip-up. She looked at him and found his grey eyes scrutinising her.

"I… er…," she stuttered, frantically searching for a way out. "Well… it's Hogsmeade. It's an important wizarding settlement. Of course, I've visited before."

"I see," Tom said slowly, his penetrating eyes never leaving her. "Actually, you never told me you've been in England before."

Hermione stared at him, pondering her options. Her mind was drawing a blank and no believable lie was coming to her. A rather nasty smirk appeared on Tom's face as he watched her. He leaned back on his arms and said smugly,

"You are a horrible liar."

Hermione scowled at him. "Well, I'm sorry I'm not such a convincing con man like you," she snubbed flippantly.

Tom's lips curved up into a mocking smirk. "Then you could try telling me the truth."

"Or I just don't tell you anything," Hermione supplied curtly.

"As you wish," he purred, making her huff at him.

Hermione's gaze left him and wandered over the landscape. Really strange how everything looked so familiar. Though, without the Shrieking Shack it just wasn't the same.

After some time Tom spoke up again. Taunt having completely left his voice, he asked cautiously, "Who was that man you called with the Resurrection stone?"

She bit her lip as she stared up at him. She didn't want to discuss Harry and certainly not with Tom. In the end she replied softly,

"A good man. I told you about him before. He's the one looking so much like you."

"Yes, the black hair," Tom mused while running a hand through his hair. Then his grey eyes flickered back to her. "How come you could call him? He's not dead yet. He hasn't even been born."

Hermione's heart clenched achingly as she thought of Harry. She had wondered herself why he had appeared before her but hadn't come to a conclusion yet. She smiled faintly up at Tom and whispered,

"The dead are always with us."

Tom only nodded at that and continued to look at her contemplatively. Then he inquired, "Do you miss your time?"

Hermione bit her lip as she heard his question. Being such a bad liar, she decided to tell him the truth
"No."

"No?" Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"There is nothing there for me anymore," she clarified softly.

He cautiously laid his hand on her arm and asked, "Because of the war?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered and looked up at him.

"Why did you fight in that war?"

"I... I needed to do it," she replied, sadness pressing tightly around her chest. "There was so much misery. I didn't want to let it continue." She paused before she added softly, "And my friends needed me."

She shuddered as she thought back to that dark time. It was grotesque that she should tell Tom about it now. When he was the cause of it all.

Tom raised his hand and ran his fingers gingerly over the skin of her neck. Hermione shuddered as she felt his fingers on her bare skin. He reached her shoulder where her blouse exposed it. She looked at Tom and saw an odd glint in his eyes as they lingered on her skin.

"Can you now tell me how you got them?" he asked quietly.

Finally Hermione realized that he was staring at the maze of scars that marred the skin of her shoulder. Raising a hand, she touched her shoulder and could feel the knobs of the scars. She looked back at Tom. There was a crimson sheen in his eyes as he glared at her scars. Hermione smiled faintly.

"Nothing special," she finally answered his question. "I fought and got hit. Happens all the time."

"Against whom?" Came his swift reply.

"What?"

Tom's eyes snapped at her and he stared at her demandingly.

"You didn't fight against Grindelwald." His voice wasn't soft anymore but quite commanding. "It is a war in the future you were involved in. So what happened? Whom did you fight against?"

Shifting a bit away from him, she said in a controlled voice, "You don't really expect me to reveal that, do you?"

"It's not going to happen in the next fifty-odd years." He pressed on sharply. "I'm sure you can tell me something without changing the future."

Hermione stared at him then said dryly, "I'd rather not risk it."

Irritation burned in his eyes as they wandered back to the scars on her skin. Hermione could see his angry magic beginning to dance around him. Even in the bright daylight she perceived it as a dark sheen bristling furiously around Tom.

"Whoever it was, I would like to hit them with a few curses," he hissed venomously.
Hermione's eyes widened as she heard the malice in his voice. Slowly a sad smile took form on her face. *If only he knew…*

"I doubt that," she told him cautiously.

He growled in frustration, "I know I can't. Them being in the future and all that. But I sure as hell want to hurt them."

*Again, I doubt that,* Hermione thought but this time didn't say it out loud. Still disgruntled, Tom leaned back on his arms and stared up at the blue sky.

"Did you win that war?" he asked, still short-tempered.

"No-one wins a war, Tom," she sighed.

"But."

"Please, can we not talk about the future?" Hermione asked him softly.

For once Tom complied with her and for a while neither of them spoke. Hermione fiddled with a blade of grass. Tom sat beside her and his nearness unsettled her a great deal. She could feel his eyes wandering over her. Yet, it wasn't completely unpleasant having him so near. Actually it was rather-

"Would you come back to me?" Tom abruptly asked.

Slowly Hermione turned her head and looked up at him. The question didn't really come as a surprise. She had expected it ever since they had left Hogwarts together. Still, she was unprepared.

Getting no reply, Tom continued softly, "I know I made a lot of mistakes. But I need you."

Hermione breathed in deeply, trying to calm herself. It didn't work.

"Tom, it's difficult," she whispered insecurely. "You *did* make many mistakes and I made a few myself." She paused shortly, collecting her thoughts. As she continued her voice had regained some strength, "Now we're here and everything is broken. Do you *really* think we can fix that?"

His calm grey eyes gazed back at her. Then he opened his mouth and said, conviction lacing his words,

"Yes."

Hermione chuckled humourlessly. "I'm not so sure. I am not sure about anything these days."

Tom still scanned her with his impossibly grey eyes.

"I don't think it's as difficult as you make it out to be," he told her. He leaned a bit towards her and asked demandingly, "What do you feel for me?"

Taken aback by his forcefulness, Hermione stared at him. Wasn't this the very question she had asked herself for some time now? Had she found an answer yet?

"I- I don't know," she stuttered pathetically. Trying to regain some form of control she said defensively, "But then again I don't know about your feelings either."

Unfazed by her snippy response, Tom smiled at her. "I already told you what I feel," he said seriously. "Nothing has changed."
As she heard it, Hermione closed her eyes and let out a breath of air. Her eyes snapped open again as she felt his hand on her shoulder. He still smiled at her and said in his smooth voice,

"You stopped threatening me with expulsion, you talk with me again, you kiss me, you agree to accompany me to Hogsmeade into a very date-like situation." The smile on his face turned into a smirk as he concluded, "Whatever you say, it sure seems like you feel something for me."

Hermione hesitated but then she admitted to her dormant feelings, "Maybe."

A triumphant glint flitted through Tom's eyes. She ignored it and continued, "Maybe I do, but what if that isn't enough?"

"It is more than enough," he reassured.

She sadly shook her head. "The first time around it certainly wasn't," Hermione replied in a flat voice. "It wasn't enough for you."

The triumph disappeared from his face as he heard that dead tone in her voice. Hermione averted her eyes from him and continued in a very soft voice,

"I revealed one tiny detail of my life and suddenly my feelings, my… everything wasn't good enough for you anymore. You just dropped me and my feelings were worth nothing." Hermione shuddered as she added in a strangled voice, "I was worth nothing."

"Hermione, I regret how I treated you," Tom said carefully. "I was wrong."

The honesty in his voice, it made her tremble. She didn't know what to do. Without looking up at him she whispered, "This racism thing… I've been hit with it ever since I entered the magical world. And I learned to live with it. But I can't… can't deal with it if the people closest to me believe in those lies."

She threw him a glance. He was looking back at her, softness glinting in his grey eyes.

"Tom, I... I know you hate me for being Muggleborn," she blurted out. "How am I supposed to live with that?"

A smile flitted over his face, then he said, "Didn't I tell you before? I don't hate you. The question now is whether you hate me."

Hermione gulped then she said, surprised by the truth in her words, "I don't." Seeing the relief in his eyes she added, "But I am still Muggleborn."

"I don't care about that anymore," Tom said quietly.

"That's just it! You don't care," she replied desperately. "My parents were Muggles and I loved them very much." She averted her eyes from him as she hissed bitterly, "I can't accept it if someone looks down on them just because they were Muggles. Especially if that someone is my... boyfriend. You said it once, you can only 'tolerate' this part of me. That's not good enough for me."

Tom put two fingers under her chin and turned her head so she would look at him. Hermione shuddered as she stared up at his grey eyes. She felt trapped in his gaze and couldn't look away.

"I don't think ill of your parents," Tom told her in a serious voice. "On the contrary. I am very glad that sometime in the future your parents will meet and that they will have a daughter. Muggles or not, I am very grateful to them."
She took in a deep breath of air to steady her over boiling emotions. A tremble went through her whole body as she stared into his eyes. She didn't know what she was supposed to find there. She knew his dark side. She had seen his future self and his evil ambitions. He had hurt her so much. He was a monster.

"Come back to me," Voldemort whispered, his alluring voice washing over her.

His fingers still rested under her chin, touching her tenderly. She could barely breathe, something constricting her lungs. She was drowning in his grey eyes. And if they had been crimson-red, she would have still drowned in them. Did she want to be with him? There certainly was a strong pull towards him. Still she was afraid as her eyes hesitantly wandered over Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort. There was no separating them anymore. She couldn't say 'yes' to one and 'no' to the other. Could she feel secure with him, with both sides of him?

His fingers now clutched her chin tightly and he leaned a bit towards her. His unfathomable eyes never released her and Hermione stared up at him. His dark magic danced as a black aura around him. Strands of it reached out for her and licked softly over her skin.

"Please," Voldemort said in his smooth, dulcet voice. "Come back."

As she heard him, she knew it was time to finally make a decision. Deep down – she had to admit – she had already made that decision some time ago. Now she only needed courage to pull through with it and accept it.

Still looking into his grey eyes, Hermione nodded slowly.

As Tom saw it, the strands of his magic, which had caressed her skin before, now wrapped tightly around her and she could feel herself being pulled towards him. Was that it? Had Voldemort finally defeated her? But it didn't feel like she had lost anything. Tom's fingers left her chin so his hand could cup her cheek. His grey eyes bored into hers and a smile curled up his lips. Then he leaned down to her, but before he could kiss her Hermione raised her hand and put her index finger on his lips.

Her eyes were icy cold as she looked up at him and warned him, "If you ever let me down, I won't be persuaded again."

There was a rueful expression on his face as Tom quickly promised, "I won't."

Then he wrapped his arm around her waist to pull her towards him. Hermione didn't stop him but she still felt tense at his closeness. His arms were slung around her gently and protectively. Even his dark magic was still curled around her. Her heart was racing away in her chest. Ever so hesitantly, Hermione snuggled closer to Tom and even buried her face into his shoulder, feeling the soft fabric of his shirt against her cheek. Her magic left her body and bristled excitedly around them both, just as if giving its consent to Hermione's actions. Then it was reaching out to Tom and wrapped tightly around him, seeking to be as close to him as possible.

And all of a sudden, it felt good to have Tom so near. Hermione closed her eyes and relaxed against him, a smile on her lips.

After some time, she felt Tom placing a soft kiss on the top of her head. Hermione looked up at him. He stared back at her, a passionate glint flickered in his otherwise always so cold eyes. Slowly he raised a hand and ran it through her hair until it rested at the nape of her neck. All the while his impossibly grey eyes kept her imprisoned. Then he abruptly pulled her towards him. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as his lips crashed against hers and he kissed her hungrily. He held her tightly,
possessively. Hermione raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck. There was no hesitancy in his kiss, no restraint. His tongue demanded urgently access and she could do nothing but comply with him. Tom deepened the kiss, his tongue playing with her own, while his hands now wandered over her body. Hermione lost herself in this aggressive, almost painful, kiss. She had missed this so much. She had missed him.

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It painfully twisted up her whole stomach. It made an insatiable fury burning up in her and at the same time she felt so incredibly sad that she just wanted to curl into some dark place and die. It was so unfair and just wrong. Wrong in so many ways. It made her sick. Her hands clenched into tight fists as Melanie stared at the two people walking, as if nothing was wrong, through the streets of Hogsmeade and towards the castle.

There he was Tom Riddle. Tom. Her Tom. His raven-black hair shimmered alluringly in the sun, making a sharp contrast with the pale skin of his face. And his face… yes, it was angelic in its beauty. His wonderful grey eyes were the best. Never had she seen such eyes before. Or maybe his lips were even better? They looked so kissable with that small smirk curling them up. Melanie's eyes left the handsome boy's face and plummeted down, now greedily wandering over his broad chest. The dark blue shirt hugged his from nicely, making her want to just rip it off his perfect body. Yes, yes, he was perfect. Even if she tried, she could find no flaw in him.

Though there was something terribly wrong here. Her eyes reluctantly left Tom's body and fixed onto his hand which was clasped around another. Now that was an abomination, Melanie decided, shivers of disgust running over her. There he was, her Tom, holding hands with that filthy girl. He was defiling himself. Why did he do that to himself? He shouldn't be anywhere near that Mudblood. Anger washed over Melanie as she glared at the bushy-haired girl walking beside Tom. There was a blissful look of happiness on her face. It made Melanie long to reach for her wand. Something like that bint didn't even deserve to breathe the same air as Tom, and yet here she was shamelessly touching him.

Melanie's perfect angel was being contaminated – tainted – by the disgusting trollop.

Melanie shook her head angrily. She had to stop that. She needed to save him. Whatever that girl had done to him, Melanie had to show him what DeCerto really was. She needed to free him from DeCerto's clutches.

Reluctantly, Melanie unfixed her eyes from Tom. She wanted to rush over to him and tug him away from the bitch. But she couldn't do that. Melanie needed a bit more finesse to help Tom. She turned away from him and a plan was starting to take shape in her mind as she walked over to the Hog's Head and entered the pub. It didn't take her long to find what she had been searching for. There in one dark corner sat a few boys. Melanie knew them all. They were sixth and seven years and all of them were part of a rather exclusive group within Slytherin house. No-one would ever mess with them because they were as feared as they were popular. Emitting an aura of glory, power and great influence everyone in Slytherin wanted to be part of that group.

Of course who else should reign from the centre of this group other than Tom Riddle? He had launched this selected group and he was their leader.

Satisfied that she had found them, Melanie's gaze quickly skimmed over the boys. She saw Lestrange, Black, Alba and even Malfoy. A smirk appeared on her face as her eyes finally landed on Ledo Avery. Just the man she had been searching for. Right after Tom, Avery was the second most influential person in Slytherin. The Slytherin Quidditch team captain was feared amongst the younger years, respected by his year mates and most popular with the girls. There was really only
one person Avery had to listen to and that was Tom Riddle.

Smile in place, Melanie strolled over to this group. As she reached their table she greeted them, "Hello there."

Unsurprisingly, suspicion glinted in the boys' eyes as they mustered her. Melanie just shrugged it off and said, turned to Avery,

"I need to talk with you, Ledo."

Arching his eyebrows, the Quidditch team captain leaned languidly back in his seat and eyed her boredly.

"And why should I talk with you?" he finally inquired, making the other boys snicker darkly.

Not one to be easily intimidated, Melanie just smirked right back at him and said arrogantly, "Because you really want to hear what I have to say." She let her eyes wander over the other boys before she looked back at Avery. "In private."

Avery sighed at that but Melanie knew she had sparked his curiosity. Sure enough he drawled, "Okay okay. If it's so important to you."

Then he got up from his place and followed Melanie over to another free table, away from the other people. They sat down and Avery eyed her inquisitively.

"So? What do you want?"

"Well," Melanie said lackadaisically. "I've heard about the unfortunate disagreement you had with Tom."

Instantly Avery's face darkened. She just smiled at him sweetly and continued lightly, "I mean, really everyone in Slytherin knows how you've tried to put Hermione DeCerto in her place." She sighed dramatically. "How unfortunate that you failed."

Elated Melanie noted how Avery's hands balled into tight fists and anger flickered over his face. She pasted a sympathetic look on her face as she added, "It's a shame and doubly disappointing because it was Tom who stopped you."

"How is that your problem?" he hissed.

"It isn't just my problem." Melanie smiled at him unimpressed. Then she leaned a bit towards him and whispered, "It affects all of us Slytherins."

"It isn't just my problem." Melanie smiled at him unimpressed. Then she leaned a bit towards him and whispered, "It affects all of us Slytherins."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped, barely suppressed rage in his voice.

She laughed softly. "Tom Riddle is courting a filthy little Mudblood and you really have to ask me what's the problem?" She leaned back in her chair and eyed him intently before she asked incredulously, "So you are really okay with his actions?"

Avery's jaws tightened in anger. Melanie raised her eyebrows at him then she asked provocingly, "You see no problem with your leader gallivanting around with a Mudblood then?"

"It is a disgusting affair," Avery pressed out between clenched teeth. "But I don't think it's any of your business, Melanie."
Suppressing a smirk, Melanie eyed him innocently. "Oh I'm sorry. I was just concerned, you see." She smiled at him apologetically. "I can't help but wonder into what this is going to develop. I mean, if things are continuing like this, we'll soon all wear red and gold and welcome every Mudblood to Hogwarts with a feast. Maybe we'll even start to admit Muggles into school."

Avery glared at her irately. "What is it you actually want?" he spat.

"Oh, no no," she replied innocently. "I don't want anything. I merely felt the need to confide in you. Tell you of my concerns about my house."

Rage still burning in his eyes he asked, "Why tell me?"

"Oh my." Melanie stared at him in false surprise. "Because you are the only one able to talk some sense into Tom, of course. After all, you are the only one powerful enough to make him listen."

Contently she watched a vain glint now fighting with the anger in his eyes. She looked at Avery with wide innocent eyes and whispered, "Someone has to save Slytherin's honour."

"Slytherin's honour..." he whispered, seemingly to himself.

Melanie nodded at him. "Why, you could even punish DeCerto for her misbehaviour," she all but purred at him. "Once you've convinced Tom of his mistakes, DeCerto would be yours. You could do with her whatever you want."

Melanie almost wrinkled her nose in disgust as she saw the lustful flicker darting over Avery's face. Why was everyone so keen on that bitch? She was nothing but a worthless Mudblood. Still, that look on Avery's face also told her that she had managed to get through to him.

A triumphant smirk begged to take shape on her face.

Melanie knew, on the long run Avery would never be able to dethrone her Tom. Tom was much too smart to be defeated by the likes of Avery. But the power-struggle within their group and Tom's temporary loss of prestige and influence would finally drive that disgusting succubus away from him. DeCerto would drop Tom like a hot brick and would drift over to Avery. That would finally show Tom what a power-hungry bitch DeCerto really was. And Melanie would be there to comfort him and see him through the tragedy. He would be so grateful.

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Hermione kissed him. Again and again. Feeling his lips against her own was so wonderful. His hand was running through her hair, tugging at it demandingly. His other hand had long since found the hem of her blouse and now skimmed lightly over the skin at the small of her back, leaving behind an exciting tingle. Hermione's eyes were closed and her hands lay on his shoulders. She enjoyed his nearness, her feeling of elation supported by her cheerful magic in the air. It was incredibly happy to have Tom back, the way it danced around him in excitement. Hermione wasn't about to question that happiness. She had made her decision. There was no knowing if it was the right one. For the moment at least, it seemed to be so.

Tom deepened the kiss. Hermione huddled closer to him and allowed his tongue to dance with her own. One of her hands left his shoulder, skimmed over his prefect badge and then down his chest. Tom growled in response and kissed her even fiercer. His lips left hers and he trailed more kisses on the line of her jaw. He nibbled at her earlobe before he whispered to her,

"You have no idea how much I've missed you."
Hermione shuddered at his words. She turned her head and now stared at him. Tom looked back at her with his calm grey eyes. His lips tilted into a smirk and he said possessively,

"I won't ever let you go again."

She smiled at him indulgently. "That, Mr Riddle, is a decision you can't make on your own."

Then she pecked him on the lips before she wrapped her arms around him and leaned into him. Tom snaked his arms around her and pulled her even closer. They sat like that for some time, Hermione breathing in his pleasant scent and Tom's fingers stroking her hair. She was stunned at how right this felt.

Hermione was startled as she heard the echoes of steps on the stone floor of the library. Up to now, the library had been very much deserted. Hermione slid a little away from Tom. She turned her head and saw Longbottom, Weasley and Lupin walking towards her. As he recognised Tom sitting beside her, Longbottom started to glower darkly at the Slytherin.

"Do you want me to go?" Hermione heard Tom whispering in her ear.

She turned her head and looked at him, considering his offer. But then she shook her head. "No, it's okay."

A small smile took form on Tom's face as he heard her reply. Then he leaned leisurely back in his seat and watched the three Gryffindors walking over to them. They sat down at the table and continued eyeing Tom suspiciously. Hermione could see Longbottom's face growing more and more purple by the second. Then he couldn't hold back anymore and barked at Tom,

"Why do you keep on pestering Hermione?"

Hermione could see an evil smile taking form on Tom's face and he opened his mouth to undoubtedly return something sharp. But then he hesitated and threw her a questioning glance.

"He's not pestering me," Hermione told Longbottom in a calm voice.

"So you like it how he's stalking you?" he asked angrily.

She didn't know how to answer to that.

"After all the things he did to you, you really wanna forgive him?" Longbottom snapped incredulously.

Hermione looked at him sheepishly. "Yes," she replied cautiously, knowing her friend wouldn't like that answer.

Sure enough, Longbottom stared at her indignantly. She didn't know how to explain the whole thing and was very grateful as Lupin helped her out.

"Does that mean you two are together again?" he inquired shrewdly.

"Yes," Hermione said confidently. Lupin didn't seem to be surprised by the whole thing and cast her a small smile.

Before anyone else could get a word in, Longbottom thundered, "What? You can't be serious."

Finally Tom decided to interfere into the conversation. He smirked at the blond Gryffindor and said condescendingly, "She is very serious."
"So it doesn't matter anymore that he treated you like dirt… slapped you?"

Hermione could feel Tom stiffen as he heard that.

"It does," she answered, her voice firm now. "But he apologised for everything."

The worry and doubt, though, never left Longbottom's face, so Hermione continued seriously, "Tom and me, we have a lot of problems. I don't know how the whole thing is going to work out. But I ask you to let us deal with it alone."

"Are you sure about it?" Weasley inquired while he threw a cautious glance at Tom.

Hermione smiled at him reassuringly. "Yes. Quite."

"This is ridiculous!" Longbottom shot at her.

Hermione bit her lip as she looked at the furious Gryffindor. She didn't want to lose him over this. Longbottom reached over the table and grabbed both of her hands. Looking down at her with his blue eyes, he said seriously,

"Hermione, please. You know what an evil snake he is." Here he threw a dark glare at Tom before he continued beseechingly, "He's not going to change. He'll just make you miserable."

Hermione stared at Longbottom. She had to admit his fear was not completely unfounded. Would Lord Voldemort change? Was he able to? Could she even expect of him to change everything he was? His ambitions, his plans, his future? Hermione drew in a deep breath as she looked up at Longbottom's concerned eyes. She pressed his hands reassuringly but her voice was strong as she replied,

"This is not open for discussion, Marc. I am going to try it again with Tom. And nothing you can say will change my mind. Please, accept my decision."

Longbottom just shook his head. "This is a mistake, Hermione." He told her as he let go of her hands. Then he looked at Tom and hissed, "I know what you are trying to do. You'll be sorry if you hurt her again, I promise you that."

Tom only raised a mocking eyebrow at the other. An unpleasant silence fell over the group. After a while Lupin asked Hermione, obviously trying to lighten the mood somehow,

"So, how do you think you did in the History test?"

Hermione looked at him thankfully. Then she said, "I really don't know." She furrowed her brow and rushed on, true anxiety in her voice, "In fact, I think I failed. I'm sure I got question four completely wrong and I don't know about number three either-"

"Not again," Weasley groaned. Then he grinned at her and said, "You always say something like that and then you get an O. Why are you doing this to me?"

Hermione smiled back at him and said, "No, this time I'm serious."

"Yeah, yeah," Weasley said tiredly, though he still grinned at her.
Hermione chuckled and then she started to go through the whole test. The only one of her friends who was willing to compare his answers with hers was Lupin. Weasley just pulled a Quidditch magazine out of his bag and began to read and Longbottom was still too busy with glaring at Tom to concentrate on anything else. As Hermione talked with Lupin, she was very aware of the fact that Tom still sat beside her. He didn't participate in the conversation, completely ignored Longbottom's hostile looks and appeared to be bored. But after some time she felt how Tom took a hold of her hand. He continued to hold her hand gently while she talked with her friends.
Facets Of Truth

A silvery cloak was spread out on the lap of the golden-haired man. His blue eyes twinkled as he looked, almost affectionately, down at the cloak. The silky material slid easily through his fingers and a wistful smile tucked at his mouth. Absentmindedly he reached for a glass of whiskey which stood on the desk in front of him. His peace was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. Reluctantly the golden-haired man unfixed his gaze from the cloak and looked up.

"Enter," he said in a soft voice.

The door to the small office was opened and in stepped another man. His dark red hair was trimmed short and he wore glasses which appeared to be out of place on the hard features of his face. His dark shirt was tucked into his camouflage trousers. A polished wand and a commando knife, both secured in a holster, hung threateningly from his belt. The golden-haired man watched amused as the other stepped before him and saluted briskly.

"At ease," the golden-haired man said, his blue eyes twinkling merrily. Then his gaze fell back down to the silvery cloak and he asked placidly, "What do you have for me, Rousseau?"

"We managed to take out Bellier, commander," the red-headed man replied swiftly.

A hand running through his golden hair, Grindelwald grinned at his second-in-command.

"I knew you wouldn't disappoint me," he said contently. "Any problems?"

"No, sir," Rousseau replied. "Everything went as planned. No-one will be able to trace his death back to us."

Pensively Grindelwald mustered the other man. Then he remarked, "With the chief of the Aurors out of the picture our line of action is suddenly that much easier."

"Probably," Rousseau said. Then he added cautiously, "But they will soon find a successor."

A mischievous smile appeared on his face as Grindelwald scanned the other man in amusement.

"Not to worry," he said carelessly. "I'm sure we can use our influence and bend those bureaucrats towards the right direction."

"You already have someone in mind, sir?" Rousseau asked curiously.

"Why, yes, I do," Grindelwald replied, smile still in place. "If he gets enough votes – which I am very confident he will – then we'll have seriously damaged the Aurors' efficiency."

"That would take a lot of pressure from our backs," the red-haired man said, seemingly impressed.

Grindelwald inclined his head in consent. "Certainly. But it shouldn't let us become complacent. To underestimate the Aurors could prove to be fatal. Even with their CO put out of action, not one of the Aurors will suddenly turn tails and run." He eyed Rousseau thoughtfully. "You've met them in combat, Rousseau. You know what I'm talking about."

"Yes, sir," Rousseau replied. "We fight on different sides but I admit they are honourable men. Dedicated to their duty and very loyal."

"Yes, no chance on swaying them to our side. At least not yet," Grindelwald agreed. "I am confident
that in the end they will see reason but as of now it's best we don't drop the soap."

Rousseau nodded then his gaze strayed to the silvery cloak which still lay over his commander's lap. Grindelwald noticed his interest and grinned archly.

"It's a very powerful invisibility cloak," he explained.

To prove his words he placed the cloak over his right arm which seemingly vanished into thin air.

"Very few spells are able to undermine its enchantments," Grindelwald proceeded. "To completely break them is impossible …not even time can make them fade."

Rousseau again eyed the silver cloak, now seemingly more impressed. "A very valuable object, I'm sure," he commented. "What spells were used to create it?"

Grindelwald chuckled softly. "Believe me, I would very much like to know the workings behind this cloak myself. Until now it sadly hasn't revealed its secrets."

"How did you come upon the cloak?" his second-in-command queried.

"Henger was so kind to bring it to me," Grindelwald admitted airily.

Rousseau raised his eyebrows and adjusted his glasses. "Well, that's something unheard of: Him bringing back things unbroken."

Grindelwald chuckled merrily. "Yes, he does have a certain reputation, does he not?" His fingers delicately wandered over the fabric of the cloak. "And indeed he did not find what I had originally requested him to track down."

Rousseau quirked a surprised eyebrow. "He failed? But I thought you sent him out to a school. He couldn't possible have had any problems there."

"Yes, it is only a school but he still met some unexpected resistance," Grindelwald answered, obviously not concerned by his man's failure. A lopsided grin appeared on his face and he added, "Very exiting if you ask me. It made me curious. Curious indeed."

"Knowing you, I bet you have a contingency plan to get what you want," Rousseau commented.

Grindelwald smiled as he heard it. "Indeed, my little wild card is still in the running. And now that my curiosity is awakened I would really like to get to the bottom of this."

"What about your reservations of getting Dumbledore involved?" Rousseau cautiously asked. "Isn't he a teacher at that very school?"

Grindelwald glanced up from the cloak and mustered the other man pensively. "Yes, you are right and I am still reluctant. We both are, I guess." The grin found its way back to his face and his finger skimmed over the silvery cloak as he continued softly, "But Albus can hardly blame me. After all, I'm only trying to finish what he started all those years ago."

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Hermione suppressed a yawn as she stepped out of the Gryffindor common room in order to wander down to the Great Hall to have some breakfast. The portrait of the Fat Lady had not yet fallen back in place as Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. Tom Riddle was in the corridor. Twirling his wand through his fingers and leaning nonchalantly against the corridor wall, he seemed to be waiting for
her. By now his incredibly grey eyes had fallen on her and he flashed her a charming smile.

Despite the events from yesterday, Hermione couldn't help but feel a bit tense. She didn't think it had been wrong to take him back but that didn't stop her from feeling jumpy and on edge when he was around. Anyway, Hermione forced a small smile on her own face as she stepped over to him.

"Good morning, Hermione," Tom said in his velvety voice.

Hermione knit her brow as she frowned up at him.

"Why are you waiting in the corridor?" she finally asked him warily. "Don't you have that very odd and mysterious source for the Gryffindor common room passwords?"

Tom couldn't completely hide a nasty smirk as he replied sanctimoniously, "I just wanted to be polite. Is that suddenly a crime?"

"No," she said slowly. She threw him a fake smile of her own as she continued innocently, "It's just suspicious."

He sighed dramatically. "You always think the worst of me."

The sweet and completely faux smile was still on her face as she countered, "Well, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it's a valid assumption."

What was meant as light taunt now made the smirk die on Tom's face. He looked at her oddly and then whispered hesitantly, "Sorry."

Slightly put off balance by his sudden gloom, Hermione reached for his hand and grabbed it tightly. She could see his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. She didn't comment but started to walk down the corridor, pulling him with her.

"If we don't hurry, we'll be late for breakfast," she told him over her shoulder.

Tom followed her and she felt him clasping her hand tightly. They walked in silence down to the Great Hall. Hermione felt still a bit unsure about the whole situation but Tom seemed to just enjoy her presence.

They quickly reached the entrance to the Great Hall. Hermione heard clatter and voices coming through the closed doors and was hit by a sudden swoop of nervousness. It already was an open secret that she was back together with Tom – thanks to her dorm mates – but Hermione didn't look forward to be the centre of attention once again. The whole school was assembled behind those doors. She didn't really want to enter but Tom didn't leave her a choice. Before he opened the door, though, he let go of her hand. Hermione almost rolled her eyes.

_The forties and their antiquated views_, she thought irritated and was very sure Legifer would give her a detention for PDA if she waltzed into the Great Hall holding hands with Tom Riddle.

Taking a deep breath of air, she followed Tom into the hall. As expected numerous eyes fell on them and whispers broke loose while Tom led her over to her table. Most of the female population of the castle threw her death glares, only her dorm mates waved at her happily. A sour expression appeared on Longbottom's face as she walked over to her friends. Hermione just wished the ground would open and swallow her. Tom, on the other hand, was completely immune to the chatter going on around him. A blank, almost bored, look on his face, he leaned down to Hermione and said,
"I'll meet you in potions."

She just nodded and was grateful as she could sink down at Gryffindor table beside Weasley. Longbottom and Lupin sat across from her.

"Morning," she said.

Lupin and Weasley smiled and returned the greeting but her heart sank as she saw the disappointed look on Longbottom's face. Hermione felt sadness tear at her as she looked at her blond-haired friend. She completely understood his resentments but that wouldn't change her decision of taking Tom back. Hermione avoided his gaze and reached for a piece of toast.

"So, Hermione." Lupin tried to brighten the mood. "Are you going to the next Slug Club?"

She looked at him in relief and answered, "Hm, when's it again?"

"Next Friday," Weasley supplied while buttering himself a bread roll.

Seeing her contemplative face, Lupin added, "It's the last one this school year."

Hermione stared at him for a second. Merlin, had she really been here this long already? It was already June and the school year was almost over.

She cleared her throat and said, "I probably will. I guess Tom would want to go, so I…"

Her voice fizzled out as she was hit by another of Longbottom's angry stares. After that even Lupin gave up any attempts at a conversation.

Breakfast was almost finished as the owls flew into the Great Hall. A barn owl dropped an envelope in front of Longbottom. The bird nicked some of his bacon before it set off again and flew away. In the meantime, the Gryffindor had ripped open the envelope and read the letter, the smile on his face growing by the second.

"So, who's it from," Weasley inquired as Longbottom was finished.

The other grinned at his friend and said, "Dad. He says mom is alright. Though she's grown really big now."

Hermione frowned but then remembered that his mother was pregnant. She hesitantly smiled at Longbottom and asked softly, "When's she going to have the baby?"

Another dark look crossed his face as he eyed her, then he informed her rather curtly, "It won't take very long, I guess."

Hermione just nodded timidly. Lupin threw her a worried glance before he asked Longbottom, "So, did they already decide on a name?"

The irate look disappeared from Longbottom's face as he turned away from Hermione. His usual cheerful grin was in place as he answered Lupin, "No, not yet. I suggested Frank. It's a good solid name, don't you think?"

Lupin nodded while Hermione didn't dare voice anything.

"Sure thing, mate," Weasley agreed.

"See? And Mom doesn't like it," Longbottom said and shook his head. Smile back in place he
continued, "The only downside is that I'll be long gone from Hogwarts until Frankie attends. I won't be able to show my baby brother all the secret passageways."

Weasley shrugged and grinned broadly. "You could draw him a map."

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After breakfast Hermione walked alone to the potion class room. She didn't want to put up with Longbottom's accusing glares anymore. Though the other students were very good at taking his place, Hermione thought wryly as she passed a group of Ravenclaw girls eyeing her darkly.

She was rather glad as she finally reached her class room. She entered and walked over to her place. Hermione ungracefully plopped into the seat beside Tom. From the corner of her eyes she saw a smug smile creeping over his face.

"Oh, so now it's okay to sit with me?" He asked innocently before he sneered, "You sure you don't wanna sit with the Gryffindor oaf anymore?" He gestured at Longbottom.

"If you keep up that attitude, I might reconsider," she replied dryly, though she didn't turn to look at Longbottom.

Slughorn then waddled into the class room, his small beady eyes wandering over the students. As his gaze came to rest on Tom and Hermione sitting at the same table, Slughorn stopped in his tracks and a dazzlingly large smile took form on his face. Hermione felt like smacking her forehead repeatedly into the table as Slughorn now even winked at her suggestively. In the corner of her eyes she could see a self-satisfied expression taking form on Tom's face while the other students in the room – mostly the girls – started to glare at her vindictively.

At least Slughorn had the decency not to make a comment. Instead he said in his booming voice, "Good morning, class. And what a wonderful morning it is." Another wink at Hermione who suppressed a groan. "Today's topic will be healing potions." Slughorn waved his wand at the blackboard and writing appeared. "Pick one of these potions and brew it. You have until the class ends." A broad smile appeared on his face and he added while eyeing Tom and Hermione, "Feel free to work in pairs."

A low murmur and clatter broke out in the class room as the students paired up and started to work.

Hermione scanned the blackboard before she turned to Tom and asked, "So which potion do you want to make?"

"Hm, Cough Potion, Boil Cure Potion or Murtlap Essence," he read Slughorn's instructions. Tom turned to Hermione and suggested, "The Cough Potion?"

Hermione nodded at him absentmindedly, already going through the different steps.

"I thought so, too." She got up from her seat and ordered bossily, "I'll get the ingredients and you heat the cauldron."

A small smirk appeared on Tom's face as he heard her tone of voice. Malfoy, who sat right beside Tom, could hear their conversation as well. His face was arranged into his usual blank expression but he raised a delicate eyebrow as he heard Hermione's tone with Tom.

As Hermione returned to the table she shoved the foxglove leaves over to Tom while she started to grind the eel eyes into a gooey pulp. The potion wasn't very difficult – at least nothing compared to the Ortus potion – and Hermione's thoughts strayed from her task. Tom was working right beside her
and she felt anxious. She watched out of the corner of her eyes as he added the cut foxglove leaves into the cauldron. Hermione had to admit that she felt unsure about her decision of taking Tom back. She did not regret it but it still felt like she had taken a step back instead of forward. Her actions were dangerously selfish. Selfish because she was messing around with time and dangerous because she was playing with Voldemort's emotions.

Layer upon layer of lies and secrets were woven around her, protecting the time line and simultaneously keeping Tom away from her. She wanted him close, though, and had allowed him to get nearer. What if he found out about her secrets? How would he react? Leave her again? Curse her? Or worse, use the knowledge?

Hermione felt shivers running up and down her spine at that thought. Still, it was a valid concern. What would Tom do if she told him that in the future she had tried to kill him? That she had fought together with the Chosen-One to bring him down? How could she go on with a relationship with Tom when everything was based on lies? Would he still like her if he knew that in her time she had hated him with every fibre of her being? Or would he close the chapter, force her memories from her and turn the future into his victory? As it was now, she was betraying both sides, Tom because she was dishonest with him and her friends in the future because she risked their achievement. It was making her feel sick with guilt.

What to do? Search the Hallows, travel back home and …spend the rest of her life miserable and alone? Or stay here, be honest with Tom and risk ripping the structure of time apart?

A strangled groan left her mouth as she stared at the bowl of eel eyes in front of her. Hermione was very scared of Tom knowing the truth. What if he used her memories to defeat Harry in the future and begin a dark reign? That would destroy everything her friends had fought and died for. If Tom used her that way, it would simply break her.

Hermione breathed out slowly as her thoughts involuntarily flickered back to the day she had told him about her being Muggleborn. Her hands now shook as she continued to grind the eel eyes.

"Are you alright?" She heard Tom's soft voice.

Hermione looked up at him. He had a wooden ladle in his hand to stir the potion but right now he mustered her concerned. Obviously he had noticed her nervousness around him.

"I was just… just thinking about something…" she muttered awkwardly.

He stared at her questioningly but Hermione didn't explain anything and looked back down to the grinded eel eyes.

Tom leaned to her and whispered gently in her ear, "If there's anything troubling you, you know you can tell me."

Telling him? No, that wouldn't do at all. Dangerous in so many ways. Suicidal.

Hermione cringed away from him and hissed, "I told you I'm okay, didn't I?"

She immediately regretted her harsh tone. There was a hurt look on Tom's face, though he hid it behind a mask of indifference.

An hour later, Hermione's hair was horribly frizzy due to the potion fumes but luckily class was over now. She took a vial and poured a sample of the Cough potion into it. Then she labelled it and walked over to Slughorn's desk. Tom was following her.
"Ms DeCerto and Mr Riddle," Slughorn said proudly as he scanned the bluish-grey liquid in the vial. "Once again a perfect potion." A rather giddy expression crossed his face and he beamed at them widely. "I am so glad you two decided to get back together." Then he winked at Tom and added, "I take it you apologized then, didn't you?"

Without waiting for any reply the professor gave Tom a pat on his back and laughed loudly. Meanwhile Hermione longingly eyed the door of the potions class room. Slughorn leaned a bit towards Tom and lowered his voice conspiratorially, though Hermione could still hear everything. "I hope you learned a lesson from this, m'boy," Slughorn whispered. "Should you ever have a quarrel again, just take the blame, whether it was your fault or not. Spares you a lot of trouble."

With that the professor ushered them out of the class room. After the door was closed and they were on their way to the DADA class room Hermione sighed, "Merlin, that was embarrassing."

Tom didn't say anything.

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The school day ended for her with DADA in which Professor McGray lectured them about how to handle a Sphinx which was a rather hazardous endeavour especially if one was not good at solving puzzles. "What are you up to now?" She heard a deep voice coming behind her. Hermione turned and found Tom leaning against the corridor wall. Since their potion class they hadn't spoken at all. Again guilt tickled at her mind. She tried to smother it. "Hm, dunno," she replied. "I still have to write that essay about Devil's Snare."

Tom shrugged his shoulders as he carelessly said, "So, you are free now?"

Hermione frowned at him. "Eh, no. I just told you. I've home work."

Ignoring her, he stepped over to her, grabbed her hand and started to lead her down the passage way. "I've something else in mind," he informed her. "And what could that be?" Hermione inquired, slightly miffed.

He flashed her a charming smile as he replied, "You remember the last time we duelled during DADA?"

Now feeling quite uncomfortable, Hermione said suspiciously, "Yes."

"As your magic was not working back then the whole thing didn't work out so well," Tom stated matter-of-factly. "So, I thought we could make up for it."

Hermione stopped walking and so did he. Then she creased her brow in confusion. "You want to duel me?"

He chuckled before he said, "In a way, yes. Though mostly I want to test your magic. You haven't had the opportunity since you got it back, had you?"

"No, not so much," Hermione admitted meekly.
"Let's go then," he said confidently while again offering her a hand.

Hermione hesitated to take it, feeling uncomfortable with the prospect of having to fight Tom. As she didn't move at all, Tom's hand sank back to his side. The smile had melted from his face which was now an unreadable mask.

"I just want to see if everything is alright with your magic," he finally said, his tone terse. "It's not going to be like our last duel."

As she still didn't react, he stepped closer to her and snapped, "What? Don't you trust me?"

Good question. Hermione saw a glimmer of annoyance and even disappointment in his eyes, mostly annoyance though.

As she didn't say anything Tom hissed, his tone chilly and distanced, "So, you haven't really forgiven me, have you?"

Hermione stared at him and didn't know what to answer. Had she forgiven him? Truly forgiven? Could she ever forgive all the things he had done to her in the future? Was it even fair to blame Tom for his future counterpart's crimes? Hermione sighed as she looked at the anger and frustration which had by now appeared on Tom's face.

"Where do you want to duel?" she omitted to answer.

She could tell that he was very aggravated by the fact she hadn't answered his question. He didn't push her, though, but just stomped down the corridor. Hermione followed in his wake. She started to wonder if it was a good idea to engage him in a duel right now. He was quite angry. She could see his dark magic dancing around him balefully. Tom opened a door and pulled her in the deserted room behind.

"You want to duel in a class room?" she asked perplexed.

"No. You are going to apparate us to somewhere else," he ordered her caustically.

Hearing his tone of voice, she was convinced this was a mistake. Still as he stared at her expectantly she replied subdued,

"Oh… okay."

She looked down at her shoes, wondering if she should really do it. Then a gentle hand clasped around her arm.

"Hermione?"

This time Tom's tone had been soft and Hermione looked up at him. He was scanning her with his grey eyes.

"I didn't mean to snap at you," he said cautiously. "I guess I'm just a little stressed is all."

She furrowed her brow in confusion. "Stressed? Why would you be stressed?"

"Well, I just… I thought you…" he mumbled. Then he drew in a deep breath of air and looked her in the eyes. "I thought you might've changed your mind… about us."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise as she saw this rare display of insecurity.
"Just because I didn't want to duel?" she asked gingerly.

Tom fiddled with the hem of his robe and didn't look at her as he replied, "You were so strange since potions and now you assume I would try to hurt you in that duel... I thought, you've forgiven me but you haven't...maybe you never will..."

Now she smiled at him softly but he didn't see it as he still wouldn't meet her eyes. She might be confused about her unique situation here in the past but one thing was certain: What Tom Riddle – not Lord Voldemort – had done to her she had forgiven.

She lightly put her hand on his forearm and soothed him, "Tom, I agreed to be your girlfriend again, didn't I? I'm not going to change my decision on a whim. We are back together. Just give it a little time."

Still not looking at her he said, "Then you are not afraid I would attempt to hurt you?"

"Pft." Made Hermione and teased him gently, "Now that my magic's back I doubt you're able to even scrape me with a curse, Riddle."

He peered at her and Hermione contently noted that the insecurity was gone and one of his trademark smirks curled up his mouth.

"Rather presumptuous," he sneered, still relief was audible in his voice. "Are you willing to prove it?"

Hermione's smile widened and without saying anything she held out her arm for him to take. Tom stepped over to her and placed a tender kiss on her lips before he grabbed her arm tightly. Hermione smiled up at him as she swirled on the spot and with a soft crack they disapparated. Miles and miles away from Hogwarts on a wide meadow they snapped back into being. The grassy ground was a little more uneven than Hermione had expected. She lost her footing and toppled over, pulling Tom down with her.

"Shit," Hermione grumbled.

Tom got off of her and offered Hermione a hand. A smirk played around his mouth as he lectured her amused, "You know, girls in this decade normally don't curse like that."

Hermione took his hand and he pulled her up.

"It relieves stress," she informed him flippantly. "Or do you want me to accumulate my pent-up anger until it bursts free, hitting someone nearby?"

"That someone would probably be me, hm?" he inquired lightly.

"Probably."

"Then by all means swear as much as you want."

He threw her another smirk then he pulled his wand and waved it in a casual movement, thus sending a Muggle repellant charm on the area.

Hermione eyed him curiously. "So, how do you want to do this?"

Tom focused on her again. "I just want to test your magic a bit. See if everything is alright. I'm going to throw a few curses at you and you try to defend yourself. Is that alright?"
"I guess so," she replied, again a bit unsure.

"Why, Ms DeCerto, is it possible that you are scared?" Tom jeered as he stepped away from her into a proper duelling distance. Then he purred seductively, "I'm sure even if I tried my worst, you wouldn't succumb so easily."

Hermione smiled at him. "Flattery won't help you here, Tom," she teased back.

Smirking darkly, he just flicked his wand in a casual movement and sent a yellow curse her way. Hermione recognised it as a mild Bedazzlement Charm. Resisting the reflex to pull her wand, she just raised her hand, palm towards the charm. She felt her magic flowing through her arm and hand towards the yellow charm. The charm immediately stopped pelting towards her and now hung suspended in mid-air. Hermione could feel the charm's power fighting against her grip. It tingled and grew hot where it brushed with her own magic. She furrowed her brow. She had never felt this close or connected with her magic. Slowly Hermione closed her hand into a fist. With that movement the Bedazzlement Charm lost in power. She was surprised as she could actually feel a resistance as she fisted her hand. Tom's charm flickered and completely died.

"What did you feel?" Hermione was ripped out of contemplation by Tom's voice.

Her eyes snapped to him. He was still standing a few metres away from her, wand in hand, and now eyed her attentively.

"It's strange," she told him. "My magic felt like an extension of my body. Normally when I used spells I would just feel them drawing on my magic. But now…" she hesitated, not knowing how to phrase the feeling. "It's more physical. I could feel the heat of your charm on my skin as if I had touched it."

A strange, almost triumphant, expression flitted over his face before he schooled his features and said, "I think that's the result of Peverell's binding spells. Your magic is now a lot tighter linked to you than ever before." His grey eyes wandered over her body appreciatively. Then he suggested, "Another try?"

Hermione nodded determined. Tom raised his wand and by the way his dark aura changed around him, she knew he was planning to use a stronger spell now. He brandished his wand in one sharp movement and a dark purple curse detached from its tip. The power radiating from the curse prickedled on her skin and sent ripples through her own magic. Shortly before the curse would have hit her, Hermione swatted at the curse while she channelled her own magic through her hand. Instantly her magic followed her lead and crashed laterally into Tom's curse, diverting it from its original trajectory. The curse impacted with the ground a metre from Hermione. She just wanted to face Tom again as she saw how the purple curse rebounded off the ground like a bouncy ball and now again flew towards her. Without thinking she raised both her arms, spread to her sides. *Scutulatus,* Hermione thought.

She felt reassured as the familiar diamond shaped shield appeared around her. Tom's curse violently crashed into it. Hermione ended her shield and gazed back at Tom. He looked at her curiously, tipping his index finger against his chin.

After a moment he asked, "How did you know the arm movements to erect the shield?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. "I didn't," she admitted contemplatively. "I just went with the flow."

"Extraordinary," he whispered as he continued to eye her. Then he said, "Is it okay if I use some
stronger curses? If anything goes wrong, I'll stop my attacks."

Feeling a bit more confident in her magic, Hermione nodded.

"Feel free to attack me in return," Tom suggested. Then a nasty smirk washed over his face. "If you manage to."

Before Hermione could get in a word, Tom raised his wand and brandished it in a complicated movement. Mist was rising from the ground, quickly getting unnaturally thick. Soon Hermione couldn't see more than a metre around her. An eerie jingle of bells seemed to come from somewhere around her.

Hermione was very tense. She had no idea what Tom had done.

The sound of the bells neared her and suddenly an ethereally beautiful woman stepped out of the mist. Her seraphic face was framed by hair so blond it was almost white. Clothed in nothing but a toga made of white silk, Hermione saw the woman wore delicate silver chains around her wrists and ankles. Small bells were attached to those chains.

As she stared at this beautiful woman Hermione was hit by the sudden urge to run over to her and embrace her tightly. She needed to be close to that flawless being. As if she had read Hermione's thoughts, a small welcoming smile appeared on the woman's face. Hermione took a step towards her. The bells jingled merrily. Hermione took another step.

Her magic then flickered skittishly. Hermione was annoyed by her own magic's antics. She needed to hug that wonderful being. Flowing agitatedly over her skin, her magic felt like ice cold water. Hermione blinked. Dizziness fell from her. She blinked again. The beautiful woman still stood there but now Hermione could see more. A thin layer of magic surrounded the woman but underneath that layer was the creature's true face. It was hideous. Pointed teeth, wrinkled greenish skin and lizardlike eyes, the creature had buried it's claws into the ground, ready to pounce. A step more and the creature would have lunged at its victim.

Hermione smiled then. Her magic was happy to oblige as she sent it into both her hands. Then she crouched down and laid her palms on the grass while she released her magic. Hermione felt it dashing through the earth. Underneath her, there was a web of magic. Tightly woven into the underground that magic had released the mist and had summoned the banshee. Hermione now shredded that structure with her own magic.

A piercing scream and the banshee disappeared. The mist thinned out until the rays of sun broke it completely and Hermione again stood on the meadow, the clear blue sky above her. The smile was still on her face as she saw Tom, standing a few metres from her. He had stumbled a step back as his spell was broken.

His grey eyes flashed at her. "Not bad," he conceded.

His wand again swirled through the air. This time he conjured up a massive wall of fire. The fire spit threateningly as it sped towards Hermione.

Aequor, she thought while waving her hand at the fire.

A wave of water appeared out of nowhere and thundered with force against the fire. The flames helplessly hissed as they died. Using the same motion she had used for the Aequor Charm, Hermione again waved her hand.

Naja.
She grinned madly as there were now countless snakes slipping out of the ground. Their black bodies quickly slithered towards Tom, intend to bite him. Hermione saw Tom throwing her a quizzical glance then his eyes wandered back to the snakes. She had to suppress a giggle as she saw the confident smirk on Tom's face. He opened his mouth and hissed at the snakes. Hermione didn't understand a word but she knew he was talking in Parseltongue.

Whether the snakes heard him or not, they did not listen to him but continued to slither towards him threateningly. A surprised look crossed Tom's face and he again hissed at the cobras. Still, no reaction. This time Hermione laughed out loud. One of the snakes had reached him and quickly wrapped around his ankle. Mouth wide opened, it moved to sink its venomous teeth into Tom's leg.

Still laughing madly, Hermione waved her hand and a bright red curse resulted from the movement. It bristled with power as it rushed towards Tom who was still very much distracted by the snake curled around his leg. Seconds before the curse would crash into him, Tom finally realized the danger he was in. He quickly moved his wand, erecting a greenish shield in front of him. Disappointed Hermione watched her red curse crashing into the shield and disappearing. Meanwhile, the snake had sunk its teeth into Tom's leg. Hermione watched in amusement, how first shock and then realization washed over Tom's face. He scowled at her darkly and waved his wand. The snakes flickered and then vanished. They had never been more than an illusion, no living beings.

Tom flicked his wand and a bright white beam resulted from its tip. The beam of magic rushed towards her and forcefully hit Hermione. She managed to push against it, holding it off. Tom maintained his onslaught, violently pushing against her own magic. Hermione had to muster all her strength to keep him off. A flip of his wand and suddenly the force behind his magic increased a tenfold. Hermione raised her other hand and now used both to press against his attack. Beads of sweat appeared on her brow as she fought against Tom's raw power. She managed to hold him off but only just.

An evil smirk slowly curled up Tom's face, then he again moved his wand. A dark strand of his magic was spiralling around the white beam, rushing towards Hermione. Her eyes widened as she saw it. She had no chance to ward of as she still needed both hands to keep the white beam at bay. The dark strand reached her, collided with her side and hurled her away. Before she would crash painfully into the ground the black strand curled around her so that it was able to cushion her fall. Still, Hermione groaned as she lay on the grass. Then she felt a hand on her arm and she was pulled up into a standing position. She blinked and looked up at Tom's smirking face.

"Seems your magic is alright," he told her airily.

Hermione glared at him through narrowed eyes. It only made him chuckle annoyingly.

"You are a sore loser, aren't you?" he teased.

"No, I'm not," she snapped irately.

"Whatever you say," he soothed her, though the nasty smirk never left his face.

Then he got serious and said, "Still, it really seems like everything is alright with your new magic. I could test the connection between your body and the magic. There was a risk that it would be unstable. But it obviously isn't."

Hermione looked up at him with huge eyes. "So, I'm not going to lose my magic again?" she asked apprehensively.

"No, you won't."
She smiled at him happily. Then she stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," she mumbled, her face buried in his chest.

Tom wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into him. She raised her face at him. His eyes sparked softly at her. Then his mouth was pressed over her own. Hermione sighed as she felt him kissing her and allowed her magic to wrap around him affectionately.

She still had found no answer to her time travel problem but despite her worries and fears she felt protected in Tom's arms.

Avery rushed down towards the ground, wind tugging at his clothes and hair. Shortly before he would crash into the turf he sharply wrenched at his broom's handle. Abruptly he was pulled out of his dive and gracefully floated down the last two metres until his feet touched ground. He jumped off his broom, grabbed its handle and raised his head, looking up at the other players in the sky.

"Get down, men," he yelled up at them. "Training's over."

The Slytherin Quidditch team soared down and landed on the ground, grouped around their captain.

"Good training," Avery told them. "If we continue like this, Hufflepuff won't stand a chance against us."

His team mates mumbled their consent. Avery smirked and said, "We can still win the house cup. We only have to totally crush Hufflepuff and we're set."

With that he ended the training session and they all trailed towards the locker rooms. Soon, only Avery and Lestrange were left, the other members already on their way back to the castle. Avery cast a quick Scourgify at his Quidditch robes then he stored them into his locker. He glanced at Lestrange.

"So, what do you think about the newest development?" he asked lightly.

Lestrange frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

Avery softly closed his locker. He nonchalantly leaned against it and peered at Lestrange. "I'm talking about Riddle's new taste considering girlfriends."

A dark look crossed Lestrange face but he didn't comment. Avery smiled at him unconcerned.

"Well, it was only a matter of time, wasn't it?" he asked loftily. "Not even someone like Riddle can escape his own lowly birth."

Now Lestrange raised his eyebrows. "What are you trying to say?" he whispered sharply.

"Come on," Avery sneered. "You can see it, too, can't you? Riddle's losing his touch."

Lestrange didn't immediately answer. He stored his broom away in his locker and slowly turned around to Avery. "Those are dangerous thoughts you have, Ledo."

Avery shrugged his shoulders casually. "It's only the truth. You have to at least admit it."

"Truth or not, what does it matter? Are you stupid?" Lestrange scoffed. "Or weren't you paying attention when he sliced open your face?"
Avery pushed away from the locker and took a menacing step towards Lestrange.

"He is fucking a Mudblood!" he hissed at the other aggressively.

A furious snarl appeared on Lestrange's face. "Yes, he is." He brutally slammed the door of his locker shut. "Riddle's screwing a Mudblood! Do I think it's disgusting? Yes, very much so. But can I do anything about it? No!"

"It's a fucking disgrace," Avery replied coldly. "Makes me feel dirty just watching it."

Lestrange had balled his hands into tight fists and nodded his head. Then he whispered, his voice shaking with hate, "I would've never thought he'd do that. He always seemed to hate them." His anger filled glare landed on Avery and he sneered, "What's it to you anyway? Aren't you the lovesick puppy for her as well, just like Riddle?"

Avery's jaws clenched in fury then he growled dangerously, "Watch what you are saying."

Not backing down, Lestrange snarled, "Don't play innocent. You've been chasing her skirt since forever." Then he sneered at the other derisively, "More like chasing the dragon, eh? Though you never had her in the first place..."

"Shut up!" Avery snapped furiously. "That slut's a hottie. You really wanna blame me for wanting to bang her? But I sure as hell don't wanna hold hands with her."

"You better not," Lestrange mumbled disgusted.

"No," Avery assured. Then he added in a bitter tone, "And Riddle shouldn't do it either. You have to admit it. The slut's very close to him. If he wants to fuck her, that's completely okay. She's a Muggle whore, it's the only thing she's good for." His eyes grew cold as he hissed, "But Riddle's parading her through the school."

"Even if that's the case, what should we do about it?" Lestrange murmured darkly.

"We could stop him," Avery suggested casually.

Lestrange snickered. "You wanna take on Riddle? Did he cut so deep that he injured your brain or what? You know how powerful he is; you really think you could beat him?"

"No," Avery admitted. Then he added, a dark inflection in his voice, "Not me alone. But if we cooperate, he won't stand a chance."

"You really are insane, aren't you?" Lestrange laughed harshly.

"Just think about it," Avery whispered. "If we team up – maybe Black and Alba, too – how would he stop us? We are four and he's fucking alone. He's not unbeatable."

A contemplative sheen entered Lestrange's eyes but then he slightly shook his head. "Maybe it's just like Malfoy says," he said slowly. "Maybe Riddle wants something from the bitch."

Avery just interjected lightly, "I doubt that."

Lestrange looked at the other. Doubt now clearly visible on his face. He clenched his jaw and then said, "I might not like what he's doing but unless I see prove that he's fucking up, I won't risk anything. I think the others would agree."

A small smile curled up Avery's mouth as he heard it.
Hermione stopped before the portrait of a mermaid with wavy long brown hair. That was the entrance to the prefects' bathroom. Or at least it had been or would be in fifty years' time. Hermione felt a little stressed and a bath had always helped her to relax. She looked over her shoulder to make sure she was indeed alone. It was pretty late already. Nearly ten o'clock and almost curfew. It wasn't very likely that a real prefect was going to use the bathroom this late.

Unfortunately she didn't know the password to open the bathroom. But that trifle matter wouldn't stop her. The mermaid eyed her suspiciously but Hermione just smiled up at her sweetly. She could see the warding magic, surrounding the portrait, as a faint bluish glimmer. Hermione raised a hand and sent her magic against that glimmer. The barrier wasn't very strong and she cancelled it with next to no effort. Without the ward the portrait sprung forward and admitted her in. Hermione recognized the huge marble basin in the middle of the room. It was almost large enough to swim in it. With a wave of her hand she opened the taps and water was pouring into the basin. While the basin slowly filled with the warm water Hermione got rid of her clothes. She hung her robes over a handle on the wall. In a niche she saw a few fluffy white towels. She took one of them and then went over to the basin. Putting the towel down next to the basin, she sunk into the warm water and sighed in pleasure.

She didn't know when she had dozed off but she was awoken by the scratching sound of the entrance being opened. Instantly Hermione was wide awake. Her gaze shot over to the entrance while she hastily tried to spread the foam in front of her so her body was at least a little bit covered.

As she recognized the person standing in the bathroom, she breathed out in relief and said lazily, "Oh, it's only you."

Tom quirked an eyebrow while his grey eyes wandered over her. A smile tucked at his lips as he replied dryly, "It is nice to be appreciated." His eyes raked over her body as he asked curiously, "What are you doing here? This is for Prefects only. You shouldn't be in here."

Hermione pursed her lips at him. "And what are you going to do about it? Give me a detention?"

A nasty smirk adorned his features as he said, "No, I have something else in mind."

Hermione ignored him and inquired sternly, "Don't you have to patrol the corridors? I'm pretty sure you're not done yet."

Tom shrugged carelessly as he strolled over to her.

"Tom!" Hermione scolded him outraged. "You can't neglect your duties."

He didn't seem to listen and now started to undo the buttons of his shirt. Slightly distracted, Hermione still insisted on reprimanding him.

"You have to be an example to the other students."

By now Tom had reached the basin and shrugged his shirt off his body. All of a sudden Hermione felt herself unable to continue her nagging. A smug smile curled his mouth as Tom looked at her flustered face. As he then started to remove his pants Hermione forgot all about his Prefect duties. After having removed his boxers, too, Tom slipped into the warm water and settled against the rim of the basin right beside Hermione. She turned her head and looked up at him. Smirk still in place, Tom draped an arm around her shoulders while he said lightly, continuing their conversation,
"We both know they should have never made me Prefect in the first place."

Hermione scowled up at him. "How irresponsible of them," she said wryly. "Clearly, it's all their fault."

Tom just smiled down at her and tutted, "Don't change the topic, young lady, we still need to discuss your punishment. After all you broke into a private bathroom."

Hermione rolled her eyes but then she indulged him and asked, "What do you have in mind?"

An innocent smile touched his features. She wasn't fooled. She could still see the devious glint in his eyes. Tom pulled her closer against him before he leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed. His hand left her shoulder and softly skimmed down her arm, leaving goosebumps in its way. He again kissed her lightly, this time on the corner of her mouth, then he bent up and looked at her, an eyebrow arched questioningly.

"So, you think this might be better than a detention?" he asked, smirking at her.

Though there was light taunt in his voice, Hermione could still see a hint of true uncertainty in his eyes. Well, she couldn't blame him, considering the way she had treated him the last time they did something more intimate than kiss.

Hermione smiled up at him. "I guess it might be."

As he heard it, the uncertainty completely left his face to be replaced by quite the haughty look. She almost regretted her words but Tom didn't leave her any time for that. He again bent down to her and engaged her in a passionate kiss. Hermione felt his hands wandering over her body and a fluttery feeling burned up in the pit of her stomach. His actions aroused desire to mount up in her. Hermione ended their kiss but proceeded to trace more kisses down Tom's neck, desperate to be as close to him as possible. She knew that demanding need building up in her so she asked between her kisses, "Did you lock the door?"

"Yes," Tom replied. She could practically hear him smirking as he continued, "But I didn't put up any Silencing Spells so you'll have to pull yourself a bit together."

As retaliation Hermione bit down hard on the skin of his neck.

"Ouch," made Tom. "What happened, woman? Did you turn into a vampire?"

Hermione peered up at him, grinning. "You deserved it," she said. There was a suspicious glint in his eyes so she added precautionally, "But you are not allowed to bite me."

As he heard it, Tom chuckled and his hand wandered to her hair. He grabbed a handful and then Hermione gasped softly as he gruffly pulled her head back, exposing her throat.

"How is that any fair?" he mumbled as he bent down to her neck.

Tom placed a kiss on the soft skin of her neck. Her skin was damp and smelled sweetly of the bubble bath she had used. He could feel a small shudder running through her body as his lips touched her and a smirk begged to take shape on his face. He trailed more kisses on her hot skin. She was tense, obviously expecting him to really bite her. He wouldn't do that. Not when he could still vividly remember that horrible bite mark blemishing Hermione's skin. The memory alone was enough to send his magic into a fit of rage. He should have killed the bastard who had dared to molest her.
He placed another kiss on her skin and heard her sigh softly in pleasure. His anger abated quickly as he felt her body shuddering under his ministrations. His mouth wandered back to hers, needing to taste her lips again. Tom pressed his mouth over hers and kissed her. He demandingly sucked at her lower lip until she complied and opened her mouth a little so he could deepen their kiss.

His tongue was playing with her as he pushed her back gently into the pool edge behind her, holding her there. Then Tom lifted her in the weightlessness of the water. He pressed her back tighter against the pool edge and wrapped her slender legs around his hips. He half expected her to shove him away but he was pleased when she instead draped her arms around his neck, holding onto him. His hands moved from her waist up, stroking over her skin until he reached her breasts. He contently noted how her body shivered helplessly and she softly moaned as his fingers caressed her. He couldn't believe how he had managed to go on for weeks and weeks without this. Without her.

He bent down so he could place kisses on her breasts. He licked over her teasingly, nibbling gently, and got more moans from her in response. She ran her hands through his hair, messing it up. Kissing and fondling her skin he wandered up her body until his lips met with hers again.

His hands were roaming freely over her hot skin and Tom could feel all his senses whirl. His body was pressed into hers and every touch burned away any thoughts until only his need remained. Soon the desire pulsed through him so demandingly that he couldn't hold himself back anymore. He needed her now.

His hands wandered to her thighs so he could steady her and felt her legs tightening around him. By now he couldn't control himself anymore. Hot pleasure ripped at him and he pushed into her. He heard her gasp as he thrust into her again, more forcefully, and a soft moan tore from his own mouth. Her hands wandered to his back, grasping him tightly, and he could feel her hot breath against his neck while he continued to move in and out of her.

Soon, Hermione's breaths became more erratic and Tom felt her body grinding against him demandingly. He moaned as he increased speed while trying to hold his own release at bay as long as he could. Pleasure ripped at him, befuddling his mind, urging him on. He felt her body shivering with the same anticipation.

As he again pushed into her, Hermione screamed out loud, his wretched name suddenly sounding nice as it fell from her seductive lips. Her shuddering body against him was enough to push him over the edge as well and Tom allowed the wave of pleasure to finally claim him.

He needed a moment to calm his ragged breathing down. But as he looked down at her a smirk curled up his mouth. Hermione was still breathing hard and her body was limp in his arms.

Only now did Tom really believe that she had come back to him.

That she was his.

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Hermione sat with her back leaned against his chest, feeling wonderfully relaxed, the warm water surrounding her comfortably. Her eyes had already dropped shut as Tom reached for the shampoo bottle which she had deposited on the tiled floor earlier. He put some of the shampoo on his palm before he started to massage it into her hair. Hermione almost purred in pleasure and snuggled closer to him. His fingers ran gently through her hair, caressing her scalp.

"Did I ever tell you that I like your hair?" he whispered to her.
Hermione giggled. "Yes, you did. And I still think you're a liar."

Tom chuckled in response. Then he gingerly rinsed the foam out of her hair. As he was finished Hermione leaned her head back against his chest and sighed. The warm water made her sleepy and she enjoyed the reassuring feeling of Tom's body against her own.

After some time, she felt Tom placing a tender kiss on the scarred skin of her shoulder. His hands skimmed down her arms until they clasped around her wrists. He raised her arms over the water level and moved them so the inner side of her forearms was visible. Tom's head was resting on her shoulder, his cheek brushing against hers, as he looked down at her forearms. Hermione followed his gaze and saw the two huge and ugly scars which marred her skin. She shuddered slightly as she remembered how Tom had hurled the cutting hex at her which had left behind these scars. Tom didn't say anything as he scanned the white lines on her forearms. After a while she heard him sigh softly then he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and pulled her into him.

A few days later, it was already Friday, Tom sat in the library, pouring over a book. His thoughts, though, were elsewhere. His duel with Hermione had been very insightful. It seemed his little ritual had been a success. Manipulating Peverell's binding spells had been a risk, but Tom had managed to bend them in the right direction. The duel had confirmed what he had known all along. The bond between him and Hermione was firmly in place. Magically she was his.

The only thing that slightly worried him was her behaviour around him. He could tell that she was still jumpy around him. Well, it was to be expected. She had only come back to him the other day, of course she needed time to get used to the new situation. He just needed to be on his best behaviour around her.

Tom turned the page in his book absentmindedly as he thought about how the whole debacle of their break-up had started. He winced slightly as he remembered how he had slapped Hermione. It really was a miracle she had forgiven him. For the first time ever he was glad that she was a Gryffindor. A Slytherin would have never forgiven him.

He should have never beaten her. He had completely lost it as she had told him about her heritage and had mocked him about his Muggle father. Tom shuddered in disgust. Though he once again wondered how she knew about his father. There was one explanation for her uncanny knowledge though: She had known him in the future. She knew things Tom had never told anyone. No-one knew that he had killed his own father. Yet, Hermione had somehow gained that information. The only possible way for her to do that would have been in the future.

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He would have been seventy-one. Then again his age didn't matter that much. Not with the plans he had in mind. He had rather neglected them lately, hadn't he? It didn't matter. His plans were still his plans and he didn't intend to bury them. He was almost completely sure that Hermione would disapprove of them. Tom smirked slightly at that thought. In these aspects she was infuriatingly Gryffindor. But once he was sure that she wouldn't run away from him, he would go back to his old plans.

'If you ever let me down, I won't be persuaded again'.

Hermione's foreboding words swirled through his head. Tom hesitated shortly but then he shrugged his shoulders. What he had in mind, it certainly wasn't a let-down. *Greatness never is.*
But back to her knowledge about me. Considering everything, Tom was almost convinced that he had made Hermione's acquaintance in the future. On top of that they had been pretty close. Otherwise he wouldn't have confided in her about his father. Still, something didn't add up. He remembered the first weeks that she had been at Hogwarts. Back then, she had been rather hostile towards him. The first time she had ever seen him she had glared at him with disgust in her eyes. Why would she do that if they had been close in the future? Maybe they had had an argument shortly before she travelled back in time? Yes, that could explain a lot. It would also explain why she had – despite her apparent hate for him – helped him during the Christmas break. She had been angry with him but the first time he had really needed her help she hadn't hesitated. Still, it was odd. Hermione had been very surprised by his treatment at the orphanage. Why would his future self tell her about having killed his father but not about his situation at the orphanage. It didn't make any sense.

Tom was ripped from his thought process as someone plopped down in the chair beside him. Her hair bushier than ever and an irritated expression on her face, Hermione deposited her school bag on the table with a resounding 'thud' as if it were filled with a ton of books. Knowing her, it probably was. Tom pasted a charming smile on his face. Ignoring the irritation she obviously emanated, he drawled,

"Why, if it isn't my favourite Gryffindor."

She just glared at him angrily while she pulled a roll of parchment and her quill out of her bag.

"Whatever got your knickers in a twist?" he asked innocently. Then he leaned down to her and whispered, a devilish glint in his eyes, "It wasn't me, was it?"

Hermione just turned her head and threw him another murder glare then she said curtly, "Tom, I'm trying to do my homework here. So, go away."

He arched an eyebrow. "Well, you sat down beside me."

His gaze wandered over her roll of parchment. Obviously she wanted to write an essay. He scanned the title and had to suppress a snicker.

"Domestic Duties of the Married Woman?"

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line, obviously trying not to snap at him, while she bent over the – still empty – parchment. Tom couldn't hold back anymore and chuckled.

"I didn't know you were trying to refine your 'domestic skills'," he said, his voice laden with taunt. He saw her grip around her quill tighten but he couldn't stop himself to nettle her further. "I am glad you are finally taking this seriously. I was slowly starting to worry about you. I mean, whoever would marry you otherwise?"

Slowly Hermione turned her head and glowered at him darkly, her brown eyes screaming murder. Tom wondered if she would stab him with her quill now.

"You should be more worried about that hex I'm going to hurl at your head," she informed him through gritted teeth.

Tom looked at her with wide eyes, false indignation on his face. "What? You want to hex me? Don't be silly. Your pretty little head would never be able to come up with any spell strong enough." He draped an understanding arm around her. "Don't worry, dear, from now on I'll do all the heavy thinking for the both of us."

The fire blazed in her eyes now stronger than ever as Hermione glared at him. Tom looked back at
her in silent amusement, waiting for her come-back. In the end she didn't throw a curse at him but just bit out,

"The sad thing is that a lot of people really think that way. Your stupid decade is driving me nuts." She glared accusingly at Tom as if it all was his fault.

Her angry gaze wandered back to her essay then she hissed, having finally lost her self-composure, "The evil old hag! Giving us such an essay! It's a waste of my time and just plain stupid. Look at that," she ordered Tom while holding up a book she had pulled out of her bag. "I even have to read this horrible book. 'For reference'. Phff. I really don't know why I even go to that stupid class again. I mean I've left before."

Now genuinely surprised Tom asked lightly, "You left the class? I didn't know that was even possible. Aren't all girls obliged to take Household?"

"I want to see them try forcing me," Hermione said, a disturbing glint in her eyes.

"Okay okay," he said soothingly. "But then why'd you return?"

Hermione looked at him as if the question had affronted her. Then she admitted while looking as if she had bitten into a lemon, "Because I kinda owe it to Legifer. She helped me out of a tight spot."

"Really?" Tom looked at her inquiringly. "What did she do?"

Hermione leaned back in her chair and he noted amused that now there was a rather sleazy smirk on her face. She patted him on the shoulder and said, light scorn wrapped around her words, "Don't overexert your cute little head on my behalf."

Then she rolled the parchment up and said decidedly, "I'll write this later."

Tom merely arched a lazy eyebrow. "Hermione DeCerto procrastinating her homework?"

He languidly skimmed his forefinger over the spine of the book he had been reading in. Then he tried to take her by surprise with his next question,

"Why do you search for the Hallows, Hermione?"

As Hermione heard the question Tom had thrown in so casually, she was hit by a feeling of trepidation. Once again, she had slipped into one of his inquisitions.

Seeing the stubborn expression on her face, Tom pressed on, "First the cloak, and now you have my ring. You are obviously collecting them."

She turned her head away from him, still not saying anything. Maybe he would give up if she ignored him? Of course Tom crushed that stupid hope by asking,

"Why?"

She looked back at him and just shook her head. Tom narrowed his eyes but yet managed to stifle his irritation with her.

"You told me the Elder Wand brought you here," he insisted.

Hermione shuffled nervously as his startlingly grey eyes wandered over her, a demanding glint in them. Then he stated blankly,
"You want to use the Hallows to get back to your time." It was not a question.

Hermione laughed softly, harshly; it sounded wrong even to her own ears. Finally she said in a shaky tone, "I wouldn't really know if it worked anyway." She hesitated but then admitted timidly, "And I lost the cloak."

Tom stared down at her. "What? When?"

Hermione fidgeted with a curl of her hair as she replied, "That was when… um… I was attacked… in the Forbidden Forest."

A shudder ran through her as she remembered that day. She could still almost feel the hands of that man on her skin as he stroked her and touched her demandingly. Tom seemed to sense her anxiety and slid closer to her.

"You had the cloak with you?" he asked incredulously.

"Back then I always had it with me as a precaution," Hermione admitted while rubbing her arms, trying to get rid of that cold feeling. "My magic was down so I had no means to defend myself against." she stopped abruptly before finishing that sentence.

Tom glanced at her. A faint smile tugged at his lips as he continued her sentence, "Against horrible ex-boyfriends who wanted to curse you?"

Hermione just nodded shortly.

"Damn," Tom whispered and ran a comforting hand over her arm. "You know what we should do? We'll get the Elder Wand. Then I'll use it to travel back a few weeks and curse some sense into myself."

She smiled up at him weakly. He contemplated her for a moment and Hermione didn't like that sharp glint in his eyes at all.

"I'm not going to let you go," Tom suddenly hissed venomously. "You said it yourself, you don't want to return to your time. Why do you insist?"

"Because it's dangerous if I stay here. I could change time." Hermione explained patiently.

Tom just shrugged at that as if it wasn't a big deal. "If you stay here, we could go and prevent that war from ever happening," he suggested innocently.

She just raised her eyebrows, too stunned to say anything other than, "What?"

He turned towards her and scanned her intently. Slowly a very nasty smirk tugged at his mouth. "All you have to do is tell me what that war was about and who you fought against," he told her in a suspiciously dark voice. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Tom!" Hermione reprimanded him sharply. "Even if I wanted to do that, you cannot change time. Really, don't you know anything?"

Tom eyed her sceptically before he replied carelessly, "Pft, no time-changing? Whoever said such nonsense?"

She glared at him, her mouth pressed in a thin line. She was bristling with indignation as she lectured him bossily, "Every book that has ever been written about time travel. And believe me, I read them
all."

He just raised an unimpressed eyebrow and inquired dismissively, "Did anyone actually travel back more than five decades?"

Hermione furrowed her brow in annoyance. Still she had to admit, "No, not really."

"Well, there you go. Those people had no idea what they were writing about," Tom replied patronizingly. "I don't see why you shouldn't change time. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

Hermione stared at him, needing a moment to digest his complete and utter disregard of time-travel rules and laws in general.

"That's... that's just irresponsible," she finally told him in a shrill voice.

He looked at her, unruffled by her outrage. Then he shrugged and said calmly, "I doubt the world is going to implode or anything. It wouldn't even be you changing time. It would be me. And as I'm no time-traveller everything should be fine."

That theory was so flawed, Hermione didn't even want to start to point out the problems. As she was momentarily too scandalized to speak Tom continued dryly,

"If you are so insistent on saving your precious time line, how come you are here, interacting with people? That could be considered as an intervention, too."

Now Hermione had to bite her lip as a wave of guilt hit her hard. How much had she mucked up the time line already? Not only had she befriended the future Lord Voldemort, no she had also managed to mess with Gellert Grindelwald and she had toyed around with the Deathly Hallows. If she really managed to find the Hallows and if they would enable her to travel home, would that still be the future she knew? Or completely changed? Maybe for the worse? Did she even want to find out...?

In the future she came from, all her friends were dead. Her parents were dead. And Tom... he was dead, too, wasn't he?

As Hermione didn't say anything but just stared at her hands in her lap, Tom said softly, "It is dangerous for you to travel to your own time. There's a war."

He raised a hand and gently skimmed over her shoulder. Hermione looked up at him as his fingers reached the collar of her blouse. He pushed it away, revealing her skin. His eyes wandered over the maze of white scars on her skin.

"You got hurt," Tom said, barely suppressed fury shaking his voice. "You were fighting in that war and people hurt you."

His frosty grey eyes bored into her own. Then he stated in a soft but dangerous voice, "You are not returning to your time. I won't let you."

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Later that same day, Hermione was walking down to the dungeons on her way to yet another of Slughorn's legendary parties. Irritated she tugged at her cyan coloured blouse and straightened her black skirt. She would give anything to wear a nice pair of denims. After all those months she still couldn't warm up to the forties clothing. At least she didn't have to style her hair into those locks and curls like the other girls did. Hermione ran her fingers through her bushy hair. It simply wasn't possible.
Living in the forties was exhausting and sometimes made her feel like a foreigner in a strange country. It had cost her a lot of explaining to tell Tom that she was perfectly capable of walking alone from Gryffindor tower to Slughorn's office and that he didn't have to pick her up. Luckily Tom was rather easy-going when it came to proper forties behaviour. He didn't mind her odd quirks at all.

Finally Hermione arrived down in the dungeons and now walked over to Slughorn's office, still thinking about Tom. She now knew it had been the right decision to forgive him. He seemed to be very honest with her and regretted how he had treated her. Still there was a jab of guilt twisting up Hermione's stomach. Tom's honesty and his sincere wish to please her, made her feel downright rotten. While he tried his best to make this relationship work, Hermione still lied to him. She had secrets from him, important secrets. She was letting everyone down.

"Urg," made Hermione in frustration.

She turned into the next hallway and found a couple of Slytherin girls walking in her direction. Hermione supressed another frustrated groan as she recognized Yaxley. She knew that the Slytherin hated her. Sure enough, the other girl glared at Hermione, an arrogant expression on her face. Actually all four girls sneered at her.

_Pft, Slytherins_, Hermione thought irately. Intending to completely ignore them she continued her way. Of course, thinking that the Slytherin girls would show her the same favour would have been too much to hope for.

Sure enough, Yaxley sneered nastily, "Oh, look at that. It's the Mudblood."

Hermione's body tensed as she heard the last word and she felt her magic starting to build up in her. Fighting for composure, she hissed,

"Shove it."

"How dare you?" the girl with long shiny black hair bit out. "You should thank us on bended knees that you are even allowed to be at Hogwarts. You and your kind should be separated from real witches and wizards."

Hermione just shook her head. She didn't want to talk with them. Their prejudices made her feel sick. She continued down the corridor not looking at the girls anymore. Yaxley's sharp voice held her back.

"What did you do with Tom, you slut? You fooled him, didn't you?"

Hermione turned around to the girl and glared at her.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he didn't sleep with you," one of the girls agreed, scorn wrapped around her words. "Tom would never lower himself like that. After all, you're filth."

The girls giggled at that and Hermione tried to restrain her now clearly incensed magic.

"So, who was it?" Yaxley inquired evilly. "Who knocked you up?"

Yaxley's eyes wandered to Hermione's stomach, disgust twisting up her face. "Anything mixed with your dirty blood is going to be a deformity. It would be best you got rid of it. We clearly don't need another Mudblood."

Hermione breathed in deeply in an attempt to calm herself down. She didn't want to curse those girls. It was useless. They would never change their disgusting opinions.
"Think whatever you want," Hermione said steely. "Now if you excuse me. I have better things to do than waste time with you."

"How dare you?" Yaxley yelled at her. "You are not even worth licking the dirt off Tom's boots and now you go around and spin lies about him."

Hermione swallowed as she heard it. Her anger burned through her but she didn't fail to notice sadness mixed into it. This sounded horribly like something Tom had once hurled at her.

The Slytherin girls' mean laughter was interrupted by a smooth deep voice, "That is enough."

Hermione turned her head and saw Tom standing in the corridor. His face was a blank mask but a baleful red sheen danced in his grey eyes. Despite the fiendish magic dancing around him, Hermione felt relieved to see him.

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Tom walked in direction of Slughorn's office. It still was a mystery to him why he insisted on going to those parties. The only reason he went to this one was Hermione. He looked forward to spend some time with her. During the last Slug Club she hadn't wanted to talk with him aside from the occasional insult.

Tom just passed a hallway as he heard a voice coming from it.

"So, who was it?" a girl's voice hissed. "Who knocked you up?"

Tom recognized the voice. It belonged to a Slytherin sixth year, Susan Yaxley. Rather annoying girl, Tom decided indifferently. If anything bored him to tears, then it was girls' talk and their gossips. So he wasn't very interested as Yaxley now sneered at someone unknown,

"Anything mixed with your dirty blood is going to be a deformity. It would be best you just got rid of it. We clearly don't need another Mudblood here."

Tom shrugged dismissively as he heard the insult. He couldn't deny that for once Yaxley was right. He was a Prefect so he should probably end this dispute but he didn't want to take points from his own house and he certainly didn't want to help whomever Yaxley insulted here. Tom had almost passed the corridor as he heard another voice. It was icy cold and its familiarity made him stop and whip around.

"Think whatever you want." Hermione's voice replied. "Now if you excuse me. I have better things to do than waste time with you."

Yaxley had insulted Hermione? Instantly Tom felt his magic beginning to furiously pulse through him. He was sent into a violent fit of temper as he again heard Yaxley's voice.

"How dare you?" she yelled at Hermione. "You are not even worth licking the dirt off Tom's boots and now you go around and spin lies about him."

His incensed temper peaked and Tom entered the corridor. He saw Hermione and a group of Slytherin girls standing not far away. There was a defiant look on Hermione's face as she glared at the other girls. Tom had to ball his hands into fists to stop himself from cursing Yaxley into oblivion.

"That is enough." he said, his voice controlled despite the fact that his angry magic screamed at him to get revenge.
All five girls looked at him. Tom ignored the Slytherins and stepped over to Hermione. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against his side. Then he faced the other girls and glared at them. He could even see Yaxley taking a step away from him as she was hit by his angry magic.

"Get away from here," Tom told them, murderous threat twisted into his words.

"B- but, Tom-" Yaxley started to say weakly.

He cut over her, a sharp edge ridging his words, "If I ever catch you again insulting my girlfriend, you won't be getting away so easily."

The terror on Yaxley's face assuaged his fury, but not much. A fearful expression on her face, Yaxley quickly hastened away, followed by her friends. Tom started to lead Hermione away. He should have fetched her from her common room like he had planned, Tom thought, his magic seething inside of him.

As a result of his incensed magic, Hermione's body stiffened. Tom scolded himself. He really needed to calm himself. He knew that Hermione was very good in sensing his magic's agitation, a small side effect of their bond.

He breathed in deeply, loosened his grip on her and asked softly, "Are you alright?"

Hermione looked up at him and replied curtly, "Of course I am. They wouldn't have been able to curse me."

He cast her a small smile. "I know," he assured. "That's not what I meant."

He could catch a flicker of emotion in her eyes before she looked away from him.

"I'm okay," she finally said in a composed tone.

The lack of emotion in her voice told him that she was trying to hide it from him. He should go and curse those brainless slags. How dare they insult his Hermione? It hadn't escaped his notice how Yaxley's words had so inconveniently resembled an insult he himself had once thrown at Hermione.

'You are worth less than the muck sticking under my boots.' Tom remembered his cold words and the sad look in Hermione's eyes told him that she remembered as well.

"I would never insult you like that again," he told her tentatively.

Her hazel eyes hesitantly wandered up to him. He could see the insecurity shining in them. Then she blinked and it was gone. A small smile curled up her mouth.

"I know," was all she said. She snaked an arm around his waist and nestled into his side. "Let's go to the party."

The momentary apprehension left Hermione and she leaned into Tom. She could smell his pleasant scent and wrapped her arm even tighter around him.

They had taken a few steps down the hallway as Tom asked, "So, what was that about you being pregnant?"

Hermione chuckled softly. "Do I hear a touch of panic in your voice?" Her amused eyes flashed at him and she winked. "It's just a stupid rumour. Calm down."

Tom flashed her a smile. "Hm, I don't know," He said contemplatively. "I think it could've been
Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "Really?" she inquired surprised. "Do you actually want children?"

"Sure," Tom replied lightly. As he saw her shocked face he chuckled and added, "Not right now. But maybe sometime later. You don't wanna have children?"

"I guess I never thought about it," Hermione said, still perplexed by the Dark Lord's family plans. "What with that war going on, I wasn't sure I'd survive the next month. It's hard planning your life that way."

A dark look crossed Tom's face as he heard her talking about the war so Hermione quickly changed the topic. She didn't want to talk about the war or the future.

"Anyway, I'm going to kill whoever spread that rumour," she tried to joke. "I'm sure my dorm mates did it."

"Really?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, obviously they saw you in my bed," she told him. "You might remember it because apparently you were naked."

A nasty smirk tugged at his lips as Tom looked down at her. "Yes," he purred. "I do remember. They were quite shocked."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. Then she huffed, "Merlin, yet another reason why I'm so annoyed with this decade. You are all so prude."

Tom raised an indignant eyebrow. "Prude? Me?"

"No, well, not you personally," she relented. Then she fell back into another rant, "It's just all this no touching in public, no holding hands. And Heaven forbid we were seen kissing somewhere."

Tom couldn't help but feel a spark of jealousy flaring up in him. He narrowed his eyes at Hermione and demanded to know, "In your time, did you do stuff like that often?"

Hermione looked up at him flustered, which only intensified the territorial feeling boiling up in him.

"N-no, I didn't," she stuttered and a blush hit her face. "With whom would I have…? No… I had a lot to do with studying…"

Tom was placated by her answer but still pulled her closer against him in a possessive gesture. He didn't like thinking about any other male touching Hermione. It was bad enough that he had to accept that Ron guy, her former fiancé. He wasn't going to put up with any more of that.

Finally they reached the entrance to Slughorn's office and Tom announced, "Okay, here we are."

Then he turned to Hermione and drawled, "This time, try not to get yourself drunk. I'm not going to carry you to bed again."

Hermione huffed which invoked an insidious smirk to take shape on his face.

"Just see to it that you won't get drunk," she sneered at him.

"Pff," made Tom condescendingly. "I never get drunk."
An hour later Hermione had a glass of sparkling wine in her hand and observed the other guests. Tom had drifted off a while ago and now talked with a guy Hermione had never seen before. Probably some ex-student of Slughorn or some kind of celebrity she had never heard of. Once again she felt so out of place. She sighed and took another sip from her glass.

A while ago she had glimpsed Marc Longbottom but he had obviously avoided her. Hermione wondered if he would ever get over the whole thing. She hoped so. It was then that she spotted Lupin standing with his girlfriend Stella Lovegood right beside the buffet table. Relieved, Hermione meandered over to them.

