His Persephone

by Reneehart

Summary

Hermione Granger is in a losing war, one causing the world to fall apart at the seams. Ever since the Battle of Hogwarts, things have only grown more dim, with Voldemort creating even more horcruxes and his army growing larger still. The order has been disbanded and those she loved are either dead or soon to be dead. But even when the world is at its darkest, light will find a way to break free, and she may be the key to turning the war around - long before it took a turn for the worst.

"1943? And you'd like me to...kill Tom Riddle?" Dumbledore shook his head, that annoying twinkle glowing thrice as bright as before. "No, my dear. I'd like you to join him."
The Grandfather Paradox

PART ONE: HADES

War does not determine who was right—only who is left.

-Bertrand Russell

CHAPTER ONE: THE GRANDFATHER PARADOX

'You may hate your grandfather, and decide to use a time machine to go back in time and shoot him long before his death. However, the universe will not allow effect (you) to come before a cause (your grandfather) and will create an instance where, no matter how skilled a marksman you may be, you will not be able to kill your grandfather, as your grandfather's death would prevent you from existing, thereby disallowing you to travel back in time to be the cause of your grandfather's death.'

-The Grandfather Paradox, as proposed by Rene Barjavel (A summary of his theory)

-xXx-

Albus Dumbledore placed the delicate china tea cup onto the saucer he held in his hand, nodding his thanks as an old witch moved around him, tapered and gnarly fingers twitching as she muttered wistfully under her breath. "Where is it, where is it?" she hummed, as though a calming mantra. Her voice echoed in the wide expanse of the room, a library built into an underground cavern. The stone walls, slick with moisture, had been carved and fitted with dark wooden shelves, each one filled with large and ancient tomes, stacks of disarrayed parchments, and artifacts that thrummed with magic—dark or otherwise. A fire pit had been haphazardly made, with magic used to create a makeshift flu, and the dark and cold living area was filled with all the efforts to make it warm and inviting. Giant area rugs that were stained to the point of being unrecognizable and large tapestries depicting prophecies of old adorned the space. Unfortunately, the naturally damp nature of a cavern led to them smelling of mold and mildew, something that made Dumbledore wrinkle his nose almost imperceptibly as he glanced around the space. A bed was shoved into the corner (do caves have corners?), and the mattress was worn to the point of caving in in the middle, the bottom of it poking out beneath the wooden bed frame. The blankets were thrown, crumpled atop the furniture, and books that were stacked on the adjacent desk were falling onto the pillow.

It was cramped, with the primary occupant seeming to be more books and knowledge than the actual witch before him, her stringy gray hair pulled sloppily into a plait with strands sticking outward as though under the influence of static. She was wrapped in multiple wool shawls, her fragile and aging body unsuited to handle the chill that came with being beneath the Earth's surface. Currently, she was gliding her finger along the spines of the various books, muttering her mantra still, until finally she hissed an 'aha!' and pulled one from the shelf, a large tome with gold gilded pages and faded lettering. The title could only be the point of being unrecognizable and large tapestries depicting prophecies of old adorned the space. Unfortunately, the naturally damp nature of a cavern led to them smelling of mold and mildew, something that made Dumbledore wrinkle his nose almost imperceptibly as he glanced around the space. A bed was shoved into the corner (do caves have corners?), and the mattress was worn to the point of caving in in the middle, the bottom of it poking out beneath the wooden bed frame. The blankets were thrown, crumpled atop the furniture, and books that were stacked on the adjacent desk were falling onto the pillow.

She turned around, shuffling back to Dumbledore and sitting down opposite him in a well-worn wing back chair. Reaching across the space between them, she handed him the book, a smile gracing a once pretty face that was now marked by deep wrinkles framing her lips and eyes.

"I believe this is what you were looking for, dear Albus," she answered, tipping her head in a nod.

He flipped through the pages, scanning the spells and potions to find the one he was looking for in particular, his white eyebrows furrowing. Finally, he came across it, and he splayed the book out on
his lap to read through the potion in detail.

After a moment, he glanced up, pressing the tome close and palming the cover. “Yes, Antheia. I do believe this is exactly what I was looking for.” He smiled at her, but the typical mirth and glimmer evident in his eyes was no longer there, diminished long ago from the brutality of war. Yes, the old man was aging faster than ever, it seemed.