As she reached them she smiled. "Hey."

Lupin and Stella both smiled at her.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Hermione?" Lupin asked her kindly.

Hermione nodded. "Sure."

"So, are you here with Riddle then?" the Gryffindor inquired in a pleasantly not snoopy way.

"Yeah, we arrived together."

Despite being quizzed about her relationship with Tom all day by her dorm mates, she didn't mind talking with Lupin about him. Lupin looked at her with his warm eyes, though Hermione did see a tint of concern in them.

"That means everything is alright between the two of you," he prodded gingerly. "You're still happy with him, aren't you?"

There was a warm feeling of comfort in her chest as Hermione now smiled at Lupin. It was wonderful to know that people cared about her so much that they were watching out for her.

"Yes, I am happy," she told him. "You don't have to worry about me. Tom's been really nice."

"That's good," Lupin said relieved.

Still smiling, Hermione took a sip from her glass of sparkling wine. Lupin watched her and a mischievous grin appeared on his face. She looked at him questioningly and he laughed softly.

Then he asked, light mock in his voice, "Are you allowed to drink wine?"

Hermione knitted her brow in confusion. "What?"

Trying to hide his smile, Lupin replied, "Well, you're in the family way, aren't you? You shouldn't drink alcohol."

Hermione groaned and hid her face in her hands. "So, you've heard that rumour?"


Hermione peered up and found Stella Lovegood smiling serenely at her.

"You know," Stella continued cheerfully, oblivious to Hermione's embarrassment. "Yesterday my whole dorm talked about it for ages and I couldn't get to sleep."
She patted Hermione's back while taking a bite from her strawberry cupcake. Hermione stared at her and then at Lupin who tried to stifle his laughter.

"I don't really see why they're all so scandalised," Stella informed them happily. "Children are always nice. I love them."

"I am not pregnant," Hermione insisted, glaring darkly at Lupin who now laughed out loud.

Stella's face dropped. "You are not?" she asked disappointed. "Oh, dear." She shook her head sadly. "Well, then you need to keep trying."

A blush hit Hermione hard as she heard it which only caused Lupin to laugh even more. Stella stepped closer to him and looped her arm through his while she blinked up at him with her dreamy eyes.

"Maybe we should have children," she announced merrily.

That wiped the smile off Lupin's face and now it was his turn to blush fiercely. Hermione just grinned at him vengefully. She never found out what Lupin had to say to that suggestion, as suddenly Slughorn appeared out of nowhere.

"Oh, Ms DeCerto," he cried in his booming voice. "Just the one I've been searching for. I wanted to introduce you to a dear old student of mine."

Without waiting for a positive reply he grabbed Hermione by her arm and swept her away. She had to watch out or she would have spilled some of her wine.

"Albus always praises how excellent you are in Transfiguration." Slughorn beamed at her fondly. "You just have to meet her."

He pulled Hermione towards a young woman wearing long black robes. She seemed to be not much older than Hermione herself and her dark brown hair was so long it almost reached her waist. Her green eyes flashed smartly at Hermione as Slughorn dragged her before the young woman.

"This is a good friend and former student of mine," Slughorn exclaimed jovially. "May I introduce you to Minerva McGonagall? Minerva, this is Hermione DeCerto."

The brown haired woman smiled at Hermione kindly and said, "Nice to meet you, Hermione."

Hermione, though, wasn't able to voice anything at the moment. She supposed she must look like an idiot as she gaped at her future professor.

"I can already see-" Slughorn said happily, swinging his glass of wine. "-you're going to be good friends."

Then he just disappeared again, obviously having seen someone else he needed to pester.

"Hm." McGonagall grinned as she watched Slughorn sailing away. "He's still as slippery as I remember him."

Hermione couldn't help but giggle at that. "Well, he's head of Slytherin. What did you expect?"

McGonagall laughed heartily and clapped her on her back. Her green eyes wandered over Hermione. "Gryffindor, I take it?"

Hermione just nodded, still grinning.
"Thought so," commented McGonagall, smile in place. "Me as well. Tell me, does the Fat Lady still get visits from her dear old friend Violet?"

"Yeah," Hermione replied amused. "All the time. I didn't know portraits could get drunk."

The other woman nodded jovially then she inquired, "Old Sluggy told me you're actually a transfer?"

"Yes, I started just this year," Hermione replied.

"Wow, must be quite exciting then for you," said McGonagall. "Where'd you come from?"

Normally Hermione didn't like it being questioned about her past but she didn't mind it coming from her former professor.

"France. I was home schooled."

"And the old Slug already took a liking to you?" McGonagall clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

Hermione almost gaped at her again. The stern professor talking about another teacher like that?

"Bah, he's a true Slytherin," McGonagall continued cheerfully. "Can smell a lucrative acquaintance from a mile away."

Hermione chuckled. "Yep. Like all the other snakes."

"You already know how they tick, don't you?" McGonagall asked in amusement.

Hermione sighed. "Seeing as my boyfriend is one of them, it's merely a survival technique."


Finally Hermione was feeling a bit uneasy. She wasn't again messing around with the time line, was she? Talking with her future professor… Tom would have a field day.

"Er… Tom Riddle," she replied meekly.


Hermione creased her brow. "Slytherin Prince?"

Wiping tears of laugh from her eyes, McGonagall said, "He was actually three years below me. Still, I've heard stories about him." Then she again giggled. "So, you're together with His Majesty, the evil heartless Lord of Slytherin?"

Hermione stared at the still giggling woman for a moment. 'His Majesty'? Rather fitting, isn't it? She pictured Tom with a shiny tiara in his hair. With that, she couldn't hold back anymore and broke down in laughter herself.

Their moment of merriment was rudely interrupted by a sharp voice. That voice was laced with anger as it inquired harshly, "What are you doing here?"

Hermione turned her head and was more than appalled to find Legifer standing right beside her. The professor wore a rather unhappy expression on her stern features. Her hair was twisted into a
flawless bun and her clothes were as usual squeaky clean. Hermione knitted her brow at the professor. It really wasn't any of her business what Hermione did, was it? After all, she was a guest here. She just opened her mouth to say so but McGonagall beat her to it.

"I actually got an invitation, mother," she snapped rather aggressively.

Hermione stared at McGonagall, then at Legifer and finally at her glass of wine. That surely was bad wine, wasn't it? Making her imagine things.

"You got an invitation from Professor Slughorn?" Legifer inquired disbelievingly.

"Yes, I did!" snapped McGonagall. "It might surprise you but some people appreciate my work."

"Your work?" Legifer threw back. "It's a waste of time, that's what it is."

McGonagall bristled at that while Hermione incredulously watched this verbal sparring match. It sounded like it wasn't the first they ever had.

"My studies a NOT a waste of time!" McGonagall almost screamed.

Legifer looked at her disdainfully. "Keep your voice down," she hissed. "We don't need to have the whole world know how hot-headed you are. When are you going to realize that your behaviour is not becoming of a woman?"

"Don't start it," McGonagall blustered.

"But you have to understand it," Legifer retorted sharply. "Look at Ms DeCerto for example." Here she gestured at a very shocked Hermione. "She's just as stubborn as you but at least she's made an effort to find herself a man."

Hermione glared at her teacher indignantly. She didn't appreciate it to be used as an argument against McGonagall. McGonagall just wrinkled her nose and snubbed caustically,

"That's stupid. And before you ask: No, I haven't found a husband yet. And double no, I sure as hell don't want you to find one for me. I'm sure this is shocking you to the core but finding a man isn't very high up on my priority list at the moment."

She breathed in deeply, obviously to calm herself down then she said icily, "I think that was all." A warm smile made it on her face as she turned to Hermione and said, "It was nice meeting you, Hermione."

Then she threw her mother one last dark glare before she turned around and stalked away. Legifer just stood there in indignation, her infuriated gaze following her daughter. Hermione felt rather awkward and took a sip from her glass.

"I can't believe it," Legifer finally exclaimed irately. "That girl is going to be the death of me. Even rejecting my husband's family name. What a disgrace."

She looked down at Hermione. Hermione stiffened as the professor's sharp gaze hit her. Legifer glared furiously at her as if all had been her fault.

"Er…" Hermione mumbled awkwardly. "Hm… nice… nice robe you are wearing… it's so black and… and clean…"

Her voice died down as Legifer's eyes narrowed to slits.
"Er… I have to go," Hermione piped before she almost ran away from the angry woman.

Seeing Tom not far away, she quickly scurried over to him and hid behind him so Legifer wouldn't think about following her. Tom watched her amused.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he remarked airily.

"Well, I kinda did," Hermione replied, still feeling shaky.

He raised an inquiring eyebrow so she said, "See that girl over there?" She gestured at McGonagall. "She's actually my-"

Before she would divulge any more of the future she stopped talking. Tom eyed the girl in question. Then he looked back down at Hermione.

"She's your what? Secret lover?"

She just threw him a nasty glare.

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Hermione needed some time to get over her initial shock. Legifer and McGonagall were related? She shook her head and leaned back in her chair. The party was still in full swing but Hermione sat a little secluded at a table.

"Hermione?"

Longbottom was standing right beside her with two glasses of wine in his hands. He offered her one as he said,

"Can we speak?"

"S- sure." Hermione smiled up at him hesitantly.

"Longbottom sat down beside her and fiddled nervously with his glass. As he didn't want to start, she asked gingerly, "So, what do you want to talk about?"

He let go of the glass and raised his blue eyes at her. An embarrassed grin tugged at his mouth as he mumbled, "I… I wanted to apologize."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "Apologize? What for?"

He leaned a bit towards her and said in a soft voice, "For my behaviour."

Hermione just blinked at him.

"Well, I've behaved like a jealous ass, haven't I?" Longbottom continued,

There was a faint blush tinting his cheeks and Hermione smiled up at him.

"I'm really sorry for that," he said awkwardly. "I still think Riddle's not good enough for you but I promise I'll try to accept your relationship."

The smile on her face widened, then she reached out for him and put a hand on his arm.

"Thank you," Hermione said relieved. "It means a lot. I know how much you hate Tom." The smile
turned into a mischievous grin as she added, "I'm sure he'll appreciate your offer to befriend him."

"I sure as hell don't wanna be his friend," Longbottom groaned indignantly. "Don't tell the jerk anything I said here."

Hermione giggled. "Don't worry. I won't. He would surely try to take advantage of the situation."

Longbottom glared darkly at the glass of wine in front of him. "There's no doubt why he's been sorted into Slytherin, is there?"

"Not so much," Hermione replied amused.

His gaze wandered back to her and he said tentatively, "Can you explain to me why in Merlin's name you want Riddle to be your boyfriend? Seriously, he's an evil freak."

She chuckled at that which made him muster her sullenly. Still smiling Hermione patted him on the shoulder.

"I know how Tom is," she told him. "And I certainly know what he's capable of."

"But then why are you together with him?" the blond asked in desperation.

Hermione leaned back in her chair and stared at the other pensively. After a while she said seriously, "I know there's a very dark side in Tom. He can be evil and cruel." As she saw the concern on Longbottom's face she added quickly, "Don't worry. He won't be evil and cruel to me. Or I'll hex his sorry ass."

He didn't seem to be assuaged by that. "That's just it. Why are you with him when you know he's evil? You're nothing like him."

Hermione smiled at him sadly. "I don't think we are so different at all."

Longbottom stared at her with wide eyes. Then he shook his head and said heatedly, "No, you definitely are. You are kind and good and not at all like Riddle."

Hermione sighed softly as she thought back at all the things she had done in the war. In the end she hadn't even hesitated to use Dark Magic. How was she any better than Voldemort? She had used the Killing Curse on her best friend. Her eyes wandered up at Longbottom and found him scanning her worried.

"Hermione, what's wro-"

"I did some horrible things," she admitted softly. "Before I arrived here."

The Gryffindor eyed her for a moment. Hermione averted her eyes, not able to stand that inquiring look on his face. She was sure he would now want to know what exactly she had done. Longbottom surprised her, though, as he gently asked,

"Why did you do it?"

Still not looking at him, Hermione replied meekly, "I... I had no other choice left."

Her eyes darted back at him as she felt a hand on her shoulder. Longbottom smiled at her.

"See? That's the difference. Even if you did the same stuff Riddle does – which I doubt – you still are nothing like him. Because you would have a different motivation."
Hermione stared up at him with huge eyes. Slowly a smile took form on her face. Then she said softly, "You know, Tom's not as bad as you make him out to be."

Longbottom just raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Hermione giggled softly.

"He can be really nice if he wants to be," she insisted. The scepticism on Longbottom's face got even worse. "I wouldn't be with him otherwise."

Longbottom opened his mouth to, no doubt, disagree whole-heartedly. Then he seemed to change his mind and raised his hands as if in surrender.

"Okay," he said. "I get it. I don't really see where you're coming from but I'll just take your word for it."

"Thank you," Hermione replied cheerfully. She reached for her glass of wine and sipped from it.

"But… er…" Longbottom mumbled. Hermione looked at him expectantly. "But if the snake ever hurts you again, is it okay if I curse him?"

"He won't."

He shrugged his shoulders and tried to bargain, "Yeah well, but what if?"

An amused smile played around her mouth as she scanned Longbottom. Then she said, "If he ever hurts me again – which he won't – I'll curse him myself." Longbottom looked at her with pleading puppy-dog eyes, so Hermione added, "But you have my permission to curse whatever there's left of him."

He grinned, raised his glass to her and then downed it in one go. Without them having noticed, their subject of discussion had wandered over to their table and now sat down beside Hermione. A sour look on his face, Tom glared at Longbottom while he grabbed Hermione's hand possessively. Disgust was wrinkling up the Gryffindor's nose as he stared back at the Slytherin. Hermione just sighed.

"Why did you suddenly run off?" Tom asked her reproachfully while still glaring at Longbottom.

"Got things to do, Tom," Hermione replied, unmoved by his bad mood.

His grey eyes flashed to her, anger glistening in them, and he said in a tightly controlled voice, "Things to do? With Gryffindor-boy here?"

"Jealous, Riddle?" Longbottom asked innocently.

"Of you?" Tom scanned the other disdainfully. "Why would I lower myself so much?"

"Tom!" Hermione groused. "You're not really helping your case here."

He turned to her and arched an inquiring eyebrow. "My case?"

"Yes," she said, looking up at him with huge innocent eyes. "We were discussing whether all Slytherins are evil gits. " She patted his arm while she continued, false pity tinting her voice, "Unfortunately, you are proving Marc's point."

Tom started to scowl at her. Hermione ignored his glare and laughed lightly.
The next day, a Saturday, was almost over and Hermione walked down a semi-dark corridor. Merlin, she hadn't even noticed how long she had been in the library. She checked her watch. Quarter to ten already? How had that happened? Only a quarter of an hour until curfew. Whatever would happen if Tom caught her out of bed out of hours? she wondered playfully. He would have to punish her again. Hermione giggled as that thought touched her mind.

The castle was deserted, the other students were already in their common rooms and Hermione turned into another empty corridor. If she just walked down this corridor and then turned left into the next, she would find the portrait of the pig-headed knight. Right behind that portrait was a hidden passageway which would save her five minutes to the Gryffindor common room.

Strange how she hadn't used this way in quite some time.

In a good mood, Hermione strolled down the corridor. She had almost reached the end of the corridor as she felt herself unable to move. Her legs just stopped as if they had a life of their own and she stood glued to the ground. As if pulled there by magic, Hermione's gaze was stuck to the corner where this corridor met with the next. Her breathing accelerated and panic inexplicably swelled up in her. She still stared at that unremarkable corner but suddenly the sight was overlapped with other pictures. Her heart was pounding away in her chest, only intensifying that feeling of panic.

Yes, she knew this very corridor only too well. She remembered the last time she had been here. Back then, the same panic had been pulsing through her. She had been so scared she had been barely able to breathe. Her hand had desperately clenched around a silvery object as if her life depended on it.

It had depended on it.

Inch by inch she had crept towards the corner. The small object in her hand had been the only feeble protection she got. As she had reached the corner, she had raised her hand and held the shiny object in front of her. It was a mirror. Her hand had been shaking violently as she turned the mirror so she would be able to see into the next corridor. Her heart had stopped beating as she had glimpsed something in the corridor. A dark mass was moving towards her. Then there had been two incredibly yellow eyes. After that, nothing…

Hermione blinked a few times, trying to tear herself away from the memory. Raising a shaky hand, she ran it over her face. She was being hysterical here. Still, her gaze was stuck to that damned corner. She closed her eyes and tried to suppress that strange feeling of danger. She wasn't in any danger right now. It was perfectly safe. So why was her heart beating almost painfully fast?

She reopened her eyes and again looked over to the corner. She could almost see a prone body lying there, unmoving and petrified. Hermione gulped nervously. To this day she wondered why the snake hadn't just devoured her.

That very day back in her second year had been the first time she had been confronted with the darkness. After that, the years had passed and every step she took had taken her deeper into the darkness – until it had manage to devour her after all.

More memories pelted down on her. She couldn't stop it and she couldn't ignore it either as the pictures played out in front of her. First there were happy memories of her parents or her friends. It was so nice, until all went downhill. It seemed an impenetrable darkness wrapped around everything. She couldn't see any details as the memories fluttered by. But she could hear the screams around her, the crashes of incoming curses, cries, pleas, noises of people fighting… of people dying.

Hermione tried to take in deep breaths of air to calm herself down but somehow she was unable to
get any air into her lungs. Her chest constricted painfully and she staggered to the wall. She leaned against it for support. Her head started to hurt piercingly. Tears sprang to her eyes as the headache intensified. She doubled over in pain and clutched her chest. She couldn't do anything to stop this. A rush of anger hit her in face of her own helplessness. Her body was betraying her. This was ridiculous. But whatever she did, she couldn't pull herself together. Her heart raced away in her chest, cold sweat built on her forehead and her head almost burst with pain.

Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder and Hermione gasped in surprise. A well-known voice asked cautiously, "Hermione?"

She straightened up and leaned with her back against the wall. As she opened her eyes she found Tom standing in front of her, a worried expression on his face.

"What happened?" he inquired.

"N- nothing," she replied, her voice hoarse and breathless.

"Doesn't look like nothing," he said sternly, though his voice was laden with concern.

"No, really," Hermione insisted shakily. She tried a weak and completely unconvincing smile. "It's nothing."

He frowned down at her. Clearly he didn't believe a word she had said. He didn't comment on it, though.

"Okay," he said soothingly. "Come here."

He gently grabbed her forearm and pulled her over to him. Holding her securely, he started to lead her down the corridor. As they reached the corner, Hermione stopped walking. Her panic had dropped into the background, distracted by Tom's sudden appearance, but now it crashed down on her again. Her breathing accelerated and she frantically tried to stop herself from hyperventilating. Her body trembled and she was once again powerless to control it.

"Calm down." Her heart was beating so loudly she could barely hear Tom.

An arm was draped around her shoulders and she felt herself being pulled into another body. It felt warm and familiar. Trying to fight the inexplicable fear, she took in breaths of air.

"Can we go another way?" she finally managed to whisper.

Tom didn't ask anything but just turned around and led her down the corridor where she had come from. As she walked away from that corner, she felt the panic slowly releasing her. How pathetic was that? Hermione was angry with herself. How could she be frightened by a stupid dark corridor?

She still tried to get her erratic breathing back under control as Tom pulled her into a small room. It was nice and cozy and he pushed her down on a soft couch. A wave of his wand and a bottle of butterbeer appeared on the side table. He offered it to her. Hermione gratefully accepted it and drank from it.

Tom sat down on the sofa. Hermione quickly skidded over to him and nestled to his side. She felt instantly better as he wrapped an arm around her. They sat like this for a while, neither one of them saying anything. Hermione enjoyed his nearness. Tom's warm body beside her was very reassuring and managed to calm her down.

It was Tom who broke the silence first. "You never told me," he said softly. "Is 'Hermione DeCerto'
actually your real name?"

Hermione smiled, glad that he didn't question her strange behaviour.

"No," she whispered.

He looked down at her. "What is your name then?"

She giggled softly and sat up on the sofa. Then she raised her hand and poked her index finger against his nose. "Not going to tell you."

Tom rolled his eyes. Then he eyed her suspiciously, "Do you even come from France?"

Now feeling a bit nervous under his scrutiny Hermione whispered, "Er… no, not really."

As she didn't explain any further he frowned at her before he asked, "Then where do you come from?"

"Um… England?" her voice was now nearly inaudible.

"What?" he exclaimed incredulously. "You are British?" As she nodded he continued, "Wait. Where did you go to school then? Don't tell me it was Hogwarts."

"You see," Hermione hesitantly replied. "Well… That's kinda true."

Tom arched one eyebrow at her. "You went to Hogwarts? In the future?" he asked. A smirk formed on his face and he taunted, "That explains why you are so good at school. You already did it before."

Hermione glared at him and crossed her arms before her chest before she huffed, "To inform you I have always been top of my year."

"Yeah, sure," he crooned sarcastically. "That's what you say now."

"Pft!" she hissed at him as she saw amusement mischievously glinting in his eyes. "It's true. And I've been a prefect in my fifth and sixth year."

"Oh, a prefect?" he scoffed at her. "Next you tell me you've been made Head Girl in you seventh year."

Hermione's stomach knotted as she heard him talking about her seventh year. Her previous panic returned and she quickly averted her eyes from him.

"Hermione?" Tom asked softly, all scorn had left his voice.

He had obviously noticed that something was wrong. Hermione berated herself for not concealing her emotions better. She didn't want to speak about her seventh year. She hadn't even been at Hogwarts back then. Hermione started as she could suddenly feel a hand on her left forearm. She looked up and found Tom staring at her in concern.

"Is something wrong?" he inquired gently. "Did something happen in your seventh year?"

"I only finished my sixth year at Hogwarts," Hermione answered sadly.

Tom furrowed his brow, "Why? What happened?"
Hermione glanced at him, she felt panicky. Why did she leave Hogwarts after her sixth year? Well, there was only one answer. But Hermione didn't know if she was ready to give it. Her breathing had quickened and she started to feel slightly sick. Tom was still staring at her expectantly. Hermione didn't want to tell Tom any more. They were dangerously close to the truth already. Guilt again ate away from her. If she wanted to stay with Tom didn't she have to be truthful? But what about the time line?

"Hermione?" Tom asked her concerned. "What happened after your sixth year?"

Hermione looked away from him and down on her hands lying on her lap. After her sixth year? Dumbledore had just died. And then? The country had been thrown into war. She had fought and fought and fought…

"I… we had to..." Hermione whispered in a very shaky voice as she looked at Tom with huge eyes. Then she broke off and again looked down as she could feel tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

She closed her eyes, trying to suppress the tears. But now she saw those terrible images again.

She saw Neville. He was lying in her arms and Hermione could feel his blood flowing down her hands and dripping on the floor. He was dying and there was nothing she could do to help him.

The image changed and Hermione was again holding someone. Again she could feel the blood flowing down her hands. But this time it was Luna.

Hermione could feel the tears streaming down her face. She couldn't stop them.

She could see Ron. His smile. His red hair. His mischievous smirk. His brown eyes sparkling with love whenever they looked at her. And then… he was gone.

There was a green light leaving Hermione's wand. It crashed into Harry's chest. Hermione watched him falling down.

Strong arms embraced her. Hermione opened her eyes and found Tom looking down at her. She sobbed as she looked into his soft grey eyes. Then she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest.

Tom looked down at Hermione. There it was again, the desperation and sorrow that he could sometimes see lurking behind her brown eyes. As she now stared up at him with her tear-stained face her pain was screaming at him. What had happened to break her so? Hermione clung to him and cried into his chest. She was trembling heavily in his arms. He pressed her tighter against him. He wanted to protect her. His magic began to swirl around him viciously. Whatever had hurt her so, he wanted to destroy it, to annihilate it.

Hermione cried as she felt Tom's arms reassuringly around her. He was holding her so gently. After some time her tears ran dry. Slowly she looked up at him. Tom was smiling at her and Hermione could see the concern shining through his eyes. But she could also see the furious, dark magic raging around him.

This was her conflict.

Her guilt was still there. She was a liar. She was keeping the truth from Tom. Yet, was he trustworthy enough to handle the truth? Hermione was incredibly scared as she looked up at him. She needed to make a decision. Now.

She unwrapped her arms from Tom and slid a little bit away from him. Her voice was soft and shaky
as she said, "I entered the magical world when I was eleven years old. It was wonderful... like in a fairy tale. Just perfect."

Hermione glanced at Tom. He was watching her intently.

"But I quickly noticed that there was something wrong. It was like a dark cloud hanging over this perfect world. No-one spoke about it but everyone knew that it was there. Back then I was too young to understand what it was but I could see the fear. Everyone was afraid of it. So scared in fact that they chose to simply ignore it. They lived their lives hoping that they would never be forced to face their fear."

"So, I grew up during a time of peace. But it was a borrowed time, a stolen time, because that peace was treacherous. It was stained by this abysmal fear that seeped through everything."

Hermione paused. Tom was still looking at her with an expression of concern and curiosity on his face. She continued in the same soft voice,

"As I grew older I slowly came to understand what it was everyone was so afraid of. But it still remained to be something abstract. Something that could make chills darting down your spine but it never really affected your life. So, everyone knew about the menace threatening their lives but no-one tried to stop it. They were still happy to just ignore it."

"Then, after my fourth year at Hogwarts, the menace chose to step out of the shadows. And it suddenly had a face and became very real."

Hermione breathed in deeply.

"It was a dark wizard," she continued while she stared into Tom's eyes. "He was so very powerful. His knowledge of Dark Magic was unrivalled. He had delved so deep into that branch of magic, I think in the end he was barely human anymore. He was a cruel man who didn't know the meaning of mercy. A creature driven only by his hate and his wrath."

Hermione stopped. The memories were again rising up in her. Memories of burning red eyes that could smother everything in despair.

"By the end of my sixth year that wizard was finally ready. He had set up an army of dark wizards and creatures around himself that would follow his every command. And then... he threw the country into a ruthless war."

Hermione had to stop. She felt a lump in her throat.

"And you had to fight in that war?" Tom asked her in a gentle tone.

Hermione's breathing was ragged again. She looked at Tom with wet eyes and just nodded. Tom could see that she was trying to fight back the tears now. So, she really had to fight in a war. Hermione had fought in the war against this dark wizard. It had been that war that had hurt her so much.

Tom balled his hands into tight fists as he imagined Hermione trying to fight off those dark wizards. Those wizards had cursed her and hurt her. He could almost see how they threw curses at her while she was unable to ward all of them off. With shock Tom remembered that Hermione had once told him how she had been hit with the Cruciatus curse before she had arrived here. So, those dark wizards had even tortured her.

Tom scanned her face. She was wiping the tears away that had fallen from her eyes. He could again
see this despondent look on Hermione's face. He had seen it many times on her pretty face. He now knew that she wore it whenever she thought about that war. There was sorrow in her eyes, grief and despair. But above all, there was fear. Hermione must have been so afraid of those dark wizards. And she still was, Tom realized as he saw that fear in her eyes, even now.

"Who was that dark wizard?" Tom asked her darkly. He needed to know who was responsible for Hermione's pain.

He watched how her head shot up and she stared at him with wide eyes. There was again this unbearable fear in her eyes as she scanned him. It almost looked like Hermione was afraid of him.

"Who was the leader of those dark wizards? What is his name?" Tom asked her again.

He furrowed his brow as he now saw Hermione starting to tremble slightly. He reached out for her to try to calm her down but he stopped his movement as he saw her tense. Her eyes wandered from his still extended hand back to his face. There was now panic on her face. It really seemed as if she was scared of him.

"For a long time I was too afraid to speak his name," Hermione whispered timidly while she still looked at Tom in fear.

Tom gazed back at her and wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her. She seemed so scared now. He wanted to protect her but he didn't dare to move because of that inexplicable fear Hermione seemed to have of him right now.

Then she continued in her shaky voice, "That dark wizard called himself Lord Voldemort."

Tom stopped breathing and stared at Hermione, eyes wide. His mind was reeling.
"Who was the leader of those dark wizards? What is his name?" Tom asked her.

"For a long time I was too afraid to speak his name," Hermione whispered timidly while she still looked at Tom in fear. Then she continued in her shaky voice,

"That dark wizard called himself Lord Voldemort."

"What?" Tom asked in a weak voice.

He must have misunderstood her. She did not say that name. It couldn't be. Tom stared at Hermione with wide eyes but she had averted her gaze from him and looked down at her hands lying in her lap.

"Hermione? Are you trying to say that it was me? I am that Dark Wizard?" Tom asked her faintly. "I hurt you so much?"

Hermione never looked up at him but she answered his question anyway.

"Yes." Her voice was very shaky.

Tom felt his stomach churn as he heard her answer. He was the one? It was him who had hurt Hermione? Always had he been wondering what had happened to her, what had broken her. Now there was the answer: He had done it. He had hurt Hermione and he had killed everyone she loved. If there was grief and sorrow in her eyes, then that was because of him. If she had nightmares that made her cry, then that was his fault. All those scars carved in her body, he had done it.

Everything was his fault. Everything.

He had broken her.

"I incited a war?" Tom whispered as his eyes wandered over the girl beside him. "And you... you fought against me? You and your friends. You were against me?"

She hesitated shortly but then admitted, "Yes."

Tom didn't know what to make of this. "We were on different sides..."

Abruptly he stood up from the couch and completely missed how Hermione flinched at his unexpected movement. He started to pace in front of the couch. Hermione sat on the couch, her shoulders slumped and her head bent so that her curly hair obscured her face. Numb shock tightly grasped Tom and he was unable to think straight. He continued his erratic pacing as his thoughts went haywire.

_Lord Voldemort._ It had been Voldemort. He had hurt Hermione. But Tom didn't want her to hurt. No, he wanted to protect her.

He ran a shaky hand through his black hair. He never wanted to hurt Hermione... …nevertheless, Tom _was_ Lord Voldemort.

He stopped his pacing and stared at the girl on the couch while his thoughts continued to rush
through his mind. Slowly, they grew darker and colder as his initial shock diminished.

Didn't Lord Voldemort have great plans? He wanted to be powerful. He didn't care about other people. Everything he had ever achieved, he had taken it by himself. If it had taught him anything, then that he didn't need anyone. He, Lord Voldemort, was superior to everyone else. He didn't need help nor any affections.

But had he really started a war?

He could see himself raising above everyone else, turning into something powerful. A dark shadow that would burn down everything. He knew that he would enjoy it. The mere thought made anticipation tingle all over him. He yearned to step out in the open. Forever he had played a role. The others were worth nothing and yet he was forced to live in hiding amongst them. Voldemort wanted to punish them. He wanted to see the terror in their eyes when they finally recognized him for what he was. He would stamp those pitiful creatures under his heels and he would love every second of it.

Yes, Voldemort had great plans.

Voldemort's, now slightly red, eyes fell on Hermione. She didn't look at him. It didn't matter. He knew her confession made sense. He had always known that he would shed his old self. Tom Riddle was nothing but a vessel. He was empty with no meaning. Lord Voldemort was the essence. It was killing him to live in hiding.

Voldemort could feel a detached coldness seeping through his mind and a twisted smirk appeared on his face. That smirk, though, dropped from him as he stared at Hermione. Never had he felt remorse. Deep down he knew that he couldn't. What had she done? Fought against him? A murderous glimmer flamed up in his blood-red eyes.

"You tried to stop me," he stated, his voice cold and devoid of emotion. "You wanted to take me down."

She had tried to thwart his plans. Fighting on the other side, she was an… enemy?

Reluctantly, Hermione raised her head and looked up at him. Shock appeared on her face while she stared into his eyes. Shock and fear. He could see her hands shaking and noticed how she shied away from him. Voldemort observed her and didn't know what she was.

What did that witch mean?

Since he knew her, she had always shifted and transformed in his mind. Hermione had no stable form. She was something he hated and something he loved. Something he despised and admired. Hermione was pathetically weak and invincible. Hermione toyed with him but she herself was so unstable he could never get a grip on her.

They had always had an odd relationship.

Hermione still looked at him as if being mesmerised. It was a hurt gaze full of fear. As he eyed her, Voldemort could feel something stir inside of him. First it was unnoticeable but quickly it grew. A powerful feeling ripped at him demandingly.

It was rage.

Its fury quickly infected his magic so that it thundered around him viciously. Hermione's eyes widened fearfully as she felt his magic. It only made his anger increase even more.
Why was she here?

Shapeless, formless that she was, what did she want from him?

She had such an impact on him and now she was seemingly scared of him?

He knew what she was. A spy. A soldier. An assassin. A liar!

"What do you want?"

He saw how she cringed at his sharp tone. Voldemort hadn't even realized he had spoken out loud.

"I… I… nothing." Her pathetic reply was laced by fear.

Voldemort heard the sorrow and pain leaking through her words – through her very being – but he did not know how to interpret it anymore, neither did he care. His fury was the only thing he trusted right now. Familiar. It had always been his guide. It kept his mind from falling apart.

"Why are you here?" His question was a hiss, cruelly lacerating the silence.

The witch stared at him wide-eyed, injured and broken. Her muteness was like oil to the fire burning in him.

"Since you arrived here, you've been lying to me, haven't you?" Voldemort's voice was twisted into a cold threat.

Still, the girl was mute but she shook her head. Strands of his magic reached out for her. She jerked as his magic ripped at her relentlessly and Voldemort felt nothing. Only fury.

"You arrived here, and you already knew everything about me," he threw at her in his dangerous voice. "From the start you deceived me!"

He didn't expect a reaction. Lord Voldemort was her enemy. Her nemesis. She had gone to war against him. How had she phrased it? 'I wanted to stop the evil.' He was the evil. She still fought. Her war had never ended; she had only relocated the battlefield. Fury overwhelmed him completely. Voldemort could feel how his magic curled tightly around his mind, a cold presence. It was uncontrollable in its fury. He didn't want to hold it back anyway.

"What have you been doing all this time? Where you trying to find a way to bring me down?" he inquired menacingly. "You are scheming my death. You and your useless little friends from the future couldn't stop me, so you travelled back in time to attack me when I am unsuspecting."

He had been blind to not see it. Her plan was simple and effective.

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Hermione felt fear constricting her throat as she stared at Tom's eyes. They were crimson-red, glowing threateningly at her. His magic left him in dark waves. It filled up the whole room and tore at her painfully. She was frozen in place by his fury. If she had ever seen him angry, then it was now. He had never resembled Voldemort more than at this moment. It made terror invade her.

"Since you arrived here, you've been lying to me, haven't you?" he said, the hate in his voice making her tremble.

The rage burning in his eyes made it impossible for her to speak but she shook her head.
"You arrived here, and you already knew everything about me." His inflection was devoid of any warmth. There was only malice. "From the start you deceived me!"

Again she was unable to say anything. His magic, though, didn't need a reply anyway. It sliced over her skin and she was surprised that it didn't leave behind bleeding cuts. Why had she told him? She had been so sure he would understand. That he wouldn't try to hurt her. Tom had promised he would never harm her again. Yet, here I am, Hermione thought as she stared into those blood-red orbs. If he took his promise back, what had she left?

Only Lord Voldemort.

"What have you been doing all this time? Where you trying to find a way to bring me down?" Tom hissed, venom dripping accusingly from his words. "You are scheming my death. You and your useless little friends from the future couldn't stop me, so you travelled back in time to attack me when I am unsuspecting."

Over and over again she had forgiven him. Trusted him. But Tom had never given anything in return. He was still evil to the core. Merciless. Hermione felt her fear die away. It was replaced by anger.

'Useless little friends'?

She sprang up from the couch, took a step towards Tom and glared at him furiously.

"Watch what you are saying," she warned him sharply.

Unimpressed, he sneered at her. "That's the very reason you travelled back in time, isn't it? You are here to stop me, to kill me."

"That's not true," Hermione insisted sharply, incredulous that he would even think that. "You know it was an accident that I ended up here."

"That's what you told me," Tom yelled so aggressively it made her jump. "But everything you ever say is a lie. So who knows why the fuck you are here."

"I didn't lie!" Hermione yelled back.

"I don't even know your name!" he shot at her. "In fact I don't know anything about you. Since we met you've fed me nothing but lies."

"At least I don't kill people just because I don't like them!" she found herself hissing accusingly.

Tom took a threatening step towards her and now towered over her. His dark magic was all over her body. It hurt.

"So that's how you justify yourself. My life isn't worth anything because I'm evil," he whispered, his voice cold and emotionless. "As if you're any better. You just acted around me, trying to get closer. Is that why you pretend to be my girlfriend? So you can kill me? Are you going to return back home after your deed is done? Planning to have a happy reunion with your fiancé?"

He hit a nerve. So, Hermione screamed, her voice trembling with fury, "Keep Ron out of this!"

"Some guy he is," Tom sneered evilly. "Sending you back to do all the dirty work. He is pathetic, just like you."
Hermione balled her hands into fists and there was fury washing over her as she glared at him.

Wrath raging in him, Voldemort couldn't believe she still dared to oppose him. That witch had deceived him, lied to him and used him and yet she had the impudence to accuse him? Why was she so angry? Because finally her little murder conspiracy was out in the open?

"I can't believe I fell for your lies," he yelled at her. "I hope you at least enjoyed getting fucked by your enemy!"

He could see her eyes widening at the insult. Then they grew cold and she whispered in a dangerous voice,

"You bastard."

Voldemort wouldn't take her insolence anymore. Shapeless, formless being. Mudblood. Witch without a name. She had sailed down on his life. Had taken everything and had given only confusion in return. Piece by piece she had mutilated him. She had torn apart his sanity. He should be grateful he still knew who he was. Lord Voldemort. He was strong enough to hold himself together, cloaked in his fury and anger.

'Bastard.'

Voldemort's fury peaked. His self-control shattered and his anger took over. He raised his hands and brutally shoved the witch. She was hurled away and lost her footing as the back of her calves made contact with the couch behind her. He was deaf to her painful gasp as she was flung down on the upholstery, her head crashing against the wooden armrest.

The witch without name ended up sprawled on the couch. Her anger had vanished from her features and she just stared up at him in shock. Voldemort's eyes were cold chips of ice as they wandered over her fallen form. He could feel that she had drawn her magic around herself protectively. Ire flared up violently and Voldemort's hand itched to his wand. What did she want to do? Attack him? As if it were even possible for her magic to be used against him. Not without his consent. His fingers danced over the smooth wood of his wand.

In the end, Voldemort didn't pull his wand at her. She didn't deserve it. Throwing her one last dark look, he turned on his heels and walked over to the door. He half expected her to hurl a vengeful curse at his back, but she didn't. As he reached the door he quickly grabbed the handle, intend to leave. Leave that nameless, shapeless, completely blank being behind.

Lord Voldemort did not need anyone.

Just as he had opened the door a crack he heard a strangled sob coming from behind him. Voldemort hesitated. He didn't understand that sound. In his world it neither had a place nor meaning.

Yet, it made him hesitated.

He slowly turned his head. His eyes widened as he looked at the witch. She was huddled on the couch, her legs folded under her body, and her face was in her hands. He could see that her shoulders shook slightly and knew that she was crying. There was a painful stab in his chest as Voldemort looked at her. Suddenly he could feel her regaining a shape.

Hermione.

His terrible anger still rushed through him but suddenly he wasn't so sure anymore that it was – or had ever been – directed at her.
Hermione.

Voldemort softly closed the door and walked back to the couch. Hermione never looked up. Without saying anything, he sat down on the sofa a bit away from her. He just sat there for a while, unable to word anything. Without a target to lash out at, his fury was pointless. He could still hear Hermione crying softly. His anger abated and was replaced by a horribly empty feeling.

Like a flash memories ran through his head. He remembered how he had seen Hermione the first time and how disgusted she had been of him. He remembered how he had crucioed her without a second thought. Then they had been together in London and she had saved him. She had protected him and cared for him. Merlin, she had helped him? Voldemort slightly shook his head in disbelief. Even as he had dropped her because of her parentage, she had still protected him from Dumbledore.

He remembered snippets of their conversations and Hermione's pleasant voice spooked through his mind.

'There happened some terrible things in my past, Tom. Really bad things.' – 'I'm not going to let fear rule my life ever again' – 'Before I arrived here, I lost everything. I don't owe you anything.' – 'Do you always have to hurt people? What's wrong with you?' – 'I've seen your true face. It's disgusting.' – 'I hate you!'

'I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.'

He remembered the pain in her eyes. There was so much grief. Most of the time it was hidden away but sometimes it was plainly visible. Screaming at him. Accusingly...

What had he done to her?

Voldemort's hollow gaze travelled back to Hermione. She still had her face hidden in her hands. Slowly, tentatively, he raised a hand and gingerly laid it down on her back between her shoulder blades. He could feel her body give a shudder as he made contact with her.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you. I lost control," he whispered, his voice flat. "I'm sorry."

Her body still trembled under his hand but now Hermione raised her head. Tom's stomach constricted achingly as he looked at her. Tears were swimming in her eyes and he felt sick as he realized that he was the cause of those tears. Yet, despite the tears, there was a hard and deathly cold expression on her face.

Her eyes narrowed at him, then she hissed, a sharp edge in her voice, "I didn't want to lie to you but there was no other option. My friends certainly did not send me to the past to... to seduce you."

"I know," Tom whispered feebly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things. Please, forgive me."

The murderous expression didn't leave her face. Instead she said, her words cutting painfully into him, "How can you accuse me like that? After all the things I did for you." With an angry movement she shrugged his hand away from her back. "I should have never taken you back."

Tom's eyes widened at her threat to abandon him again.

"No, no," he pleaded with her. "Please, Hermione, I was just so shocked. I didn't know what I was saying. Please."

The hard glint in her eyes wasn't assuaged by the panic lacing his tone.
"You shoved me," was all she threw at him icily. "And you considered cursing me."

Tom cringed as he heard the accusation in her tone.

"I… I'm..." he stuttered desperately. "I know. I shouldn't have. It was all too much... and I- …don't leave me."

Tom closed his eyes. He couldn't lose her. Whatever he was meant to be, he would not relinquish Hermione. She was his. Everything about her, it belonged to him. He would never let her escape.

Tom looked back at her and the steely hard glint was still in her eyes. He slid nearer to her on the sofa so that he sat right beside her. She narrowed her eyes at him. Tentatively he raised his arm and slipped it around her shoulders so he could pull her against him. He expected her to lash out at him but she didn't. Still, her body stiffened as he embraced her.

He knew what he was. He was different. Special. Superior to everyone else. Hermione was not his equal. No-one was. But, he supposed, she was a part of him.

His arms were snaked around her and he felt her warmth comfortingly against him. Hermione didn't return the embrace but Voldemort didn't expect her to. Actually he was surprised that she had ever responded to him with something other than hate. Voldemort leaned down to her and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head, her bushy hair tickling him pleasantly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her soft hair. "Forgive me?"

At first he thought she would finally push him away, but then he felt her body relax and Hermione leaned into him while her arms loosely slipped around him. Something deep inside of him twitched as he felt her weight against him. He wanted to pull her in even tighter but was afraid he would destroy their closeness instead. It was grotesque that she had allowed him to come so near.

He would never hurt her. Not his Hermione. Lord Voldemort would not harm her.

One of his hands wandered up her back and he knew that hidden underneath the fabric of her blouse many scars were blemishing her skin. It was a strange feeling to know that he himself had caused those scars …or his other self, his future self.

Tom gently unwrapped his arms from Hermione and grabbed one of her hands. She looked up at him, a steely sheen dancing in her hazel eyes. He realized that she was still trapped in her war. She was ready to fight him should the need arise.

"Could you show me?" he asked softly. "I want to see what became of me."

Her eyes widened at his request and she shook her head. The hard glint was still bravely glowing in her eyes but Tom nearly cringed as he could also spot fear.

"Please, show me."

"No," she said, her voice strong and determined though her hand trembled.

Tom smiled at her encouragingly before he said gingerly, "I would really like to see. I need to understand."

Hermione didn't know what to do. It would be easy to show Tom one of her memories. She glanced up at him. His eyes were back to grey and sparkled at her softly. His hand gently held hers, his thumb soothing over her skin, but the back of her head still hurt from when he had flung her against
"Please," Tom pleaded softly. "I want to see my future self."

Hermione exhaled slowly. She felt everything breaking down around her. How would Tom react if he saw Lord Voldemort? Her lower lip quivered as she stared up at him. She really couldn't give away even more and she certainly would not show Tom how Harry had finally defeated Voldemort. But maybe she could show him a less important memory, just so he could have a glimpse of his future counterpart. If it was so important for him.

Hermione still stared up into his eyes and said in a soft rather unstable tone, "Okay."

She shifted on the sofa so that she sat on her knees and was fully turned towards Tom.

"I don't have many memories of Him, for which I should be grateful, I guess," she whispered, her words making him cringe. Then her voice got firm, "I'll allow you to see them. But nothing more. After you've seen them you retreat again."

"Yes, of course," Tom quickly assured.

He let go of her hand and reached for her face, cupping her cheeks with both his hands. Then he gently raised her head so that she was forced to look up at him. As she stared into his mesmerizing grey eyes, she could feel his presence pulling at her mind. Hermione had to suppress the urge to erect her Occlumency shields. Instead she allowed Tom to enter her mind and he was being very gentle as he did so. Normally it hurt quite badly to have someone invading one's mind but this time Hermione didn't feel any pain. As she could feel Tom's presence in her mind she guided him to the memories she would share with him. She wasn't going to show him any more. If he so much tried as to get a glimpse of her other memories, she would instantly throw him out of her mind.

A shudder ran through her whole body. Then she plunged into the memory, pulling Tom with her.

She stood alone in the middle of a battlefield. The Aurors were losing. There were just too many Death Eaters. Warm blood was flowing down Hermione's left arm, constantly dripping from her fingers. In a crouch she sprinted over to a house nearby. Pressing her back against the wall, she crept along the house. The biting stench of smoke filled her lungs. Lying in a flowerbed a mere metre away was a mangled corpse. Blood flowed out of it and trickled into the soil.

Hermione reached the end of the wall and cautiously peered around the corner. Fighting still raged everywhere. She hadn't yet decided on her next actions as suddenly there was a painful pressure in the air. The hand holding her wand started to tremble as she let her gaze wander over the street in front of her. Hermione inhaled sharply as she could see a figure standing not far away from her in the middle of the street.

Lord Voldemort had just appeared on the battlefield. He was clad completely in black which made his deathly pale skin stand out even more. The hood of his cloak was shadowing the upper half of his face so that only his glowing crimson eyes could be seen. Hermione didn't dare to move and fearfully stared at the Dark Lord. His magic was all over the place. It ripped at her furiously, mirroring the evil intentions of its master. Lord Voldemort seemed to calmly scrutinize the devastation his Death Eaters caused. Then he slowly lowered the hood of his cloak. Hermione's breathing quickened as she stared at his face, pale as death itself. The worst were his ruby-red eyes. They had slit-like pupils that radiated nothing but hate and cruelty as they observed the misery in front of them, unmoved and uncaring.

A lazy flick of Voldemort's wand and an Auror fighting a Death Eater nearby released a
bloodcurdling wail. His body seemed to just compress. Hermione gagged as she watched the man yielding to the Dark Lord's magic. Blood was splattered over the sidewalk. Chunks of flesh and bone fell with a sickening splash on the asphalt. The Dark Lord showed no reaction to the man's grisly death. Not even twisted amusement. Only disinterest. His long spiderlike fingers softly held his wand as he calmly observed how his army lay waste to a once peaceful neighbourhood.

Hermione stiffened in fear as his deathly cold gaze fell on her, her wand foolishly raised at the Dark Lord. A fearsome smirk curled up the corners of his lip-less mouth. Then he brandished his wand casually, like waving away a bothersome insect. He put no effort into the spell but Hermione quickly erected her strongest shield, drawing upon all her magic. Voldemort seemed to lose interest in her as soon as the spell left his wand. He looked away before his spell even reached her.

As the spell hit her, it became very clear why Voldemort hadn't considered it necessary to pay her more attention. Her shield was destroyed upon contact and his magic crashed unimpeded into her chest. She felt her rips break and was hurled a few metres away until she was stopped by a brick wall. The impact was hard. Blinding pain shot through her whole body. She screamed. Her body slid down the wall and came to a halt huddled on the ground. Everything hurt. She couldn't move.

The fear of that memory still clasping her tightly, Hermione delved into the next that had happened many months later.

"Open your mouth, Muggle-whore!" the man yelled at Hermione.

She whimpered as his foot collided with her already bruised side. Unaffected by her obvious pain, the man grabbed her by her hair and hauled her up.

"Where is the pathetic Boy-Who-Lived?" the Death Eater sneered at her.

Hermione wouldn't tell them. Never. Being confronted with her continued silence, the Death Eater raised his fist and punched her in the face. Hermione was flung away. Lying on the floor, her cheek throbbed painfully. Her wand was gone, they had apparated with her to this disgusting cell and she was outnumbered by five to one. Hermione could do the maths: She was screwed.

"Where is he?" another of the Death Eaters yelled at her.

She gasped as yet another kick hit her.

"Speak, Mudblood!" the Death Eater thundered. "Where is he?"

Always the same question. For how long already? It felt like days. Weeks. But it couldn't have been more than a few hours. Hermione tried to crack her eyes open; one was swollen shut. She still managed to make out the men looming over her fallen form. She regretted that this dirty cell and their vile faces would be the last things she ever saw.

One of the Death Eaters raised his wand and once again hissed the same curse, 

"Crucio."

Hermione was smothered by pain as another torture curse hit her. It sliced open her body, chopping away from her flesh. She screamed and screamed. Until her mind boggled, unhinged at the edges.

The curse ended, her mind re-structured but the aftereffects of the pain made her lie limply on the floor. She only heard their voices as faint and muffled.
"She won't talk."

"We should kill her."

"No, we should call Him."

"He'll punish us if we call Him and she doesn't know anything."

"She does know where the boy is. The Dark Lord will rip her secret from her."

"You want to risk His wrath by calling him for nothing?"

"If we don't call Him and let her knowledge go to waste, then He'll punish us."

"...okay. You do it. Call Him."

Her senses slowly returned to her and Hermione stiffened in fear at the last statement. Frantically she tried to scramble up, her broken leg howling in pain. Maybe she could hold her own against the Death Eaters but if Voldemort tried to get the information from her, she didn't stand a chance.

Her head swirled horribly, making her nauseous. The cell seemed to blur before her eyes. Then she heard a soft crack. Trembling heavily Hermione raised her bruised and swollen face. A soft gasp left her, aside from that she was frozen in terror. As if a dementor had just entered the cell, biting coldness wrapped around her. Lord Voldemort stood mere metres away from her. Clad in black robes, his cold presence seemed to instantly suffuse everything. All five Death Eaters were kneeling before him while Hermione fearfully pressed herself against the concrete wall behind her. She cringed as his malicious red eyes fell on her. A mirthless smirk twisted up his lipless mouth as he mustered her in indifference. His dark magic already tore at her painfully and fear completely overrode her. She could do nothing but tremble helplessly as she looked into those eyes. Merciless, hate filled, empty ...soulless.

She was going to die.

Then there was another crack. Suddenly thin arms embraced her, the knobbly fingers clasp her tightly. The dark pressure of apparatition surrounded her. His inhuman high-pitched voice still followed.

"Avada Kedavra."

The dark pressure swallowed her whole. She reappeared far, far away from that horrible cell. Everything hurt. Her sight was blurry. The thin arms released her. A soundless sob left her as she saw Dobby falling to the ground. Lifeless. Then there was his face. Smiling down at her. Worry etched into his features. Ron.

Then blackness.

Hermione stared into a pair of crimson eyes. She stiffened and quickly skidded away from them on the sofa she was kneeling on. She needed a while before she could see beyond those glowing red eyes. She could see black hair and handsome features. Tom! She was looking at Tom and not Voldemort. Hermione blinked while she tried to wake completely up.

"That was me?" She jumped as she heard Tom's low, dangerous voice.

She focused on him again. His eyes were still an angry red while he glowered at her darkly. Hermione swallowed. She was unsettled by this angry glare.
"Yes," she answered him in a small and nervous sounding tone.

After a while Tom stated in a cold tone, "I hurt you."

Hermione could hear no emotion in his voice. She answered him nonetheless.

"Yes," she whispered shakily.

Why was he angry? The fear she had gone through in her memories hadn't yet left her and Hermione felt insecure around Tom. What had the memory done to him? Had he liked that darker version of himself? She glanced up at him but still found the same malicious red in his eyes.

"I shouldn't have showed you," she whispered. "It was a mistake."

She wanted to get up from the sofa. Anything to get away from those red eyes. A hand held her back. Tom had grabbed her and pulled her back down. His hand was clenched so tightly around her wrist, his fingernails were digging painfully into her skin. She gulped nervously as she mustered him. His face was an impenetrable mask.

"That was Lord Voldemort?" he asked again, his voice hard as stone.

She only managed to nod at him. With that the malign red colour suddenly left his eyes. She was surprised as they slowly turned back into a beautiful shade of grey. Tom abruptly raised his arms and brusquely pulled her into a hug. He embraced her so tight it almost hurt. It took Hermione a moment to get over her shock but then she realized that there was a desperate streak in his embrace. He wasn't hugging her; he was holding onto her to keep himself from falling. Hermione shakily raised her arms and put them around him.

"He's a monster," Tom whispered.

She felt him embracing her tighter.

"He's a powerful wizard with an army of followers and he's feared by everyone," she said cautiously. "Isn't he what you always wanted to be?"

Tom's head snapped at her and he stared at her. Hermione didn't want to see it but there was definitely a hint of agreement in his gaze. Part of him had liked what he had just seen. He didn't need to admit it, but Hermione still knew.

"I… I don't know…" Tom finally stuttered weakly, shock and desire both lacing his tone. Then his eyes left her. As he spoke next his voice was soft, barely audible, "He attacked you."

Hermione didn't know what to make of him right now. Still, she was holding him tightly.

"I could feel his magic," Tom continued in a hushed voice. "It was my own. But… there was something off with him. It was odd." He gulped. Then he whispered, seemingly searching for the right word, "His magic… He was empty. Like there was missing something."

Hermione neither confirmed nor allayed his fears. She just held him.

"How did you get away?" he asked her after a while.

Hermione looked up at him. Tom was staring down at her and there was concern glinting in his eyes.

"In the first memory, he threw the Detrimentum curse at you."
Hermione frowned at him. She'd never heard of that curse.

"It's a dark curse," Tom explained as he saw her confused expression. "It's supposed to drain all the energy from its victim."

"My friends rescued me," Hermione answered his previous question in a soft voice. "They found me and apparated me away. I was unconscious for a week. If Ron hadn't managed to stabilize my magic, I would have- " she stopped herself.

"You would have died," Tom finished her sentence in a hollow voice.

Hermione didn't reply. They both knew he was right. She could hear him breathing in deeply. He continued to hold Hermione, obviously needing to feel her presence.

"I don't understand," Tom said. "As you arrived here, you knew who I am. And yet you stay with me. Why?"

"You might remember that I tried to stay away from you but you wouldn't leave me alone," Hermione answered him, worried by his empty eyes.

"I can't believe that you can even bear my presence," Tom continued flatly. "After all the things I did to you."

"Not you, Tom," Hermione tried to calm him down. "It was Voldemort."

"I am Lord Voldemort," Tom replied in a horribly empty tone.

Hermione looked up at him. He stared in space in front of him and there was a forlorn expression on his face. She raised her hand and gently skimmed her fingers over his jaw.

"No, he is not you," Hermione told him in a firm voice.

Tom slowly looked down at her. She shuddered as she saw that anguish in his eyes.

"In those memories, you were hurt. By his men and by himself," Tom told her as he stared down at her. Then he continued, a dead tone in his voice. "Just like me. Since you got here I've always hurt you."

Hermione shook her head vehemently, "No, you didn't-"

But Tom cut across her, "I did. I threatened you, I cursed you and…" There was now disgust on his face. "I even hit you."

"You already apologized for that," Hermione said in a gentle tone.

"How can you forgive me?" he asked her. "I'm actually surprised you didn't try to kill me right after you arrived here."

Hermione stiffened in his arms as he said that.

"You considered doing it, didn't you?" Tom asked her.

Hermione didn't reply anything.

"What changed your mind?"
"The time line," she finally admitted in a soft voice. "I couldn't risk changing it."

"I see," Tom said numbly. "Well, it does explain why you seemed to hate me from the very first day we met. It did bug me back then, you know? Normally girls don't hate me. At least not the first time we meet."

Hermione smiled faintly up at him. Then she draped her arms around him and pressed him against her. She ran her fingers gingerly through his dark silky hair while Tom continued to just stare vacantly into space.

They sat like this for a long time. Tom didn't say anything and Hermione didn't want to press him into talking. The sun had long since set as she decided that it was time to get some sleep. She gently placed a kiss on Tom's cheek.

"It's pretty late," she told him. "Let's go to bed."

His grey eyes were still dull but he nodded his head. Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him off the sofa. Then she accompanied Tom to the Slytherin common room. They didn't speak a word as they walked through the deserted corridors. Hermione could clearly see his magic oozing out of him. It was darker than ever and wobbled around him, leaving behind a feeling of desolation. There were probably countless questions flying through his head but he obviously didn't want to talk about it and she wasn't going to push him.

They finally arrived at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Tom still hadn't said a word. He stared down at her with empty eyes. Hermione shifted nervously as his gaze wandered over her. He took a hesitant step towards her. She could see the uncertainty in his movement as he slowly raised a hand and touched her chin. He bent down to her and brushed his lips against her own. They had barely touched as he quickly let go of her again.

There was insecurity in his grey eyes. Tom looked as if he had just now done something forbidden, expecting to be punished. Hermione smiled up at him softly.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she told him gently.

The next day, Hermione was quite anxious to meet Tom. It had cost her a lot to trust Tom enough to be able to tell him the truth. She was incredibly relieved that he hadn't started to curse her after her revelation. Still, in face of her own fears, she had forgotten to consider how Tom would live with the truth. How did he feel, now that he knew? Knowing one's future couldn't be an easy thing, especially if it was such a dark one. She wondered how he would handle everything.

During breakfast in the Great Hall Hermione didn't see Tom sitting at the Slytherin table. She tried to reassure herself that everything was okay with him. After all it was a Sunday and Tom hated it to get up early. He was probably sleeping in. Still, Hermione wanted to search for him. They needed to talk. In the end, though, she decided to spend the day in the library. Maybe Tom needed space and didn't want to be confronted again. If he wanted to talk, he would find her in the library.

He didn't though.

Hermione's anxiety grew. After a few books, it was time for lunch. She left the library and walked to the Great Hall, hoping to find Tom there. As she sat down at the Gryffindor table her gaze immediately skimmed over the Slytherins. Unfortunately she found no handsome dark-haired prefect. Now she was really concerned. Sighing softly, Hermione placed a bit of chicken on her plate. She
wasn't really hungry.

Where was Tom?

Someone nudged her in the side and asked, "Hey, Hermione. You alright?"

She turned her head and looked up at the laughing blue eyes of Longbottom.

"You look kinda jittery," he informed her while stuffing a forkful of roast potatoes in his mouth.

"Yeah," Weasley agreed. He, too, was speaking with his mouth full. "Is it about the match?"

Lupin just rubbed the bridge of his nose and groaned, "Guys, don't you have any table manners?"

Longbottom washed his potatoes down with a large gulp of pumpkin juice and grinned at Lupin. "Man, we are Gryffindors," he said proudly. "We don't need any manners."

"Too brave for it, are you?" Lupin commented dryly.

"Damn right," Longbottom said, still grinning.

Lupin wisely chose not to reply.

"So what's wrong?" Weasley asked Hermione. "Are you worried Slytherin'll win the match?"

She just frowned at him, not knowing what he was on about.

Longbottom, recognizing that look, said reproachfully, "You have no idea what's going on, have you?"

"Not so much," admitted Hermione.

"I knew it," groaned Longbottom and shook his head at her. "How can you not like Quidditch? Is that even possible?"

"Yes. Yes, it is," Lupin threw in, but Longbottom just ignored his friend.

"Hufflepuff is playing Slytherin today," the blond informed Hermione. "So we have to go and cheer for Hufflepuff."

"Really?" Hermione said slowly.

"Yes," pressed Longbottom. "If Slytherin beats them, they'll win the Quidditch Cup. But if they lose, we'll get it."

"I see," she said.

Obviously she still not showed the proper enthusiasm as Longbottom again shook his head at her and mumbled something about 'lack of Gryffindor pride'. Hermione just chuckled. But then her gaze again wandered to the Slytherin table. Still no Tom anywhere. Her face fell.

"If it's not the match-" She heard Weasley ask. "-then why are you so tense?"

Hermione unfixed her eyes from the Slytherins and looked at her friends. All three of them eyed her with concern.

"It's nothing." Then she hesitated before she said softly, "Just Tom-"
Here Longbottom rolled his eyes. Hermione glared at him and he raised his hands in clemency, "Didn't say anything."

She threw him another dark glare before she continued, "Well, Tom, he… received some bad news yesterday. I haven't seen him since then. And now I'm a bit concerned about him."

Longbottom frowned at her, looking as if he didn't quite understand where the problem was. At least, he refrained from mocking Tom again. That was some progress, Hermione assumed.

"Maybe he's in his common room," Lupin suggested kindly. "You could check."

Hermione threw him a small smile. "You know, I think I'll really do that."

Before she got up she placed some food on a plate. After all Tom had already missed breakfast. He had to be hungry. She grabbed the plate and stood up. As she walked away from the table Longbottom called after her,

"Hey, you'll miss the match. It's about to begin soon."

Hermione just waved at him and continued her way towards the exit from the Great Hall. She noticed that the Slytherin Quidditch players had already left for the pitch. She was a bit relieved. At least she didn't risk meeting Avery in the Slytherin common room. After all, he was the Quidditch team captain.

Carefully holding the plate with the food, she wandered down to the dungeons. It didn't take her long and Hermione stood before the blank patch of wall. She had no idea what the password to the Slytherin common room was. Most of the Slytherins would be at the pitch now, so there was no chance that someone would let her in. Hermione just shrugged her shoulders and summoned her magic. It softly skimmed over the wards on the entrance. She could feel them stubbornly pushing her magic away. Still, they stood no chance against her new magic. It seeped into the wards and it didn't take long to undermine them. Finally the damp patch of wall glided away. Hermione felt a bit nervous as she stepped into the Slytherin common room.

The long, low room was exactly like she remembered it, a bit chilly and rather gloomy. Hermione let her gaze wander over the black leather couches, in search of Tom. The room was pretty much empty but she saw a lone figure sitting at the far end of the room. Hermione instantly knew it was Tom even though he sat with his back to her.

She walked over to him. As she reached him, she put the plate with the food on the side table and slumped down on the couch opposite from Tom's armchair. He had been reading in a thick book but now looked up with a frown in place. Hermione chuckled. Obviously the other Slytherins would never dare to interrupt him. As Tom realized it was her, he looked surprised.

"Oh," he said colourlessly. "How did you get in here?"

Hermione shrugged lazily. "Elder Magic."

"Hm," he made. Then his eyes dropped back down to the book in his lap.

*What an enthusiastic welcome,* Hermione thought sarcastically. *He's such a doting boyfriend.*

Tom was obviously trying to ignore her but she wasn't having any of it. She pushed to plate over to his side of the table.

"You missed lunch," she observed, ignoring his foul mood.
He glanced at her and then at the plate before he resumed to ignore her.

"Eat," ordered Hermione.

"I'm not hungry," he said coolly, not even looking up at her.

"I carried that food from the Great Hall all the way down here," Hermione informed him in her bossy voice. "So you'll eat it."

There was annoyance in his eyes as they wandered back to her. She just raised her eyebrows expectantly. Tom probably wanted to avoid arguing, so he just huffed irritated and reached for the fork. While he ate, Hermione snatched the book he had discarded on the table. Secrets of the Darkest Art read its title. Hermione wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Some light reading?" she asked him reproachfully.

Tom glanced at the book in her hand.

"Well, obviously I'm a dark wizard," he replied flippantly. "What did you expect I would read?"

He reached for the book, pulled it out of her hand and stuffed it into his leather bag. Then he resumed eating as if nothing had happened. Hermione breathed in deeply while she watched him. She could see his magic surrounding him as a dark cloud. It perfectly mirrored his sullen mood.

"Look," Hermione began gingerly after he had finished eating. "What I said yesterday, I know it was quite the shock for you, but I'm sure we can wor-"

"I don't want to talk about it," Tom cut over her.

Hermione eyed him in concern. They really needed to discuss this some more but the dismissive sheen in his eyes told her that it would be useless to press him now. Sighing softly she leaned back in her couch. Tom averted his gaze. He seemed to be unable to look her in the eyes.

"Tom?" she said after a prolonged silence.

"Yes?"

"What do you want to do during the Holidays?"

That finally brought him out of his brooding. He looked at her confused. "What?"

Hermione smiled at him. "I'm sure you noticed the school year is almost over. I just wanted to know what you wanna do in the Holidays."

"I… I…," he stammered, clearly unbalanced by the change of topic. "I haven't thought on it. I…" A dark look crossed his face. "I normally go back to… London."

Hermione wrinkled her nose as she heard it. "Well, this year you are certainly not going back to the orphanage. You can be sure of that." Then she smiled again and mused, "We could go to Saint Ives. I've been there once with my parents. It has quite the spectacular beach. Or we could go to Albania. Didn't you want to visit Albania?"

Tom just raised his eyebrows at her and asked stunned, "You want to go on vacation?" Then he added incredulously, "With me?"

"Well, what did you think?" she said lightly. "That I go on my own?"
"I thought-" he said. Then he again averted his eyes and mumbled, "I didn't think you would… want to spend time with me…"

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Tom, whatever I said yesterday it doesn't change too much." As he just stared numbly at her, she added, "At least not for me. I've known those things all the time."

He nodded shortly at her. But then he quickly fell back into his depressed mood and avoided her eyes. Obviously her revelation yesterday had changed a lot for him. Hermione's concerned eyes wandered over Tom. He stared down at his hands in his lap and looked rather miserable. As her gaze skimmed over his hands, she suddenly had an inspiration on how to cheer him up.

She reached for the coppery necklace which hung from her neck, opened the clasp and removed it. The pendant still glowed in an eerie red light. Right beside the pendant hung the Gaunts' ring from the necklace. Slowly Hermione removed the golden ring. The black stone shimmered lustreless and was unnaturally cold to the touch. In fact, Hermione mused, the ring was ugly. As she looked up she saw that Tom eyed her curiously. Without hesitating anymore, Hermione offered him the ring. He furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Can you keep it for me?" she asked in a steady voice.

Tom's eyes flickered from the ring back to her face. He seemed to be taken aback that she would really entrust him with one of the Hallows.

"Why would you…" he whispered. "You know that's a Hallow, don't you?"

She smiled at him. "Of course I do, silly. Now are you going to accept it or what?"

He still stared at her as if he thought she had lost her mind. But then he finally stuttered, "S… sure."

He took the ring from her and slipped it on the ring finger of his right hand. His eyes lingered on the ring for a second then they flitted back to her. Hermione smiled at him brightly.

"You take good care of it, won't you?" she said. "I might need it later on."

"Okay." He nodded, still puzzled by her behaviour.

"Good good," said Hermione. She got up from her seat, stepped over to him and pecked him on the lips. "I'm off then and leave you to your… book."

Before she slipped out of the common room she told him, "Try not to think too much."

Long after she had left, Tom still admired the ring that once again stuck on his finger.

"Yeah, and you definitely should save your queen," Weasley told Hermione seriously. "Rule number three: Never lose your queen except it's in direct conflict with rule number one."

"Okay, okay," she said distractedly, while frowning down at her chess pieces.

"So, what's rule number one again?" the red-head inquired innocently.

She looked up at his smiling face. "Er… Not losing the king?"

The smile on Weasley's face widened. "Exactly," he said. Then he turned to the pieces on the check board and said, "Knight to B2."
Hermione's face fell as she watched Weasley's miniature knight proudly riding on his horse over the board. Reaching his destination, he pulled his sword and stuck it right through her king's chest. Her demise was accompanied by gales of laughter, coming from her side. Hermione turned her head and scowled at Longbottom.

They were sitting in the Gryffindor common room. It was rather late already, curfew was approaching, and Hermione enjoyed the evening with her friends. She had spent the rest of her day watching a rather foul-filled Quidditch match. In the end, Slytherin had beat Hufflepuff and Longbottom had set the stands on fire with an angry burst of accidental magic. Luckily no-one died – during the match or in the fire.

Longbottom was still laughing at her. He wiped his tears from his eyes and managed to get out between giggles,

"Didn't I tell you? Don't play against Richard."

Hermione swiped at his head, but his Quidditch reflexes saved him and he continued laughing at her. She ignored him and waved her hand over the chess board, arranging the pieces anew.

"One more time," she told Weasley.

"Sure," he replied good-naturedly.

"You don't know when to give up, hm?" Longbottom asked languidly.

He had stretched out on the sofa, a bag of Bertie Bott's in his hand, and peered mischievously at her. Hermione huffed, snatched the bag of beans from him and flipped a red one in her mouth. Urg, cabbage. She grimaced.

"You are in a rather good mood," she told Longbottom, smirking at him. "Considering that you lost the Quidditch Cup today."

Immediately there was a scowl on his brow. Then he buried his face in his hands and groaned.

"Don't talk about that," he whined. "Those stupid cheating Slytherins!"

Hermione chuckled, though Weasley seemed to concede with his friend.

"If only Hufflepuff had beaten them today," the red-head lamented. "I still can't believe it. If they had won, Gryffindor'd have the Quidditch Cup."

Longbottom groaned pitifully again and then stole the bag of Bertie Bott's back from Hermione.

"And now those snakes have it," he ranted while stuffing a handful of beans into his mouth. "Evil, undeserving, slimy snakes!"

"Aww, come on," Hermione teased. "They are not all evil and slimy."

Longbottom turned his head and glanced at her. "We've been there before, Hermione. It's all of them," he lectured, though there was a small smile on his face.

Hermione giggled softly then she looked down at the chess board on the table. She just wanted to order her first move as she noticed a second year walking up to her. The girl stopped beside her, looking nervous.

"Yes, dear?" Hermione asked kindly.
"Er..." the girl stumbled. "There's someone waiting outside the common room for you. He asked me to get you."

Hermione knitted up her brow in confusion. Who could that be? Didn't Tom want to enter her common room anymore? After thanking the girl she got up from her seat on the sofa and walked over to the portrait hole. Her bewilderment only intensified as she climbed through the hole and found Abraxas Malfoy standing in the corridor, obviously waiting for her. His aristocratic face was arranged into an expressionless mask as he eyed her. Hermione felt slightly uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

"Er..." she mumbled. "Did you want to speak with me?"

"I am sorry to bother you, Ms DeCerto," he said politely, which freaked her out even more. "But could you accompany me?"

Her suspicion now awakened she narrowed her eyes at him. "Where to?"

"We have to leave the castle," he answered seriously.

Hermione openly gaped at him now. "Are you kidding me?" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

Raising his eyebrows was the only visible reaction she got from him.

"I assure you I am not," he told her, still in that unnervingly polite voice. "Unfortunately, there is a bit of a situation and it seems you are the only one who could hope to solve it."

Hermione stared at him for a second, processing what he had said.

"It's about Tom, isn't it?" she asked in a collected voice, trying to suppress the upcoming concern.

Malfoy inclined his head at her statement. Taking in a breath of air, Hermione quickly made up her mind.

"Lead the way," she said in a firm voice.

So Malfoy did. He led her through the castle down to the Entrance Hall. They didn't speak a word during their journey and Hermione was thankful for that. Draco Malfoy's grandfather, though being very much unlike his boastful grandson, still managed to unsettle her greatly.

Malfoy opened the entrance doors for her. Hermione thanked him and stepped outside the castle. Night had already fallen and she could see the first stars glinting down from the dark sky. Despite it being already June the Scottish nights were still chilly and Hermione pulled her black robes tighter around herself.

"It's not far," Malfoy said as he set off into the night.

Gulping nervously, Hermione followed him. He had been right; they only walked a few steps as she could hear voices and screams. She hesitantly walked nearer to those noises. There were people in the dark. As she stepped closer she was able make out more. Hermione gasped softly.

It didn't take her long to assess the situation. She could see a few figures crouched on the ground, kneeling in front of another figure. That one was standing and had obviously drawn a wand which was pointed at the last figure, lying on the grass, twisting and twitching in pain while yelling loudly. Hermione gaped as she felt sickness bubbling up in her. It didn't take a genius to guess who exactly
the dark figure with the wand was. If she wouldn't have been able to tell by that arrogant stance, she
would have recognized him by the angry dark magic in the air.

Hermione breathed in deeply and braced herself for whatever was to come, then she walked over to
Tom. As she neared them she saw that the figure on the ground was Avery who obviously suffered
from the Cruciatus Curse. His painful yells made her feel faint even though she didn't like the guy.
The other Death Eater forerunners were assembled around Tom in a semi-circle and kneeled to him.
Aside from fear, Hermione surprisingly spotted a hint of outrage and resistance on their faces. What
had Tom gotten himself into this time? Her gaze reluctantly wandered to him.

He was standing there with his wand poised at Avery. With a feral smile on his face Tom observed
how his curse caused so much agony. His eyes were a deep crimson red and dark magic was leaving
him in angry waves. Hermione shuddered involuntarily as she watched that eerie smile on Tom's
mouth. Avery's cries of pain still tore at the silence of the night but Tom seemed to just enjoy it.
Hermione felt disgusted by his behaviour. How could he enjoy another's pain like that.

She shortly turned her head and looked at the castle. Some windows were still lit and glowed like
beacons in the night. Hermione stared back at Tom. He was doing this in plain sight of the castle.
Anytime a professor could look out of a window and see them here. Why was Tom messing up like
this?

Finally, Hermione ripped herself from her stupor. With a flick of her hand she sent her magic
towards Avery. It crashed into him and hurled him out of Tom's curse. Avery's screams stopped but
he still lay on the ground, panting loudly. Hermione walked over to them. Tom had turned his head
and finally noticed her presence. Her sight did not banish the furious red colour from his eyes. His
dark magic still swirled around him and now even tugged at her aggressively. It was obvious that
Tom had lost his temper.

In the corner of her eyes she saw his Knights shifting nervously as they recognized her, but
Hermione didn't pay them much attention. Tom was still glaring at her belligerently and took even a
threatening step towards her. Hermione flicked her wrist and released the fake-wand from its holster.
After all, Tom's Death Eaters were here. She needed to keep up pretences. Seeing the wand in her
hand, Tom's eyes burned up in an angry red and his magic descended upon her with wrath.
Hermione had to build a cocoon of her own magic around herself to protect her body from his
assault. It stung and burned were his magic came in contact with her own.

As her magic continued to fight him, Hermione could see something snap in his blood red eyes.
Without giving any warning, Tom raised his wand. With practiced ease he twirled it through the air.
"Scinde," he hissed.

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard it. Not a harmless curse and definitely dark. There was
nothing visible leaving his wand but Hermione could feel the power of his curse already ripping at
her protective net of magic as it rushed towards her. She bore her wand at him and sent her magic
through her hand. It ignored the fake-wand and rushed towards Tom's curse. Her magic was
strangely reluctant to obey. So, it took her some effort but in the end she managed to subdue his
attack.

The fire of Tom's anger still burned in those crimson eyes. Enraged by her continued defiance, he
began to wave his wand again. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.
"Don't you dare attack me again," she warned him, her voice calm but the underlying threat was
clear.
Tom stopped the attack but still pointed his wand at her, obviously undecided on how to continue from here. Dimly Hermione heard his followers gasping in outrage as Tom hesitated to curse her. She felt the situation slipping from her hands. The sight of Tom sent cold shivers down her spine. Obviously he was in his Voldemort-mode and she felt the strong need to turn and run.

"Lower your wand!" she ordered him sharply.

His red eyes bored into her threateningly but then slowly, very slowly, Tom's wand sunk to his side. Hermione released a breath she hadn't known she had held in. Her eyes shortly flickered from him to his followers. Avery was still huddled on the ground, hunched over in pain. What really disturbed her though was that now a smirk tugged at his mouth. Something was amiss. The other Death Eaters seemed to shift nervously, shock and disgust on their faces as they stared at Tom. Hermione's gazed back at him. Whatever this was about, she needed to get him away from here. If a teacher found them now, which wasn't that unlikely, he was in deep trouble.

Ignoring her instincts, which told her to run away from Voldemort, she stored her wand away in its holster. Then Hermione raised her hands in what she hoped was a calming gesture and took a step towards him.

"Tom?" she asked tentatively.

His blood red eyes were glowing eerily in the dark. His magic was dancing around him forcefully, leaving behind an unpleasant pressure on her skin. At least his wand hand had dropped to his side. He didn't look like he was about to curse her, but appearances could be misleading. Hermione breathed in deeply.

"Calm down. Okay?" she told him cautiously.

Hermione turned her head and looked at Tom's followers. Alba, Lestrange and Black were now trying to hoist up Avery who still had a triumphant grin on his face. Her gaze wandered to Malfoy who stood a little away from the others. She caught his eyes and gestured for him to leave. He gazed back at her with his unfathomable eyes until he nodded slightly. Then he walked over to the others and started to whisper to them. Satisfied that now at least Tom's stupid followers would be out of her hair, Hermione turned back to their Master. Now she only had to somehow get him away from here. They were so close to Hogwarts. It was a miracle no-one had heard the commotion. Hopefully no professor came already hurrying their way. Hermione gulped nervously and took a step towards Tom. His angry red eyes which had rested on his followers now snapped back at her.

"Tom?" she said soothingly. "Could you please put your wand away?"

This only provoked him to grab the handle of his wand even tighter. Hermione suppressed a sigh.

"You won't be needing it," she tried to reason with him.

She took a cautious step towards him. Merlin, his crimson red eyes were scary. They smouldered menacingly in the dark. Hermione felt her pulse racing as she stared at Tom. He still held his wand tightly in his hand as if he considered cursing her.

They were still standing right in front of Hogwarts. How could he be so careless? If a teacher had seen him throwing the Crucius curse at Avery, that would have been Tom's one-way ticket to Azkaban. What was wrong with him? Hermione wondered as she peered up at the malice in his ruby red eyes. She took another step towards him, intending to get his wand from him.

It was then that she realized something was really off with Tom. She furrowed her brow as she stared
up at him in bafflement. It couldn't be, could it? Tom still fixed her with a dark glare. No, I must be mistaken, Hermione thought and shook her head. But as she looked closer, it was painfully obvious what exactly was wrong with Tom. Hermione opened her mouth and asked incredulously,

"Are you drunk?"

A few hours earlier, Tom sat in the Hog's Head Inn with a glass in front of him. The glass was opaque with dirt, not having been properly cleaned ever. Still the brownish-golden colour of the Firewhiskey was discernible. Not that Tom cared what colour his drink had, as long as its alcohol content was satisfactorily high. He grabbed the glass and downed its content in one go. The whiskey burned in his mouth and then down his throat. He didn't hesitate to refill his glass. He swirled the glass in his hand and looked down at it. Memories swirled through his head just like the amber liquid in the glass. They weren't his own, though. Like snapshots from a different life they played over and over in his mind. He wished he could get rid of them.

Closing his eyes, he could see Hermione clear as daylight. She pressed her body fearfully against the damp concrete wall behind her. Her face was horribly bruised, blood trickled from her mouth and she trembled heavily with the aftereffects of the torture curse. She had been beaten brutally and cursed mercilessly but nothing could make her break. She had taken their violence without batting an eye, proud and unbroken. Then He had appeared and Tom had seen the fear flaring up in her. Her vibrant eyes had turned dull with it. In His presence Hermione had completely descended into terror. Tom knew that look. Sometimes he had seen the same fear in her as her pretty eyes had fallen on himself.

…and I always wondered why…

Tom raised his glass and emptied it. If only he could wash the memories away like the whiskey. Blessedly the alcohol already tugged at his brain. Normally he never got drunk. Losing his self-control disgusted him. Right now, though, he longed to numb his ever busy brain. Tom's glassy eyes slowly wandered over the bar. The tables were dusty and the windows so grimy Tom wasn't able to look out at Hogsmeade's main street. Actually the whole inn was gloomy and disgustingly dirty, just like its few customers.

How well I fit in here.

Tom groaned softly, propped up his head in his hand and poured himself another glass. He slouched on the bench and miserably eyed his whiskey. With an unsteady hand he raised the glass to his lips and took a swig.

To the future, Tom snorted in his head.

He didn't know anymore what he thought of that concept. For everyone it should be a blank slate. Not for him anymore. He closed his eyes and could see that grotesque snake-monster hurling a curse at Hermione. Her cries of pain echoed through his head.

Tom had no idea what to think of the future Voldemort. Was he what Tom had always aspired to be? He honestly didn't know. He couldn't deny that he felt a certain amount of admiration for the dark snake-man. Still, his magic had been hollow. As if it had been a twisted version of Tom's own magic. Even worse, he had used it against Hermione. What had happened to turn him into that dark wizard?

Maybe Hermione knew. After all, Lord Voldemort had managed to ruin her life.
Tom cringed as he remembered how that snake-man had hit her with that dark curse. Like a rag doll, she had been hurled against a brick wall. Then he had left her lying there while her life force had seeped out of her.

Only a symbol of all the things he had done to her.

Tom took another gulp from his glass, drowning that not-memory from his brain. He shakily leaned back in his seat. It was probably still afternoon. He had no idea. The other students must still be at the Quidditch pitch, watching idiots on broomsticks trying to kill themselves. He wondered if Hermione was there.

If he were his older counterpart, he would rush over there, lay waste to the Quidditch pitch, kill everyone in passing until he finally found Hermione. Then he would send a few crucios at her, just for the fun of it. She would probably not even be surprised.

Tom reached for his glass and emptied it. The burning liquid thankfully intensified the fluffy feeling in his head. He stupidly wondered what would happen if he were to marry Hermione one day. How would he introduce his wife at dinner parties? He could almost see it before him. All those rich purebloods would stand around them, sipping from their wine glasses.

'That's my wife,' Voldemort would proudly announce to them.

'Oh, how pleasant,' they would say politely. 'How did you two meet?'

Voldemort would laugh then and say, 'That's a long story. Isn't it, darling?' He would wrap his arm around Hermione's waist and she would smile up at him lovingly. 'I think it all started back when I was trying to kill her. I almost succeeded, too. In the end I only scarred her for the rest of her life. Gave her some really maiming memories. I did manage to kill all her friends and her family, though,' he would add jovially. 'Such is life. Still have to pay for her psychiatrist.'

Tom blinked several times as those thoughts flew through his foggy head. Then he simply reached for the Firewhiskey in front of him and took a gulp straight from the bottle. The whiskey burned down his throat and he nearly choked on it. Still, it was unsatisfactory in its mind-numbing abilities. Tom put the bottle on the desk, almost breaking his glass in the process. Then he got up from the bench. He swayed dangerously and had to blink a few times to regain his sense of balance. Merlin, the world was spinning a lot faster today, wasn't it? He staggered over to the men's room and entered.

As clean as the rest of the Hog's Head, he thought wryly. Trying not to breathe in too deeply he stumbled over to a toilet stall. Inside the stall he started to rummage through his pockets. Finally, in the back pocket of his pants, he found the small potion vial with its bilious green content. With unsteady fingers, Tom tried to remove the tiny stopper. He cursed colourfully as it wouldn't budge. He finally tugged at it with his teeth. With a small 'pop' the stopper gave in. Some of the green liquid ran down Tom's chin as he carelessly spit the stopper away. Then he poured the potion in his mouth and promptly gagged at its bitter taste. With sheer self-control he managed not to vomit on his own shoes. He still retched and heaved as he stumbled out of the toilet stall, flicking the now empty potion bottle over his shoulder. With both arms he heavily leaned on the washbasin, head bowed, as he waited for the potion to kick in. He could almost hear Hermione's scandalized voice as she would nag at him,

'Tom! Are you using?'

–No, never. You know me. I'm not one to break the laws.
As Hermione squeezed herself back into his thoughts, Tom squinted his eyes shut, willing the thoughts to go away. Luckily, the potion already tingled at the back of his mind. Fluffy and dizzy it quickly spread, snuffing any coherent thought. It even affected his magic and turned it into languid goo, wobbling around him. Tom relished in the numbing effect of the potion and giggled sillily as it hit his brain fully.

*Gods, I need more booze.*

He left the restroom with that plan dancing in his foggy mind. He was a sucker for plans, wasn't he? He stepped back into the Hog's guest room and squinted his eyes as he tried to remember where his seat was …more importantly, where the bottle was. Finally he spotted it standing, like a godsend, on a table nearby. He walked over to it, feeling more like floating through the air. If only he could turn into a wisp of smoke and just fly to wherever he wanted to go. That would be impressive. Grinning stupidly, Tom gracelessly plopped down on the bench, immediately reached for the whiskey bottle and took a gulp. Breathing in deeply he tried to steady his spinning head. To no avail. He took another swig from the bottle.

*That'll surely help…*

He discovered that sarcasm made him even dizzier.

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Melanie Nicolls had had a splendid day. After all, Slytherin had just beat Hufflepuff in the final Quidditch match of the school year. Not that Melanie was such a big Quidditch fan but it always made her day when her house won. Now the Quidditch Cup was theirs. Slytherin would surely win the House Cup as well. Since Tom Riddle had entered Hogwarts, Slytherin had never lost the House Cup. He was so incredibly smart.

A small smile tugged at her lips and a glassy look entered her eyes. Tom was so perfect and handsome. If that horrible girl hadn't stolen him away from Melanie, he would still be her boyfriend. She balled her hands angrily. Melanie needed to rip Tom out of DeCerto's grip. That Mudblood would only ruin him. He deserved someone far better.

She really shouldn't get so worked up because of that Muggle filth. After all Melanie had a plan to save Tom. Sadly Avery hadn't acted yet. Of course she had always known he would never attack Tom head-on. After all, Avery *was* a Slytherin. She knew his plan though: He tried to pull more people over to his side first. He needed to shift the power structure within Slytherin house. Melanie could only hope that he would be successful. Tom was very popular; it would be difficult to recruit people to work against him. If anyone would manage that, though, it would be Avery. That was why she had singled him out after all.

Melanie felt bad for working against Tom. But it was for his own good. After all Tom would never really lose against Avery. He only needed to stagger a little bit. Then DeCerto would leave him and Melanie could comfort Tom. The little Mudblood would be better off with Avery anyway, wouldn't she? Melanie thought maliciously.

A gruff voice brought her out of her musings, "Next."

Pulled out of her day dreams, Melanie stepped over to the counter. The man behind the counter looked at her disinterestedly as she handed him the slip of paper. He checked it absentmindedly before he turned around and waved his wand at the pile of parcels and packets behind him. A tiny parcel flew towards him. He handed Melanie the parcel.
"Three Sickles," he informed her.

Melanie paid and left the post office. If only her father wasn't so paranoid. It wasn't like he couldn't send this by owl. Shaking her head, she walked down the main street of Hogsmeade. At least she had gotten permission from Slughorn the leave Hogwarts. Again she was glad to be in Slytherin. Dumbledore would have never allowed one of his Gryffindors to slip out of the castle for a quick trip to Hogsmeade.

*Just to get my dragon hide gloves.*

She looked disdainfully at the parcel in her hands. All that hassle only because crazy Kettleburn had told them he wanted to work on Fire Crabs next Magical Creature class. Melanie rolled her eyes in disgust. She *surely* was not going to use the school's old *used* gloves and get her fingers burned.

Cursing inwardly, she strolled down the main street in direction to Hogwarts. She passed the Hog's Head Inn as she stuffed the parcel into her bag. The inn's door opened and a figure staggered out, clearly in a drunk state. Melanie wrinkled her nose in disgust. It took her only a few seconds to recognize that stranger. Then her disgust completely vanished and turned into shock.

**Tom!**

Melanie's eyes widened as she stared at Tom. He truly looked the worse for wear. His silky black hair was mussed up just like his rumpled uniform. He staggered heavily and even had to lean with one hand against the house wall to keep his balance. Melanie couldn't believe her eyes, but it was quite obvious: Tom Riddle was completely sloshed.

Her first impulse was to run over to him and help him. She had taken a few steps towards his stumbling form as she hesitated. She worried her lip as her gaze wandered over Tom. He couldn't walk a straight line but obviously was headed for Hogwarts castle. Wasn't this exactly what she needed? What Avery needed? Tom's sad condition would provide Avery with the dent in Tom's reputation he so badly needed. After all, who wanted to have a sot as their leader?

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Tom ran a hand over his face as he staggered towards the castle. If only he was already in his dorm. He really needed to lie down. He tried to check his watch, but somehow wasn't able to decipher the time. He looked up at the sky. Judging by the solar altitude it was… well, he had no idea but he was kinda tired. For a second he eyed the grassy ground longingly.

**No. I'm not going to sleep on the streets.**

He'd been there before – thanks to one dreadful orphanage – and he wasn't keen on doing it again. So Tom tumbled on, always in direction of Hogwarts. He could already see it, having passed the Entrance Gate some time ago. Rather pathetic how he had managed to slip by the wards, considering that he wasn't at all at his best right now.

**Ah well, I am brilliant.**

It took him a while to stumble over Hogwarts' Grounds. He almost got lost in the Forbidden Forest, which was strange as it wasn't even on his way. He wasn't too concerned though. Luckily he had taken his bottle of Firewhiskey along. He raised the bottle and took a hearty swig, draining it. For a second, Tom stared at the empty bottle in his hand.

*Shoulda taken two,* he mourned but then remembered that he wanted to go to sleep anyway. So he just shrugged and threw the bottle carelessly away.
Sometime later, he finally neared the castle. The sun was setting, bathing everything in a blood-red glow. He had almost reached the castle as Tom saw a few dark figures walking towards him. He groaned softly. If one of them was a teacher, he was in big trouble, Tom thought as he tried to flatten his dishevelled hair. He really needed to pull himself together.

…and try to avoid puking on a professor, a snarky voice generously informed him.

Tom promised to heed that advice as he stumbled on. The sun had completely disappeared by now, so he didn't recognize the people until they were only a few metres away. He didn't know if he should be relieved or concerned. So he went for annoyed, as he recognized his Knights.

"Riddle," Avery greeted him.

Tom tried to not look drunk and threw Avery a dark glare. Then his gaze wandered from him to the other boys. Lestrange stood right beside Avery with Black and Alba standing a bit in the background. How very inconvenient. Tom's glassy eyes snapped back to Avery.

"What do you want?" he asked irately, fighting against a slur.

"Nothing much," Avery replied innocently. "We just thought it would be a good time for a meeting."

Tom clenched his jaw and ran a hand irritably through his hair. He really wasn't in the mood for this nonsense right now. He wanted to lie down and get this spinning motion under control.

"Too bad," Tom hissed at Avery. "I don't give a shit about what you think."

He saw Alba and Black stiffen at his sharp tone of voice. Avery though just continued to look at him blankly. Lestrange seemed to muster him with curiosity. Tom was feeling too dizzy to deal with them right now, so he just glowered at them before he continued to walk towards the Entrance Doors.

"Why in such a hurry?" Tom heard Avery's exceedingly innocent voice.

He halted in his steps and breathed in deeply. Merlin, if that twit didn't shut up, Tom would rip him into pieces and feed him to the Basilisk. Slowly he turned around to Avery who smiling at him winningly. It only made Tom sneer irritably.

"Come on, Riddle, it's Sunday," Avery cajoled greasily. "I'm sure you don't have anything important to do."

Tom grinded his teeth. If his head hadn't been swirling like mad, he would have thrown a witty insult back. But as it was he only growled,

"Shut the fuck up."

Avery raised his eyebrows, the innocent smile never leaving his face.

"I didn't want to insult you," he apologized generously. "I was just hoping you could spare us a little of your time. After all, we didn't have a meeting in quite some time now."

At that, the other boys nodded in agreement. Tom felt more and more irked by this, but he just couldn't think straight.

"I don't have time," he finally hissed, trying not to stumble over his own words.

"You don't?" Avery said calmly. "It just is strange-" He threw a fleeting look at the other boys before he continued, ",how you never have time for our group lately but you are together with DeCerto all
At those words Tom's mild annoyance turned into something more sinister. He even felt the first stirrings of his angry magic boiling up.

"Keep Hermione out of this!" he shot at Avery, his voice shaking with ire.

Avery again turned his head and shot a meaningful look at the other boys but Tom was too enraged to notice.

"But Riddle, that bitch is a worthless Mudblood," Avery said, innocently surprised.

The other Knights mumbled in consent at Avery's insulting words. The dizziness was tugging at Tom's mind worse than ever and now it was supported by his furious magic. It rushed through him wrathfully, burning away any clear thought. Avery, seeing Tom's upcoming rage, smiled another innocent smile.

"I can see why you would get angry over all those rumours circling the castle," he informed Tom sympathetically. "They claim you are that Mudblood's boyfriend. That is tainting your reputation. I fully understand if you want revenge for it. One word from you and we'll go and teach that filthy Muggle never to cross your path ever again."

Pictures of Hermione's bruised face flew through Tom's mind. He fisted his hands tightly as he felt his magic turning into an uncontrollable torrent. If these idiots continued to bug him, he would surely lose his grip on his dark magic.

"We are all your devoted followers." Avery said in his oily voice. "You just have to order us." With one hand he gestured at the other Knights, grinning evilly. "What are you waiting for? You have us at your command. We can make that slag's life the living hell. No less than she deserves."

As the other Knights confirmed Avery's suggestion, Hermione's memory replayed in Tom's mind. He saw her helplessly lying on concrete floor as those men used the Torture Curse on her. Losing his composure, Tom took a step forwards and his magic finally left his body and crackled around him balefully.

"Keep away from Hermione!" he snapped menacingly.

A smirk twisted up Avery's mouth as he saw Tom losing his self-control. Then he plastered a look of fake-confusion on his face before he turned around to the other Knights. Triumph glimmered in Avery's eyes as he found a sharp frown on Lestrange's brow. The other boy stepped forward. Slowly doubt darkened his eyes as they wandered over Tom.

Lestrange opened his mouth and asked hesitantly, "Isn't Avery right, though? Why do you waste so much time on a Mudblood?"

Tom's magic bristled around him furiously as his cold eyes drifted from Avery to Lestrange.

"I won't repeat myself," he hissed, a sharp edge twisting his words. "You will do as I say. Stay away from Hermione." He took a step towards his followers and the dark magic in the air intensified. "If you disobey me, you will regret it."

"Why though?" Black now inquired bemused.

Alba by his side nodded while he eyed Tom with narrowed eyes. A suspicious glint in his eyes, Lestrange addressed Tom again,
"We know that you despise Mudbloods, but the way you are behaving lately suggests something else."

Tom saw Black and Alba nod at this with grim faces, while Avery just grinned.

"If you try getting anything from the Mudblood," Lestrange continued. "I'm sure there are other ways."

Between his furious magic howling around him and the dizzy feeling in his head, Tom felt unable to reply. Seeing that hesitation, Avery stepped forward, evil smirk in place.

"Don't get us wrong," he said in a slimy voice. "We sure understand how you want to fuck that filthy Mudblood. After all, she looks nice enough. But why do you allow her to be so close to you?"

Tom was quaking in anger. There was no hope controlling his infuriated magic anymore. It whipped out at Avery making him stumble a step back. Feeling that baleful magic in the air, Avery didn't back down. On the contrary, his smirk widened and then he said darkly,

"You are not starting to listen to a Mudblood now, are you?" A crazy sheen entering his eyes, Avery purred, "The whole castle already thinks you are DeCerto's boyfriend." Then a mocking smirk appeared on his face. "Or are those rumours true after all? Are you taking orders from her now? Do you allow that Muggle-whore to boss you around?"

'Muggle-whore'

The word echoed through Tom's head. The same insult those men in Hermione's memory had hissed mercilessly at her. It was then that Tom snapped. There was no way to quell his wrath. Without saying anything he pulled his wand and pointed it at Avery.

"Crucio."

"Are you drunk?" Hermione's incredulous voice rang through the night air.

Tom's eerie red eyes wandered to her.

"Nope," he slurred, obviously having problems with talking.

Hermione stared at him flabbergasted. It only now registered with her that he was swaying slightly on the spot and – crimson-red as they might be – his eyes looked suspiciously glassy. Now a rather stern expression on her face, Hermione stepped over to him and she scanned his face. Tom unhurriedly arched an eyebrow at her, thought the gesture missed his usual elegance. Now that Hermione stood so close to him she was definitely hit by a whiff of cigarette smoke and alcohol. Without saying anything she raised her hand and with two fingers lightly pushed against his chest. Tom had to take a struggled step back to keep his balance.

"Merlin, you are drunk!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Mmm," was all Tom could contribute to this conversation.

"I can't believe it!" she exclaimed indignantly.

She watched with a furrowed brow how Tom tried to store his wand away in his pocket. He had grabbed the front of his black uniform robe with one hand while he tried to clumsily stuff his wand
into the pocket with his other hand. He miserably failed. He missed the pocket and his pale yew wand landed with a soft thud on the ground. It took him a moment to understand that something had gone wrong then he stupidly stared at his wand in the grass. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation. Tom bent forward, obviously with the intention to pick up the wand. With how inapt he was at the moment, she could already see him lying face-down in the dirt. She stepped forward and quickly reached for his wand. Throwing him another glare, she put the wand in his pocket.

"What are you doing, walking around drunk like this?" she hissed at him angrily. "And then you curse those idiots? What if a teacher saw you? Are you stupid?"

He just blinked at her slowly, overchallenged by all the information. Hermione ran a hand through her curly hair. It was completely useless rebuking him now. He didn't get it and would probably not remember anything in the morning.

"Oh dear," Hermione sighed as she turned her head and looked at the castle.

She almost groaned. How was she going to manoeuvre Tom to his room and tuck him into bed without any teacher catching them? She cursed under her breath before she looked back to Tom. He currently tried to sit down on the ground. Hermione quickly hastened over to him.

"No no no," she chastised him while she grabbed his arm, stopping him from plopping down on the floor. "No sitting-down."

Tom groaned in protest. Then he draped an arm around her shoulders and heavily leaned on her. Hermione staggered with his weight. Damn it, how would she get him back to his bed? She considered casting a Levitation Charm on him but quickly discarded the idea. It was rather difficult to levitate someone who didn't keep still. Considering Tom's current state, it was highly likely that he would wriggle around a lot.

Maybe a little Petrificus totalus before? a tiny voice suggested helpfully. Hermione did consider it…

…but no. She was positive that Tom wouldn't appreciate it at all. He would just make even more of a fuss when she finally released him from the spells.

"The Muggle way then," she decided as she wrapped an arm around Tom's waist.

Then she set out for the castle. Tom followed her lead with unsteady steps. His arm was draped over her shoulders, leaning on her heavily. He smelled like a liquor store. Hermione again cursed under her breath. They were climbing up the stone steps to the Entrance Door as Tom started to talk. Though 'talking' was stretching it a bit, it was more that he slurred terribly. Though 'talking' was stretching it a bit, it was more that he slurred terribly.

"Now that you are Muggleborn," Tom began and Hermione's face sank.

Boy, that's not going to end well, she thought tiredly, preparing herself for one of his prejudiced speeches.

Tom struggled forwards another step and then rattled on, "So, tell me about the Muggles in the future. Did they finally manage to invent something against chicken pox?"

Hermione furrowed her brow in surprise and stared at him. That was… unexpected?

"…er… what?" she asked as she waved her hand at the Entrance Door to open it.

Tom allowed her to pull him inside the castle as he continued, "I had chicken pox when I was a kid.
It was horrible. But I think Mrs Cole was glad I couldn't get up and cause any trouble."

She didn't know what to answer but obviously Tom didn't really need a conversational partner for his monologue.

"Ha, I got back at her for that," he informed her triumphantly. "Used my magic wise and set her dress on fire."

"Well, I'm sure Dippet would be so proud of your responsible use of magic," Hermione commented sarcastically.

Tom just nodded solemnly while he tried not to trip over his own feet. She tightened her arm around his waist and tugged him down the Entrance Hall and towards the moving staircase. He continued to mumble nonsense and wasn't at all offended by her monosyllabic answers.

Out of any context he then said, "But 'Voldemort'. It is a nice name, don't you think?"

"Sure, Tom," Hermione concurred soothingly, not wanting to upset him.

"Yeah," he continued. "It has a nice ring to it. Vol-de-mort," he said it again. "Very esso… est… exo-tic."

His glassy eyes wandered to her and Hermione was relieved to notice that they were back to grey. Well, she didn't think she would have been able to explain the malicious red colour if they were to be caught by a professor.

Having no such concerns, Tom said, dripping over his words, "You wouldn't know how long it took me to come up with it."

He scanned her expectantly so Hermione asked dutifully, "No, I wouldn't. How long did it take?"

A roughish smile appeared on his face.

"It must have been… mmh… a few years ago? In my fourth? …don't remember… But-" he said triumphantly. "$I had double History with Binns. So it was either making up that name or… or writing my potions essay. I spend the whole class making up my new name. And I needed… let's see… How many hours…?"

He tried counting off his fingers but ended up just staring at his hand, completely forgetting what he was going on about. Hermione, for one, wasn't going to encourage him but just dragged him along the dark corridor.

Then they reached to moving staircase and Hermione wondered if bringing Tom down to the dungeons and the Slytherin dorm was such a great idea. She would have to pass the common room with him, risking him to be seen in his drunk state. On top of that, she didn't want to meet his little Death Eaters again today.

Where to? Where to? she wondered while the staircase in front of her creaked softly each time it changed position. Her own dorm was out of the question. She didn't even want to imagine what her dorm mates would say to a drunk Tom …in her bed. Hermione chuckled softly and started pulling Tom up the stairs, having finally thought of a place to bring him to.

They had just passed the second floor and were ascending further as Tom proudly declared, "It's an anagram."
"What's an anagram?" Hermione asked distractedly, feeling a bit breathless from having to half carry him.

"Voldemort, of course," he said rather patronizingly as he looked at her. Then he frowned and added, "But you can't know; I never told you. I have a middle name."

"Really?" Hermione asked dryly.

Not hearing her sarcasm, Tom nodded delighted. Then he leaned his head a little down to her, accidentally bobbing it against hers. Ignoring it, he whispered happily in her ear,

"Yes. I have. But don't tell anyone."

Here he broke down in giggles and Hermione just shook her head at him.

"It's 'Marvolo'," he finally managed to word.

She couldn't help it as a small grin appeared on her own face. "Marvolo, hm?"

Tom nodded enthusiastically, still giggling softly. "And, man, was I glad. You can't do much with 'Tom Riddle' alone."

"I see," Hermione agreed patiently.

She was glad as they finally reached the right floor. Tom was rather heavy. She dragged him down the dark corridor, hoping to quickly reach their destination.

"I wonder what happened to Marvolo," Tom mused, obviously not realizing he talked out loud. "Probably dead."

He glanced at Hermione and explained generously, "That's my grandfather." He furrowed his brow and continued his rambling, "Actually, whatever happened to my grandmother? Never heard of her at all…" He shrugged then and concluded, "Well, I guess she ran away. Can't blame her."

A few more steps down the corridor and he said, "Just like my mother. She ran away, too. Don't know if I blame her, though. Seems like there's a tradition in my family of our women running away." Another unsteady step and he turned his gaze on Hermione and asked hesitantly, "But you're not going to leave me, are you?"

She subconsciously tightened her hold on him and soothed, "Don't worry, Tom. I'm right here."

A radiant, if a little lopsided, smile appeared on his face as he beamed down at her satisfied. Hermione couldn't help but throw him a small smile of her own.

Everything went so smoothly. They had finally reached the right floor and hadn't met anyone on their way, not even a ghost. It at gone very smoothly. Hermione should have known her luck wouldn't last. But as she heard the steps moving towards her, it was already too late. She didn't know if she should laugh or cry as she watched none other than Albus Dumbledore walking towards her and Tom. She did neither but just stood there, stock-still, in the corridor with a very drunk Tom hanging off her side while she stared at Dumbledore.

By now the professor had spotted the two students. Immediately a sharp frown appeared on his face. It was after curfew after all. Hermione could tell the exact point in time when Dumbledore recognized Tom by how the merry twinkle in his eyes died away. She nearly groaned in frustration.
Dumbledore stepped over to them and Hermione stiffened as his clear blue eyes wandered over Tom. Tom had his arm still draped around her shoulders and dangerously swayed on the spot. He hadn't even looked up at the professor. Hermione doubted he had noticed Dumbledore's presence. Right now Tom was the picture of being drunk and disorderly. Judging by that disapproving expression on Dumbledore's face, he had come to the same conclusion.

Sure enough he inquired sternly, "He is not drunk, is he?"

Hermione's eyes widened then she lied, and rather badly at that, "No, of course not."

Dumbledore raised both eyebrows as he heard her transparent lie, then he looked at Tom with narrowed eyes. Tom still leaned on her, not able to hold his balance alone, and mumbled to himself under his breath. Dumbledore looked back at Hermione. She suppressed a groan as she saw that disapproving glint in his eyes.

"Ms DeCerto," he addressed her in a strict voice, obviously thinking that talking to Tom wouldn't make any sense right now. "I know you've been here for only a few months but I am sure you did notice that we do not allow the students to drink alcohol at this school."

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied meekly. "I'm sorry."

The professor's sharp gaze lost nothing of its severity as it again skimmed over Tom's staggering form.

"Tom knows this as well. He's even a prefect," Dumbledore added. His clear blue eyes bored into her accusingly, making Hermione uncomfortable. "We've talked about his tendency to break the rules before. And I believe I warned him more than once to not misbehave again."

Hermione nodded timidly while she pulled Tom protectively against herself.

"I think he just had a bad day, professor," she tried to defend Tom. "Normally, he would never drink."

Dumbledore just eyed Tom sceptically as if expecting the other would pull his wand any second now and then run off on a killing spree.

*Can't blame him for thinking that,* Hermione thought dryly.

"Please, sir," she pleaded, seeing the hard expression on the old wizard's face. "I swear he's not doing it again. And I'll look after him now. He won't cause any problems."

The stern expression on his face told her that Dumbledore doubted her words. He still thought Tom was a possible danger to others.

At that point in time, Tom, completely oblivious to the professor's presence, suddenly leaned even closer to Hermione. He looked down at her with his grey eyes before he declared rather loudly,

"You are kinda beautiful, you know that?" He raised a hand and ran his fingers through her hair. "Your hair is like… like… a lion's mane. Maybe that's why you are in Gryffindor, you know." He scanned her with his glassy eyes, seemingly thinking intensely. Then he concluded, "Tho' lionesses don't have no manes." Ignoring the double negative, he just patted her on the head. "Don't worry I still like you," he reassured, smiling at her.

To her horror Tom then leaned down to her and kissed her on the cheek. His hand left her hair and wandered down her arm. It skimmed over her flat stomach, searching for the brim of her blouse.
Hermione blushed deeply as he continued to trace wet kisses over her cheek while his hand slipped under her blouse and stroked her waist. With wide eyes, face deep red, she stared at Dumbledore.

_Great. Just great._ She was being groped by Tom Riddle. In front of Albus Dumbledore no less.

Mortified by the whole situation, Hermione pushed against Tom, so he had to stop assaulting her with kisses. Then she hissed at him under her breath so the teacher wouldn't hear,

"Keep your hands to yourself, you pervert!"

As a response Tom just grunted before his head sagged against her shoulder and he hung even heavier on her. Struggling with his weight, Hermione suddenly heard a chuckle. She raised her head and furrowed her brow in bewilderment as she found Dumbledore grinning at her. His eyes twinkled merrily as they skimmed over Tom and her.

"Well, Ms DeCerto," he said, amusement tinting his voice. "It seems you really have everything under control."

Hermione just stared at him in complete surprise. Dumbledore chuckled again before he said cheerfully, "Let's just pretend I never met you tonight, shall we?"

Ripped from her stupor, she replied stupidly, "Er… hm… That would be… for the best… I think."

Dumbledore eyed amused how Tom ran his fingers through Hermione's curly hair with a fascinated expression on his face. She distractedly waved his hand away from her hair. Then with a grateful nod at the smiling professor, she continued to haul Tom down the corridor.

"Oh, and Ms DeCerto?" Dumbledore called after her.

Hermione turned her head and looked at him expectantly. A warm smile played around his mouth and his eyes twinkled at her.

"I am glad you decided to give Tom a second chance."

A small smile appeared on her own face as Hermione looked at her professor. Then she said softly, "I think he's already on his third …or fourth. I don't remember." She readjusted her hold on a very cuddly Tom before she said playfully, "If he botches it up again, I will have no choice but to curse him." Remembering that she was talking to a teacher she added, "…er… no dangerous curses, of course."

Dumbledore chuckled blithefully. His hand stroked over his auburn beard and he mused, "As a teacher I could never endorse students cursing each other. But should such an event ever occur, I would be inclined to forget my teaching post for a moment." His blue eyes laughed at her and he said, "Good night to you, Ms DeCerto."

"And a good night to you, professor." Hermione grinned at him.

Still smiling, Dumbledore turned around and hummed a merry tune to himself as he continued his way down the corridor.

Hermione breathed out in relief as they finally reached the right corridor. She leaned Tom against the wall while she walked to and fro three times. Instantly a door appeared where before had been nothing more than bare wall. Hermione grabbed Tom's arm and pulled him over to the door.

They entered a cosy room with a king-sized bed standing in its middle. On the opposite side of the
room was another door leading into a small bathroom. Satisfied with the room's appearance, Hermione closed the door behind her and heaved Tom over to the bed where she dumped him on the soft mattress. He snuggled into the pillow with a content expression on his face. Hermione just glared down at him lounging on the bed. He had no idea how much trouble he had caused her.

"You are really lucky Dumbledore let you off like that," she snubbed at him angrily.

He only groaned softly as he rolled onto his back, eyes closed. She huffed at him but then bent down and pulled his shoes off his feet.

"What did you actually drink?" she asked cuttingly.

"Mmm, dunno," he moaned. "Stuff?"

"No shit," Hermione mumbled angrily under her breath.

After having removed his shoes she started to pull his black outer robes off him, which turned out not being so easy as Tom was just lying there like some dead weight. Finally she managed and held his robes in her hand. She made sure that his wand was still stored in the robe pocket and then laid it over the back of a chair far away from Tom. She stepped over to the bed and looked down at Tom with narrowed eyes. He yawned loudly before he shuffled a little on the bed to find a more comfortable position.

"You were in Hogsmeade, weren't you? How did you get back, drunk like this?" she inquired mordantly while she pulled his tie off his neck and opened his shirt a bit.

Tom didn't even open his eyes as he answered. "Never heard o' tha' village, ma'am," he slurred.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. She should save the scolding for tomorrow when he would be able to understand what she said. Mumbling angrily under her breath, Hermione pulled the light blanket over him. Then she turned around, wanting to leave, as she felt a hand grabbing her wrist. She turned and looked down at Tom. He had his eyes opened and gazed at her, relatively steadily even.

"Don't go," he whispered.

"Tom, I..."

She really didn't want to stay away from her dorm the night. Her helpful dorm mates would spread even more gossips. Tom grabbed her wrist tighter, obviously not wanting to let her go, while he looked at her pleadingly.

"Well, o- okay," Hermione caved in.

What did she care about some stupid gossips anyway? She stepped out of her shoes and then slipped into the bed beside him. Immediately Tom slid nearer to her. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her against his chest, then he buried his face into her neck. She could feel him nibbling softly at her skin while his hands ran possessively over her body. One of them started to greedily undo the buttons of her blouse, the other ran down her back to grab her buttocks.

Hermione just rolled her eyes. Then she grabbed his stray hands and forced them to stop their exploring.

"No groping, Tom. I'm not in the mood and you smell like a whiskey bottle."

Hearing this, he stopped his actions. His body sagged against hers and his mouth stopped fondling
her skin. He didn't remove his head from her neck, though, but just remained lying there limply. Hermione released his hands and they fell down, not moving anymore. Sighing softly, she gently ran her fingers through his hair. Tom snuggled a bit closer to her. She continued stroking his head. After a while she heard his breathing even out and knew he had fallen asleep.

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The warm water washed over her body soothingly. The Room of Requirement was really something else, Hermione thought fondly as she reached for the taps and closed them. She stepped out of the shower cabin and grabbed one of the fluffy towels. Drying her body, her eyes wandered to the pile of clothes on the floor. She scanned it pensively, then she raised her hand and snapped her fingers at it.

"Plico," she whispered.

Instantly the clothes rose up from the floor, all the wrinkles left the fabric then they folded themselves as a neat stack. Her new wandless magic wasn't bad. Not bad at all. Hermione smiled triumphantly down at her neat clothes.

…and finally Legifer was rubbing off on her. *Urgs!* She reached for her clothes and got dressed.

Not much later Hermione stepped out of the bathroom, rubbing her hair with the towel so that it looked horribly bushy. Ignoring her stubborn hair she scanned the room for Tom. He was still in bed. Lying on his stomach, he had the light blanket wrapped around him and his face buried in the pillows. Hermione walked over to the bed and sat down beside him.

"You okay?" she asked him softly.

"Mpf," was all the answer she got.

"Hangover, hm?" she said lightly. "No wonder."

Tom didn't reply anything and his face was still pressed into the pillow. Hermione raised her hand and fondled the back of his neck.

"How about you get up and take a shower?" she suggested. "It'll make you feel better."

"Dun wanna," he mumbled into his pillow.

Hermione chuckled softly. He was such a child.

"It's rather late already," she informed him. "Breakfast is long over and Potions already started. We could go down to the kitchens. Something to eat will help you."

"Or it'll make you throw up. I guess we'll have to find out."

"You are an evil witch, you know that?" he muttered sullenly.

Hermione giggled at that. Sighing loudly, Tom turned around on the bed so that he lay on his back and looked up at her with tired eyes. Hermione smiled at him softly and wiped a strand of his dark hair out of his face. Then she leaned down to him and placed a tender kiss on his lips.

As she bent up again she grinned at him and teased, "You still smell like a whiskey bottle and you taste like one, too."

He ran a hand through his hair, making it even more dishevelled.

"Okay okay, I get it," he groused, though there was a hint of a smirk on his face. "I'll take the shower then."
Groaning softly, Tom got up from the bed and slowly staggered over to the bathroom. On his way he started to undress. He slipped out of his shirt and carelessly dumped it on the floor. While he opened the bathroom door he simultaneously unbuckled his belt. Hermione shook her head and summoned his shirt to her.

"Scourgify," she whispered. Instantly the shirt was cleaned and stopped smelling like someone had used it to wipe the floor of a pub.

Hermione still tried to untangle her rebellious hair with a brush as the bathroom door opened again. Tom stepped out, his hair damp. He was barefoot, wearing nothing but his black pants. He walked over to her and slumped down beside her on the bed.

"Feeling better?" Hermione asked.

Tom just threw her a nasty glare and reached for his shirt. He slipped into it, not bothering to button it, and remained to be sitting on the bed beside her.

"How did you find me?" he asked quietly, his voice unreadable.

Hermione grinned at him. "As much as it pains me to say it but Malfoy came to fetch me."

"Malfoy?"

"Hm, quite the loyal lapdog he is," she whispered amused.

Tom didn't answer anything. Hermione stopped brushing her hair and looked at him inquiringly. He let his head hang and stared down at his hands. He looked miserable and that had nothing to do with his hangover, Hermione knew. She skidded a bit closer to him on the bed before she asked gently, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Reluctantly, Tom turned his head and peered at her. His face was a blank mask, though there was some unknown emotion flickering in his grey eyes.

"No," he said, frost leaking through his tone.

Hermione threw him a faint smile. "Still, I'm here should you change your mind."

His grey eyes left her and he didn't react to her at all anymore. Just as Hermione contemplated leaving him alone to give him some space, Tom suddenly moved. Without saying anything he lay down on the bed and put his head in her lap. He turned so he lay on his side and buried his face in her flat stomach. Hermione raised an arm and gingerly looped it around him. They sat like this for some time, Hermione rubbing soothing circles on Tom's back.

After a while he spoke up. His voice was completely free of any emotion as he whispered, "Why didn't you just kill me?"

Hermione's arm around him tightened as she heard the hollow tinge in his tone. She bent down and whispered softly in his ear,

"Because I don't want you dead."

Then she placed a light kiss on his cheek. Tom didn't reply anything. He just remained lying there. Hermione didn't know what else to say so she continued running her fingers gently through his velvety hair.
After a while, Tom sighed softly then he sat up. She noticed how he avoided looking her in the eyes. He sat on the bed with his head bent while he fiddled with the golden ring he wore on his right hand. Hermione patiently waited for him to speak. She had known since she had told him about his future that they would have to discuss it some more.

After long silence, Tom finally whispered, without looking up at her, "I know I asked this before, but the war you fought in…"

His eyes hesitantly wandered to her. His face was expressionless and he seemed to be composed but Hermione had long since learned how to read Tom. She could see the unease flickering through his grey eyes.

"Did you… did you win that war?"

Hermione couldn't help but tense as she heard his question. She bit her lower lip nervously but then replied cautiously, "Tom, I don't think it's such a good idea to tell you."

He stared at her, not reacting at all. Hermione suppressed a shudder as his penetrating gaze wandered over her.

Finally, Tom concluded flatly, "Because I could use the information against you?"

Hermione didn't know what to answer. She didn't want to admit it but, yes, he was right. Tom took her silence as such and averted his eyes from her.

"Why did you fight against me?" he asked tonelessly.

Hermione sighed. She reached out for him and took his hand in hers. The Gaunt's ring was cold against her palm. Tom stared down at their entwined fingers as if he didn't understand it.

"Frankly, you didn't leave us much of a choice," she answered his question gently.

His whole body stiffened as he heard it but Hermione held on to his hand. For a long while he didn't say anything but just stared blankly down at her hand holding his.

After an eternity he asked in a soft voice, "Can you tell me more about that war?"

"What do you want to hear?" Hermione responded hesitantly.

"What was it about?" Tom queried in a bleak tone.

He was staring vacantly in front of him. Hermione grabbed his hand firmer before she answered slowly, "I am not really sure."

His eyes flashed at her and she could read confusion in them. "What do you mean, you don't know? Shouldn't you know?"

Hermione ran a hand through her curly hair as she scanned him contemplatively.

"It's difficult," she sighed. "That conflict was fuelled by several things. One side started to become disappointed with society. Over many years there accumulated so much hate, frustration and fear that at some point it couldn't be held back anymore. That insecurity led to a campaign of hate against all Muggleborns."

Hermione looked at Tom cautiously. He stared at her with a frown on his face.
"Muggleborns?" he asked in a low voice and she couldn't help but notice the slight amount of aversion running through his voice.

Hermione nodded before she continued in a nervous voice, "Those people felt threatened. They feared that Muggleborns would one day take over their world and destroy it. In their opinion there was no reason to share their world with... lesser beings."

She paused shortly. Tom was looking at her intently but she couldn't tell what he thought about her story.

"Since I entered the magical world I've always been confronted with hate and mistrust," Hermione tried to explain her situation in a timid voice. "Some people looked down on me because of my parentage. During my earlier years at Hogwarts it wasn't yet that bad. Sometimes the Slytherins would call me names or ridicule me but nothing too serious."

There was anger swirling though Tom's steely grey eyes as he heard it. "Nothing serious?"

Hermione nodded uneasily, disturbed by the cold gleam flaring up in his eyes.

"Like that Draco guy you told me about?" Tom inquired coldly. "He called you a Mudblood."

"Yeah," said Hermione, trying to smile faintly. "Didn't like me too much, Draco."

Tom didn't seem to be amused at all. His eyes flashed dangerously as he asked, "And he was in Slytherin?"

"Will be," Hermione corrected him shyly.

Tom glared at her, a red sheen threateningly burning in his eyes. Finally he gritted out, fury twisting his words, "I wish I could go and curse that little snot!"

A hesitant smile on her face, Hermione looked up at Tom and gently skimmed her fingers over his cheek. "Don't worry, Tom. Back then, Draco was just an idiotic kid. No need to turn into an avenging angel."

Tom elegantly arched an eyebrow but his fury already started to dim.

"Really it was nothing more than harmless banter." Her eyes fluttered up at him as she continued her story, "Though, over the years the hostility against Muggleborns got worse and worse. Until, one day, war broke lose."

"A war against Muggleborns?" Tom asked with an expressionless tone.

"Yes," Hermione whispered sadly. "It flared up just after my sixth year."

"You lost your parents in that war?" he asked, his voice terrifyingly blank, indifferent even.

A lump forming in her throat, she was only able to nod at him.

"And a lot of your friends, too?" Tom's voice was still painfully distanced.

"Yes," she whispered in a broken voice.

"It was then that you decided to fight," he stated callously. "...against me."

Hermione stiffened as she heard it. Was there accusation in his voice or was she imagining things?
Her eyes hesitantly wandered up at his face, fearful at what they might find. Tom didn't look at her but again vacantly stared down at the golden ring at his hand. She shuddered as she saw the detached expression on his face.

Without looking at her, Tom asked in a horribly cold tone, "How come I into this?"

Hermione frowned at him confused. As she finally understood his question, she said quietly, "You do not come into this at all."

"Then what about Voldemort?"

She sighed as she wondered how to answer. How much did she want to tell Tom about his future counterpart.

"Yes, Voldemort. He was the leader of the anti-Muggle movement," Hermione said cautiously. "He gathered many supporters around him. The movement gained quickly in influence as more and more people leaned to his side. While he attracted more followers he also spread fear among his enemies. Before the war started, people suddenly disappeared, others were murdered blatantly and many more threatened. Death Eaters were everywhere."

"What is a death-eater?" Tom asked her confused.

Hermione scanned him intently, surprised that he didn't know. Then again, so far he had only formed the Knights of Walpurgis.

"That's what Voldemort called his followers," she explained in a strained voice.

At the word 'followers' she could see understanding dawning in Tom's eyes. He could obviously draw the connection. Hermione ignored it and continued with her story, "It took him some time but in the end Voldemort was strong enough to risk open war. He wanted to overthrow the Ministry and reshape the country after his ideals."

Hermione ended her story and hesitantly glanced at Tom. His grey eyes regarded her and his face was still a horribly cold front that made her stomach flop.

"I started a war and attacked the Ministry?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she replied tentatively.

He turned his head away from her.

"I wanted to kill all Muggleborns…?" Tom whispered softly as if tasting the words, and the idea behind them, on his tongue. He mulled it over for a moment, muttering to himself as he did, "I don't like Muggles or Muggleborns…"

Hermione shuddered at his statement.

Suddenly, Tom's eyes shot at her. His cold gaze raked over her form, making her shift nervously on the bed. Hermione had to stop herself from shying away as Tom slid nearer to her. He raised a hand and made her flinch as he skimmed his fingers over her cheek. His eyes still wandering over her, he released a breath of air. The coldness drained from his gaze as he locked eyes with her.

"You got drawn into this war and you got hurt," Tom whispered gingerly.

His fingers wandered to her shoulder where her scars were hidden under the fabric of her blouse.
Tom stared at her as he stated, "You got injured because of me."

"Because of Voldemort," Hermione corrected in a soft but steady voice. "Not you, Tom."

"We are the same."

Tom stared at Hermione and nearly shuddered as her hazel eyes wandered over him. It was now that he understood how much she had already seen with her pretty eyes. She had had to go through a war, fight against dark wizards.

How did she perceive him with those eyes?

Tom was the reason for all her misery. Did she see him right now? Or that grotesque monster from her memory? Was there even a difference? After Hermione had revealed her parentage, Tom had started to hate her. No wonder she had been so reluctant to tell him. After she had been honest, Tom had hit her and abused her. In his eyes she had been worthless. His future counterpart would have done the same or worse. Tom's blood turned cold as he wondered what would have happened if that man had managed to catch Hermione. He stared at the witch sitting beside him on the bed and dread filled him as he imagined what he could have done to her. He cautiously reached for her and his fingers almost timidly clasped her hand.

"I will never hurt you for being Muggleborn," Tom vowed.

Hermione stared at him. Then she opened her mouth and said in a strangely flat tone, "That war will not take place for another fifty years. Fifty years is a long time. Many things can happen. People change."

Tom swallowed hard as he heard that. She still expected him to harm her? He balled his hands into tight fists as he recalled Hermione's memory. She had been lying helplessly at his future self's feet, her body bruised and broken, and that man had just smirked down at her. Amused by her pain, he had approved of what his followers had done to her. They had almost beaten her to death and if she hadn't managed to escape, his future self would have continued were his servants had let off.

Tom started as he suddenly felt a warm hand on his arm. He looked down and found Hermione eyeing him in concern.

"I think Lord Voldemort just accelerated a development which would have taken place anyway," she told him in her pleasant voice. "He was something like a catalyst. I'm actually not sure if Lord Voldemort himself really believed in this propaganda against Muggles. He might have just used the already existing hate to reach his own goals."

Tom laughed mirthlessly. Oh, Voldemort sure believed in it. No doubt about that. Of course his own beliefs wouldn't stop him to also use the pre-existing hate for his own benefits. That's how he operated after all.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" he said in a strained voice.

Hermione smiled up at him faintly. Then she skidded closer to him on the bed. Tom tensed as he felt her gently slinging an arm around his waist. How could she even bear his presence?

"Don't worry so much. None of the things I told you about have happened yet," she said in her soft, soothing voice. "It is just the future."

Tom stared at her with wide eyes. "But-"
"You didn't do any of those things," Hermione stopped him as she cut across him.

"I… I hurt you so much," Tom said in a flat voice. "Not only in the future but here, too. I don't understand..." He paused, then he added almost inaudibly, "You should hate me."

"I don't."

Hermione still looked at him with affection radiating from her eyes. She snuggled even closer to him. Why did she stay with him?

"I love you."

A twinge went through him as Tom heard those soft words being spoken to him for the first time in his life.

Hermione looked up at him, feeling nervous and fearful of his reaction. Tom was frozen in place. For a second she was sure he would push her away. Her heart was racing painfully fast in her chest. But Tom didn't push her away. Instead he draped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against him. Hermione smiled as she felt him embracing her. Strange, how long she had waited to utter those words. She had known for some time how much Tom meant to her but she had never told him.

Tom rested his head on top of hers and Hermione contently closed her eyes. She felt comfortable and protected, encased in his arms. He placed a soft kiss on the top of her head and whispered,

"Thank you."

Hermione just smiled and hugged him even tighter. After that they sat in silence. She would have gladly sat here with him forever. Sadly, they couldn't do that. After a while Hermione stretched her neck and placed a soft kiss on Tom's cheek.

She smiled up at him and asked, "Ready to face a new day?"

His grey eyes sparkled down at her and a smile curled up his lips. For a change, it was a real smile not a smirk. There was a fluttery feeling in her stomach as Hermione saw it.

"As ready as I'll get," he softly answered her question.

Hermione bent up to him and kissed him tenderly on the lips. After she released him again she got up from the bed. She checked her wristwatch and groaned. It was so late, it wouldn't make any sense to go to potions anymore. Turning her eyes back to Tom, Hermione found him still sitting on the bed. Concern struck her as she noted that he again let his head hang, looking quite listless. He hadn't fallen back into his depression? She took a step towards him and softly stroked over his head.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Raising his head, Tom looked at her dismally, increasing her worry. Before she could say anything, he groaned pitifully,

"I have such a headache. You have no idea."

Her concern vanished into thin air. Instead an evil grin slowly curled up Hermione's lips as she took in the miserable expression on Tom's face.

"Seriously, I need a headache potion."

"It's your own fault," Hermione said between giggles, making him glare. "Did you really sneak to
Tom nodded and the movement made him groan again. He gingerly rubbed his temples. "God, I wonder how I managed to get back to the castle."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "I thought you've been to the village with your stupid followers. Didn't they bring you back?"

He furrowed his brow. "No. I met them right in front of the castle."

"Oh," made Hermione. "What a coincidence."

"Yeah," said Tom darkly. "Coincidence..." He mulled it over for a moment but then asked hesitantly, "Did I actually curse Avery?"

Remembering the whole fiasco from yesterday and how much trouble Tom had caused, Hermione scowled at him reproachfully. "You don't remember?"

Seeing her angry gaze, Tom shifted awkwardly on the bed. "Dimly?"

"Cruciatus Curse rings a bell?" she asked sharply. "Right in front of the castle?"

Tom paled at that statement. He stared at her for a second before he inquired urgently, "No-one saw, did they?"

"I don't think so," she replied, still glaring at him irately. "At least I didn't see anyone."

Tom relaxed visibly as he heard that. Seeing the relief on his face, Hermione scolded him in a stern voice, "Still, that was really irresponsible of you, Tom. First you sneak out of Hogwarts to get drunk, of all things, and then you tumble back and start to use Unforgivables. I mean, do you know how dangerous that is?"

"Yes," Tom said softly.

Hermione just threw him a withering glare and continued her rant, "You can't go around and use the Cruciatus Curse. That's despicable."

"It was only Avery," Tom threw in cautiously.

Not impressed, she snubbed at him, "That curse is unforgivable no matter whether the victim would deserve it or not."

"I'm sorry," he whispered feebly.

Hermione's gaze only darkened more as she heard his apology.

"Stop being so compliant," she hissed at him. "I know you don't really regret it."

He glanced at her and tried to look remorseful. He couldn't fool her though. Hermione saw a rather dark, self-satisfied glint in his eyes.

"I don't know what Avery did," she said impatiently. "Neither do I want to hear. But, Tom, what you did yesterday was incredibly dangerous. You know what would have happened if anyone had seen you using that curse, don't you?"

He nodded at her, still trying to appear repentant.
"Can I expect you never being so stupid again?" she asked sharply.

"Yes," Tom replied meekly.

"You caused me a lot of trouble," she sighed.

Hermione glanced at him. He had averted his eyes and, for a change, really looked contrite. She skinned with her hand over his head.

"Next time you decide to get drunk, tell me beforehand so I'm prepared."

She smirked at him. Then she searched for her uniform robe and slipped into it before she strapped her wand holster with the fake-wand to her right forearm. As she turned around to Tom, she found him still sitting impassively on the bed.

"What did you actually drink?" she inquired curiously. "Surely not Butterbeer."

"Firewhiskey… I think," Tom replied contemplatively. "And-"

As he didn't continue Hermione prodded sternly, "And what?"

"Nothing," he mumbled innocently.

She narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. "Okay." Then she ordered, "Get up, Riddle."

He looked at her questioningly. "Why?"

Hermione checked her watch and explained, "It's lunch time. And I'm kinda hungry."

He smirked at her. "We really missed potions, hm?"

"Neatly."

Tom moaned miserably as he got up from the bed. Hermione just rolled her eyes and handed him his black uniform robe. Shortly later, they left the Room of Requirement and walked towards the Great Hall. Hermione noticed amused how Tom walked rather slowly, now and then rubbing his head painfully. Her lips twitched dangerously but his disgruntled glare stopped her from commenting.

Finally they reached the Great Hall. Hermione opened the door and they slipped in. Lunch had started a while ago and the school's population sat at the large house tables. Hermione walked over to the Gryffindor table, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. She simply ignored the curious eyes and whispered conversations that followed her process through the hall. Merlin, they were not going to make yet another rumour out of this. She had merely missed one class. Was that so bad?

Yes. Yes, that is bad, her know-it-all side pointed out sourly. Hermione spotted her friends at the Gryffindor table and walked over to them. Gratefully she sat down on a seat beside Lupin.

Lupin smiled at her kindly and inquired, "Where have you been? You missed Potions."

She smiled at him apologetically as she reached for the casserole. Weasley grinned at her mischievously and said, "Don't worry. You didn't miss too much."

Longbottom, sitting right beside Weasley, looked up from his plate and beamed at Hermione.

"Yeah," he said good-naturedly. "Potions was a bore. Old Sluggy actually sai-"
He stopped short and suddenly the smile melted from his face to be replaced by a rather hostile look. Hermione furrowed her brow and followed his gaze. Tom was slipping into the seat beside her.

"What's with you? Didn't you notice this table is not for slimy snakes?" Longbottom asked gruffly. Then suspicion accusingly burned up in his blue eyes. "It's your fault Hermione missed her class, isn't it?"

Tom stared at the enraged Gryffindor. Then he blinked slowly before he bent a little down so he could whisper in Hermione's ear.

"I can't put up with that right now. Please? Shut him up?"

Hermione suppressed her laughter as she heard Tom's tired voice. She turned to Longbottom.

"You have to excuse Tom here," she said generously and patted Tom's arm. "He's a bit grumpy because he didn't sleep so well."

Hearing this, Weasley tried to muffle a laugh. Tom's murder glare shut him quickly up and the redhead turned back to his plate, grin still in place.

Unmoved, Hermione filled her own plate with casserole and offered Tom some of it, "Hungry?"

Sniffing sourly Tom didn't grace her with a reply but reached for a jug and poured himself a glass of water. Hermione giggled softly as she began to eat. Longbottom still eyed the Slytherin resentfully. He obviously wanted to throw more insults at Tom but also seemed to remember how he had promised Hermione to accept Tom as her boyfriend. She smiled as she saw Longbottom struggling with himself. As she caught his eye she winked at him good-naturedly. The instant he saw that, the bad mood dropped from Longbottom and he beamed at her.

"So, what did we do during potions?" Hermione asked her friends.

Not surprisingly, it was Lupin who replied, "As it was the last lesson this year, Slughorn said we could brew whatever we wanted."

"Oh," Hermione made enthusiastically. "What a shame I missed that."

Longbottom shovelled spoonfuls of casserole into his mouth as he declared, "Hermione, you are the worst nerd I've ever met."

She rolled her eyes at him and asked Lupin, "What did you brew?"

"Dreamless Sleep Potion," Lupin replied casually.

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "That's rather tricky."

Lupin blushed slightly. "No. It's not that difficult."

"But isn't it quite complicated to heat the potion correctly?" Hermione fell into her know-it-all modus as she continued, "I mean if it's too hot, you'll ruin it when you add the mugwort. But if it's too cool, it'll just get the wrong consistency and it'll clot. So you really have to wa-"

As her voice had risen in volume and got quite shrill with her enthusiasm, Tom buried his face in his hands and groaned, "Why don't you just stop talking?" He peered at her through his fingers. "Or at least do it with less noise."

Hermione turned away from Lupin and grinned at Tom. "If you don't want friendly conversation,
may be you should go over to the Slytherin table. Everyone there is so snobbish and self-important they can't be expected to waste their precious time talking to other people." She threw him another glance and added, "I guess you fit in well with them, don't you?"

At that Longbottom laughed loudly. Tom threw him a sour glare and said, turned to Hermione, "I'm not walking over to the Slytherin table. It's too far away."

"You are kidding me, right?" Hermione scoffed. "It's only on the other side of the hall."

"Exactly," he groaned. "I have the largest headache ever. I just wanna sit here, so leave me alone."

"Poor dear," Hermione sighed, hiding an evil smirk as she ran her fingers through Tom's hair.

Her actions earned her quite some envious looks from the other girls and a glare from Tom. Longbottom on the other hand ignored it and continued to dig into his casserole. A broad grin grew on his face as he mustered Tom. Finally Longbottom asked airily, turned to Hermione,

"What's wrong with the psycho?"

"Marc!" she reprimanded him, glad that Tom was too hung-over to do any more than glare sinisterly.

"Hey, I was just trying to be polite." Longbottom grinned innocently.

"You are treading on thin ice," Hermione warned crossly, making him at least look apologetic.

Briefly she peered at Tom who was angrily staring at Longbottom. A mischievous glint appeared in her eyes then Hermione stage-whispered to the blond Gryffindor,

"Beware or he might curse you."

Longbottom laughed good-naturedly and Hermione soon joined in. Tom seemed to have given up and just continued to cautiously nip from his glass of water, coldly ignoring everything.

After that Longbottom and Weasley discussed their failed attempt on a Forgetfulness Potion. While Hermione listened, her gaze roamed over the hall and landed on Slytherin table. She was not at all surprised to find a lot of them glaring at her angrily, especially the Slytherin girls. What really disturbed her though, was the angry expression on Avery's face. Surprisingly, he didn't glare at her but at Tom. Lestrange, who sat right beside Avery, looked equally miffed. Hermione was slightly troubled by this. During all her time here in the forties, Tom's followers had never dared to openly glare at him. She had always assumed they were too scared by Tom to ever disrespect him. She glanced at Tom. By now, he seemed to have recovered a bit and even ate from the stew.

She leaned a bit towards him and whispered in his ear, "Whatever that was yesterday, your dear followers are not exactly pleased with you at the moment, are they?"

Tom looked up from his bowl and scanned her disinterestedly, not even bothering to turn his head to look at the Slytherins. Hermione rolled her eyes in face of his indifference.

"As you so nicely put it," he said blasé. "They are my followers. Hence it doesn't matter at all whether they are displeased with something or not. Either way, I don't care."

Hermione narrowed her eyes hat him. "You are an emotionless block of ice."

A vile smirk appeared on his face. Then he purred, "You know me so well."

"Really, Tom." She raised her hand and poked her index finger against his temple. "Something up
After lunch, Hermione went to retrieve her schoolbag from her dorm. Not much later, she met Tom at the Grand Staircase. She stepped over to him and let an appraising look wander of her his form. He looked a lot better.

"So?" she inquired tauntingly. "Got your headache potion, I presume?"

He ignored her question and instead grabbed her by the arm while he ordered, "Come on. I thought you didn't want to miss DADA."

Still giggling, Hermione allowed him to drag her away.

"We need to apologize to Slughorn for having missed his lesson," she mentioned.

He glanced at her. "Yeah. It's probably best I do that."

"Why?"

"Because you are a horrible liar." Tom condescendingly smirked at her.

"So you are planning to lie to a teacher?" Hermione asked in mock-outrage.

"What else do you want me to do?" he sighed in exasperation. "Tell the old slug that we missed potions because I was so terribly hung-over I couldn't get up? I don't think that would go down we-"

He stopped talking abruptly. Confused, Hermione followed his gaze and spotted Dumbledore walking towards them. There was an amused twinkle in the professor's eyes as they wandered over the both of them. Hermione couldn't help but grin at him.

"Ah, Ms DeCerto, Mr Riddle," Dumbledore said jovially. "What a nice day, isn't it?"

Hermione smiled at him brightly. "It certainly is, sir."

Tom didn't reply anything but just glared at Dumbledore. Of course that angry look was expertly hidden behind a decidedly polite mask, but Hermione could still see it. Dumbledore, judging by the amused twinkle in his blue eyes, could see the glare as well.

Unperturbed by Tom's hidden hostility the professor said merrily, "Such a pity to waste it away in stuffy classrooms."

Hermione giggled playfully, "Why, professor, is that permission to ditch the next class?"

Through the corner of her eyes she could see Tom stiffen at that and she had to stifle her laughter. Dumbledore smiled at her blithely and chuckled,

"Ah, Ms DeCerto, I'm sure professor McGray would never forgive me if I kept two so bright students away from his class."

His clear blue eyes left her and shortly skimmed over Tom, provoking Tom's face to shut down into a veneer of detachment. The professor was neither surprised nor upset by Tom's obvious aversion. Instead he said cheerfully, turned to Hermione,

"I'm afraid I must take my leave now. A class of first years is waiting for their Transfiguration
professor." A mischievous glint in his eyes he added, "Do take care of Mr Riddle, will you, Hermione? I wouldn't want him to get lost on his way to the DADA classroom."

Hermione smiled at him and nodded. With that Dumbledore left. Tom furrowed his brow and suspiciously watched Dumbledore walk away. After the professor turned around the next corner, Tom tightly grabbed Hermione's hand and hastily pulled her away.

"Well, that was weird," he commented dryly. "Am I imagining things or did that old coot wink at me? I swear he's getting stranger and stranger."

Hermione couldn't hold back anymore and giggled, making Tom turn to her.

"What?"

Suppressing her laughter, Hermione pasted a sombre expression on her face and sighed, "It's probably time to tell you that we met Dumbledore yesterday."

Tom stopped dead in his tracks and just stared at Hermione. "What?"

"You don't remember?" she breathed in false shock, desperately trying to hide her laughter behind a grave look.

"No," said Tom, in a tense tone. "When?"

"Shortly before I dragged you into the Room of Requirement," Hermione replied with a straight face. He just stared at her horrified. Hermione nodded, finding sadistic pleasure in the panic on his face. Well, he had caused a lot of trouble yesterday.

"Yep, you were… how shall we say it? Indisposed? Dumbledore was not amused." Obviously, Tom had fallen into some kind of stupor so Hermione continued readily, "You should have seen the angry expression on his face as he found you, totally drunk, in that corridor. Wanted to expel you on the spot."

"Oh, Merlin," Tom lamented. "What happened then?"

"Well, before he could get you expelled-" Hermione whispered, thoroughly enjoying his growing unease. "-you started to feel me up. Right in front of him."

He groaned as he heard it and ran a shaky hand through his hair. Hermione shrugged her shoulders and suggested lightly, "I guess he was too shocked to expel you after that."

Tom still stared at her incredulously. Finally he hissed accusingly, "God, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Hermione couldn't hold back anymore. The serious look melted from her face and she openly laughed at Tom. He angrily narrowed his eyes at her and snubbed,

"What's so funny? Dumbledore's been waiting for something like this. What if he expels me now?"

Seeing that he was really concerned, Hermione stopped laughing and said in a soothing voice, "Don't worry. He won't throw you out of school. We talked yesterday and he said he wouldn't punish you. It's okay, really."

A sharp frown between Tom's eyebrows, he inquired suspiciously, "Why would he do something like that? I'm sure he wants something in return… did he say anything to you?"
"Don't be so mistrustful, Tommy." Hermione smiled at him. "He decided to turn a blind eye. That's all."

Tom arched an indignant eyebrow as he heard the nickname. Hermione just grinned.

"And how can you be sure, Herms?" he said dryly.

She flinched at her nickname and wrinkled her nose. "Okay, okay. No more pet names. But I know Dumbledore. I'm sure he'll just drop the matter. You really don't have to worry."

Tom drowned her in a doubting look but he didn't pursue the matter anymore and pulled her towards the DADA classroom.

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It was later that same day after classes that Hermione decided to visit the library. It was a bright sunny day. She should probably sit outside and enjoy the warm weather, but she wanted some quiet. The whole population of Hogwarts was probably outside on the grounds. After all those curious stares and, in some cases, glares during DADA, Hermione wanted to be alone. The rumour of her supposed pregnancy was still circling the school's corridors and she was not in the mood to hear what had been added to the fairy tale. It had been enough that during DADA Rose offered to help Hermione buy all the baby clothes she would obviously need very soon. She had even recommended that Hermione asked Tom to pay half of it. Naturally, the moment McGraw ended the class Hermione had fled. She hadn't even waited for Tom to catch up with her.

He can't blame me, she told herself. After all, he was not the target of all this ridiculous gossip. Well, that wasn't true, but Tom didn't care about the whole thing. On top of that, he had the rather useful ability to scare people away with just one glare. Hermione turned into the next passage way that would bring her closer to her refuge of books as she heard an oily voice coming from behind her,

"Little Ms DeCerto."

She turned around and found Avery in the corridor. Sleazy smirk in place, he walked towards her. Morgana! Hermione cursed. Is that guy stalking me? Probably yes. She suspiciously narrowed her eyes at him.

"Pleasure meeting you here," Avery crooned smugly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Avery," was her curt greeting.

She wanted to just walk on but obviously the Slytherin had other ideas.

"Nice performance yesterday," Avery hinted.

Hermione raised her eyebrows and rebutted condescendingly, "Ditto. Very impressive screaming and sobbing."

He merely sneered at her, "Maybe I should use that curse on you, little girl. So you know how it feels."

Unmoved by his threat, a frosty smile curled up Hermione's lips. She took a step towards him. Though he was at least a head taller than her, she glared up at him.

"If I were you, I wouldn't dare to try."
Avery just sniggered darkly as he heard her threat.

"Listen, girl," he spat at her. "Riddle won't be here forever to protect you. You should really try to get on my good side." A disgustingly greedy sheen in his eyes, he leered at her. "You just have to be a little nice to me and I promise I'll take good care of you."

Hermione stared at him in indignation. A slimy smirk twisted his mouth as Avery raised his hand and teasingly skimmed his fingers over Hermione's cheek.

"And how should I get on your good side?" she bristled.

"Hm," Avery purred and licked his lips as his lecherous gaze wandered over her chest area. "How about a practical demonstration?"

Hearing this, Hermione scorned, "Don't be ridiculous. I don't want to associate with you in any way."

Avery's gaze snapped back at her face, fury burning in his eyes. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her closer to him before he hissed harshly,

"Listen here, Mudblood. I'm getting tired of you playing hard to get. We both know you want me."

Avery completely missed the dangerous touch on Hermione's face and slowly bent down to her. He probably planned to kiss her? Hermione didn't hesitate anymore. She directed her enraged magic into her right hand before she placed the hand, fingers spread, on Avery's chest. Using the magic, she violently slammed him against the corridor wall with a force she physically would have never mustered. The surprised look on his face was priceless, Hermione thought as she sneered up at him. With the aid of her magic, she kept him pressed against the wall.

"Let me tell you one thing," Hermione said, her voice a cold hiss. "I do not need anyone to protect me. I don't need Tom to 'take care of me' and I certainly don't need you."

The initial shock left Avery to be replaced by fury. Hermione didn't care though. She didn't want to waste more time on him. Throwing him another death glare, she released him from her magic's hold and removed her hand from his chest. Then she turned around, intending to walk away. Hermione had barely taken one step as she felt someone grabbing her wrist. A painful gasp left her as Avery twirled her around and pulled her against him.

"Not so fast," he bit out.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at his stubbornness. To hell with any teachers catching her. She was going to curse the bastard to kingdom come. Just as that decision formed in her mind, Avery leaned down to her and forcefully pressed his mouth against hers. Temporarily Hermione was overwhelmed by shock and disgust while he engaged her in a violent and repulsively wet kiss. One of his hands still tightly clasped her wrist and the other had wandered to the back of her head, forcing her into place. As she felt his tongue demanding entry, Hermione finally regained her senses. Her enraged magic gathering in her fingers, she was about to send a curse at Avery.

Diffin-

Suddenly echoes of steps were ringing through the corridor. Abruptly, Avery let go of her and Hermione stumbled a step away from him. Wiping in disgust over her lips, she glowered up at him. He just smirked at her triumphantly.

"What is the meaning of this?" came a sharp voice from behind her.
Instantly Hermione recognized that voice. She turned around and sure enough found her favourite professor stalking towards her and Avery. Hermione didn’t want to deal with Legifer right now. She would prefer to send a castrating curse at Avery's smug form. Reaching them, Legifer mustered the both of them with a sour expression on her mirthless face. Then she snapped,

"What a disgraceful behaviour. That is fifteen points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin."

Hermione could have pointed out that Avery had forced it upon her, but the harsh look on Legifer's face silenced her. The woman would never believe her anyway.

Legifer's death glare wandered to Avery and she hissed, "Mr Avery, I am disgusted by your dissolute ways. If I ever catch you again, you can be sure I'll have a talk with your Head of House about it."

"Yes, professor," Avery murmured, trying and failing to look contrite.

Hermione angrily fisted her hands as she saw Avery's mouth slightly curling up into a smirk. He excused himself and walked away, but not before whispering to her, barely audible,

"It was worth it."

Hermione's magic was raging inside of her so forcefully, she feared she might explode from it.

"Ms DeCerto, what are you thinking?" Legifer's stern voice called her back to the problem at hand.

Hermione inhaled deeply before she looked at the angry professor.

"Lately I've seen so much progress in your behaviour," Legifer lectured indignantly. "Why are you now regressing to your former unseemly conduct?"

"I'm not re-"

Before Hermione could finish Legifer cut over her, shaking her head while speaking, "I really don't understand you at all, girl. We both know that you can't afford to be choosy considering men-" Here Legifer's disapproving eyes wandered offendingly over Hermione's form. "-but that doesn't mean you should throw yourself so shamelessly at any man."

Indignation taking over, Hermione glowered back at the professor and her absurd accusations. "I certainly did not thr-"

Once again she was interrupted by Legifer's piercing voice, "Don't you have Mr Riddle? You should be grateful that he lowers himself to spend time with you. Only Merlin knows why he does it. And how do you repay his kindness?" The professor's rant turned into an accusing hiss. "You are betraying him."

"I am not betraying Tom!" Hermione shot at Legifer heatedly.

Her defiance didn't wipe away the sharp frown on Legifer's face. "Do not risk your relationship with Mr Riddle again. He is such a fine young man."

"I do understand that young people can get carried away. The professor showed an uncharacteristic display of empathy. "But heed my advice, letting go of Mr Riddle for someone like Mr Avery would be a grave mistake."

For once, Hermione had to agree with the crazy woman. Their moment of consensus was soon
destroyed as the patronizing frown returned to Legifer's face and she snapped incisively, "Don't mess up the only chance you have, Ms DeCerto. I'm sure Mr Riddle will treat you well. He might ask you to marry him. You could start a family with him. Try to convince him that you could be a good obedient wife."

As she didn't want to end up in another detention with the dragon, Hermione reduced the sass to a minimum as she replied,

"Yes, professor. I will surely heed your advice."

Legifer just glared at her suspiciously. In the end she didn't comment anymore but just left, stalking briskly down the corridor. Hermione huffed and took off in the other direction. Merlin, what a prejudiced, horrible woman. Poor professor McGonagall. Hermione was hit by a wave of compassion as she remembered that Legifer was apparently Minerva McGonagall's mother. She shuddered as she imagined being the daughter of that evil hag.

Hermione breathed out in relief as she reached the library. She quickly scurried to her little refuge in the hindmost corner of the library. Tom had shown her this save haven some time ago. Hermione gladly sat down on the window sill and was very contend that she was now hidden behind a rather dusty shelf. She relaxed against the window frame and pulled a book out of her bag. The sun was warmly shining through the window glass and Hermione began to read. Strangely enough, Legifer's words disturbed her and didn't want to leave her alone.

'He might ask you to marry him. 'You could start a family.'

Hermione shook her head, desperate to get the words out of her mind. Ludicrous. As if the only aim a woman could ever have was to get married and have children. Hermione huffed but she couldn't help but notice that hollow feeling in her chest. Since she had left Hogwarts after her sixth year, the only plans she had ever made had been battle plans. Although she had yearned for it, she hadn't dared to dream about her life after the war. Despite being his fiancé, Hermione had never pictured Ron and herself being married, living happily in a house together. Starting a family? Sadly, it had never crossed her mind.

Feeling rather glum, Hermione closed her book and placed it on the window sill beside her. It had become an alien concept to her: Her future. If she was honest with herself, she had never expected to really survive the war. How could she plan a happy life after all those things she had seen and done? The happy innocent Hermione, wasn't she dead? Reviving her dreams would be pointless.

Through the window, Hermione looked down on Hogwarts' grounds. Students sat on the grass, chatting and laughing while the sun shone merrily on them. 'Marry.' 'Start a family.' Such easy, simple plans. All the students down there probably had the same dreams. Yet they terrified Hermione.

Was she happy here with Tom? Yes. Yes, she might really be.

But she couldn't stay here in the wrong time period and settle down. The only reason for her to stay at Hogwarts was to accomplish her mission. She needed to find a way back to her own time period. Biding her time, she waited for Dumbledore to finally defeat his nemesis, Grindelwald. That would be Hermione's chance to get the Elder Wand and the Invisibility Cloak. Combined with the Gaunts' ring, she would be able to unite all three Deathly Hallows. If she was right, that would be her way to her own time period. It was her mission. She owed it to her friends to protect the timeline. Hermione knew that and yet…

…yet, she felt horribly empty whenever she thought about getting home. Home. It didn't even sound
right anymore.

Hermione blinked as she stared out of the window. Her eyes burned and she was tired. After Tom's antics yesterday, she hadn't slept very well. Tiredness was slowly taking its toll. Hermione leaned against the window frame, her eyelids already dropping.

It was so dark. Everything was shrouded in darkness. Hermione couldn't see anything. Not even her bare feet as she walked over the stone floor. It was bitterly cold and she wasn't wearing any clothes to protect her. The frosty air mercilessly tore at her exposed skin and Hermione trembled helplessly. She wrapped her arms around her body but it didn't help, neither against the cold nor the feeling of exposedness. She wanted to yell for somebody to find her but she knew that no-one would answer. It was only her and the darkness.

On and on she walked. She didn't even know why. Her feet hurt. The icy coldness got more and more bitter. Was that snow crunching under her feet? Regardless, Hermione went on. She was desperate to see something. Anything but the darkness.

Suddenly, there was a light, flickering and dull. Hermione hurried on. Towards the light.

Just a few more steps and she would escape the darkness. As she finally reached the light, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. There in that greenish cone of light stood none other than Lord Voldemort. Black cloak, pale skin. His eyes gleamed blood-red and menacingly, as they slowly wandered over Hermione. They sucked the last rest of warmth from her body. Hermione had never felt more exposed. She tried to hide her naked body behind her arms but it was futile. His cold eyes feasted on her and Hermione saw a vicious smirk slowly tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"I have waited for you,” Lord Voldemort whispered, his voice cold steel.

Hermione felt herself unable to answer. She was stuck. Her body didn't want to move. Even as the Dark Lord slowly glided over to her, she wasn't able to turn and run. She could barely breathe as he stood before her, only inches from her trembling body. As he raised his hands and put them on her shoulders, Hermione gasped in fright. A sadistic smile twisted up his snake-like features as he gazed down at her, drinking in her fear.

"Waited for so long," he murmured darkly.

Hermione couldn't move, though she desperately wanted to. Then Voldemort bent down to her. Fear clenched around her heart as she felt his icy cold mouth pressed over her own. He kissed her slowly, lazily. There was no rashness or need behind his actions. She felt his mouth moving against hers, oddly mechanical. His tongue slipped between her lips, claiming her completely, and Hermione could not stop him. Her blood was freezing over with fear as she felt him so close. Finally he released her mouth and Hermione gave a shudder.

"Please, don't," she whimpered through quivering lips without looking up at him.

His cold snicker was her only answer. He pressed against her. Hermione was powerless to stop him as he pushed her down to the floor. Snow bit relentlessly into her naked skin as she lay on the ground. Voldemort loomed over her. She was imprisoned under his body. His crimson eyes bored into her and the unsavoury smirk on his face told her he would not be gentle with her. Tears finally spilled from her eyes. Voldemort's smirk only widened as he saw them.

"You made me wait for too long," he hissed, cold threat dripping from the words.

She felt his hands on her body, demandingly taking possession of her. Without haste or desire they
ran over her. Everywhere. Hermione didn't beg him again to stop. He would never stop. With his
touches, cold as ice, he was showing her that she belonged to him. More tears ran from her eyes and
Hermione turned her head to the side.

"Wake up."

"Hermione, wake up," a voice drifted to her.

The warmth in that voice was foreign to her. She was trapped in a world of ice and dark.

"Hermione," again the same voice.

There were hands on her shoulders, shaking her gently. The contact made her cringe. Though, this
touch was not claiming, not punishing. Slowly, Hermione dared to open her eyes. A soft whimper
left her and she stiffened in fear as she found Voldemort before her. She was still trapped! Quickly
she skidded away from him until her back hit something. She protectively drew up her knees against
her chest and slung her arms around them. Her heart was racing painfully fast as she stared at him
with wide scared eyes. Voldemort opened his mouth to speak. Hermione was surprised that his voice
wasn't twisted by cruelty anymore.

"Hermione, calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

Hermione blinked as she heard the words. Slowly they sank in. Her breathing was still erratic but she
tried to control it as she let her eyes wander over Lord Voldemort. He was changed. Hermione
blinked again. Finally, she recognized him. It was Tom. Not Lord Voldemort.

A dream, only a dream. Hermione, still trembling, flung herself at Tom. She wrapped her arms
around him. Her face was buried in his chest and she could feel his body head comfortingly seep
through his clothes and slowly warming her.

"Bad dream?"

She nodded and hugged him tighter.

Tom strode through the library in search for Hermione. What better place to search for her than a
room full of books? A small smirk crept on his face. He passed a few tables crowded with
Ravenclaws, and sauntered towards the Restricted Section. His gaze longingly skimmed over the
books about Dark Magic but he didn't enter the section. He needed to find Hermione. Since DADA
Tom hadn't seen her and he didn't like it at all when he didn't know where she was.

Finally he reached the old dusty shelf at the back end of the library and deftly stepped around it. He
breathed out in relief as he saw Hermione sitting on the window sill. Her body was leaned against
the wooden frame, her eyes closed in sleep. A book lay by her side; it had probably slipped from her
hand. Sun rays shone through the window, making her brown hair shine golden. A smile stole on
Tom's face as he watched her sleep. That girl was still a mystery to him. One by one her secrets had
fallen from her but he still didn't understand her at all. She should be running away from him or
fighting against him. Instead she sat here, waiting for him. He would never allow her to leave but
what was it that kept Hermione willingly? Tom breathed in deeply and stepped over to the peacefully
sleeping girl.

As he stood in front of her he realized that her sleep wasn't as untroubled as he had assumed. Tom
stared down at her face. Rapidly, tears were running from Hermione's closed eyes. Slipping from
under her long eyelashes, they left wet paths on her skin until they dripped down on her blouse. Like
frozen in place, Tom stood before Hermione's sleeping form and watched her tears. Something clutched at his chest, twisted and constricted it.

Tom stumbled a step away from Hermione and slumped down on the broad window sill. He stared at her with wide eyes. Worry ran through him and demanded of him to take action: wake her, console her, anything to make her feel better. But Tom just sat there and stared at the trembling girl. There was a horribly guilty feeling soiling his protectiveness. Watching her tears, Tom was paralysed by guilt. At that moment, Hermione whispered so softly, Tom almost missed it,

"…please …don't …"

Her voice was soft and broken as she begged. It pulled Tom out of his stupor. He leaned towards her and hesitantly raised his hands. Lightly he put them on her shoulders and shook her gently.

"Wake up," he tried to reach her. "Hermione, wake up."

She shifted slightly on the window sill as slowly sleep was falling from her. Tom shook her again to completely bring her back.

"Hermione."

He felt her twitch under his touch then slowly, almost fearfully, she cracked her eyes open. As soon as her hazel eyes fell on him, he could see panic burning up in them. Hermione gasped softly and flinched away from him. Her back was protectively pressed against the window frame while she continued to eye him in fear. Tom felt sick as Hermione cowered before him.

"Hermione, calm down," he tried to soothe her. "I'm not going to hurt you."

His voice seemed to reach her. Her eyes cleared and the nightmare finally released her. Before Tom could say more, Hermione threw herself at him.

"Bad dream?" he asked gingerly.

As an answer he could feel her nod against his chest. Her body was pressed desperately against him and she was trembling all over. He pulled her closer. He had known about her nightmares since the Christmas break. It had been a mystery what had caused Hermione's past to haunt her so. Now that Tom had seen her memories, he wished that he didn't know. He tightened his arms around her and continued to hold her. He didn't have to ask to know what she had dreamed about. The fear in her eyes as they had fallen on him had already told him.

After a while Tom felt how her body stopped to tremble and Hermione relaxed into him. He knew she didn't want to talk about her dream. Actually, he didn't want to talk about it either. He needed to somehow calm her down.

"Hermione?"

"Hm?" came her muffled reply as she had her face still hidden in his chest.

"Do you remember the Christmas break?"

It took a moment until she looked up at him in confusion. Tom felt his stomach twist as he saw remnants of tears on her cheeks. He raised his hand and cautiously wiped the tears from her skin.

He smiled down at her. "Back then we talked about our plans for after graduation. But you never really told me what you want to do."
The confused frown only deepened on her face. Tom's smile turned into a sly smirk and he inquired innocently, "Now that you'll have to stay in the past, what do you want to do after leaving Hogwarts?"

"Have to stay?" she asked slowly.

Tom nodded at her as if the whole thing was a done deal. "Sure. I told you that I won't let you go, didn't I?"

Hermione stared up at him flabbergasted. Then she laughed softly. "Okay okay. Let's see. What could I do?" She mused pensively before she said, "I always wanted to be a Healer."

Tom snorted and commented teasingly, "A female Healer? Only over my dead body."

Hermione nudged him in the side. "Well, you would be dead, without a Healer around." She pursed her lips and said, "Or I could be an Unspeakable. I've always wondered what those people do." Her eyes flashed back at him playfully. " Seriously, what are they up to?"

Tom laughed softly and was satisfied as he saw amusement hesitantly dancing in Hermione's eyes as well. At least he had managed to distract her from her nightmare.

She felt definitely better, Hermione decided as she smiled up at Tom. The coldness of her nightmare had finally left her. She sighed contently before she leaned back against the wooden window frame. Tom poked his finger against her book as he wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Transfiguration?"

Hermione reached for her text book. "Yes, I still have to write that essay Dumbledore asked of us." She scanned him before she inquired bossily, "Did you already write it?"

Tom looked at her as if he thought she was slow. "Nah, maybe I'll do it on Friday."

"Tom!" she said sternly. "Transfiguration is on Friday."

He just shrugged and pulled a book out of his bag. "It's the last class before term ends. I'm sure Dumbledore won't check that essay anyway."

Although he was probably right, Hermione huffed at him in indignation. After drowning him in a reproachful glare, she decidedly re-focused her attention on her Transfiguration book. They sat together in comfortable silence and Hermione felt immensely reassured by Tom's presence. She had nearly finished the chapter in her text book as suddenly Tom said in a sharp voice, "What the hell is that?"

Hermione frowned at him but he wasn't looking at her. He glared down at her hand. He bent forward and slightly tugged at her sleeve. Hermione looked down and was surprised to find a small bruise on her wrist. At first she was confused until she remembered her little encounter with Avery during which he had grabbed her. Hermione looked back up at Tom. He mustered her demandingly, waiting for an answer. She just shrugged her shoulders.

"Bah, it's nothing."

Tom scowled at her darkly, clearly not satisfied by her reply. So, Hermione elaborated, "Just Avery
being a complete prick again." She raised her hand and examined her bruised wrist. "I guess I should have cursed the idiot after all."

It was then that she was hit by a wave of Tom's furious magic. She glanced up at him and raised her eyebrows as she saw his magic as a dark cloud balefully dancing around him. There was a murderous look on his face with a touch of crimson lurking in his eyes. Hermione gulped nervously.

"I'm going to kill that bastard." Malice twisted Tom's voice into a murderous hiss.

The threat made shivers running down her spine.

"Calm down," Hermione tried to soothe him. "It's nothing. And don't forget, you already cursed him yesterday, didn't you?"

The blood-red colour still shone sinisterly in his eyes as he glared at her. Hermione was rather glad she hadn't told him anything about that forced kiss. She was certainly no fan of Avery, but she still didn't want to be responsible for his untimely death. She just ignored Tom's death glares and turned back to her book.

Slowly Avery was developing into a real problem, Tom thought enraged as he mustered Hermione wrist. The angry red welts on her skin almost made him lose his temper again. Avery was going to pay for that! Tom didn't remember much of yesterday's events, blurred by alcohol as they were. Still, he knew that at some point Avery had insulted Hermione. That probably was the reason Tom had hurled the Torture curse at the twit. Angrily scanning Hermione's bruised wrist, Tom realized that obviously the message hadn't stuck with Avery. He definitely should force it in that idiot's mind. Avery was a pathetic coward. He would never dare to openly go against Tom. None of his Knights would, actually. They were much too afraid of him, Tom thought smugly. Still, he needed to stop Avery from sneaking around his girlfriend. Tom glanced at Hermione. Absentmindedly she rubbed her wrist while she read in her book. The next chance he got, Tom promised himself, he would gladly crucio Avery again.

Tom's eyes left her wrist and skimmed over Hermione's face. Noticing his attention, she looked up from her book and smiled faintly at him.

Such a mystery…

"How is Hogwarts in the future?" Tom asked her to get his thoughts away from Avery.

Hermione was surprised that Tom had addressed her again. She had actually expected him to stew for a while in his anger. She looked up from her book and arched her eyebrows at him.

"Well, there didn't change much." She smiled softly. "In my sixth year I even had Slughorn as potions professor."

"Really?"

Hermione nodded amused. "Yeah. And he was still recruiting for his Slug Club."

"Some things never change, hm?" Tom commented before he inquired cautiously, "What's with Dumbledore? Don't tell me he's still Transfiguration professor."

"No," she revealed. "He was Headmaster."

Tom stared at her and she saw a rather disgusted expression crossing his face. She grinned at him broadly.
"Well, I'm glad he's not Headmaster now," Tom tossed in dryly. "Would have expelled me years ago."

"I guess so," said Hermione, still grinning. "Dippet's a lot easier to manipulate. Didn't even notice that you blamed Hagrid for the Chamber incident."

Shock flooded his whole face as Tom stared at Hermione. "You know that?" he asked faintly.

Hermione suppressed a giggle as she saw the surprise on Tom's face. He hadn't expected anyone to have seen through his deception. She slipped a bit closer to him on the sill and said teasingly,

"There isn't much I don't know about you."

It was meant as a light joke, so Hermione was surprised as Tom's face completely shut down. He even turned his head away from her and had his eyes downcast. After a while he whispered softly,

"Know thy enemy."

Hermione bit her lip as she scanned him. Then she wrapped an arm around his waist. As he didn't react to her and still averted his eyes, Hermione took his chin into her hand and forced him to look at her. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared up into his beautiful grey eyes. Insecurity plagued Tom, Hermione could see it. Her fingers released his chin and gently skimmed over his cheek until her hand came to rest at the back of his neck. Hermione never broke eye contact with Tom as she pulled his head down to her. Her eyes only fluttered shut as she felt his lips against hers. They were so soft and Hermione began to nibble at them tenderly. He didn't react to her at all. Hermione circled her arms around his neck and pulled him against her, never breaking their kiss. Warmth was spreading all over her as she felt him so near. Even her magic reacted to his presence. It bristled around her excitedly and affectionately reached out for Tom. It was then that Tom began to slowly, tentatively, move his mouth against hers. Hermione smiled into the kiss as she felt it. He became more demanding and even traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue. She parted her lips, admitting him in. An electrifying feeling shot through her as she felt his tongue against hers, playing with her. She eagerly responded to his caress.

As Tom finally ended the kiss, Hermione peered up at him. She was relieved to find a small, hesitant smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Raising her hand, she lovingly wiped a strand of his dark hair out of his face.

"So," he whispered cautiously. "You know I opened the Chamber of Secrets?"

Hermione smiled up at him and nodded. "Sure. And I also know that you are the Heir of Slytherin."

"Of course," Tom said as he scanned her warily. "I didn't forget that conversation we had about my ancestors. On that occasion you also mentioned that Salazar Slytherin was just an idiot."

"I said he might have been an idiot." She smiled at him bashfully as she admitted, "To be honest I think it's quite fascinating that you are related to him."

Now Tom stared at her in surprise. "Really?"

Hermione shrugged and said defensively, "Well, he was one of Hogwarts' founders. Even a thousand years later he's still famous."

Tom found himself smiling down at Hermione as he looked into her pretty eyes. It was so strange that she still sat here with him, even kissing him.
"Hermione…" he began tentatively but then stopped himself and shook his head.

She raised her eyebrows at him. As he didn't want to go on Hermione took his hand and smiled up at him, encouraging him to go on. Tom sighed softly. Then he asked quietly, avoiding her eyes,

"If I turned into that monster from your memory …if I turned into Voldemort, would you still stay with me? Would you still love me?"

Hermione didn't immediately answer so Tom chanced a glance at her. She scanned him and he cringed as he saw that sad expression on her face.

"Tom, I do love you," she finally said in a numb voice. "But if you turned into Lord Voldemort, my feelings wouldn't be the problem."

He looked at her and didn't understand. His confusion must have shown on his face as she now continued,

"Voldemort does not feel anything but hate." She hesitated, as if to search for words. "He lost the part that made him human. I don't think he can feel affection towards anyone. He is not able to love."

It took Tom effort to look into Hermione's hazel eyes now. He could feel her hand holding his gently. Then she said with sadness tinting her voice,

"If you turned into Lord Voldemort, I wouldn't be able to follow you, regardless of what I feel for you. If I tried to follow you, you would kill me."

His eyes widened slightly as he heard her words. There was sorrow in her voice, unbearably much so. But he could also hear her conviction. She wasn't suggesting something here. She just stated a fact.

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Hermione tentatively glanced at Tom. He was walking beside her, deeply absorbed in his thoughts. By the look of it, they must be rather dark thoughts, Hermione mused. She worried her lip as she scanned him and then stepped a bit closer to him. Cautiously she took his hand in hers. Tom didn't turn his head to look down at her, but she felt him clasping her hand in return. Currently they were headed to the Entrance Hall. Hermione planned to take Tom outside. Maybe they could sit by the lake.

Just to get his thoughts away from evil Dark Lords, Hermione asked, "So what classes are you taking next year?"

Raising an elegant eyebrow, Tom looked down at her. "Well, I'm certainly not going to drop any classes."

Hermione pouted her lips. "Not even Divination? I told you, Tom, it's a waste of time."

"No, it's not," he insisted stubbornly. "How can you be so short-sighed?"

She grinned at him. "I'm not short-sighed, I'm being realistic. Or did you ever predict anything in that class of yours?" she asked provocingly.

Tom just scowled down at her, making Hermione smile triumphantly. Then she said conciliatory, "So let's see. If you have to insist on Divination, how many classes do you have?"
Without having to consider it, Tom answered smugly, "Eleven."

Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. "So, that's eleven out of twelve. Which one did you drop? Muggle Studies?"

Tom only nodded at that. Her gaze wandered over him as Hermione stated pensively, "Or course you would drop Muggle Studies."

As he head her thoughtless remark, Tom's grey eyes widened before he quickly averted them from Hermione and had them downcast. Then he mumbled bitterly,

"Yeah, because obviously I'll try to kill them all."

As she heard his flat voice Hermione cursed herself inwardly. Then she quickly tried to soothe him, "No no, that's not what I meant. It's just, you grew up in the Muggle world so of course you wouldn't need to study them."

Tom nodded stiffly at that but still didn't want to meet her eyes. Hermione again took his hand into hers and held it gently.

"So, after seventh year you'll have eleven NEWTS." She paused but then teased cautiously, "All 'O's I assume because you are a know-it-all."

She was relieved as a smirk grew on Tom's face. Chary amusement was sparkling in his grey eyes as he sneered, "Hark who's talking."

Hermione was just opening her mouth to scoff something in return as she heard a voice coming from behind her.

"Hermione?"

She turned around and saw Longbottom walking towards them.

"Could you…" he started. Then he broke off and his eyes wandered to Tom who still stood beside her. He gazed at her again and said, "Er… can I speak with you alone?"

Hermione frowned at him. He seemed to be rather nervous about something. As she didn't immediately answered Longbottom implored,

"It's… it's kinda important. Please?"

"Yes. Yes, sure," Hermione finally replied, a little bit concerned about him.

A relieved smile broke out on his face. "Thanks."

Hermione turned towards Tom and said, "We'll meet later, okay?"

He didn't seem to be happy with this development, but then he just nodded at her. Before she had the chance to turn towards Longbottom again, she felt him grabbing her hand and pulling her away. Hermione saw a sharp frown appearing between Tom's eyebrows as he saw it, but she just smiled at him reassuringly. Then she followed Longbottom down the corridor while wondering what trouble he was in.

Tom watched Hermione and the Gryffindor disappearing behind the next corner. This whole thing didn't sit right with him at all, but there was nothing he could do about it. Marc Longbottom was Hermione's friend, he had to accept that. Tom wanted to run after them and hex the wanker but he
knew Hermione would never tolerate it. Grudgingly he took off towards the dungeons. Now that Hermione had obviously other plans, he wondered what to do. Maybe he could get started on that essay for Gauß.

Yes, or I could devise an evil scheme on how to take over the world, he thought wryly.

After all, it seemed, that would be his past time in the future. If Hermione had heard that thought, she would have surely killed him. Tom chuckled softly. This whole time travel thing was pretty twisted. Tom sighed as he descended the stairs towards the dungeons. Soon, he whispered the password and entered the Slytherin common room. A few students sat here and there on the black leather sofas, doing their homework or just chatting. As Tom strode through the room, the other Slytherins greeted him reverentially though he didn't reply. He had almost reached the stairs leading down to his dorm, as Tom noticed Avery, Lestrange, Alba and Black lounging on a couch. An angry frown appeared between Tom's eyebrows as he scanned Avery. He still had a score to settle with that one, hadn't he? By now Avery had got up from the sofa and, smirk in place, stepped over to Tom.

The nerve of the git, thought Tom heatedly, though his face was arranged into a blank mask.

Avery smirked at Tom and greeted, "Riddle."

Tom didn't reply anything but narrowed his eyes at him. An image of Hermione's bruised wrist flashed through his mind. At the moment, it served very well to divert Tom from the other memories he had of a hurt Hermione. He was almost glad to drown himself in fury as he glared at Avery.

"We wondered if you had time for us," Avery continued, an irritating smile on his face.

The three other boys had by now got up from the couch and stood behind Avery. Tom's incensed magic gave an angry twitch as he saw the silent demand on their faces. His Knights calling in a meeting? How utterly presumptuous. His cold gaze wandered back to the arrogant look on Avery's face. He was almost begging to get cursed and who was Tom to refuse such a request? He snickered darkly.

"Lead the way," he ordered Avery, careful to keep his voice neutral.

There was a triumphant glint in Avery's eyes. What a fool. Tom followed Avery back to the exit of the Slytherin common room. Seeing their procession through the room, Malfoy quickly joined them.

They made their way through Hogwarts' corridors in silence. Not much later they stood before the familiar patch of bare wall. Without waiting for the order, Avery started to walk by the same patch of wall three times. A door appeared before their eyes. Sneering at Avery, Tom stepped over to the door and entered the room behind. He raised an indignant eyebrow as he took in the room's design. Obviously, Avery had not asked the Come-And-Go room to change into their normal meeting place. Instead it was a dimly lit, rather small room with rough stone walls. Tom noticed that the throne-like chair he normally occupied during the meetings was missing. Avery really wanted to get killed today, didn't he?

Tom turned around. He noticed that the exit door had disappeared and turned into stone wall. Without commenting on the room's interior, Tom scanned the Slytherins before him. His Knights had formed a semi-circle around him, standing in respectful distance to him. Again, Avery stood out like a sore thumb. There was a provocative expression on his face and he dared to look right back at Tom. Tom didn't pay the other Knights any attention but fixed Avery with a glare.

He inquiring in a polite voice, "So? What do you want?"
Unlike Avery the other Knights started to squirm uncomfortably under Tom's scrutinizing gaze.

"We have a problem," Avery cockily broke the silence.

*Of course we have a problem,* Tom thought angrily but hid his upcoming temper behind a curious mask.

"What problem?" he asked innocently.

"The Mudblood." Avery spat the word like it was a foul-tasting piece of dirt.

Tom had to close his eyes shortly as he was hit by a powerful wave of his enraged magic. He mastered himself, kept his magic under control and his face a blank mask. As he talked, though, he abandoned the polite touch in his voice,

"I assume you are talking about Hermione. What seems to be the problem with her?"

Hearing Hermione's name, a condescending smirk flitted over Avery's face. Then he inquired demandingly, "Why are you spending time with a dirty Mudblood?"

"Hmm," made Tom, his calm mask never dropping. "I really don't think that is any of your business."

Tom's frosty eyes wandered over Avery, daring him to defy him further. But it wasn't Avery who replied. Tom maintained his calm exterior but he was utterly surprised as Lestrange yelled aggressively,

"It is our damn business!"

Tom turned his cold gaze towards him. He had expected something like this from Avery. But why was Lestrange siding with the traitor? Lestrange stared at Tom, his face purple with rage.

"You are wasting your time on a worthless Mudblood," the Slytherin snarled wrathfully. "You allow that slut to order you around!"

Tom heard assenting mumbles from the other Knights. Avery took a step towards Tom.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded to know. "She's a floozy! If you are trying to get information, you surely can do that without submitting to that dirty Muggle."

Tom could feel his magic awaken fully. He was actually surprised it had lasted this long. Now though, it burned through him, this angry force, trying to find a way out.

"Now, Avery," Tom said, his voice eerily calm. "While I can understand your concern, I should like to inform you that if you continue to talk to me like that, you are going to regret it."