They sat in companionable silence for several moments, sipping their teas and gazing into the fire that provided both essential heat and light to a place otherwise without. As the fire crackled in the air, the smile on Antheia’s face slipped as she looked at her dear friend, her expression turning somber.

“Do you truly think this will work?” she asked, her voice shaking.

He was thoughtful, his appraising gaze looking down at the cover in his lap. He wasn’t certain if it would, if he were being honest. But what other option was there? Tom’s army had grown exponentially powerful, and had taken a stranglehold over both worlds—wizarding and muggle. Many were killed, many were sold into slavery, and many went into hiding—sanctuaries and safe houses. Some simply cut themselves off from the world, with Antheia literally going underground to avoid the onslaught that waged before their eyes. No, they were out of options by now, everything else having failed or been exhausted. If there were ever hope of defeating Voldemort and reclaiming the world in the name of the light, this was it.

“I believe it will,” he answered, and her frowned deepened. She knew he wasn’t entirely confident, but remained silent, her lips pursed. “I assure you, I have someone in mind who is more than capable of this task. I have yet to approach her about this, but she is very brave and very aspiring. I have little doubt she will turn me down.”

At Antheia’s questioning look, he added, “A former student of mine. She is—was—a good friend to Mr. Harry Potter.”

She mouthed a silent o shape, her features relaxing as she leaned back and folded her hands on her lap. “Do you know how to find this witch? Last you told me, before his unfortunate passing, Potter and his friends were traveling all over God’s good earth in search of something or another,” she said, gesticulating wildly above her head.

“An ally of mine has been operating for our side in his ranks, and has been instructed that should the Death Eaters finally capture this witch, he is to take her to a safe spot as soon as physically possible. There is no longer a need for his information, and I do not believe his removed post from them will hinder us anymore than we have already been. After the incident at Moscow, Tom has focused his efforts on capturing her, and as smart and powerful as she is, it is only a matter of time before she is found. And Severus will be there to remove her,” he answered, focusing on the tea leaves in his now empty tea cup. The drenched leaves had formed themselves into interlocking circles, four in a row. He tutted, swishing what little water remained in the cup so that the leaves were swept away.

“And what if the potion is dangerous, Albus? It has never been tested, from what I am aware of. What if it undoes more than the war, what if it undoes the very fabric of time and our world? Is it truly worth the risk?” she posed, shaking her head and clucking her tongue as her startlingly green eyes begged with him, pleading him to be sensible.

Settling his tea cup and saucer down on the battered trunk-turned-table, he stood and smoothed the front of his lavender robes, pocketing the book. “I’m afraid, at this rate, the world will be undone regardless. Perhaps, this will give us a chance to stitch it back together.”

-xXx-
(Five months later...)

Run.

That was the only word playing through Hermione's mind as she did just that, her arms pumping in time with her legs as her body was propelled forward, the gravity pulling her as she ran down hill. She kicked rocks out from beneath her, trying hard to keep her footing on the uneven forest floor, her arms spreading out like wings every so often to keep her center of balance. The wind whipped at her face, freezing her cheeks that were stained with her blood, tears and dirt- all she could hear was it whistling past her, the shouts of the cloaked figures chasing her.

Run.

They were shouting at one another, their footsteps crunching hard on the leaves and sticks that coated the floor. The occasional crack and pop of spells and hexes cut through their jeers of 'mudblood'. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!” hissed a manic voice, followed by a sharp, jovial cackle. They were getting closer, and her breaths turned into frantic pants, her vision swimming into a blur. She couldn't see, but she didn't stop. She just kept obeying the commanding voice in her head, the deepest most subconscious part of her that disregarded heroism and martyrdom in favor of self-preservation.

RUN!

And suddenly she was falling, her foot catching in a hole in the ground and throwing her forward, the momentum keeping her going as her limbs pushed outwards, searching for purchase and finding none. A sickening crack followed by her strangled cry signaled a bone breaking, but she couldn't tell right from left, foot from hand at the moment. She kept plummeting, her neck lolling around despite her best efforts to curl her body inward. The forward motion only ended when her body smashed into a strong oak tree, her legs swinging around the base. It was punctuated by a loud snap in her ribs, and she attempted to yell but no noise was produced, her throat too raw. Her mouth stayed open in a wide 'O' shape as she screamed silently, tears pouring from her tightly clenched eyelids.