Avery, in his stupidity, didn't seem to be impressed at all by this threat. It wasn't him though who answered Tom.

"I think he posed a fair question," Lestrange snarled irately. "You are strutting around the place with a dirty Mudblood hanging at your side. I think you owe us an explanation."

Again Lestrange took Avery's side and Tom felt hit by a flush of rage. His eyes quickly swept over the other boys. They didn't dare meet his gaze directly but Tom could see ill-disguised approval on their faces. This was a set-up, wasn't it? The only one looking uncomfortable with the whole situation seemed to be Malfoy. He even stood bit away from the others.
"You know what we think?" Lestrange continued, mad glint in his eyes. "That you actually don't have any reason for seducing that whore. You just do it because you like her."

"Yes," Avery spat at Tom. "That's what we assume. Is that true? Did you betray our cause?"

Tom didn't want to put up with this insolence anymore. He couldn't believe the nerve of these idiots. He just pulled his wand and waved it angrily. Instantly, a blue curse rushed towards Avery. Before it could hit, though, Avery brandished his own wand and dared to defend himself. Tom watched furiously how Avery's silvery shield easily stopped his curse.

**How dare he...?**

Unperturbed by Tom's anger, Avery sneered at him, "You are a damn blood-traitor."

Suppressing his fury, Tom countered, "If that is true, what will you do about it?"

"We already decided what to do." Avery hissed. "You are no longer our leader."

"I see," Tom replied in a belittling tone. "And who's leader now? You?"

"Damn right, it's me." Avery proclaimed proudly. "And my first official act will be to get rid of you."

Without giving an advance warning, Avery slashed his wand through the air. An angrily red curse left his wand's tip and soared towards Tom. Quickly Tom erected a barrier between him and the powerful dark curse. Avery's curse violently crashed into the shield. To Tom's surprise his heavy shield shook dangerously as it stopped the curse.

His gaze turned into ice as he scanned Avery. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Avery didn't reply. A fat smirk appeared on his face and he brandished his wand in a complicated movement. Of course Tom recognized the movements. He had, in fact, taught his Knights that very spell. Growling in anger, Tom already noticed how the floor under his feet quickly began to heat up. It would continue doing so until it was white-hot, boiling its victim. A furious wave of anger broke down upon Tom as he glared at Avery. He flourished his wand and released the counter-curse. Avery's curse put up quite the unexpected struggle. Tom arched an eyebrow as he had to increase the amount of magic to protect himself against the heat.

It was at that point in time that Tom saw a yellow light rushing towards him. He barely had time to raise his left hand, channelling a flimsy shield through his fingers. The yellow curse brutally dashed into the thin shield. Tom had to suppress a gasp of pain as remnants of the curse reached him and cut into his other hand clasped around his wand, still fighting off Avery's heat curse. Sending more of his magic towards the floor, Tom finally managed to defeat Avery's attack.

Tom's eyes darted to his other attacker and he saw Lestrange bearing his wand at him. By now even Alba and Black had pulled their wands. Only Malfoy had taken a step back, not interfering in the fight. Tom pressed his mouth into a thin angry line as he glared at his Knights. He could feel blood slowly trickling down his left hand.

Again Avery attacked, sending a dark curse at Tom. The force behind that curse made the air flicker. Tom's cold eyes observed its process towards him. Did this bugger really think he could defeat him with such pathetic curses? Tom lazily waved his wand, intending to banish the curse. His eyes widened in surprise as he felt his magic reacting only reluctantly to his lead. Like the shield Tom had used just moments before, his defence was again flimsy and weak.

Avery's curse was not defeated by Tom's weak counter curse. Snarling angrily Tom raised his wand...
and brought it down in a sharp movement. His magic reacted sluggishly but in the end it formed into a curse. Tom's bright curse crashed into Avery's and they cancelled each other, resulting in a small explosion. Tom was forced to take a step back and stumbled into something behind him. Surprised, Tom turned his head slightly. There was nothing but thin air behind him. Furrowing his brow he looked back at the Knights. Avery scanned him with triumph pasted all over his face. It was then that Tom spotted a circle of small runes carved into the stone floor around him. He breathed in sharply as he recognized the runes.

"Ah, did you finally notice?" Avery scoffed at him. "Took you long enough."

Tom's mouth was pressed into an angry line as he glowered at Avery. His fingers clasped his wand so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"Binding magic?" Tom hissed through gritted teeth.

Self-satisfied smirk in place, Avery drawled, "Correct. And, of course, a few caging runes here and there."

Tom's gaze again wandered over the runes. He knew this ritual. He also knew how to rescind it. Normally the runes were written in blood or chalk. One only had to wipe a bit away and the whole circle would collapse. These runes, though, were carved into the stone. There was no disturbing them. Tom glared at Avery.

"You are pathetic at Ancient Runes," he stated maliciously. "How did you come up with this?"

None of his Knights even took Ancient Runes anymore. Aside from Malfoy actually…

Avery merely snickered and sneered, "Maybe I am. But Melanie Nicolls certainly isn't."

Tom grinded his teeth in anger as he heard it. "Nicolls?"

Avery smiled at him indulgently. "Well, she wanted me to keep quiet. But I think she deserves praise for her fine work."

He leisurely flicked his wand. As a result the runes glowed forebodingly and Tom felt a sharp tug at his magic. A steady flow of magic floated out of him and was sucked into the runic circle. Avery smiled evilly as he again waved his wand.

"Secaris."

No visible spell left Avery's wand but Tom still brandished his own to erect a shield. Again the magic was reluctant to obey and Tom had problems to maintain the shield. As Avery's curse crashed into it, the shield only managed to divert the trajectory of the curse. Tom hissed in pain as the curse grazed his left thigh. It cut him open, then blood flowed from the wound. Tom glared at Avery murderously while he felt the runic circle mutilating his magic further. Tom's magic was being drawn and bound into the runes. He tried to pull it back into his body but it didn't work.

"Not so strong anymore, are you?" Avery mocked while he evilly stared at the blood.

"Fucking coward," Tom hissed.

Avery merely snickered as he heard the insult. "My my, it seems I need to teach you respect."

He waved his wand and cried, "Crucio!"
Tom had no chance to dodge the curse. A triumphant smirk twisted up Avery's face as he realized that. The Torture Curse slammed into Tom. But it had no effect at all. Tom did not crash down on the floor, thrashing in agony. He remained standing, completely unperturbed by Avery's attack. Eyes wide with surprise, the other Slytherins stared at Tom.

"What… what…? How is that possible?" Avery stuttered.

"Let's call it a fail-safe," Tom hissed darkly.

Rage quickly replaced the surprise on Avery's face and he snarled aggressively, "It won't save you!"

He waved his wand and Tom was suddenly enveloped by a surge of Avery's angry magic. It painfully slashed over Tom's body. He groaned softly as he fell down on his knees. Cocky smirk in place, Avery sneered at Tom. He again slashed his wand through the air. Tom felt a sharp blow across his face, throwing his head to the side. His eyes were narrow slits as he looked back up at Avery's smug face.

"You know," Avery jeered evilly. "Since I'm leader of the Knights now, I think it's only fair that I get your precious Mudblood." Seeing the furious snarl on Tom's face he sniggered, "Aww, don't worry about her. She'll be in good hands."

He contemplatively tapped his wand against his chin. His eyes glinted gleefully as they wandered over Tom.

"It's going to be my pleasure to show that slut her place. I can already see her kneeling before me." He winked at Tom suggestively. "It's going to be quite enjoyable for me."

Tom's hands shook as a demanding thirst for revenge howled through him. He got up from the floor and took a step towards Avery, the invisible shield still separating them.

"You are going to pay for this," Tom promised softly, cold rage twisting his words into a deathly threat.

Avery just sniggered at him. "Easy easy," he tsked. "You can hardly blame me. That Mudblood is asking for it with her slutty behaviour." Evil glint in his eyes, he continued conceitedly, "You know, since I've seen her for the first time I wanted to fuck her brains out. Actually just a few hours ago I already forced a snog from her. I can't wait to finally bang her."

With that Tom was thrown into a fit of violent temper. A disturbing image of Avery forcing himself upon Hermione flew through his mind. He gritted his teeth as fury howled inside of him. Avery was not allowed to touch Tom's property! Hermione was his. And his alone!

Tom continuously fought against the flow of his magic into the runes. Now though as he was hit by an uncontrollable wave of rage, he lost control of his magic. As he stared so murderously at Avery Tom abandoned his effort of holding his magic inside his body. Instantly the pull into the runic circle intensified. Tom lost more and more of his magic, but the wrath ravaging through him stopped him to care anymore. Avery still sneered at him triumphantly. The rest of Tom's magic coiled around his mind, twisting his thoughts. Icy cold, the magic lusted to rip Avery apart but the rune shield stopped it.

Tom closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. He could feel the runes greedily drawing upon his magic. He stopped fighting the pull, but instead ordered his magic towards the runes. He crammed more and more of his magic into the runes. At first they sucked it in voraciously. Soon Tom felt their restrictions. His dark magic raged with force inside of the runes, mercilessly gnawing at their
boundaries. Avery took a shaky step away from the circle as he saw the runes burning up in a red light. Cracks appeared in the stone floor around the runes, as they fought against the raw power of Tom's magic. They shuddered and trembled as they were confronted with such quantities of magical power. Their capacity was exhausted, as Tom rammed another wave of dark magic into the runes. He felt them giving in. More cracks appeared in the stone floor, breaking the runes apart. There was a soft swishing noise as the runes disappeared.

With the runes gone, Tom's magic was unshackled. It left him in thick waves, raged around him with cruel intent and filled up the whole room, suffusing everything.

Tom re-opened his eyes. They smoldered in a blood red colour.

Voldemort enjoyed how his magic sung a murderous tune as it bristled in the air around him. With malicious joy he watched how Avery stared at him, terror in his eyes. Voldemort's magic tore ferociously at everyone in the room. Only his self-control stopped the magic to lacerate his Knights on the spot. They looked at him in fear.

Gulping nervously, Avery raised his hand. It trembled violently as he waved his wand at Voldemort. A violet sickle of light left its tip. It rushed towards Voldemort. The curse crackled dangerously as it slashed through the air. Indifferently, Voldemort regarded Avery's curse. His wand hung by his side, its tip pointing to the floor. Voldemort didn't use the wand, in fact he didn't move at all, but suddenly Avery's curse crashed into an invisible wall. It stopped in mid-air for a second then it just died.

A vile smirk distorting his handsome features, Voldemort scanned Avery darkly. Without saying anything, he flicked his wand in a small casual movement, like waving away a bothersome insect. With that Voldemort's magic crept towards the other occupants of the room. The Knights gasped in pain as Voldemort's magic mercilessly wrapped around them. Like a snake, it coiled around it's victims, rendering them immobile.

Voldemort slipped his wand confidently into his robe pocket. His eyes glinted in a malevolent red as he slowly walked towards his Knights. He looked every one of them in the eyes as he passed them. Voldemort thoroughly enjoyed the horror on their faces. Grinning madly, he snapped his fingers and the Knights were forced to kneel down. Another flick of his hand and he sent a nonverbal Cruciatos Curse at them. Voldemort laughed a high-pitched laugh as he revelled in the screams of pain. The only one he spared this torture was Malfoy. The other Knights screamed in agony, begging him to stop.

Voldemort maintained the unforgivable curse for an eternity. Smiling a cruel smile, he finally broke the spell. Then he released his Knights from their hold. At once they all slumped down to the floor, trembling and twitching in pain. Lazily, Voldemort's gaze wandered to Malfoy who shakily knelt on the floor. As he felt his Master's gaze, Malfoy looked up.

"Fetch Melanie Nicolls," Voldemort ordered coldly.

Malfoy didn't ask any questions, he only nodded obediently, got up from the floor and hastily left the room. Voldemort's attention turned back to his other Knights. His gaze was completely devoid of any compassion as it wandered over the trembling young men. The silence spiralled horribly, making the Knights squirm in fear.

Finally Voldemort spoke, his voice a cruel hiss, "What did you think? That you could stage this little coup d'état and oust me? What made you think that you could ever defeat me?"

He stood before the kneeling men and let his magic crackle dangerously around himself. He continued in a deathly quiet voice, "It seems you are living under the illusion that this is some sort of
democracy. Let me straighten this out for you: I started this association. I lead it. And I am the only one who can disband it."

His angry red eyes wandered over his Knights. Not one of them dared to face him. They knelt before him, trembling from head to toe.

"Maybe you haven't notice," Voldemort said, his quiet voice laced with coldness. "But I am not a member of the Knights of Walpurgis." A sinister smirk curled up his mouth as he concluded, "I am their leader."

"So, when I want to spend time with a Mudblood, you will have to accept it," he explained in his dangerously soft voice. "You can't do anything about it. The only thing you need to do is obey my orders."

Lestrange couldn't hold back anymore and sobbed, "Please, we will follow you. Have mercy."

Voldemort stared at him, then his angry magic lashed out. Lestrange hissed in pain as he was hit, a large gash appearing on his cheek. Voldemort chuckled sinisterly and started to pace in front of the Knights.

"Oh, you don't have to follow me. I never forced anyone to join me," Voldemort said quietly. "You all came to me out of your own free will. And wasn't I very kind to you? Even though I didn't have to, I selflessly took the time and taught you. I showed you things you would have gained from no other wizard."

Voldemort continued to pace, his steps echoing eerily from the cold stone walls. Then he said in his horribly light voice, "But now, after all the things I have done for you, you decide to stab me in my back? Is that how you repay me?"

He paused shortly and stopped his pacing. A sinister sheen leaked into his red eyes as he scanned the men before him. They all trembled in fear, some shaking their heads in denial.

"Did you never consider, while you were conspiring against me, that I might not take this very well?" Voldemort said, never raising his voice. "You've seen me doing magic. You know what I can do. Did you really think that you would be able to overcome me?"

He stepped over to Avery, who still cowered on the floor. Slowly a twisted smile appeared on Voldemort's face.

"It seems you are the leader of this little mutiny," he whispered.

Avery shuddered in terror as he heard it. Then he cried panicky, "Please, I'm sorry."

Voldemort sneered down at him, unmoved by Avery's obvious fear. They were interrupted by a soft click coming from the door and then a sharp intake of breath. Voldemort raised his head. Malfoy stood by the door. His hand tightly grasped Melanie Nicolls' arm. Shock was plastered all over the girl's face. Voldemort gestured for Malfoy to step closer. Malfoy bowed to him and pulled Nicolls with him into the room.

Voldemort didn't pay them more attention but lazily twirled his wand through his fingers, as he peered down at Avery through half-lidded eyes. Sadistically he enjoyed how Avery trembled with fear. Voldemort closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. So much fear, so much despair. He could almost smell it. A deranged smile distorted Voldemort's features as he drank in the terror he had created.
Voldemort's eyes shone like eerie ghost lights as he re-opened them. He raised his hand and his pale long fingers mercilessly grabbed Avery's hair. Pulling cruelly, he brought the other's head up. Voldemort laughed softly as he saw the tear tracks on Avery's face.

"So weak," he whispered pleasantly, sweet malice warping his tone.

Avery gave a shudder. Voldemort abruptly released his hold on him and took a step away from his victim. Cold hate distorted his features as he hissed maliciously,

"I will teach you what happens to those who defy Lord Voldemort."

"P- please, my Lord, have mercy," Avery sobbed terrified. "Forgive me! Forgive us all!"

A high pitched laugh tore from Voldemort's mouth as he heard Avery beg. His eyes were alight with hate as they skimmed over his followers. Voldemort revelled in the fear he had evoked. Insane smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he raised his wand and waved it at Avery.

"Crucio."

Avery's painful screams instantly filled the room. His body convulsing violently, he lay on the floor. Unimaginable pain ripped at him, making his limbs thrash and twitch uncontrollably. Voldemort could feel his magic rushing through him and towards Avery. He thoroughly enjoyed the pain he inflicted on the other. Reluctantly, Voldemort pulled his magic back and ended the curse. Avery remained to be weakly lying on the floor. Voldemort stepped over to him. He bent slightly forward so he could look down at Avery.

"You are lucky that you have such a merciful Lord," Voldemort whispered, his silky voice seeping like poison through the silence. "I will grand you your wish. You are released from my Knights."

A slash of his wand and Avery was forcefully pulled into a sitting position. His whole body was shaking heavily with the after effects of the Torture Curse. He flinched away as Voldemort took a step towards him.

"You don't have to be afraid," Voldemort purred softly in a reassuring voice. "You needn't have gone through all this trouble. As I said, I never forced anyone to join me. If you want to leave, I have no problem with that. You are free to go whenever you want."

Avery's eyes uncertainly wandered up at Voldemort's red ones. Tentative hope swelled up in him. Just then a vicious smirk grew on Voldemort's face.

"There is just one little problem we have to solve before you leave," he said, voice deathly cold.

Avery shied away from him and the smirk on Voldemort's face even widened.

"You have seen me performing some - let's say - darker spells," Voldemort continued in the same dangerous voice, "So, if I let you go with that knowledge in your head, I run the risk of you telling people about my deeds. And that, Avery, is something I cannot allow. You see, I don't fancy being shipped off to Azkaban."

"I… I won't tell anyone," Avery sobbed scared. "I swear."

"Now, we are back to the trust." Voldemort smiled down at him. "I started this association and everything is founded on trust. I trusted you not to tell anyone. I trusted you would be intelligent
enough not to brag about it. And I trusted you wouldn't try to backstab me."

"But here we are," Voldemort concluded, spreading his arms wide.

"Please, my Lord," Avery pleaded. "You can trust me. I won't tell anyone."

Voldemort sniggered lightly. "From personal experience I can tell you, Avery, trust is very hard to regain."

With that raised his wand.

"Osculum mortis," Voldemort whispered mercilessly.

As the spell hit him, Avery's eyes glazed over. An empty look fell over his features as he sat immobile on the floor. Then suddenly there was something golden oozing from his eyes, mouth and nose. Neither liquid nor gas, it swirled through the air and was sucked into Voldemort's wand tip. As more and more of the golden substance left him Avery's body started to convulse heavily. His trembling got more and more violent, until he opened his mouth and released a bloodcurdling scream. Still, he could not turn away as the golden substance left him, never to come back. His scream of agony echoed from the stone walls.

Voldemort did not release him from the spell. Not even as blood started to accompany the golden substance. Blood red tracks covered the skin of Avery's face. It steadily dripped from his chin and soaked into his white shirt. Still, the golden substance was pulled from him. Avery stopped to scream. His mouth was still opened but no sound left him. Something flickered in his eyes. Then it just went out.

His body stopped to tremble. It hung in the air limply as if held by invisible hands. His face was empty and expressionless as the last drop of gold detached from him. Like a wisp of smoke it swirled through the air. Then it made contact with Voldemort's wand and just disappeared.

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E- everything went so swimmingly. She had had a plan. A good one. Everything fell into place and played out just right. She had honed it, her dream, held it dear and watched it blossoming before her eyes. Today was supposed to be her day. A day of triumph, of reunion.

What had happened?

Standing here, her body trembling all over, things crumbled before her eyes. She felt as if someone had pulled away the ground under her feet.

Could dreams turn into nightmares?

Melanie whimpered softly in fear as she stared at Avery's still body. He was lying there, agony etched into his still face. His skin was incredibly pale which made the blood standing out even more. Oh, the blood. So much. Its metallic tang made Melanie gag. Her mind was clouded by fear as she stared at Avery. Blood was seeping from his mouth, from his nose and even from his eyes. Abominably, the red tracks contrasted with his pale skin.

What had gone wrong?

H- her plan wasn't supposed to work like this. She had only wanted to play around with the popularity structure within Slytherin house. Nothing serious. A harmless plan. Her first step had been to pull Avery to her side. He was a powerful ally. Avery was supposed to rise in Slytherin house.
Melanie had speculated that DeCerto, being the opportunistic Mudblood that she was, would drop her current boyfriend and go for Avery. That was Melanie's plan: harmless intrigue. With her help, Avery had managed to convince his friends to side with him and raise a mutiny. She had even given them a runic ritual to be able to disempower their leader.

So, why was there blood dripping to the floor?

Terror invaded her and made her heart racing away. Melanie could barely breathe. There he stood, the reason for her plan. Tom. Tom. Tom. For him she would do anything. Since she had seen him for the first time, she had known that she was destined to be with him. He was perfection. Last year he had been her boyfriend and for Melanie life had been bliss. Handsome, smart, gentle Tom Riddle had spent his time with her and she had been happy. Everybody loved Tom Riddle. He was always polite, a model student, a prefect and the perfect gentleman. Who wouldn't love such a wonderful person?

Tom Riddle. Her Tom.

He stood there, just a few metres from her. Pale skin, black hair, lithe form. He was still handsome. Tom Riddle. But Melanie wanted nothing more than to run away from him. Wand in hand, he looked down at Avery's bloodied form. A maniacal smile ghosted eerily around his soft lips as he took in Avery's injuries. Tom's beautiful grey eyes were gone, in their stead Melanie saw blood red orbs. They glowed demonically in the dim light of the room. The worst was the magic pouring out of that wizard. It crackled around him with dark intention. Melanie felt the magic wrenching at her maliciously. It sliced over her skin, thirsting to rip her apart. Melanie stood frozen in horror as she stared at that dark wizard.

Who was that?

Abruptly his cruel gaze left Avery's bleeding form and snapped to Melanie. Her breathing hitched with fear as his crimson eyes wandered over her. Evil smile on his face, he took in her fear with cold amusement. In terror Melanie flinched away as he glided over to her. She trembled helplessly as he stood before her. The pressure of his horrible magic took away Melanie's breath. She cowered before him, barely daring to look up at his expressionless face.

"Now that that's dealt with, let's talk about you," the wizard said as his icy cold eyes appraised her mercilessly. "No need to deny anything. I know you started it all."

He tapped his chin while he smiled down indulgently at the shaking girl.

"I confess myself to be at wit's end with what to do with you," he informed her pleasantly.

Melanie looked up at him with wide scared eyes. Incredulity was spread all over her face as she stared up at the dark wizard.

"P- please, Tom," she managed to sob weakly. "I didn't want t- to do this. Don't h- hurt me."

The smile didn't drop from his face, if anything it now had a fiendish touch to it. He raised a hand and skimmed his fingers gently over her cheek. His voice, though, was deathly cold as he whispered,

"You didn't leave me much of a choice, did you little girl?"

A horrified sob left Melanie. Tears were freely rolling down her cheeks. She trembled in terror as she looked up at Tom.

"Please, I only did it to help you," she breathed out desperately.
"To help me?" Tom echoed in a soft voice, tasting the words on his tongue.

Melanie nodded panicky. "Y- yes. I just wanted to… wanted to get you away from DeCerto," she mumbled, her voice trembling and broken. "She's n- not good for you. P- playing around with you…"

Tom merely raised an eyebrow at her shaky confession, his unforgiving eyes never leaving her.

"Ah, so you wanted to scare Hermione away from me, did you?" Tom simpered gently, underlying threat twisting his words. "What if I like having Hermione around?"

"B- but she's… she's a Mudblood," Melanie sobbed helplessly.

"Maybe." Tom smiled his cruel smile. "But that is of no concern to you. Tell me, why do you have this stupid need to save me?"

Melanie looked up at Tom pleadingly, then she confessed in a choked voice,

"I- I love you,"

As he heard it Tom laughed, his cold voice echoing harshly in the room. After his laughter had died down, he took a step towards Melanie, making her flinch fearfully away from him. Then he bent down to her and grabbed her chin roughly. Melanie sobbed pathetically as Tom forced her to look at him, his face mere inches away. The girl was shaking in terror as she saw a destructive force dancing behind his red eyes. Never had she seen that murderous drive in Tom. His magic was completely dark as it reached out for her.

He… he had always been that handsome prefect. Polite. Gentle. Perfect in every way.

But now Melanie trembled in fear as she looked up at him. Masks fell from Tom's face and she saw a dark abyss. For the first time Melanie got a glimpse of his true self and cold panic overtook her. Emotions like mercy or pity were absolutely non-existent in him. There was only darkness, hate and a sadistic need to cause pain. Melanie shook in fear and terrified sobs left her as she stared at that cruel dark wizard in front of her.

Seeing the fear he invoked, slowly a depraved smirk twisted up his face. Then Voldemort sneered at the sobbing girl, "I doubt you are strong enough to love me."

With that Voldemort raised his wand at. He sniggered evilly as Nicolls took a clumsy step away from him.

"N- no," she cried in panic. "Please, don't hurt me!"

"You should have thought about that before you displeased me," Voldemort lectured her in a deathly cold voice. "There is no use begging me now."

As he raised his wand, his magic in the air changed direction and rushed towards Nicolls. She squealed pitifully as Voldemort's magic prepared to attack. Like fire it licked at her skin. Amused by Nicolls' tears, Voldemort brandished his wand.

"Exur-"

"Master," a voice interrupted his spell.

Voldemort slowly turned his head. The beginnings of his dark curse already wrenched at the sobbing
Nicolls. Abraxas Malfoy had left the ranks of the other Knights and knelt on the floor before Voldemort.

"Malfoy," Voldemort hissed icily. "This is not the best of times to annoy me."

"I apologize," came Malfoy's swift reply. Even his otherwise so composed voice shook slightly as he continued, "I know I have no right to ask anything of you but I beg you to spare her."

"That is very bold," Voldemort whispered, a sharp edge in his tone.

Malfoy bowed his head even lower, expecting a curse to hit him any moment. "Yes, and you have every right to be disgusted by my awkward behaviour. Still, I beg for your mercy."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes in anger at the blond. His magic demanded to be set free and he enjoyed the angry dark power too much to stop now. If it had been anyone else asking, he would have discarded the request on the spot. His blood-red eyes wandered slowly over Malfoy's kneeling form.

"I know you did not take part in this conspiracy," Voldemort whispered frostily. "You did not betray me. You were faithful…"

The silence in the room was almost palpable, only disturbed by Nicolls' soft sobs. Voldemort considered Malfoy. After an eternity he slowly, reluctantly, lowered his wand.

"I will reward your loyalty," Voldemort hissed. "Take her."

Malfoy bowed low. Then he stood, stepped over to the desperately crying Nicolls and wrapped an arm around her shaking shoulders. The girl pressed herself against him fearfully, grabbing his shirt in her hands.

Before Malfoy could lead her away, Voldemort said, a dangerous tint in his voice, "If she ever causes any trouble again, I'll hold you responsible for it, Malfoy."

The blond inclined his head. "Yes, Master. Thank you."

Voldemort lost interest in Malfoy but let his demonic eyes wander over his other followers.

"Should you ever try something like this again--" he warned them, dark threat dripping from his voice. "--you will follow Avery's fate."

His followers all dropped to their knees, heads bowed, as they pledged their loyalty to him. Tom's derisive gaze skimmed over them. Then he turned and walked over to the exit of the Come-And-Go room. He snapped his fingers and a door appeared.

The moment Tom stepped over the threshold of the room and into Hogwarts' corridor, he could feel something burning up in his robe pocket. His hand went to the pocket and he pulled a small black stone out. Its form was irregular and rough. Tom stared at the stone, lying on the palm of his hand. His stomach knotted with fear as he saw an angry red colour raging in the middle of the stone. The fury behind the spell had heated the material up so much that it burned Tom's hand.

Tom's eyes slowly wandered from the black stone to the entrance of the Come-And-Go room and he pressed his mouth in an angry line. Obviously, his traitorous Knights had ordered the room to transform into something unplottable, so they wouldn't be disturbed while deposing of him. As they had resided in this room, they had all temporarily been separated from everything. Tom's hand balled tightly around the stone, burning him further. Then his gaze wandered back to his Knights. The other
Slytherins cowered away from him as they felt his angry magic in the air, but Tom's eyes lingered on Lestrange. There was fear visible on the other's face as he stumbled away from Tom.

Tom's voice was deathly cold as he whispered, "If anything happens to her, I am going to kill you."

He could see Lestrange's eyes widen with panic, but then Tom just turned around and ran down the corridor, leaving his Knights behind.

{{{{{{{{+}}}}}}}}
"Hermione?"

She turned around and saw Longbottom walking towards Tom and her.

"Could you..." he started. "...er... can I speak with you alone?"

Hermione frowned at Longbottom. He seemed to be rather nervous about something.

"It's... it's kinda important. Please?"

"Yes. Yes, sure," Hermione finally replied, a little bit concerned about him.

A relieved smile broke out on his face. "Thanks."

Hermione turned towards Tom and said, "We'll meet later, okay?"

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Longbottom's hand clutched Hermione's wrist and he pulled her away down the hallway.

"Now, Marc, what's wrong?" she asked curiously. "Are you in trouble?"

Longbottom turned his head and cast her a reassuring smile. "Let's go outside. I'll tell you then."

Hermione sighed tiredly. He was being very mysterious, wasn't he? How very unlike Longbottom. She chuckled softly. It wasn't long and they reached the Entrance Hall. As they stepped outside Hermione squinted her eyes. The sun shone brightly down on Hogwarts' grounds. A few students were loitering around on the grass, chatting and laughing. Hermione breathed in the summer air, enjoying the warm sun on her skin. Obviously Longbottom was in a bit of a hurry as he tugged her away.

"Okay, okay," Hermione said amused. "I can walk alone, you know."

Longbottom let go of her and she fell in step beside him. He led her towards the Great Lake in silence. Hermione frowned at him. He wasn't his old talkative self.

"You are not in real trouble, are you?" she asked suspiciously.

Longbottom grinned at her and shook his head. "No, don't worry."

She raised her eyebrows at his rather vague answer. Slowly she was starting to get worried. Longbottom just ignored her questioningly raised eyebrows and continued to briskly walk towards the Great Lake. Hermione almost had to jog alongside him to keep up with his long strides.

As they passed the Quidditch pitch, Hermione heard someone yell, "Oi, Marc, Hermione! Wait!"

She turned around and saw Lupin and Weasley walking towards them. Oddly enough, Longbottom stiffened as he saw the other boys. It didn't seem like he appreciated the company right now. Hermione glanced at him in suspicion. Maybe he had girl trouble and that was why he wanted to talk to her alone? If that was the case, Hermione doubted she would be able to help him out. She probably had even less of a clue about the girls from the forties than he did.
Unperturbed by Longbottom's dismissive behaviour, Weasley smiled and waved. He was carrying a broom over his shoulders and his windswept red hair stood in every direction from his head. Lupin followed behind him and he too was carrying a broom. Hermione giggled as she saw the greenish colour of Lupin's face. How had Weasley managed to persuade him to fly? Hermione knew that Lupin wasn't exactly a fan of Quidditch …or brooms in general. As the boys reached Longbottom and her, Weasley patted Longbottom's back good-naturedly.

"What's up, mate? Thought you wanted to join us." He grinned at Hermione and added, "Did the lady hold you back?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot," Longbottom apologized.

Hermione noted how the smile he threw at his friend was rather forced.

"We actually just wanted to go down to the lake. So if you excuse us…" Longbottom's voice trailed off pointedly.

"Oh, to the lake?" Weasley asked cheerfully. "Great. You guys mind if we tag along?"

Hermione had to stop herself to roll her eyes at the redhead. It was very obvious that Longbottom wanted to speak with her alone. Sometimes Richard Weasley was so much like Ron. They both had the sensitivity of a sledgehammer. Hermione giggled at that thought.

Longbottom shrugged at Weasley, clearly not at all delighted. Still, all four of them wandered down to the Great Lake. Hermione followed her friends, a serene smile on her face, while she wallowed in memories about Ron. She was surprised that instead of pain they were suddenly accompanied by a warm feeling.

"So, where's the boyfriend?" Weasley asked her conversationally.

"Hm?" made Hermione absent-mindedly. "Tom? In the castle. Probably up to something no good."

Weasley laughed at that. Even Lupin, who seemed to have gotten over his nausea, chuckled slightly. Only Longbottom didn't react at all. Hermione peered up at him. Something must be really wrong, she thought.

As they reached the shore of the Great Lake they sank down to the soft grass. Hermione smiled contently as she sat there with her friends, looking out on the water. She couldn't believe how time had flown by. Now it was already June and the school year was almost over. In less than a week, she would be off with Tom for the summer break.

"-shouldn't have caught the Quaffel with your face." Hermione tuned back into the boys' conversation. Weasley laughed at Lupin. "That was your main mistake. You're lucky it wasn't a Bludger, mate."

Lupin scowled at him. "In case you didn't notice, I tried not to get killed by that death-trap you call a broom."

They broke down in laughter after this. Hermione had to wipe tears from her eyes. As she had calmed down a bit, she noticed that Longbottom hadn't joined in.

"Okay, that's it," she said sternly. "Tell me, Marc. What's wrong?"

"Huh?" he made innocently. "What do you mean?"
Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Something's bothering you. What is it?"

"No. I'm fine," he said, not meeting her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Weasley cut in confused.

"Something is up with him." Hermione gestured at Longbottom. "And he's not spitting it out."

Longbottom threw his arms up in the air in frustration. "Okay okay. I tell you."

Hermione, Weasley and Lupin looked at him expectantly.

"It's that Charms essay we had to write for Merrythought," he admitted grudgingly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't tell me you didn't write it." As he wasn't very forthcoming with an answer, she groaned, "Marc, we had two whole months to write it. What happened?"

He shrugged, still not meeting her eyes. "I did write something. I just think it's rubbish. And you know I need to pass Charms. Mum'll have a heart attack if I don't."

"Why do you come up with that now?" Hermione nagged, reverting back to her know-it-all voice. "One day before it's due."

Longbottom grinned apologetically at her. "You know how forgetful I am. Actually I once even managed to lose a Remembrall…"

Hermione tried to hit him with a reproachful glare but she had to giggle as she heard that.

"Okay," she said. "How about you give me your essay and I check it?"

A relieved expression washed over Longbottom's face and he grabbed his school bag, digging through his stuff.

"There it is," he finally announced, pulling a scroll of parchment out of the bag.

He offered her the scroll. Hermione threw him one last reproachful look before she reached for it. Her fingers had almost touched the parchment as Lupin suddenly yelled,

"Don't touch it!"

Knitting her brow, Hermione hesitated and turned to him. "What…?"

Lupin grabbed her sleeve and wrenched her arm away from Longbottom. His eyes were wide with disbelief as he stared at his blond friend.

"Amarys, what's wrong?" Hermione inquired confused.

An uncharacteristic dark look crossed Lupin's face as he continued to eye Longbottom as if he was seeing him for the first time.

"Something's not right with him," he growled darkly.

The frown on her face got deeper and Hermione inquired confused, "What are you going on about?"

"Something's not right," Lupin repeated, never letting Longbottom out of his line of view. "He's
acting funny. And that essay…” He gestured at the scroll, still in Longbottom's hand. "I've been working with him on the essay. It's fine. He knows that."

Hermione turned her head and looked at the blond Gryffindor in confusion.

"Marc, what's this all about?"

"I really don't know," Longbottom replied honestly.

He eyed Lupin with innocent bewilderment written all over his face. He seemed to be alright. What was Lupin going on about? Hermione's eyes slowly wandered over Longbottom's face. He really looked fine. Just like everyd-

A gasp left her as she stared into Longbottom's eyes. Normally they shone in a bright blue. Now they looked dull and glassy. Lifeless. How could she have missed that? Lupin was right. There clearly was something odd going on. As she squinted her eyes, Hermione detected remnants of very dark magic all over Longbottom. This was very wrong. She warily skidded away from him on the grass.

The innocent confusion dropped from Longbottom's face as he saw Hermione retreating from him and his fingers clenched around the scroll of parchment, crumbling it. Suddenly he sprang into action. Without giving any advance warning, he aggressively lunged himself at Hermione. She screamed in surprise and pain as the whole weight of his body collided with her and Longbottom tackled her to the ground.

"Stop this!" she yelled breathlessly.

Hermione tried to wriggle away from him but Longbottom had no problems holding her in place with his larger frame. Seeing his friend's violent actions, Lupin pulled himself out of his shock and tried helping Hermione.

"Dammit! What's wrong with you?"

Lupin grabbed Longbottom's shoulders in an attempt to pull him away from Hermione. Weasley helped him but Longbottom fought against them and did not let go of her. Suddenly, he raised his hand and pressed the scroll of parchment, he was still holding, against Hermione's cheek. Seeing this Lupin quickly reached for the scroll, trying to rip it away. Hermione could feel the rough parchment against her skin as Longbottom said in a hollow voice,

"Activate."

A sharp breath of air left her as Hermione felt the familiar sensation of a hook behind her navel, pulling her away. She could still feel Longbottom's body pressed against her and Lupin's hand at her cheek as he tried to wrench the parchment away. His effort was in vain and all three of them were hurled through space towards an unknown location by the portkey.

Just moments later, a painful hiss left Hermione as she impacted hard with the ground. For a moment she was disoriented, her head swirling from the unexpected travel. There was a gruff hand clasping her wrist and pulled her into a standing position.

"Let her go!" She heard Lupin's angry voice.

Hermione blinked. The world swam back into focus. It was Longbottom's hand that was holding her wrist painfully tight. Lupin stood beside her, his wand in his hand. He pointed it at Longbottom. There was an uncharacteristic snarl on Lupin's face as he hissed at Longbottom,
"Let go of her!"

He grabbed Hermione and wrenched her away from Longbottom.

"Why did you do that?" Lupin said, anger and disbelief shaking his voice.

Hermione's gaze snapped back at Longbottom. He somehow had stopped all activity but now stood there with an empty expression on his face. He didn't even look at her but seemed to just stare vacantly in front of him. Hermoine's eyes wandered over his face and she gulped nervously as she looked into Longbottom's blue eyes. They were still dull and glazed over, his pupils dilated. As she saw those lifeless eyes, it suddenly hit her. Why hadn't she realized sooner? She had behaved like an amateur.

"I can't believe you did that," Lupin spat at Longbottom. "How could you, Marc?"

Hermione raised a hand and cautiously put it on Lupin's hand which still pointed his wand at the blond Gryffindor. She gently pushed his arm down.

"It wasn't him," she whispered softly.

Lupin turned his head and stared at her. "What…?"

As an answer, Hermione just uttered two words, "Imperius Curse."

Lupin's eyes widened and darted back to his friend.

"He's been cursed?" he asked deeply shocked. "Why… Who would do that?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders, grim expression on her face. This didn't sit right with her. All her senses were on high alert. She turned and quickly scanned her surroundings. They stood alone in the middle of a hall-like room. The floor and walls were made of stone. Countless pillars flanked the walls and grew towards the high ceiling, melting together in round arches. Huge windows were set into the thick stone walls. Their glass had once been coloured beautifully but layers upon layers of dust had turned it opaque. Only dull light managed to penetrate the blind glass. On the far end of the room, the dreary sun shone through a round window. Its rays died even before they reached the broken altar which stood under the window. A golden cross had once proudly been attached to the wall behind the altar but it had broken from its mounting and now lay, burst in two, on the floor. The gold colour had flaked off the wood long ago and now the sad pieces only gathered dust. As if swept away by a hurried hand, wooden remnants of pews lay in a mouldering pile in a corner. Everything was broken and covered by dust. The place looked like it had not seen any human presence for decades. Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as she let her gaze travelling over the church. Seemingly, it was abandoned and empty.

Looks were deceiving, though, and Hermione could sense it. Magic was thick in the air. When she squinted her eyes, she could even see a weak sheen of magic emanating from the stone walls and the high ceiling. It was almost imperceptible and cleverly woven into the stone, but Hermione could see it gleaming in a dull green light.

What was this place?

Hit by the burning urge to leave, Hermione found that she had no need to find out. They needed to leave. Now! She threw a concerned glance at her friends. Longbottom still stood where they had left him, his dead looking eyes staring into space. Lupin eyed his surroundings with an alarmed expression on his face. Hermione was sure he could neither see nor feel the threatening film of magic that covered everything. Even with her new magic, Hermione herself could barely perceive it. She
had to get her friends out of here. Hermione took a step towards Lupin and grabbed his hand.

"We need to leave," she whispered urgently.

He only nodded at her, unease clear on his face. Hermione took a hold of Longbottom's hand which lay unresponsive in hers. Holding tightly to her friends, Hermione twirled on the spot. She gasped softly as the dark pressure of Apparition did not want to welcome her. Instead of disappearing from this place, they ran into what felt like a solid wall.

"What's wrong?" Lupin asked nervously.

"I don't know," Hermione replied shakily. "I can't apparate."

This wasn't possible. Panic started to tug at her. Not even Hogwarts' wards were able to hold her. Why couldn't she break that green glow? Hermione closed her eyes and summoned all her magic. Then she pushed it out of her body. It crackled around her forcefully. But as soon as it came into contact with the green light, her magic recoiled. There was an incredibly strong ward spun over the whole church. Never before had Hermione encountered magic like this. However hard she tried, she was not able to overwhelm it.

"It's a ward," she informed Lupin breathlessly. "I can't take it down."

"I really don't like this," he replied softly. "We should leave."

Hermione nodded. She threw a glance at Longbottom. He still stood at the same spot and hadn't moved an inch. Maybe he knew what this was about?

There's no time for this, a cold voice warned. Hermione threw in a breath of air and collected her thoughts. This was not the time to panic. Decidedly, she grabbed Longbottom's hand and started to pull him over to the huge oaken doors which hopefully led out of this place.

"We are leaving the Muggle way. Keep your wand out," Hermione ordered, turned to Lupin.

He nodded and made to follow her, his eyes still flying nervously around the church. Then he whispered,

"Hope the gate's not lock-"

He couldn't finish his sentence as suddenly sharp cracks echoed through the empty church.

Shit!

Hermione saw several figures appearing out of thin air. Again portkeys, she noted as she fell into her duelling stance. Lupin was a few steps beside her, now raising his wand defensively. Hermione's gaze swept over their opponents. She counted four. Maybe more in her back. Those men had surrounded them pretty well. Through the corner of her eyes, Hermione saw one of them swirling his wand.

"Expelliarmus!"

She reacted instinctively. Without raising her arm, she balled her right hand into a fist to then open it abruptly. A white, diamond shaped shield appeared around Lupin, Longbottom and herself. The disarming spell harmlessly rebounded off that shield. Hermione didn't want to wait for more. She tightened her grip on Longbottom's hand and hissed to Lupin,
"Stay with me, Amarys!"

With that she made to dash towards the doors, Lupin hot on her heels. The white shield was following them like a bubble. The man standing in Hermione's way was pushed away by the shield's power. That obstacle out of her way, Hermione started to sprint towards the door, still wrenching Longbottom with her. Even as she ran, she could feel curses colliding forcefully with the backside of her shield. Its power already dwindled. Hermione gritted her teeth.

Weakened by the fact it had to protect three people, her shield already wobbled dangerously. As an especially potent curse hit, Hermione knew it was no good. The curse, though its power reduced by the shield, still penetrated her defence. Hermione's heart clenched with fear as she heard Lupin yelp painfully. She stopped her flight and whirled around, ready to hurl a curse at her attackers. Hand already half raised, her body froze in horror as she stared at the scene before her. Lupin lay on the ground a few metres from her. One of the attackers was bent over him, held him by his hair and menacingly bored a wand into his throat. As Hermione saw her friend's life in danger, the curse she wanted to throw at her attackers died on her lips and her arm fell uselessly to her side.

In a matter of seconds, the men had surrounded them. Lupin was still threatened by a wand to his neck. Hermione felt Longbottom being ripped from her grip and another man violently grasped her arms and twisted them to her back. Her fake-wand was ripped from her holster and a painful pressure appearing around her wrists told Hermione that she had been magically bound. Then she was brutally kicked in the backs of her knees and sagged down on the floor.

So far, none of the men had said anything. They had worked well together, not needing to communicate with words. Heart racing away in her chest, Hermione took in their captors with one swift glance. There were six men, including the one behind her who probably pointed his wand at the back of her head. All of them were tall and quite muscular, uniformly dressed in black. Hermione saw heavy boots, black combat trousers and jackets. Their wands had been removed from their holsters at their hips.

Hermione knew who they were. These men had moved like a unit, a tactical team. Their attacks had been powerful and precise. Unmistakably, there was cold blooded routine and combat experience behind their swift actions. Though they were indeed missing the customary black cloaks, Hermione was quite sure she knew whom those soldiers belonged to. That knowledge made ice cold chills running up and down her spine.

One of the soldiers, a man with dark-red hair and glasses, stood a bit behind the others. He stowed his wand back into its holster, obviously confident that the situation was under control. The other soldiers continued to hold Hermione and her friends at wand point.

"Pécresse," the redhead, obviously their leader, ordered briskly. "Go, inform the commander."

One of the other soldiers inclined his head though never letting his targets out of sight. "Yes, sir."

He reached for a dog tag hanging on a chain around his neck. Grasping the tag in his hand he said, "Headquarters."

With that the man was sucked away from the church. Hermione bit her lip painfully hard. The portkeys could obviously overcome that green ward which had stopped her from disapparating.

"Get them over there," the leader again ordered, gesturing to the church's altar.

With dread Hermione realized that this would place a good twenty metres between them and the
doors. She gasped in pain as the soldier standing behind her brutally grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into a standing position. Swearing silently, Hermione wished to be able to curse the bastard, but she couldn't even see the man's face as he brutally pushed her to the other side of the church. In the corner of her eyes Hermione saw that Lupin received the same rough treatment. Longbottom followed his captor docilely, still with that blank look on his face. Hermione berated herself that she hadn't recognized the symptoms sooner. She knew the Imperius Curse was quite difficult to diagnose, thus the reason why Death Eaters liked to claim they had been under that curse while committing their crimes. Still, Hermione should have recognized it.

As her captor had finally dragged her over to the altar, Hermione expected something to happen. The soldiers, though, did just resume their position where they threatened her with wands and then waited. She quickly needed to find a way out of her. Whatever happened, Hermione had no desire to meet the leader of these men.

Her dark thoughts were abruptly interrupted as the soldier behind her stepped closer to her. Hermione felt how he pressed himself against her back. Panic was swelling up in her and she tried to squirm away from him. He easily stopped it as he snaked an arm around her waist, pressing her back tightly against his chest. The man slightly bent down to her and Hermione shuddered in fear as he whispered into her ear from behind. Her blood froze over as she recognized that voice.

"Hm," the man groaned huskily into her ear. "I remember you."

It was Henger. The man who had molested her and nearly killed her. Now there was no doubt anymore that these were Grindelwald's soldiers.

Hermione's breathing was quickened as she felt Henger so near. One arm was possessively wrapped around her waist while his other hand started to wander deliberately slowly over her body. Hermione tensed and tried to wriggle away from his unwanted touch, but Henger held her steady. His stray hand greedily skimmed over her chest, enjoying the curves of her body. Hermione threw in a shaky breath of air. Her whole body started to tremble which only caused Henger to laugh softly into her ear.

"Last time you have been lucky, Schlampe," he maliciously hissed into her ear. "Not this time. After my commander is finished with you, I'll have a go with you."

Hearing this, a fearful whimper left Hermione. Henger pulled her tighter against him. She didn't dare to move even an inch.

"Let go of her, bastard!" Lupin, still being restrained by another soldier, yelled at Henger.

Henger threw him an uninterested glance, before he re-focused on Hermione.

"Gotten yourself a new boyfriend, hm?" he said in his harsh accent.

Unimpressed by Lupin's protest, Henger continued to grope her. Hermione wanted to curse him. Push him away from her. No-one knew about her wandless magic. That bastard wouldn't even know what hit him. But then what? Hermione might be able to get away from Henger, but what about the other men? Could she take on all of them? It might prove fatal to underestimate Grindelwald's soldiers. If Hermione attacked, they might try to hurt Lupin or Longbottom.

Hermione couldn't risk her friends' lives. So she held completely still as Henger's hand continued to explore her body. It wandered up her body and Hermione yelped as his fingers brutally closed around her neck. Cold panic was flooding her as Henger choked her.
"Don't think I've forgotten our last rendezvous." His voice was twisted into a dark threat. "You'll pay for that."

As he finally released her Hermione sucked in breaths of air. His abominable fingers wandered to her hair. Grabbing a fistful, he forced her head back. Hermione stiffened as he bent down to her. Slowly, lecherously, he licked over the soft skin of her neck. Hermione shuddered in disgust.

"Mm," Henger purred to her. "You still taste the same."

"Get away from her!" Lupin roared furiously, but was only rewarded with a kick by his captor.

Henger snickered coldly into Hermione's ear. "Quite fiery your new lover boy, eh?"

Then he resumed to let his hand greedily wander over her flesh. Lupin growled with frustration and anger as he had to watch it. He tried getting to Hermione but was held in place. Irritated by these developments, the redheaded leader of the soldiers narrowed his eyes angrily at Henger.

"Cut the crap, Henger," the leader sharply reprimanded the other. "This is no pleasure trip."

"Yes, sir."

Thankfully Henger's disgusting hand left her body and Hermione released a shuddered breath of air and she found that she could think again. While fear still rushed through her Hermione frantically searched for a way out. The church's doors were the best option they had. She still had her wandless magic. The soldiers did not expect something like that. Still, they were six and Hermione was alone. On top of that she would have to protect both Lupin and Longbottom. It was a risk. Hermione closed her eyes and forced her racing heart to calm down. A risk. But she would have to take it.

Hermione pushed her magic into her right hand and was just about to form it into a curse as a soft crack echoed through the church. Hermione stiffened but the soldiers didn't even flinch as another man appeared out of thin air.

Hermione's gaze shot at the new arrival. The man stood just a few metres away from her. He looked out of place standing beside the black clothed soldiers with their grim expressions. It seemed like some kind of apparition mistake had brought that man here and he had originally aimed for Diagon Alley to meet his family for an innocent shopping trip. He seemed to be twenty, maybe thirty, years older than the soldiers. Not very tall, his slight built made him look dwarfed in comparison to the muscular soldiers. His clothes were nothing remarkable either. He wore simple brown trousers and a nondescript greyish shirt which was frayed at the hems. His golden coloured hair stubbornly stood at odd angles from his head, clashing with the short accurate hairstyles the soldiers sported. The man's skin was tanned and weather-beaten, giving him the impression of someone earning a living while working outdoors. Laugh lines wrinkled up the skin at his eyes, though right now there was no smile touching his face.

As unimposing as this man looked, Hermione couldn't help but gulp nervously as she felt the magic emanating from him. The man's magic washed over Hermione's body and it felt like an electric shock to her, temporarily knocking the air out of her. The magic left behind an unpleasant coppery taste on her tongue. Crackling powerfully around the man, Hermione could see the magic as a strangely colourless aura. Unnerved Hermione realized that even the greenish ward which covered the whole church reacted to man's presence. As if welcoming back an old friend the green ward burned up excitedly.

While Hermione had taken in the man's appearance, the redheaded leader of the soldiers had stepped over to him. He saluted before the golden-haired man and reported with military conciseness,
"The situation is under our control, commander."

"Good work, Rousseau," the golden-haired man replied. His voice was quiet but it nevertheless carried authority.

His gaze left Rousseau and wandered over the other people in the church. Hermione stiffened in fear as his hard eyes came to rest on her.

"Bring her over here," the golden-haired man ordered Henger who still held Hermione in place.

Hermione felt Henger's grip on her arms tighten. Then he roughly pushed her over to his commander. Henger forced her to stand right in front of the golden-haired man. By now Hermione could feel her whole body trembling, still she didn't avoid the man's eyes. His face was stony, giving nothing away, and his eyes were cold and emotionless as he took her in.

Finally he said, his sharp voice cutting through the silence, "Hermione DeCerto, finally we meet."

Hermione couldn't reply anything. In his close proximity his magic hit her full force and the power behind it made her weak in her knees.

"I'm sure you've already guessed who I am," the man said and without waiting for her reply he inclined his head slightly in greeting.

"I am Gellert Grindelwald."

Hermione heard a soft gasp coming from Lupin. It painfully reminded her of her friends' presence. She needed to get them out of her unscathed. Grindelwald was obviously used to people falling in a state of panic after hearing his name and declared unmoved,

"You are like a ghost, Ms DeCerto. Very difficult to catch."

She still chose to remain silent. There was nothing she had to tell him. Grindelwald obviously saw it the same way, as he continued unsmilingly,

"I don't want to spend any more time on this than necessary. I'm sure you know why you are here?"

Of course Hermione knew. She knew what he wanted ever since the first time she had crashed into his soldiers in Nicolas Flamel's flat. *Peverell's manuscript*. Still staring up at his face, Hermione slowly nodded at him. Grindelwald registered her answer coldly.

"Very good. You seem to be quite clever," he stated emotionlessly. "That should makes things easier. Let's get straight to business, shall we?"

He took a step towards her, increasing the pressure of his magic on her body. Hermione had to suppress a painful whimper. Henger, standing behind her, still held her in place. Grindelwald scanned her slowly, thoroughly. Then he said, his voice calm and demanding,

"I want you to bring me Peverell's manuscript."

"I… I don't have it anymore," Hermione whispered, cursing her shaky voice.

A hollow smile curled up Grindelwald's mouth, making him look even more menacing.

"That is a lie," he stated coolly, never raising his voice.

Hermione quickly shook her head. Grindelwald ignored her denial and said curtly,
"I know that the book did not leave Hogwarts' castle since you brought it there, Ms DeCerto. I will tell you now how this works: You will bring me Peverell's manuscript and in return I will not kill your friends."

With that Grindelwald gestured at Lupin and Longbottom who were still held by the soldiers. Fear clenched brutally around Hermione's heart as she heard his threat. Her head swirled as her gaze fearfully shot at Lupin and Longbottom. Longbottom was still dazed by the curse but Hermione could see the panic in Lupin's eyes. She could barely breathe as terror mounted up in her. No! She couldn't let anything happen to her friends. Hermione's wide eyes shot back at Grindelwald. He was indifferent towards her obvious fear and told her coldly,

"As a display of my good will, I release Mr Longbottom from his binding spell."

With that Grindelwald pulled his wand. A toneless gasp left Hermione as she recognized the Elder Wand in his hand. It looked exactly like she remembered it before she had broken it in two and started the whole time travel. Hermione's shock at seeing the Unbeatable Wand did not go unnoticed by Grindelwald. A dangerous gleam appeared in his eyes as they now wandered over her.

"I see you did your homework well," he commented quietly.

Without more words he waved the Elder Wand in a small movement. Hermione turned her head and watched Longbottom. For a moment he still looked vacantly in front of him. Then his blue eyes cleared up with a new glint of life. He blinked several times and shook his head as if getting rid of dizziness. As the hold of the Imperius Curse completely released him, Longbottom became slowly aware of his surroundings. Hermione saw how first bewilderment and then shock washed over his face. He struggled against the grip one of the soldiers had on him.

"Wha- what happened?" Longbottom exclaimed, trying to free himself. "Let go of me!"

His eyes frantically skimmed over the people around him. With confusion and panic he stared at the soldiers. Then he spotted Lupin.

"What's going on?" he asked, fear ridging his voice.

"C- calm down, Marc," Lupin stuttered in a shaky voice. "Everything's going to be alright."

Of course it didn't calm Longbottom down at all. His wide eyes jumped from Lupin to Hermione. She stood a few metres away from him and was still being held in place by Henger. Anxiety flared up in Longbottom's blue eyes as he saw his friend being threatened like that.

"Let go of her!" he yelled at Henger furiously.

Henger only smirked at the other and pulled Hermione even tighter against himself.

"Keep your hands off her!" screamed Longbottom, struggling against his bonds. "What is going on?"

Hermione's stomach constricted painfully as she stared at him. She needed to save her friends. Fast.

"Welcome back, Mr Longbottom," Grindelwald said calmly, unmoved by the cause of events.

Longbottom stopped his struggles and looked at Grindelwald, confusion momentarily replacing his anger.

"Who are you?" Longbottom stammered.
"Oh, just on old friend of Ms DeCerto," Grindelwald replied humourlessly.

Longbottom's eyes widened with understanding.

"You are Grindelwald," he choked out, fear tinting his tone.

"Hm, it seems my name precedes me," Grindelwald commented softly.

His cold eyes wandered over the shock and fear on Longbottom's face before he added frostily, "I have to admit I would have preferred to use your services under different circumstances."

Longbottom again tried to pull away from his captor. It was fruitless, so he barked at Grindelwald,

"What the fuck did you do to me?"

Grindelwald did not seem to be angered by the other's outburst. In the end he sighed regretfully,

"It does pain me to lose such a good spy."

"I am no spy," Longbottom yelled, indignation and anger in his voice.

Grindelwald snickered as he heard it. "The best spy, Mr Longbottom, is the one who isn't aware of his true nature himself."

Longbottom furrowed his brow but his blue eyes were still full of anger as he glared at Grindelwald.

"I would never work for scum like you!"

The insult washed over Grindelwald, leaving him unaffected. His voice, too, was perfectly composed as he replied,

"You already did by bringing me Ms DeCerto."

Upon hearing this, Longbottom's eyes widened in horror. His gaze snapped at a bound Hermione with Henger brutally forcing her into place.

"No, I didn't," Longbottom stammered desperately. "I didn't bring you- I didn't bring you here, did I?"

Hermione quickly shook her head. "No, Marc. No. It wasn't you. It wasn't your fault. You've been controlled. The Imperius Curse. Don't blame yourself."

Pain crossed Longbottom's face as he heard her.

"Oh God," he whispered brokenly, his blue eyes staring at her, begging for forgiveness. "I'm so… so sorry, Hermione. I didn't want this. I swear."

She tried to smile at him reassuringly. "I know you didn't. It wasn't y-"

"Enough with this," a hard voice cut over her.

Grindelwald's frosty gaze had fallen on Hermione again. Impatience glinted in his eyes as he stared down at her.

"Today you've lost me a good spy," Grindelwald declared coldly. "For months Mr Longbottom has been my eyes and ears in Hogwarts, keeping one of my greatest adversaries under surveillance."
Being a sleeper, not even an attack on Mr Longbottom’s mind would have revealed him as my spy because he is unaware of his doings."

"T-that’s not possible," Hermione whispered, her voice ridged by fear. "The Imperius Curse can’t be used like that. Not without Marc’s knowledge and not without the caster being close-by."

Grindelwald snickered coldly as he heard it. Then he said, "You will find that magic tends to bend to my will as does the human mind."

"No!" Longbottom yelled, his voice thick with fear and disbelief. "You did not do that to me! You bastard!"

Grindelwald completely ignored Longbottom, his hard eyes never leaving Hermione.

"You probably wonder why I’m telling you this, Ms DeCerto?" he stated, dangerous inflection in his tone. "It’s because I want you to understand the problems you’ve caused me. I expect compensation."

Not waiting for any reply, Grindelwald continued, his voice brooking no disobedience, "You will bring me Peverell’s manuscript. Bring me the book and your friends are free to go."

As he heard this offer Lupin interrupted, his voice strangled, "What about Hermione? If she brings you what you want, will you let her go?"

Grindelwald turned his cold eyes at Lupin and answered with one sharp word.

"No."

Hearing this, Longbottom yelled in protest, "You will not lay a hand on her, you monster."

He tried to get away from the soldier holding him. Hermione bit the inner side of her cheek hard as she stared at Longbottom and Lupin. Her mind was reeling. She knew she would do anything to get them out of this. Nothing was more important than their safety.

She turned to Grindelwald and asked, her voice firm despite the panic gnawing at her, "Why should I trust you? If I brought you the book, who is guaranteeing me that you’ll free my friends?"

An evil smile curled up his mouth as he replied, "No-one. But if you don’t do it, you all will die right now."

"No!" Longbottom yelled anger and fear lacing his tone. "Hermione, don’t do it!"

Grindelwald ignored his yells but continued to scan Hermione, his eyes boring into her. She could still feel the force of his magic on her body, tugging at her impatiently.

"I see you are hesitating," Grindelwald stated, his voice free of any emotion. "You do not yet understand the gravity of your situation. Let me make it clearer for you."

Grindelwald’s cold gaze wandered from her to Henger who still held her tightly. Grindelwald nodded at the other man curtly, conveying a silent command. Seeing this, sadistic glee twisted up Henger’s features and his fingers tightened around his wand.

"Yes, commander."

He let go of Hermione but she still couldn’t move at all. Magic ripped at her and she knew it was Grindelwald who now held her in place. In the corner of her eyes she saw Henger raising his wand. Icy cold the panic crashed down over her. With cruel precision he flicked his wand through the air.
"No!" Hermione screamed, begged and cried.

Henger did not hesitate. "Avada Kedavra."

An eerie green light left his wand. Mercilessly the light hissed through the air. Once released, nothing would ever stop it. Nothing could take it back.

Nothing.

Longbottom's eyes widened in shock. He was unprepared. He was not ready to go. The green light was uncaring. Remorselessly, it smashed into his chest. A soft surprised gasp left him, then Longbottom's body grew limp and he sagged down to the floor. His hands were still bound to his back as he lay on his side, sprawled on the cold stone floor. Unmoving and completely still. His eyes were open, disbelief etched into his features. Longbottom lay there, lifeless and abandoned. Not himself anymore.

Nothing.

Grindelwald's magic released her and Hermione weakly fell down on her knees. Tears streamed down her face as she stared at her friend. She couldn't breathe.

He was gone. She knew it. Gone.

She heard Lupin cry out in pain and shock but she couldn't make out his words. The only thing she saw were those blue eyes in front of her. They were all that existed for her. This could not be true! No! NO! Hermione's hands balled into fists, her fingernails cutting into her skin. She didn't notice anything around her. Only Marc. She stared at him and she knew he was dead.

"I do not joke around, Ms DeCerto. Ever," Grindelwald's icy cold voice drifted to her. "Don't make the same mistake twice. You only have one friend left. Bring me Peverell's manuscript or he is dead."

Hermione couldn't think straight, not with those empty blue eyes still staring at her. It took her an immense effort to pull her eyes away from Marc's expressionless face. She turned her head and looked up at Grindelwald. The man scanned her, not a hint of compassion on his face.

"You forced my hand, Ms DeCerto," he told her, his voice steady. "Because of your obstinacy I lost a perfectly good spy."

Hermione stared up at him, a numb feeling ripping at her painfully. She gazed back at Marc. Lupin had fallen down beside his body; tears streamed over his cheeks as he desperately held to his friend. Hermione knew no amount of tears or begging would ever convince Marc to come back. He was gone.

She noticed in surprise that tears were falling from her own eyes. Still kneeling before him, Hermione looked up at Grindelwald and whispered brokenly,

"I... I will do whatever you say. Please, don't hurt Amarys. I'll bring you the book, I promise. Don't hurt him."

There was neither surprise nor triumph flickering through Grindelwald's eyes. All along he had known she would break. He inclined his head in acceptance and said,

"Very good."
His hand wandered to a trouser pocket and he pulled out a tiny golden bell attached to a short chain. The old bell glinted dully, its edges red from rust. Grindelwald tossed the bell down to Hermione. It jingled weakly as it rolled over the floor and came to rest right before her.

"The word 'forest' will activate this portkey," Grindelwald informed her harshly. "It will transport you right to the edge of the forest surrounding Hogwarts. Go to the castle, retrieve the manuscript. You have one hour until the portkey will automatically bring you back. If talk to anyone or fail to acquire my book, your friend here is dead."

Hermione extended a trembling hand and took the little bell. It lay in her hand, small and frail looking. Her gaze wandered from the bell back to Marc. He still lay where he had fallen. Lupin was bent over his body, holding to him tightly. Silent tears were falling from his eyes as he stared back at her. Hermione shuddered. Her own eyes were swimming with tears, blurring her vision. Kneeling uselessly on the floor, her body trembled all over. It was all her fault. Her fault that Marc was dead. From the beginning she had pulled her friends into her problems. Hermione's heart clenched painfully.

Focus! A cold voice cruelly cut through her misery. You can wallow in self-pity later, Granger! Now, you save Lupin.

Yes, she needed to pull herself together. She had already failed one of her friends. There was no way she would allow them to hurt Lupin as well. Hermione breathed in deeply, forcing her fear and pain away. There would be time to mourn later. Not now. Now she needed to concentrate. She needed to be strong.

Hermione knew what she had to do and her hand balled tightly around the bell, the portkey to Hogwarts.

Still kneeling on the floor, she suddenly raised her hand, index and middle finger extended. Her magic accumulated at the tips of her fingers and she formed it into a powerful cutting hex. The hex left her hand as a white flash of light. Hermione slashed her fingers through the air in a long arch, the hex following her movement.

Grindelwald, who stood closest to her, was hit first. He was not prepared for any form of attack and certainly not for this display of wandless magic. Her cutting hex would have slit open his chest but he reacted instinctively and put up a shield. Still, he stumbled away a few steps. Hermione continued the movement of her arm, the hex following horizontally to the ground. In a matter of seconds the cutting hex reached Grindelwald's soldiers who were standing around Lupin. Lupin was still crouched on the floor so that Hermione's hex ran over his head. The soldiers were not so lucky. One of them was hit before he erected a shield, inflicting a deep wound to his arm. Quickly shields sprang up, but all of the soldiers were pushed away by Hermione's magic. She quickly cancelled her spell but used the same movement of her arm to erect a shield of her own.

Obex!

The shield gleamed in a bright yellow light and spun over the whole room. As Hermione had managed to push Grindelwald and his soldiers away with her cutting hex, the yellow shield now separated them from her and Lupin.

Still kneeling on the floor, Hermione had her hand raised to maintain her shield, but she gasped as she felt how it sucked her magic out of her. Grindelwald had overcome his surprise. Elder Wand in hand, he took down her shield. He was incredibly strong. Already her yellow shield flickered dangerously. Hermione knew it was impossible to maintain the shield for long. Only seconds.
The bell - the portkey - was still in her hand. Her eyes darted to Lupin. Surprise and shock on his face, he stared at her.

"Take it!" Hermione shouted, her voice shaky from exertion.

She flung the golden bell over to Lupin. It landed on the stone floor a metre away from him and skidded until it lay right before him. Lupin quickly grabbed the portkey and scrambled to his feet. Hermione watched as he wanted to run over to her. Her yellow shield already broke down at the edges. There were mere seconds until it would disappear. Lupin would be too slow.

"Go!" Hermione screamed. "I can't hold it. Get Dumbledore!"

Lupin's eyes widened as he heard her. Then the shield broke. Grindelwald's skills had been too much. With the shield gone, Hermione was instantly hit by a violent wave of Grindelwald's powerful magic. It pressed down hard on her body, making breathing difficult. Her eyes desperately shot at Lupin. The force of Grindelwald's magic had pressed him down on his knees. He stared back at her. Hermione could see the fear in his eyes. She smiled at him faintly.

"Go," she mouthed.

Lupin pressed his mouth into a thin line. Grim expression on his face, he nodded at her. Tears still glinted on his cheeks as he grabbed Marc's hand. Then he whispered something under his breath. The portkey in his hand lit up in a blue light. Hermione breathed out in relief as she watched Lupin being pulled away. To safety.

Mere seconds later an array of curses impacted with the stone floor where Lupin had been. Hermione waved her hand swiftly through the air. A bluish shield appeared before her, just in time to protect her against the curses Grindelwald's soldiers had sent her way. Her shield held but the force of the impacts still hurled her away. Hermione skidded over the floor before she came to a halt, her shoulder aching where she had been flung to the ground.

"Stop!" a sharp voice ordered.

The curses stopped and Hermione dared to look up. The soldiers had rounded up on her. They were moving stealthily, aiming to surround her. Hermione's eyes flicked from them to Grindelwald. He stood there, looking poised and completely at ease. The Elder Wand was in his hand but he did not point it at her.

Hermione shuddered uncomfortably as his eyes slowly wandered over her, appraising her. The hard glint in them had somehow disappeared, instead his eyes twinkled strangely with an almost innocent curiosity.

"That was-" Grindelwald said softly, his voice suddenly warm and gentle. "-unexpected."

A pleasant smile curled up the corners of his mouth and he tilted his head while he continued to scan Hermione with interest.

"I am impressed," Grindelwald purred, still in the same suave tone.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. He had completely abandoned his former chilly conduct. This sudden change of demeanour was abrupt and - as he so nicely put it - unexpected. Grindelwald's eyes only reluctantly left her as he looked at Henger. He gestured for the man to come over to him.

"You have her wand?"
Henger nodded swiftly. "Yes, commander."

Extending a hand, Grindelwald ordered, "Give it to me."

Without hesitation Henger obeyed and handed over Hermione's black wand. With growing trepidation Hermione watched the proceedings. She bit her lower lip as Grindelwald examined her wand. Her very fake wand. He turned the black wood in his hands, now and then waving it experimentally.

Still staring down at Hermione's wand, a triumphant grin appeared on Grindelwald's face. Then he suddenly snapped the wand in two, making Hermione flinch. The fragments of her fake wand uselessly fell to the floor as Grindelwald's eyes wandered to Hermione. If anything, the excited glimmer in his eyes had intensified.

"Henger," Grindelwald said without taking his eyes from Hermione. "I understood that you still have some unfinished business with the lady?"

"Sir?" Henger looked in confusion at his commander.

"Well, she's all yours now," Grindelwald said calmly.

As he heard that a sinister smirk appeared on Henger's face and Hermione was hit by a wave of panic. Grindelwald stood back, observing everything like a hawk.

Evil smile still in place, Henger stalked over to Hermione. She only now noticed how he limped slightly, his right leg stiff. He leered at her lustfully. Insatiable rage boiled up in Hermione as she stared at Henger. This disgusting bastard had cast the \textit{Killing} Curse at Marc. He had… that vile excuse for a wizard had murdered her best friend!

Hermione couldn't stand it anymore. She got up from her position on the floor, making Henger raise his wand at her. He was going to pay. Hermione's magic reacted to her state of mind. Furiously it burned in the air, crackling with her anger.

In her ire Hermione failed to notice the excitement lighting up Grindelwald's eyes as he sensed her magic in the air. She only had eyes for Henger.

Henger waved his wand and sent a curse at Hermione. It dangerously hissed through the air and would hit her right in her chest. Hermione waved her hand like slapping someone. Her magic crashed into Henger's curse and changed its trajectory. It harmlessly collided with the stone floor beside Hermione. She wrinkled her nose in disgust as the man again waved his wand. She didn't wait for Henger to finish his incantation but instead waved her hand angrily.

\textit{Sectumsempra}!

Yes, yes, it was a dark curse. Hermione knew. Right now, though, she did not care. The curse detached itself from her fingers and dashed towards Henger. He smirked at her smugly as he waved his wand and a grey shield appeared before him.

Ever since Tom had restored Hermione's magic, she had a lot more control over it than ever before. Seeing Henger's shield, she pushed her magic out of her body and made contact with her own curse. Through that connection her curse grew in power and gained in momentum. The enhanced \textit{Sectumsenpra} curse crashed into the shield, easily broke it down and then mercilessly smashed into Henger. Through her magic, Hermione could feel how her curse cut into his flesh. Henger yelled in pain as the curse ripped open his chest. Blood gushed out of the wounds while the force of the impact hurled Henger through the air. He made hard contact with the stone floor and lay still, not
moving anymore as he drifted off into unconsciousness. Hermione coldly watched how the blood seeped from him, somehow hoping that they hadn't yet found any form of cure to a curse Severus Snape would invent in a few decades time.

Suddenly laughter rang through the church, echoing from the stone walls. Startled, Hermione's gaze flew to Grindelwald. A wide smile on his face, he beamed at her in amusement. His eyes were shining with delight as they wandered over her. The way he stared at her, Grindelwald seemed to be mesmerized by Hermione's mere existence.

Then he said, his voice soft, "Rousseau."

The red-haired leader of the soldiers swiftly stepped over to him. "Yes, commander?"

Grindelwald still stared at Hermione longingly as he replied, "My friend, take your men and return to Headquarters. Your services are no longer needed."

Rousseau seemed to be surprised by this order. His eyes shortly dashed to Hermione.

"Are you sure, commander?" he dared to ask.

Finally Grindelwald managed to unfix his eyes from the witch and he looked at his second-in-command. A small smile curled up his mouth as he scanned the man.

"Yes," he replied softly, not enraged by the other's intrusion. "I think Ms DeCerto and I have to sort this out in private."

Rousseau raised his eyebrows as he spotted an almost childish joy on Grindelwald's face. Then he nodded sharply and with military swiftness saluted before his commander before he strode over to his men.

"Okay, boys, get your shit together, we are out of here," Rousseau ordered sharply. He gestured to Henger who still lay on the floor. "Grab him and then move."

"Yes, sir."

Two of the soldiers lifted up the unconscious Henger. Then they all pulled the dog tags out from under their uniforms shirts. After a few softly muttered 'Headquarters' Grindelwald's soldiers disappeared from the abandoned church leaving nothing behind but a swirl of dust.

Hermione had observed these proceedings with growing bewilderment. Now that the soldiers were gone, her gaze wandered back to the only wizard left in the church. Grindelwald stood a few metres away from her and still eyed her with interest. As he noticed her attention on him, a reassuring smile appeared on his face. Gone was the ice cold look from before, instead there now was nothing but warmth in his eyes.

"My dear Hermione," Grindelwald said softly, suddenly using her first name. "Your magic is quite extraordinary."

"So I've heard," Hermione threw back coldly, warily.

His warm smile didn't even waver at her disrespectful tone of voice. Hermione was on edge, her magic nervously swirling around her. Did Grindelwald want to catch her off guard? That wasn't likely to happen.

"I knew you were quite the resourceful witch," Grindelwald said conversationally. "But I had no
idea you would be this capable."

Now he definitely tried to flatter her. Hermione scanned him with open distrust. Grindelwald's eyes were twinkling merrily at her, an inviting smile curled his lips and his mussed up golden-hair made him look like an innocent school boy.

"What do you want from me?" Hermione asked sharply,

Grindelwald chuckled as he heard it. He didn't even try to deny it but admitted, "I thought that would be rather obvious. I want you to join me."

Hermione stared at him incredulously. "You want me to join you?"

Whatever she had expected, it certainly hadn't been this. What did Grindelwald plan? The man was eyeing her, still with that unnerving smile on his face.

"Yes." He nodded at her enthusiastically. "I do want you on my side."

Hermione shook her head in disgust. "You just ordered the murder of my best friend. I'll never join you. Go to hell!"

Grindelwald looked at her. The smile melted from his face and suddenly regret was swirling in his eyes.

"I am sorry," he whispered gravely. "I should have never let your friend die."

Hermione stared at him. The warmth in his voice, the gentleness expressed on his face, Grindelwald looked like he genuinely regretted his acts.

She shook her head.

"Please, Hermione," Grindelwald said sincerely. "I've made a horrible mistake. I see that now. Please, join me and give me the opportunity to gain your forgiveness."

Hermione stumbled a step away from him. This was ridiculous. Pulling her magic protectively around herself, Hermione hissed at Grindelwald,

"Your men gained so much intel on me. I'm sure they also told you that I'm Muggleborn. Why would you let me join you when I am the very thing you fight against?"

Grindelwald smiled at her apologetically and insured, "No, no. You are mistaken, my dear. I do not fight against Muggleborns."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in disbelief. "Sorry, but that's bull. Last thing I heard from you, you attacked a French Muggleborn registration office. If you are not fighting against Muggleborns, then by all means enlighten me. What are you fighting against?"

The smile on Grindelwald's face never faltered and he answered simply, "Ignorance. I fight against ignorance. I am trying to make this world a better place by building the society we all deserve. I fight for freedom."

"How can you say that? You are killing people." Hermione sneered mordantly. "You are building something new on a graveyard. The only thing you will create is hate."

His eyes still twinkling, Grindelwald countered, "Throughout history, revolutions have always been accompanied by bloodshed. The loss of life is unfortunate but it does not blemish the idea behind the
revolution. If we want to achieve anything, we need to make sacrifices. I am fighting for the greater good of mankind."

"Then why are you only sacrificing Muggleborns?" Hermione shot back aggressively. "They are your only target. Muggles and Muggleborns."

Grindelwald smiled at her indulgently as he explained, "The first time a Muggleborn enters the magical world, they don't know anything about magic. They enter a society where one form of magic is being persecuted and criminalised. Being brainwashed like this, Muggleborns will likely join the system of oppression. You see, until we manage to free our society, every Muggleborn entering the magical world will only multiply the number of enemies."

Hermione stared at him aghast. There was conviction burning in his eyes. It made her sick. Did he really believe he was on the right side? Her eyes shortly darted to the doors leading out of the church. She wanted to leave here. Hopefully Lupin would alert Dumbledore. If she played for time, maybe Dumbledore would come and save her. Or could she dare make a run for it?

Staring at Grindelwald, Hermione asked, her voice steel hard, "Why?"

"Why what?"

Grindelwald looked so suave, so terribly affable. His eyes twinkled at her and the smile looked charming on his face. He looked innocent, just as if he hadn't just ordered her best friend's death.

"Why do you want me to join your side?" Hermione bit out, magic crackling around her forcefully.

"Oh, but, Hermione, why wouldn't I want someone like you fighting for me?" Grindelwald chortled. "Just now you showed a very inspiring display of magic. You truly would be a fine addition to my ranks. I would be honoured."

A mischievous grin appeared on his face and he added, "If you worked with me, you could also easily acquire Peverell's manuscript for me. It could be your first mission."

A sharp frown appeared between Hermione's eyebrows. "Why are you so obsessed with that book? Why that interest in the Deathly Hallows?"

"Don't judge me too harshly, Hermione. After all, you are trying to find them yourself, aren't you?" Still smiling, he winked at her and suggested, "If you would agree to come to my side, we could join forces in our quest to find the Hallows."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment. What was he up to? She didn't understand it at all. First he wanted her to get the manuscript for him. But now? Why did he talk to her like this? Why the sudden change in his behaviour? It made Hermione edgy, her eyes again darted to the doors.

Ignoring his offer, she asked, "Why do you try to find the Hallows? What is it? Immortality?"

Grindelwald gazed at her, the smile on his face slowly widening.

"Immortality? No, no. I am certainly not interested in that."

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. It took her off guard, the honesty in his voice.

"Why should I strive for eternal life?" Grindelwald began to pace in front of her. "Why should I trouble myself with scenarios of my possible death, when I live here and now. It is my responsibility to shape the present, so why waste my time with the future?"
"But the Deathly Hallows…" Hermione whispered. She couldn't read this man at all. It made him dangerous. "They are supposed to be able to conquer death. Why would you hunt them, if not to stop death?"

Grindelwald stopped his pacing. The irritatingly charming smile still stretched across his face.

"Yes, I do know that tale," he told her thoughtfully. "The three brothers and their encounter with death. Which left them each with a token from death himself."

Grindelwald ran a hand through his golden coloured hair as he grinned at her mischievously. Hermione felt a twinge in her stomach as his tousled hair now reminded her of Harry.

"Say, Hermione. Do you believe in fairy tales?"

Hermione didn't answer. She had no idea where he was going. Getting no response, Grindelwald went on,

"Neither do I. If you ask me, my dear, then the Hallows are nothing but a wizard's creation. Of course incredibly powerful, but still man-made. Death certainly did not step out of his realm to bestow three innocent men with his power."

Shaking herself out of her stupor, Hermione said rudely, "You did not answer my question." As Grindelwald raised his eyebrows she added, "If you are not interested in immortality and if you don't believe in the Hallows anyway, then why are you trying to find them."

"Very perceptive, indeed. And so impatient." He smiled at her. "Well, actually I tried to find the Hallows for quite some time now. Years and years. You wouldn't believe. At the beginning a friend of mine helped me. That was before he abandoned me."

"Albus Dumbledore?"

"He told you?"

Hermione just stared at him, not saying any more. Grindelwald again ran his hand through his hair as he pensively stared at the ceiling.

"Hm, who would have thought. Albus speaks of me." Then his gaze snapped back at her and he smiled, "Hopefully only good things."

He turned to her and spread his arms wide. "The Hallows are only a past time of mine. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"Then why, if this is a mere past time of yours, did you spend so much time and men, to get Peverell's book from me?"

"Well, I really want to have it." Grindelwald grinned impishly. "No hard feelings, I hope?"

Hermione didn't reply.

"Come on, my dear," Grindelwald said amicably. "The Hallows are powerful magical objects. Every wizard would want to own them."

"Do you expect me to believe that you interrupted your actual mission to just gain a few trinkets?" Hermione hissed. "Because I'm not buying it. What do you want from me? Why do you want me to join you?"
"Ah, I see," Grindelwald grinned at her, seemingly not offended by her mocking tone. "Can't get anything by you."

He scanned her innocently for a while before he asked, "Did you read his book, dear?"

"Yes." Came Hermione curt reply.

"I see, I see," Grindelwald chippered. "Now, the big question is: Do you know who Ignotus Peverell is?"

Despite herself, Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. Who Peverell was? Why did he ask that? Peverell had lived more than a thousand years ago. He was the one creating the Elder Wand. What more was there to be known? Grindelwald's eyes glowed up with pleasant surprise as he saw the bewilderment on Hermione face.

"So, you don't know," he chuckled. "You read His book, but you have no idea."

Hermione saw something flickering over his face. The charming smile was still in place, but now there was a strange sheen in his eyes as they wandered over her. That glint changed his whole expression and there was an odd longing behind his benign façade. It only stayed for a second though, then his face was a suave mask again.

"My dear, Peverell may very well be the most important figure in the history of magic. You really don't know about him?" Grindelwald flashed her one of his charming grins as he said, "But I can't blame you. Young people are never really interested in history."

Hermione shook her head. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because we want to work together in the future and I most certainly cannot let my soon-to-be partner remain ignorant," Grindelwald said warmly. "See? I will honour our future alliance with sharing my knowledge. I promise, all will become clear."

Hermione didn't reply. Stalling time was the best plan she had right now anyway. So why not listen to his delusional ideas?

"Back in his time, Peverell was what they called a master in the magical art," Grindelwald told her. "He had excelled every spell and charm known to man, he had studied every aspect of magic and had spoken with everyone who had been considered a master themselves."

"But soon, Peverell came upon something the other wizards had failed to see. His comprehensive knowledge allowed him to realize that there were boundaries to magic. Not being satisfied with that, Peverell tried to push those boundaries. His efforts were successful. The moment he saw the boundaries fall was a revelation to Peverell. He understood that what had until then been taught as magic was in reality nothing more than a mutilated version of that force. All the beliefs and teachings were restricting the magical force and turning it into something inflexible."

"So, Peverell took that force – which had been believed to be unchangeable – and changed it. He managed what before him no-one had even dreamed about; he modified the very foundations of magic itself. He gave magic back to nature. He set it free."

Hermione frowned as she heard Grindelwald's passionate speech. His words didn't sit right with her at all. Still she listened as Grindelwald continued his story,

"Instead of celebrating Peverell and thanking him on their bended knees, the other wizards shunned him and called him a daemon. Even devil himself. Peverell did not let them stop him. He never gave
up and even though everyone else called him a heretic and tried to put a stop to his work, he committed his discoveries to paper, Hermione."

"His work, his beliefs, later managed to influence wizards like no-one before or after him ever did. He split magic itself. So, that after him there were two forces. The one wedged into rigid forms and stipulations; and the new one, the one that is pure freedom, not bound by anything. An eternally changing force."

Hermione felt dizzy as she listened to Grindelwald. Her thoughts rushed through her head. Two forces of magic? One controlled and one eternally changing… She had heard those words before, hadn't she? 'Eternal and ever changing'. Once Snape had used those words, but back then he hadn't described magic itself.

Hermione's eyes widened with realisation as she stared at Grindelwald. What he said…

"Peverell, he created…" she whispered weakly. "Dark Magic."

The smile on Grindelwald's face was now icy cold as he kept her imprisoned in his stare.

"Not dark," he whispered. "That's how his antagonists may call it. No, his way of magic is change. Eternal change. How can something that has no form and no direction be dark and evil?"

Grindelwald took a step towards her. A kind smile played around his lips as he scanned her. Hermione felt herself being pulled into his eyes. Into his words. It scared her. As if being able to see her fear, Grindelwald threw her a reassuring glance before he continued,

"As a follower of Peverell's teachings, I don't like it when they call me a dark wizard. For I am not dark. I am light. Just as much as Peverell has been a beacon of light in those dark times."

Hermione blinked, trying to pull away from his mesmerizing eyes. Then she said in a flat voice,

"Dark Magic is evil."

It sounded silly to her own ears.

"Peverell's way of magic – the original magic – is neither good nor evil." Grindelwald told her softly. "It's freedom."

Hermione was stunned. Her thoughts seemed to have come to a standstill. Peverell was the origin of it all? Since reading his manuscript she had known he was dark. But was he the creator of all darkness?

"You see, my dear," Grindelwald continued. "Even a thousand years after Peverell's death, dark forces are still trying to work against him and his legacy. He did create something wonderful and unique. He set magic free, so that it could be what it always was meant to be: Pristine and mighty, like every force of nature. Divine."

Grindelwald took a step towards her his eyes glistening down at her with conviction. "In Peverell's time, people were too short-sighted to realize what he had created. So, they tried to fight what they could not understand. Even to this day, wizards still are too stubborn to accept Peverell's present."

Grindelwald turned away from her and took a few steps away while he continued in his mesmerizing voice, "They call it heresy and are condemning his way of magic. I will not let them continue to defy nature. I will not let them commit such a crime."
"Dark Magic is dangerous," Hermione whispered, hating how weak her voice was. "It is only used to hurt and to kill. How can that be nature's way?"

"Sometimes, in all its beauty, nature is cruel. Still, we should never dare to judge it. We need to accept our place in nature and not fight it."

"But Dark Magic is solely about fighting and destruction. It is pain and suffering; there is nothing good, nothing divine behind that branch of magic. I've seen Dark Magic," Hermione spoke up, forcing conviction into her words. "It brings devastation, nothing else."

"Why do you say that, Hermione?" Grindelwald asked gently. "Be honest, why do you demonise Peverell's magic? Is it perhaps that you have been indoctrinated by all the propaganda from the government? Do you even know what Dark Magic really is."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Hermione whispered shakily.

"You asked me why I want you to join me," Grindelwald replied seriously. "This is your answer: I need you."

Hermione stared at him, not understanding what he meant. Then she stuttered in bewilderment, "Y- you need me?"

"I do," Grindelwald confirmed. "We are at war. This war has been raging since Peverell's time. I want to finally end it. And you, my dear, will help me."

Hermione took an unsteady step away from him and asked weakly, "How could I help?"

"You are intelligent, my dear, and you are an incredibly powerful witch." A greedy expression in his face, Grindelwald added, "Infused by Peverell's spirit, are you not?"

Hermione stiffened as she heard the insinuation in his last words. Did he know about the Elder Magic? Hermione threw in a sharp breath of air.

The Elder Magic!

It was inside of her. So deeply entwined with her own magic that it was now one force. That magic came directly from Peverell. Was her magic dark?

Was she dark?

Hermione stared with wide eyes at Grindelwald. He smiled at her reassuringly, seeing the panic on her face.

"I can feel it," he told her gently as if confirming her thoughts. "It is all over your body. You emit Peverell's magic. The original magic. You breathe it; you live it. Why do you fight against it?"

Dark magic? Hermione took a struggled step away from him, shaking her head.

"No…"

"You are a mystery. A paradox." Grindelwald's eyes glided over her body. An excited glint appeared in them. "Just tell me, my dear, who made you?"

"W- what?" Hermione chocked out, feeling dizzy on her feet.

"Hm, you don't want to divulge who your creator is?" Grindelwald asked, not sounding surprised at all. "Don't worry, I'll find out sooner or later. I need to meet him anyway."

"What are you going on about?" Hermione voiced weakly, thoughts swirling through her head.
"Very bold, his actions. So much could have gone wrong," Grindelwald chuckled, his eyes twinkling at her in amusement. "But here you are, mysterious creature. Why, I think even Peverell would have been delighted to meet you. You are everything he stood for. Everything that I fight for."

He stepped closer to her and raised a hand, affectionately tugging a strand of her curly hair behind her ear.

"Child of the original magic. That is why I need you."

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. No, that couldn't be. Her breathing came ragged as his words sunk in. Child of the original magic? She shook her head in desperation.

…and child of Dark Magic…?

No. No! She didn't want to accept that. Biting her lower lip hard, drawing blood, she still stared at Grindelwald.

"I- I am not. Not like you. You killed… you… killed Marc," Hermione whispered, her voice choked and shaky. "I would never fight for you. I'm not dark."