Keep running!

The noise was quickly approaching, coming louder and more deafening and she tried to push herself back up from the floor, only to have her wrist protest, sending shocks of pain and electricity all the way up her arm, her shoulder, and into her neck. She wanted so badly to follow the commands she was receiving, to keep going and run through the pain, but she physically was unable. She was barely able to before she began her escape, and she certainly couldn't now. All she heard was static, with the sounds of her captors seeming further and further away. Her vision was speckled gray scale, blurring along the outside perimeter, and only came into focus as the looming face of a death eater mask came into view.

Escape!

Her hand reached outwards, almost disembodied from her as she brazenly gripped the mask, slowly prying it off as the tip of his wand entered her pinhole vision. 'Show me your face, you coward,' she muttered, her voice the only thing she had left at this point. The mask fell forward, revealing the familiar face of her former potions professor. Her eyes fluttered closed, a small smile pulling on her lips.

Safe.

She briefly registered the sounds of the other Death Eaters coming into the same clearing, heard them
calling out to Snape. Suddenly she was hoisted in the air, Snape holding her bridal style as he cursed loudly, apparating the two of them away from the scene. The tug in her lower belly made her whole torso ache deeply, similar to her impact with the tree trunk, and she could feel her consciousness slipping from her.

'You better be worth it, you chit!' Snape drawled, and her final thought before giving into the darkness was, worth what?

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Wake up!

She groaned, her head feeling simultaneously light and heavy. Her entire body was congested, and thrummed with the dull numbness she recognized as the effects of pain potions. But she wasn't in pain- far from it. Enveloped in what felt like a cloud encompassing her, she couldn't recall that last time she felt so at ease and comfortable. Her feet rubbed against the cotton bed sheet, and she delighted in rolling her head on the soft and fluffy pillow beneath. A pillow! She hadn't felt since luxury since-

Suddenly, she sprung up from the bed, her eyes wretching open and squinting as light invaded her senses. She was dizzy, and she swayed from side to side as she tried to adjust her vision to focus on her new surroundings. She was in a room she didn't recognize, one that looked like it belonged to a little girl. The walls were colored a pale pink shade, with shelving units displaying dolls and stuffed bunnies and bears with the fake fur matted- a side effect of being loved too much. The bed she was on was small, and if she stretched her full length out her feet would be exposed over the end. The blanket was a worn and handmade quilt, and running her hand over it, she smiled as she observed some of the squares which were made with old t-shirts that were once favorites that had grown too small. A part of her wished to stay and wonder on the origin- who did this quilt belong to? Who made it? Were there any stories behind the patterns or fabrics that made it endearing?

But she couldn't. Her head was still heavy and rolling around her shoulder, and try as she might her memories of what lead to this moment were not coming to her. Instead, the voice that seemed to have sole control over her recently was telling her to go. To not stop. She couldn't afford it.

'But where do I go?' she thought, her rational side taking hold once more. She stood, raising herself gingerly as her body ached in response, and looked around the room as though for advice, startling when she caught sight of herself in a white framed mirror. She let out a shocked, self conscious shout and her hands flew to her head. Her wild mane of curls were gone, her hair reduced to possibly two inches in length, and her exposed ears seemed large and stuck out along her narrow face. She barely even had time to focus in on her face!- pale and sallow, her lower lip swollen and bruised with a large cut going through it. Deep purple bags made her eyes look sunken in, framed by ugly bruises and a myriad of cuts.

"The lion's lost her mane."

She whipped around at the bemused voice, gasping out in pain and falling to the ground. Just as soon as she fell, she was being picked up, with Severus Snape placing her down on the bed with startlingly gentle hands.

"Careful, girl! You're still healing!" he barked.

"W...what?" she muttered, berating herself for her lack of coherency. "Where...am I? What happened...?"
And then it came back. The manor, large and looming with steeples that reached out and pierced the heavens. The Death Eaters, taking turns torturing her. Her screams sounding dissonant to herself, echoing around the expansive ballroom. Days turned into nights, and she felt like an eternity had passed while she was in their hold. The terrifying, distorted face, even more serpentine than before, of Lord Voldemort as he used his own wand to inflict pain and torment on her. And then the escape. Her split decision to run and go, her animal like need to survive outweighing anything else. And then she was falling through the air to the ground, from heaven to hell. The white mask, the skull visage coming into view and replaced by...