Grindelwald just smiled at her indulgently and Hermione's thoughts went haywire.


Hermione had known who he was. She had read his manuscript and his dark reasoning had leaked from his every word. Since she had opened his cursed book for the first time all those months ago, she had known. Why had she ignored it all the time? Peverell was dark. Peverell was a murderer. He had killed his own brothers without remorse. Why would the magic he had transferred into the Unbeatable Wand be anything but dark? The very same magic that now was fused with Hermione's body. As Tom had helped her regain her lost magic, she hadn't cared at all that it would mean regaining Peverell's magic as well. Dark magic…

No. No. No!

Hermione stared to tremble violently. Her magic still raged around her and its presence now sickened her.

"I AM NOT DARK!" Hermione desperately screamed, wanting to make the burning truth go away.

"I'm not your enemy," Grindelwald soothed. "I can be your protector."

Hermione frantically shook her head. Her eyes shot to the door leading from the church. She needed to leave here. Now!

Her hand trembled uncontrollably as she raised it. Her movements were agitated as she waved her hand at the pile of unsound wood which lay in a corner not far away. The rotten pieces of the church's pewage obeyed and rose in the air. Following Hermione's hand movement the wood shot towards Grindelwald. The wizard flicked his wrist thus erecting a shimmering shield around himself. The wood pummelled into the shield, causing no damage at all.

Hermione turned and raced over to the door. Reaching the exit, she desperately pulled at the huge brazen handle. It didn't move an inch. In fact it was so static, Hermione was sure magic held it in place. As she pushed her magic into the door, she could feel the same ward which had stopped her from apparating earlier. Hermione wrenched and pushed, but it was no use. Grindelwald's magic did not release the door.
It was then that Hermione felt a powerful curse rushing towards her back. Instinctively she ducked and hurled herself to the side. The curse thundered into the wooden door, right where Hermione had stood moments before. Her eyes dashed to Grindelwald. Elder Wand in hand, he eyed her curiously. She threw in a shaky breath of air as she saw his magic crackling around him. It was again a strangely colourless aura.

Hermione quickly jumped up from her position on the floor. She raised her right hand and furiously slashed it at Grindelwald. A white beam of light emerged from her hand and sped towards the wizard. Hermione kept her hand up and maintained the rush of magic towards her opponent. Grindelwald easily waved his wand through the air. The white beam crashed into an invisible wall, not able to reach Grindelwald. Hermione gritted her teeth and increased the amount of magic she put into the white beam of light. Wand raised, Grindelwald had no problems to protect himself. Hermione imperceptively snapped the fingers of her left hand.

*Accio!*

With that she sent a simple summoning charm towards the stone altar which stood at the far end wall of the church. Grindelwald did not notice her actions. The simple magic of the summoning charm was concealed by the stronger magic behind the white beam. The heavy flagstone of the altar reacted to Hermione's summon and rose easily into the air. Grindelwald stood right between Hermione and the altar, the flagstone was aimed to crush into his back. With bated breath, Hermione watched the flagstone soar through the air, while she still attacked Grindelwald with the white beam of light. Only seconds and the stone would crush into Grindelwald and yet he hadn't detected the danger behind his back.

Just as the stone was to hit the wizard, a semi-transparent wall of cyan coloured light sprang up out of nowhere. The flagstone collided with that wall. The force of the impact made the heavy stone burst and shards of stone flew everywhere. Grindelwald's eyes widened in surprise. A slash of his wand and he overpowered the white beam of light from Hermione's attack. Then he turned his head slightly and stared at the broken stone. With a flick of his wand he cancelled the cyan shield. It obviously was part of a standalone ward which acted independently from him. Grindelwald turned to Hermione again. She noticed in surprise that an amused grin played around his mouth.

"You fight dirty, Hermione," he told her cheerfully. "I like it."

Without further words, Grindelwald slashed his wand through the air. The wand movement was complicated and Hermione had never seen it before. A greyish orb made up of smoke detached itself from his wand. The sphere of smoke did not rush towards Hermione but instead floated up to the arched ceiling of the church. As Hermione's eyes warily followed that sphere, she completely missed the calculating glint in Grindelwald's eyes as he watched her like a hawk. The grey smoke hovered in mid-air right below the colourful mural painted on the stone ceiling. Suddenly, without warning, a flash of energy left the smoke. The lightning angrily crackled through the air, aimed straight for Hermione.

Hermione had expected an attack so she quickly crossed her arms before her body and let her magic gather there. Then spread her arms to the sides.

*Subsisto!*

A thick yellow shield appeared right before her. A mere second later the angrily hissing bolt of energy crashed into her shield. Immediately, her shield turned from yellow to orange and bright red before it collapsed. The lightning had barely lost any power and rushed towards Hermione. In the last second she flung herself to the side. Through the corner of her eyes, Hermione saw that the lightning changed direction and angrily followed her movement. Using the forward motion of her
jump, Hermione let herself fall to the floor and rolled over her shoulder. The lightning couldn't follow her sharp change of direction. Sizzling dangerously, it crashed into the stone floor, just inches from Hermione's position, leaving behind a whole in the floor.

Shakily Hermione got up from the floor. Her eyes darted up to the grey sphere of smoke which still floated right under the ceiling. As she squinted her eyes, she saw the orb emitted fine strands of magic. Almost imperceptible the whole church was traversed by a net of magic, originating from the orb. Any time Hermione moved, her magic would disturb that net and the orb sensed her position.

The sphere of smoke again glowed up and another bolt of lightning crackled through the air. Without hesitation Hermione immediately suppressed her own magic, so it wouldn't disrupt the grey orb's web anymore. Then she quickly waved her hand and sent a surge of her magic towards Grindelwald. Confused by her actions, the lightning now followed that surge of Hermione's magic and dashed towards Grindelwald.

Hermione saw Grindelwald arching his eyebrows as he was suddenly confronted with his own curse. His eyes flicked to Hermione, an impressed glimmer in them. The lightning had almost reached him as Grindelwald brandished his wand. Immediately the lightning died down. Another wave of his wand and the grey orb up at the ceiling disappeared, dissolving into nothing. Hermione breathed out in relief as she felt the web of magic die down.

"You are indeed fascinating." Grindelwald smiled at her. Excitement glinted in his eyes as he mustered Hermione "Say, did you actually see my attack? Most people just get struck by that curse without ever finding out what it was that hit them. But your movements… you could really see the magic, couldn't you?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. Well, of course she had seen it. Honestly, those blindingly white lightnings had been hard to overlook. What was Grindelwald…? Hermione threw in a sharp breath of air. Of course, since Peverell's magic had taken over her body like a parasite, Hermione had been able to not only feel magic but see it, too.

She stared at Grindelwald with narrowed eyes. With this duel he was testing out her powers, wasn't he?

_Not anymore_, Hermione thought angrily. She raised both hands, fingers spread wide and palms pointed to Grindelwald. Hermione moved her hands closer. Green sparks were now and then springing from one hand to the other, humming with electricity. Finally Hermione's hands made contact. Index finger against index finger and thumb against thumb, Hermione formed a ring with her hands. Her magic quickly accumulated inside the circle. Hermione pursed her lips and gingerly blew through the ring. As soon as that gentle breath of air passed through it changed and left the other side as a violent storm. With ferocity it thundered through the church, interlaced with strands of Hermione's magic.

Confronted with the furious storm, the smile dropped from Grindelwald's face and he quickly waved his wand. A silvery shield formed in front of him. It shook dangerously in the storm. As a result Hermione's tempest managed to reach the wizard. It cut over him, the magic behind the storm slashing fiercely into his cheek.

Shakily, Grindelwald waved his wand, reinforcing his shield. A thin line of blood ran from the cut on his left cheek but he paid it no mind. Concentration on his face, he fought against Hermione's magic. Fine strands of Grindelwald's colourless magic left his shield. Those strands slowly wormed their way towards Hermione. Flexible as they were, Hermione's storm could not get a grasp on them. It wasn't designed for such a precise attack. By now Grindelwald's magic had almost reached her. With a groan of frustration Hermione moved her hands apart. The angry storm immediately died
down. Another wave of her hand and Hermione put up a shield around herself. She gasped as she felt those strands of Grindelwald's magic touch her shield. They greedily licked over it, trying to find an opening.

Her eyes shot at Grindelwald. The wizard hadn't moved but still stood a few metres away from her. Hermione gritted her teeth in anger as she found an amused expression on his face. He winked at her playfully as he brandished his wand. Instantly the strands of his magic left Hermione.

"I still maintain that you are an incredibly talented witch," Grindelwald told her, his voice calm as if they weren't engaged in a fierce duel right now.

"But-" With a flick of his wand, Hermione's shield broke down. "-you have still much to learn."

She inhaled sharply as she felt her shield disappear.

"I could be your teacher, Hermione," Grindelwald offered in an alluring voice. "You are a perfect creation. Let me help you bring out that perfection."

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes and shook her head as she stumbled a step away.

"I will never work for you," she hissed at him and drew her magic protectively around herself.

Without giving him any advance warning, Hermione waved her hand. A bright yellow curse left her fingers and dashed towards Grindelwald. He didn't even have to break eye contact with her as he flourished his wand. Her yellow curse flickered and died down before it could get even close to the wizard.

"My dear child, you have no idea what magic really is. Peverell's form of magic is restricted by no boundaries. Duelling me is pointless, because I have infinity on my side. Your Storm Spell just now was impressive, I admit. But against nature it is nothing. Meet the personification of wind, Hermione."

He grinned at her and Hermione tensed. She watched with trepidation as Grindelwald waved his wand in a small elegant movement. Immediately his strangely colourless magic seemed to gather at a point just a metre to Grindelwald's right. Grindelwald watched with a satisfied smile on his face how the vortex of magic gained in momentum, spinning faster and faster.

Hermione took a wary step away as suddenly that vortex exploded in a surge of blazing bright light. As the vortex collapsed it ripped a hole into the air. That hole looked like an opening leading into another world. Through that portal, powerful magic was pouring into Hermione's world. Her whole body trembled as she was confronted with such quantities of dark magic she had never before felt. Whatever that world beyond the portal was, darkness reigned there. Although he stood just a metre from the opening, Grindelwald wasn't in the least affected by the dark magic. Instead he smiled at Hermione's trembling form.

"Peverell gave us something, Hermione," he said in his gentle voice. "He gave us knowledge."

His eyes wandered from her to the portal. His face was alight with contentment as he scanned the darkness. Excitement laced his tone as he told her,

"Don't you see it? Feel it in the air? This power is what Peverell presented to us. He freed magic and gave us a choice."

With that Grindelwald again waved his wand. This time towards the portal. As he did so, he whispered gently, just as if calling a lover,
"Celaeno."

At first nothing happened. The portal still hovered there, looking like a wound ripped into another dimension. Dark angry magic was bleeding from that wound. Suddenly a terrifying screech ripped through the silence. Hermione felt her heart hammering away in her chest.

She swallowed nervously as she could see something moving in the darkness of that portal. There was another angry screech, now closer. Slowly a figure detached itself from the portal. Hermione felt her hands shake as she was hit by a wave of dark magic. It painfully wandered over her body and the fury behind that magic made her breathing hitch.

With wide scared eyes Hermione watched as a woman appeared in the portal. Her body was still shrouded by darkness, but Hermione could see her face. She was beautiful. Her smooth skin was white like porcelain, without any flaw. She had full rosy lips and her high cheekbones were only increasing her exotic beauty. Her fair face was framed by jet-black curly hair.

Even though she was the most beautiful woman Hermione had ever seen, that otherworldly beauty made cold chills darting down her spine. The woman's face did not mirror any emotions. As if chiselled from marble, there was no movement on that face. Not even her eyes showed anything. Hermione shivered as she looked into the woman's eyes. They had no resemblance to a human being. There were neither pupils nor irises, instead her eyes were two pitch-black orbs. They looked unnatural and out of place on that face. It was wrong.

With strangely abrupt movements, the woman made to come out of the portal. Hermione gasped in fear as she saw the rest of the woman's body. Her chest was bare, the skin of her breasts as unblemished and soft as her face. Starting from the skin at her shoulders and her stomach, shiny dark feathers grew on the woman's body. Their pitch-black colour clashed with the paleness of her skin. Where her arms should have been, strong wings were folded against her smooth body. The woman's lower body was completely covered by the same black feathers. Half woman half animal, the creature looked like a twisted image of a powerful bird of prey.

Gracefully the bird-woman detached herself from the portal and landed on the flagstones of the church, the talons of her feet scratching sharply over the stone. Her unfathomable black eyes took in their surroundings, the woman's head following the movement abruptly. Soon her eyes fell on Grindelwald. The wizard smiled at the creature.

"Celaeno," he greeted gently.

The bird-woman did not react but just stared at him, her eyes strange and inhuman. Suddenly she opened her perfect lips. A harsh screech left her mouth. The sound made Hermione flinch in fear. Somehow the bird-woman must have detected that movement. She turned her head and her black eyes fell on Hermione.

Fear paralysed Hermione as the woman looked at her. Magic dark as night was swirling around the creature. The bird-woman released another screech. Then she spread her wings and with one powerful stroke of them she raised into the air. Swift as a predator, the bird-woman charged at Hermione, talons raised threateningly.

Quickly Hermione waved a shaky hand. A dazzling blue spell sped towards the bird-woman. There was no shield snapping up, no counter curse. The moment Hermione's curse reached the woman it just disappeared. The curse's magic was sucked into the aura of dark magic which surrounded the bird-woman, adding to its power. An angry flap of her wings and the bird-woman sent a surge of magic at Hermione. Hermione quickly moved her hands.
The familiar white shield appeared around her. The wave of dark magic rammed into the shield. The shield's power broke and was sucked in, now adding to the bird-woman's attack. Hermione's eyes widened in shock and she could only leap out of the way. She yelped in pain as she felt the dark magic grazing her left elbow. It left behind a deep cut.

Hermione was crouched on the floor, on one knee and both hands. Her heart hammered away in her chest. Another inhuman screech tore from the bird-woman's lips as she lunged at Hermione. Hermione scrambled away. The woman's talons scraped over the stone, leaving deep claw a powerful beat of her wings the woman touched off the ground and was airborne again. Hermione sent another curse at the woman. Once again her curse was sucked into the woman's magic.

Running out of harm's way, Hermione tried to avoid the razor sharp talons which aimed to rip her apart. She ran over to one of the pillars of the church as pain erupted in her back. It felt like someone had drawn a knife across her back. The incredible pain made Hermione's knees give in. She fell on the floor. A sticky liquid pasted her blouse to her back. Ignoring the blood and the pain, Hermione scrambled away on the floor. By a hairbreadth she escaped the bird-woman's razor sharp talons. Hermione rolled away and pressed against the church's pillar, aiming to bring the pillar between the angry bird-woman and herself. Hermione shuddered with exertion, wondering how to destroy the beast. As if he had read her thoughts, Grindelwald's voice echoed through the church,

"Harpies are neither dead nor alive, my dear. They are dark spirits. Killing them is not possible."

As if to confirm his words, the Harpy screeched furiously, her talons angrily scratching into the pillar which kept her from her prey. On all fours Hermione crawled away. She could feel the air brushing her from the angry strokes of the Harpy's strong wings. Magic was completely useless against the Harpy and Hermione did not know how to protect herself. Her back collided with the church's wall and she gasped in pain. She could feel the blood running from the lashes as she pressed herself against the wall.

The Harpy had by now rounded the pillar and lunged at Hermione, talons raised. Hermione brought up another shield. Again it was useless against the Harpy's dark magic. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head to the side, awaiting the merciless talons to be rammed into her.

"Stop," a voice rang through the church.

Insecurely, Hermione dared to open her eyes. A toneless gasp of fear left her as she found the Harpy sitting on the floor right in front of her. Her talons scratched over the stone floor and her inhuman black eyes stared down at Hermione.

"Thank you, Celaeno," Grindelwald whispered.

He stood right beside the Harpy and looked at her with admiration in his eyes. Only reluctantly the Harpy unfixed her gaze from her prey. Her eyes swirled with darkness as she stared at Grindelwald. There was no recognition nor any other human emotion in those eyes. Grindelwald raised his left hand. He ran his wand over the palm of his hand, leaving behind a bleeding cut. The Harpy watched as the blood fell from Grindelwald's hand down to the stone floor. As soon as the blood made contact with the floor, the Harpy's empty eyes snapped back at Grindelwald. There still was no emotion on the Harpy's face, neither anger nor anything else. Abruptly she spread her beautiful black wings. With one stroke of those wings, the Harpy disappeared into a gush of wind.

Hermione still lay sprawled on the floor, her heart racing away in her chest. Her breathing was fast, her back hurt intolerably and her body trembled heavily as she raised her head and looked up at
Grindelwald. He stood right in front of her. The benign smile was still on his face as he mustered her.

"I want you, Hermione," he told her, his voice leaving no room for argument. "I know it is selfish, seeing that you are no more than a child, but I need you on my side."

Still breathing hard, Hermione stared up at him with wide eyes.

"In the end, Celaeno and you are not so different. Whether you want to accept it or not, you belong to the original magic," Grindelwald whispered to her almost lovingly.

Hermione's throat tied up as she heard his words. Peverell had been a Dark Wizard. All his creations had been dark. The Elder Wand, too. That wand's magic was inside of her ... it was a part of her. Grindelwald was right, wasn't he?

She was dark. Peverell had made it so.

Hermione stared up at Grindelwald and shook her head in denial. "I will never fight for darkness."

It only made Grindelwald chuckle softly. He slowly raised his wand. His eyes were twinkling in amusement as he said,

"You are misled, my dear. It is not dark. You grew up with people feeding you lies. They corrupted you with their archaic convictions. I will show you what all those ignorant people do to the original magic."

With that he waved his wand at Hermione. She flinched away from him. Nothing happened and she looked in confusion up at Grindelwald. He just eyed her curiously. Suddenly Hermione noticed a light prickling sensation in her right hand. It felt like blood rushing back into a numb limb. Hermione raised her hand and examined it. It looked normal, though the prickling sensation had intensified. It started to hurt. Hermione's eyes widened as the tips of her fingers started to turn pale. They looked grey and waxy. Slowly the paleness wandered down from the tips, dull pain accompanying the process. Hermione tried to bend her fingers, hoping to make the strange pain go away. She yelped in fright as she couldn't move her fingers. They grew stiff and rigid. Then the skin under her finger nails grew dark before it spread down her fingers. Hermione watched in horror how the discoloured skin shrivelled and all feeling left her withered hand. Slowly, the tissue under her skin collapsed, substance loss making it look like her nails had grown a few millimetre. A terrified sob left Hermione's mouth as she watched helplessly how the decaying flesh finally lost all stability and fell away in lumps, exposing the bones below. The putrefaction spread, wandering down her fingers.

As she saw the progressive nature of the decay, Hermione pulled herself out of the stupor she had fallen into. Without thinking, she extended the index finger of her left hand and ordered a cutting hex towards her dying right hand.

Blinding pain hit her as the hex cut through still vital tissue. The hex cut away half her hand, leaving only a sad stump where once her pinkie had been. The rest of her fingers, still attached to what had been half of her palm, lay in a rotting lump on the floor, slowly turning into nothing but dust and bones. Red blood gushed from the gaping wound the cutting hex had left behind of Hermione's hand. The blood flowed over exposed muscle tissue, bone and tendons. Hermione choked back a sob and pressed the heavily bleeding stump against her chest.

"Very good," a dark voice penetrated her misery.

Biting back more sobs Hermione raised her head. She found Grindelwald smiling down at her. His gaze wandered with interest over her bloodied arm.
"You instinctively did the right thing. You cut away the spreading disease," he told her, just as if they were discussing this over a cup of tea. "Can you really blame me for doing the same? If I don't act, no-one will and our world shall fall to ruin."

He held his wand in his hand and gently tapped it against his thigh as he mustered her bleeding arm.

"Hermione, there is a fork in the path before you. One path is leading into dark and misery. The other is pure light."

Grindelwald crouched down in front of her, his face only inches from her own. Hermione shuddered as his mesmerizing eyes bored into her own.

"I want to help you," he said soothingly, his gentle voice washing over her. "I am willing to fight for you."

He reached for her and ran a hand over her cheek. Hermione flinched away from his touch, holding the bleeding remains of her hand tighter against her chest.

"I can show you the way into the light," Grindelwald purred at her. "Stay by my side, and I will give you the world."

A soft sob tore from Hermione as she stared at him. His magic bristled around him and she could feel it on her own body. It skinned over her, caressing her skin and asking her own magic to join in a dance. Still, Hermione could feel the raw power hidden underneath the gentleness. One wrong move, one word he didn't want to hear, and Grindelwald would not hold his magic back anymore. If he wanted to, he could rip her into pieces.

Abruptly, Grindelwald stood up from his crouched position and towered over Hermione's crumbled form.

"Believe me, Hermione, if you join me, there will be nothing you cannot achieve. You will be invincible. Join the light side and you will be the most powerful witch ever to graze the earth," Grindelwald promised in dulcet tones. Then a menacing glint flared up in his eyes as he continued, "Refuse me, though, and you will be devoured by darkness."

Between her painfully pounding hand - or what was left of it - and the fear rushing through her, Hermione understood one thing: Whether she joined Grindelwald or not, darkness would devour her anyway. She needed to get away from the wizard.

Hermione shakily waved her left hand, pressing all her magic into the movement. Her magic obeyed and left her as a powerful flash. It crashed hard into Grindelwald's defences and pushed him back a step back. Hermione used this and frantically scrambled up on her feet. Her head swirled, black dots dancing in her vision from losing so much blood. She ignored the nausea and ran away, desperate to get as much distance between the wizard and herself as possible.

Hermione had barely taken a few steps as she felt a furious wave of magic rushing towards her back. It crackled in the air so powerfully, Hermione could almost taste it on her tongue. Before that curse could reach her, she hurled her body to the side. A soft gasp of pain tore from her as she impacted hard on the stone flooring of the church. The curse crashed into the flagstones, shattered one completely and made deep cracks appear on its neighbours.

Hermione trembled uncontrollably. Blood gushed freely from the deep wounds in her back and her mutilated right hand. She could already feel her conscious slipping away from all the pain and blood loss. She turned and saw Grindelwald walking towards her, wand raised. How could she win against
him? She was so weak now, she doubted she was able to get up.

Shit!

Hermione clenched her teeth. It wasn't a rumour what they said. When Grindelwald raised his wand, there was no way to win against him. Hermione breathed in, fear ripping at her.

Still, she was not going to join him. Ever.

Hermione was not going to let Peverell win. He had forced that dark magic into her but she was not going to act upon it. Whatever Grindelwald did to her, she was not going to join him. Ignoring the agony she was in, Hermione extended her left hand.

"Suspiratio draconis!"

Her magic tingled down her arm, into her hand. It hissed angrily as it left her through her palm. As soon as her magic touched the air, it turned into heat which immediately burst into fire. This was not a merrily crackling orange-red fire. This flame would furiously burn, melt and destroy everything upon contact. The blue flame crushed into the shield Grindelwald had conjured up. Like a blowtorch, the flame hissed threateningly as it fought against him. The heat was so intense, Hermione saw the flagstones cracking under it, slowly beginning to glow where they were closest to the flame.

Grindelwald took a step back as he was confronted with Hermione's attack. She saw him raising his eyebrows in surprise. But then her stomach sank as a smile started to curl up his mouth.

"Using such dark spells," he snickered at her. "You are already half-way there."

Then he swirled the Elder Wand through the air. The angry fire roared in protest as Grindelwald's magic smothered it. It sucked away every air, thus destroying the fire. Hermione could do nothing but watch in terror as her fire curse broke down. Another wave of the Elder Wand and Grindelwald's magic collided with her. She screamed in pain as she was hurled away. Pain shot through her already injured back as she impacted with the stone wall. Limply she sagged down to the floor. Hermione lay there, weakly leaned against the wall, and watched in fear as Grindelwald walked over to her.

He stopped right in front of her. An evil smile stretched his mouth as he looked down on her. Hermione fearfully pressed her body against the stone wall behind her. Grindelwald raised his wand, dark magic already gathering at its tip. She turned her face away from him, squeezing her eyes shut.

Before Grindelwald could finish his attack, another voice echoed through the church,

"Protegeris."

Her eyes flew open. A wall of blue light appeared between her and Grindelwald. The force of it was so great that it managed to push the wizard a step back. An angry snarl on his face, Grindelwald glared at the wall which was humming with magic. Hermione turned her head as she heard steps hurrying towards her. A soft sob left her trembling lips as she spotted Tom rushing to her. He held his pale wand in his hand and there was a dark expression on his handsome features. His magic was a furious whirlwind of power raging around him.

The bluish shield still kept Grindelwald away as Tom reached Hermione. His grey eyes widened slightly as he saw all the blood on her clothes. He crouched down on one knee beside her. Concern flashed over his face as he took in her injuries.

"Hermione? Are-"
Tom couldn't finish his question as Hermione quickly threw herself at him. She still pressed her bleeding arm against her but now wrapped her other arm tightly around Tom and desperately clung to him. She squeezed her eyes shut and hid her face in his chest. She could feel Tom's dark magic all over her body like a raging tempest. For once that dark force comforted her.

Hermione shuddered as she heard Grindelwald's composed voice, "Oh, another guest? I did hope you would show up."

"Gellert Grindelwald I assume," Tom replied, his voice deathly cold.

Grindelwald chuckled softly, "But of course. With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"Tom Riddle."

"What a very Muggle name that is," Grindelwald commented mockingly.

As a result, Hermione could feel Tom's magic giving an angry budge. Still trembling, she looked up at him. A sinister red sheen was smouldering in his grey eyes as he glared at Grindelwald. Hermione turned her head. Grindelwald still stood behind the blue shield Tom had conjured up, but he didn't seem in the least bit troubled by it. There was a mischievous grin growing on his face. As he noticed Hermione's attention, Grindelwald even winked at her, making Hermione flinch. Tom felt her shudder and quickly glanced down at her. A sharp frown appeared between his eyebrows as he scanned her. He slipped a bit away from her and whispered gently,

"Show me your arm."

Hermione obeyed him and whimpered in pain as she moved her right arm. Tom narrowed his eyes as he stared down at her mutilated hand. She could see that his jaw was set in a silent resolve to hold his temper back. As he examined her injured hand, Hermione noticed that he never really let Grindelwald out of his line of view. She cast a glance at the golden-haired man herself. The grin still in place, Grindelwald watched them with interest.

With an angry frown on his face, Tom raised his wand and whirled it through the air. A streak of silvery mist appeared. First shapeless, the mist quickly solidified and finally formed into parts of a human hand. Another swirl of his wand and Tom ordered the hand towards Hermione. She watched with wide eyes as the silvery hand floated to the still severely bleeding remnants of her right hand. The silver hand latched upon the wound and Hermione gasped softly as the brutal pain immediately stopped. Feeling flashed back to her hand and she found that she could move the silvery fingers as if they were her own.

"May it always serve you well," Tom whispered to her, sealing his magic.

Hermione peered up at him and said in a shaky voice, "Thank you."

He nodded curtly before he grabbed her arm and pulled her up in a standing position. Hermione's head swirled as she stood, blood loss still affecting her. She glanced down at her arm. The sleeve was still drenched in her own blood but her new silvery hand was unblemished. Tom's arm snaked around her waist and Hermione was tightly pulled into his side. All the while, Tom glared at Grindelwald, his eyes burning with barely suppressed rage.

Grindelwald, on the other hand, eyed them both with a serene look on his face. A casual flick of his wand and the church door, through which Tom had entered, snapped shut, closed by more than just its heavy lock. Another wave of his wand and the bluish shield Tom had conjured flickered and died. Grindelwald took a step towards them, causing Tom to tighten his arm around Hermione. His magic
bristled around him as an aggressive black aura, strands of it vindictively reaching out for Grindelwald. As he felt Tom's dark magic in the air, Grindelwald raised an eyebrow.

"How very strange," he said pleasantly. Then he turned to Hermione and added amused, "After hearing all your beliefs and convictions, I must admit, I would have imagined your knight in shining armour to be not quite so dark."

"Don't talk to her," Tom hissed at Grindelwald.

The wizard just looked at Tom jovially, neither impressed nor angered by the other's tone.

"I am very glad to meet you, Tom." Grindelwald smiled disarmingly. "You don't mind me calling you 'Tom', do you?"

Tom's magic had never calmed down but still raged around him as he whispered darkly, "I will make you pay for what you did to her."

Grindelwald continued cordially, completely unaffected by the furious glare on Tom's face,

"I understand your aggravation. Believe me, I deeply regret my previous behaviour towards Hermione. If I had known what she is, I would have shown her more respect." He smiled charmingly at Tom. "You have to forgive my crude actions. Before I met her today, I was merely tracking down our dear Hermione because she stole something from me. I had no idea what an interesting creature she truly is."

Grindelwald's gaze shortly flicked to the protective arm Tom had wrapped around Hermione. His eyes twinkled with excitement as he glanced shrewdly at Tom.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

Tom narrowed his eyes at the other and pulled Hermione tighter against him. "What are you talking about?"

Grindelwald's face lit up and he purred, "Yes, it was you." His calm eyes slowly, appraisingly, wandered over Tom. "I can feel it in your magic, Tom: the connection."

"What are you going on about?" Tom hissed at the other, his voice deathly cold.

Grindelwald ignored the question but inquired curiously, "I take it that you used Peverell's manuscript? How did you create her? That magic, where did you find it? I can even sense the same binding spells. How did you re-create it?"

Hermione felt Tom stiffen. Then his arm around her tightened painfully.

"That is none of your business," Tom replied, malice twisting his voice.

Grindelwald's smiling eyes travelled over Tom, appraising him. Then he said jovially, "Please forgive my rudeness but I am simply bursting with questions. It's all so exciting. But you are right; I can understand your reluctance to tell me. It's only natural that you want to keep her."

Suddenly a hard glint entered Grindelwald's eyes, clashing with the smile on his face. "I want Hermione and you know as well as I do, I have to defeat you."

Tom snickered coldly as he heard it.

"You think you could beat me?" A mad glint entered his crimson eyes as he whispered, "You will
not take what is mine."

Hermione gasped as she sensed the dark magic rushing around Tom. Grindelwald, not impressed at all, beamed at Tom.

"I understand that you wouldn't want to part with something so precious." He glanced at Hermione in Tom's arms. "She is impressive and I congratulate you on creating something so unique. Still, I will make her mine."

"You seem very sure of yourself," Tom sneered at Grindelwald disdainfully.

The other wizard just grinned. "I am," he admitted lightly. "Another thing we have in common, it seems."

Vicious glint in his eyes, Tom glared at the other. Then he pushed Hermione protectively behind him. Grindelwald's sharp eyes followed her before his gaze shot back at Tom.

"It doesn't have to come to this, Tom," he said quietly. "How about we forget our dispute and you hand Hermione over to me? I know how valuable she is, but I promise I will compensate for your loss."

Hermione stood behind Tom and her hands shook as she tightly held to the back of his black robes.

"I doubt this is negotiable," said Tom.

A wide smile stretched across Grindelwald's face and a calculating glint entered his eyes as he heard it.

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Tom's hand balled tightly around the black stone, burning him further. His gaze wandered back to his Knights. The other Slytherins cowered away from him as they felt his angry magic in the air, but his eyes lingered on Lestrange.

Tom's voice was deathly cold as he whispered, "If anything happens to her, I am going to kill you."

He could see Lestrange's eyes widen with panic, but then Tom just turned around and ran down the corridor, leaving his Knights behind.

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As Tom dashed away from the Room of Requirement, he quickly examined the bond that tied Hermione to him. He clenched his teeth as he could barely feel her presence. Either she was very far away or…

Or badly hurt.

At that thought Tom's magic started to frantically pulse through him, urging him on. The black stone in his hand, which was the twin to the one imbedded in Hermione's necklace, burned up with new vigour, telling him that she was indeed in grave danger. Tom sped up and sprinted down the next corridor. He needed to be fast. Obviously Hermione had left Hogwarts' grounds and had gotten into trouble.

What had driven her to leave? Why hadn't she told him?

With dread he remembered the last Hermione had been in danger. Dark cloaked men had attacked her in the Forbidden Forest. They had hurt her and – Tom visibly flinched – had hurled the Killing Curse at her.

Had they found her again?

A wave of anxiety hit him and with trembling hands Tom stuffed the black stone into his robe pocket as he raced down the next hallway. He needed to leave Hogwarts but the castle was protected by those damned anti-apparition wards. Tom had to leave the grounds to apparate to Hermione. Cursing colourfully, he finally reached the Grand Staircase. Taking two steps at a time, he ran down the stairs. Only one last flight of stairs separated him from the ground floor as Tom ran into a crowd of students. Joking and laughing, they made their way down to the Great Hall for dinner. Tom again swore, making a pair of Hufflepuff girls stare at him scandalized. He ignored them but tried to push his way through the crowded staircase. Unfortunately it was so narrow here that Tom made barely any progress.

"Make way!" he angrily yelled and shoved a group of first years out of his way.

A well-known voice interrupted his rather gruff actions. Tom nearly screamed out in annoyance as he spotted the potions professor standing just a few steps away.

"Tom!" Slughorn protested sternly. "What is the meaning of this?"

The professor was visibly shocked by his star pupil's rude behaviour. Tom glanced at Slughorn who clearly expected some sort of explanation. By now, the other students had stopped walking altogether and stupidly gawked at Tom, completely blocking the stairs. Once again the stone in
Tom's pocket gave an angry burn.

"Dammit!" He was losing too much time.

Slughorn huffed at him, outraged by Tom's crude behaviour, and opened his mouth to no doubt reprimand him. Not wanting to hear the rant, Tom simply pulled his wand. Hermione was in danger and he needed to get to her. His furious magic howled in approval. It left his body in dark waves and swirled forcefully around him. Two Gryffindors, standing nearest, were hurled against the wall by the raw power behind Tom's dark magic. Even Slughorn had to take a shaky step away from the angry Slytherin.

"Tom…?" the professor stuttered weakly.

Tom's eyes burned up in a dangerous red colour as he glared at Slughorn. Without further words he swirled around and, forgoing the stairs, leaped over the stone banister. A few of the girls screamed as Tom jumped off the staircase. It was a good ten metres down to the ground, promising a broken neck upon impact. Shortly before Tom would have crashed into the stone floor, his descend was slowed by his magic and he softly sailed down the last metre. He landed deftly in a crouch, one foot, a knee and both hands on the floor. Not wasting more time, Tom got up and ran to the Entrance Hall. Like the staircase, it was crammed with students on their way to the Great Hall. All of them stared wide-eyed at Tom. He never stopped but pushed them out of his way as he raced towards the doors. He didn't even stop as he heard Dippet's voice.

"What is going on here?"

Alarmed by the turmoil, the headmaster had left the Great Hall to establish order. Seeing Tom racing through the hall and violently pushing the other students out of his way, Dippet exclaimed, sharp edge in his voice,

"Mr Riddle, stop this instant!"

Tom didn't even turn around to the angry professor. He continued to dash towards the exit doors. Still running he raised his wand and waved it. An electric blue strand of magic bristled through the air. It forcefully slammed into the oaken doors. The wards, which kept the doors locked, gave in and with a loud crack they were torn open. Tom ran through the door and out of the castle, completely ignoring the shocked gasps and chatter coming from Hogwarts' population.

He fell into a jog as he left the castle behind and passed the Great Lake, always in direction of the Entrance Gates. Tom dimly remembered the last time he had taken this way. Was it really just a day that he had staggered down this very path towards the castle, totally drunk? Now he ran in the opposite direction, purpose and determination in every step.

His breathing was ragged and his lungs burned as he finally reached the gates marking the exit to Hogwarts' grounds. With a wave of his wand he unlocked the doors, glad that he had found a way to do so in his third year. Tom quickly slipped through the gates, leaving Hogwarts' wards behind. He hastily pulled the black stone from his pocket which again burned his skin. Tom concentrated on the pull that connected this stone with its twin and let it guide his magic. Then he twirled on the spot. With a loud crack Tom disappeared into thin air, leaving Hogwarts and its confused occupants behind.

Only seconds later, Tom stepped out of the dark pressure of apparition. He stood on a path somewhere in the countryside. Grassy fields were around him, fenced off by hedges and low stone walls. Not far from him, Tom saw a church. The desolate building stood quite abandoned in the wide landscape. Tombstones, covered by lichen and moss, marked the small graveyard at the church's
Some of the stones where overturned and lay forgotten in the grass. An old knobby yew tree decrepitly leaned against the church. Over the years its persistent roots had made cracks appear in the stone wall.

Tom grabbed his wand tighter as his grey eyes wandered over the church. It seemed to be abandoned, but he could sense it in the air: The whole place reeked of Dark Magic. His own magic already thundered around him jealously, demanding to be allowed to take that other force down. Determinedly Tom strode over to the church. The closer he got the thicker the magic was in the air. Soon he stood before the entrance. Warding magic was cleverly woven into the door. Obviously, it was meant to keep something inside.

Or someone…

With that unsettling thought, Tom raised his wand and attacked the warding magic. It took him some time, but the ward was weaker from the outside. Finally it gave in and a clicking sound could be heard from the church door's ancient lock. Cautiously, wand still in hand, Tom opened the door and stepped inside. It was much cooler inside and the air smelled mustily of decay. The floor was made of rough flagstones and windows flanked the thick stone walls. As Tom's gaze skimmed over the room, it quickly came to rest on the only other people in this room. Yet, they were unaware of his presence.

Since he had felt the black stone burning up in his pocket, Tom had steelled himself for something like this. Still, his stomach constricted painfully as he saw Hermione sprawled helplessly on the floor. Tom's angry magic gave a violent twitch at the sight of her blood covering her clothes. Her pale face was raised at a man standing before her. Fear flickered in Hermione's hazel eyes but also defiance. Tom's gaze darted to the blonde man. Not very tall, he looked quite unimposing. His outwards appearance was deceiving though. Dark Magic crackled around that man. It danced in the air and even permeated the very stone of the church's walls. Tom's own magic left his body and bristled around him excitedly, eager to join in that Dance of Death.

It was then that the blond man raised his wand at Hermione. Her eyes widened in fear. Obviously she was too weak to protect herself and just turned her head to the side, awaiting the blow. Tom's magic gave an angry budge as he saw the man threatening his Hermione. Without further thought, he slashed his wand through the air. His furious magic was more than eager to form into a spell to protect his possession.

"Protegeris."

Instantly a bluish shield sprang up before Hermione, protecting her from that blond wizard. There was confusion on Hermione face as she stared at the blue shield. But as she turned her head and saw Tom, relief washed over her features. He furiously stared at the blood covering her. Her blouse shone with the crimson liquid. As he reached Hermione, Tom sank down on the floor beside her.

"Hermione? Are-"

He couldn't finish his question as Hermione suddenly lunged herself at him. She quickly wrapped her left arm around him - her right one obviously being injured - and pressed herself against him. Tom could feel how she trembled all over as she buried her face into his chest and clutched him tightly. He raised an arm and draped it around her. His dark magic flowed to the witch and protectively wrapped around her.

Pressing Hermione against him, Tom's gaze flashed to the blond man. The blue barrier still separated them but Tom felt the urge to end the shield and curse the mocking smirk off that bastard's face. His eyes slowly wandered over the man and it was then that Tom recognized him. He had seen that face
before. There had been photographs in the Daily Prophet. Granted they had been rather blurry but, peaked by curiosity, Tom had paid close attention. Back then, he had been impressed by the man's work. Now Tom only wanted to rip him into shreds.

"Oh, another guest?" the blond said, his voice repulsively saccharine "I did hope you would show up."

Bastard! Tom could barely hold back his magic anymore. Only Hermione's trembling body in his arms stopped him from attacking the man on the spot.

Baring his teeth, Tom said, "Gellert Grindelwald I assume."

"But of course," Grindelwald said in a sickeningly friendly tone. "With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"Tom Riddle," he spat at him aggressively.

A smirk tugged at Grindelwald's mouth as he responded, "What a very Muggle name that is."

Tom grinded his teeth as he glared at Grindelwald. His magic raged around him, parts of that cold force were brushing against his thoughts, whispering words of vengeance. All the while, Grindelwald smiled at him. His nonchalance made Tom's blood boil with fury. Hermione shuddered in his arms and he gazed down at her. She was still covered in her own blood, pressing her right arm protectively against her chest.

"Show me your arm," Tom ordered.

Hermione did as she was told. Tom almost lost control over his murderous magic as he stared at her injured hand. A cruel spell had cut into her, leaving almost nothing behind of her hand. Blood freely spilled from the gaping wound. Tom breathed in deeply, forcing his incensed magic back – For now! – so he could help Hermione. He swirled his wand through the air, forming his dark magic into a rather complex spell. With satisfaction he watched as his magic complied and constructed a silvery replacement for Hermione's lost hand. The hand floated through the air and aligned with the wound. Satisfied Tom could see some of the pain seeping from Hermione's eyes.

"May it always serve you well," Tom whispered to her, his words completing the magic and fully connecting the hand to her.

"Thank you," Hermione breathed.

Tom gently took a hold of her and pulled her up. He could feel Hermione weakly leaning into his side. Tom snaked a possessive arm around her waist as he glared at Grindelwald. The other wizard still smiled at him, making Tom's angry magic bristle around him vengefully. A wave of his wand and Grindelwald locked the church's door. Another flick and Tom's shield was broken. Tom wasn't surprised to see his shield yield. He knew Grindelwald promised to be a powerful opponent.

"How very strange," Grindelwald all but purred in satisfaction. He even had the audacity to address Hermione, "After hearing all your beliefs and convictions, I must admit, I would have imagined your knight in shining armour to be not quite so dark."

Tom felt Hermione tense as Grindelwald spoke to her.

"Don't talk to her," he snarled at the other wizard.

Grindelwald didn't comment on that but said cheerfully, "I am very glad to meet you, Tom. You
don't mind me calling you 'Tom', do you?"

"I will make you pay for what you did to her," Tom hissed murderously.

Grindelwald was irritingly unaffected by Tom's wrath and said, "I understand your aggravation. Believe me, I deeply regret my previous behaviour towards Hermione. If I had known what she is, I would have shown her more respect. You have to forgive my crude actions. Before I met her today, I was merely tracking down our dear Hermione because she stole something from me. I had no idea what an interesting creature she truly is."

That last statement made an unpleasant feeling of foreboding break through Tom's fury. He narrowed his eyes at Grindelwald. 'Interesting creature?'

"It was you, wasn't it?" the wizard asked curiously.

Pulling Hermione closer to him, Tom growled, "What are you talking about?"

Grindelwald couldn't have found out about Hermione's true nature, could he? Tom wondered with trepidation while his angry magic coiled possessively around her. The next words, though, confirmed Tom's fear.

"Yes, it was you." Grindelwald exclaimed delighted. "I can feel it in your magic, Tom: the connection.

An angry budge ran through Tom's dark magic as he heard it. So he knew? Grindelwald knew about Hermione. Tom tightened his arm around her. Not even Hermione herself was aware of what she really was and Tom had no intention of telling her. How very inconvenient that Grindelwald had appeared. Tom needed to get him out of the picture.

"What are you going on about?" he hissed, though he knew playing ignorant would not help him.

Sure enough, Grindelwald was not diverted but said, "I take it that you used Peverell's manuscript? How did you create her? That magic, where did you find it? I can even sense the same binding spells. How did you re-create it?"

"That is none of your business," Tom snapped furiously. He needed to shut that man up before he spilled too much.

"Please forgive my rudeness but I am simply bursting with questions," Grindelwald said in an infuriatingly light tone. "It's all so exciting. But you are right; I can understand your reluctance to tell me. It's only natural that you want to keep her."

The lightness left him as he hissed, "I want Hermione and you know as well as I do, I have to defeat you."

Tom's mouth curved into a cruel smile. Hermione was his. She was bound to no-one but him. He would certainly not surrender her allegiance to some dark wizard scum.

"You think you could beat me?" Tom sneered darkly. "You will not take what is mine."

Again Grindelwald remained unimpressed but merely smiled at him. "I understand that you wouldn't want to part with something so precious." Tom growled darkly as Grindelwald's eyes greedily travelled over Hermione. "She is impressive and I congratulate you on creating something so unique. Still, I will make her mine."
"You seem very sure of yourself," Tom hissed condescendingly.

Grindelwald grinned as he heard it. "I am. Another thing we have in common, it seems."

Tom had enough of the avid glint in Grindelwald's eyes and pushed Hermione behind his back.

A gentle tinge was in Grindelwald's voice as he continued. It only managed to infuriate Tom more, "It doesn't have to come to this, Tom. How about we forget our dispute and you hand Hermione over to me? I know how valuable she is, but I promise I will compensate for your loss."

Tom felt how Hermione pressed herself against his back, her hands shaking as she grasped him.

"I doubt this is negotiable."

Hermione's silvery new hand clenched tightly around the black fabric of Tom's robes as she pressed herself against his back. Shock and blood-loss made her body tremble heavily. Her head swirled and the pain coming from the deep cut, the Harpy had inflicted on her back, made black dots dancing in her vision. She knew that unconsciousness already ripped at her mind. Never letting go of Tom, Hermione cautiously ppered at Grindelwald. The wizard stood there, just a few metres away, looking relaxed and totally at ease. A harmless smile played around his lips as he eyed Tom.

"Why so dismissive, Tom?" Grindelwald asked gently, sweet innocence lacing his tone. "Think about all the wonderful possibilities this meeting of ours presents us with."

"Possibilities?" Tom hissed. "What are you talking about?"

"Can't you see it, Tom?" Grindelwald said smilingly. "Hermione, being the wonderful creature that she is, is the reason that we should meet. I, for my part, am more than delighted to make your acquaintance."

A sneer twisted up Tom's features as he scoffed, "Why would I want to meet you?"

The smile on Grindelwald's face widened, but Hermione stiffened as she saw a predatory glint burning up in his cold eyes.

"To join my forces, Tom," Grindelwald whispered in an even voice. "After all, don't we have the same aims?"

"I very much doubt that," replied Tom sharply.

"I think we do," Grindelwald insisted thoughtfully.

His eyes slowly wandered over Tom, appraising him. Finally he asked, "That magic wrapped around you isn't it completely dark? Is that not the true nature of your magic, Tom?"

"So, what if it is?" Tom snapped, his inflection cold. "Why do you care?"

"I care because once I've been where you now are," Grindelwald replied gently. "Surrounded by people who do not understand. People who are trying to quench your magic."

This time, Tom didn't answer anything and a very bad feeling of foreboding mounted up in Hermione. Grindelwald took a step towards Tom, never raising his wand, but looking at him with a soft expression on his face.
"Is it not true, Tom, that you are living in hiding?" he whispered gingerly.

Hermione's hands were still clenched around the fabric of Tom's black robes. Under her touch, she could feel him stiffen as he heard Grindelwald's words. An encouraging smile flitted over Grindelwald's face as he said soothingly,

"You have so much potential. Those people are holding you back. The same thing happened to me as well. People kept telling me that dark magic is evil, abnormal. They threatened that I would get punished should I ever use it." Sympathy washed over his features as he looked at Tom. "Now they are doing the same to you, Tom."

With trepidation Hermione noticed how Tom still didn't reply a thing. He listened to Grindelwald as if enraptured by the words.

The kindness never dropped from Grindelwald's face as said, "Do you really wish to continue living like this? The government is despising people like you. They are doing their best to exterminate our way of magic. The so called dark magic."

"They will never catch me." Tom's voice was strong and self-confident as always, but Hermione could hear a hint of hesitancy.

"No-one is free from error," Grindelwald replied smartly. "One mistake, Tom, one slip-up and you are in very deep trouble. After all you are living in a country where the use of one curse can get you into prison. Just one curse and you will be locked away in Azkaban until you die. There will be no judges and no jury. No-one will ask any questions. Without a second thought, they will abandon you and let you rot. You won't receive any mercy. Your prison guards will be hideous beasts. Monsters, whose pure presence will be torture to you."

A grim smile crossed Grindelwald's face as he concluded, "Just one curse, Tom, and you will be locked away and brutally tortured for the rest of your life."

Hermione wanted to scream at Grindelwald to shut up. But something held her back. Maybe it was Tom's silence. It scared her. The worst part, though, was that behind Grindelwald's attempt at persuasion there was truth. Tom certainly hadn't missed it. A sympathetic smile curled his mouth as Grindelwald calmly gazed at Tom.

"And why all of this?" he asked gingerly. "Because you were born this way? Because you have a different perception of magic? Does that allow them to hurt you in the worst kind of way? Believe me, the Killing Curse would be more merciful. And after all this injustice they still have the audacity to call themselves good?" Grindelwald continued in his suave tone, "Your 'Ministry' is led by a bunch of criminals. They can call dark magic evil only because they are the ones who decide what evil is."

He took a step towards Tom and said softly, "Don't you want to escape that rule, Tom? Because I do. I don't want to live in hiding anymore. I want to be free and I am ready to fight for it. Please, join me, fight with me and together we shall shatter their regime of oppression."

Finally Tom spoke, "You want me to help you?"

Hermione shuddered as she heard the curiosity in Tom's voice and she fearfully pressed herself against him.

"Yes, Tom." Grindelwald smiled benignly. "I want your help; I need it. I can see you are a powerful wizard, after all you managed to follow in Peverell's footsteps." He glanced at Hermione. "If you
give me Hermione, I will use her powers to bring down the corrupt government. And we will all be free."

"You still want her, do you?" Tom asked, horrible consideration tinting his voice.

"Hermione brought us together, Tom," Grindelwald explained gently. "It is a sign. She can help us reach our goal. Does it really matter to whom she is bound? Her presence will gain us our victory."

For a moment Tom didn't reply anything. He seemed to be deep in thought. Hermione's hands at his black robes trembled. Fear flashed through her so forcefully it made her sick. What if Tom wanted to join Grindelwald? Scary thoughts rushed through her head. Lord Voldemort and Gellert Grindelwald working in unison? Not even Dumbledore would be able to defeat them. Merlin, had she completely destroyed the timeline now? Tom still hadn't said anything. Face blank he seemed to mull over Grindelwald's offer.

Grindelwald, seeing Tom's hesitation, said alluringly, "Together, Tom, we can rewrite history. Finally Peverell's achievements will be recognized by everyone. Imagine that: A society run by our kind. I am sure giving me Hermione is but a small price compared to that achievement."

Tom stared at Grindelwald with his steely grey eyes. His face was a blank as he scrutinized the other wizard. Hermione's breathing came fast now. He wouldn't join Grindelwald, would he? What would she do then? Fight against Tom? She didn't want to. But what if he left her no other choice? Fighting against him and Grindelwald, would she even stand a chance? Hermione bit her lower lip hard and buried her face into Tom's back.

It was then that Tom's dark magic began to furiously dance around him. The interested look dropped from his face and an evil smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Do you really think I would want to help you better the world?" Tom sneered at Grindelwald, mock lacing his cold words. "Frankly, I don't care about it enough to even bother."

The friendly smile dropped from Grindelwald's face and he said coldly, "Don't be stupid, Tom. It lies in our hands to finally set magic free. Do you want to be persecuted forever?"

The evil smile never left Tom's face as he said, cold venom oozing from his every word, "Seriously, if someone is stupid enough to get caught and gets locked into Azkaban, then I don't give a shit about it. Such an idiot would deserve worse than just be thrown to the Dementors. I will not fight for such pathetic wizards."

Grindelwald's eyes narrowed at Tom and his tone was sharp as he said, "So, you are not afraid of what will happen to Hermione once people see her for what she is? They will realize what kind of magic she commands. What do you think they will do with her once they know? Lock her away? Experiment on her? Kill her?"

"Believe me that will not happen." A red sheen burned dangerously up in Tom's grey eyes. "No-one will ever take Hermione from me."

"Why don't you see this opportunity for what it is?" Grindelwald replied, anger already twisting his voice. "If we work together, we can change things."

Tom just snickered evilly at the other wizard. "Don't worry. I will change society. But I don't need your help to do it."

Suddenly, without any warning, Tom sliced his wand through the air. His magic instantly followed his lead and viciously slammed into Grindelwald. A cyan coloured shield sprang up and protected
the wizard from Tom's attack. Still he was pushed a few steps back. A high-pitched laugh escaped Tom's lips as he again ordered his irate magic towards his enemy. Again Grindelwald was forced to erect a shield. This time a green wall flickered up and Tom's magic was unable to cause harm.

Finally whirling his own wand, Grindelwald sent a purple curse Tom's way. Hermione gasped as she felt the raw power of that curse in the air. Tom had barely time to flick his wand, weaving a thick net of protective magic in front of him and Hermione. Grindelwald's onslaught thundered into the net. Parts of the curse flowed around the shield and crashed into the stone pillar behind them. The pillar burst under the incredibly power of Grindelwald's curse. Pieces of stone flew through the air as the pillar collapsed, pulling parts of the arched ceiling down with it. Hermione coughed as she inhaled the stone dust.

"I see," Grindelwald's dark voice echoed over the chaos he had created. "We cannot find a compromise. A shame, Tom. I would have liked for you to join me."

"If you are so eager," Tom hissed at him and pulled Hermione possessively against him. "Why don't you join me?"

Grindelwald merely grinned at Tom's words. His eyes, though, were cold and unforgiving as they wandered over Tom. Hermione could see that a fight was now inevitable. Quickly she edged closer to Tom, stood on her tiptoes and whispered hoarsely into his ear,

"He has the Elder Wand."

She felt Tom stiffen as he heard it. Otherwise he didn't react.

"So, there will be no partnership between us?" Grindelwald asked darkly, unfazed by Tom's murderous glare. "A pity, but I will still take Hermione."

With that Grindelwald waved his wand and a violent flush of his magic dashed towards Tom. Angry snarl on his face, Tom brought his wand down in one sharp movement. His magic followed his lead and cut into Grindelwald's curse, ripping it apart. Hermione felt Tom unwrapping his arm from her waist. His hand clutched her shoulder tightly, then he flung her away from him. Hermione gasped as she lost her balance at the unexpected movement. She painfully fell on the floor behind Tom. He pointed his wand at her and whispered an incantation under his breath. Hermione watched with raised eyebrows as a silvery mist extracted itself from Tom's wand. It twisted and formed itself into an animal. With feline grace, it pounced from the tip of Tom's wand, landed on large paws and immediately stalked towards Hermione. Ears put back and sharp teeth bared, the silvery lynx growled dangerously as it started to pace around Hermione protectively.

She still trembled uncontrollably as she sat crumbled on the floor. A sickly warm liquid flowed down her injured back. Dark spots danced in her vision as Hermione looked up at Tom. He stood with his back to her and faced Grindelwald. Hermione's gaze quickly wandered to the other dark wizard. The easy smile had finally abandoned Grindelwald's face. It was replaced by a dark look as he fixed Tom with his unreadable eyes. His strangely colourless magical aura danced around him and the force behind that aura made Hermione swallow nervously. Not even Tom's patronus could block Grindelwald's magic completely. While he had fought Hermione, his magic – although still dark – had been fuelled by a certain playfulness. Now that he was faced with Tom, Grindelwald had completely dropped that lightness. This time, he was fighting in earnest.

Realising this, Hermione frantically tried to get up from the floor. Tom needed her help. She was certainly not going to let Grindelwald hurt him… like he had hurt Marc. Biting down her upcoming emotions Hermione fought to stumble up from the floor. A blindingly sharp pain shot through her back and she fell back. The harpy had sliced a deep cut into her which crossed her whole back from
her left shoulder all the way down to the right side of her waist. Grinding her teeth, Hermione covered the wound with a layer of her magic and formed it into a basic healing charm to stop the heavy blood flow.

Tom didn't pay her any attention but stared at Grindelwald. A feral smile on his face and his eyes glowing in a blood red, he slowly raised his wand. As he did so a dozen of the massive flagstones of the church's floor floated into the air. Another almost imperceptible flick of Tom's wand and the stones dashed towards Grindelwald. Tom wasn't finished though. He sent a blazing red curse to support his attack. Grindelwald didn't even bat an eye. Never breaking eye contact with Tom, he raised the Elder Wand. He moved his arm in one large circle in front of him and a shielding charm sprang from that movement. With tremendous force the heavy flagstones violently crashed into this shield. The force of the impact was so great that the stones burst into nothing but dust. Grindelwald's shield, though, did not waver under the heavy attack. Only as Tom's red curse slammed into the shield did Grindelwald's defence falter. Surprise flamed up in Grindelwald's cold eyes as he fought off Tom's powerful curse. The red curse pressed on, thinning out Grindelwald's shield at the contact point. Only seconds and it would shatter the shield and rush towards Grindelwald himself. An angry snarl appeared on the man's face as he realized that. One furious slash of the Elder Wand and Grindelwald batted the curse away. It soared past Grindelwald and impacted with the church's window. Fragments of coloured glass rained down on Grindelwald. Before the shards could touch Grindelwald their descent came to a halt. The many shards floated in Grindelwald's magical aura like they were swimming in water.

Grindelwald didn't pay attention on the glass shards. His eyes were blazing with rage as he stared at Tom. With trepidation Hermione saw how the shards started to glow forebodingly as they remained under the influence of Grindelwald's magic. They were heated up drastically that soon countless drops of molten glass hovered around Grindelwald, trapped in his furious magic. The man never took his eyes from Tom as he barely moved his wand. Instantly the drops of glass hissed through the air, aimed for Tom. A swift flick of Tom's wand and a shield protected him. The projectiles of molten glass pelted down on the shield. Upon impact the glass congealed and soon Tom's shield was coated by a layer of glass. An evil smile crossed Grindelwald's face as he slashed his wand and sent aickle of orange light towards Tom. The layer of glass had made Tom's shield brittle so it could not withstand the attack and burst.

Hermione's stomach knotted with fear as she saw Grindelwald's orange curse rushing on towards Tom who was now unprotected. He flung himself to the side but the orange curse still managed to scrape him and ripped a chunk of flesh from his left upper arm. Tom didn't bat an eye even though Hermione could see dark red blood oozing from the wound. A murderous sheen burned in his crimson eyes as he fixed Grindelwald with a hard gaze. Slowly Tom got up from the floor.

"Seems you like playing with fire," he hissed, malice twisting his dark voice.

Tom didn't wait for any reaction from Grindelwald. He brandished his wand in a complicated pattern, whispering an incantation under his breath. Hermione couldn't hear his words but she gasped as she recognized Tom's wand movements. Already the air around the wand's tip started to shimmer with heat.

*Fiendfyre!*

Very dark magic, Hermione knew. She herself had never dared to conjure up those cursed flames. Calling them was ludicrously easy but controlling the fire was near impossible. With wide eyes Hermione watched Tom, hoping he knew what he was doing. He ended the incantation by bringing his wand down in one sharp slash. The air around the wand's tip burst into fire. Within seconds the spark grew and turned into a raging wall of fire between Tom and Grindelwald. The flames roared
furiously, burning so high they almost reached the church's ceiling. Already thick smoke began to turn the religious mural on the ceiling black. Hermione had to raise her hands to her face to protect herself against the heat. Through squinted eyes she saw Tom standing in front of the inferno, seemingly undisturbed by the heat. His wand was raised and a demonic smile had slipped on his features as his blood red eyes fondly regarded the flames. Hermione saw his dark magic bristling around him, eagerly dancing with the magical fire. Cold chills darted down Hermione's spine as she saw that image of Tom in the shine of the cursed fire. Suddenly he didn't look like Tom at all anymore but reminded her of someone she would rather never have met.

Behind the raging fire stood Grindelwald. Hermione could barely make him out anymore. She shuddered as she stared into the fire. It didn't only breathe heat but also magic. This fierce magic fuelled the flames and twisted their shape grotesquely. They took the form of animals, hideous faces or dark creatures that had no name. All of them were screaming in rage, eager to devour their prey. Tom's crimson eyes burned up with dark delight as his incantation's fury threatened to rip apart the whole building.

Effortlessly, it seemed, Tom was able to control the Fiendfyre. With a steady hand he pointed his wand at the fire. His control was perfect and the enraged fire demons bent to his will. Hermione thought she heard Tom laughing, but over the roaring fire she couldn't really tell. A flick of his wand and the wall of fire moved towards Grindelwald, encircling him. Hermione could only see him as a small shape amidst the fire. Vindictively the fire demons extended their spidery fingers longing to pull Grindelwald into the purgatory. Hermione held her breath as she saw Grindelwald's colourless magic desperately fight against the cursed flames.

To die like this, Hermione wished upon no-one. Only a dark wizard would ever use such magic. Hermione shortly glanced at Tom. She found only twisted glee on his face as he watched his fire demons dance and try to burn Grindelwald alive. By now Hermione couldn't see Grindelwald anymore but only caught weak glimpses of his magic. All the while Tom mercilessly kept his wand pointed at Grindelwald. Malice glinted in his red eyes as he watched his fire threatening to snuff the last bit of magic that still protected Grindelwald. It was as his magic almost perished in the flames that Grindelwald's deep voice thundered unnaturally loud through the church,

"Incende quod tu obedivit."

His colourless magic, which had moments before almost been devoured by Tom's fire, suddenly grew. It didn't destroy the Fiendfyre but joined it. At first the fire demons fought against the invasion but then they turned. They stopped their attempts to incinerate Grindelwald. Instead they charged at Tom. Confronted with his own curse, Tom stumbled a step back. Hermione balled her hands tightly into fists, her fingernails cutting into her skin, as she watched Tom quickly waving his wand. The fire demons weren't pacified by his attempts to regain control but still attacked him. Only a hair's breadth separated Tom from the irate flames as he finally gave in. Angry snarl on his face, he slashed his wand and withdrew his magic from his incantation. The fire demons wailed as they were bereft of their power. With an angry hiss the flames exploded, leaving nothing behind.

With the fire gone, Hermione could see Grindelwald again. A derisive sneer adorned his features as he lazily gazed at Tom. Around him the church's floor was blackened from the fire's rage but the spot where Grindelwald stood was undisturbed. Still Hermione noticed that the fire had left angry burns on the skin on his left hand.

"Not bad, Tom," Grindelwald said coldly. "But I daresay your attempt at arson was from the start futile."

His words were accompanied by a jet of yellow light. Hermione's stomach gave a painful lurch as
she saw the powerful curse rushing at Tom. This time she didn't wait to see if Tom managed to protect himself. Her whole body still hurt incredibly but Hermione waved her hand. A cloud of magic gathered in front of Tom. As the yellow curse dashed into the cloud, its power was sucked away. Seeing his attack had been parried, Grindelwald peered at Hermione. She was taken aback as she saw something akin to fondness gleaming in his otherwise cold eyes. The gleam was gone as soon as he looked back at Tom.

"Now that you have your girlfriend to support you," Grindelwald said, his lips curled up into the semblance of a smile. Behind that gesture, though, Hermione could see the sharpness of a sword. "I think it is only fair for me to have the same."

With that he twirled his wand lightly through the air. Hermione watched with trepidation how his magic gathered and swirled around. She had seen him using that spell before when he had called the harpy. Grindelwald's magic quickly grew in power and soon later it exploded into a bright light. A familiar crack ran through the air, seemingly having opened a portal into another dimension. Dark magic oozed from there. A smile danced around Grindelwald's features as he opened his mouth and called,

"Ligeia."

It didn't take long and Hermione saw a dark silhouette appearing in the portal. She knew what was coming now. With bated breath Hermione waited for the harpy to show herself. However, it weren't the harpy's sharp features that appeared. A beautiful woman stepped out of the portal. With a sweet, welcoming smile on her face, she held no resemblance to the harsh beauty of the harpy. Her hair was ash blond and fell in shiny waves down her back. A garland of flowers was attractively woven into her hair and she held a small delicately crafted harp in her hand. Aside from that the woman's perfectly shaped body was naked, her beautiful tanned skin giving off a golden glow. Her hypnotic green eyes were fixed upon Tom as she slowly walked towards him.

"Mmm. I know you," said the beautiful woman, smiling attractively.

She took another step towards Tom. Hermione noticed how her feet barely touched the ground. She was more floating than walking.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle," the blonde purred. Then she laughed, the sound melodious and clear.

Hermione saw Tom's hand tightening around his wand, yet he did not attack. In fact he stared at the woman as if entranced by her. Hermione could partly understand it – the blonde was certainly beautiful – still, Tom was in the middle of a fight here. He needed to pull himself together, Hermione decided annoyed as she glared at him. He didn't notice Hermione's angry look, though, too enthralled was he with the blonde beauty. The woman again opened her mouth and whispered, her voice like sweet honey,

"Do you know who I am, Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

Tom stupidly shook his head, still staring at the woman. She threw him a wonderful smile that even sent pleasant shivers down Hermione's spine.

"Don't worry," she told Tom soothingly. "My name does not matter at all. What I can do for you that is of importance."

She took another step towards Tom, smiling her beautiful smile. Her emerald green eyes were glinting excitingly as she continued seductively,
"I am all-seeing. Nothing in this world or in the next stays hidden from my eye. I can see your past, present and future."

She tittered softly, her clear voice merrily dancing through the room. Her fingers played with the strings of the delicate golden harp as she told Tom,

"Listen to me speak. Listen to me sing. I will give you nothing but the truth."

With trepidation Hermione watched Tom's grip on his wand lighten and it threatened to fall to the ground. The blonde woman took another step towards Tom. Through the corner of her eyes, Hermione saw a devious grin stretching over Grindelwald's face as he lazily twirled his wand in his fingers. That was enough. Gritting her teeth, Hermione shakily got to her feet. Her back hurt unbearably and her head swirled but she just ignored it. In fact that sharp pain in her back reminded her quite cruelly what Grindelwald's creatures were capable of.

Hermione quickly waved her hand through the air and turned her magic into a wall of light between the blonde and Tom. The green eyes of the woman shortly flicked to Hermione. Like acid her gaze burned into Hermione, making dizziness wrap around her thoughts. Quickly the Elder Magic jealously pushed that dizziness away. The blonde unfixed her eyes from Hermione and, smile back in place, turned to Tom. Another step and she touched Hermione's strong shield. Hermione's eyes widened in shock as her shield fell without a struggle. Her magic was just being sucked into the woman.

Still Tom hadn't moved at all; he just stared at the woman. She was now only a metre from him. Hermione's heart clenched in fear as she saw that the right hand of the woman had changed. From her elbow down, her skin was covered in silvery fish scales and her fingers had turned claws, glinting dangerously in the light. Tom had not noticed any of this but still only stared into the woman's green eyes. The seductive smile remained on her face even as she reached back with her claw. Hermione didn't hesitate anymore. She jumped up from the floor, ignoring the pain in her back, and sprinted towards Tom. The blonde woman struck at Tom as Hermione crashed into his side, pushing him away. The woman's sharp claws only cut through air instead of Tom's chest.

Pain shot through her back as Hermione crashed on the floor, still holding Tom. With panic she noticed how the blonde already turned towards them. Only a few steps and she would reach them. Her startlingly green eyes were still fixed on Tom and now that she was so close, Hermione could hear that the blonde was humming softly, the tune accompanied by dizziness. Tom stirred beside her. He blinked and slightly shook his head.

Hermione grasped him tightly and breathed, "Tom?"

The woman was almost upon them as Hermione saw how Tom's eyes cleared. With a vengeance the crimson colour flooded his eyes and he glared murderously at the blonde woman.

"I- I don't know how to fight her," Hermione whispered urgently. "No magic works."

Tom didn't answer anything but instead reached for his robe pocket. He pulled a silver dagger from it. Hermione watched in confusion as he mumbled an incantation under his breath, clearly weaving a layer of dark magic around the dagger. What did he plan? Hermione knew it was impossible to harm the blonde with any form of magic. Like the harpy, she would only suck the magic into her body.

Tom grabbed the handle of the dagger tightly and in one swift movement hurled it away. Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as the dagger wasn't aimed at the blonde woman but at Grindelwald. He had calmly observed the proceedings but now his self-satisfied smile dropped from his face. Tom's aim was true and the dagger directly flew towards Grindelwald's heart who waved his wand and
erected a shield around himself. Seconds later the dagger hit the shield. The spell Tom had put around the dagger temporarily ripped a hole into the shield. It passed and rushed on. Grindelwald's eyes widened in surprise as he was confronted with the dagger. He tried to sidestep it but was too slow. The dagger managed to graze his arm, drawing blood. Hermione watched with bated breath how the dagger landed behind Grindelwald on the floor. Crimson red blood covered its silver blade. A drop of blood dripped on the floor.

The moment Grindelwald's blood touched the floor, the blonde woman stopped to advance on Tom and Hermione. The seductive smile dropped from her face and she immediately stopped to sing. Her face was blank and her green eyes empty of emotion. Then she suddenly burst into a bright light and disappeared from the church. With the woman gone Tom calmly got up from the floor, pulling Hermione with him. A sneer on his face, he gazed at Grindelwald.

"You are so low you even force a poor siren to do all your dirty work?" Tom scorned harshly.

Fury twisted up Grindelwald's face as he heard the mock and the magic around him burned up dangerously. Hermione huddled closer to Tom as Grindelwald's irate magic viciously licked over her skin. Murderous look on his face, Grindelwald brandished his wand. An immense wave of magic rushed towards Hermione and Tom. Grindelwald kept his wand pointed at them to maintain the flow of his furious magic. Tom waved his wand and an eerily black shield extracted itself from his wand, backed up by his raw magic. The full strength of Grindelwald's magic crashed into the dark shield and Hermione gasped as she felt the two forces collide. Tom's magic roared angrily as it fought with Grindelwald's curse. Pure magic bristled in the air and it burned like flames over Hermione's skin.

With fear Hermione saw that Tom's shield was slowly losing in power under Grindelwald's onslaught. Grindelwald had an advantage of several decades over Tom. Clearly he had not wasted this time doing nothing. Still, Tom might have been able to beat Grindelwald if it hadn't been for the Elder Wand. Grindelwald's furious magic was espoused by the allegiance of the Elder Magic. Having the same magic inside of her, Hermione could feel its presence in Grindelwald's attack.

She stopped breathing as she saw cracks appearing in Tom's shield. Hermione closed her eyes. She trembled in fear and huddled closer to Tom. She felt so helpless. An angry growl left Tom as he saw his shield falter. He forced more of his magic into the shield. Hermione's heart clenched in fear as she saw the cracks still getting wider. Already bits of Grindelwald's magic passed the shield and angrily ripped at Hermione. She knew, the moment Tom's shield fell that magic would tear them both apart.

"I can't win like this. I need more power," Tom whispered softly,

Hermione looked at him. He still had his wand raised to maintain the shield and his crimson eyes were narrowed in concentration as he stared at his enemy. Shortly his gaze flashed at her. Hermione stiffened as she saw a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"I have to use it..." he said quietly, sounding as if he talked himself into something.

Tom's cold eyes left her and he stared back at Grindelwald.

"I'm sorry, Hermione" he told her, his emotionless voice contrasting with the statement. "But he is using the Unbeatable Wand. I need something of equal strength."

"W... what?" Hermione stuttered weakly, alarmed by the dark tint in his tone.

Hermione's eyes shot at Grindelwald. He stood there, still maintaining the curse. Her gaze wandered to the wand in his hand. The Elder Wand. It was a truly horrible adversary.
"You don't have anything of equal strength," Hermione stammered desperately.

"Maybe not the wand," Tom whispered callously. "But I have its magic."

Her eyes shot back at him. The Elder Magic? Yes, it was still inside of her. But Hermione had already used it to fight against Grindelwald. It hadn't helped her at all.

"It's useless," Hermione told Tom panicky. "I can't beat him. Not even with the Elder Magic. I tried."

Tom unfixed his gaze from Grindelwald and looked down at her. An unsavoury smirk twisted up his features.

"You are no more than a vessel," Tom said darkly.

"What?" Hermione asked weakly.

The smirk didn't drop from his face as Tom said frostily, "Peverell's magic might be bound to you, but it does not belong to you."

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard it. Horrible suspicion boiled up in her as she scanned Tom's blood red eyes. He hesitated shortly but then unclosed,

"The Elder Wand's true power can only be activated by its owner."

"O- owner…?"

"Yes," Tom purred at her.

Hermione's mind was reeling as she stared up at the twisted smile on Tom's face.

"Peverell's magic is bound to your body," Tom stated darkly. "But it belongs to me. I am its Master."

"M- master?" she echoed weakly.

The smirk remained plastered over his face as Tom looked back at Grindelwald.

"There's no need calling me that."

Hermione's body tensed up as her thoughts swirled and tried to wrap around the concept. The Elder Magic… her magic, wasn't really her own? Tom had… he had claimed it? When? As he had used that dark ritual to get back her missing magic? Hermione's stomach clenched, making her slightly sick. With wide eyes she stared at Tom.

A wand is nothing without a Master.

Her flesh and bones, had they simply replaced the Elder Wand's wood? Like the wood of the wand, was she nothing but an instrument? A mediator between magic and wizard? A weapon to be wielded by its owner. Her owner! Hermione could barely breathe as she stared up at Tom.

"That… that ritual…" she stuttered. "You… did you…?"

Tom's red eyes were trained on Grindelwald as he confessed in a cold, emotionless voice, "I re-enacted Peverell's experiment. Binding his magic into the wood, he created an unbeatable wand which was bound to serve him."

A greedy sheen in Tom's eyes, he added, "And only him."
"You… you did that to… to me?" Hermione heard her own voice break. "Am I… bound to you?"

Tom's icy cold eyes slowly wandered over her. There was not a hint of remorse there. His gaze was locked with hers as he replied callously,

"Yes."

Hermione threw in a sharp breath of air.

"And now, my dear magical object, it's time I use your power."

Her breathing hitched as Tom's silky voice washed over her. Shaking her head, she stared up at Tom with wide eyes. He couldn't have done that.

"Tom, why di-"

Hermione was cut short as Tom's dark shield gave a dangerous buckle under Grindelwald's attack. Hermione's wide eyes shot back at the wizard. Grindelwald laughed as he flicked the Elder Wand and increased the force of his attack. The cracks in Tom's black shield widened.

"Do you really think you can win?" Grindelwald's cruel voice mocked Tom. "I will kill you and Hermione will be mine.

Hermione gulped as she heard it. Finally she understood what Grindelwald wanted from her. Did she now share the Elder Wand's fate? Fought over by power-hungry wizards? Her eyes fluttered at Tom. An empty feeling knotted up her stomach as she saw the red colour in his eyes. Hermione cruelly pushed her hurt feelings away. This was not the time to think over Tom's deception. He had lied to her and used her but for now they needed to work together should they wish to beat Grindelwald.

"What do we do now?" she asked Tom, her voice shakier than she had wished for.

Tom smirked as he said arrogantly, "Now, Hermione, we defeat him."

Hermione furrowed her brow as she stared at him. Tom's black shield was now so full of holes that Grindelwald's fierce magic painfully cut over her skin. Her eyes left Tom and wandered to Grindelwald. Wand raised, he maintained his attack while a triumphant smile curled his mouth.

How was Tom going to defeat him?

Hermione just wanted to open her mouth and ask as suddenly, without her permission, her magic welled up inside of her. Hermione's eyes widened as her magic burned until the force was so strong that it oozed out of her body. The magic swirled around her, stronger than ever before. A strange pull drew that force towards Tom. It wasn't long and she felt her magic connecting with him. It wrapped around him tightly. Hermione gasped as a powerful ripple went through her and she could feel the force behind her own magic increasing while it continued to wrap around Tom. The flagstones of the floor around her cracked under the magic's force, forming a circular indentation around Hermione. Still the magic's power increased. The tighter it was bound to Tom the stronger it got.

Was that still her magic? Hermione wondered. The magic was feral, uncontrollable. There was a wild undercurrent in her magic. It crackled through the air, strands reaching out, probing, testing. Like a wild beast ready to attack, her magic was howling in her ears. Growling. It was begging and demanding to be free. It wanted to roam and hunt. It was a savage force, undefined and led by pure instinct. If it weren't for its raw dangerous strength, it could have been called innocent. Hermione felt dizzied by her magic and suddenly wanted nothing more than just join it in that overly strong wish to be free. Completely free. No restrictions, no rules.
Despite its animalistic nature, her magic still reached out for Tom and wrapped around him affectionately. It danced around him playfully, nudging his own magic and inviting it to join into that dance. Soon, her magic completely encased him and suddenly Hermione could feel Tom through that connection. Her magic was now so tightly intermingled with his that she could sense Tom's magic like it was her own. His power was humming around her and she shuddered as she felt the force behind his magic. It was only now that she understood how exceptional Tom really was. His magic was an unrestrained force, infinite and dark. Very dark. There was no innocence, only darkness. It was incredible how easily Tom managed to dominate that terrible force which seemed to rip as fiercely at him as it now ripped at Hermione. It raged around him maliciously. Through their connection, that terrible force now wrenched at Hermione, too. It tore at her unrelentingly, searching for a weak spot. A cruel coldness brushed her thoughts as Tom's magic wrapped around her mind. It furiously ordered her to take action, to attack, to hurt. If Tom hadn't controlled that power, Hermione would have yielded. But he restrained the furious dark force and didn't allow it to overwhelm her.

In the end, she didn't know anymore where her magic ended and where his began. Everything seemed to mingle and mesh. That new force crackled around her. It had transformed into something uninhibited, backed up by a dark force. Hermione could barely breathe. She felt like drowning. But over all the chaos that threatened to pull her in, she could always feel Tom's presence. He controlled everything. While the magic around Hermione burned fiercely and would have dragged her away, Tom's presence was cold and dominated that violent force.

She knew that he would have easily been able to control her as well. She was completely in his hand. He could do with her whatever he wanted and she would have to obey. But while Tom tightly controlled the powerful magic, he didn't seem to want to dominate her. Hermione could feel the power he had over her, but he wasn't using it. His grip on the magic was firm, but as soon as he came close to her, he immediately loosened the tight control.

Hermione breathed in deeply. Her legs felt wobbly and weak, but she tried to pull herself together. She turned her head and cast a glance at Tom. Right now, he wasn't looking at her. There was a fearsome expression on his face as he stared at Grindelwald. An evil smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth and Hermione twitched as she saw the ruby red colour of his eyes. For the first time Hermione could really feel the force which burned behind that crimson colour.

Tom flicked his wand and Hermione felt a ripple going through her magic. It quickly abandoned her and eagerly followed Tom's command. It bristled viciously as it flowed into Tom's black shield, fortifying it. The cracks disappeared and the shield warded off Grindelwald's attack with ease. The evil smirk on Tom's face widened as he stared at Grindelwald. The triumphant expression had long since died on the other's face. Instead beads of sweat were on his forehead as Grindelwald fought to maintain his attack. A dark laugh escaped Tom's mouth as he saw the other struggling.

Timidly Hermione glanced up at Tom. His crimson eyes danced with malicious glee and an evil smile curled up his mouth. She shuddered as she felt Tom's dark magic raging around him aggressively. Her own magic had abandoned her and joined in that dance. Hermione was torn between the need to cower away from the dark wizard and the desire to join the magic and be as close to Tom as possible. Tom may have sensed her inner chaos through the bond because his possessive arm around Hermione's waist tightened.

"You are a wonderful magical object," he purred at her.

Then Tom channelled even more magic into the black shield. It eagerly absorbed the magic until it burst with a bright white light. A shock wave washed over the whole church. It easily shattered
Grindelwald's attack and smashed into him. His cyan coloured standalone shield sprang up and saved him from being ripped apart. Still Grindelwald was violently hurled against the church's wall.

Hermione felt dizzy as she all this magic rushing through her body. She glanced at Tom. The evil smile still twisted up his face and his eyes burned in a foreboding blood red colour. Hermione didn't know if she liked the control Tom had over her, but right now she saw no alternative. Tom's arm slipped from her and he took a step towards Grindelwald.

"Now," Tom said silkily. "Did you change your mind about joining me?"

A snarl appeared on Grindelwald's face as Tom ridiculed him. Tom just laughed coldly as he calmly scanned the rage on the other's face.

"No?" he said, faux innocence in his tone. Then he mockingly echoed Grindelwald's words, "A pity."

Tom swiftly waved his wand in a complicated pattern and instantly Hermione could feel an incredibly strong pull on her magic. He even opened his mouth and spoke out an incantation, which in and of itself was something rather rare for Tom.

"Tenebrae sum," he whispered in a dark voice.

Hermione felt her magic bending to Tom's will. Without her permission it rushed around him excitedly and then flooded the whole church. She had no idea what Tom's incantation would entail, she had never heard it before. Suddenly an unnatural darkness fell over the church. The light streaming through the church windows became dulled as if night had fallen outside. The darkness was almost palpable as it filled the church. Tom's patronus lynx pranced back to Hermione and resumed to circle her protectively, its silvery sheen dispelling the darkness. Nevertheless, Hermione could barely make out Tom, although he only stood a few metres from her. Grindelwald was still visible, the weak light reflected from his pale face and his golden hair. He tightly held the Elder Wand in his hand and for the first time had fallen into a duelling stance.

Grindelwald swished his wand and a purple curse rushed through the air. Its light eerily illuminated the darkness which had fallen around them. The curse crashed into Tom's chest, but didn't cause any harm. Tom's body became un-solid and with a swish of his robes he turned into nothing but black smoke. Grindelwald's curse harmlessly passed the smoke, whirling it up. The curse's light died away, devoured by the darkness.

Hermione tried making Tom out but he was nowhere to be seen. He seemed to have melted with the darkness. Still, she could feel his presence through her magic. Her magic was pulled into the darkness, feeding it. The curse Tom had used needed a tremendous amount of magic to be maintained. Even with the Elder Magic's support Tom wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. Maybe that was the reason as Tom now attacked Grindelwald full force. Hermione gasped as her magic was ripped from her. Dark mist gathered around Grindelwald and furiously wrenched at him. Grindelwald frantically waved his wand, trying to dispel the attack. His attempts, though, were not strong enough to break the darkness. The cyan coloured standalone shield sprang in place to support him. The dark mist dashed into the shield. There was another strong pull at Hermione's magic as Tom tried to take down this shield. Her legs turned to jelly and she felt faint as more and more magic left her. She could only hope that Grindelwald would give in before Tom's or her magic. Luckily Grindelwald's shield already wavered. It flickered under the pressure of Tom's attack. Not even the Elder Wand could help Grindelwald as the cyan shield fell.

Hermione could hear a painful gasp coming from Grindelwald as the dark smoke descended upon him. Out of nowhere deep cuts appeared on Grindelwald's skin. Blood already oozed from a slash on
his right cheek. The Elder Wand still raised to defend himself, Grindelwald weakly sank down on his knees. Hermione clenched her teeth, hoping it would be enough. The dark mist mercilessly continued to lash out at Grindelwald, inflicting more injuries.

Grindelwald's hand shook violently as he waved his wand in order to attack once again. A blood red curse flashed through the air. Again it only whirled the black smoke harmlessly. The curse, though, didn't die down and Hermione's eyes widened as she realized it was aimed for her. Tom's patronus lynx reacted in an instant. It leaped in front of Hermione and took the full brunt of the attack. The red curse and the patronus exploded and disappeared. Hermione was violently hurled away by the backlash of the explosion. A painful moan left her as she impacted with her injured back on the stone floor. She lay on the floor and her vision blurred as agony pierced her body. Before Hermione could lose her consciousness, she suddenly felt her magic flowing back into her. It cleared her thoughts. Then there were hands on her shoulders and a soft voice spoke to her,

"Hermione?"

She opened her eyes and looked up at the worried face of Tom. He had ended his curse but still his breathing was laboured as if he had run a marathon. Hermione carefully sat up on the floor and watched as Tom once again faced Grindelwald. Although blood ran from several cuts, the wizard still held the Elder Wand tightly in his hand. A murderous sheen burned in Grindelwald's eyes as he brandished his wand and an angrily crackling yellow curse soared through the air. Hermione gulped as she noticed that it was once again aimed at her. While the yellow curse dashed towards her, Hermione could see the weak light of another curse detaching itself from Grindelwald's wand. Almost completely invisible, only its outlines could be seen as a blurry disruption in the air.

Hermione felt how Tom pushed her magic back towards her. She used that magic and quickly raised her hands, palms touching as if in prayer. Then she moved her hands apart, spanning a thick shield between her hands, preparing to defend herself against the yellow curse but also against Grindelwald's sneak attack. It was a second before the first curse hit her shield, that Hermione saw a triumphant glimmer shooting through Grindelwald's eyes and she knew something was not right. Suddenly both curses abruptly changed direction. Avoiding Hermione's defence, they chose to slash towards Tom. Hermione could see his grey eyes widen in surprise as he was suddenly confronted with the attack. Quickly he moved his pale wand, erecting a shield of his own. It was a strong shield, but not strong enough to ward off both curses. Hermione frantically tried to push her magic back to Tom but it was too late. The yellow curse rammed into Tom's shield with a loud crack. The defence shook but it held and with a loud hiss the yellow curse disappeared. Still, the second curse, blurry and disguised by the first one, rushed towards Tom. Hermione's heart clenched in fear. Only Peverell's magic enabled her to see that curse but to Tom it was invisible. So he was surprised when it hit his shield forcefully. The shield fell and the curse rushed towards Tom.

"No!" Hermione screamed as she watched the curse impacting with Tom's chest.

A deep gash was ripped into his chest and he was hurled away by the curse's power. Hermione ran towards Tom. She fell down by his side and quickly waved her hand, spinning a shield around them both. The impact of another heavy curse told her that Grindelwald had not stopped his vicious attack.

"Tom," Hermione whispered and pulled him by his shoulders into a sitting position.

Tom groaned painfully and his hands wandered to the cut which ran over his chest. Blood gushed out, already soaking the front of his shirt. That wasn't the worst, though. A shuddered breath escaped Hermione lips as she saw a sickly green glow around the heavily bleeding gash. Without a doubt, this was a cursed wound.

"Tom," Hermione sobbed.
He looked at her. His eyes were still burning in a crimson colour, but Hermione could see pain flashing through them. Her mind clouded with fear as she felt the presence of Tom's magic withdrawing from her. The bond between them weakened by the second. As if Tom were too exhausted to maintain his hold on her, the connection slipped away.

"Stay with me," Hermione sobbed panicky.

A weak smirk washed over his features and Tom teased, his voice hoarse, "As if I would ever let you sneak away from me."

Hermione worried her lip as she looked at him. She felt Tom's grip on her magic lessen more and more. Their connection was slowly breaking down. The more Tom retreated the fiercer her own magic became. Without his guidance, her magic turned back into that feral, uncontrollable force. It hurt incredibly as this magic pulled at her, threatening to rip her to shreds.

Hermione breathed in deeply and her eyes wandered to Tom. He was kneeling on the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood. Hermione felt worry bubbling up in her. As a direct reaction to her emotional state she slowly lost her grip on the whirlwind of magic around her. This was dangerous. She couldn't lose herself into her emotions. This unstable magic was not allowed to slip away from her. Hermione pushed her emotions away. So her face was blank as she stared at Tom. He was looking back at her with his once again grey eyes.

I need your help, Hermione thought as she stared at him.

One of his arrogant smirks tugged at Tom's mouth as he extended a hand towards her. Hermione gasped as she felt a ripple going through her magic. Then she released a breath of air as she felt Tom's magic wrapping around her. His dark magic merged with her own and suddenly Hermione didn't have to fight for control anymore. Her magic didn't try to break her; it now swirled around her, submissively awaiting her orders.

Or maybe his… Hermione thought as she looked at Tom. The conceited smirk still ghosted around his lips as he told her smugly,

"The greatest of all magical objects is nothing without her Master."

A small smile crossed her features as she looked at that twisted self-satisfaction on his face. As she then opened her mouth her words were laced with condescension,

"I hope you can handle me, Master."

The smirk on his face changed into a real smile as he heard the well concealed fear behind her words.

"Not to worry, dearest."

Without looking, Hermione sensed another curse rushing towards her. She released a shield and fended it off. Reluctantly she let go of Tom and stood up, facing Grindelwald. The wizard was panting and bleeding heavily from Tom's attack but there was a nasty grin on his face as he mustered first her then Tom. Hermione protectively stepped in front of Tom.

"I have to say, Tom, you trained her rather well, haven't you?" Grindelwald said, his words harsh. His cold eyes snapped back at Hermione. "I hope you'll fight as fiercely for me as you do for him."

Hermione bared her teeth and hissed venomously, "Never!"
Grindelwald barked out a laugh. "As if you had a choice."

He brandished his wand and Hermione immediately felt his magic pressing down on her from every side. She raised a hand and pushed her magic against his attack.

As Grindelwald felt her defence he said quietly, "Hermione, dear, you know I do not want to fight against you."

With an angry movement of her hand, Hermione ended his attack. Then she hissed, unable to keep her temper in check,

"You only say that because you know you'll lose."

The dark wizard shook his head. "No, I'm saying this because I might injure you and I don't want that."

Instead of an answer Hermione sent a curse at him. Grindelwald blocked it with a wave of his wand. He cast her a weird smile as he waved the Elder Wand. Hermione's heart stopped beating as she saw an eerie and very-well known green light flying through the air. The Killing Curse was very much unblockable. Panic consumed Hermione as she realized it wasn't aimed for her. It rushed with deadly precision towards Tom. Hermione reacted instinctively. She waved a hand at Tom. Her magic obeyed, rushed towards him and slammed into his side. Tom groaned in pain as he was hurled away. A mere second later the Killing Curse impacted with the floor, exactly where he had been before.

Hermione's magic howled in protest as she stared at Tom lying on the floor while blood freely flowed from the cut in his chest. Then her eyes snapped back to Grindelwald. He sneered at her, wand in hand, ready to attack. Hermione stepped in front of Tom, shielding him. She knew only the tight grip Tom had on her irate magic prevented it to completely lose control. Her magic's agitation had by now infected her thoughts. Everything meshed and swirled together: her body, her mind and her magic. Fury pulsed through her so forcefully, Hermione wanted to charge at Grindelwald and rip him into pieces with her bare hands.

Tom shakily sat up on the floor. Pain ripped at him mercilessly. Blood had drenched his shirt and wetly plastered it against his aching chest. He could feel more blood flowing from the wound, but he couldn't concentrate on that right now. His breathing was ragged as he raised his face and looked at Hermione. To Tom she had never been more beautiful. Pure unadulterated magic crackled around her. It sang in the air, wrenching and burning. He could feel the magic through the bond as it reached out for him. Hermione's magic needed him. He was the only one who could ever hope to control it. The power behind that force was incredible; Tom had never encountered anything like it. And all of this was at his disposal. He knew he held that magic and Hermione in his hands. It was a wonderful feeling, having the allegiance of something so powerful. Despite the horrible pain in his chest, a smirk curled up Tom's mouth as he greedily stared at Hermione.

Through the bond he could feel different emotions racing through Hermione. There was fear and protectiveness but above all else Tom could feel her fury. Her magic was driven by nothing but a violent thirst of revenge as it bristled around her. The anger and fury of her magic was perfectly mirrored on Hermione's face as she fixed Grindelwald with a murderous glare. Tom watched in fascination as Hermione extended her right arm in front of her, the palm of her hand pointed to the floor. A strand of her magic reached out for Tom and timidly asked for his permission. Of course Tom granted his approval. Never would he want to miss seeing Hermione's anger played out in front of him like this.

Hermione almost snarled in fury as she stared at Grindelwald. She raised her hand and felt her magic rushing through the arm until it left her palm. In the back of her mind, she still dimly felt Tom's
Hermione spread her fingers and the magic formed into a silvery knife with a sharp seven inch blade. Her hand closed around the smooth cold handle. Then she hurled the weapon at Grindelwald. The man waved his wand to protect himself against the attack. Backed up by her fury, Hermione's blade easily cut through Grindelwald's shield and hit him. The wizard gasped in pain as the knife buried itself deep into his side before it disappeared into thin air. Blood gushed from the wound it had ripped into Grindelwald's abdomen. He held his heavily bleeding side and looked at Hermione in surprise. Waving his wand, he whispered shakily,

"Salus est in mortem."

With that his magic was sucked into the floor. Although a graveyard was positioned right beside the church, long ago the clergy and noble folk had made sure to be buried inside to be closer to God. Their remains still rested in a crypt directly under the church's floor. Life had long since left their bodies, but still they reacted to Grindelwald's call. The opening of the crypt was situated in the nave of the church very close to the altar. During the duel the flagstone sealing the crypt had partly been destroyed. With horror Hermione watched as rotten corpses crawled from the opening. Already five of those Inferi had left their crypt. Two of them died so long ago, they were no more than brittle dry bones, held together by magic. The other three were more recent. Rotting remains of clothes still clung to them while mummified skin was stretched over their skeletal bodies. Their empty eye-sockets were trained on Hermione and slowly they approached. She stumbled a step back as she was confronted with Grindelwald's Inferi. Never had she seen a wizard calling so easily upon the dead. Obviously the Elder Wand enabled him to accomplish the impossible. Hermione had fought Inferi before and she knew they were dangerous opponents. They could neither be destroyed nor injured by any magic. Fire could delay but not stop their assault. To break the spell, one had to defeat the wizard who had called them.

Hermione nervously glanced at Tom. He still knelt on the floor, holding his heavily bleeding chest with one hand the other was extended to her so he could maintain the control over the bond. Tom trembled and his face had paled considerably. He wouldn't be able to keep their bond activated for long. Her hazel eyes shot back at the approaching Inferi and Grindelwald who stood behind them. Hermione knew she had to defeat them fast. Without the activated bond between her and Tom, she would never be able to win.

Drawing heavily on her own but also on Tom's magic, Hermione crossed her arms before her chest. Abruptly she spread her arms to her sides, thus hurling a destructive wave of magic at the Inferi. The magic crashed into the dead bodies and they were pushed back a step. Deep cuts appeared in their parchment-like skin which would have killed any living thing. The Inferi just pressed on.

Hermione drew in a deep breath of air as she stared at the corpses. They were almost upon her. In close combat, she had no chance against them. Tom wouldn't last much longer anyway. She needed to beat the Inferi and Grindelwald quickly. She closed her eyes. Magic was everywhere around her. It fluctuated in the air as the different sources of magic struggled against each other. There was Grindelwald, a colourless mass of powerful magic. Tom was to her right. The last source of magic was in between herself and Grindelwald. Hermione sensed the dark presence of the Inferi. She never opened her eyes, as she channelled her magic towards the Inferi and Grindelwald who stood behind them. Hermione knew she had to defeat them fast. Without the activated bond between her and Tom, she would never be able to win.

Hermione then snapped her eyes open. The Inferi still approached her. Though now their bodies were penetrated by strings of her magic. As Hermione raised both her hands, her fingers curled claw like, those strands connected with her finger tips. The Inferi stopped moving. They just stood there motionlessly, held by the strings like some macabre puppets. Hermione didn't hesitate to play her part.
as the puppeteer. She moved her fingers, sent the command over the strings of magic to the Inferi and thus ordered them to turn around. Turning her wrists slightly and stretching her fingers, Hermione gave her dead puppets the order to attack Grindelwald. They had no will of their own and knew no loyalty. Without hesitation all of them charged at Grindelwald.

Hermione knew this was the last attack either of them could afford. Hermione's magic was losing in strength as Tom grew weaker and the heavily bleeding wound in Grindelwald's side restricted the time he was able to fight.

Hermione moved the ring finger of her left hand and the Inferius that was only bones sprang towards Grindelwald. It raised its right arm, not disturbed by the fact that the radius and parts of the humerus were missing, and swiped at Grindelwald. The wizard groaned in pain as the skeleton's hand left behind deep scratch wounds on his chest. Before the Inferi could strike again, Grindelwald waved his wand and the skeleton burst into nothing but dust. Seeing that, Hermione moved her fingers and pulled at her magical strings. Instantly all four remaining Inferi attacked. Grindelwald managed to destroy another one, but he was pushed back against the church's wall. The hand holding the Elder Wand shook with exertion. Grindelwald had to lean against the wall in order to keep standing. Hermione saw the opening and ordered the Inferius wearing the rotten remains of a once magnificent dress to claw at Grindelwald's eyes. He barely escaped the attack and Hermione sent the other two Inferi to jump on Grindelwald. He screamed in pain as the skeletal Inferius embraced his chest in a vice like grip, threatening to crush all air from him. The last Inferius, which was wearing an old tattered and ripped monk's habit, grasped Grindelwald's upper body and opened its mouth to sink its rotten teeth into the wizard's neck.

It was then that Grindelwald shakily waved his wand. Hermione saw his desperate magic surrounding the Inferi. The magic struggled but then it managed to break the Inferi's charm. All magic was pulled from the Inferi and they lifelessly fell to the floor. The strings that gave Hermione control over them were clipped off and she stumbled a step back. Still her eyes were fixed on Grindelwald. The wizard shakily leaned against the stone wall, blood was oozing from many wounds. His magic was weakened. Relief flooded Hermione as she realized that he wouldn't be able to put up much of a resistance from now on. Only one curse, and she would have won this duel.

Hermione just raised her hand to deliver her last attack, as Grindelwald reached into the pocket of his pants. Her eyes widened as she saw him withdrawing a dog tag hanging from a chain. A Portkey, like the ones his soldiers had used. Grindelwald raised the tag to his mouth and whispered something under his breath. The tag burned up in a blue light but Grindelwald did not disappear. Instead, several cracks resounded in the church. Hermione's heart hammered away in her chest as suddenly Grindelwald's soldiers appeared. Everywhere around her, men in black uniforms stepped out of thin air, chains with bluish glowing Portkeys around their necks. Hermione counted nine... ten people. With horror she watched how they all aimed their wands threateningly at her and Tom.

Hermione cursed her own stupidity. She hadn't expected this. But of course Grindelwald would call reinforcements now that his victory was threatened. This fight between them was not a wizard's duel. There was too much at stake to waste time abiding by any honour-bound rules. Actually, Grindelwald would have been an idiot not to use all his resources. Hell, she would have done just the same.

*Unfortunately I don't have an army at my command*, Hermione thought glumly as she watched one of the soldiers stepping over to Grindelwald. She knew that man with red hair and glasses. If Hermione remembered correctly, his name was Rousseau.

"Commander," Rousseau said, his eyes swiftly wandering over Grindelwald. "Are you severely injured?"
A smile flitted over Grindelwald's face as he returned, "Only my pride."

Rousseau grabbed Grindelwald's arm, helping him up, as he inquired, "What do you wish us to do?"

"Seize her," Grindelwald ordered his second-in-command while gesturing at Hermione.

"What about the boy?" Rousseau asked.

Grindelwald's gaze wandered to Hermione and she shrunk away from him a step.

"Kill him."

Rousseau only nodded. Hermione's heart raced away in her chest while she still stared with fear-widened eyes at Grindelwald. With force she ripped herself free of his penetrating gaze. His soldiers already advanced on Tom. Hermione hastened over to him and quickly whirled her fingers through the air, building up a shield. Already the first curses rushed through the air and hammered into her shield. Panic started to override Hermione as she watched the soldiers encircling her.

Suddenly, Hermione's magic slipped away from her. Panicky, she turned her head and looked at Tom. His face was very pale, his eyes were closed and she could see the pool of blood around him had grown alarmingly. His grip on their connected magic was loosening. Hermione could feel that he was mere seconds away from unconsciousness. She bit her lip hard as she stared back at the attacking soldiers. There was no hope beating them and Grindelwald without Tom's help.

Frantically, Hermione formed her magic into one last spell, the strongest of her shield spells. She extended her index finger and pointing it to the floor, she whispered,

"Protegat nos."

A thin golden threat of magic extracted itself from her finger. As soon as it reached the floor Hermione spun around herself. The light followed her movement and left behind a golden coloured ring around her and Tom. Hermione sunk down on her knees and pressed Tom against herself. As her arms closed around him, she felt his body growing limp and his head sagged against her shoulder. Instantly, her magic threatened to break down, pulled into unconsciousness together with Tom. Hermione fought against her dwindling magic and forced all of it into the golden ring. In a last effort she breathed out,

"Quaeso."

The golden ring burned up in a bright light. Like a pillar it rose up until it met the ceiling of the church, building a wall between Hermione and Grindelwald's soldiers. She pressed Tom against her and squeezed her eyes shut. She could feel each curse the soldiers hurled at the shield. The hits shook her up, their power reverberating painfully through her whole magic. Hermione begged every deity she knew for help as she willed her magic to keep up the shield.

It wavered dangerously, already faltering at certain points. She knew it wouldn't last much longer. Her arms tightened around Tom. She couldn't let Grindelwald get to him. He would kill Tom. Tears of desperation built up in Hermione and her throat tied up. She couldn't lose Tom. Never. Another curse hit her shield hard and Hermione gasped as she felt it ripping a hole into the golden barrier. With force and pure concentration she managed to maintain the shield, but only just. A few more curses and she would…

…fail.

Hermione opened her eyes. The soldiers still surrounded her. Grindelwald was standing a little behind them. Dark red blood was oozing from his wounds. Still a triumphant grin stretched around
his mouth as he stared at her. Hermione knew that Grindelwald could sense it as well: Her shield was breaking.

She could barely breathe anymore and a pitifully whimper left her lips as she buried her face in the crook of Tom's neck. Greedily she breathed in his pleasant scent, dreading to accept that it might very well be the last time. Tears ran down her cheeks, dripping on him, and Hermione placed hurried kisses on his skin.

"Tom..." she whispered, her voice stifled with suppressed sobs. "... don't worry... I'll- I'll stop them..."

The words left her and Hermione knew they were lies. She brushed her lips gingerly against Tom's neck, leaving another kiss. All the while, she felt her magic slowly breaking down. The golden shield flickered and steadily lost solidity. Hermione watched Grindelwald waving the Elder Wand to release a curse. It was rather weak since he had lost so much blood but Hermione somehow knew that this time, he would destroy her shield.

This time, Grindelwald would win.

Hermione closer her eyes and pressed Tom against herself as she waited for the impact.

Instead of the expected crash of a curse slamming into her shield, a deafening bang rang through the church. Hermione's head snapped up, her eyes wide. She saw Grindelwald's soldiers turning around, looking at something at the church's entrance. Hermione followed their gazes. Disbelief flooded her as she stared at the gates. They were blown off their hinges and now lay broken on the church's floor. On the threshold stood none other than Albus Dumbledore. Wand in hand, his magic crackling around him, he made a fearsome impression. Not even Grindelwald's green ward which sealed the whole church could keep Dumbledore out. He entered the church and before the green ward could spring back into place two other people slipped in. Hermione couldn't believe her eyes as she recognized her DADA teacher, professor McGray, and none other than Legifer.

Rousseau, Grindelwald's second-in-command, signalled for the soldiers to stop attacking Hermione. The soldiers obeyed and stepped into formation to face their new opponents. Hermione could only watch incredulously as her professors started to engage Grindelwald's soldiers in a fight. McGray was swirling his wand through the air, hurling curses and raising shields so fast Hermione could barely follow. Legifer was right by his side. As Hermione watched her professor, she understood how Legifer had managed to become an Auror. Her curses were incredibly strong and well placed. The only reason that they hadn't already won was that Grindelwald's soldiers were superior in number.

While his soldiers duelled, Grindelwald did not participate in the fightings. With wide eyes he stared at Dumbledore. On the other side of the church, Dumbledore did just the same. It seemed neither one of them wanted to do the first move.

Suddenly the greenish ward Grindelwald had spun around the church flickered. Slowly its colour changed. Here and there patches of yellow appeared, fighting against the sea of green. The patches grew, turning into bright red. It was only now that Hermione spotted a group of men, clad in blue cloaks, standing by the entrance of the church outside of the green ward. They had their wands trained at the ward and seemingly muttered incantations under their breaths. The greenish ward in their proximity had already turned red. Hermione's eyes wandered over them. Curse breakers, she guessed. Her gaze stopped at one of them. That person was smaller than the others, lighter built. Obviously a woman. As Hermione caught a glimpse of the woman's face, she wasn't really surprised. Hermione had met her younger self here in the past and had always admired her in the future. Minerva McGonagall was an incredibly talented and powerful witch.
It didn't take the curse breakers too long and Grindelwald's ward fell. The moment the green ward was gone, sounds of apparition rang through the church. Dark red robes billowing around them, several men appeared out of thin air.

“Aurors!”

Hermione watched the duels break out around her. Not even hesitating a second the Aurors immediately engaged Grindelwald's soldiers in battle. A multitude of curses flew through the church, shields sprang up and dust whirled in the air as the men fought. Still protected within her pillar of golden light, Hermione watched the proceedings with wide disbelieving eyes. Now Grindelwald's soldiers were outnumbered and slowly they were losing.

It was then that Grindelwald finally joined into the fight. Although he was already gravely injured it only took him a slight wave of the Elder Wand to hurl three Aurors violently away. Another wave of his wand and he sent a curse at Legifer who stood mere metres from him. For a second, both men just stared at each other. Then they simultaneously raised their wands. Grindelwald's face was pale and his hand shook as he pointed the Elder Wand at Dumbledore. His other hand painfully held his bleeding side. His breathing was visibly laboured as he stared at his adversary. Dumbledore stood tall, his clear blue eyes filled with determination. The wand in his hand was steady as stone as he pointed it at Grindelwald who already staggered slightly on his feet due to the blood loss.

A grin flitted over Grindelwald's face. Then he teased, his voice rough with pain, "Hardly a fair duel, Albus, wouldn't you say?"

Dumbledore's face remained to be unreadable as he replied, "Fairness is overrated. Isn't that what you always preach?"

Grindelwald inclined his head, the grin never dropping from his lips. At once, they both brandished their wands and started to duel. Their angry magic washed over the whole room. Hermione pressed her eyes shut and pulled Tom's limp body against herself. She didn't need to see that duel. Through her eyelids she could see flashes of lights from the curses. The magic made her hair stand on end.

For something that was going to go down in history books, the duel did not last very long. Maybe just a heartbeat. With Tom desperately pressed against her, Hermione couldn't tell. But then there was another dazzling light and Hermione heart the sound of a body falling to the ground. Then all the other duels around her seemed to come to a standstill and it was deadly silent in the church. Cautiously Hermione opened her eyes. Her gaze immediately fell on Grindelwald. He was kneeling on the floor, both hands empty. Dumbledore stood before him and he had a wand in each of his hands. Grindelwald eyes were locked on the Elder Wand in Dumbledore's hand, then his gaze wandered up at the other's face.

"You know what they say about this wand, Albus? Destruction follows its path." A smile flitted over his face as he added, "I am inclined to believe them now."

Dumbledore didn't immediately reply. He just looked at Grindelwald. His clear blue eyes held a dull sheen. Finally he opened his mouth said, sadness wrapped around his tone, "I would have wished for our reunion to be under different circumstances."

Grindelwald laughed gruffly as he heard it. "At last, one point we could agree upon."

Dumbledore's face was wan as he looked at the man in front of him. He asked, his voice tired, "Why
"Did you do all of this, Gellert?"

"The old argument again," Grindelwald sighed. He glanced at Dumbledore and said quietly, "I bear no grudge against you, Albus. You know that."

"Maybe not against me, but against the rest of the world," Dumbledore replied tiredly. "Why risk everything for an illusion? A twisted phantasy?"

A grin stretched over Grindelwald's face. "Did you forget, Albus? You once agreed with me."

Dumbledore slightly shook his head. "I did. And I regret it deeply."

"You shouldn't. You should be proud of it." Grindelwald whispered, still his voice cut through the silence like a knife. "Everything I did, everything I achieved, was for the Greater Good."

Disgust crossed Dumbledore's face as he heard that phrase. The smile on Grindelwald's face widened as he saw it. His eyes left Dumbledore's face and wandered to the wand in his hand.

"There it is, Albus," Grindelwald told him. "The most powerful object in this world."

His eyes shortly dashed to Hermione. The smile on his face faltered shortly as he mused, "Maybe the second most powerful thing."

As his gaze wandered back to Dumbledore the vicious smile was back in place and he said, coldness lacing his voice,

"Can you truly feel the wand's power and still say that I am wrong? I remember how fascinated you were by the notion of an unbeatable wand. Now it is yours to command and I will tell you one thing, Albus: You will be tempted by that wand for the rest of your life. Because deep down, you know that I am right."

Dumbledore did not reply. His eyes were still empty as he stared down at the man. After an eternity he turned around and told the Aurors in a quiet voice,

"Take him away."

The Auror closest to Dumbledore inclined his head and gestured for his colleagues before he strode over to Grindelwald. Two men grabbed Grindelwald's arms and wrenched him up in a standing position while two others pointed their wands at him. Grindelwald did not put up any fight. Instead his eyes were fixed upon Dumbledore's back, a glimmer of unknown emotion in them. Then he opened his mouth and suddenly his voice was gentle, almost sad, as he said,

"To answer your question, my friend: Yes, it was your curse."

Dumbledore faltered in his steps as he heard it, but he never turned around to Grindelwald. The other said no more as he was led away by the Aurors.

Hermione had watched this interaction between the two men. But with Tom unconscious in her arms, suddenly exhaustion overwhelmed her and the golden shield broke down around her. She was feeling numb. So numb. And empty.

A voice tugged her out of her dark thoughts, "Hermione? Hermione DeCerto? Is that you?"

Hermione flinched as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned her head and found Minerva McGonagall scanning her with worried eyes.
"What are you doing here?" McGonagall asked, concern lacing her tone.

Her green eyes wandered over Hermione, checking her over for injuries. The concern only intensified as she saw Hermione's blood covered clothes. Her gaze finally stopped at Tom.

"Is that Riddle?" McGonagall asked cautiously.

Hermione felt herself unable to answer. Somehow her voice must have gone missing. The hand on her shoulder stroked her soothingly as McGonagall gently whispered,

"Don't worry. You stay here I'll get you a mediwizard."

McGonagall got up from the floor but before she could hurry away a voice stopped her.

"Minerva, I'll look after Ms DeCerto."

McGonagall's eyes widened as she recognized Dumbledore. Something akin to hero-worship washed over her features as she stumbled,

"Of- of course, sir."

Dumbledore smiled at her kindly. "Why don't you go over to your mother and insure her that you are unscathed?"

A frown appeared between McGonagall's eyebrows, still she turned around and walked away. As she left them alone Hermione could hear her whisper something like "As if she even cares." under her breath. Dumbledore's clear blue eyes had left his future transfiguration professor and he gazed down at Hermione. A few of the Aurors near-by mustered Hermione with interest, probably wondering why Dumbledore paid her so much attention. He even crouched down beside her.

"Hermione?" he said gently. "I am so sorry you have been pulled into this."

Hermione stared up at him, her eyes wide.

"How- how did you know…" her voice was hoarse and broken.

Dumbledore smiled at her. "Mr Lupin told me what happened. I alerted the Aurors and used Gellert's Portkey to track back your position."

Hermione nodded but then whispered weakly, "I'm sorry, sir. This is all my fault. I- I should have protected…"

Her voice broke. Dumbledore only shook his head and soothed, "Nothing of this was your doing, I assure you. But now, Hermione, you have to return to Hogwarts. You are injured."

Hermione didn't reply anything but just tightly held to Tom. Dumbledore pulled an old door knob out of the many pockets of his robe and transfigured it into a portkey. Then he pressed the knob into Hermione's hand. Dumbledore's hand gently brushed over her head and whispered reassuring words to her. Hermione though couldn't hear them. She felt horrible and alone and hollow. Just numb.

If she hadn't still held to him, she was sure she would have broken down completely. Hermione tightened her arms around Tom. He was still unconscious and his head rested on her shoulder. She could feel his blood slowly soaking into her blouse, but his body felt warm against her and he was breathing. Hermione thanked Merlin for that.

"-will transport you directly to the Hospital Wing," Dumbledore's kind voice penetrated that deep
emptiness and Hermione raised her head at him.

She found the old professor smiling down at her.

"Are you coming with us?" she asked weakly.

"I will have to stay here a little while longer," he told her gently. "But don't worry, you'll be safe."

His eyes wandered shortly to Tom. "And Tom will be safe, too."

Hermione looked up at him and then nodded slowly. Dumbledore continued to smile at her reassuringly. He turned his head and called for someone behind him.

"Austeria?"

Legifer appeared by his side and raised her sharp eyebrows at him. Dumbledore merely smiled.

"Could you accompany Hermione?" he asked. "I think she could use some help."

Legifer's stern eyes travelled over Hermione who still cradled Tom's unconscious body in her arms. Her gaze shot back to Dumbledore and Legifer nodded curtly.

"Certainly."

Then she strode over to Hermione. Hermione didn't have the energy to look up at the woman. She felt Legifer's hand closing around her own, touching the portkey. Then the woman waved her wand in a sharp movement, thus activating the Portkey. There was a warm feeling originating from the door knop in Hermione's hand. Then they were pulled away from the church. Hermione clutched Tom even tighter.

Cautiously Hermione re-opened her eyes and was met by the sterile white walls and ceiling of the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. She hadn't time to adjust herself to her new surroundings as someone yelled at her. She flinched and turned her head slightly. Her eyes fell on Lupin and Weasley. Both were running towards her and she now realized that those yells were actually shouts of relief. In no time, both boys were kneeling beside her and hugging her tightly.

"Hermione," Weasley sobbed as he held her. "We thought you wouldn't come back!"

Hermione opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She only hugged Tom even tighter to her.

"Why did you stay behind?" Lupin choked out while desperately grabbing her. "You could be dead!"

Dead dead dead... the word spun around her head and the emptiness swelled to an unbearable size. Dead... he was dead. An image swirled around her head. A mischievous grin, blond hair, blue eyes. Hermione had to close her eyes as the numbness in her started to overwhelm her. That feeling was so well known to her. And every time so new. Cruel. Her arms tightened around Tom.

"Please, calm down," a firm voice tried to restrain Weasley's and Lupin's relief. "Give her some space."

Hermione didn't open her eyes, she only felt her friends' arms releasing her, leaving behind another sort of emptiness. But thank Merlin, she still had Tom. She could still feel his body against her. Then there was a hand softly touching her shoulder.

"Ms DeCerto?" the same voice, firm and stern, said.
Slowly Hermione opened her eyes. She looked up and found professor Legifer bent down to her. Her face was sharp as ever. The deep frown on her forehead in its familiarity oddly calming to Hermione.

"Ms DeCerto," Legifer repeated. "You need to let go of Mr Riddle. He needs to be looked after."

Hermione's eyes widened. Letting go of Tom? She frantically shook her head and tightened her grip on him. The hand on her shoulder wandered to her back and rubbed soothingly.

"Perry is going to have to heal him. So you need to let go of him," Legifer told her curtly, harshly, as was her manner. "But you can stay with him."

Hermione looked up at the professor.

"Okay," she finally choked in a broken voice.

At that Legifer turned away from her and nodded at someone. Hermione's breathing quickened as Tom was pulled away from her. His warmth was taken away, the pressure of his presence was gone. And the emptiness hit her again.

Numb.

Her lower lip started quivering, her eyes tingled and her throat tied up dangerously but there were no tears falling. She barely noticed as a pair of hands grabbed her under her shoulders and stood her up. Then she was led away towards a hospital bed.

"…Tom…" Hermione whispered desperately.

"He's right here," a kind voice answered and Hermione recognized it as Madam Dulan's. "Don't worry. He'll be alright. Just lie down here …that's it."

Hermione curled up on a hospital bed.

"Now drink this."

She felt a glass being raised to her lips. She drank the potion and immediately warmth was spreading through her body. The effect of the potion was instant and Hermione felt sleep pulling at the edges of her mind. Tiredly she opened her eyes. Her gaze fell on the bed right beside hers. She could see Tom lying there. Perry, Hogwarts' healer, was bent over him with a serious expression on his face. Hermione saw the healing magic bristle around Tom. His face was so pale and his eyes closed. But his chest was moving up and down in breathing. A small smile tugged at her mouth as she saw that. Then her eyes dropped from Tom and were drawn to another bed. Further away from her at the other end of the room, there was another hospital bed. It was occupied, just like hers or Tom's.

Occupied, yes, but still empty.

Hermione felt her chest constrict as she saw that bed. She could barely breathe. A body lay stretched out on that bed. A white hospital blanket had been laid over that body. A blanket, just like her own. But that blanket was pulled over the whole body so that nothing could be seen. Not even the face.

Hermione closed her eyes. Immediately the face sprang up in her mind. She saw that mischievous grin and blue eyes laughing down at her.

Mercifully, the sleeping potion then overwhelmed her. Hermione was glad to be pulled down into the depths of unconsciousness.
Hermione woke up with a gasp. Her eyes shot open, the rest of her body didn't move at all. The moment she became conscious, desolation and grief hit her. At first, she didn't know why she felt so horrible but then the memories crashed down on her. A miserable whimper left her lips but tears didn't want to fall. Maybe there were no tears left in her. Maybe it wasn't her place to cry. She didn't know.

Hermione rolled on her side. The drapes of the neighbouring bed were drawn and she couldn't see its occupant. A wave of panic immediately broke down on her. Tom was alright, wasn't he? With shaky arms she pushed herself up into a sitting position. It was then that she noticed soft whispers, just as if someone was talking nearby. She turned her head. There on the other end of the room, bathed in the weak light of a hospital lamp, stood three people.

Something clawed at Hermione's heart, wanting to rip it out, as she saw those people. One was professor Dumbledore. She instantly knew who the other two were, even though she had met them only once. Her breathing became laboured as she watched them, but Hermione still stood up from her bed. Her legs shook, as they had to support her weight. The floor was icy cold as her bare feet touched it. She barely registered it. She felt like in trance as she walked over to the three people. At the same time, though, her mind was incredibly sharp, noticing every detail. Like how the man's blond hair shone brightly even in the dim light of the hospital, how the woman's fingernails were painted in a soft pink or how there was a small, blood-red stain on the sleeve of Dumbledore's grey robe. Trivial things, but Hermione noticed.

Maybe she noticed all those things, because she desperately tried not to look at that bed; not to look at the white blanket …not to imagine what it meant…

"-the pain you are going through," Hermione heard Dumbledore's grave voice. "Words cannot express how sorry I am."

There was a stony expression on the blond man's face as he stared at the bed. Tear tracks glistened on his pale cheeks and he had his arms wrapped around the woman. Hermione couldn't believe this was happening. It shouldn't be happening. It was totally wrong.

Suddenly there was a warm hand on her shoulder. "Hermione," Dumbledore said, concern accompanying his soft words. "What are you doing here? Why are you out of your bed?"

Hermione raised her head and looked up at him.

"I…"

Her gaze couldn't stay on him but strayed back to the two other people standing there by the bed. They held each other desperately. Just as if the other was the only thing stopping them from falling down into the darkness. Or maybe they just didn't want to fall alone.

The eyes of the woman, swollen from crying, fell on Hermione.

"You…" she said, her voice shaky with tears. "You were with him, weren't you? When he… when he…"

Hermione nodded and more tears ran down the woman's face. The blond man tightened his arm around his wife and finally detached his eyes from the hospital bed. His blue eyes fell on Hermione.

"How did he die?" Mr Longbottom asked, his tone laden with so much emotion that it hurt Hermione.
As she stared into those blue eyes, their familiarity made the ground fall underneath her feet. Her throat constricted but the tears did not fall.

"It was... the Killing Curse," she finally said, her voice sounding strange to her own ears.

Now the tears spilled from Mr Longbottom's blue eyes, but his voice was still firm as he asked,

"So it was quick?"

"Yes."

He then nodded sharply, unable to say anymore. His eyes left her and he again stared down at the bed. Mrs Longbottom raised her arm and laid her hand on Hermione's forearm. It was a soft touch, but it burned through Hermione like fire... or like ice. She didn't know. Wasn't able to tell her feelings apart anymore.

"Thank you," Mrs Longbottom said in a broken voice. "Thank you for telling us."

Then her hand left Hermione again and Mrs Longbottom's eyes, too, were drawn to the bed. Her hand wandered to rest on her belly which protruded in her pregnancy.

"I just wish he could have seen his brother..." the woman said softly, barely audible, as she leaned against her husband.

Hermione just stood there. Stupid and useless. She wanted to say something, anything to make it better; to help. But no words came to her and she just stood there, mute, with those people who had lost the most important thing in the world.

"Hermione," she heard someone whisper in her ear.

She turned her head and found Dumbledore's kind face looking down at her.

"Why don't you go back to your bed?" His clear blue eyes wandered over her and he added, his voice laden with regret, "You can't help them. No-one can."

Hermione stared at him, then she nodded. Her eyes went back to the two people, embracing each other in their despair and grief. Shortly, Hermione looked at the hospital bed. She saw the contours of a body lying underneath the white blanket. But then she turned around and walked away, over the ice cold hospital floor and away from that bed.

As she stood before her own bed, she couldn't lie down. She stood there on the other side of the infirmary in her thin pyjama and couldn't bring herself to lie down. The dim light from the other end of the room washed over to this side. It seemed to bring along grief which reached out for Hermione with merciless fingers. She turned around and looked at the bed right beside hers. The drapes were still drawn. Cruel fingers clasped around her heart as she stepped closer. She raised a shaky hand and opened the drapes a little, so she could slip inside.

Hermione stood in the semi darkness and looked down at the body on the bed. There was the same white blanket, but this time not drawn over everything. It was only pulled up to his abdomen. Hermione's eyes left the blanket behind and wandered up. She extended a hand and put it down on Tom's stomach. A relieved sigh left her as she felt the movement of breathing. Her eyes continued their journey. There was a thick bandage covering his chest. Hermione could see a soft silver sheen of healing magic hovering over that area. Her gaze left the bandage and looked at Tom's face. His head was slightly turned to the side and his eyes were closed in peaceful sleep.
Cautiously as not to disturb him, Hermione climbed up in the bed beside him. There was no way she would leave him alone. She quickly huddled up against his side. Her head was lying right by his, just inches away. The heat his body was radiating was incredibly reassuring to Hermione and she snuggled even closer against him. The hollow feeling still clawed at her but Tom's presence allowed her to close her eyes and to sleep.
As Hermione woke next, the darkness had gone and she was greeted by the white hospital ceiling. A new day had dawned. Hermione felt exhausted. She would have fallen back into unconsciousness if it hadn't been for those horrible memories flooding her mind. Like a knife they mercilessly cut through her. Hermione tried to roll onto her back, but was instantly punished by a sharp pain flashing through her. A soft moan left her lips.

"Oh, you are awake," a kind voice penetrated her misery.

Reluctantly, Hermione turned her head. She found Madam Dulan standing on the other side of the bed, smiling kindly. Hermione only now noticed that she didn't lie alone in the hospital bed. Tom Riddle lay, fast asleep, right beside her. Dulan had her wand in hand and waved it in a complicated pattern over Tom. Hermione watched as a silvery net of magic detached itself from the wand, floated down and disappeared into Tom's chest, leaving behind a faint shimmer.

"You gave us quite the scare as you weren't in your bed," Madam Dulan chided Hermione gently. "Luckily we found you very quickly."

Hermione nodded distractedly, her eyes still fixed on Tom. His face was awfully pale and there was a thick bandage covering his chest.

"Is he alright?" Hermione asked concerned.

"He's been hit by a nasty curse," Dulan explained and Hermione's eyes shot up at her. "Don't worry, deary. Healer Perry managed to break the curse in the wound. Its power is receding ever since."

Hermione looked back at Tom's sleeping face. "Why isn't he waking up?"

"He's still healing," replied Dulan. "But he'll wake up soon."

The nurse put her wand away and then reached for a potion bottle standing on a shelf nearby before she handed it Hermione.

"Drink that," the nurse told her. "It'll help you regain your strength."

Hermione accepted the potion and drank it. As soon as the potion hit her system, her drowsiness disappeared.

"Thank you."

Dulan smiled at her and stepped over to Hermione's side of the bed.

"Do you think you can get up?" she asked cautiously. "I need to have a look at your back."

Hermione nodded and tried to get up in a sitting position. She hissed in pain as her back was bent. Dulan grabbed her upper arm to support her.

"Careful," Dulan warned her gingerly. "You've got quite the nasty cut there."

Still holding Hermione securely, Dulan led her away from Tom's bed. Only shortly Hermione's eyes dared to dart over to the other side of the infirmary. Her chest constricted achingly as her eyes landed on an abandoned hospital bed. Yesterday, that bed had not been empty. Hermione shuddered. Surely that was why his parents had been here. They had wanted to take their son home.
Hermione released a breath of air that sounded more like a whimper. Promptly Madam Dulan threw her a concerned glance. The nurse made Hermione sit down on an examination table before she gently helped her to remove her pyjama shirt. Hermione pressed her arms against her exposed chest while the nurse worked on her back.

"It is a rather unusual wound," Dulan commented while she stood behind Hermione. "How did you get it if I might ask?"

"Hm… it was… it was…" Hermione mumbled timidly. "A Harpy?"


"What's no wonder?" Hermione asked cautiously.

The nurse cleared her throat before she said shakily, "This cut is healing extremely slow. Potions don't seem to work on it. I had to resort to Muggle treatment actually."

Hermione stiffened as she heard that. Dulan obviously felt it and quickly tried to soothe her, "Don't worry, dear. It's not a cursed wound. But there are residues of Dark Magic. Nothing untreatable but I'm afraid this will leave behind a considerable scar."

Hermione breathed in deeply. Another scar on her body? Tom was right. She really was collecting them.

"It's fine," Hermione told the nurse. Then she joked weakly, "It's on my back. I won't see it that much."

Dulan stroked a hand over Hermione head affectionately and promised, "I'll do my best to keep it as small as possible."

With that the nurse brandished her wand once again and Hermione felt a bandage being wrapped around her back. Dulan took Hermione's shirt and helped her to slip in while she tried to console Hermione,

"I really don't think Mr Riddle will mind the scar so much. After all he's got a matching one on his chest. Quite the pair you two make."

Involuntarily Hermione tensed up as she heard it. Somehow that innocent comment made her stomach knot painfully. A pair? Tom and her? Before yesterday Hermione would have wholeheartedly agreed. Now she wasn't so sure anymore. Surely, there was a bond that shackled her to Tom, Hermione thought. But to call them a 'pair'…? Wouldn't that suggest they both had equal standing in this union?

Which isn't true, a voice in her head sniggered cruelly. As the bitter thought involuntarily echoed through her head Hermione gritted her teeth and buttoned up her hospital shirt. Then she turned to Dulan and whispered softly,

"Thanks for helping me."

Dulan smiled at her kindly. Hermione noticed a golden band at the nurse's ring finger and raised her eyebrows. Dulan must have noticed Hermione's gaze and a faint blush coloured her cheeks. While she looked lovingly down at the ring on her left hand she said,

"It's from Vallo." Dulan peered sheepishly at Hermione. "Professor McGray."
A smile appeared on Hermione's face. "My congratulations."

"Thank you," Dulan grinned. "He came to me yesterday, all beaten up from that horrible battle, and told me we shouldn't wait any longer. And I... I said 'yes'." The smile on Hermione's face was disrupted by a jab of guilt. She asked cautiously, "He was not... not hurt yesterday was he?"

"Oh, no." Dulan quickly shook her head. "Nothing serious. Not like you or poor Mr Riddle. Vallo is quite fine."

Hermione felt relieved to hear that. At least someone got something good out of yesterday, she thought as she eyed the smile on Dulan's face.

"I am very happy for you," Hermione told Dulan.

"Thank you," the nurse replied, serene glint in her eyes.

Hermione nodded at her before she stepped over to Tom's bed. He was still fast asleep with a peaceful look on his face. Hesitantly Hermione raised her hand and carefully wiped a strand of Tom's dark silky hair out of his face. He stirred slightly in his sleep. As she studied him, Tom's words from yesterday echoed through her head,

'You are no more than a vessel. Peverell's magic belongs to me. I am its Master.'

His words now cut through Hermione like a sharp blade. A fine pair they made indeed. The power and control lay undeniably on Tom's side. Where did that leave Hermione? Was she nothing more than a servant on his beck and call?

Hermione shuddered as she looked down on Tom. She still gently stroked with her fingers over his head. As her eyes landed on her own hand, she noticed how the silvery colour contrasted sharply with Tom's dark hair. Hermione raised her hand and scanned it. Her cutting hex had sliced her hand off from the base of her thumb over to what had once been the knuckle of her pinkie. Tom's spell had replaced the missing parts and her new hand glowed in a strangely beautiful sheen. Hermione sighed as her eyes fell back to Tom. She was grateful that he had given her the new hand and she was even more grateful that Tom had helped her to escape Grindelwald. Still, as Hermione looked down at him, she felt her gratitude and relief being tainted by an odd numb feeling.

'I won't hurt you again. I swear.'

Tom had given her this promise shortly before she had agreed to be his girlfriend again. He had assured her that he would never hurt her again and in the end Hermione had believed him. She had forgiven all the things he had done to her, all the insults and the abuse. He had apologized and she had dared to love Tom again.

'My dear magical object...' his content voice purred to her in her thoughts and she tensed. She couldn't help but think that Tom broke his promise. Because Hermione was hurting again.

She sighed as she looked at Tom's sleeping face. Dulan's voice brought her out of her thoughts.

"Professor Dumbledore asked me to tell you to meet him as soon as you feel up to it."

"Where is he?" inquired Hermione.

"He returned just an hour ago from the Minister. I think he's speaking with the Headmaster right now." Dulan's eyes wandered over Hermione's form as she added concerned, "Maybe you should
stay here a little longer and rest, dear. I'm sure Dumbledore can wait."

Hermione shook her head and looked back down at Tom. "I'll come back later."

"I'm sure Mr Riddle will appreciate it," came Dulan's kind reply. "You should also seek out Misters Lupin and Weasley. They were so concerned about you; I had to kick them out of here so they could get some rest themselves."

Hermione nodded at the nurse. The prospect of seeing her friends heartened her. She spied a black robe lying on the bed right beside Tom's. She took it and quickly slipped into it, hiding her hospital pyjama. The robe was rather large. It probably belonged to Tom, if those green and silver trimmings were anything to go by.

"Oh, I can get you some clothes," Dulan exclaimed hastily as she saw Hermione's actions.

Hermione quickly shook her head. "No, that's not necessary. Really. I'll just head back to my dorm first."

Seeing the look on Dulan's face, Hermione knew the nurse would have preferred to keep her tucked in bed for the rest of the day. Hermione wanted to avoid that. She had never liked hospitals to begin with. And if she was honest with herself, she wasn't sure she wanted to be here when Tom woke up.

So with a last wave to Madame Dulan, Hermione hurried out of the Hospital Wing. Quickly, she set off towards the Gryffindor tower. Unfortunately that also brought her closer to the part of the castle where most classrooms were situated. To add to her bad luck, classes seemed to be just finished and Hogwarts' hallways started to crowd with students. As Hermione wormed her way through the people, she quickly noticed the many curious stares she received.

*Just the thing I need now*, Hermione thought sarcastically. She wrapped Tom's robe tighter around herself and lowered her head. Whispers broke out as the other students recognized her. Obviously, Hogwarts' population had heard rumours about the events from the day before. It probably wasn't just Hogwarts, Hermione mused. Doubtlessly the whole wizarding world was in turmoil now that Grindelwald had fallen and had to deal with the ramifications his crusade had left behind. Hermione shouldn't be surprised that people wanted to know how she was connected with the affair.

She hastened down the corridors, never looking up at the staring students. Although she tried to block out the whispered conversations around her, bits and pieces still reached her.

"Really? That's her? DeCerto?"

"Wow. What do you think she had to do with Grindelwald?"

"I hear she's Muggleborn. Maybe that's why she got attacked."

"There are a lot of Muggleborns in Hogwarts. Why her?"

"Maybe she's a dark witch and wanted to actually help Grindelwald. Did you see that crazy glint in her eyes?"

"Yep. Definitely looked a bit mad, that one."

Hermione breathed in deeply to suppress her upcoming annoyance. She, a dark witch? Preposterous. There was a painful lurch in her stomach at that thought, but Hermione shoved it away. It would be crucial to talk with Dumbledore as soon as possible so he could staunch the flood of rumours. There was no way Hermione's involvement with Grindelwald could be revealed. People would surely start
to look closer into that persona of 'Hermione DeCerto'. How long until they realised that Hermione DeCerto didn't exist at all? That would lead to a lot of nasty questions. Tom couldn't afford Aurors poking about his not so innocent background either.

A nice pair, aren't you? A voice scoffed at Hermione meanly. It sounded horribly like Grindelwald. Both covered deeply in darkness. So very sticky, isn't it?

Hermione balled her hands into tight fists as she climbed up the stairs to Gryffindor tower. Grindelwald's laughter rang in her ears.

'Whether you want to accept it or not, you belong to the original magic.'

That was not true! Hermione thought furiously. Why was there doubt boiling up in her, though? Since she woke up, she hadn't even tried to touch her magic. She could have used a simple spell to transfigure her hospital pyjamas into something more presentable. But she hadn't. She preferred it to run through half the castle to get clothes from her dorm. Why? Because Grindelwald was right? Because her magic was dark? Hermione shook her head frantically. She was not dark!

Why do you deny it? The voice that sounded like Grindelwald sneered. It's an honour.

No, it was a curse. And Hermione could only feel bitter resentment for the one who brought this plaque about. Peverell. He had created Dark Magic. Now he had infected Hermione with his darkness. She hated him for doing this to her.

'Child of the original magic,' Grindelwald had called her lovingly. 'Wonderful magical object,' Tom had called her, equally lovingly.

It scared Hermione. She didn't want to be a magical object. And surely not a dark one. Was that what she had become? Nothing but an object, filled with dark magic and attracting dark wizards.

How could Tom have done this to her?

Hermione let her head hang as she stood in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady. She raised one delicate eyebrow and her chubby face turned into a frown as she took in Hermione appearance.

"Why're you wearing a Slytherin robe?" the Fat Lady asked suspiciously.

Hermione just shrugged before she whispered the password, "Horseshoe crab."

The Fat Lady huffed and only reluctantly revealed the entry to the Gryffindor common room. Hermione breathed out in relief as she found the room abandoned. The other Gryffindors probably were on their way to their next class. Hermione quickly walked over the stairs leading up to the dorms. This time though she took the ones leading up to the boys. She had an inkling that her friends were there. They probably hadn't wanted to go to classes today. Hermione cautiously knocked at the door which led to the sixth year boys' dorm.

"Yes?" she heard a voice coming from the room.

She slowly opened the door and stepped into the room behind. Her gaze only briefly wandered over the dorm. She saw the four-poster beds with their Gryffindor red curtains. A small smile flittered over her face as she realized nothing much had changed in all those years. Then her gaze landed on Amarys Lupin, Richard Weasley and, surprisingly, Stella Lovegood. Obviously they had been absorbed in conversation but now had turned to her.

As Hermione saw them she was suddenly hit by a wave of fear. What if her friends blamed her for
Marc's death? By all means they should. Because it all was Hermione's fault. Guilt flooded her and
she felt unable to take another step into the room. Hermione was bewildered as she saw a smile
stretching over Weasley's face.

"Merlin!" Lupin exclaimed, smiling as well. "Hermione. We were just talking about you."

He quickly strode over to her. Hermione's flinched as he smothered her into a bear hug. Weasley
quickly joined his friend and wrapped his arms around Hermione. Stella had a serene smile on her
face and gently patted Hermione's head.

"Yeah," Weasley said, his voice muffled as his face was buried in Hermione's curly hair. "We
wondered how to break into the Infirmary to see you. Dulan didn't want to let us see you."

Upon hearing the word infirmary, Lupin ended his embrace and held Hermione at arm's length.

"How are you? Is it safe for you to leave the Hospital Wing so soon?"

Hermione was still surprised by her friends' behaviour. She had expected them to yell at her. She sent
Lupin a shy smile and said,

"Yes, I'm fine. Dulan let me go."

Weasley took her hand. Upon noticing its silvery colour he raised his eyebrows in question.

"What happened to your hand?"

"Oh," made Hermione.

She had completely forgotten about her artificial hand. It felt exactly like her lost one so it was easy
not to think about it. She just shrugged at Weasley and supplied,

"I got hurt. But it's fine now." To prove it she flexed her fingers. "Just looks a bit strange."

Weasley and Lupin eyed the hand, worry clearly visible on both their faces. Meanwhile Stella
stepped closer to Hermione and took the silver hand in her own. Her misty eyes slowly wandered
over Hermione's artificial hand. Then Stella looked at Hermione, smiled and said serenely,

"It's pretty."

A small smile flittered over Lupin's face as he heard his girlfriend. Weasley just shrugged his
shoulders in acceptance and pulled Hermione over to one of the four posters.

"Here, sit down," he said while he pushed her down on the soft bed.

Lupin sank down beside her, followed by Stella. Hermione felt Lupin's hand gently stroking over her
forearm and he said softly,

"We were so scared for you. You have no idea how glad I am that nothing happened to you. As you
told me to take that Portkey and leave you behind, I thought I would never see you again."

"It's okay, Amarys," Hermione tried to soothe him. "Nothing happened to me. And I'm glad that you
got away unscathed."

Lupin just shook his head, self-reproach all over his face. "We knew that Grindelwald was after you.
If only I had watched out better. Now it's so clear that Marc was... was... imperiused."
Hermione stared at her friend. She was stunned that he seemed to blame himself. If it was anybody's fault, then it was hers. She didn't know what to say. So she just leaned over to Lupin and placed an affectionate kiss on his cheek.

"Hermione?" Weasley asked gingerly. "What... Exactly what happened after Amarys left? How did you manage to escape Grindelwald?"

Hermione looked at the three others. They were eyeing her with curiosity. She hesitated a bit as her gaze fell on Stella. It wasn't that Hermione didn't like her, but she didn't know much about the Ravenclaw girl. Seeing Hermione's hesitation, Stella smiled serenely and said frankly,

"Don't worry. I won't reveal anything what you say. Even if I would, no-one would believe me. People seem to think I am a bit odd."

She didn't seem in the least bit bothered by that fact and just shrugged cheerfully. Lupin threw his girlfriend a crooked smile. Hermione looked at her friends nervously. Then she decided to just tell them. So she started to recount in a shaky voice what had happened the day before. She omitted the parts where she had learned about the true nature of her magic or the bond between her and Tom. But Hermione did tell them how Grindelwald attacked her and how she had trouble defending herself.

"That was when Tom showed up," Hermione told her friends. "He helped me to keep Grindelwald at bay long enough for Dumbledore to show up."

Weasley raised his eyebrows as he heard that. "So Riddle really helped you, didn't he? We heard how he yesterday suddenly disappeared from the castle."

Hermione nodded. Talking about Tom made that numb feeling return to her. She looked down at her hands in her lap. Lupin must have seen her dejected reaction as he now grabbed one of her hands and asked gently,

"Is Riddle alright? He didn't get hurt yesterday, did he?"

Hermione raised her eyes at the Gryffindor. "He's okay. Tom's got hit by a curse. But Madame Dulan told me he should be fine soon."

Lupin squeezed her hand and smiled at her. "Well, I never liked Riddle but I am glad you had him with you. I know from DADA classes that he's a strong duellist. It's reassuring to know that he fought for you."

Hermione looked at her friends with large eyes. As she saw the affection in their eyes she couldn't hold back anymore.

"I am so sorry," she whispered hoarsely, tears in her eyes.

Seeing her tears, Weasley wrapped an arm around her trembling shoulders. Stella soothingly stroked her fingers over Hermione's arm. And Lupin asked gently,

"What are you sorry about?"

She looked at him, her vision blurry, and whispered, "I... I pulled you into this. G- Grindelwald was after me. If it hadn't been for me... M-Marc would still be... still be alive..."

Hermione saw the pain in Lupin's eyes as she mentioned Marc Longbottom. Still, he managed to smile at her encouragingly. Shaking his head he told her softly,
"No, Hermione. You heard Grindelwald. He already had Marc under the Imperius Curse since before you even arrived at Hogwarts. It was Grindelwald who attacked Marc and Grindelwald who targeted you. You are certainly not responsible for any of it."

Hermione nodded tearily.

"There will be a burial," Lupin said, his voice laden with grief.

"We are going," Weasley said, unshed tears swimming in his eyes. "We want to say good-bye."

Hermione nodded. Her chest constricted painfully. "I'll come with you."

After that they sat for a moment in silence. Each lost in their thoughts and memories. A little while later, Hermione excused herself. She still needed to speak with Dumbledore. So she left the boys' dorm and walked over to her own. Luckily her dorm was abandoned. As Hermione went over to her side of room, she noticed that one of the five beds was vacated. There was no school trunk at the foot of that bed, nor any belongings on the small side table. Hermione frowned as she looked at Diana Potter's empty bed. It was only a second later that she remembered something Lupin had once told her. The Potters and the Longbottoms were always close. Diana and Marc practically grew up together.' Hermione stared at Diana's empty bed with a glum feeling. Maybe the girl had gone home, to her family.

Hermione swallowed down some tears. Quickly she pulled some clothes from her trunk. She didn't bother with her school uniform but slipped into a grey skirt and a plain white blouse. She carefully folded Tom's robe and laid it over the back of her chair. Then Hermione turned and left the dorm. She really needed to talk with a certain Transfigurations professor.

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It was only a short while later that Hermione was in Dumbledore's office. She sat in a comfortable chair and had a cup of peppermint tea in front of her. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, half-moon spectacles on his nose and looked rather tired. Hermione threw him a small smile before she asked,

"So? Do you like your new wand, sir?"

A sad smile ghosted around Dumbledore's mouth as he looked down at her. "Once I would have given anything, even my soul, to get this wand. Now it is nothing more than a burden."

Hermione nodded. She understood him. Only too well, considering that she had to live with the wand's dark power herself. She reached for her cup of tea and took a sip. Dumbledore considered her for a moment then he asked gently,

"Why was Gellert after you, Hermione?"

Hermione fidgeted in her chair, before she voiced cautiously, "It was still the book I stole from Flamel. Peverell's manuscript."

Dumbledore nodded pensively. "Quite the trouble Peverell caused. Even though he's been dead for so long."

"Yes," Hermione sighed. "You could say that."

She peered at Dumbledore timidly. There was something she really needed to resolve.

"Sir?"
"Yes, Hermione?"

She sat up a bit straighter in her chair before she said in a firm voice, "I don't want anyone to know about mine or Tom's involvement with Grindelwald yesterday. Could you just… I don't know… not mention that we fought against him?"

Dumbledore observed her over his half-moon spectacles, his blue eyes piercing her. After a while he said gingerly, "What you did yesterday was a great feat. Without you, Gellert would probably still be at large. Why do you want to deny the world its hero?"

Hermione quickly shook her head. "I am no hero. And it was you who defeated him."

Dumbledore sent her a kind smile. "You are too modest, my dear. I do know how powerful a wizard Gellert truly is. As I duelled him yesterday, there was not much left of that power. He is not easy to weaken but he obviously had to use a lot of his magical reserves to fight against you."

Hermione squirmed in her seat, not feeling comfortable with the compliments.

"I had a lot of help," she said bashfully. "Without Tom, I wouldn't have lasted long."

Dumbledore nodded. Amusement was in his voice as he said, "Yes. Tom. Running off to rescue his girlfriend. Why, just a year ago I would never have thought him capable of even keeping the same girlfriend for longer than a week." His blue eyes glinted at her mischievously as he added, "You seem to bring out the best in him, Hermione."

Or the worst, Hermione thought glumly, sending the professor a forced smile. Dumbledore regarded her for a moment before he suggested,

"I think the Aurors would want to bring the both of you in for a questioning." Seeing the panic in Hermione's eyes Dumbledore added, "I'll talk with them and sort it out so you won't have to give your testimonies."

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione gratefully. Then, wanting to change the topic, she asked, "What happened to Grindelwald?"

Dumbledore sighed and tiredly leaned back in his chair. "He's been handed over to the French authorities. Soon he will be moved to Nurmengard where his trial will take place."

Hermione nodded mutely. She already knew that Grindelwald would never leave Nurmengard again. He would remain to be incarcerated in that prison for many years. Much later, Lord Voldemort would pay him a visit and kill him in his search for the Elder Wand.

Hermione stopped in her thoughts, realization making her blood freeze over. Would Voldemort really question Grindelwald about the Elder Wand's whereabouts? Didn't he already know? Hermione swallowed nervously. Why would Lord Voldemort even want to have the Elder Wand when he already had something very similar? The timeline had melted before Hermione's eyes. Things changed and now Voldemort already held the power of the Elder Wand in his hands.

No! Hermione thought. No. Tom is not the Voldemort I know from the future.

Oh, but he is well on his way into the darkness, a voice, sounding so much like Grindelwald, mocked her. You know that. The question is: Do you want to follow him? Your magic already did…

Hermione angrily pushed that voice away and focused on Dumbledore.
"Do you think he was right?" Hermione found herself asking as she stared up at Dumbledore's clear blue eyes. "Grindelwald?"

"About what, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked in his kind voice.

"That Dark Magic is not evil but freedom."

There was a tired smile on Dumbledore's face as he scanned her. As he finally replied, his answer shocked her to the core,

"I don't know."

Hermione's eyes widened. She had expected a lot but not this. Dumbledore cast her a small smile before he went on,

"The distinction between normal magic and dark magic is probably the most difficult object to study. Where to draw the line? How to decide what is evil and what is not. There are as many definitions of 'evil' as there are people on this world."

Hermione felt desperation wash over her. Was everything just messed up?

"So, he was right?" she asked weakly. "Dark Magic is freedom?"

Dumbledore leaned a bit towards her, his hands folded on his desk in front him. His eyes never left her as he said in a serious tone,

"Hermione, whatever Gellert told you, however he tried to convince you, one thing you should know: He never fought for freedom. I assume he told you how he is not a Dark Wizard? How he fights to help people. To show them the way of magic?"

Hermione nodded weakly as she looked at him.

"I once believed him, too," Dumbledore admitted wearily. "Is Dark Magic truly the evil force we assume it to be? I don't know. Dark Magic is certainly more flexible than normal magic. Unfortunately, that also makes it prone to be bend in the wrong direction. But is it really evil…?"

His eyes glistened with an emotion Hermione could not determine.

"Dark Wizard, or fighter for the light?" Dumbledore mused, lost in thought. "In the end, does it really matter how we call him? Whether Gellert fights for his own selfish benefit or for an uncorrupted greater ideal, could anything really justify his actions?"

Hermione stared at him. Dumbledore continued in the same grave voice, "To gain his goal Gellert tends to sacrifice things that are not his to sacrifice. Many people suffered at his hands. I am very sure Marc Longbottom had no intention of dying to further Gellert's ambitions."

Hermione stiffened at the mention of Marc's name. Guilt once again mercilessly burned up in her. The professor might have sensed her despair as he said gently,

"You yourself suffered from Gellert's doings. He cruelly took your friend away from you. I don't know if Dark Magic is a purely evil force or if it really is a pristine power of nature. But I can see nothing pure or pristine in what Grindelwald did."

Hermione stared at Dumbledore for a while, lost in her thoughts. He didn't disturb her but let her think. Finally Hermione asked shakily,
"Do you think Marc could forgive me?"

Sadness crept over Dumbledore's features as he heard her question. His eyes were distant as he replied,

"I don't know if the dead are able to forgive, but I like to think that they can."

The professor's eyes wandered back to her and softness appeared in them. With a small smile on his lips he told her,

"It is very tragic that Marc Longbottom died but you shouldn't blame yourself for it. And I really don't think Marc would do that either. You both were victims."

Hermione breathed in deeply as she heard it. Her hands were tightly clenched around the edge of Dumbledore's desk.

"Thank you," she whispered shakily.

The professor nodded at her, still smiling. As his gaze wandered to Hermione's hands, he interestedly scanned her silvery right hand.

"That is an impressive piece of magic."

Hermione's own eyes dropped to her hand. She self-consciously curled it into a fist to hide the silvery fingers.

"Yes," she whispered. "Tom gave it to me."

"Of course," Dumbledore mused. Then a small grin crossed his face. "Well, I never doubted his magical abilities."

She raised her eyebrows at him but then sighed, "Me neither. Although there are a lot of other things to doubt."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and looked at her over his half-moon glasses.

"Do tell," he prompted her gently.

Hermione averted her eyes and stared down at her artificial hand, her thoughts drifting around her magic that bound her to Tom. She bit her lower lip hard before she whispered,

"He lied to me. Again."

Dumbledore cocked his head to the side as he considered her. "I assume it was something important he lied about?"

"Yes," she replied bitterly. "Yes, you could say that."

"He disappointed you," Dumbledore concluded gently.

As Hermione didn't reply anything the professor said softly, "I've known Tom since he was ten. I was actually the one who introduced him to the magical world."

"Yes, I know," Hermione replied. "He told me about it."

Dumbledore nodded his head, his eyes misted over with memories as he looked out of the window.
When he looked back at Hermione, she saw a sad streak in his clear blue eyes.

"I always liked visiting Muggleborn students who were about to enter their very first year at Hogwarts," the professor mused. "It is wonderful seeing that happy spark in their eyes when they realize that there is a whole new world hidden behind their own."

"Tom was different, wasn't he?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Dumbledore sighed and removed the half-moon spectacles from his nose. His blue eyes rested on Hermione as he continued gravely, "Yes. 'Different' might describe him rather well. Whatever it was, I left his orphanage feeling a bit unsettled, a bit concerned. It made me decide to have an eye on Tom."

Hermione nodded.

"Sometimes I regret that decision, because otherwise I wouldn't have had to see Tom's career through this school and watched how he immersed himself so deeply into the wrong kind of magic." Sadness and regret laced Dumbledore's voice. "Very quickly he gained a mind-set which is defined by nothing but darkness and cruelty."

Hermione averted her eyes and sadly looked down at her hands in her lap.

"I tried very hard to keep Tom away from all that hate." Dumbledore continued softly. "In the end, I failed. Instead Tom managed to pull other people down with him. I felt guilty for not being able to help Tom but I had to accept my failure."

Cautiously Hermione peered at the professor. His eyes were turned on her and a wan expression was on his face.

"Whatever I tried, he did not want to change. I don't know when exactly it happened, but over the time I had given up on Tom," he admitted softly.

Suddenly a small smile appeared around Dumbledore's mouth. "That was before you turned up, Hermione."

"Me?" she asked surprised.

Dumbledore inclined his head. "He's changed a lot since he has you."

Hermione frowned at him and said unconvinced, "How would you know that? Tom is an extraordinary liar. Maybe he deceived the both of us."

"Hm," made Dumbledore. "You are very harsh with him. I think he never had anyone taking care of him, maybe he needs time to adapt?"

"I know that," Hermione said desperately. "I know growing up in that orphanage wasn't easy for Tom. He's suffered a lot."

She stared out of the window. Frustration slowly turning into fury. Then she hissed, "But I'm tired of making excuses for Tom."

Dumbledore looked at her pensively. Then he gently pointed out, "I don't know what Tom did to you to hurt you so, but you shouldn't forget that he risked a lot yesterday. He risked his life for you, Hermione. And he almost lost it, too."
Hermione shuddered as she heard that. She remembered that horrible green curse rushing towards Tom. The image still made fear tightly curl around her chest.

"Yes." She exhaled sharply before she continued, "I know he feels more for me than the usual cold indifference. But I don't know what it is he feels for me. Maybe he loves me or maybe he just needs me. Or it could be that he wants to possess me. I don't know. He confuses me."

Dumbledore let her talk and listened attentively. Now he whispered, "I felt the same way many years ago with Grindelwald. He was an enigma. I didn't understand him. Maybe that was what drew me in. We were very close, you must know. A deep friendship connected us. At one point it could have even been called love."

"At one point?"

Dumbledore cast her a small smile. "Love, Hermione, is a strange thing. If you truly find it, it can be a powerful, vibrant force. Sadly enough, infatuation and obsession tend to disguise themselves as love."

Hermione looked at the professor with large eyes. She didn't know what she had with Tom. She knew she loved him. But what if that love was one-sided? What if Tom was only capable of a twisted and unnatural form of love?

…what if he merely uses me?

"I know that Tom is a special case," Dumbledore's voice penetrated her doubts. "I remember how you told me you wouldn't give Tom another chance."

Hermione nodded at the professor. "Yes, I've given him so many already. Too many perhaps."

"Hm," made Dumbledore pensively, mulling over her words. Then he remarked thoughtfully, "Maybe Tom needs one more. I think before you came, not many people ever gave him one."

Hermione glanced at the professor. A tired smile tugged at her lips as she said, "For someone who gave up on Tom, you surely defend him quite fiercely."

Dumbledore smiled at her, a twinkle burning up in his eyes, "Maybe I'm not doing this for him."

Hermione shortly shook her head as if to clear it off its thoughts. Then she told Dumbledore, smiling faintly, "Tom seems to have taken over my whole life. After all, I came to Hogwarts with a mission in my head. Now it is within my reach and here I am thinking about Tom."

"What sort of a mission is that?" Dumbledore inquired tentatively. He raised his eyebrows and asked innocently, "Are you by any chance trying to collect the Deathly Hallows?"

Hermione blinked at him in shock. Then a small grin crossed her face. Of course Dumbledore would catch up to her doings. So she had no problems to admit,

"Yes. And I even know where exactly they are."

Dumbledore looked at her in surprise. "You do? All three?"

Hermione nodded darkly. The Hallows... her plan. She had ignored it for quite some time. There had been so much to divert her attention and she had forgotten. Forgotten about her plan. Her mission. She needed to unite the Deathly Hallows. Maybe they could overcome what the Elder Wand had done to her and she could travel back to her own time. An icy cold shudder ran down Hermione
spine as she looked at Dumbledore.

"Yes," answered his question. "All three."

Hermione shifted in her seat. Her hazel eyes regarded Dumbledore calmly as she explained, "The Elder Wand is now bound to you, professor. So, it is right here in this very room. I stole the Invisibility Cloak from the Potters and Grindelwald stole it from me. Now that he's defeated, I am very sure that you secured the cloak from his stronghold."

She scanned Dumbledore and a smile appeared on her face as she spotted an affirming twinkle in his eyes. Still, as Hermione continued her voice wavered slightly,

"The stone… the Resurrection Stone, is not far away either. I could get it…"

Yes, Hermione would be able to get all three Hallows. Then… Was it possible that she would fly home? This past year would be nothing more than a dream. A dream from a distant past.

"Hm, all three Hallows united," Dumbledore mused pensively. "What would you do with them, Hermione?"

She threw in a sharp breath of air. Yes, what? Hermione worried her bottom lip. Her mission dictated what she should do. But did she want to return to her time? Nothing was there for her. Then again, what held her here?

Looking into Dumbledore's sharp eyes, she stumbled, "I… I would- What I needed to…"

A soft smile appeared on Dumbledore's face as he saw her hesitation. Hermione trembled slightly and squeezed her eyes shut. They shot open again, as she heard the door being torn open. Hermione jumped and turned her head. Her eyes widened as she saw Tom standing in the doorway. His steely grey eyes were fixed on her, his pale face an impenetrable mask. He didn't acknowledge Dumbledore's presence in any way but just strode over to Hermione. Tom stopped standing directly in front of her. She stared up at him, feeling put off balance by his sudden appearance. There still was not even a speck of emotion on Tom's blank face as his cold eyes wandered over her form. Hermione frowned up at him, opened her mouth and said weakly,

"Tom, what ar-"

Before she could finish, Tom abruptly bent down to her and slipped his arms around her. He pressed her tightly against him. Hermione gasped softly as suddenly her magic left her. Completely unconnected with her own feelings, it bristled joyfully and wrapped affectionately around Tom. Her magic's happiness contrasted with that painfully numb feeling inside Hermione.

Indeed, what holds me here?

Hermione could feel the urgency behind Tom's embrace but she was unable to raise her arms and return it. Instead she wondered for how long her magic had already reacted to Tom in this enthusiastic way. Had it even managed to influence her own emotions?

Tom was totally oblivious to the aching stab in Hermione's heart. He unwrapped his arms from her but continued to hold her by her shoulders. His grey eyes swiftly wandered over her, searching for injuries.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

His voice was perfectly composed. Maybe he didn't want to reveal any emotions in front of
"I see Madam Dulan already discharged you from the Hospital Wing, Tom," Dumbledore's voice said.

Tom slowly turned around to Dumbledore. His hand never left Hermione's shoulder. While there was a kind expression on Dumbledore's face, his blue eyes missed the familiar warmth as they regarded Tom. A polite smile appeared on Tom's face. It was all fake, though. Hermione could tell.

"Yes, professor," Tom replied blandly.

"I hope you are feeling better then," Dumbledore said, now a hint of genuine concern in his tone.

Tom merely narrowed his eyes at the other's worry and replied, clipped, "Yes. Thank you, sir."

Then he grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her up from her chair. Dumbledore merely observed how Tom tugged the witch into his side in a possessive gesture. Ignoring the tense silence, the professor claimed cheerfully,

"Look how late it got. I think it is already time for dinner." His eyes twinkled at Hermione as he added, "Madame Dulan would have my head if she knew how I deterred you from a healthy meal."

Hermione smiled at her teacher. Tom, though, just tried to hide his glare behind a polite mask. Taking Dumbledore's words as a dismissal, Tom pulled Hermione towards the exit. Before he could wrench her out of the office, Hermione stopped. She turned around to the professor and said,

"Do you remember the last thing Grindelwald said to you?"

Dumbledore didn't reply but the painful look crossing his face told her that he did. Hermione threw him a small smile and whispered,

"It doesn't change anything."

Then she allowed Tom to finally pull her from the room. After they had walked a distance away from the office, Tom suddenly turned to her and before she could do anything hugged her tightly. He kissed her on the forehead. Then he placed more soft kisses on her face. Despite these gentle actions, Hermione could not spot any emotion on Tom's blank face after he released her again. His eyes were hard as steel as they wandered over her.

"Why did you leave the Hospital Wing?" Tom demanded to know, accusation clear in his tone.

"Dumbledore wanted to speak with me," Hermione replied in a small voice.

Tom huffed at her, "Did you want to give me a heart attack?"

She shrugged at that. Not meeting his angry gaze Hermione mumbled, "I'm alright. You didn't have to worry."

He glared at her, though there was concern glinting in his grey eyes. "Merlin, Hermione, the last thing I remember is you fighting against Grindelwald. And then I wake up in the Hospital Wing. With you no-where to be seen. How did you think that would make me feel?"

"I didn't expect you to wake up this soon," Hermione replied in a colourless voice.

Maybe she should feel contrite but somehow she didn't. Instead she wondered why Tom hadn't used the bond between them to find out where she was. He probably could even force her to apparate to Dumbledore.
him. *Like a master calling his dog*, she thought bitterly. In the meantime, Tom had again grabbed her hand and tightly held it as he pulled Hermione down the corridor. The anger had not completely left his voice as he asked cuttingly,

"What happened? How did we get back to Hogwarts?"

"Didn't Madame Dulan tell you?" Hermione asked bewildered.

Tom angrily shook his head. "Are you crazy? As soon as I woke up I went to search for you."

Hermione only now noticed that he wasn't wearing his school uniform, but a grey shirt and black pants. Probably transfigured from a pair of hospital pyjamas.

Tom stared at her expectantly. Hermione sighed and told him, "Well, after you passed out, I couldn't fight Grindelwald any longer. His soldiers turned up and we were trapped."

Tom's eyes widened. "How did we get away?"

Hermione scanned him, coldly taking in his concern. "Dumbledore showed up with a unit of Aurors."

"Dumbledore?" Tom echoed weakly, clearly not happy with this turn of events.

Hermione nodded. "He fought Grindelwald and won. The Aurors overwhelmed his soldiers. And we were being portkeyed back to Hogwarts."

Tom's hand around hers tightened and he pulled her closer to him. Hermione's magic celebrated the close contact. Hermione herself was disturbed.

"I'm glad nothing happened to you," Tom whispered to her and pressed another kiss to her temple.

He didn't say anymore as he then led her through Hogwarts' corridors and hallways towards the Great Hall. He never let go of her hand and made sure she stayed close to him.

Soon they reached the Great Hall. Upon entering, Hermione could feel many eyes falling on her and Tom and murmur broke out in the hall. It made her feel extremely self-conscious. Her eyes cast down, Hermione made to drift over to the Gryffindor table. A sharp tug on her hand stopped her.

Brow furrowed in confusion, she looked up at Tom. He whispered decisively,

"You are coming with me."

"What-?"

Tom turned away from her and pulled her with him over to the Slytherin table. Hermione wanted to protest, but she didn't really want to start an argument. The other students already stared at her as it was. So, Hermione allowed Tom to drag her to the Slytherins. She could see them glaring at her disapprovingly, but none of them dared to object. That would have meant to go against Tom, and obviously no Slytherin wanted to risk that. Tom pulled her to a seat right at the middle of the table. Dark look on his face, Tom gestured for Lestrange to clear space for Hermione. Immediately the other Slytherin obeyed. Tom sat down and pulled Hermione so she sat right beside him.

Just as they had sat down, Dippet stepped in front of the teachers' table and let his eyes wander over the students.

"Settle down, settle down," his voice thundered in the hall.
The Headmaster was dressed all in black. A black wizard's robe over black pants and shirt. Appropriate for the occasion. But Hermione didn't like the rather self-important expression on his face. After the students calmed down and the chatter stopped, Dippet said in his pompous voice,

"I am sad to inform you that a tragedy befell our wonderful school. You might have already heard it from your parents, but yesterday Marc Longbottom got attacked by Grindelwald. Sadly Marc did not survive the attack."

Hermione's face was stony as she heard Dippet's speech. Some of the students in the hall gasped as they heard of the death. Some Gryffindors, who had known Marc, even started to cry. Hermione sat at the Slytherin table and couldn't react at all. Her breathing was calm, almost mechanically so. Her gaze dropped from Dippet and to Dumbledore who sat right beside Professor Legifer at the teachers' table. Hermione wished he could have made the speech. Dippet's words were empty of any emotion. He just wanted to get it over with, Hermione could tell. She was pretty sure that until yesterday, the Headmaster hadn't even known who Marc had been.

Regardless of Hermione's thoughts, Dippet continued, sombre mask pasted on his face, "It is a great loss, we have to bemoan. Marc Longbottom will never be forgotten but always remembered as a brave young man. But as painful this loss might be, we've got to look ahead and concentrate on the future."

"Easy for you to say," Hermione thought bitterly, her eyes narrowing at Dippet. The pompous air still sickeningly hung around Dippet. An encouraging smile appeared on his sharp face. It looked completely out of place.

"It is with great pleasure that I can announce that the dangerous criminal Gellert Grindelwald could finally get arrested."

The hall erupted in excited chatter. After people had calmed down again, Dippet continued, "In the same confrontation in which Marc so tragically lost his life, our very own Albus Dumbledore managed to overcome Grindelwald. Single-handedly he defeated that dark wizard and brought him to justice. Although we lost Marc to Grindelwald's evil machinations, Professor Dumbledore succeeded in rescuing two other students, Tom Riddle and Hermione DeCerto, who were unfortunately caught up in the events."

Here Dippet gestured at the Slytherin table, making Hermione groan softly. All eyes of the occupants of the Great Hall were directed at her and Tom. There was an imperceptible smirk on Tom's mouth. He didn't seem to mind the attention at all. Hermione on the other hand wanted to just flee from the hall. Did Dippet have to mention them? Hermione looked at Dumbledore. His clear blue eyes had by now left the Headmaster and he gazed back at her. Hermione saw a small, almost apologetic, smile on his face. She threw him a smile of her own and shrugged helplessly with her shoulders. Dumbledore's eyes glinted in amusement. The Headmaster opened his mouth and proclaimed in a voice heavy with meaning,

"While these days are days of mourning, let us not forget to also celebrate the end of a terrible war."

With that he raised his arms and food appeared on the four house tables. Excited chatter once again broke out in the hall as the students started to discuss all the new information. Hermione still stared at Dippet, annoyed with the man's attitude. How could he suggest to celebrate now? Marc was dead. Didn't he care at all?

"Probably not," she reasoned with herself. Her eyes left the self-important Headmaster and they dropped to her empty plate. She could feel many curious eyes resting on her and was suddenly glad she sat at the Slytherin table. At least they were too scared to address her as long as Tom sat beside
her. As Hermione made no move to get some food, Tom started to load her plate with a bit of the pasta bake. Without raising her head, Hermione reached for her fork and started to nibble at her food.

During the whole meal, Hermione could feel Tom's touch. As if needing to assure himself that she was still there, he continued to initiate contact. As if by accident his hand would lightly brush her knee or softly skim over her arm. Hermione wouldn't say those touches of his were in any way possessive or intrusive. Still, the way her magic sent enthusiastic jolts through her whole body whenever Tom made contact made her feel violated. A mixture of helplessness and anger wrapped tightly around her. Hermione wanted to push Tom away. As her delighted magic rushed through her body, Hermione somehow felt tainted.

Through the corner of her eyes she could see the other Slytherins eyeing her inconspicuously. It made her feel very exposed. Strangely enough Nicolls, who sat only a few seats away, never glanced in Hermione's direction. Hermione was used to Nicolls throwing her death glares while smiling at Tom amorously. Not that Hermione missed Nicolls' hostility but this was odd. As her eyes wandered over the other Slytherins Hermione noticed how Tom's followers were sitting in the seats closest to Tom. They all looked rather glum and subdued. Like Nicolls they obviously tried to not look at Hermione. Not even Lestrange glowered at her.

"Strange, Hermione thought. And Avery's missing."

She couldn't wonder long about these oddities as Tom's hand again skimmed over her forearm. Hermione's skin prickled pleasantly where he touched her. Small strands of her magic twirled happily from her skin to Tom's hand.

Hermione bit her lower lip hard and she stared down at her plate. She had barely eaten from her pasta bake and felt no appetite anyway. She just couldn't stop to wonder what would have happened had she not agreed to let Tom perform that dark ritual to bring her magic back. If he had never bound her magic to him, would she have still taken him back as her boyfriend? How much had her bound magic influenced her decision? Now it was very clear how much her magic enjoyed Tom's presence. As she had still been unaware of their bond, maybe she had taken her magic's affection towards Tom for her own.

Had he planned this from the start? Did he enjoy it to enslave her to him? Hermione gritted her teeth. Was she really nothing more than a possession to Tom? Something to own and dominate? Hermione didn't want a relationship where she constantly had to fight against her partner. She wanted honesty and equality just as much as she wanted to be loved.

What did Tom want, though?

Had she been naïve to think he would want the same? Hermione knew he liked to play his little games. He was manipulative, a liar and had little to none moral sense. Now he had forced that bond on her and had pushed her into a submissive position. Maybe that was what Tom wanted in a relationship – a slave and not a partner.

Hermione put her fork down on the table, her appetite completely gone. She could feel Tom's concerned eyes wandering over her but didn't return his gaze. He reached for her hand and held it gently. His touch was warm and reassuring. Hesitantly her own fingers curled around his. Deep down, Hermione knew she still loved Tom. But if their expectations in this relationship differed so fundamentally, was she able to play that role Tom had intended for her?

Dumbledore always preached the incredible strength of the force called love. Was Hermione's love powerful enough to turn her into the submissive servant Tom expected her to be?
Hermione's fingers tightened around his hand.

Deep down, she already knew the answer to that question.

Hermione exhaled softly. Her magic protested and her heart ached, but she pulled her hand free of Tom. She still couldn't look at him. Avoiding his grey eyes, Hermione got up from her seat and quickly stepped away from the Slytherin table. She felt many eyes on her as she hastily walked towards the exit of the Great Hall. There were steps behind her and she knew Tom was following her. Of course he would. Hermione quickened her own steps and exited the hall. Before the doors could fall shut behind her, Tom passed them as well.

"Hermione? What's wrong?" She heard his voice. "Wait!"

She didn't turn around to him. Was that all he had for her? Orders?

Hermione knew her dorm mates were still sitting in the hall. Her dorm should be deserted. It didn't take much – just a small twirl – to rip down Hogwarts' wards. Hermione stepped into the pressure of apparition and left Tom behind.

It was the next morning, a Wednesday, that Hermione stood in the bathroom of her dorm and examined her hurt back. She knew she should probably get back to the Hospital Wing. The Harpy had cut her up nicely. Hermione craned her neck to stare at the reflection of her back in the mirror. A deep cut ran diagonally across her whole back. Dark blood had caked over it so that it stood out quite dramatically against her rosy skin.

Whatever you say about Harpies, Hermione thought dryly. They sure know how to use their talons.

A sigh left her. If only she could open a portal to the Harpies' world like Grindelwald did, maybe she could hide away there.

In the darkness…

Since yesterday, Hermione hadn't spoken with Tom. Instead she had preferred it to cowardly hide away in her dorm. It was pathetic but she didn't know how to deal with him at the moment. She felt disappointed and used. It made her want to yell and rage at Tom. It made her want to leave. Leave his dirty web of lies and deceptions behind. But Dumbledore had been right. Tom had risked his life for her. How could she be angry with him?

Was she being petty?

Hermione irately shook her head at her own reflection in the mirror. No. Tom had lied to her and manipulated her so she would agree to undergo that dark ritual. Now, he had finally got what he had always wanted. Her magic… her body was his. He had turned her into an item, a possession. Voldemort had turned her into one of his trophies.

A new wave of anger washed over her. Then Hermione ripped herself out of her dark thoughts and got dressed into her uniform. She was going to classes today, she decided stubbornly. Not even all the nosy stares from the other students would stop her.

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Not much later, Hermione sat in greenhouse number three and regretted her decision. *Should have stayed in bed,* she thought in frustration. Herbology would have gone swimmingly if it hadn't been for her dorm mates, Lucia and Rose.

The class was occupied with repotting Fanged Geraniums. Tedium work but as they said: *Someone has to do it.* Hermione wouldn't have minded so much if Rose and Lucia hadn't decided to settle down right beside her. To make matters even worse Isabel Sato, the Herbology professor, didn't mind at all if the students chatted while doing their work. Rose and Lucia were rather thrilled at the prospect of talking with Hermione.

"So," said Rose innocently, obviously trying to break the ice. She gestured at Hermione. "What happened to your hand?"

"Why?" asked Hermione, equally innocent.

"Well, because it's silver," Lucia said, scanning the hand nosily.

Hermione inwardly groaned. She didn't want to talk with them at all.

"It's a spell," she explained reluctantly. "To replace the lost parts."

"Oh my God," made Lucia, visibly shuddering. "What happened? Why did you need replacing?"

"Because the original hand was chopped off?" Hermione said bluntly.

The two girls stared at her, mouths hanging open.

"'Chopped off?'" Rose screeched in horror.

"That's terrible!" Lucia exclaimed. "You really lost the hand?"

Hermione just shrugged and regretted not having used her dragon hide gloves today. Rose laid an understanding hand on Hermione's arm and asked solemnly,

"Did Grindelwald do that to you?"

"Nope," said Hermione, trying to concentrate on her geranium. "I did it myself."

Both girls screeched at that. Even the mild tempered professor Sato turned towards them and sent them a glare.

"Whyever would you do that, Hermione?" asked Rose breathlessly.

"The situation required it."

Rose shook her head and Lucia furrowed her brow, probably wondering what kind of situation that could have been. Hermione just sighed tiredly,

"Don't worry. The hand is gone but the replacement really isn't half bad."

After that Hermione considered this conversation to be over but she didn't have so much luck. A big grin appeared on Lucia's face and she chortled,

"We've seen Riddle, you know."

Rose nodded importantly. "Yeah, as he ran after you. To save you."
"Indeed?" whispered Hermione tartly.

"Oh, he was so scary," Rose continued, glassy-eyed. "Running around like that, wand in hand. Don't know if it was the light but even his eyes glinted dangerously. You should have seen him."

*I think I had my fair share of an angry Tom already,* thought Hermione dryly.

"But then," Lucia squealed happily. "We heard Riddle only did that for you. So he could save you from Grindelwald. He must have been sooo concerned."

"Mhm." Hermione angrily tugged at her Fanged Geranium, trying to avoid the sharp teeth.

"Oh, I'm so glad he saved you, Hermione," Rose suddenly wailed in her shrill voice. "Imagine, if the same had happened to you that happened to poor Marc."

Lucia looked at Hermione with wide watery eyes. This time, Hermione felt unable to hold that gaze.

"I can't believe he really died," sobbed Lucia dramatically.

Hermione gritted her teeth and stared down at her geranium.

"His parents must be so sad," whispered Rose tearfully.

Lucia nodded and pulled a hanky from her pocket, using it to blow her nose. Then she wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and said,

"I'm so glad Riddle saved you, Hermione. He's so wonderful."

"Yeah," confirmed Rose. "Running off to save his girlfriend." Suddenly her eyes lost their glassy look and she stared at Hermione inquiringly. "Say, Hermione. Is it actually true? Did Riddle propose to you?"

Hermione blinked at Rose stupidly.

"Don't be shy," Lucia tried to coax her into telling the truth. "He did ask you to marry him, didn't he? Aww, how romantic. First saving your life and then he wants to marry you."

"Yes, and rather on time, don't you think?" asked Rose.

To Hermione's horror the girl then scanned her stomach expectantly. It was enough to remind Hermione of that rumour about her supposed pregnancy. This time a frustrated groan left her mouth. She didn't reply to Rose's question but determinedly put her Fanged Geranium into another, larger pot.

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"Tom, my dear boy, if only I had known." Slughorn looked at Tom indulgently. "I would have never tried to hold you back from rushing to Ms DeCerto's side."

"It's fine, sir," Tom replied blandly.

It cost him quite some work not to drop his polite mask. A pleasant smile played around his lips as he looked at the potions professor. With an inquisitive glint in his beady eyes, Slughorn scanned Tom. Tom had been on his way to his next class as Slughorn had stopped him. Tom only wished he could pull his wand and curse the man into unconsciousness.
"Though I have to say," Slughorn continued merrily. "You gave us quite the scare. Running around the castle like a berserk."

Tom forced a bashful blush on his face and replied, "I'm very sorry about that. But I couldn't waste any time. Hermione needed me."

"Aw, no no, don't worry. I fully understand." said Slughorn. A big grin appeared on his face as he exclaimed, "You wanted to save your little girlfriend. It's such a wonderful thing, young love."

_Indeed_, Tom thought sardonically.

"Ms DeCerto is really a fine young woman," Slughorn continued. "I'm so glad nothing happened to her. We certainly didn't need another casualty." He patted on Tom's back and said approvingly, "I'm glad you could bring Ms DeCerto back unhurt, m'boy."

"So am I," replied Tom, this time being quite honest.

"See? I always told you, you two belong together." The professor playfully wagged his finger at Tom and said, "You have to take good care of Ms DeCerto, Tom. We don't want her to leave you again."

A small smile curled at Tom's mouth and he replied silkily, "Don't worry professor, I intend to do that."

"Good good," said Slughorn cheerfully.

Tom then excused himself, desperate to be alone. Just a few corridors later, Tom spotted a group of seventh year Hufflepuff girls. As soon as they recognized him, all four girls blushed deeply. One of them, a pretty brunette, even threw him quite the seductive look. Tom cast them a dazzling smile. Instantly the girls broke down in asinine giggles.

Tom almost groaned as he felt the beginnings of a headache throbbing behind his temples. Since those events with Grindelwald and particularly since it had become officially known that Tom had been involved in the whole thing, the girls were even more infatuated with him. It was quite annoying how they now flocked around him. After lunch this day, some poor Ravenclaw first year had been sent to deliver a love letter to Tom.

_Of all the things…_

If he hadn't been in the Great Hall at that moment, Tom would have cursed the messenger boy. Sadly he had to keep up his reputation as the polite prefect and had been forced to _timidly_ accept the letter. Tom shuddered in disgust. Reluctantly he reached into the pocket of his black robe and produced the letter out of it. _Pink, of course._ He rolled his eyes. 'To Tom' was written in twirly letters on the envelope. Tom supposed he should thank Merlin that his stupid name didn't involve any 'i's. At least this spared him the customary heart-shaped dots. Knitting his brow in distaste, he looked at the horrible letter in his hand.

_Silly girl_, he thought annoyed. Like he wanted to waste his time reading some chick's pointless scribbling. Tom angrily closed his hand into a fist, thus completely crumbling the letter. Flames engulfed his fist, though they left his skin untouched. As he opened his hand again, the letter was gone and ashes softly fluttered to the ground. His temper still flared as Tom continued his way towards his next class: Divination. _Just perfect_, he thought wryly. It was a Hufflepuff/Slytherin class and the other students were almost all girls. Tom groaned inwardly.