“You!” she called, pointing her finger to Snape as though clarification was needed. “You...you...”

“Saved you?” he finished, raising a thick brow. “I know, it seems quit astonishing, but I assure you, your memory serves you correctly.”

“But...why? And how? You didn't compromise your position as a spy did you?!” At this, she started to stand, only to be pushed back down by the man before her, who growled at her inability to follow his orders.

She settled back into the pillow, trying to reign in her emotions as he pinched his long nose, a sigh escaping him. “You were captured by snatchers during your...excursion in Russia, and brought back to his manor. I was not aware of your initial arrival, as I was not invited to any meetings in the time. When I did learn, however, I was informed it was approximately a fortnight.”

Her jaw dropped, a tremor coursing through her body. “Two weeks?”

“Yes. You managed to escape when the Dark Lord received some troubling news-” he shot her a withering look when she started to ask about the news, and then continued. “The Death Eaters, foolishly, became distracted, and you took the opportunity and ran.

“Unfortunately, you had the grace of a new born calf and nearly broke your neck in the process.”

Bristling at being called a cow- even if a baby one- she narrowed her eyes at him and said, “You brought me back here then? You saved me?” Hesitantly, he nodded. “How did you explain it to the others? He didn't...blame you did he?” She gasped at this thought, a hand covering her mouth as she suddenly felt ridden with guilt. She couldn't bear to be responsible for his suffering, knowing full well what Voldemort did when he thought one of his servants had impeded a goal.

He snorted. “Had he gotten his hands on me, I would be dead.” At her furrowed brow, he scowled and explained, “You pulled my mask off after the others found us. They know I am a spy now.”

Her stomach fell and she was overcome with the weight of what she had done. She had ruined twenty years of work, and deprived the light of one of their most valuable- and only- assets. In her one track thought set only on self-preservation, she could have condemned the whole world- Wizarding and Muggle- to lose at the hands of Voldemort.

Seeing the panic take over, he folded his arms over his chest. “I was hardly of use, at this point. The Dark Lord was confident he would win, and I served only as a fail safe.”

While she appreciated what she recognized was his attempt at comfort, it didn't little to relieve her concern. 'We're losing the war,' she thought. Ever since the Battle of Hogwarts- where they had been hopefully certain the war would come to an end, until Voldemort escaped once more and set anew on building his army and remaking his horcruxes- the world was slowly being overtaken by his army. Most of the European ministries were under control of a known Death Eater, and Russia was the newest country to be overrun. Rumors were spreading that they managed to infiltrate the strict
American borders and were working from the inside out.

And then, about eight months ago, they revealed themselves to the Muggle World, no longer wanting to hide from the creatures they deemed to be inferior. They wanted to rule over them, and would not be able to do so from the Underground. And, bless the fight in them, because the Muggles refused to simply bow to him. Guns against wands, aircrafts against trolls, and tanks and armored cars against dragons. But in the end, they were ill prepared and no match, and their numbers were quickly depleting. Mass evacuations of muggle communities were occurring, with Rebel bands similar to the Order of the Phoenix offering solace. If they weren’t in hiding or dead, they were enslaved. She could recall seeing some of them there, in the manor, like house elves. She had been horrified to discover that many of them had thick, ugly black stitches hastily sewing their lips together.

‘Muggles and mudbloods don’t have the right to speak to those of us with a higher pedigree,’ the icy voice of the Dark Lord himself had explained, chuckling when she recoiled as he delicately traced her own lips.

Drawing herself from the horrific memory, she shuddered, the weight of the situation she was in finally settling on her. ‘We are in a losing war. We are not winning. We are dying,’ her brain told her matter-of-factly, as though resolved to her fate. The past several years, she had tried to remain positive. She had struggled through what seemed like a hopeless situation to be hopeful. She had traveled with Harry and Ron once more, pilgrimages around the four corners of the world to research anything and everything they could think of that may help the war come to an end. And then they tried to keep afoot of Voldemort’s new horcruxes, but it was harder now that Harry no longer had the same dark magic within him, the very same that had acted as a beacon to the others. They fought in more and more battles, the tally of casualties rising faster than they could keep track of. All but a handful of the Order members had lost their lives—noble and heroic though it was—and it seemed like only a matter of time before death would finally meet the infamous Golden Trio. Yet they evaded it, somehow, miraculously, coming out safe in any and all battles they found themselves in.