_How grotesque._ Every girl in the castle was chasing after him but the only one he was interested in
coldly ignored him. Since dinner the day before, Tom hadn’t spoken with Hermione. He had tried to get closer but she had obviously avoided him. Of course Tom could guess why Hermione was angry with him: The bond. She had always been independent, so Tom had known she wouldn’t take very well to the fact that he owned her magic. That was the reason he had never told her about the bond. Of course Grindelwald had to go and ruin that for Tom. He knew how stubborn and resentful Hermione could be. Tom had often wondered if her need for independency was a by-product of her coming from the future. In a way he liked her strong-willed and fiery nature but it made dealing with her that much more difficult.

Tom sighed softly. He had hoped for Hermione to be a little bit more affectionate and grateful. After all he had saved her from the evil Dark Wizard. A rather stupid assumption. He rolled his eyes. Then he checked his watch. There was still some time until the next class. Maybe he should go and search Hermione. He really needed to talk to her and convince her that this bond between them was a good thing.

Which it really is, Tom thought, smirking to himself. With time, Hermione would realize that too.

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Annoyed Hermione stepped out of the Arithmancy classroom. Gauß was a horrible teacher. On top of that, the whole day she had felt the other student's curious gazes on her. One Hufflepuff fifth year had even asked her if it was true that Tom Riddle had rushed to her rescue and if he had afterwards proposed to her. Hermione had refrained to answer the girl and had preferred it to flee the inquiry. She supposed she had to thank her dorm mates for that new rumour.

Hermione rolled her eyes and hurriedly walked away from the Arithmancy classroom. She still hadn’t spoken to Tom. Naturally he had tried to corner her but she had managed to escape him. Hermione knew it was silly to just ignore him but couldn't help it. Her inner debate was cut short by a voice.

"Well well well," that voice said mockingly. "What have we here?"

Hermione looked up and exhaled in irritation. Yaxley was blocking her way. Right beside her stood Melanie Nicolls. To Hermione's surprise Nicolls seemed to be rather uncomfortable with the situation and looked like she wanted to be somewhere else.

Nicolls tugged at Yaxley's sleeve and whispered, "Let's go. It's not worth it."

Yaxley didn't want to listen to her friend. Instead she sneered at Hermione, "What the hell are you thinking, Mudblood? Pulling Tom into your problems."

Without answering Yaxley, Hermione sidestepped the girl, wanting to continue her way.

"Wait!" snapped Yaxley and grabbed Hermione's arm. "Not so fast."

Hermione angrily wrenched her arm away and snapped, "What do you want?"

"Oh, come on, Mudblood," Yaxley scorned. "I'm sure you can guess."

Tiredly Hermione ran a hand over her face, then she peered at the angry Slytherin girl.

"For me to leave Tom alone?"

"Yes," hissed Yaxley. "First you stole Melanie's boyfriend and now you go and pull him into your problems."
Hermione turned her head and peered at Nicolls. "Do you agree with your friend here?"

Hermione was truly surprised as Nicolls shook her head. "No. I don't want To-Riddle back."

"What?" Yaxley turned at her friend. "What are you talking about? That ugly Mudblood took your man. And now she stalks through the whole castle, mocking you."

Indignantly, Hermione said, "I do not stalk around."

"Just shut up, bitch," Yaxley hissed furiously.

Suddenly there were steps echoing in this silent corridor. Hermione turned around and was not really surprised to find an angry Tom walking towards them. Come to think of it, he always appeared out of no-where and helped her in situations like these. Coincidence? Unlikely. Hermione narrowed her eyes at Tom. Was he using that bond to monitor her? At that thought Hermione's temper flared up.

"I think you are the one who should shut up," Tom said coldly.

Yaxley seemed to heed that advice and just stared at Tom wide-eyed. He ignored her but turned to Nicolls. Hermione was surprised to see the girl cower away from Tom.

"I didn't think you would cause trouble so soon again," Tom whispered in a silky voice.

Nicolls looked at him and stuttered, "P- please, I didn't m-mean to bother DeCerto."

"Hm," made Tom and a pleasant smile tugged at his lips. "I hope so."

He smiled down at Nicolls indulgently and purred sweetly, "I would hate for you to be on my bad side, Melanie."

With Tom using that saccharine tone of voice on Nicolls, Hermione would have expected the girl to immediately throw herself at him. Wasn't she completely infatuated with Tom? Instead, pure terror warped up Nicolls' pretty face. She blanched and even stumbled a step away from Tom.

"P-please. I d-didn't do-" Nicolls mumbled, her terrified voice quickly dying away.

Hermione was surprised to see the fear shining in Nicolls' eyes. What was happening here? Why was Nicolls so afraid of Tom? Hermione stared at him in confusion. A satisfied smirk was on Tom's face as he regarded the Slytherin girl. He lazily raised a hand and skimmed his fingers over Nicolls' cheek. She seemed to completely freeze over with fear at the contact. Her eyes were wide as she stared up at Tom, obviously caught in horror.

"I think," Tom told Nicolls pleasantly. "It might be a good idea for you to go now. Don't want you to miss your next class."

"Y- yes," Nicolls stammered, frightened.

Hermione could see the girl's hands shaking. Nicolls didn't even dare to look up at Tom anymore. She grabbed Yaxley's hand and pulled her with her, away from Tom.

Suspicious, Hermione thought and eyed Tom. But she didn't want to ask him what this was all about. So Hermione mimicked Nicolls and quickly walked away from Tom. It wasn't long and, to her dismay, he fell in step beside her.

"We should stop meeting like this," Tom joked, obviously trying to break the silence.
Hermione didn't smile. She barely spared him a glance.

The smile dropped from Tom's face and he asked seriously, "What's wrong, Hermione?"

"Nothing," she returned briskly.

Tom stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and turned her around to him. He scanned her intensely before he ordered,

"Tell me what is wrong."

Hermione bristled at the commanding aura he emitted. Angrily she swatted his hand away from her.

"You are avoiding me, Hermione," Tom wanted to know. "Why?"

She couldn't hold back anymore and said flippantly, "Well, what do you think is wrong?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You lied to me again."

Tom raised his eyebrows innocently. "What? I didn't lie. About what?"

Surprise was clear on his face. It made even more anger mount up in the pit of Hermione's stomach. As if he didn't know what she was talking about.

"The bond, Tom," she managed to fume. "I'm speaking about how you stole my magic!"

Surprise and innocent confusion were still pasted all over Tom's face. If Hermione hadn't know him so well, she would have believed this act. He took a step towards her and grabbed her upper arm. She tried to resist him as he pulled her away but while there was innocence on his face Tom's grip was very firm. He opened a door near-by and pushed Hermione in the room behind. It was rather small and stuffy. Tom turned around to Hermione. Indignation dominated his features as he insisted,

"I didn't steal your magic."

Hermione snorted at that before she spat furiously, "Are you kidding me? You said that my magic belongs to you. That you are its master. I don't remember allowing you to become my magic's master. Hence you stole it!"

An irritating smile curled up Tom's mouth and he patted her arm soothingly.

"No, Hermione," he said patronizingly as if talking to a child. "I didn't steal it. I brought it back for you."

His fake sincerity managed to rile Hermione up even more. She ignored his lies and snapped,

"Why did you do it? What made you think this was okay?"

He just looked at her calmly, not at all unsettled by her fury. His friendly façade made Hermione want to punch him in the face.

"I don't know why you are so angry," Tom finally said, unfazed by her upset state. "Your magic was gone. If I hadn't done anything, you would have ended up as a Muggle."

The cockiness he displayed and the condescending smile on his face made Hermione finally snap. She seethed with barely controlled fury.

"Listen, Riddle," Hermione said slowly, her voice icy cold. "I don't like being lied to. Neither do I
tolerate getting used. You did both to me."

The frosty and threatening tint in Hermione's voice managed to make the smug look on Tom's face waver for the first time. Unease flared up in his grey eyes as he observed the fury on her face, finally realizing how serious the situation was.

"Just a mere week ago-" Hermione hissed darkly. "-we sat there in the grass a little bit away from Hogsmeade and you promised me to never let me down again."

Hermione took a step towards Tom and stared him in the eyes, then she said, fury twisting her quiet voice into a snarl,

"You know what? I'm feeling very much let down."

Nervousness flittered over Tom's face and he said cautiously, "I- I didn't lie to you, Hermione. I just… just thought you…" He swallowed thickly before he whispered tentatively, "Listen, bonding your magic to me was the only way to get it back. But I… I never planned to use that bond anyway. That's why I never told you about it."

Hermione's nose crinkled in disgust as she heard him. She angrily shook her head and snapped at him, "You are lying again, aren't you?"

Tom quickly shook his head but he averted his eyes from her. As his grey eyes again flashed at her insecurity shimmered in them. "It was the only way to bring your magic back. What should I have done instead? Leave you with no magic at all?"

There was nothing remaining from the cocky look he had sported just moments before. Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin angry line as she glared at him.

"You could have told me what you planned before you took possession of my powers," she snarled at him. "You could have been honest with me instead of tricking me and manipulating me."

Tom clasped Hermione's hand, squeezing it soothingly. She took an angry step away from him and ended the contact. He looked at her, anxiety clear in his eyes, and said imploringly,

"If I had been honest, would you have trusted me?"

Hermione snorted bitterly as she heard that. "Who knows? At least, I would have made my own decision."

Tom threw his hands up in the air frustrated.

"Back then we barely talked, Hermione," he tried to reason. "And at the times I was lucky enough to get you talking with me, it always ended with you yelling at me. How was I supposed to be open with you? Back then you would have never trusted me."

Hermione narrowed her eyes to slits as she hissed aggressively, "And whose fault was it that we broke up in the first place? Huh? Certainly not mine. You lost it after you found out I'm Muggleborn."

"I know!" Tom exclaimed desperately.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Then he said, softer, "I know it was my fault, okay? I told you I'm sorry over how I treated you."
Tom's grey eyes flicked at her and he explained cautiously, "As Grindelwald's men attacked you in the Forbidden Forest and… and almost hit you with the Killing Curse… I just knew I wanted you back. But you told me you would never take me back."

Tom visibly shuddered. Hermione almost congratulated him for his amazing acting skills. He ignored her frosty glare and continued beseechingly,

"I tried everything but you wouldn't even look at me… and then I learned about your lost magic. I thought if only I could give it back to you, you would finally see that you can trust me."

Hermione stared at him. Her voice shook with rage as she whispered, "So you wanted to regain my trust by lying to me?"

Tom winced at her sharp tone of voice. "No. I wasn't lying. Please, believe me I really only wanted to get you your magic back."

"Yes, I do believe you," Hermione replied darkly. "But you didn't do that because you wanted to help me. You wanted to help yourself. Giving me my magic back you hoped to make it back into my good graces. And, of course, turning me into a magical object, didn't that also solve the problem of my dirty blood?"

Tom winced at the words. As his grey eyes flashed at her Hermione could see the guilt there.

"You are still disgusted by my parentage, aren't you?" she accused sharply.

"No," he quickly denied. "We both know that I'm neither fond of Muggles nor Muggleborns, but you do not disgust me in any way. I wouldn't spend time with you otherwise. Look, I wanted you back even before I knew anything about Peverell's magic. Doesn't that prove anything?"

"In fact, that only proves that you quickly adapt to new situations and have no scruples to squeeze profit from them."

Tom just stared at her pleadingly, not replying anything. Hermione growled irately and started to pace. Fury rushed through her. In a fit of violence, she raised her hand and snipped her fingers. A dusty old chair, standing in this abandoned room, exploded into smithereens. Through the corner of her eyes, Hermione saw Tom flinching at her actions.

As if he needs to fear my magic, she thought enraged. After all he controls it.

She fixed Tom with a murderous glare before she barked, "How much am I bound to you? Just my magic? Or more?"

"What do you mean?" Tom whispered in a small voice.

Hermione stopped her pacing and faced him again. Then she thundered, "How much can you influence me? My feelings, my decisions? How much of an independent person am I still?"

Tom swallowed as he looked at her with wide eyes. "I swear, it's only your magic that's linked to me. I have no influence on your mind."

Hermione almost growled as she heard it and snapped accusingly, "And how do I know that you are not lying again?"

"I'm not," Tom pointed out, almost timidly.
She just snorted in disbelief as she heard his assurance. Tom ran a hand through his dark hair while he stared down at her.

"Hermione, until yesterday I never used that connection between us," he said beseechingly. "I won't force you into anything."

"You won't force me into anything," Hermione echoed, sharp sarcasm in her tone. "That's bullshit! Do you have any idea how violated I already feel, just knowing that you only have to snap your fingers and I have to obey?"

"I… I… I didn't want you to feel that way," Tom stuttered. His grey eyes were fixed on her as he said honestly, "You know I would never abuse you nor that bond between us."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Hermione whispered bitterly. Before Tom could protest she said cuttingly. "Even if you would never misuse that power over me, what if you were defeated by another wizard? What if Grindelwald had won? God, Tom! I would have had to serve that man."

"He… he didn't win," Tom said cautiously. Then the hesitancy dropped from his voice and he stated with conviction, "No-one will ever defeat me."

"You are arrogant," Hermione replied coldly. "Maybe it was the same arrogance that drove you to own another human being."

She shook her head at him and asked caustically, "I mean, what do you see in me, Tom? Now that my magic belongs to you, do you think I'm just like the Elder Wand? An object you can use as you see fit?"

Tom shook his head vehemently. "No, I don't wa-"

"But that's what you turned me into. A soulless magical object. A thing!"

"I only manipulated your magic. Everything else, that's still you." He cautiously took a step towards her then he said firmly, "I know you're not just an object. And I won't treat you as such."

Hermione just narrowed her eyes angrily at him. "We both know you have quite the short temper. What if we argue again? Don't tell me you were never tempted to use your power over me."

Tom raised a hand and gently put it on her shoulder. Looking deep into her eyes he said, "I wouldn't do that. I know how you would never forgive me something like that. Yes, I admit I did sometimes want to use the bond, but do you really think I would risk losing you again?"

Hermione could not see even a hint of guilt in Tom's eyes. He really didn't understand the problem at all, did he?

"Is this what you want?" Hermione asked biting. "Do you want me to be completely yours? Do you need me to be nothing but a servant to you? A slave? What shall I do next? Hm? Do you want me to kneel before you? While I'm at it, maybe it would please you if I kissed the hem of your robe."

Tom stared at her, his eyes widening slightly. He shook his head but didn't say anything. Maybe words had left him. Maybe he just didn't want to admit she was right.

"What?" Hermione scorned mercilessly. "Don't like it how I speak to you? Not enough reverence in my voice? Not enough submissiveness? How do you intend to punish me for my insolence, My Lord? The Voldemort I know wouldn't have hesitated to crucio me."
Tom still only stared at her. As the last words washed over him, though, Hermione saw tiny flecks of red beginning to sprinkle his grey eyes. They persistently burned up in a sea of light grey. As Tom finally replied traces of anger laced his tone,

"That's stupid, Hermione. You shouldn't say things like that. I'm not him."

He never raised his voice but the dark inflection in his tone still made Hermione take a suspicious step back from him. Her first reaction was to wrap her magic protectively around herself. With a stab of insecurity in her stomach she realized that her magic would be no help at all against Tom. Feeling exposed, Hermione glared up at him. By now Tom's angry magic started to crackle around him. Hermione felt helpless and that made her snap at him cruelly,

"But that's who you are, Voldemort. I would have thought you'd be proud of it."

Hearing this, Tom's features turned into a snarl. The red colour in his eyes intensified as he glared at her sinisterly.

"Stop insinuating things!" he commanded, his voice was a fearsome hiss. "I don't think you are a slave, a pet or a mere object. If I thought of you that way, I would have forced that ritual on you. I wouldn't have asked."

Hermione took another nervous step away from the now clearly enraged wizard and snapped, "But you didn't ask me! You never told me a thing about how you would steal my magic!"

His dark magic raged around Tom furiously and he took a threatening step towards Hermione. He was now standing so close, she had to tilt her head back to be able to look him in the face. His malicious magic was thick in the air. Hermione inhaled it with every breath she took. It left behind a strangely metallic taste on her tongue.

"I brought your magic back. Without me you would have nothing," Tom bit out furiously. "Why are you so angry?"

By now Tom's eyes glowed in a deep crimson colour, his lost temper dancing in them. His magic in the air, the intimidating snarl on his face, it somehow made Hermione's previous anger die down. She looked up at the furious wizard and was hit by sadness. It tightly clenched around her heart and unshed tears started to tingle in her eyes.

"I'm not angry," Hermione replied, her voice suddenly a mere whisper. "I'm disappointed because you think I'm nothing but a possession to you."

Tom didn't seem to notice the sadness swimming in Hermione's eyes. Instead his dark magic peaked painfully. Still towering over her, he hissed aggressively,

"Do you really think I would be standing here, discussing this with you, if I thought you were nothing but an item?"

As his magic thundered so furiously around her, Hermione felt painfully vulnerable. Could she raise her own magic to protect herself? Would Tom allow her to do that? A sad smile played around Hermione's lips as she said,

"Honestly, Tom? I don't know what I am to you anymore. If I am anything at all."

Tom's eyes widened in shock as he heard her empty voice. Hermione didn't wait for him to yell something in return. She just turned on her heel and wanted to storm away. She didn't feel at all like talking anymore. Tom would only twist the truth into something that pleased him. Honesty was
something he had never held in high esteem.

Before Hermione managed to flee Tom, she felt a hand on her arm. She expected him to twirl her around and continue yelling at her. He didn't do that though. Instead Tom stepped closer to her until Hermione felt his chest against her back. She gasped softly as he gently draped his arms around her waist, pulling her even closer. Tom's aggressive dark magic had stopped to rage around him. The only thing that now surrounded Hermione was his warmth and his pleasant scent. Tom bent his head so that his chin rested on her shoulder and his cheek brushed hers. She could hear him releasing a breath of air. Then he whispered so softly she almost missed it,

"I love you."

Hermione shuddered as she heard him repeat the confession he had given her only once before. The first time he had said those words, Hermione hadn't believed him at all. Now that he said them again, her heart clenched in a painful mixture of joy and sadness. Feeling shaky on her feet, Hermione tentatively turned around in his arms. As she looked up at Tom, she found his beautiful grey eyes observing her cautiously. There was no hint of red left in them. Tom tightened his arms around her, then he leaned down to her. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she felt his soft lips on her own. He was kissing her so tenderly, her head swirled. Hermione automatically parted her lips as she felt his tongue tracing the seam of her mouth. Soon his tongue was playing with hers and a wonderful electrifying feeling fluttered through Hermione's whole body.

But whose feelings were this? she wondered painfully. Her own, her magic's, or Tom's? Did he force this on her? Was he literally enchanting her?

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. Everything in her screamed to pull Tom even closer but her mind was full of doubts. Raising her hands to his chest, Hermione forcefully pushed Tom away from her. She was surprised to hear him moan painfully as he stumbled a step away from her. Tom leaned against the stone wall and squeezed his eyes shut in pain. His breathing was struggled while he held his chest. Hermione took a tentative step towards him. She could see traces of Madam Dulan's healing magic swirling around Tom's chest. Obviously the cut he had received while fighting Grindelwald was far from healed yet. Hermione raised a hand to grab Tom's arm to support him. But before she made contact with him, she felt unable to touch him. Her arm sank back to her side and she suggested in a distanced tone,

"I think it's best you go to the Hospital Wing."

Tom leaned weakly against the wall. As he heard the cold inflection in her voice he opened his eyes. Hermione almost shuddered as she saw the pain in his grey eyes.

"It's fine," he whispered unsteadily. "I'm okay."

"Doesn't look like it," Hermione replied, her voice lacking emotion. "Madame Dulan should check you over."

Tom stared at her in a rare display of vulnerability. Then he mumbled softly, "Could you accompany me?"

Just as Hermione opened her mouth to agree, her magic reached out for Tom without her consent. It bristled with worry as it wrapped around him tenderly and started to feed the healing charm on his chest. Her previous anger rushed back to Hermione and her voice was quite callous as she answered Tom's question,

"I've still some things to take care of. I'm sure you'll find the way alone."
Tom averted his eyes from her and had them downcast as he nodded. Hermione felt something twitch in her chest as she looked at him. She ignored the feeling and said frostily,

"Look, Tom, let's talk later, okay? I'm not up for it right now."

He again just nodded without looking at her. Hermione sighed softly. He still didn't raise his eyes at her as he whispered almost fearfully,

"But you are still my girlfriend, aren't you?"

Tom looked so much like a lost little boy, Hermione wanted to hug him and comfort him. But she just couldn't. Tom wasn't a little boy; he was a dangerous dark wizard. So instead of soothing him, she replied in a voice that was colder than she had intended,

"Yes. Still."

Hermione tossed and turned in her bed but she could find no sleep. Too many thoughts ran through her head. On top of that, her back had started to smart again.

Probable all the turning, Hermione thought annoyed and tried to untangle herself from her blanket. She sighed tiredly and sat up in her bed. Opening the curtains of her four-poster, Hermione found her dorm dived in darkness. Her room mates were already asleep. The sudden urge to get a breath of fresh air made Hermione get up from her bed.

Once again, she didn't want to use her magic. So instead of just apparating to somewhere outside of the castle, she walked through dimly lit corridors in direction of the Entrance Hall. Hermione didn't pay any attention to her surroundings. Thus it wasn't surprising at all as a sharp voice stopped her,

"Stop right there!"

Hermione cursed under her breath, not in the mood to deal with this. Slowly she turned around and found none other than Professor Legifer walking towards her. Like usual the woman was clad in her immaculate clothes and her hair was styled flawlessly. Hermione wondered how the professor had looked after the fight. She couldn't remember at all.

Legifer stopped standing right in front of Hermione. A sharp frown furrowed her brow as she muster the Gryffindor girl's appearance. Hermione knew she must look awful. Her hair was completely frizzy and she was wearing nothing but her short nighty with Tom's black robe on top of it as she hadn't wanted to search for her own. Glaring down at Hermione, Legifer said curtly,

"Ms DeCerto, wandering the corridors at-" Here the professor checked her tiny silver wristwatch. "-exactly an hour after curfew."

Her sharp eyes snapped back to Hermione and she raised her thin eyebrows. "Do you have an explanation for your behaviour?"

For a second Hermione just stared at her stupidly. Of course she didn't have any excuse for being out of bed out of hours. Aside from her horrible thoughts keeping her awake. In the end Hermione said tiredly,

"No. Not directly."

Legifer harrumphed at her indignantly and drowned Hermione in a withering look. "Will you never
cast away your insolence, Ms DeCerto?"

Hermione couldn't help but grin at the woman. "Probably not."

She could almost see the indignation taking a hold of Legifer. Before the professor would lose her temper and yell, Hermione said, her voice suddenly unsure,

"Professor?"

"What now?" Legifer asked impatiently, eyes glistening with anger.

"Er..." made Hermione. She looked down at her shoes as she said awkwardly, "Thank you. For... you know... for helping me... against Grindelwald..."

The anger melted from Legifer's face but the hard glint never left her eyes.

"I only did my job," she replied caustically.

Although her voice had been sharp as a knife, Hermione couldn't help but smile at her slightly.

"I didn't know risking one's life was in the job description of a Hogwarts' professor."

Legifer narrowed her eyes at her and said curtly, "You are as imprudent as ever, I see. Professor Dumbledore asked Professor McGraw and me for help."

"Hm," made Hermione. "Anyway, I'm still grateful."

"As you should be," snapped Legifer. "I hope you, for once, showed a little bit of good manners and also thanked Mr Riddle. He got hurt badly for helping you."

As Hermione wasn't very forthcoming with any reply, Legifer continued, asperity lacing her tone,

"I have been against your relationship with Mr Riddle from the start. I could see in class that you lack any form of feminine grace of even the basics of proper behaviour. Mr Riddle is a very bright student and a polite young man. He deserves a young lady who is not likely to embarrass him. And yet-"

Legifer's gaze slowly wandered over Hermione. A crinkle of disgust curled up her nose. Then the professor continued, "Yet, he chose you. Quite frankly, it is a mystery to me. It seems to be such a waste."

Hermione did her best not to be offended by Legifer's words. Still, she scowled right back at her.

Legifer ignored it and said cuttingly,

"But, in light of the events in that church, I am now convinced that Mr Riddle is adamant in his choice. He seems to truly care for you, however odd that might be."

The customary sharp frown adorning her features, the professor raised her hand and slightly tugged at the collar of Hermione's robe, straightening it.

"So, now that such a fine young man like Mr Riddle has decided to court you and possibly even wants to marry you," said Legifer, incredulity thick in her voice. "I think it is more important than ever to turn you into a real lady."

Hearing this, Hermione couldn't help it. A groan left her lips. Instantly she was hit by a disapproving stare from Legifer who continued in the same sharp tone,
"I don't want Mr Riddle to end up with… with…"

Words failed Legifer as she gave Hermione a once-over, clearly not liking what she found. She cleared her throat and said,

"With such an unruly, unmanageable girl like yourself. I've seen your obstinacy first hand. It is unbecoming for a young lady to talk to a man like you do to Mr Riddle. He deserves a good wife and I swear I will turn you into one."

Legifer glared at Hermione, probably expecting some kind of refusal. Hermione was too shocked right now and didn't say anything so Legifer continued firmly,

"This school year is as good as over, but I promise you I'll put even more effort into your education next year."

Hermione just stared at Legifer, aghast with this information. She still felt unable to reply anything. *Well, one reason more for you to return to the future, Granger,* she thought dryly.

"And now, Ms DeCerto," Legifer pronounced sharply. "I expect you to instantly go back to your dorm and not cause any trouble. I will not take any house points from you for now, but the next time I catch you I won't let it slide."

"Of course, Professor," Hermione replied. "Thank you."

Legifer threw her one last evil glare before she turned and stalked away. Hermione was surprised the dragon-lady hadn't thrown her into another detention. Maybe the old bat had a heart after all.

Hermione walked down the corridor in the opposite direction. She had no intention of returning to her dorm.

Not much later, Hermione sat in the soft grass and looked out to the Great Lake. The fingers of her right hand grabbed a fistful of grass. This was exactly the place she had sat with her friends before all had gone down. Marc had still been with them. She still couldn't quite believe that he was really gone.

Hermione released a shaky breath and let her eyes wander over the Great Lake. Its waters were black. Just like the sky above, only interrupted by the full moon shining quite serenely. It was almost midnight.

As she sat there in the grass at the shore of the Great Lake Hermione felt painfully alone. She hadn't talked with her friends again and after their fight she had avoided Tom as well. If only she could talk to Marc. She had never noticed it before but he had always been there for her. Whenever Tom had decided to once again show his dark and unreliable side, Marc had consoled her. He had tried to help her. Always. And now…

*Now…*

Marc was gone. Hermione had to face it. *I shouldn't be that surprised,* she thought bitterly. After all sooner or later all her friends died. She sniffed and raised a hand to angrily wipe a few tears away. In the future all her friends were dead. And Hermione had had nothing better to do, than travel into the past and try to ruin other people's lives here as well.

Hermione clenched her teeth. Terrible guilt was eating away from her as one question cruelly swirled around her head: *If she hadn't travelled back in time, would Marc still be alive?*
Back in the future Hermione had never heard anything of a Marc Longbottom, but that didn't necessarily mean he was dead. She knew Neville Longbottom and had heard from his parents, the Aurors, Frank and Alice Longbottom. And of course, Neville had often talked about his grandmother, Augusta Longbottom. Obviously she had been very strict with her grandson. Hermione remembered the Howlers Neville had often received from her. So, that-

*Dear God!*

Hermione froze in her thoughts. Augusta Longbottom? Could it be? She swallowed nervously. Just a day ago, Hermione had met Marc's parents. They had been devastated by their son's death. The wife… that had to have been Augusta Longbottom. Hermione breathed in shakily. The poor woman. Her older son was dead, her youngest son and his wife would be tortured into insanity and her husband would probably die too. Hermione bit her lower lip hard. Had she brought all this misery on that woman? Back in the future, as they had still hunted after Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes, Neville had died. Died because Hermione hadn't been strong enough to protect him. And now… now it was also her fault that Marc was dead. Hermione's stomach knotted with guilt. She pulled her knees against her body and slung her arms around them. Leaning her head against her knees, she tried to breathe steadily.

Hermione didn't know what to do. All those months ago as the Elder Wand had chosen to hurl her fifty-four years into the past, Hermione had appeared completely lost and with a broken arm on an abandoned meadow. Now months later, she still felt painfully lost. And broken, too. So broken in fact, she even managed to mess up the lives of the people around her.

"Hey," a deep voice brought her out of her thoughts.

Hermione slightly turned her head and found Tom standing beside her at the shore of the lake. It was the dead of the night, no-one knew she was here. Still, Hermione was only mildly surprised to see Tom.

"Tom," she acknowledged him, her voice detached.

He sat down beside her on the grass. Hermione stared out to the lake, not paying him any attention. After a while, Tom asked quietly,

"How do you feel?"

Hermione still didn't look at him. For a moment, she considered his question. How did she feel? Shouldn't she be angry with him? Somehow Hermione couldn't muster anger right now. So, she answered Tom's question quite honestly.

"Sad."

Tom didn't reply but he cautiously slid closer to her. A tremble ran through Hermione as he reached for her hand. Furrowing her brow, she turned her head and looked at Tom. He had his head bent a little and stared down at her hand in his. Hermione studied his face. Tom was quite pale even by his standards. Only his eyes gleamed vibrantly as they wandered over her silvery hand. Cautiously, Tom ran his fingers over the artificial part of her hand. As he examined the hand, there was a strange prickling sensation whenever his fingers skimmed over the line where her flesh met the silvery hand.

"How's your back?" Tom asked softly, without looking up from her hand.

"It hurts," said Hermione in a colourless voice.

His grey eyes wandered to her face. Hermione looked back at him, her gaze unwavering. Once again
it struck her how beautiful Tom's eyes were. They were the lightest shade of grey Hermione had ever seen, around the pupils they were speckled dark blue.

"You need rest, Hermione," Tom told her tentatively. "Maybe you should return to the castle."

Hermione's face was a blank mask as she continued to take in the incredible colour of his eyes. They truly could draw one in, she thought numbly. Not replying, Hermione turned her head and resumed to scan the lake.

"I'm sorry your friend had to die," Tom said gingerly.

Hermione threw in a shuddered breath. Her hazel eyes flew at Tom. Then she said, unable to ban all bitterness from her voice,

"You never liked him."

"No, I didn't," Tom admitted. "But to be fair, there are not many people I do like."

He raised his hand and gently tugged a curl of her hair behind her ear. Eyeing her intently, he mused,

"Not many…"

Hermione stared up at him. Something inside her shuddered under his gaze. Never breaking eye contact, Tom's hand wandered from her hair to her shoulder. Then he slowly pulled her over to him. Hermione again felt her magic react to his touch. It was delighted to have Tom near. This time though Hermione didn't feel angered by her magic's antics. They were hopelessly overshadowed by the sadness coursing through her. Hermione was still upset with Tom and disappointed but right at this moment, as sorrow threatened to wrench her down, she needed him. She couldn't be alone right now. So, Hermione didn't push him away. Instead she leaned against Tom's side. Her head rested on his chest and he had his arm securely wrapped around her.

They sat like this for a while. Hermione was nestled against Tom while her eyes wandered over the still waters of the Great Lake. She made no move to escape his nearness.

"I am not in the least bit content with that bond between us."

She could feel Tom stiffen at the mention of their bond and her possible anger. Hermione ignored his discomfort and continued resentfully,

"You forced it on me and that does make me doubt the sincerity of your feelings towards me."

Tom shook his head and quickly tried to deny, "Hermione, please, don't think I di-"

Hermione raised a hand to stop his justifications and excuses. She breathed in deeply. "Regardless, I should still… thank you. If you hadn't turned up, I don't know what Grindelwald would have done to me. I'm also sorry that you got hurt. Grindelwald was my problem."

The arm around her tightened and Tom shifted a little bit. As he replied, Hermione heard bewilderment in his voice, just as if he were surprised she even mentioned it.

"You don't have to thank me," Tom stated in his silky voice. "I'll always protect you."

She peered at him. Though there was honesty on his face, Hermione couldn't help but say, "Because you can't have it that your possession gets stolen from you?"

Tom sighed in face of her reproach. He was obviously fighting for words as he stumbled, "I
understand why you are upset about the bond. Really. And I should—although there were a lot of reasons I didn't, I probably should have told you about it. I'm— I'm sorry I didn't."

Hermione sighed softly. "I guess I shouldn't be so surprised that you deceived me. After all, a leopard cannot change its spots."

Tom winced at the hard tint in her voice. Then he said gravely, "Hermione, after all the things we've been through, do you really think I would just go and use you like some replaceable thing? I like that you are powerful but that isn't all. You are too precious to me to ever mistreat you."

Hermione raised her eyebrows and asked callously, "What's precious? Me or my magic?"

Tom slightly tilted his head. "That is inseparable. Your magic is a part of you."

She didn't reply but continued to fix him with a hard stare. Tom bit his lip before he whispered in a raw voice,

"Magic or not, you are the only person I ever cared for. Please, I don't want you to run away from me."

Hermione released a deep breath of air. Having Tom looking at her like this turned her emotions into a whirlwind. Even without her magic's conflicting influence it was hard enough to deal with this confusion. Hermione closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against Tom's chest.

"You know you are a manipulative, evil, conceited bastard, don't you?"

Tom's arms encased her in a warm embrace and he whispered tonelessly,

"Yes."

Not looking up, a small smile slid on Hermione's face and her arms around Tom.

The next morning, Hermione was late as she sat down at the Gryffindor table to get some breakfast. She just reached for a pot of coffee as she finally noticed the depressed mood hovering over Gryffindor table. Turning her head, she realized that it were not only the Gryffindors that were so gloomy. Hermione gulped. Whatever had happened now?

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked Lupin and Weasley who sat across from her at the table.

Lupin turned towards her. There was a grave expression on his face as he said, "It's Avery."

Hermione wrinkled her brow. Before she could question Lupin further, Rose cut into the conversation.

"Ogg found him," she said, eyes wide.

It did nothing to clear Hermione's confusion. What had Ogg to do with anything? He was the current gamekeeper of Hogwarts. Hermione had never really met the man. Meanwhile Lucia nodded frantically at Rose's explanation.

"Yeah," she said shakily. "In the Forbidden Forest. Merlin, that's so horrible."

"Okay okay," said Hermione, raising her hands. "What exactly happened?"
She turned to Lupin, who was obviously better at explaining things than her dorm mates. The serious look hadn't yet left the Gryffindor as he said,

"Apparently, early this morning Ogg was walking through the Forbidden Forest. That's when he found Avery."

Weasley shuddered at that and said, "Avery was unconscious, so Ogg took him back to the castle. But neither Perry nor Dulan could wake him up."

"That's when they transferred him to St. Mungos," Lupin continued darkly.

Hermione had a bad feeling of foreboding as she listened to her friends. Sure she had never liked Avery but this didn't sound good at all. As Lupin was too shaken to continue, Rose again cut in.

"They say it was a stray Dementor," she told Hermione in her shrill voice.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked confused.

"They assume Avery wandered into the forest," Lupin said quietly. "Somehow he must have come upon a Dementor. Though no-one knows how it could have got here." His eyes dully stared at Hermione as he added, "The Dementor kissed Avery. He will never wake up again."

Hermione stared at her friend with wide eyes. Her blood froze over with shock. Avery was… he was…

Dead?

No. A cold chill ran down her spine. How could a Dementor have wandered to Scotland? That was just too improbable. There was a horrible suspicion mounting up in Hermione. It made her stomach twist and she felt sick. The last time she had seen Avery, he had been his old insufferable self. He had mocked her and forced himself on her, kissing her. The very same day, Hermione had told Tom about it. Another shudder ran through her body. He had been very angry.

Slowly, Hermione turned her head and looked over to the Slytherin table. They all looked rather glum, having just heard about the death of one of their number. Quickly, Hermione's gaze found what she had been searching for. Tom Riddle sat at his usual place. His face was an inscrutable blank mask. He wasn't looking at her but Hermione's eyes widened as she could see an icy cold glint in Tom's grey orbs.
Monsters

Unwillingly Tom opened the door and stepped into the room behind. His cold grey eyes swept with distaste over the rather untidy office until they settled on the man sitting behind the desk. Seeing the old man, Tom was instantly overwhelmed by the desire to either turn around and run or pull his wand. His fingers already itched towards his robe pocket where his wand was stored. Regrettably Tom was stopped as professor Dumbledore offered kindly,

"Sit down, Tom. Can I get you anything? Tea maybe?"

"No, thank you, sir," Tom replied, decidedly polite.

Dumbledore sent him what was probably meant as an encouraging smile. Maybe that worked on his stupid Gryffindor students, but Tom knew very well how fake that smile was.

"Have a seat," Dumbledore said warmly, gesturing at the chair in front of his desk.

Tom only reluctantly complied and stiffly sat down on the edge of the chair. Like always, being in Dumbledore's presence made him incredibly tense. With dread Tom remembered how Hermione had mentioned that Dumbledore had saved her – and by extension Tom himself – from Grindelwald. Of course he knew that Dumbledore wouldn't have lifted a finger if Grindelwald had targeted only Tom and not Hermione. Still, he should probably thank the man – just to keep pretences. Tom opened his mouth but found that he would choke on the words if he really pulled through with it. So instead he asked coldly,

"Why am I here?"

The irritating smile on Dumbledore's face didn't falter. "I just wanted to see how you are doing. In the aftermath of Grindelwald's demise, I didn't find the time until now."

Tom felt hot anger building up in him. As if Dumbledore cared about Tom's well-being. If Grindelwald had killed Tom, Dumbledore would have been the first to celebrate. Tom wasn't very forthcoming with an answer, so the professor inquired kindly,

"How are you feeling? Is your injury healed?"

"Yes, sir," Tom replied, fighting to keep his tone polite. "I'm fine."

"That is good to hear," Dumbledore said happily.

Tom tried not to snort.

"Very good indeed." The professor scanned Tom for a moment. "You must know Hermione was very upset as you got hurt. I think she blamed herself."

"She shouldn't have," Tom supplied curtly, not very keen on discussing Hermione. "It wasn't her fault."

"Of course not," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Still, you were hurt quite badly. Hermione didn't want to leave your side."

Maybe that's why I woke up in a hospital bed totally alone, Tom thought wryly, still feeling bitter that Hermione had abandoned him in the infirmary. He probably should be grateful she hadn't cursed
his unconscious form. After all, she had been rather angry about the magical bond between them. Tom's musing was cut short as Dumbledore asked,

"May I ask you something, Tom?"

Tom inclined his head. The fake smile had finally dropped from Dumbledore's face.

"How were you able to find Hermione?"

Tom arched an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Grindelwald forced Mr Longbottom to portkey Hermione out of Hogwarts," Dumbledore clarified, his tone sharp. "No-one, aside from Grindelwald and his men, knew where that Portkey was headed. So I ask, how could you find her, Tom?"

Tom's mouth narrowed into a thin line. What was the old man insinuating here? Tom forced his angry magic down and instead proclaimed in a sickeningly sweet voice,

"But, sir. You don't think my undying love for Hermione enabled me to find her?"

The calm expression on Dumbledore's face did not falter even as he was hit by the brazen taunt behind Tom's words.

"Indeed a strong thing, love. But I doubt it can be used like a tracking charm," the older wizard said evenly. "Does Hermione know you are monitoring her with that necklace you gave her?"

Of course the old coot would know. Tom's hands tightened around the arm rests of his chair so that his knuckles turned white. Still he kept his voice composed as he replied,

"Yes, she knows. Do you think I could ever lie to her?"

"I should hope you wouldn't," Dumbledore replied warningly. "You know how bright Hermione is. She is not someone you can lie to easily. You would be well advised not to try and deceive her."

"I am not deceiving her in any way," Tom replied acridly. "Hermione trusts me."

"Omitting the truth is as good as telling a lie," replied Dumbledore curtly.

Tom considered omitting his wand and strangling the old bastard with his bare hands. It took him some time to restrain his bloodthirsty urges. In the meantime the professor continued,

"Hermione DeCerto is a very powerful witch. Do not make the mistake and assume you could bend her to your will, Tom. You would certainly lose her."

Tom almost laughed in the old man's face. Maybe Hermione was a bit cross with him at the moment because of her bound magic but Tom was never going to lose her. He would never risk that again.

"Hermione is-" -mine! "-my girlfriend," Tom told the professor frostily. "I really don't think our relationship is any of your concern."

"I see," said Dumbledore.

The almost disappointed touch in his voice made Tom's temper flare even further. He knew that Dumbledore was up to something. The old fool hadn't summoned him to his office just to chitchat about Hermione. Silence descended upon the two wizards. Dumbledore eyed Tom somehow expectantly as if waiting for something. Tom just stared back stoically. He certainly wasn't going to
pour out his heart. After a while, Dumbledore spoke again. A grave look on his face, he asked,

"What did you do with Mr Avery?"

Tom sat back in his seat and scanned the other wizard warily. All this talk about Hermione had been a prelude to this, hadn't it? Dumbledore had wanted to unbalance Tom by mentioning Hermione. He had wanted to plant the seeds of guilt.

*That never worked with me*, Tom thought coldly, inwardly sneering at Dumbledore. Outwardly he pasted a look of confusion and earnest surprise on his face as if unsettled by the blunt question.

"I- I-," Tom stuttered shakily. "W- why would you ask?"

"Mr Avery has been put in the Janus Thickey ward in St. Mungos where he will probably stay for the rest of his life," Dumbledore said, his sharp eyes never leaving Tom. "While his body might still be functioning, his mind has been irrevocably damaged. He will never regain consciousness."

A tremble visibly ran over Tom as he heard it and he breathed in shakily. Dumbledore ignored that display and continued coldly,

"Although a Dementor's attack is the most obvious explanation for Mr Avery's condition, there are a lot of other possible scenarios that could have led to this tragedy."

Tom blinked at the professor and asked, his voice quivering, "What scenarios could that be?"

"Curses, Tom, as you very well know," Dumbledore answered shortly. "Dark Magic."

Tom stared at the professor with wide eyes and asked incredulously, "Y- you think someone cursed Ledo?"

"Yes," Dumbledore supplied his voice hard. "You were among the last to be seen with Mr Avery."

Tom furrowed his brow as he heard that. He looked at Dumbledore with wide innocent eyes and asked, confused,

"Why are you pointing this out, sir?"

Dumbledore folded his hands on the surface of his desk and regarded Tom over his half-moon spectacles. Then he said sharply,

"Tom, I know it was you who attacked Mr Avery."

Tom's body stiffened as he heard the accusation. Swallowing thickly, he averted his eyes from Dumbledore. He ran a shaky hand through his hair, obviously trying to calm himself down. Then Tom raised his eyes and looked at the older wizard insecurely, almost timidly. Shaking his head slightly, Tom pleaded,

"No, sir. I- I didn't. Please, you have to believe me."

"You cannot deny-" Dumbledore replied harshly. "-that the attack on Mr Avery matches quite obviously your modus operandi."

Tom worried his lower lip before he said shakily, "I- I don't have a... a modus operandi."

Dumbledore's penetrating gaze never left Tom as he listed stonily, "A student is found dead. It almost looks like an accident. There are no external injuries nor bears the body any signs of violence.
No-one can explain what happened and eventually the incident is ascribed to an animal attack."

"I don’t… don’t understand what you are talking about," Tom stuttered feebly.

Dumbledore's blue eyes hardened as they wandered over Tom's trembling form. Then he said coldly,

"I am talking about the events from last year which resulted in the death of a student."

Tom blinked at the other, his eyes wide. "M- Myrtle…?"

"For how brilliant you think you are, Tom," said Dumbledore cuttingly. "It is quite easy to see through your doings."

"Please, professor," Tom whispered honestly. "You have it down all wrong. I told you I had nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets incident. And I certainly didn't do anything to Ledo."

"Is that your last word?" Dumbledore inquired firmly.

Tom leaned a bit forward in his chair, looked at the other beseechingly and breathed,

"I had nothing to do with this, sir. I swear."

Dumbledore took the half-moon spectacles from his nose and placed them on the desk in front of him. His blue eyes bored into Tom.

"Your act of the innocent victim won't convince me, you know that very well," Dumbledore finally stated, his voice icy cold. "Let's stop pretending, Tom, shall we?"

For a second Tom continued to look at Dumbledore pleadingly, innocently. Then, suddenly, the air of the wrongly accused easily slid from Tom's features. His gaze hardened and an unreadable mask obscured his every emotion. A vicious smirk started to tug at the corners of Tom's mouth. He lazily leaned back in his chair, never taking his frosty eyes from Dumbledore.

"I might not be a victim," Tom said smoothly, no signs of a tremble in his controlled voice anymore. "But I'm still innocent of the crimes you are accusing me of."

Dumbledore didn't react to Tom's abrupt change of demeanour at all. Not that Tom was surprised. They had both known it had been an act. *Well, it was fun while it lasted*, Tom thought maliciously.

"How did you do it?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring Tom's claim of innocence. "What curse did you use?"

The vile smirk on Tom's face became slightly more pronounced as he replied composedly,

"I told you, I did *not* attack Avery in any way."

"We both know it was you who cursed Mr Avery," Dumbledore insisted. "You are one of the very few people in this castle able to perform such Dark Magic."

"You overestimate me," Tom said chillily.

"And you humble yourself," Dumbledore shot back, equally cold.

"Why are you always singling me out?" Tom asked in exasperation. "I didn't do anything to deserve such treatment."
Dumbledore did not reply but continued to hit Tom with a hard stare. Tom sighed softly, as if annoyed by the whole meeting.

"Why would I harm Avery?" he asked dismissively. "He was my friend."

"Was he now?" Dumbledore inquired, doubt clear in his voice. "I was under the impression that he was more in the order of servant."

"Why would you assume something like that?" Tom said silkily. "By the way, as Avery was attacked I was far away from Hogwarts. Fighting one of your friends."

If Dumbledore was affected by the jibe, he hid it very well and stated calmly, "I think you had ample of time to attack Mr Avery before you followed Hermione."

Smugly, Tom scanned Dumbledore and suggested airily, "If you want to insist on accusing me of murder, you need to present evidence."

"There is none."

Dumbledore's gaze rested on Tom for a moment. Suspicion boiled up in Tom as he watched the hard glare leaving the professor's eyes. His features softening, Dumbledore asked, silly hope lacing his words,

"Don't you want to confess?"

Tom scowled at the other and did not want to deign it with a reply.

"Tom, I urge you to confess," Dumbledore beseeched, odd kindness in his voice. "It's not yet too late to turn back. Your life has only just started; do you really want to throw it away?"

"I am throwing nothing away," Tom bit out, his temper flaring dangerously.

"I know you think I want nothing more than to put you in Azkaban, Tom," Dumbledore said gingerly. "But that is not true. I want to help you."

This time, Tom couldn't help it. A sarcastic snort left him. It didn't stop Dumbledore from prodding,

"If you do not want to repent, if you continue with your life like this, you are going to lose everything."

"This is ridiculous," Tom snapped.

He got up from his seat and stalked over the office door. Dumbledore's voice held him back.

"What about Hermione?" the professor asked softly.

Tom's hand hovered over the door knop. He turned his head and glared at Dumbledore.

"What about her?"

A grave look was pasted on Dumbledore's face.

"You know Hermione has already suffered a lot in her life," the teacher told Tom, irritating sadness in his tone. "Do you really want to do this to her? Do you want to expose her to even more darkness? Your darkness?"
An angry snarl appeared on Tom's face and he hissed, "I would never hurt Hermione. Don't pull her into your false accusations."

A sad expression washed over Dumbledore's face. Tom ignored it, turned around, and stalked out of the transfiguration professor's office.

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Tom sat in his seat, feeling a bit out of place. His girlfriend was sitting right beside him, holding his hand so tightly it was cutting off the circulation. Tears were running down the girl's cheeks. She tried to stem the flow with a hanky. Tom glanced sidelong at her and studied her face. He saw each and every single tear forming in her eyes until it spilled over. Some of them she wiped away others managed to roll down her face until they dropped from her chin and landed on her black blouse, soaking it. Her normally so radiant hazel eyes were dull with grief and her breathing was laboured with the effort of suppressing sobs.

Tom unfixed his eyes from the crying witch and let his gaze wander over the large room. Many chairs had been set out in rows. People, clad in black, occupied them. Their faces were stony or tearful like Hermione's. The grief was almost palpable in the air. The rows of chairs were facing a small podium. A grey-haired wizard, clad in a black velvet robe, stood behind a lectern, giving a funeral oration in his solemn voice. Behind the grey-haired wizard stood a coffin. Curiously it was painted in a bright cheerful red colour.

Tom unfixed his eyes from the coffin, looked back at the grey-haired wizard and pretended to listen. Truth be told Tom didn't care for Marc Longbottom's death at all. It didn't touch him in the slightest. Then again, there was still Hermione's distraught magic he had to deal with. She was sad and grieved over her friend's death. Tom was hit by the urge to somehow comfort her. He didn't like it when Hermione suffered.

Tom glanced at Hermione's tearful face. Other people's emotions had always been quite alien to him. Back in his orphanage, years before he had known he was a wizard, Tom had taken to study the other children's emotions. Joy, anger, jealousy, mirth, fear. After some time Tom had been able to recognize those feelings, he had understood how they could be evoked and knew how to emulate them. Later in his years at Hogwarts, as he and the students around him had grown older, the emotions had got more and more complex. Tom's talent, though, had not deserted him. He was still able to read emotions quite easily. Like an outsider - a scientist observing a huge experiment - he had catalogued those emotions. He knew in which situation what emotion was appropriate and he could mimic them. It was so easy going even a step further. All the other people were trapped so deeply in their irrational feelings, it took no effort at all to manipulate them. Actually it was ridiculously easy to use them.

Pathetic…

His musings were cut short as Tom felt Hermione's hand around his tighten yet again. He glanced at her. The tears were still flowing from her eyes. She skidded nearer to him and nestled into his side. He freed his hand from hers and gently slid his arm around her so he could hold her more securely. For whatever reasons, Tom had to admit that he couldn't brush away Hermione's emotions. They were dangerous and not something he should play with mindlessly. Manipulating Hermione was like playing with fire. He had done it before, hadn't he? It had never worked out well. When it came to Hermione Tom's ability to read and use emotions failed quite spectacularly.

The witch in question was still tugged into his side, crying silently. Tom raised his hand and gingerly skimmed his fingers over her cheek. The contact made her shuffle even closer to him and another wave of her desolate magic washed over Tom. He ordered his own magic to cautiously wrap around
Hermione, knowing that it would calm her. As he held Hermione securely, the confession he had given her just yesterday came back to him.

'I love you.'

A rather desperate act. Hermione had been angry with him because of the bond that linked her magic to Tom. Tom had simply panicked. So, he had blurted out those words. Tom knew how very important they were to Hermione.

In reality, though, the words were nothing but a hollow phrase.

Tom didn't know whether he loved Hermione or not. It wasn't something he spent any time thinking on. After all, it was completely irrelevant and inconsequential. Tom was a master at identifying and manipulating emotions. If that had taught him anything, then that emotions were fleeting and unreliable. They were worth nothing. Love was just another emotion. It didn't mean a thing.

What bound Tom to Hermione was certainly not something so weak. He was not going to wrap their relationship into empty words. Hermione meant so much more to him. Labelling their bond with one of those petty emotions, he had rehearsed all his life, would be an insult to her. Hermione was a part of Tom – an extension of himself. Before Tom had met Hermione, he had never thought about another's wellbeing as something important. He had put himself always first. Now, though, with everything Tom did he had to consider Hermione as well. She was a part of him, so she was equally important.

Tom's train of thought was cut short as he noticed the other people getting up from their seats. Obviously the funeral oration was over. Tom clasped Hermione's hand tightly, helped her up and again pulled her into his side.

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Hermione was feeling miserable. She stood all by herself, surrounded by people clad in black. Turning her head, she scanned the room for Tom. He was no-where to be seen. Hermione bit her lower lip.

After the actual burial in the small cemetery of Godric's Hollow, the funeral party had walked over to the Longbottom house. Now Hermione was standing in the Longbottoms' living room. To be honest, she just wanted to be somewhere else. It had been horrible to see the coffin, to know that it was really over. Marc had died.

A watery smile appeared on Hermione's face as she remembered the bright red colour of the coffin. She was pretty sure Marc would have liked it. Quickly Hermione tried to blink away fresh tears. Her eyes were probably already puffy and red. Again she searched the room. Where was Tom?

"Hermione DeCerto, I presume?"

Hermione jumped a little before she whirled around to the voice. She gaped at the man she found standing behind her. Everything, from his messy black hair to the boynish smile, looked just like Harry. Hermione blinked a few times, making sure she wasn't dreaming. This man was the exact mirror image of Harry, aside from his eyes. They were not vibrant green, but brown. Hermione's stomach dropped. This was not Harry.

"Er… I'm…" she was unable to form a coherent sentence. "This…"

The grin on the Harry-image's face widened. Smartly he offered his hand to her.
"Hi," he said. Even his voice sounded like Harry's. "I'm Charlus Potter. Nice to finally meet you again."

"C- Charlus?" she asked, uncertainly shaking his hand.

He inclined his head. Then he pointed over to Dumbledore who stood a little away, uncharacteristically clad in nothing but black, and talked with an elderly man.

"Dumbledore pointed me out to you," Charlus told Hermione.

She looked up at him questioningly which prompted him to send her a soft smile.

"After all, the last time we met, we didn't find the time to talk at all."

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. "The last time we…?"

"Well, I guess it is some time ago," Charlus said good-naturedly. "But one would think you remembered the guy you hurled a Stunner at unannounced."

Hermione's eyes widened as she remembered. It must be about two months ago that she had apparated to Godric's Hollow with the intent to steal the Invisibility Cloak. She had broken into the Potters' house and while she had been searching for the cloak, Charlus had found her. They had duelled, though in the end Hermione had managed to escape with the cloak. Hermione stared up at Charlus and blushed with embarrassment.

"Ah, I see. You do remember," Charlus said teasingly.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione said breathlessly. "I am so sorry. I- I stole that cloak and then I even attacked you. I'm… You must be quite angry…"

Charlus ran a hand through his hair, mussing it up even further. There was a painful stab in Hermione's heart. He looked so much like Harry.

"Don't worry about it," Charlus said soothingly. "Dumbledore told me you stole the cloak because of Grindelwald. You thought it could help defeat him?"

"Erm..." Hermione blinked up at him. "Er.. yeah… that was the plan…"

"See?" Charlus said and laid a reassuring hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Of course, breaking into a house is never right but at least you had good intentions. The next time you are in a tight spot, though, just tell me. I'm sure we can work it out without trying to curse each other."

Hermione nodded at him timidly. Charlus was really nice and obviously had quite the forgiving nature. She bit her lip hard as she was again reminded of Harry. He had been just the same. Of course he had had a quick temper, but Harry had never been able to hold a grudge for long.

"I'm just glad it's over," Charlus' suddenly grave voice told her.

She looked up at him. The smile had left his face and there was sadness in his eyes. Once again, there were so many similarities to Harry.

"It's good Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald," Charlus continued. "I hear you were there when it happened?"

Hermione could only nod. Charlus sighed softly and said, gloom lacing his voice, "I'm sorry, it must have been horrible. You were a friend of Marc, weren't you?"
"Yes," Hermione replied in a watery voice.

Charlus' hand rubbed over her arm consolingly. "He was a good guy. He didn't deserve this." A soft smile ghosted around his features. "Marc was like a brother to me. An annoying, rule-breaking, little brother. But still, my brother."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said in a weak voice.

Charlus released a deep breath of air, before he said sadly, "Thank you. I miss him. A lot."

His brown eyes left Hermione and he looked at something behind her.

"I'm sorry," Charlus said. "But I should go back to my sister. Diana, you probably know her from Hogwarts. She's not taking this very well. She and Marc were very close."

"Of course." Before Charlus stepped away from her Hermione asked, "By the way, did you get the Invisibility Cloak back?"

"No, actually," Charlus said over his shoulder. "Dumbledore asked if he could borrow it for a while. My dad said it was okay. So I guess it's still at Hogwarts."

After Charlus had left her, Hermione stood a bit away from the other people. She felt uncomfortable. Now her mind was not only full of memories of Marc, but also of Harry. They spun around in her head and torturously always ended with the image of them lying dead before her.

Hermione felt sick. Her heart was hammering away and her chest felt constricted. She could barely breathe. She wondered what Harry would do if he could see her now. Would he be as forgiving as his grandfather? Or would he blame her? Blame her for risking the future so carelessly.

*Blame me for being with Tom...*

Hermione released a shuddered breath of air. She tried to stop her thoughts and let her gaze skim over the room. They stopped at Mr and Mrs Longbottom. Mr Longbottom held a baby in his arms. There was a happy expression on his face as he cooed the baby, but it was undeniable that there was also a terrible streak of sorrow in his blue eyes. Mrs Longbottom, standing beside her husband, seemed to radiate happiness whenever she glanced at her new-born son. Aside from those moments, though, the woman was obviously ridden by grief.

Hermione bit her lower lip hard as she stared at the couple. Guilt was mounting up in her. She knew that she hadn't actively helped to kill Marc but she had the sneaking suspicion that he might still be alive if it hadn't been for her. Time travel, Hermione thought bitterly, was one of the worst curses in existence.

She wondered if Marc would blame her for his death. Actually, now that she thought on it, she even wondered if Avery would blame her for his death. Hermione had her suspicions as to how he had died. As she had heard about Avery's death, her first reaction had been to hope that her boyfriend wasn't the one responsible. Hermione had never liked Avery, but she hadn't wanted him dead. What if it really had been Tom? She hadn't confronted him about it. She was too scared. If it really had been Tom, if he had really murdered again, Hermione didn't know what that would mean. To her... or to her plans of returning to the future.

Hermione gritted her teeth. So much was unclear, so much lay in despair. She felt overwhelmed. Helpless even. Right now, she just wanted to be alone. She needed to curl up somewhere and stop thinking.
Hermione's gaze slowly wandered over all the black-clad people and she wrapped her arms around herself protectively. She didn't belong here at all and felt like trespassing. She had no right to be here and disrupt those people's grief – especially as she might be the cause of all the grief.

Suddenly an arm was looped around her waist. Hermione's body stiffened and she turned her head. Tom was standing by her side and she relaxed instantly. Hermione shuffled a bit closer to him and leaned into him. Tom's body heat was slowly seeping over to her and with every breath she took she smelled his wonderful familiar scent. It felt so incredibly reassuring.

Tom bent down to her and whispered, "Do you want to leave?"

Hermione nodded at Tom gratefully. He took her hand and slowly led her to the door. Before Hermione stepped outside, she caught Lupin's eye. He stood with his family and Stella Lovegood who held his hand. As Lupin spotted Hermione, he smiled at her softly. Hermione sent him a small smile before she followed Tom out of the room.

Tom never let go of Hermione's hand as they left the Longbottom house. He grabbed her arm tightly and whispered in her ear teasingly,

"Hold on. This time, I'll get to drive."

With that Tom pulled her into the dark pressure of apparition. Seconds later, they reappeared, standing right outside the gates to Hogwarts' grounds. A small smile curved Hermione's lips as she saw the castle some distance away.

"I see someone passed the examination for their Apparation license," Hermione commented, grinning up at Tom.

He threw her a smug smile. Then Tom led her towards the castle. They walked in silence and Hermione enjoyed it. She didn't want to talk. Tom seemed to sense that and didn't press for conversation. He pulled her into Hogwarts, through the Entrance Hall and up the Moving Staircase. It wasn't long and they stood before a familiar patch of wall. Hermione furrowed her brow at Tom.

"What are we doing here?"

"We've been here before. Remember?" Tom informed her. "It's the Come-and-Go room."

Tom paced by the patch of wall three times. A huge wooden door appeared. He opened it and pulled Hermione in the room behind. The room looked nice and cosy with a couch and an armchair in one corner. To the left side stood a few shelves, filled with nothing but rows and rows of books. Hermione mused the room, but didn't step further inside.

"Tom," she said tentatively. "I know you meant well. But I just want to be alone. It's… I need to… think."

"I don't want you to be alone," insisted Tom and grabbed her hand tighter.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at his stubborn face and said shortly, "I'm not in the mood to talk right now."

"We don't need to talk. Look, here's a truckload of books. You just grab one, curl up on that sofa and read." Tom placed a kiss on her forehead. Then he added playfully, "And while you read your book, I'll just sit over there and observe you like a hawk. How does that sound?"

Involuntarily, a small smile curved Hermione's lips. She quickly got rid of it and looked into Tom's
starlingly grey orbs. It was very unusual for his steely eyes to show anything else than cold indifference but right now they glimmered with concern. What was it with Tom being so gentle and caring one moment and a ruthless scary dark wizard the next? He was confusing.

"I rather want to go back to my dorm," Hermione stated curtly.

She turned away from him and wanted to walk over to the door. Tom stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," he told her firmly. "You'll just end up cloistering yourself away in that horribly red-coloured bedroom and worry – about everything. You need to relax a bit."

Hermione stared to the exit door. "I don't know…"

Tom quirked an eyebrow. Then he stepped over to one of the book shelves and exclaimed, fake-surprise in his voice,

"Look at that."

He reached for one of the books. Presenting it to Hermione, he baited her, "Hm, the first copy of Wafflings' Theorem on the Alignment of Magical Currents. Oh no, whoever is going to read it if you abandon it?"

Hermione frowned at his silly antics. Tom tilted his head and said, now serious, "Listen, Hermione, I know you are upset about Longbottom. And you are probably still angry with me because of that bond. But locking yourself away and over-analysing things won't help you solve them at all. Why don't you just take this day off?"

She pressed her mouth in a thin line. Over-analysing? As far as she was concerned such a thing was not possible. Though she had to admit that couch looked rather inviting at the moment. Tom might have sensed that she was about to falter because he pressed on,

"Come on. There's been a lot going on in the last few days with Grindelwald and all that. Tomorrow's the last school day before the summer break. Let's just laze around for a while."

Hermione pursed her lips in irritation as she looked back at Tom. Her eyes dropped to the old book he still held in his hand. It was tempting…

"Okay," she snapped, snatched the book from him and added grumpily, "You are stubborn. I'll give you that."

Tom smirked at her and mock-bowed. "Always at your service."

Hermione huffed at him and stalked over to the couch. She plopped down on it, leaning with her back against the couch's backrest while stretching her legs out. It indeed was rather comfortable. Still, Hermione sent Tom a dark look before she started to read. He was very good at ignoring her hostility and studied the books in the shelf. After a moment, he took one and sauntered over to Hermione's couch. She was already immersed in her book and only noticed Tom's presence as he lifted her legs, sat down on the couch and placed her feet in his lap. Hermione looked up from her book and frowned at him.

"Didn't you want to sit over there?" She gestured at the armchair.

"Changed my mind." A smirk played around his mouth as Tom added haughtily, "Now stop talking, I need to read this."
Hermione sniffed indignantly, her eyes sweeping over his book. It didn't have any title but it was bound in leather. A few suspicious blood-red stains marred the cover and a dark aura of magic hovered around the book.

"Of course you would need to read that."

Tom threw her an innocent and totally fake look. Hermione rolled her eyes at him. Then they dropped back to her own book. It didn't take long and she was captivated by the knowledge the book offered. Everything else dropped in the background and Hermione just enjoyed reading. It was a long time that she had been able to read just for the fun of it and not because she desperately needed to solve a problem. A small smile tugged at the corners of Hermione's mouth. Tom seemed to be trapped in his own book, never taking his eyes from the words. One of his hands had wandered to Hermione's foot in his lap, now and then stroking it gently. Hermione sighed contently, leaned comfortably back on the couch and continued reading.

They kept reading for what felt like hours. It probably really were hours, because Hermione had almost finished Wafflings' theorem as her eyes slowly drooped. She blinked a few times, trying to wake herself up. Another two paragraphs later and her eyelids again dropped. Hermione didn't even realize that the book slipped from her fingers. Only remotely she noticed that there was an arm around her waist and under her knees. Then she was lifted up. Sleepily Hermione raised her face and looked up at Tom through hooded eyes.

"Time to go to sleep," he whispered to her.

"Mm. I should go… to… dorm..." Hermione agreed, her voice slurred by sleep.

Despite her statement, she didn't try to get away from Tom but draped her arms around his neck and nestled against him. He chuckled in amusement.

"Well, I'm not going to carry you up all the way to Gryffindor tower," Tom told her haughtily. "Seems like you have to stay here."

"Hn," made Hermione, too tired for a real comeback.

"You are lucky you have such a considerate boyfriend," Tom informed her generously as he carried Hermione around a shelf of books.

Through half-closed eyes, Hermione spotted a king-sized bed standing right under a huge window. She hadn't noticed it before, obscured as it was by the book shelves. Tom gently put her down on the soft mattress. Then he pulled his wand and waved it over her. Instantly, Hermione's clothes morphed into a simple shirt. She sighed contently and rolled onto her side snuggling into the silky blanket. Her eyes had fallen shut again and she only remotely heard the rustling of fabric. Then the light was switched off and she felt a weight lying down beside her. Shortly later there were two strong arms around her and she was pulled against a chest.

"Good night," Tom whispered to her and placed a soft kiss on top of her head.

A small smile on her face, Hermione huddled up to Tom. She could feel his arms around her and felt quite safe in his embrace. Her head rested against his chest and she listened to the reassuring sound of his breathing. She would never admit it, but Hermione was glad Tom hadn't let her go back to her dorm. Being alone now… after the funeral… she didn't think she would have been able to stand it. The warmth of Tom's body next to hers was incredibly reassuring. She didn't have to wait long for sleep to claim her.
Hermione was waking up the next morning to grey eyes staring down at her. She blinked a few times and scanned her surroundings. It was quite unfamiliar. It took her a few seconds to remember that Tom had dragged her into the Room of Requirement the day before.

"Good morning," Tom said softly.

He was lying on his side, his head propped up by his hand, and looked down at Hermione.

"Morning," she said and stretched her arms.

Hermione felt surprisingly well-rested, considering that the day before hadn't been all that great. She looked back at Tom. He still lazily lounged on the bed beside her. She only now noticed that he was wearing nothing but his boxers. Hermione's eyes widened as she spotted the angry red cut that ran across Tom's chest. Concern bubbling up in her, Hermione leaned towards Tom and gingerly touched the healing skin.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked worriedly.

Tom chuckled softly and his grey eyes smiled down at her. "No. It's quite alright. Healed up perfectly."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. Tom was in a suspiciously good mood. Still smiling, he slid a bit closer to her on the bed. By now a rather predatory glint had appeared in his eyes.

"Did I ever tell you how beautiful you are?" Tom inquired, his index finger slowly trailing up her side.

Hermione suppressed a shiver as Tom touched her and replied, trying to sound unaffected, "Did I ever tell you that you are a liar?"

Slowly a vicious smirk curved Tom's lips and a dark shadow obscured his eyes.

"Yes, on several occasions," he purred at her rather seductively.

The smirk still adorned his features as he surveyed her through half-closed eyes. Lazily his hand skimmed over her until it came to rest lying on her stomach. Then Tom leaned down to her. Hermione was hit by a familiar tingling in her stomach as Tom pressed his lips over her own. He kissed her leisurely, nibbling at her lower lip. Hermione tentatively responded to him and moved her lips against his. As he felt her reacting to him the tip of Tom's tongue demandingly brushed along the seam of her mouth. Hermione was hit by a hot wave of desire as she felt Tom's mouth nibbling at her and his hands rubbing over her.

Still, her mind was swirling with worries and unsolved problems. Hermione just couldn't relax. The Hallows, the bond with Tom, the time line, Avery – she desperately had to think everything through. It already buzzed through her thoughts anyway. While Hermione enjoyed Tom's kisses and his nearness, her mind was too preoccupied. This wasn't the time to snog. She had some serious decisions to make, Hermione's know-it-all side lectured her. She agreed with the inner voice and pushed Tom away. He looked at her with one eyebrow arched delicately. Hermione shuddered as she saw the dark desire burning in his grey eyes.

"W- we have class," she mumbled an excuse, well aware how breathless her voice sounded.

She averted her eyes from Tom's smouldering ones and made to get up from the bed. A firm hand
around her wrist stopped her. Hermione squealed as she was pulled down. A weight pushed her hard into the mattress and Hermione blinked up at Tom, startled by his actions. He was looming over her, imprisoning her waist between his legs. Hermione furrowed her brow at him before she again tried to push him away. This time with both her hands on his chest. Tom grabbed her wrists and pinned them down above her head. Hermione was taken aback by Tom's forcefulness. She tried to wriggle away from him.

"T- Tom?" whispered Hermione shakily.

A smirk twisted up his lips as he heard the quiver in her voice. Tom bent down to her and captured her mouth with his lips. The kiss was fierce, bordering on bruising, and Hermione's head swirled from it. Tom licked over the seam of her mouth, hungrily demanding entry. She was so dazed by his rough actions, that she didn't hesitate to obey and parted her lips for him. Instantly Tom deepened their kiss. His tongue explored her mouth rather aggressively.

Under Tom's heated actions Hermione's troubled thoughts came to an abrupt standstill. All of the problems dropped into the background and she just gave in to Tom's invasion. A burning need boiled up in her as his tongue continued to ravish her mouth. A soft moan escaped her and she relaxed into the tight hold he still had on her. It was then that Tom broke the kiss and bent up. Still pinning her into the mattress, he smugly grinned down at her, clearly enjoying the sight of her now red and swollen lips.

"You are not running away from me," Tom told her, finality in his tone.

Hermione's heart was racing away in a mixture of surprise, trepidation and, strangely enough, desire as she stared at the evil glint in Tom's eyes. Involuntarily her gaze dropped from his eyes down to his lips. A wave of heat hit her face hard as she realized she wanted him to kiss her again. She blinked up at him with huge confused eyes. Tom still smirked viciously at her and she was feeling very much exposed under his smouldering stare. His eyes slowly wandered over her, taking in every curve of her body, every shudder that ran through her. Tom took his sweet time drinking in her flustered state. All the while he was easily restricting her movements. Finally his steely grey eyes locked with Hermione's.

The dark smirk curled up his mouth further as he took in the shock his gruff actions had evoked. He chuckled and bent down to her. Hermione's stomach jumped as she felt him again so close. A soft whimper of anticipation left her and Tom snickered. She could feel his lips against her ear as he whispered, light tease in his voice,

"You are such an innocent Gryffindor."

Then he released her wrists. Still chuckling softly, Tom traced kisses from her ear down her neck. His hands skimmed down her arms and her sides until they found the hem of her shirt.

"I'm not innocent," Hermione's feeble protest left her before Tom sealed her lips with a kiss.

"Sure you are not," he whispered wryly between kisses.

Hermione wanted to reply something to his smug statement but she couldn't. She was pulled down into a torrent of desire as Tom peeled the shirt from her body. Hermione felt the air hitting her exposed body, but she wasn't feeling cold at all. Not with Tom still looming over her. His gaze was burning like fire on her skin as it wandered from her face to her bare chest and shamelessly raked over her breasts. His grey eyes flashed to hers and he said, amused,

"I might be a liar, but you really are beautiful."
A small hesitant smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as Hermione heard it. She raised a hand and ran her fingers through Tom's silky black hair.

"Okay, okay," she breathed hoarsely. "You win, Riddle. I'll stay. Now, come here."

With that she tugged at him, her hand resting at the back of his head. A triumphant smirk washed over Tom's face. Hermione ignored the smugness dripping from him and hastily pulled Tom into another heated kiss. She moaned softly as his mouth left her lips. Tom traced kisses over her neck. Now and then teeth were nipping teasingly at her soft skin. Shudders ran through Hermione's whole body. Quickly Tom's hot lips reached her breasts. Hermione squirmed under him as he started to nuzzle her flesh, his tongue licking over her.

Tom's hands sneakily traced down the curve of her waist until they found the seam of her knickers. Then he slipped the last piece of clothing easily from her body. By now Hermione was panting and her trembling fingers wandered down Tom's broad chest until they greedily tugged at his boxers. Seeing the lust in Hermione's eyes, Tom quickly complied and shed the boxers before he leaned over her again. His fingers glided over her body, rubbing and pinching at places, and soft moans left Hermione's lips. She raised her hands and clutched Tom's well-toned upper arms, pulling him closer.

Her demand was clear and Tom didn't need to be told twice. Gently he nudged her legs apart and insinuated himself between her thighs. Hermione moaned softly as she felt him against her, desire running through her so demandingly it made her dizzy. Her magic bristled around her, mingled with Tom's and pulled at him demandingly. Hermione couldn't take it anymore. Lust ripping at her unbearably, she looked up at him. Her magic rushed around them both fervently and Hermione whimpered,

"Tom…"

A devilish smirk slid on his face as he heard the desperate need which laced her throaty voice. Tom's hands moved down her body until he grabbed her tights, fingers biting into her soft skin, and spread her legs further. Then he moved and entered her in one confident stroke. A groan left Hermione's lips. Tom bent down to her and placed a greedy kiss on her quivering lips. He ended the kiss and his steely grey eyes bored into her hazel one, his face only inches from her own. Hermione's breathing was laboured as she stared back at him, mesmerized. It was then that Tom started to move. He pulled out of her before he, almost forcefully, thrust in. Hermione groaned again, biting her lower lip in her lust. Tom propped his weight up on his elbows on either side of her head while he remained a steady rhythm of moving in and out of her. Hermione raised her legs and hooked her feet around his back.

Her fingernails scratched demandingly over Tom as she pulled him even closer to her.

By now Hermione had lost control over her passionate magic. It hotly sizzled in the air, strands of it wrapping possessively around Tom, urging him on. Her excited magic threw Hermione into an overdrive of sensations. It was intoxicating. She felt her magic greedily snaking over Tom's body and there was a feverish burn where it clashed with his magic. Through their interlocked magic, she felt his lust as if it were her own.

Hermione's desire spiralled up even further. Soon, she couldn't take it anymore. The lust rushed through her, almost painfully demanding release. She was so close now. Each time Tom entered her, his name fell from her lips pleadingly. She urgently wrapped her arms around him and buried her face into his shoulder. Her excited magic told her that Tom was very close, too.

The next time he entered her, Hermione cried out loudly as her lust burst. It exploded and her whole body shook as it was flooded by the ecstasy of her release. Hermione trembled and breathlessly clutched Tom. Through her magic she felt that the same satisfaction ran through him.
Tom sighed softly and his body sagged down on her. His head rested against the joint where her shoulder met her neck and Hermione felt his hot breath against her skin. She let her own ragged breathing calm while she still held to Tom tightly. After a while, he cautiously rolled from her and lay on the bed. Quickly, Hermione huddled against his side and Tom wrapped an arm around her. She thoroughly enjoyed the nearness of his warm body and lazily closed her eyes.

"You are bad company, Tom. Yet again, you made me miss a class," Hermione teased.

Tom snickered softly and pulled her closer to him. His grey eyes smiled down at her as he replied, "Actually before you arrived here I have never missed a single class. So, if somebody is bad company, it's you."

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It was a good while later that Hermione hurried down the corridor towards the Transfiguration classroom. She nervously checked her watch and groaned. Then she angrily hit Tom's arm and nagged,

"Look what you've done. We're late for Transfiguration and I missed Household. Legifer'll have my head."

Tom rubbed his arm while replying condescendingly, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you seemed to enjoy yourself very much during our free time."

That said, Tom presented her with a rather sleazy smirk. Eyes narrowed in ire, Hermione swiped at him again. He easily caught her hand and pulled at her unexpectedly so that Hermione stumbled against him. Tom's snicker was washing over her as he snaked an arm around her waist.

"Hm, you are rather affectionate today," he purred at her teasingly.

Hermione harrumphed and pushed Tom away from her. She glared at him in suspicion. Tom wasn't impressed but smiled at her dazzlingly. Hermione rolled her eyes. Then she grabbed his hand and started to pull him after her.

"Stop being silly," she ordered. "And hurry up. We have Transfiguration."

"And I surely don't want to ever miss that class," Tom muttered darkly.

Hermione was not in the mood to deal with a grumpy Tom. It was bad enough that they were already ten minutes late for Dumbledore's class. She turned the next corner, still dragging Tom with her, as they ran into the last person Hermione wanted to meet right now.

"Ms DeCerto."

Legifer stood there, in all her glory, her sharp eyes wandering over Hermione in distaste. The professor's gaze softened considerably as she spotted Tom.

"Mr Riddle," she greeted, disturbingly nice.

Tom nodded at the professor in greeting. Hermione felt a tinge of anger bubbling up in her as she saw the look of innocent zeal on Tom's face which he always used to lull the teachers. What a swot ...and so transparent, too. Hermione almost shook her head at him. Legifer on the other hand seemed to be impressed by Tom's display of the perfect student. Unfortunately the softness immediately left her eyes as they dropped back to Hermione. A foreboding tinge of asperity already oozed from Legifer's words as she snapped,
"How curious to see you walking around – quite healthy I might add – after you missed two hours of my class."

"Er… yeah… about that…" mumbled Hermione, her voice dying away under Legifer's menacing stare.

"I think we had more than enough conversations about how you, more than anybody else, need my help." Legifer's dark eyes wandered disapprovingly over Hermione's form. "As it is now, I am thinking about giving you remedial classes next year."

Hermione stared at the woman, horror-struck. It took her a few seconds to find her voice back, during which the malicious smile on Tom's face didn't escape her notice. Hermione tried to suppress the urge to hit Tom and cleared her throat.

"That really is not necessary, professor."

"I beg to differ," Legifer promptly replied.

Legifer threw Tom a short glance before she lectured Hermione scathingly, "Just because you've made a good catch, doesn't mean you can sit back and slack off."

As if Legifer's insanity wasn't enough, Hermione heard Tom snicker evilly. Gritting her teeth in anger she glared at him. Tom's features were arranged into a politely interested expression, but Hermione could see amusement darkly flickering in his grey eyes. She decided against strangling him and changed her tactic. Turning back to Legifer, Hermione said eagerly,

"You are perfectly right, professor."

Surprise temporarily drove away the sharp frown on Legifer's brow. She blinked at Hermione, obviously not having expected agreement. Hermione fluttered her eyelashes at Tom. He took a tiny step away from her as he saw the sickeningly love-struck expression on her face. Suppressing the need to cackle evilly, Hermione told Legifer in a naïve voice,

"I honestly wanted to go to your class. But then Tom told me to pack his things for the summer break. So I – being a dutiful girlfriend – had no other choice but to comply with his wishes."

Through the corner of her eyes, Hermione gleefully watched Tom's face getting rather stony. Legifer, on the other hand, mustered Hermione pensively, if not a little proudly. Then the professor's sharp gaze switched to Tom and she reprimanded,

"Mr Riddle, when the two of you are married, it is of course your decision whether you allow Ms DeCerto to get any further education. As of now, I advise you not to delay her studies. Believe me, in the end it will benefit the both of you."

Tom's eyes shortly darted to Hermione. She was pretty sure he could see the evil mirth hidden behind the obedient smile she sent him. Tom looked back at Legifer and said apologetically,

"Of course you are right, professor. I assure you it won't happen again."

Legifer nodded at him shortly. Hermione couldn't believe it as the professor didn't throw her into detention. Instead Legifer just wished them a 'Good day', before she proceeded down the corridor, her squeaky-clean black robe billowing behind her dramatically. As Legifer was out of earshot, Hermione couldn't hold back anymore. She giggled inanely and had to hold on to Tom's arm. He gruffly clutched her and started to pull her away.
"I thought you didn't want to be late for class," Tom hissed at her. "Hurry up."

Hermione still had to fight against her giggles as she said breathlessly, "Of course, if my dear boyfriend says so, I have no other choice but to obey."

Tom scowled and informed her indignantly, "Forget what I said about you being an innocent Gryffindor. Clearly you belong in Slytherin."

Hermione waved that comment away with a gesture of her hand and said airily, "I'm learning from the best."

_Silence._

Sadly enough, Hermione's good mood evaporated into nothingness as they finally reached the classroom. As expected Dumbledore had already started his lecture. Hermione apologized profusely for their tardiness. All the while Tom stood behind her with a cold front expertly covering all his emotions. Hermione shuddered as she could feel hints of his dark magic angrily brushing against her.

"Please, take a seat," Dumbledore said kindly.

"Thank you, sir," Hermione replied sheepishly. "And we're really sorry."

The professor smiled at her warmly. Though as his gaze wandered to Tom, the merry twinkle in his eyes died away and they grew hard. Hermione swallowed nervously and took a step towards her seat. She noticed that Tom wasn't following. Glancing at him, she spotted a dangerous red glint flaring up in his grey eyes as he scanned Dumbledore. Quickly Hermione reached for his hand and decidedly pulled Tom away from the professor.

_What was that?_ Hermione wondered, disturbed, as she slowly sat down beside Lupin. Slightly turning her head, she made sure that Tom sat down on his place as well. The murderous fire still raged in his eyes. Hermione gulped and averted her eyes from him. She could still feel Tom's angry magic licking over her. Hopefully it was the bond that enabled her to feel it and Tom wasn't really emitting such dark magic in a classroom.

"You alright?" a voice whispered to her.

Hermione turned her head and found Lupin scanning her concerned. She hadn't seen him since yesterday during the funeral. Hermione threw him a reassuring smile and nodded. Lupin took her hand in his and pressed it gently. Returning the gesture, Hermione whispered a soft,

"Thanks."

Then she reached for her parchment and quill. As usual Dumbledore's class was quite interesting. Still, Hermione couldn't concentrate at all. Tom's behaviour troubled her and the aggressive dark magic swirling in the air made her feel like suffocating. Suddenly all her problems came crashing down on her. Tom had managed to distract Hermione for some time, but now it all came back.

She needed to get the Hallows and go back to her time period. Or should she just stay here? Between that question spinning around her head, Avery squeezed himself into Hermione's thoughts as well. He was dead, attacked by a Dementor. Hermione wanted to believe that story, but doubt was poisoning her mind. Did Tom do it? Hermione didn't want to believe it. He wasn't that monster from her nightmares anymore, was he?

Hermione shook her head, trying to stop that train of thought, but her brain did not let itself getting deluded. Why should Tom have changed? Hermione had never asked him to change and she had
never expected it.

*Is he still Lord Voldemort?*

Her hand holding the quill trembled. Before Hermione could think on it any further, Dumbledore concluded the class. He hadn't even asked for the essay they had had to write. The other students broke out in merry chatter. Of course they would. After all, the school year was over and tomorrow they would ride the Hogwarts' Express back to London.

At the moment, Hermione couldn't share their enthusiasm. Mechanically, she stuffed her quill, textbook and parchment into her bag. Someone walked by her table. Hermione raised her eyes and watched Tom storming from the classroom. Once again she wondered if something had happened between him and Dumbledore. It wasn't long and the other students had followed Tom's example. Hermione sat in the empty classroom, feeling strangely exhausted.

The room wasn't so empty after all, because an amused voice said, "Ms DeCerto, as much as I like your studious nature, you should know that the school year is officially over now."

A smile drifted over Hermione's face. Then she looked up at Dumbledore. He stood by his desk and mustered her kindly.

"You are right."

She stood up, shouldered her bag and walked towards the exit. Before she could leave, Dumbledore's voice held her back,

"Hermione?"

Hermione turned to him and raised her eyebrows. The professor's clear blue eyes scanned her for a moment.

"Is there anything troubling you?"

Hermione couldn't stop that sarcastic smirk. "The question should be: Is there anything that's not troubling me."

Dumbledore sighed softly as he heard it and scanned her in concern.

"I know life has not been easy on you lately," he said gently. "You had to go through a lot. I wish I would have been able to spare you the grief."

"It's fine, professor," Hermione said in a small voice. "You already did enough. After all, you saved my life. Thank you."

"Oh no, Hermione. No, no," Dumbledore said, smiling at her kindly. "I have to thank you. Without you, I would have never found the courage to face Gellert and the truth."

Hermione smiled at him. Fiddling with a strand of her curly hair, she asked hesitantly, "Do you… do you regret finding out the truth?"

Dumbledore looked at her, lost deep in thought. After a moment of silence he said, "I don't like the truth Gellert has confided in me. Still, I am glad that it is out in the open. Not knowing the truth and being afraid of it is a lot worse."

Hermione nodded pensively. Her thoughts swirled around Tom and Avery as Dumbledore
interrupted her.

"If there is something troubling you, I gladly offer you my help."

"Thanks, professor. I appreciate it," Hermione softly replied. "Unfortunately, I'm not faced with a scientific problem but more with a personal decision I have to make."

"Ah," made Dumbledore thoughtfully. "That is in most cases even more difficult."

Hermione peered at him and supplied, "Yes. It's very complicated. The end of it is that I'm stuck. I know what I have to do. But it just feels wrong." A harsh laugh left her. "That even sounds stupid."

"Not at all," Dumbledore said kindly. "I assume Tom plays a part in that decision you are facing?"


"So, does that mean the issue of trust between you two is resolved?"

Hermione glanced at the professor and sighed, "Not really. It might have got even worse."

"Hm… You know what always helps when there's a difficult decision lying ahead?" Dumbledore threw her a crooked smile and unclosed, "Time. In most cases the solution will present itself in due time.

"I'm not sure I have an ample amount of time at my disposal," Hermione chuckled before she added wryly, "Or maybe too much."

Dumbledore just raised his eyebrows at her cryptic answer. "Maybe the summer break is exactly the thing you need. Do you have any plans?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "To be honest, I haven't been thinking about it."

She looked at Dumbledore suspiciously and added firmly, "But Tom will stay with me. He's not going to go back to the orphanage."

Clear blue eyes regarded her for a moment before Dumbledore replied, "I thought you would say that. Regardless, I still have to take Tom's wand away for the break. Can I count on you to have an eye on him? I have an inkling that Tom would need it."

"Yes," Hermione said cautiously.

Guilt was mercilessly sneaking up on her. She couldn't really guarantee that she would still be here for the summer break. In any case, she didn't want Tom to return to his orphanage. A prolonged silence fell over the two. After some time Hermione said softly,

"Professor?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Do you think people can change?"

Dumbledore didn't seem to be surprised by her strange question.

"A very difficult question," he mused. "Do you think that you ever changed?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. Had she changed? Her thoughts danced around all the events during
the war. All the things she had done. They had somehow changed her. Had made her colder. She certainly didn't trust people so easily anymore.

"Probably," Hermione said hesitantly. "But I'm not sure it's a good thing."

Dumbledore glanced at her as he remarked, "You know, many voices demanded for Gellert to be executed. They wanted retribution for the atrocities he committed. I am very glad, that in the end they decide against killing him. Now he still has the chance to understand what he has done wrong. He has the chance to feel remorse… to change."

Hermione stared at him and asked cautiously, "So you think it is possible to change someone?"

Dumbledore smiled at her kindly. "Are you, by any chance, talking about Tom?"

"Maybe."

Dumbledore put a warm hand on Hermione's shoulder and told her, "You can't change someone. They have to do that themselves."

It was a little while later that Hermione stepped out of Hogwarts' castle. A shudder ran through her body even though the sun shone warmly down on her. Ignoring those unpleasant chills, she slowly walked over to the Great Lake. Dumbledore's words spun around her head. Hermione sighed softly and ran a hand distractedly through her curly hair. Tom. He always proved to be the source of all her problems, didn't he? His latest actions had shaken her up quite a bit. Too much of Lord Voldemort had shone through Tom's acts lately. He had lied to her and bound her magic to him. A flush of anger hit Hermione. Indeed a clever move, worthy of Lord Voldemort, wasn't it?

Hermione's gaze flicked over the students sitting here and there in the soft grass, chatting with their friends. Hermione needed to talk with someone very urgently. Someone who had behaved quite strangely the last few days. Especially around Tom.

It was a few minutes later that Hermione finally spotted Melanie Nicolls. She sat with a group of her Slytherin friends on the soft grass not far from the Great Lake. Nicolls' dark-brown hair shone glossy in the sun. She was wearing her uniform and Hermione had to grudgingly admit that the clothes hugged Nicolls' delicate frame attractively. The Slytherin girl had this effortless beauty hovering around her person. Just like Tom. He looked even nice right after waking up in the morning. Maybe his hair would be mussed up but that only added to his handsome appearance. Hermione knew that by no means did she look like a troll but she certainly wasn't exceptionally beautiful either. If she wanted to look pretty, she had to put some effort into it.

Hermione sighed softly as she looked at the group of Slytherin girls. This was neither here nor there. Breathing in deeply and straightening her shoulders, Hermione walked over to the Slytherins. She was still some metres away from them as the girls noticed her and started to glare. Nicolls stared determinedly in another direction. Yaxley, though, made up for the other girl's abstinence and drowned Hermione in death glares.

"Do you have a minute?" Hermione asked Nicolls neutrally.

Reluctantly Nicolls looked up at her. Once again the customary disgust was missing on her pretty face. Instead anxiety shone in her pretty doe-eyes. What had changed Nicolls' behaviour so drastically? What had Tom done?

As Nicolls didn't immediately answer, Yaxley hissed aggressively, "No, she doesn't have time for the
likes of you!"

Hermione ignored it but concentrated on Nicolls.

"Just a few words?" she asked cautiously. "It won't take long."

The other girl obviously didn't want to be alone with Hermione but replied, clearly not happy with the decision,

"Fine."

"Why?" Yaxley protested immediately. "You don't have to talk to the Mudblood."

Hermione coldly ignored the insult but Nicolls winced as she heard it. It indeed was strange.

"No, Susan," Nicolls said softly. "I'll talk with her."

She got up from the grass and stepped towards Hermione. Together they slowly walked along the shore of the lake and Hermione wondered how to broach the topic. Reluctance was still clear on Nicolls face. Hermione cleared her throat before she asked awkwardly,

"Er… so… What are you planning to do in the holidays?"

Nicolls frowned at her, a sharp wrinkle between her eyebrows. Hermione sighed. She knew well enough her attempt at small-talk was pathetic. Nicolls cleared her throat before she said stiffly,

"I'll go back to my father, to the family manor down in Wales."

"That sounds nice," said Hermione clumsily.

Nicolls nodded. Probably just to keep the semblance of politeness, the Slytherin girl asked,

"What about you?"

"Oh," made Hermione. "I guess… Well, I'm not sure yet. I'll spend the break with Tom though. We'll probably stay at a hotel."

Upon hearing Tom's name, Nicolls clamed up completely. Determinedly she avoided Hermione's eyes. Again, quite out of character. There was no breakdown from the girl after hearing Hermione would spend the whole summer break with Tom.

"Er.. the reason I wanted to speak with you," Hermione said tensely. "I know it sounds strange but… Do you have any idea what happened to Avery?"

Nicolls' eyes flashed at her. She narrowed them at Hermione before she asked sharply,

"Why should I know?"

"Well, he seemed to be a friend of yours," said Hermione lightly. "Maybe you heard something."

Nicolls' gaze hardened and she clarified curtly, "We weren't friends. He was merely an acquaintance. I certainly don't know any more than you do."

The lie left Melanie's mouth not with the usual ease. She could hear her blood pounding in her ears and just wanted to run away from DeCerto. The other girl scanned her with that penetrating gaze. She suspected something, didn't she? Melanie resisted the urge to nervously wring her hands.
"If that was all," Melanie said, forcing her voice to sound condescending. "I'll go back to my friends."

She turned away from DeCerto but the other girl stopped her.

"You know," DeCerto said lightly. "Maybe I should ask Tom about it."

Melanie couldn't help but flinch at the mention of his name. Images were burning up in her and Melanie felt slightly sick. She didn't want to imagine what Riddle might do to her if she told DeCerto the truth. Last year, Melanie had been the girlfriend of that… that monster.

"Why would you ask him?" Melanie asked faintly.

DeCerto shrugged and said easily, "Well, he and Avery were friends."

It was so grotesque, Melanie couldn't help but snort wryly.

"I don't think Riddle has any friends," she whispered coldly. "Maybe you should really ask him."

Not saying anymore, Melanie fled DeCerto. Since that girl had arrived at Hogwarts, almost a year ago, Melanie had been jealous of her, because of her good grades, because of her obvious talent with magic and, above all, because she was Riddle's girlfriend.

Now though, Melanie could feel nothing but pity for the poor girl. To be stuck with someone like Riddle must be horrible. She wondered if DeCerto knew how Riddle really was. Melanie shuddered as she remembered those evil red eyes. For DeCerto's sake she hoped that he wasn't going to hurt her too badly.

Either way, Melanie was very glad that she didn't have to deal with the Dark Wizard. Abraxas had told her to just stay away from Riddle. That way he would forget about her. Melanie was very grateful that Abraxas had helped her out of it.

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Hermione's eyes wandered over the Scottish landscape. It was such a bright beautiful day. She breathed in the warm air. Nicolls had not been very helpful. Fortunately Hermione had a contingency plan.

Irritated, she wiped a strand of her curly hair out of her face. While she waited, Hermione wondered what it would mean to her if Tom had murdered Avery. Was it even important? Hermione knew that sooner or later he would start to hurt other people. She knew how Lord Voldemort had been. That man was still Tom's future, wasn't he? Between now and fifty years in the future, Tom would turn into that grotesque snake man.

Hermione shook her head. Maybe… maybe Tom had changed. Maybe he didn't want to become Voldemort anymore. He had seen Voldemort in Hermione's memories, and Tom had seemed to be rather appalled by the dark wizard. But if that was true, and Tom didn't want to become Voldemort anymore, that would mean Hermione's presence in the past had changed the timeline. That was something she just couldn't do.

Frustrated, Hermione let her gaze wander over the wide Scottish landscape. She heard the door leading to the platform being opened. Someone was walking towards her but Hermione didn't turn around. She already knew who had entered the platform. Hermione's eyes were fixed on the rough landscape of Scotland as she said,
"Thanks for coming."

Through the corner of her eyes, she spotted platinum blond hair as someone leaned against the balustrade beside her.

"It is not a problem," Abraxas Malfoy answered politely. Then he inquired, "Why did you need to see me, Ms DeCerto?"

It still unnerved Hermione how courteously Abraxas Malfoy treated her. She wasn't used to civil behaviour coming from a Malfoy at all.

"There's something I have to ask you."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"About Avery."

The bland expression was still on his face, but undoubtedly suspicion grew in Malfoy's eyes. Before he could come up with an excuse to leave, Hermione pressed on,

"You were a friend of his. Do you have any idea what happened to him?"

"As far as I know, it was a Dementor attack," Malfoy replied smoothly.

Pushing herself away from the balustrade, Hermione turned and fully faced Malfoy. Not even under her scrutinizing gaze did his polite mask waver. Hermione decided to drop the act. She opened her mouth and said, a steely edge in her voice,

"Look, I already know Tom had something to do with it. Just tell me what happened between him and Avery."

Malfoy hesitated for a second. Then he proposed delicately, "If you are convinced that Riddle had something to do with it, maybe you should ask him."

Hermione groaned softly. Nicolls and him had a lot in common. She knew very well that they were right. She should just go and ask Tom instead of confronting his lackeys. Hermione glanced at Malfoy. Clearly he knew something. Just like Nicolls had known the truth.

As cowardly as it was, Hermione decided on another approach. She felt dirty as she stared into Malfoy's eyes and flicked her fingers.

*Legilimens.*

With that she forced her mind into Malfoy's. If he was unwilling to tell her the truth, she was going to find it by force. Hermione quickly searched though his memories until she found something that made her blood freeze over.

*Malfoy was standing in a small chamber, holding a trembling girl. 'Nicolls,' Hermione noticed as she saw the girl's tear-stained face. She couldn't concentrate on Nicolls any longer, as Malfoy turned away from her and scanned the room. Hermione saw some figures kneeling on the floor. She could identify the closest ones as Lestrange and Black. They trembled all over and had similar looks of horror and fear on their faces. Malfoy's gaze then stopped at another kneeling form. It was Avery.*

*A look of absolute terror twisted his face as he fearfully stared up at another figure, looming threateningly over him. Hermione's heart accelerated as she recognized that standing figure. Tom.*
sadistic smile danced around his mouth as his gaze wandered over Avery's trembling form. The air in the room was thick with fear and Tom seemed to enjoy it very much.

Hermione stared with wide eyes as the scene unfolded in front of her. It was as if she had fallen into a trance. She couldn't take her eyes off Tom. His skin shone eerily pale in the dimly lit room. Only a sick smirk disturbed the completely emotionless look on his face. His eyes glowed like embers in the dark. Hermione could see nothing in them. They were empty.

Tom was talking but she couldn't hear him. She couldn't concentrate on anything else but those cruel red eyes. Avery sobbed, pure terror on his face. With fear paralyzing her body, Hermione watched as Tom raised his wand.

"Osculum mortis," he said, his cruel voice icy cold.

Hermione felt like the world had stopped spinning. Her thoughts were strangely muted as she stared at Avery. She knew the magic, disgusting as it was. Kiss of Death. Hermione trembled all over, feeling horribly nauseated. Tom's wand was mercilessly pointed at Avery. A golden substance slowly flowed from Avery. Fickle as smoke, it floated through the air until it disappeared into the tip of Tom's wand. How would one call that substance? Hermione wondered numbly. The soul? The mind? She didn't know.

Hermione could see the life bleeding out of Avery. He kneeled there on the stone floor and it was obvious that he was dying. It was plainly visible on his face, contorted into a mask of pain. There was nothing but fear in his eyes while his body was hunched over feebly, already accepting its fate. Hermione's breath came in short gasps as she watched the boy's last seconds of being alive. She wanted to squeeze her eyes shut. Trapped in Malfoy's memory, though, Hermione was forced to see what he had seen. Avery screamed and screamed. Hermione gritted her teeth.

Tom was merciless. He did not stop. Never. There was an insane smile on his face as he watched Avery's agony. The twisted amusement on Tom's face was probably the last thing Avery saw before he died.

Hermione felt like throwing up. A last time her gaze went to Tom. He stood over Avery's limb body. His eyes were crimson red and shone ghastly with satisfaction. However hard Hermione whished for it to be differently, she could not see Tom there. Just a horrific nightmare.

A monster.

Overwhelmed with disgust, Hermione pulled herself out of Malfoy's memory. She found herself standing on the platform of the Astronomy tower. The mild summer sun and the bright blue sky seemed to mock Hermione.

"What was that?" Malfoy's startled voice demanded to know.

Hermione leaned against the balustrade and with empty eyes stared up at the azure sky.

"Legilimency," she replied numbly. She glanced at Malfoy's shocked face and advised, "You should look it up. Especially if you plan to be around Tom in the future."

Malfoy seemed to be too upset to say anything. Hermione inhaled deeply. Blood red eyes ghosted through her mind. Eyes of a demon.

"So, it was Tom," she stated colourlessly.

Malfoy still remained to be mute. He looked ruffled if not a little scared. His smooth mask
unmistakably showed cracks. Hermione asked, her voice alarmingly empty,

"How did Avery end up in the Forbidden Forest after… after Tom did that?"

Malfoy looked at her warily, fear glinting in his eyes.

"I- I brought him there," he confessed. "It was the only way to cover everything up."

Hermione nodded. "Why did Tom do it?"

Malfoy shifted under her gaze, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. His eyes even darted shortly to the door. In the end, though, he stayed and explained tentatively,

"The others were conspiring against Riddle, planning to overthrow him. Avery wanted to become the leader of our… group. Melanie… well, she helped him along the way."

Hermione's hands around the balustrade tightened, her knuckles turning white. Then she said, her voice eerily soft,

"So, Avery challenged Tom for the leader position? And as a reaction Tom… What? Killed Avery?"

Malfoy stepped a bit closer to Hermione. He leaned with his back against the stone balustrade.

"You are Riddle's girlfriend, Ms DeCerto," he said seriously. "I'm sure you know how he is. There was no way he would take that attempt to usurp lightly. Avery knew the risks and he still attacked Riddle."

Hermione was hit by a flash of anger. Her sharp eyes fixed on Malfoy, she growled,

"Of course, Tom was the victim here. He didn't have any other option to deal with Avery. Surely killing him was the best way."

The Slytherin raised his eyebrows as he was hit by Hermione's harsh sarcasm. Still, his voice was soft, even gentle, as he said,

"You were a part of the reason Riddle punished Avery so ruthlessly."

Hermione's upcoming fury was cut short by confusion and she furrowed her brow.

"How so?"

"You know that Avery has been stalking you for quite some time," Malfoy told her calmly. "As he attacked Riddle, Avery point-blank told him he would force you to… er… be his lady friend after he had taken over the Knights."

Hermione arched her eyebrows in disgust. "Tom knows that Avery could have never defeated me."

"Avery attacked Riddle and he threatened to attack you as well," Malfoy reasoned with her. "Everyone who knows Riddle, knows that he would not react very kindly to such threats. Avery miscalculated; he risked too much."

Hermione clenched her teeth and snapped at Malfoy, "So, you think it was reasonable of Tom to kill Avery?"

"I'm not saying that," Malfoy replied defensively. "But Avery was not completely innocent in this development. If he hadn't acted up, Riddle would have never cursed him. I can tell you, if Avery had
been successful – and for a short moment it looked like he would be – then he wouldn't have hesitated to seriously injure Riddle."

Hermione stared at Malfoy. Suddenly she wasn't able to muster any anger anymore. She just felt tired and somehow empty. Maybe she should have yelled at Malfoy and told him that his twisted Slytherin logic couldn't explain away that Tom had, yet again, taken life. Instead of yelling, though, Hermione asked something she had burned to ask ever since the first time she had heard of Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

"Why do you follow Tom?"

Malfoy stilled as he heard Hermione's soft question. "W- what?"

Hermione sighed. "You were right. I do know how Tom is. So, what makes you follow someone so dangerous?"

Malfoy frowned at her and pointed out stiffly, "Well, you are his girlfriend. Clearly, you are following him around as well."

Hermione wrinkled her nose and said firmly, "That's different. I spend time with Tom because I actually like him. Aside from that he has no authority over me."

Malfoy contemplated her. Finally he said thoughtfully, "Riddle, he's… He's a very powerful wizard. He has plans and he has the brains to pull through with them. I truly believe he can change things. I want to be part of it."

Hermione nodded pensively. Then she remarked, "You do realize I'm Muggleborn, don't you?"

Malfoy's eyes were sealed up and unreadable as he mustered her. "Yes, I know."

"And talking with someone like me doesn't collide with the principles of Tom's little group?" she asked snippily.

"I don't have anything against you personally," Malfoy said elusively. He hesitated shortly but then explained, "In a perfect world, Muggleborns would live together with wizards without any problems. But we are not living in a perfect world. All the Muggleborns entering our world put us at risk. Wizards are losing their jobs, our customs disappear and we are threatened to be exposed. Wizards mixing with Muggleborns cause the magical blood to dilute. If we don't do anything, in a few decades magic will have disappeared. The wizarding world will perish and nothing will be left of us."

Hermione looked up at Malfoy. He seemed so convinced of the rightfulness of his cause, so genuine in his concern about the wizarding race. It actually hurt Hermione. She didn't want to do this anymore. She didn't want justify her existence.

Hermione had wondered if Tom had changed. After seeing him in that memory, she had her answer. Tom was Voldemort through and through. He would continue spreading hatred against Muggleborns. In a few decades that hate would culminate in war. Hermione had seen that already. She was not going to be caught up in the middle of Tom's hate ever again.

Hermione turned her eyes at Malfoy and said softly, "Thank you for telling me about Avery. And I'm… I'm sorry I used Legilimency on you."
The Slytherin looked startled by that abrupt end of their conversation. Hermione averted her eyes from Malfoy and hurried over to the door leading from the Astronomy Tower.

Hermione felt shaky and sick. Malfoy's memory played out in front of her mind's eye. Over and over again, she watched that dark wizard killing Avery.

_Dark wizard_...

Maybe Hermione should be grateful for this wake-up call. She really was a naïve Gryffindor, just like Tom had said. What had she thought? That her love for Tom would change him? Hermione snorted bitterly. Yes, she did love him and she was quite sure that Tom loved her in his very own way. But at the end of the day, it didn't matter. Whatever Dumbledore might preach, Hermione had seen too much to believe that love could overcome everything.

She wasn't _that_ naïve.

Disappointment, anger, sadness, it all tugged at her relentlessly. Even her magic swirled around her as a mournful cloud. Still, Hermione's hands were steady as stone as she opened the door and slipped into an abandoned classroom. It was rather late already. Hermione knew Hogwarts' population, including Dumbledore, was down in the Great Hall, having dinner.

As Hermione stood in the middle of the unused classroom, she bit the inner side of her lip hard. This was not what she wanted to do. Everything inside of her told her it was wrong, but she knew it would be the right thing to do. Determinedly she balled her hands into fists. A grim expression on her face, Hermione twirled on the spot and disapparated.

Seconds later, she came back into being, standing in Dumbledore's office. It was still as messy as ever. Strange silvery instruments were spread over the room and books that lay everywhere on the broad desk. There was a light aura of magic hovering over everything. It tingled pleasantly on Hermione's skin.

Hermione closed her eyes and let her magic flow from her body until it filled the whole room. It wasn't long until she detected a familiar source of magic. It obviously came from one of the drawers in the shelf behind Dumbledore's desk. Hermione's eyes snapped open. Protective wards were spun around the drawer. They were quite powerful, but so was Hermione's magic. It didn't take her longer than ten minutes and the wards yielded. With shaky hands Hermione opened the drawer. She was met by the silvery material of the Invisibility Cloak, just like Charlus Potter had said. Hermione clasped the cloak, pulled it against her chest and with a loud crack she disappeared from the office.

Hermione reappeared at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She stood there for what felt like hours and just stared down at the silver cloak in her hands. Everything felt so unreal. Her body trembled all over. The accomplishment of her mission was so close. She would go home. Still, Hermione felt horrible.

"Hermione?"

Hermione turned and wasn't at all surprised to see Tom. Wearing his sleek uniform, he mustered her with concern in his grey eyes. He didn't look at all like that monster from Malfoy's memory. _Appearances can be misleading._ Hermione's fingers clasped the silvery fabric of the cloak tighter.

"What are you doing here?" Tom asked, worry tinting his voice.
His gaze dropped from her face and wandered to the silver cloak she pressed against her chest. His expression instantly grew dark. Cold eyes snapped back at Hermione's and Tom forcefully demanded to know,

"What is that?"

Hermione swallowed as she stared at Tom with wide eyes. She couldn't answer his question. Her throat felt constricted. So, she whirled around and ran away from Tom, into the Forbidden Forest. She couldn't think straight. She needed to get away from Tom.

Obviously Hermione was in a state of dazed shock, otherwise she would have remembered that Tom was a lot faster than her. A terrified gasp left her as she felt a hand roughly clasping her upper arm. She struggled but Tom was a lot stronger as well. He turned her around to him, tightly holding her by her shoulders. No room for escape, Hermione stared up at him with fear-widened eyes. Tom glowered at her, a sharp frown between his eyebrows. He tightened his grip on her painfully and growled, barely suppressed anger in his voice,

"What is the meaning of this?"

Hermione didn't reply. She only pressed the Invisibility Cloak tighter against her chest. Tom's intense stare was boring into her, his eyes ablaze with anger. Already his magic crackled around him forcefully.

"That is the Invisibility Cloak, isn't it?" Tom's voice was low, danger hidden within.

"Yes," Hermione breathed shakily

She gasped softly as Tom's magic achingly washed over her. It felt like thousands of sharp needles were stuck into her skin.

"Why do you have that cloak?" Tom never raised his voice, but it had a deathly cold tinge. "What do you plan to do with it?"

Hermione looked up at Tom. A dark glint smouldered in his eyes and his magic raged around him wrathfully. His hands on her arms clamped her painfully tight.

"You know what I plan to do," Hermione whispered tonelessly.

With that Tom's irate magic burned up and bristled in the air like electricity. Suddenly he yelled at her, making her flinch,

"Don't tell me you're still collecting the Hallows!"

As Hermione was unable to answer anything, Tom continued to yell at her furiously,

"You are not going to use them to travel to your time period. I forbid you to do that."

His sharp tone made it very clear that Tom would not tolerate any disobedience here. Ignoring his furious magic, Hermione told him gently,

"Tom, you've always known I can't stay here. I don't belong."

"I don't care about your stupid time travel rules," he hissed. "You belong with me."

Hermione stared up at him. Despite the anger twisting up his face, she could see desperation underneath. Her heart clenched as she saw it.
"Don't you understand?" she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "I can't stay here. I have to go back."

"You 'Have to'?" Tom yelled enraged. "'Have to', Hermione?"

Abruptly he let go of her arms. Hermione stumbled slightly and blinked as Tom started to pace furiously in front of her. He glanced at her and snapped,

"You don't have to do anything!"

"If I stay here, I'll change the timeline," Hermione tried to reason with the angry wizard. "I can't stay. I could change the future. I could destroy everything. This is dangerous."

"Destroy the future?" Tom raged. "You can't destroy something that hasn't even happened yet!"

"I CAN!" Hermione screamed at him desperately. Then she added, her voice cracking, "It's my fault Marc is dead."

As he heard her tone of voice, Tom stopped his pacing and his angry magic died down. Hesitantly he took a step towards Hermione. His eyes were soft as Tom told her,

"It's not your fault."

Hermione was taken off guard by his sudden gentleness. She stared up at Tom and whispered, desperation soaking her words,

"It is my fault. I am here in the past when I shouldn't be. I did things, I talked to people. And I changed the time line! My presence here was enough to get Marc killed. Without me, Grindelwald wouldn't have killed Marc. He wasn't meant to die. I caused his death."

"Grindelwald made Longbottom spy on Dumbledore. Sooner or later he would have killed him anyway," Tom pointed out but Hermione wasn't listening.

"Do not meddle with time! Bad things happen to wizards who meddle with time," she stated in a dead tone. "Me being here is dangerous. I am playing around with things I can't control."

Her eyes shot back at Tom and slowly wandered over him. He stiffened as her gaze scanned him so scrutinisingly.

"Hermione, you are not responsible for everything. Certainly not for the whole future," Tom said soothingly.

Hermione pressed her mouth in a thin line as she glared at him. "Don't you get it? It's not the future for me. It's my past!"

"You don't want to return to your time period," Tom reasoned with her gingerly. "You said so yourself."

"What do you suggest I do instead?" Hermione inquired, her tone harsh. "Do you want me to stay here in the past? With you? I can guarantee you that's not going to work out."

"B- but, I thought…" Tom said hesitantly. "I thought you… love me?"

Hermione snorted cruelly, "Sure I do. How long do you think that is going to work out for us?" She raised her eyebrows mockingly. "What? Forever? Ten years? One? Maybe we manage six months. I have my fingers crossed."
"Why do you say that?" Tom whispered, clearly taken aback by her hard words.

"Because with how things look right now it's only a matter of time until you go and implement your plans," Hermione snarled.

Tom furrowed his brow. "What plans?"

\textit{As if he doesn't know.} Hermione glared at him and hissed nastily, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe becoming Lord Voldemort is high up on your agenda?"

Tom's eyes widened at the mention of that name. "I am not going to be that man."

"He is all you ever dreamed of, all you craved for." Hermione's tone was hard. "He has power, followers and no moral sense whatsoever."

Tom shook his head as he heard it. He took a cautious step towards her so that he stood directly in front of her. His eyes stared at her imploringly as he said,

"I've seen in your memories what he did to you. Do you really think I would be able to hurt you so?"

Hermione met his gaze unwaveringly, her eyes hard and unforgiving. As she didn't reply anything Tom said shakily,

"I told you, I will never hurt you, Hermione."

"So you promised," Hermione replied coldly. "But let's be fair, you broke promises before, didn't you?"

"Not this one."

"Then you are not going to hunt me down because I'm Muggleborn? No Torture curses for me?" she asked nastily. "How about this then? Maybe you'll instead use the bond between us to make me do your evil deeds. Maybe you won't use the Cruciatus curse on me but use my magic to hurl it at other people …at my friends. Either way, Tom, you will hurt me."

"I- I won't," Tom stuttered. "I won't be that man."

"You just claimed that my presence in the past did not cause Marc's death," Hermione snapped hotly. "What does that mean then? That I cannot change the past even if I tried? Is it already set in stone?"

"I don't know…" Tom looked at her helplessly.

"If that is true, then I already know your future." Hermione bared her teeth. "And I refuse to stay here by your side and watch how you turn into Him. I certainly won't be dragged down into your dirt."

"Why do you insist I would become that man?" Tom asked cautiously. "Didn't I already change much?"

He her hand in his and said gingerly, "I'm your boyfriend, Hermione, even though I know you are Muggleborn. I don't care about your parentage anymore. I opened up to you. You know things about me no-one else does. And I'm fine with that. I know the bond between us irks you. But I told you, I will never u-"

Hermione cut over him ruthlessly, "I know you killed Avery."
"-se it against you..." Tom's voice tailed off and his eyes widened. "What?"

Hermione mustered him coldly as she repeated, "I know that it was you who murdered Avery."

"N- no," Tom said, honesty wrapped around his voice. "I didn't do that. I didn't kill Avery. Who told you that? Dumbledore? It's a lie. I didn't do anything."

Tom's grey eyes were wide with shock. He looked at her with sincerity shining in his soft eyes, begging her to believe him. All of this only made Hermione wrinkle her nose in disgust.

"Don't bother yourself," she hissed at him. "I know it was you. I already had my suspicions as I first heard about it. Then I went and talked to some people. Nicolls for example. And Malfoy."

Tom shook his head, still stubbornly remaining his mask of innocence. Hermione could see the shadow of unease building up behind his mask.

"Don't believe them," he said beseechingly. "They lie. They try to separate us. They tried it before."

"No, Tom," Hermione yelled, losing her temper. "I know it. I looked into Malfoy's mind. I've seen you. Don't deny it."

As Tom heard that, the innocent expression dropped from his features. He opened his mouth, his voice cold and emotionless.

"What should I have done instead? That bastard attacked me. Should I have just stood there and taken it?"

"No," Hermione replied furiously. "But there are a few more options than to kill him."

Tom's eyes were unreadable as he mustered her. "If Avery had managed to overcome me, he would have gone after you next. I couldn't let him do that."

"Tom. I don't need you to protect me against people like Avery," Hermione said gruffly.

"I couldn't let Avery get away with it," Tom hissed darkly. "Don't you understand? He would have tried again. I'm not losing against the likes of him."

Hermione snorted at him. Tom narrowed his eyes at her and asked mockingly, "Or maybe you would have enjoyed it if Avery had defeated me and you would have been bound to him? I'm sure he would have treated you like a real gentleman."

Hermione pressed her mouth into a thin line as anger ripped at her furiously. "You can go on and justify your actions as long as you want, but that won't change the fact that you killed another human being."

There was a fearsome red light glowing in Tom's grey eyes as he whispered in an eerily calm voice, "He deserved it."

"No," Hermione snarled. "Avery was a sick bastard and I really hated him, but he did not deserve to be killed."

She took a step towards Tom and glared up at him, her eyes hard as steel. "Just admit it, Tom, you didn't kill Avery because he threatened me. You did it because you wanted to. You enjoyed taking his life and that was the only reason you did it."

Hermione's eye glinted dangerously as she glared at Tom, daring him to contradict her. Tom's gaze
wandered over her form. Surprisingly the eerie red glow disappeared from his eyes together with the anger.

"Hermione, please," Tom said, his voice soft and gentle. "I might not be a nice guy but I'm not that soulless demon you are making me out to be. Stop using my supposed evilness as an excuse to leave. You don't want to go back to your time. Why do you insist?"

He raised a hand and lightly put it on her shoulder. His gaze was intense as he looked into her eyes. Hermione shuddered under his touch. Swiftly she took a step back, ending the contact. Pulling the Invisibility Cloak tight against her, she said in a flat voice,

"I don't care what you say. It is my duty to go back to my time period."

"This is the present! Right here, right now!" Tom told her forcefully. "You have to stop running away!"

"I'm not running away!" Hermione snapped angrily. "I'm trying to protect the time line!"

"It is not your duty to do that," Tom insisted, holding her by her shoulders.

"My friends DIED, fighting for peace. How can I destroy their sacrifice?"

"This is ridiculous! None of your friends is dead yet!" Tom raised his voice and shook her gruffly. "No-one died! You have to stop feeling guilty."

Hermione averted her eyes, tears swimming in them. Tom saw it and told her gingerly,

"I haven't known any of your friends, but they wouldn't have wanted this. They wouldn't have wanted you to suffer so much. You have to finally let go of them. You are allowed to be happy."

Hermione broke free of him and took a step back, breathing heavily. Desperate tears ran down her cheeks as she screamed at Tom,

"NO! You say you didn't know them? That they didn't die?

Her magic awoke and started to dance around her forcefully, fed by the anger boiling up in Hermione. Hatefuly she glared at Tom and hissed,

"You know what? You killed them! Each and every one of my friends is dead. Because! Of! You!"

Tom stumbled a step away from her as her accusation hit him full force. A strangled laugh left Hermione's mouth as her eyes again wandered over him.

"Maybe it's even my fault that you… that you are… turning into that evil, disgusting monster!"

Tom's eyes widened as he heard that last word being hissed at him. Hermione, though, just continued to rage,

"You are already half-way there, aren't you? Everything you ever told me was a lie. I practically begged you to not betray me again, to be honest with me. I was so naïve to believe you. All this time you only… only wanted to have the power of the Elder Wand. I was so stupid to trust… and now you own me."

Tom still stared at her, breathing hard, and just shook his head. Hermione's magic bristled around her. Still, the angry magic did not touch Tom. It didn't tug at him aggressively like it should and that fact enraged Hermione even more. Her next words were sharp as a blade and icy cold,
"You know what, Tom Riddle? As you turned up, you ruined everything. You killed my family. You killed my friends and my love. Everyone!" Her voice rose in volume and she was screaming in fury, "You destroyed me! You broke me and you laughed in my face whilst doing it. You really are a depraved monster! You suck the life out of everything!"

"And now... and now, after everything you've done, you want me to forget my friends?" Hermione hissed incredulously. "Just forget how they've fought and died? How I fought?"

Tom stood before her, frozen to the spot. Then he said softly, almost inaudibly, "I'm not a monster..."

"You tell me to be happy?" Hermione whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Without you, I would have been happy."

Tom turned his head to the side, avoiding her eyes. His hands were balled into tight fists. Hermione watched him as more tears spilled from her eyes.

"Give me the ring."

Her voice was stifled by tears but there was an underlying edge of steel. Tom still didn't look at her but his jaw clenched as he heard her order. His grey eyes wandered to the golden ring at his right hand. The black stone on the ring shone lacklustre in the sunlight. Unlike the stone, Tom's grey eyes shone beautifully as he gazed at her pleadingly. Then he whispered,

"Please..."

Despite the sadness wrenching at her, Hermione's face was stony and completely emotionless. Even the tear tracks on her cheeks seemed to be out of place on her hard face. She didn't reply to Tom's plead but just snapped her fingers. Her magic complied. The golden ring was forcefully ripped from Tom's finger and flew into her waiting hand. Hermione grabbed the Invisibility Cloak in one hand and the ring in the other. Then she called her magic and turned on the spot. The dark pressure of apparition took her and she fled Tom.

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With a soft pop Hermione reappeared miles away from Hogwarts. Immediately she sagged down on her knees. Her empty eyes wandered over her surroundings. A rich green meadow lay before her. Not far away wheat was growing. The crops still shone in a bright green, but it wouldn't be long and they would turn golden yellow. Everything was so peaceful and idyllic. It was strange to imagine how Hermione had arrived here at this very same spot, not even a year ago. A refugee who had just managed to escape from a war-shaken country.

With trembling fingers Hermione spread the Invisibility Cloak out in front of her. Cautiously she put the Gaunts' ring on top of it. Then she sat, cross-legged, in front of the two Hallows and stared at them. Her tears didn't want to stop running down her cheeks. Angrily Hermione raised a hand and wiped them away. Her fight with Tom replayed itself over and over in her head. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes as she remembered the hurt look on Tom's face shortly. But it was all true, what she had said. All valid. All the arguments to and fro were rock-solid. Hermione's mind was too structured, too organized, not to see that.

Trembling all over, Hermione sat in the grass. Time was flowing by. It always would. Always had. Her eyes were fixed on the Hallows lying before her in the grass. Her churned up thoughts didn't stop to circle around Tom. That sad broken look in his beautiful eyes, would that be the last she had seen of him?
'Depraved monster.'

Again Hermione's structured mind supplied her with the facts. Voldemort indeed was a monster. He was a killer and a torturer. He enjoyed others' pain. He was remorseless, merciless, cold and completely unable to feel compassion. Voldemort was evil and he had destroyed her life. Tom and Voldemort were one and the same man. So, calling Tom a depraved monster was justified.

Facts. All solid fact.

Hermione's index finger gently slid over the golden ring with the black stone as images burned up in her mind's eye. She saw Tom's handsome face smiling, his soft grey eyes glinting at her. She saw him laughing about something she had said. Then he was kissing her tenderly. His arms were slung around her tightly as if she were something precious, something worth protecting.

Facts...?

Tom was a liar and he had no scruples to use other people. He enjoyed to hurt others and did not even shy away from murder. He was exactly like Lord Voldemort. That was a fact. But the affection radiating from his eyes whenever he looked at her... that also was a fact. As far as he could, Tom loved her. And Hermione...? She loved him as well.

'Without you I would have been happy.'

That, on the other hand, was not a fact. Not even close to the truth. Without Tom, Hermione would not be happy.

That thought made her breathe in deeply. The scent of freshly mown grass, that had lain in the gentle summer sun, hit her. Hermione closed her eyes and let the warm sun shine down at her face. She inhaled deeply. The wonderful smell of the cut grass filled her nostrils. Now that all the facts were in the open, all the lies called and the truth revealed, what should she do?

Her direction had been so clear. She had been so sure what to do. Harry and Ron, she wanted to make them proud by doing what was right. She was supposed to go to her own time, back to the war-shaken country. Hermione glanced down at the Hallows. What held her back? Why couldn't she just do it?

…because she did not believe in monsters?

Hermione bit her lower lip hard, drawing blood, as she again touched the golden ring …Tom's ring.

Time was still flowing by. Continually and unaffected, it seemed. If time was a stream, was it possible to disrupt it? Hermione did not understand the concept of time at all and knew nothing of the consequences of changing it. No-one did, actually.

So, here she had ended up, Hermione thought as her eyes wandered over the green meadow. Stranded and completely lost. Hermione liked to analyse things, gather information and balance facts. On the basis of her research, she liked to make logical decisions. This time, though, solid facts did not solve anything. They pointed uselessly in both directions. She could either stay in the past and hope that nothing bad would come of it, or she travelled back to her time period… and hope that nothing bad would come of it.

Hermione closed her eyes and let her head fall back. The sun shone warmly in her face as a timid hope entered her mind. Could the river of time continue to flow by peacefully, even though a time traveller stood at its shore, observing?
Deep down Hermione knew, she could run from it, hide from it and deny it. She could call it her shame or temporary madness. She could claim the time travel had destroyed her otherwise so logical way of decision-making. In the end, though, it was very simple.

She did not want to leave.

Hermione still sat, eyes closed, in the middle of the meadow. The sun shone warmly down on her, the scent of fresh cut grass washed over her and a smile slowly curled up her mouth. It was time to go home.

She had to tell Tom that – depraved monster or not – she still loved him.

Hermione opened her eyes. Slowly, unhurriedly, she removed the necklace Tom had once given her. Then she slid the chain through the Gaunts’ ring and put the necklace around her neck. The ring fell against her chest. With steady hands Hermione carefully folded the Invisibility Cloak. Holding the cloak in her hand, she stood up from the ground.

This time, as she twirled on the spot, her destination had never been clearer.

"Give me the ring," Hermione said, her voice harsh and without emotion.

Tom just stared at her numbly. Mercilessly Hermione ordered her magic to rip the ring from him. He could not stop her but just whispered shakily,

"Please…"

Hermione did not listen and with a soft crack she was gone. Tom felt his body tremble and he hated himself for it. He raised a shaky hand and wiped it over his face.

'Depraved monster…'

That insult wasn't new. Tom had grown up hearing things like that. Twisted, foul, insane, abnormal Tom Riddle. Depraved. The children at the orphanage had called him that, the care workers, Mrs Cole …Carter. They had thought he was possessed by a demon and had wanted to chuck him into a mental asylum. Mrs Cole had often exclaimed that only a lobotomy could help someone like him. They all had been convinced that Tom was evil and rotten to the core. Tom balled his hands into tight fists.

Had he really thought things would change?

Even here where he was at home, at Hogwarts, in the magical world, he was still strange… different.

Merlin, he had been so scared back in the orphanage. Tom remembered how he had cried himself to sleep, hoping that his mommy and daddy would come to save him. How pathetic. His mother had been a worthless, squib-like witch. Disgustingly weak. And his father had been a Muggle. Tom was glad they hadn't come and saved him. He certainly didn't need people like them in his life.

Now, Hermione had left him as well. She had abandoned him, just like his mother, just like his father. With empty eyes, Tom stared at the spot she had disapparated from. Hermione had been the only one who had ever seen him for what he really was and had still accepted him. Tom shook his head. He… he didn't need Hermione either.

He needed no-one.
With that a memory crashed down on Tom. Cruelly it played out in front of him as if wanting to remind him where he came from and where he needed to go…

Tom stepped out of his room and strolled down the narrow corridor towards the stairs. An evil smirk appeared on his face as he saw the fear in the other orphans’ eyes and how they scurried out of his way.

Filthy Muggles!

If only he had his wand with him, then Tom could give those disgusting Muggles real reason to fear him. An angry scowl appeared on his face. Dumbledore had confiscated his wand over the summer break. How he hated Dumbledore.

There was a group of pre-schoolers blocking the corridor. They hadn't yet noticed Tom, immersed as they were in their silly game of marbles. Tom sneered at them in disgust. A little girl with pigtails sat on the floor, a big red marble in her hand. Without saying anything, Tom cruelly shoved the girl out of his way. She was hurled against the wall and started to cry loudly. Tom ignored the Muggle girl and turned to the staircase.

He had to talk with the new patron, Carter. Tom inwardly sneered at the man. He had no desire to speak with that Muggle. It annoyed Tom greatly that Carter had dared to summon him to his office. As if he didn't have better things to do with his time. Only a few weeks and Tom would be off to his third year at Hogwarts anyway.

Tom reached the ground floor and walked over to the patron's office. He stood before the well-known door and reluctantly raised his hand to knock. Mrs Cole had often summoned Tom to her office, trying to lecture him. He suppressed an irritated sigh and knocked at the door.

"Enter," came a voice from behind the door.

Grudgingly, Tom opened the door and stepped into the room behind. It looked just as shabby as he remembered it: Mismatched old furniture, a rusty wood-burning stove in one corner and a worm-eaten desk right under the window. The patron, Carter, stood beside his desk and already eyed Tom suspiciously. The man stood tall and a large silver cross hung on a chain from his neck, proudly proclaiming what a pious man Carter was. Tom rolled his eyes in disgust, not at all impressed by the sharp frown between the man’s eyebrows.

"Tom," Carter thundered irately. "What took you so long?"

Tom arched a lazy eyebrow at the man before he sneered dismissively, "I came here as fast as I could."

Carter's expression grew even darker, fury burning up in his eyes. Tom coldly ignored it. He didn't care what the stupid Muggle thought of him.

"Don't you use that tone with me, boy," Carter barked threateningly.

Tom only shrugged and asked indifferently, "So? Why did you want to see me?"

Carter's already purple face had turned a few shades darker. Opening his mouth, he bellowed at Tom,

"I want you to explain this blasphemy I found in your room. For your sake, I hope you have a good explanation."
Carter angrily pointed at something. Tom's cold gaze followed and found a book lying on the desk. His eyes grew wide as he took in the book's ancient leather cover. Tom's body froze over with shock. Even without having to read the book's title he recognized it: Curses and Counter-Curses. He had borrowed it from Hogwarts' library and had taken it with him back to the orphanage. Tom had hidden it away in his room, so no Muggle would see it.

As Tom stared at his book lying on Carter's desk, anger was swelling up in him. How dare that Muggle touch his things? How dare he lay his filthy worthless fingers on something that belonged to the magical world? Tom's eyes snapped back at the man and he hissed darkly, "That's mine!"

Tom made to grab the book but Carter was faster. Quick as lightening, he stepped away from his desk. He forcefully grabbed Tom's upper arm and held him firmly, stopping him from getting the book.

"Let go!" Tom ordered while he tried to pull away.

Carter wasn't in the least bit impressed. He painfully tightened his grip on Tom. His eyes glinted with anger as he thundered furiously, "So, you admit that this monstrosity is yours? That you are doing the devil's work?"

"You have no right to touch my things," yelled Tom furiously.

Carter raised his hand and slapped Tom across the face. A cry of pain and surprise left Tom. His free hand shot to his cheek.

Carter still held him tightly and hissed threateningly, "Mrs Cole warned me about you, boy. I will see to it that you learn respect."

Tom had got over his initial shock and redoubled his efforts to get away from the man. How dare that filthy Muggle hit him? Unfortunately, Carter was a rather brawny man and had no problems restraining a twelve-year-old Tom.

"Let me go!" Tom yelled angrily.

Carter's grip on him tightened again and Tom hissed in pain. The man snatched the library book and wrenched Tom over to the wood-burning stove. "I will not tolerate your unchristian behaviour, boy. The work of the devil will never prevail under this roof," Carter exclaimed loudly as he took Tom's book and threw it into the fire.

Tom stared in shock as the pages of the book blackened and crumbled. He was brought out of his stupor as a brutal hand clasped a fistful of his dark hair and shoved his face closer to the fire. Heat burned on Tom's face as Carter hissed at him, "Believe me, boy, this is where you go if you do not do penance."

With force, Tom tried to rip himself free of Carter's vice like-grip. He kicked out at the man and tried to wriggle free. A hiss left Carter as Tom's heel collided with his shin. He didn't let go of Tom, though. Instead Carter hauled him over to the office door.

"Get your hands off me!" Tom yelled at the man.
"I'm going to put you back on the right path, Tom," Carter hissed menacingly. "You will renounce
the devil."

Tom fought to get free as Carter pulled him over to the staircase. Fighting tooth and nail, Tom still
couldn't prevent to be dragged down to the cellar.

"No wonder you are such a depraved boy," Carter stated sharply as they reached the cellar. "Your
mother was a whore from the circus, eh? Getting herself pregnant with a bastard, that's the only
thing she could do."

Tom gritted his teeth as he heard it. "I'm not a bastard!"

The man didn't react but just brutally hauled him down a dark, damp passageway.

"You should be grateful Cole took a disgusting monster like you in. I would have thrown you in the
streets," Carter said cruelly as he opened a metal door and hurled Tom into the room behind.

Tom staggered and almost lost his balance. He could barely glimpse damp concrete walls and
mildew on the floor, as once again Carter grabbed him. Tom gasped in pain as he was hit across
the face. This time he managed to yank free and dashed for the door. His hand already closed
around the handle as Tom felt someone grabbing him by the collar. Then he was hurled away and
violently collided with the concrete wall. Tom fell to the floor. He held his aching shoulder as he
stared up at Carter with wide eyes. The man loomed over him, his face purple with anger.

"I won't let you infect the other children with your satanic ways." Carter accentuated his
exclamation with a kick. "This is a house of honest, hardworking people. We are devoting our lives
to the Lord."

Tom gasped in pain as another kick hit him in the side. He lay crumbled on the floor and pressed
himself against the wall behind him as Carter continued to hit and kick him. There was a metallic
taste in Tom's mouth and he could feel blood flowing freely from his nose. Uselessly he tried to
protect himself against the blows with raised arms. Soon Tom felt dizzy from the pain and his
breathing was laboured.

Over the pain, he barely noticed that the kicks had stopped. Cautiously, Tom opened his eyes.
Through a mist he made out Carter standing over him. There was something silvery in the other's
hand. Tom gasped in pain as the man suddenly stepped on his left hand. Carter bent down to him
and Tom realized it was a knife the man held in his hand. Tom weakly tried to get away. His fingers
were still crushed under the man's heel as Carter sliced the knife deep into Tom's arm. Tom
whimpered in pain as the knife was dragged through his flesh all the way from his wrist up to his
upper arm. Instantly dark red blood flowed from the deep cut.

Sharp pain clouded Tom's mind and his whole body trembled. Then he was grabbed by the collar
and yanked up. Tom moaned painfully. He cracked his eyes open and stared at Carter's face.

"If I ever find you again with something unholy like that book," Carter hissed at him, menace in his
voice. "I will kill you, Tom."

His hand tightened around Tom's collar, almost choking him.

"Do you understand?"

Carter's eyes were full of hate as they bored into Tom's. Tom could barely breathe, still he managed
to choke out,
"Yes."

Carter let go of him. Tom's body weakly fell down on the concrete floor. He squeezed his eyes shut and curled into a tight ball. Pain wracked his body. Over his agony he heard the steps of Carter as he left the chamber. The heavy metal door fell shut behind him. Tom heard the sounds of it being locked. He was left behind, bleeding and hurt, lying on the dirty floor of the room.

Tom lay there, forever it felt. Hours and days. His mind was drifting. This way and that. He couldn't follow it anymore. There was only pain. And fear. He was terrified. He could feel everything slipping away. His body was hot with fever but Tom still trembled uncontrollably and felt icy cold. His cut arm hurt incredibly. Every movement sent agonizing jolts of pain through his whole body. He was so thirsty but there was no water. No-one to look after him. And Tom was scared. His body and his mind were deserting him. He knew he somehow had to survive against all odds. Tom begged his magic to help him. It was the only thing he could rely on. He forced himself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. Even the pain was better than to be sucked into the darkness.

He didn't want to die…

Yes, that had been the moment, Tom realized. The moment as he had been at his lowest and as he had finally understood. Back then Tom had seen the truth and his path. Away from weakness and death. Away from his useless mother and his filthy Muggle father. He didn't need them. He didn't need anyone. He had his magic and his power. It was enough for him. How could he have forgotten? Tom wondered, disgusted with himself.

'You are a monster.'

Even she thought so. Hermione was a weakness. He didn't need her. A storm of anger was building up in Tom. She had side-tracked him. Full of lies. He had believed her. Believed in her. He had been blinded by her kindness. It had all been lies. Tom's magic left his body and crackled around him. It was purely dark, full of anger and hate. Tom closed his eyes and enjoyed his magic's fury.

'I love you.'

Her voice echoed through his head and made Tom's stomach knot with a strange feeling. His eyes shot open. Lies, lies, lies… his magic whispered to him. Cold as ice it wrapped around Tom's mind. Even if it was no lie, it didn't matter. Tom had his power and his magic. He did not need anything else. Not her, not anyone. He was no monster. Tom was different. Better. It was time he again followed his path. He would be invincible. The darkness of death would no longer threaten him.

Tom turned away from the castle and looked over to where the ground gate of Hogwarts was situated. In a weird way Carter had started it all, hadn't he? Consequently he should have the honours…

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Hermione furrowed her brow as she stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Tom was no-where to be seen. She had left him behind here. Then again, she had been gone for quite some time. Still, Hermione desperately needed to find Tom.

'You suck the life out of everything!'

Hermione shuddered at her own harsh words. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her magic. The bond between Tom and her still didn't sit right with her but on this occasion she was going to use it. She summoned her magic and let it freely danced around her. There was a slight but
noticeable pull on her magic into one direction. A smile washed over Hermione's face. That was Tom. He seemed to have wandered very deep into the Forbidden Forest. Maybe Hermione should have worried about that but she was just glad she had found him. Her magic was eager to envelope her and Hermione apparated to Tom.

As Hermione stepped out of the pressure of apparition, she was instantly hit by a wall of dark magic. She gasped in surprise. The magic was heavy in the air, surrounded everything and tore at her painfully. Hermione found herself in a small clearing, enclosed by a wall of trees. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the tree tops and the clearing was dived into semi darkness. But Hermione didn't realize all of this as her gaze was drawn to the source of all this dark magic. Tom was standing in the middle of the clearing. He hadn't noticed her yet. Hermione could feel waves of angry dark magic flowing from him. Then she spotted a figure lying on the forest floor. Hermione took a sharp breath of air as she recognized that person. She had seen that man before; he was the patron of Tom's orphanage, Carter. He was lying, unconscious, on the ground. Right beside him, lay a book. It was opened and the white of its pages stood out in the darkness. Horror wrapped around Hermione so tightly, she could barely breathe. She recognized that black book. It was a diary.

Trembling all over, Hermione took a step towards Tom. He still hadn't noticed her but his magic ripped at her furiously. It hurt as she moved and she was slowed down. It was like wading through a thick layer of mud. Suddenly Tom waved his wand and a bright white light emerged from its tip. The light flew through the air and circled above the fallen form of Carter and the diary beside him. Then the light descended slowly and split in two. One part wrapped around Carter's body the other lingered over the diary to then, after a few seconds, be sucked into its pages.

Fear flooded Hermione. She knew what was going on, though she had never witnessed such a ritual. This was the creation of a Horcrux. Tom wanted to create his first Horcrux! Mercilessly panic consumed Hermione completely. She couldn't let him do that.

'You are a depraved monster!' Her cruel words flew around her mind. Hermione still tried to get to Tom. He was only a few metres away from her, but the nearer she got the more difficult it was to break his dark magic down. She could feel strands of this overwhelmingly strong magic slashing at her. She tried to protect herself with her own magic, but still fine cuts appeared on her hands and face. A drop of blood trickled down her cheek. Tom still hadn't noticed Hermione, too deeply immersed was he in the dark ritual.

But he wasn't yet finished. Hermione could still see life in Carter's body. He breathed and twitched slightly while the bright light snaked around him. Tom hadn't killed him yet. It was then that Tom raised his wand and panic flooded Hermione. She could already see the dark curse as a faint green sheen at the tip of Tom's wand. He was going to kill Carter. He was going to rip his soul in two.

"Tom!" Hermione yelled desperately, before he could finish this darkest of all curses.

Tom hesitated as he heard her voice. He didn't lower his wand, but he turned his head towards her. Hermione gasped softly as she saw his face. It was a blank mask, impenetrable and completely emotionless. But his eyes… they were blood red, shining eerily in the twilight. They looked like embers, smouldering with hate. Nothing of Tom was left in those eyes.

"Tom, stop!" Hermione yelled.

There was not even a glint of recognition in his eyes as they wandered unblinkingly over her form.

"Please, you have to stop," she pleaded, her soft voice shaky.

Tom's gaze wandered to Carter, then it shot back at her.
"Why?" he asked and his voice was icy cold.

"Stop this," Hermione whispered desperately. "You can't do this. It's wrong."

"You want to save him," Tom stated in his soft, dangerous voice.

Hermione shook her head vehemently, while she still struggled to get nearer to Tom. His magic, though, stopped her. As much as she tried, his dark magic pushed her violently back.

"Of course you want to protect that man from me," Tom said softly, though the frighteningly cold undertone never left his voice. "Because I'm evil. I'm a monster."

He turned away from her and Hermione could feel his magic intensifying.

"NO!" she yelled as Tom started to wave his wand. "I'm not here to save him."

There were tears rolling down her cheeks as she watched Tom hesitating. He didn't finish his spell but again faced her.

"Not him?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"No," Hermione shook her head. Then she whispered, "This is only about you."

As he heard her, a sinister smirk curled up the corners of Tom's mouth.

"Me?" he asked, a vicious edge in his tone.

"You." Hermione looked at him pleadingly. "Only you. I don't want you to turn into that monster."

Suddenly, the dark magic around her wrenched even more forcefully at her. Hermione winced in pain as she felt that power on her body.

"Too late," Tom said in that horribly calm tone. "I already am a monster. You want to change me. But this is what I am."

Tom spread his arms while a cruel mocking smirk played around his mouth. Then he said, enunciating each word clearly,

"I am a murderer."

Hermione took in a shaky breath as she looked at that impenetrable cold mask on Tom's face. His eyes burned in a crimson colour as they bored into her.

"I know who you are," she said faintly. "I love you. Don't leave me."

His eyes flared up dangerously as he heard her. Then Tom sniggered darkly.

"You don't love me," he replied cruelly. "You love Tom Riddle. But he is a lie. He never existed. I'm Voldemort."

"No no," Hermione cried desperately. "It doesn't matter what you want to call yourself, I love you."

There was a flicker of doubt churning up the crimson colour in his eyes. But then it was gone and he said, his voice hard as steel,

"Too late. You were right. I am a monster."
Tom turned away from her. Hermione watched in horror how he waved his wand. She knew those wand movements and she knew that horrible power, building up around the wand's tip. It was a cold force. Merciless and without forgiveness. It was the only curse that could not be taken back. Its consequences were ultimate and irreversible.

Hermione could not let Tom do this to himself. There was no way she would let him hurt himself. She had to stop that.

Tom's dark magic was still everywhere. It flooded the whole area and stopped her from moving. Hermione summoned every bit of her own magic. She could feel it pulsing through her. A warm power. It had changed so much over the time, but it felt so good. So reassuring. Hermione let that power leave her body.

As her magic wrapped around her, Hermione suddenly felt how Tom's dark magic stopped to assault her. Instead the two forces mingled. Hermione wasn't really surprised. After all, her magic belonged to Tom. He was its master. Why should Tom's magic fight a part of itself? She let her magic mesh with Tom's. Now she couldn't use her magic anymore but Hermione could move again.

She watched how Tom pointed his wand at Carter. Beginnings of a curse were gathering at the tip of his wand. Hermione could smell it in the air. It left behind the disgusting taste of decay and putridity on her tongue.

She closed her eyes. Hermione was scared but she knew what she had to do. Her hand fisted around the silky material of Harry's cloak of invisibility. It was reassuring to have a piece of her past to accompany her. Even Tom's ring would be with her as it still hung around her neck. She wasn't alone. Her magic flowed around her. Strands of Tom's magic were woven into it. It felt so comfortable and familiar. Hermione breathed out slowly.

Then she heard Tom's voice. It was no surprise.

"Avada Kedavra."

Hermione's eyes shot open and she sprinted towards Tom. A green curse swished through the air towards the unconscious form of Carter. That man was going to get hit, but it was Tom who was going to die. Hermione had to save him.

The curse was unblockable. Once freed it wouldn't disperse without taking life. Hermione didn't hesitate, but plunged herself between Tom and Carter, right into the course of that green light.

Tom needed to be saved.

The curse soared towards her, crackling with raw power. The last thing she saw before the curse hit her was the crimson red disappearing, leaving behind soft grey eyes. They widened in fright. Hermione marvelled that softness, which had finally managed to dispel the hate completely.

After all, Horcruxes could only be born from coldblooded, remorseless murder.

The green light crashed into her chest.

It didn't hurt.

{{{+}}}
Her eyelids fluttered as consciousness came back to Hermione. She groaned softly but didn't dare to open her eyes. The moment her mind woke, memories forcefully rushed back to her.

Darkness. Fear. A green light.

Hermione pressed her eyes tightly shut. Definitely, she had been unable to dodge that green light. She inhaled deeply, very conscious of the process of her lungs inflating with air. It should have been lost to her. Still, her chest rose and fell with her breathing. No pain. She had been hit square in the chest. Shouldn't there be pain?

The green light, it had hit her.

There should be no pain, no breathing, no thoughts anymore….

…nothing…

Fear flashed through Hermione so forcefully, her head swirled from it and her pulse thundered in her ears. What had happened to her? Slowly, fearfully, Hermione cracked her eyes open. Bright white light blinded her. Shouldn't it be dark? Surely night had already fallen. Her eyes watered from the white light and Hermione shakily got up into a sitting position. She had to blink a few times and rubbed her eyes. They still burned but finally she could make things out. She sat in the middle of a white, seemingly endless, plane. Hermione turned her head. The whiteness extended as far as she could see. The sky was white, too. Or was that the ceiling? She couldn't tell. The air was stale and all sounds were strangely muffled.

Where was she?

Slowly Hermione tried to stand up. Her body felt strangely light. No tiredness weighted her down. She looked down at herself, checking for injuries. In confusion she noticed that she was wearing a tight black t-shirt and black jeans but no shoes nor socks. Those clothes weren't forties compatible and she hadn't been wearing them but had been clad in her usual Hogwarts' uniform. How odd. As Hermione ran her hands over the new clothes, she noticed that her silvery right hand was gone. In its stead was her normal one, made of flesh and bone. Hermione furrowed her brow. This was odd. Upon further inspections she realized that the Invisibility Cloak and the Gaunts' Ring were gone. Frantically Hermione turned around herself and searched the floor. Neither the ring nor the Invisibility Cloak was anywhere to be seen. Slowly her fuzzy mind picked up speed and Hermione tensed as she remembered the reason that green curse had hit her.

Tom.

He had been right in the process of making a Horcrux. And then… Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and her hand flew to her face. Tom had hurled the Killing Curse at Carter. And she had… That curse had hit her… Hermione's eyes snapped open. The endless white plane was still there. The eerie silence was deafening. What was going on here? Her fear spiralled up even further. She needed to get away from here. *Fast!* Not hesitating anymore, Hermione pictured that clearing in the Forbidden Forest then she twirled on the spot.

Nothing happened.

The white plane still surrounded her. Anxiously, Hermione called her magic. However hard she tried, though, nothing answered. Her magic was gone and finally Hermione fell into a panic.
Where was she?

There was nothing here. Just this endless white plane and strange sky. She was alone. Hermione's breathing quickened and she started to tremble helplessly. She took a few tentative steps. But where should she go? Wherever she turned there was just whiteness. Nothing else. It was just her here, no-one else. Nothing. What was this?

"Tom?"

Hermione's strangled voice was lost in the endlessness of the white plane and her call remained to be unanswered. She took in deep shaky breaths. Her head swirled and she started to hyperventilate as the truth formulated in her mind. There was no denying: The killing curse* had* hit her. Then… was she…? W- was she…?

A sound coming from near-by stopped that disturbing thought from fully taking form in her mind. The sound was soft and muffled at first. The more Hermione listened, though, the clearer it got. It was a thumping sound like something was flailing and struggling. It sounded so pitiful, like some kind of creature was in pain and helplessly tried to escape. Somehow, though, those flapping sounds made Hermione's hair stand on end and she shuddered in displeasure. She couldn't help but feel like she was hearing in on something indecent. Something furtive. Her eyes searched for the source of this twisted sound. She spun on her spot and it wasn't long and she spotted a bundle lying on the white floor some distance away from her. She was quite sure it hadn't been there just moments before.

Clearly, those thumping and whimpering noises came from that bundle. Something lay there, carelessly wrapped in rags. Slowly and tentatively, Hermione inched closer to that small heap. Strangely as she got nearer inexplicable fear began to twist up her stomach. Why was she afraid of that thing?

Finally Hermione stood before the bundle. She swallowed down disgust as she stared at the thing. It distantly resembled a small child but it was grotesquely deformed. Arms were too long and thin, the torso was out of proportion and the face was bizarrely distorted. It gave the creature a disturbing, haunted appearance. It lay on its side and probably hadn't noticed Hermione's presence but continued to flail weakly. Looking at the thing made chills darting down Hermione's spine and she shuddered with revulsion. She was surprised how much fear coursed through her.

Why was she so afraid of this small thing?

It made her feel ashamed of herself. Whatever it was, it seemed to be wounded. Its skin looked rough and raw while it lay there curled up helplessly on the floor. It still struggled and flapped frailly, whimpering pitiable. Hermione took another reluctant step towards it. Disgust churned up her stomach but she crouched down in front of that thing. It still hadn't noticed her presence but continued to whimper and struggle. It was clearly injured and seemed to be in need of help.

Still, Hermione couldn't help but feel nauseated just by looking at it. That thing was disgusting and she really didn't want to touch it. Hermione was unsure of what to do. As she stared at the creature, a new wave of irrational fear welled up in her. She wanted to leave the twisted creature as it was unbearable to remain in its presence. Just as she made to get up, the thing again whimpered painfully and Hermione felt horrible for not helping.

Reluctantly, she extended a trembling hand towards the thing. She wanted nothing more than to run away but she wasn't going to do it. Whatever that thing was, she was not going to abandon it. It was hurt and needed her help. The tips of Hermione's fingers touched the raw looking skin and she shuddered. It felt so cold. But now that she touched it, the creature had stopped to struggle and
whimper.

"I always knew you are the braver one of us."

Hermione yelped in surprise as she heard a voice. She jumped up from the ground and spun around. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she instantly recognized the speaker. Her mouth opened slightly but she was unable to say a word.

"What? Not happy to see me?" Harry Potter smiled at her mischievously.

His incredibly green eyes wandered over her. They were glistening with laughter, just like they had used to before everything had gone bad. Hermione still stood there, riveted to the spot. She was unable to do more than stare at Harry in shock. He was smiling at her affectionately. It was really him. How?

Tears were starting to run down Hermione's cheeks then she broke from her stupor and ran over to him. She practically flew into his waiting arms and clung to him for dear life.

"Harry!" she cried as she held to him tightly.

The tears still flowed from her eyes as he wrapped his arms around her. This was impossible. Hermione could feel his arms. As if he were really here. As if he wasn't…

… dead.

Very slowly Hermione raised her head and looked up at Harry's face. She found him still smiling at her softly. But he was dead. Did that mean…?

"Am I dead?" Hermione asked him in a shaky voice.

The smile on his face widened and he shook his head. "No, Hermione, I believe you are not."

She looked up at him in confusion and asked, "W- where are we?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Harry answered as he wiped the tears from her face.

Hermione frowned. Why should she know? Harry released her and she took another look around. Suddenly the white plane was gone. They were now in what seemed to be a room. Pale yellow wallpapers were on the walls while on one side of the room was a huge window and a glass door. Outside Hermione spotted a terrace, a garden with grass and beyond that a hedge. There even stood an old swing on the small patch of grass. Warm sunrays shone into the room.

It was familiar.

Hermione somehow knew that soft sofa standing in front of the window. She also knew that class cabinet standing at one side of the room. And the dining table with the three chairs around, that was awfully familiar, too. Hermione looked back at Harry and her voice broke as she said,

"I'm home."

Harry smiled at her and said in a gentle voice, "Of course."

He walked over to the sofa and sat down. Hermione wiped a solitary tear away that had been trickling down her cheek. Her eyes still wandered over the beloved room. She had never expected to see it whole again. She didn't question as to how she could be here, she was just incredibly happy to see it again. It was the living-room of her parents' house.
Hermione slowly walked over to Harry and sat down beside him on the dark green sofa. It was a horribly ugly sofa, Hermione thought with a smile on her face. And it was wonderfully comfortable. She had always loved it. She closed her eyes and breathed in. It even smelled like she remembered it. Suddenly the tears streamed down her face and then sobs shook her body.

She was home.

"How is that possible?" she asked between the sobs. "It burned down. It's gone."

"Yes," came Harry's calm reply. "It's gone. Although you might also argue that it hasn't even been built yet."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "How can you be here anyway? You- you've not been born yet. How… how can you be… dead?"

Harry smiled at her and said amused, "You know, after you die time suddenly stops to be of any importance. Here, it has no meaning. I am exactly where I need to be."

Hermione stared at him, not really able to take all in. Harry was sitting on the sofa and leaned comfortably against the backrest while he still smiled at her. Suddenly there was the whimpering sound again. Hermione's eyes searched the room until she found that horrible creature lying not far away from the sofa. It looked even more disgustingly out of place lying in her parents' living room. Hermione shuddered as she watched it. Obviously Harry had followed her gaze and soothed her, "Don't worry about it."

Hermione looked back at him. This got stranger and stranger.

"W- what happened to me?" she asked weakly. "What is this place?"

He shrugged lightly before he said, "Who knows really?"

She furrowed her brow, panic swirling through her whole body. "I- I should be dead. It was the Killing curse. It hit me." Desperately Hermione stared up at Harry and gestured at her chest. "Right here."

Harry chuckled merrily and winked at her. "The unblockable curse. It's gotten quite the joke. Didn't kill me as a baby and now it didn't manage to kill you either."

Hermione stared at him, bewildered. As she so looked at him she noticed that the scar on his forehead was gone. Hermione shook her head. Her mind was being slowed down by confusion and fear.

"How?" Hermione whispered shakily. "The Killing curse definitely hit me."

"I don't really know. I can only guess," answered Harry lightly. "But considering everything, it actually would have been a surprise if that curse had managed to kill you."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "What do you…?"

Harry grinned and teased lightly, "Dear old Hermione, you always need an answer to everything, hm?"

Hermione looked at him helplessly. Nothing made sense. As her thoughts danced around Tom's Killing Curse, she suddenly remembered another green light. Back then it hadn't flown towards her.
No, it had left her wand. Hermione quickly averted her eyes from Harry. How could she have forgotten? It was her fault. Everything, everything was her fault.

"I am so sorry, Harry," she whispered in a grave tone.

"What are you sorry about?" Harry asked curiously.

"It was my fault," she said in a hollow voice. "My fault that Ron died. And that you died."

Her eyes wandered reluctantly back at him. Then Hermione opened her mouth and, while staring into those deep green eyes, spoke the horrible truth,

"I killed you."

For the first time she could see anger on Harry's face. Fearfully she shied away from him, knowing that he would surely blame her now. He had every right to do so. She deserved to be hated for what she had done. Hermione stiffened as Harry grabbed her shoulders and forcefully turned her around so that she fully faced him. Timidly she looked up into his angered eyes. Then Harry said in a furious tone,

"Don't you ever blame yourself, Hermione. Don't you ever think that you are responsible for our deaths."

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard him say that. He didn't blame her?

"But… it was my fault," she breathed in a weak voice. "I made mistakes. I was not strong enough. And then you died."

She still looked into his eyes though she didn't want to face them. He should be blaming her. Why didn't he blame her? She broke down again and cried.

"I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to kill you," Hermione sobbed, begging for forgiveness.

Harry pulled her over to him and wrapped his arms around her. He held her gently as he insisted,

"You didn't kill me."

Hermione still cried. She surely deserved to be despised for the things she had done.

"I couldn't stop Bellatrix. And then she murdered Ron," she sniffed tearfully. "I hurled the Killing Curse at you."

"Oh, Hermione, Hermione," Harry crooned to her while his hand rubbed over her back. "You are not responsible for everything that goes wrong in the world. Ron knew what he was getting into. He was a strong wizard. And it was Bellatrix who cast that curse at him, not you."

Hermione still sobbed. "Then what about you? That time, it really was me. Because I cast the Killing curse."

Harry ended the embrace and Hermione shuddered. Finally he had seen her guilt, hadn't he? She mustered up all her courage and looked at him. There was a serious expression on his face and Hermione bit her lip.

Then Harry spoke, his voice serious, "As you hurled that curse at my body, I was already dead. You certainly didn't kill me, Hermione. You don't have to feel guilty about it. It should be me feeling guilty."
Her head swirled. What was he going on about? Staring in confusion up at Harry, Hermione managed to ask,

"Why?"

Harry smiled at her sadly as he answered in a grave voice, "It was my job to stop Him. But I couldn't do it. I underestimated him; I made mistakes."

Harry looked at her and she thought there was something akin to pride in his green eyes.

"But you, Hermione," he continued and that proud smile on his face brightened. "You succeeded. You stopped him in the end. You have no idea how very grateful I am. If you hadn't cast the Killing curse at my body, Voldemort would have continued to possess me and would have used my body to bring about his dark realm."

'You stopped Him. You stopped Him. You stopped Him'

Harry's words flew around Hermione's head. Harry was grateful that she had stopped him? Voldemort? Guilt. Harsh brutal guilt burned up in Hermione and made her feel sick. She had done no such thing! She had stopped no-one. Hermione trembled heavily. Harry shouldn't be grateful. He should feel nothing but disgust for her. Because she had betrayed his trust. Right after Harry had died she had gone and befriended the enemy. She had started to like him. She had kissed him. She had… Hermione looked down at her hands in her lap. She didn't dare to look into Harry's eyes as she whispered fearfully,

"Harry. I am a horrible person. Do you even know what I have done?"

There was a short pause, but then came Harry's calm answer,

"Yes."

Hermione inhaled sharply. More tears welled up in her and rolled down her cheeks. Her voice quivered with fear as she said, "I'm sure you despise me now… hate me."

Harry's soft voice answered her, "No, Hermione. Never."

Fearfully, she raised her head and her eyes hesitantly wandered to his. Hermione expected Harry to rage at her but he just sat there and smiled at her.

"But… look what I have done." Hermione felt terribly sick while she stared into those soft green eyes. "I betrayed you. I betrayed everyone."

More tears were running down her cheeks as she confessed in a shaky voice,

"I betrayed Ron."

Hermione wiped the tears away, hiding her face behind her hands. She stiffened as she felt Harry's arms around her. He was holding her protectively while he whispered in her ear,

"Don't say that. You did not betray us."

New tears ran from her eyes and Hermione sobbed, "Yes, I did. He killed so many people, Harry. He's the reason you had to go through so much pain. He murdered your parents. And what do I do? I start to like him."

Harry embraced her even tighter then he said, "You love him."
New sobs shook her body but she managed to say, "Yes."

Harry ended the embrace and Hermione was sure that he would abandon her now. He was surely disgusted by her. What she had done was unforgivable. Hermione didn't want to see the hate in Harry's green eyes and averted her gaze. Tugging at a strand of her curly hair, he teased lightly,

"Why do you look so sad? Love is always a good thing, isn't it?"

Hermione stared up at him and stammered, "You... you... Why are you not angry with me?"

"Why should I be?" Harry asked, clearly amused by her puzzlement.

"Because he's Voldemort," Hermione said forcefully and winced at how terrible it sounded.

Harry waved her remark away with a hand and said as if it was no issue, "Yes, he is."

Hermione stared up at him. She was unable to understand why he was so acceptant about the whole thing. He should be raging at her, cursing her. So she opened her mouth to tell him the horrible, painful truth,

"He's evil, Harry."

Another smile formed on Harry's face. It was the last thing Hermione had expected to see.

"I was one of his Horcruxes, Hermione. Do you know what that means? I had a part of him in my mind. So, I know him quite well." Harry leaned towards her a little bit as if he wanted to tell her a big secret then he whispered amusedly, "No-one is completely good or completely evil."

"What?" Hermione couldn't say more.

"Don't get me wrong." Harry leaned comfortable back on the sofa and scanned her, his eyes sparkling softly. "Lord Voldemort was a very dangerous man. He was a murderer and had to be stopped."

He laid a hand on Hermione's forearm as he continued in his kind voice, "Lord Voldemort was very sick. He had a lot of issues and was unable to deal with them. Then he created those Horcruxes and mauled his already rather mutilated soul even further. However much he tried to fight it, though, he was still human."

Hermione shook her head. How could Harry remain so calm? She had done the worst thing possible. Maybe Harry was right and Tom wasn't completely evil but still that didn't make him a nice person. There was a horribly dark side in him. Didn't this whole thing prove his evilness anyway? Tom had been in the process of creating a Horcrux as Hermione had stopped him. And then she had got hit with his Killing curse.

"We both know that he is a dark wizard, Harry." Hermione said in a dead tone. "And he hasn't changed one bit since I've met him. How can you say that I'm not betraying you and everything we have fought for?"

There was an amused twinkle in his eyes as Harry said, "I don't think he is as dark as you now make him out to be. I know you, Hermione. And I know that you wouldn't have fallen in love with him if you hadn't seen some hope in him. Something good."

Hermione bit her tongue as she looked at Harry's still smiling face. Why did he keep defending Tom? Harry was the last person she had ever expected to take Tom's side.
"I'm not sure," Hermione whispered faintly. "There is so much darkness in him. Tom is capable of doing terrible and cruel things. We have seen it, Harry." She looked pleadingly at him. "We have seen what he can do. Still, I can't stay away from him. I really tried."

Harry was smiling at her. Why was he smiling? She didn't deserve his kindness. Hermione flinched as she could feel a warm hand on her shoulder.

"You think that there is no trace of goodness in him and that it is wrong for you to like him but you should trust your feelings in this," Harry's gentle voice soothed her. "You always think too much, Hermione."

Hermione stared at him. She couldn't believe it. Did Harry really forgive her everything? She had to make sure.

"Are you sure you want to forgive me? Forgive my betrayal?"

Harry just shook his head in exasperation then he told her, "There is nothing to forgive."

Hermione could see honesty shining in his eyes. She breathed in deeply. Suddenly she heard the whimpering noise again and her eyes fell on that strange bundle. This grotesque thing, it still lay there on the floor. It whimpered and winced so pitiably. But even though it looked so helpless, Hermione felt disgusted by the thing.

"What is that?"

"Hmm, I thought you would have been able to guess it by now." Harry tilted his head to one side. "Obviously not. Let me give you a hint then: It always follows me around wherever I go. And though it doesn't belong to me, it is a part of me."

Hermione furrowed her brow at him. What could that be? It didn't take her long. Her eyes widened in shock as she remembered what Harry had told her. He had said that Voldemort had been a part of his mind. Her eyes flew back to that pitiable creature lying on the floor. It couldn't be…

"That is Tom?" Hermione stuttered weakly.

"No, don't worry," came Harry's reply. "That thing is what remained of Lord Voldemort after he died."

Her eyes flew back at Harry and Hermione whimpered shrilly, "But they are the same."

"Not yet, no." Sadness shone in his Harry's eyes as they wandered over the whimpering creature. "That thing shows us what happens if we start to cut our souls into pieces. It's all that is left of Voldemort."

Hermione's eyes darted back at that thing lying on the floor. She felt suddenly sick as she looked at its red and raw skin and heard its painful whimpering noises. She tried to get up to hurry over to that thing… Tom… but a warm hand on her forearm stopped her. Her gaze shot back at Harry.

"You can't help him," he told her in compassionate tone. "It's too late."

Hermione stiffened as she heard him say that. He seemed to be very sure about it. Was it really too late? She couldn't believe it. She didn't want Tom to have to suffer like this. Harry's hand stroked reassuringly over her arm as he said in a soft voice,

"It was his own decision."
Hermione's eyes shot from Harry's deep green eyes to the thing lying on the floor and then back at Harry.

"But… if that really is Tom…" she whispered, her voice shaking with fear.

Harry shook his head while he smiled at her sadly, "I told you, it's not him. That thing is the last bit that remained of Lord Voldemort's soul after he had dismembered it beyond recognition."

Hermione furrowed her brow. Then she said slowly, "So, that happens when someone creates a Horcrux?"

Harry looked back at the whimpering heap on the floor. "I'm not sure. At least that is what happened to Tom Riddle after he decided to become immortal."

He looked at Hermione's scared face and a smile appeared on his face.

"You don't need to be so sad, Hermione," Harry told her in a soothing tone. "You stopped Tom from creating his first Horcrux, didn't you? That's the reason why you are here. So nothing's lost."

There was a mischievous glint in Harry's green eyes, as he suggested, "All you have to do is to stop him the next five times, too, and then everything should be all right."

Hermione watched perplexedly as Harry started to chuckle softly. She frowned at him and said, "You make it sound like it's so easy."

There was a big smile on his face as he answered her, "You shouldn't worry so much, Hermione. You are going to get grey hair from all your worrying. And while I do want to see you with grey hair someday, that is still years and years in the future."

Then Harry was serious again and he leaned a little towards her. "I know it's not easy. But I also know how strong you are. You really don't have to be so afraid of everything."

Hermione felt like drowning as she stared into Harry's brilliant green eyes. She could see so much affection in them, so much love. She again felt guilty. First it had been her stupidity that had cost her friends' lives and then she had started to like the very person that was responsible for their deaths. Now Harry forgave her everything and he even wanted her to be happy again.

Hermione blinked at him while she bit her lip nervously and asked fearfully, "You are really not angry with me?"

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Harry said and there was again a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "I told you, didn't I? You didn't do anything that could have made me angry."

Hermione scanned him anxiously but she couldn't find anything but honesty on his face. Still doubt ate at her. If she really wasn't guilty then why had the Elder Magic attacked her and sent her back in time. Why was she stranded in the wrong time period if she hadn't done anything to deserve it?

"Why have I been hurled back in time, Harry?" Hermione asked timidly.

"Ah, don't tell me that you think it is some kind of punishment," Harry exclaimed.

Hermione just continued to stare at him with huge eyes. Harry sighed softly then he laid a hand comfortingly on her arm before he said,

"The Elder Wand's magic never tried to hurt you. I even think it's meant to protect you."
Hermione broke eye contact with him and stared down at her hands. Then she whispered in a dull voice,

"I don't want to be protected by that dark magic."

There was a pause but then Harry replied in a quiet tone, "It's not dark."

Hermione stared at Harry. The Elder Wand had brought nothing but sorrow to the people wielding it. After all, Ignotus Peverell had been a Dark Wizard. Of course his creation could only be evil and dark. All too well, Hermione remembered her meeting with Grindelwald. He had told her everything about Peverell and his evil-doings.

"The Elder Magic is dark," Hermione insisted. "Peverell was a dark wizard and he created the Elder Wand. He was evil and so is the Elder Magic."

Harry smiled at her and told her kindly, "Don't judge him so harshly, Hermione."

"How can I not? He was evil," Hermione exclaimed in desperation. "He killed his own brothers just to get his hands on the cloak and the Resurrection Stone. Then he went and invented all sorts of dark curses."

She bit her lip hard before she continued, "I met Grindelwald, you know? He told me all about Peverell. He said Ignotus Peverell was the one who created Dark Magic. He started it all. How did Grindelwald call it...? Peverell created the original form of magic."

Hermione stared up at Harry with scared wide eyes. "If Dark Magic is the origin of it all, if that's the natural state of magic, then everything is rotten from the start. The Elder Magic is dark and I... I'm lost in it... I'm dark and evil."

"I would have expected more from you, Hermione," Harry teased and gingerly poked the tip of her nose with his index finger. "When we went to school together, I don't recall you ever believing anything without re-checking the information with other sources."

Hermione knitted her brow in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Harry beamed down at her and said, "Grindelwald told you a lot of things. Some were true and others... others were not."

"N- not true?" she stuttered weakly.

He shook his head. "There was more to Ignotus Peverell. Behind the names and the facts, there always is a whole story."

Harry reached out for Hermione and lovingly wiped a strand of her curly hair out of her face.

"We are all haunted by our ghosts," he told her pensively. "Sometimes they afflict us with fear or anger... regret. Sorrow or grief. We all have them: Things that just won't leave us in peace. Things that keep tormenting our souls. Ignotus Peverell had his own ghosts and so does Gellert Grindelwald. Tom Riddle certainly has them as well. Albus Dumbledore. You. Me. Everyone."

Hermione bit her lip painfully hard as she looked up at Harry's kind face. Then she mumbled confused, "I- I don't understand..."

Harry threw her a reassuring smile. Then he reached for her hand and held it in his own as he told her gently, "Ignatus Peverell was indeed a very gifted wizard. Sadly, during his time Peverell was..."
misunderstood. Wizards didn't want to accept him or his findings. Novelties often evoke fear. Peverell saw the rejection and he grew bitter over it. All his anger and hurt drove him to use his magic in ways that in turn again caused nothing but hate and suffering. That was the point in time when people started to call his way of magic, Dark Magic."

Hermione blinked as she took in all the information. Then she hesitantly asked, "But- but Peverell did create a new form of magic, didn't he? That's what Grindelwald told me. Peverell split magic in two. One force was the normal form of magic. And- and the other one, the new one, that was Dark Magic, wasn't it?"

Harry shook his head at her and explained softly, "Peverell certainly was a very powerful wizard but he did not split magic nor did he create any new form of magic. Magic has always been there. It did not need any creating. It is one force."

Hermione looked at him with confused eyes. "Peverell set magic free. That's how Grindelwald called it."

"Hm," Harry mused lightly. "That is a nice way of putting it."

"I don't get it. What is Peverell's way of magic then?" Hermione shook her head. Desperation was in her voice as she asked, "What is the Elder Magic inside me? Is it evil? Dark?"

"That is completely up to you," Harry told her reassuringly. "Peverell decided to use his magic the way he did out of hate and resentment. Gellert Grindelwald was driven by greed for power and a narcissistic belief that he alone knew the way that leads to salvation. Tom Riddle's life has never been easy from the start. Before he met you, Hermione, he didn't have much more than hate and a sadistic need to prove himself. All those wizards could be called dark, but it certainly wasn't their magic that turned them this way."

Hermione looked at Harry with wide eyes. "Harry, I don't ge-"

"Don't you see it, Hermione? The truth?" Harry cut over her. "Dark Magic does not exist."

She couldn't help but stare at him in disbelief. Finally she managed to choke weakly, "What?"

Harry's incredibly green eyes scanned her. "There always will be people who misuse their power and bring misery to others. I don't know if you should call them evil but their way of using their power is certainly destructive. If those people are wizards, then they may be called dark. But their magic itself? It's nothing but a tool."

He smiled at her as he continued to speak, "So, you see, the Elder Wand's magic is neither evil nor did it want to punish you by hurling you back in time. Today, it even saved you."

Hermione gulped as she thought back to Tom's Killing Curse that had hit her squarely in the chest. "You think the Elder Magic protected me against the Killing Curse?"

"Yes." Harry grinned at her. "Maybe the bond you share with Tom helped along the way."

"What?" Hermione squeaked. "You know about that, too?"

Harry chuckled in amusement as he scanned the panic on her face. "Yes. I know what Tom's done. He has bound your magic to him. I know you are not the Elder Wand but if you were, then Tom
Hermione still furrowed her brow at him. Then she asked unconvincedly, "And you think that... *bond* somehow saved me from his Killing Curse?"

"Hmm, I suppose so," Harry replied pensively. "I'm not sure how, though. Maybe the connection between you two is so strong that it can't even be broken by death. Or Tom's magic can't hurt you anymore, because it is partly your own magic. I really don't know. Then again, you are one of the Hallows now. And you had the other two with you as Tom's curse hit you. Actually I thought it was a rumour, but maybe the Master of Death really can't die."

A soft chuckle left Harry's mouth before he added amusedly, "But maybe the explanation is simpler. After all, for the Killing Curse to really work, you have to mean it. Without the desire to kill, the curse would inflict nothing more than a nosebleed."

Hermione blinked at Harry stupidly. Then she asked shakily, "So, either I'm Master of all three Hallows, or Tom simply didn't want to kill me. Is that it?"

Harry shrugged lightly. "I guess it's one of those things you just have to accept." As an afterthought he added, "Rather funny, isn't it? How you are now bound to Tom."

Hermione stared at Harry. The frown on her face turned into a scowl and she said bitingly, "Funny? I don't see how that's funny."

Harry just looked at her interestingly, a smile hovering around his mouth. Looking at her best friend, Hermione groaned softly and buried her face in her hands.

"I don't know what to do, Harry," she whispered shakily. "Tom lied to me, deceived me and manipulated me. And now look at me, he completely controls me. What shall I do?" She peered at him through her fingers. "I need to return to my time period and preserve the timeline. Still, I don't want to because I have nothing there anymore. But I can't stay in the past either because Tom literally *owns* me. What if he turns into Voldemort? Then he'll use me for his evil deeds."

Hermione lowered her hands and stared at Harry desperately. "I do love Tom and I don't want to leave him. But even if the Elder Magic inside of me is not dark... not evil... I'm afraid that sooner or later Tom will use that power he has over me. He will use the bond between us and force me to hurt people... kill them even. I... I wouldn't be able to live with that. I... just don't know what to do."

While he had listened to her, Harry had laid a reassuring hand on Hermione's arm. Now he gazed at her and told her gravely, "I know it's not easy for you, Hermione. Tom has the potential of causing a lot of evil and that is not going away just because he has you by his side. But by the looks of it, you already made your decision, didn't you?"

Hermione looked at Harry, insecurity in her eyes. Yes. She already had decided what to do, hadn't she? That was the reason she had not used the Hallows but had instead apparated back to Tom and had found him in the Forbidden Forest.

So Hermione nodded shakily. "I... I want to stay with Tom. But... I'm scared..."

"I know." Harry squeezed her arm comfortingly. "Tom is dangerous and he has a lot of power over you through that bond."

Hermione nodded weakly and Harry slid a bit closer to her on the sofa. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and said pensively, "I remember as I've been in Diagon Alley for the first time. I had just turned eleven and was about to go to Hogwarts. Of course I needed a wand. Do you know what
Ollivander told me as I wanted to buy a wand from him?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows and shook her head. Harry sent her a soft smile and continued, "He
told me that it's the wand that chooses the wizard. Not the other way around."

Hermione's eyes widened and she inquired, a little hopefully "W- what are you trying to say? That
I'm not forced to obey Tom? It's my… choice?"

Harry tightened his arm around her, pulled her into his side and supplied cryptically, "Maybe you
have replaced the Elder Wand, but you are certainly not just a piece of wood. You have a heart and a
mind of your own."

Hermione looked at Harry, trying to comprehend what he had just told her. After a moment of
silence she asked hesitantly,

"Why do you think the Elder Magic sent me back in time?"

Harry replied gently, "That, I don't know. Maybe the Elder Wand's magic just wanted to protect you
from any more grief in your own timeline. Or it might have felt you were needed back in the past."

Harry's vibrant green eyes wandered to that crying bundle that still lay on the floor.

"The Last Resort of Kings and Common Men… You know, Hermione, that doesn't always have to
mean war."

Hermione's gaze followed his and eyed the miserable creature on the floor. "Yes, you might be
right."

She continued to look at the bundle, whimpering so pitiable, and she swore to herself that she would
prevent that from happening again. She would prevent Tom from ever becoming this thing. Maybe
that was her last resort …or Tom's. Her thoughts were interrupted by Harry's kind voice,

"It is time."

Hermione unfixed her gaze from the crying creature on the floor and looked back at Harry. He was
still sitting beside her and Hermione felt so warm and protected as she looked into his emerald green
eyes. Only slowly his words registered to her.

"Time for what?" she asked him hesitantly, somehow dreading the answer.

Harry just smiled at her affectionately. "For you to go back."

Hermione's eyes widened. Go back? She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to lose Harry again.
She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him desperately as she sobbed,

"Don't leave me again."

She felt his arms around her which only made her cry even harder.

"Everything's going to be alright," Harry crooned to her. "But you can't just stay here, Hermione.
There are people who would miss you very much. I'm sure Tom would."

Hermione still trembled but her sobbing died down. Then slowly, very slowly, she raised her head
and looked up at Harry's face. He smiled at her reassuringly as he caressed her cheek gently.
Hermione leaned into his touch while she stared in his startlingly green eyes. He was right. She
should go back. A small smile appeared on her face as she looked at Harry, her best friend, her
brother.

"I love you."

Harry's smile even widened.

"And I love you, Hermione. But now you have to go."

Hermione felt a tear trickling down her cheek as she looked at him and nodded.

White soft warmth engulfed her completely. Harry disappeared just like the sitting room of her parents' house. Hermione was floating in this warm softness. She felt so light. As if she didn't have a body to weight her down. It was so nice, being wrapped in this whiteness.

Then she remembered. Yes. She needed to go back. Hermione remembered her body and she drew in a deep breath of air.

She gasped and choked as she tried to breathe again. The world welcomed her back. And it did so with pain. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as she struggled for air. Her chest hurt. It burned like fire with every breath she took. There was the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. Her whole body felt so heavy and hurt all over. Her breathing was shallow and painful but Hermione was glad to be able to breathe at all. Slowly, things were starting to make sense. She had a body. It might hurt but that also meant that she could feel again. She could breathe.

She was alive.

Next she realized that she was lying somewhere. Hermione felt incredibly weak but she opened her eyes anyway. She was instantly met by wide, scared grey eyes. Then a fearful voice spoke to her,

"Hermione?"

She blinked slowly, trying to concentrate. It was difficult as she was so tired but then a figure swam into focus before her. Hermione recognized Tom. He was crouched down beside her. One hand was extended towards her but he didn't touch her. It looked as if he were too scared to touch her. As if he expected her to suddenly disappear should he touch her.

A smile stole on Hermione's face as she looked up at Tom. He seemed to be so incredibly scared. She had never seen him like this before. His grey eyes were fixed on her and she could see the panic and fear in them. She wanted to tell him that he didn't need to be so scared. That everything was okay. But she still felt so weak and tired. So, the only thing she could croak out was,

"… Tom…"

There was something flickering in his eyes as he heard her voice. It looked as if until now Tom
hadn't really believed that she was here. Now he hastily wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up a little, pressing her against his chest. Hermione felt how his body shook. He pulled her so tightly against him as if he intended to never let her go again. Her arms felt like lead but she still raised them and slid them around him. No words left her as Hermione held to him just as tightly as he held to her. She didn't intend to ever let Tom go either.

The End


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