Until they didn’t. Until that fateful night in Moscow when Voldemort appeared at their personal camp site—a Ancient Runes library that housed a handful of one of a kind, dangerous texts. Hermione had been studying in the basement while Ron and Harry kept watch, and by the time she heard the disturbance and ran to the lobby, Ron was dead and Harry was dying. “Run!” he had yelled, and it was this same voice that came to her now when she was in trouble, as though her brain had recorded the dying yell and played it to her when she needed it most. “RUN! ESCAPE!”

And she did, not looking back at Voldemort and his face, the face which was becoming less human with every horcrux he made, every piece of his soul he split and sacrificed. He now sported golden-yellow scales that started at just above his brow bone and ran down to beneath the back of his head and down the collar, growing larger as it descended. His ears began to disappear, molding into his head. And when he laughed, she could see the giant forked tongue, red and wet and entirely unnatural.

She had left the library, but not before hesitantly setting a fiendfyre loose on the premises. She hated the very thought of ruining all those books—books which existed no where else!—but she had read through some of them, and knew that it would be detrimental had Voldemort gotten his hands on them. She only hoped that Ron and Harry would forgive her for not having ensured for them a rightful burial.

Swallowing the lump in her throat and closing her eyes tight so as to prevent tears from breaking through, she took a deep and steadying breath before asking, “Where are we?”
“A muggle home, left behind during an evacuation. This neighborhood has been untouched for seven months, and is under as many wards as possible. We should be safe for now.”

She opened her eyes to study him. The man had lost his fight, in a way. He was still brilliant and more powerful than ever, and on the few occasions their paths had crossed, he had been a right git. But he seemed more willing now to allow his once heavily guarded mask to slip some, the effort of maintaining it too much for one man to burden. He wasn't about to start sharing his feelings or even express his care for someone in way or the other, but he seemed to settle on indifference. As though his energy had been spent on hating the muggles and mudbloods when he was his Death Eater persona, and he hadn't anymore to give.

“We?” she parroted, before moving to the much more pressing question. “Shouldn't we be leaving? We can't stay in one place too long, it simply isn't safe.”

“No. We came here for a specific purpose, Granger.”

She looked quizzical. “What purpose-”

“Bloody hell!” he ground out, reaching over to the bedside table for a potion bottle and thrusting it into her hands. “You're asking far too many questions! At this rate, you'll keep me up for the rest of the night and you may not care about things like sleep and hygiene- oh yes, I had to cut off that rat's nest you claimed was your hair because I was genuinely concerned that it played host to all sorts of nasty little creatures. While your obnoxiously unquenchable thirst for knowledge has not ceased once since your abrupt leave of formal education, I am NOT your teacher anymore. Drink the dreamless sleep, so that I may finally get more than three hours of rest, without having to wake up to you thrashing in your sleep.”

She reeled, her mouth pursing tightly as she narrowed her eyes. She was ready to argue back, had an entire arsenal of quips to fire back at him (how dare he of all people remark open the questionable hygiene of her hair?) but she bit her tongue. He had, after all, saved her from an excruciating and drawn out death, and was now trying to help her build up her strength for whatever this specific purpose was. Perhaps the least she could do was quiet her never ceasing mind for once and get some sleep. It had been so long since she's had a proper rest herself- surely she could benefit from it as well.

“I simply wanted to know what was being planned for me,” she mumbled, angrily uncorking potion.

He snorted. “And then you'd want to know why, and how, and what if? And why again-”

“I get it!” she snapped curtly, swigging the potion in one quick motion. “I'll shut my mouth and go to sleep.”

“About bloody time.”

-xXx-

Hermione awoke to the sound of voices, an argument, and quickly shuffled up in the bed. The walls muffled the words, but she was able to make out bits and pieces, straining her ears to listen as she slowly and carefully rose. Her body was aching now as the potions Snape gave her settled in, the healing process almost to a close now as the formerly broken bones in her ribs and wrist realigned and strengthened.

She was careful not to cause further pain as she shuffled to the door and pressed her ear against it, immediately recognizing the current speaker as Snape.
“...I can't believe you would even conceive of something so foolish! You are truly going daft in your old age!” There was the sound of chairs scraping across floorboards, and the sound of heavy footsteps pacing back and forth in agitation. “And to think I exposed my true alliances for THIS! When you said you had a plan, and gave me direction, I had trusted you!”

At this point, Hermione winced, unsure of whether or not he was regretting saving her life. Before she could further expand on his words, another, more calm and weary voice, spoke up.

“Severus, I assure you I am no more daft than I have ever been.”

A snort punctuated this statement, followed by a barely audible “A disturbing prospect, nonetheless.”

A chuckle. “My boy-”

“Do not patronize me, old man!”

“I do believe that this is the best, and perhaps only, option for us at this moment. I assure you, I would not rush into this plan without thoroughly thinking it through. Admittedly, I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, and that perhaps if it had that we could have at least had more time. But, unfortunately, the best laid plans tend to go awry, as they say, and we must work with what we have been given.”

“But do you think Granger is truly the best person for this task?”

“I haven't even given thought to another.”

At this, she pulled back, her brows knitting together as she cocked her head to the side. 'Task?' she thought, standing to her full height and placing a hand on the doorknob. What task were they discussing? Was this the specific purpose for which she had been brought here? And was this why Snape had come to her rescue, not in a show of heroic sympathy, but out of necessity of war? Somehow, the thought made her purse her lips, a twinge of anger at being treated like another pawn on the chessboard, to be moved around as the player saw fit. Anything to achieve the end, so long as the truly important ones needn't be sacrificed.

But her anger was short lived as her curiosity got the best of her, and she exited the room. She was brought into a narrow hallway, where to the left she saw what appeared to be a darkened sitting room, the soft edge of yellow lights coming from the jointed room. She followed the voices into the dining room, where a single light shone over a small dining table, a vase with dead flowers and stale water placed in the center.

Severus Snape sat opposite from the emerald draped figure of Albus Dumbledore, his half moon glasses sitting on the polished surface of the table instead of the bridge of his nose as he tiredly rubbed his blue eyes with thin fingers. His long white hair has taken a more dingy appearance, as though something so bright and pure were not welcome in this world anymore, and his long beard was tucked underneath a worn leather belt.

The two wizards turned at the sound of her approaching, and she felt her cheeks redden as she suddenly realized the state of her appearance. Torn and stained jeans that she had worn for over two weeks now, with a plain yellow shirt in equal state of disarray- she supposed Snape had used some charms to dampen down the mildew smell she would carry otherwise, but had not bothered to use a cleansing one. Her exposed arms were a sallow yellow color as the bruising healed, and she didn’t even want to think about her face or her hair- or lack there of. The last she knew, her hair had become dreaded from inconsistent washing, and the stringy pieces tangled together into frayed, tapered lengths. Her tumble through the forest floor had surely done it no favors, and she was aware
that it posed a health and hygiene risk. She couldn't really blame Snape for deciding to hack it all off instead of using spells to cleanse it. 'Doesn't seem like the type to have a large repertoire of cosmetic charms, anyway,' she thought.

“Ah, Miss Granger, how good it is to see you. I was pleased to hear that Severus was able to get you to safety. I have worried about your well-being.”

“Did you worry about Harry and Ron?” she asked, unable to prevent the bitterness from lacing her voice. This man had used Harry to his heart's content, and when the younger man needed saving, he was nowhere to offer help and wise words.

At this, Dumbledore seemed to sag, frowning deeply and solemnly. “I am terribly sorry, Hermione, at the loss you have experienced. There is no greater casualty of war than the innocent and the young.”

They were hardly young now, Hermione was now 21 years old- a woman, in her own right- and she had ceased being a child the moment she, Harry and Ron had vanished from Bill and Fleur's wedding to begin their search for the horcruxes. No, she was not young, she was older than many would ever grow to be. But she refused to mourn for her childhood, not once in the three years that the war had escalated. She was alive, wasn't she? That was more than could be said of the many who fell, the young and the old, who died at the hands of Voldemort and his army.

No, she had no reason to mourn for herself.

“What task do you have in mind for me?” she asked suddenly.

At this, the twinkle that had long since been absent from Dumbledore's eyes returned, and he chuckled. “Ever to the point, my dear.” He waved his hand, the chair in front of her sliding out from the table enough for her to sit down and join the two wizards. She obliged, not once breaking eye contact with him as she waited for him to continue. When she was settled, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “About five months ago, I sought to have tea with a dear friend of mine, Antheia Thibault, a librarian you see. She initially refused due to...rather binding circumstances, but I was rather insistent, as I believed she had a rather rare book that could be of use to me. Finally, she agreed. So, I made plans to travel to France- a simply beautiful country, if you've never had the oppor-”

“Albus!” Snape barked in irritation, his arms folding over his chest.

The old man barely had the good grace to look embarrassed as he continued, “Well, I met up with her in her new home- she was in hiding, you see, as many are. And lo and behold, she had just the book I was looking for.”

At this, he reached into his robe and produced a large tome, thick with gold gilded pages. A filthy velvet slip sat randomly between the pages, stained and muddled. She was certain that, once upon a time, the color had been a vibrant and brilliant red, but had now become a hideous hue, similar to blood. The binding itself was tattered and aged, the leather of the cover creased and folding back to reveal the framework of the book. The title was difficult to read, as the golden letters were peeling off and flaking away, but she could see the imprint of it pressed into the leather.

'Magick Beyond Time and World'
Priamos Nickandro

She raised a slender brow as she reached out, delicately fingering the corner of the book. She was afraid to touch it, so fragile it looked. But when it didn't disappear into a cloud of dust and smoke,
Take heed, for within this book lie spells capable of breaking time and destroying worlds; Terrible things happen to those who meddle with time.

“Time Travel?”

“Ah, yes, but you see, not just any time travel. This book,” Dumbledore said, pointing a slender finger to the book as he leaned forward. “Is the first and only book to truly delve into the art of magic involved in time. Not just explain it, or go into the academic merits and theories of such a thing- it is from this book and Nickandro's research that our Time Turner has come to be. It is truly remarkable, and the only copy of it left in existence.”

At this, her eyebrows rose. “Sir, how can there be only one if it truly contains such pertinent information?”

Snape spoke now, his slow drawl giving the impression that he was bored with this conversation. “No one knows for certain why, but in 1753, Minister Noland had all copies burned without even a notice to the public. When the destruction was uncovered by a ministry official and he was placed under investigation, he cited the Elven Wars as his motivator, believing that such spells allowed for too much power and manipulation over time. One popular theory, however, believes that Noland had used the spells to his own advantage. He was a well known supporter of limiting the rights of elves and other non-wizard creatures, and his entire political campaign hinged on them remaining subservient. He continued to dutifully serve the public and all their Pure-blood theology for thirty plus years.”

Her mouth formed an o shape and she remained silent for a brief second before knitting her brows once more and asking, “And what exactly does this have to do with me?” Surely he wasn't suggesting that she...travel into the past, was he? No, even if he were truly daft as Snape said, he would never suggest something so drastic and chaotic. There was no control, and it was near impossible to determine what changes would be made for the better. Besides, time had a way of maintaining itself, it simply wouldn't allow for changes to be made in the flow of time. Just as when she and Harry had used the time turner to save Buckbeak and Sirius, their presence in the time had already been accounted for. Buckbeak was never in danger because they had always saved him, Sirius and Harry were rescued from the Dementors by Harry and only Harry. They were originally part of the timeline, and their travel backwards had been planned and designed before they were even planning and designing it.

In response to her question, Dumbledore flourished towards the book, and the pages began flipping of their own accord until they landed on the page marked with the tattered bookmark.

Per Cruor Visci

Long Distance Travel Blood Potion

A Potion to assist in seamlessly affecting the timeline, and creating an alternate venue for the newly formed present and future, without compromising ones burden to the restraints of time travel

The first page, containing the name and description of the potion was followed with an inked image of a faceless person holding their palm above an hourglass, a knife to the exposed skin and droplets of blood slipping into the sand of the hourglass. It was barbaric, yet she couldn't stop herself from
turning the page over to read the list of ingredients and preparation. The first thing she noted was that
it was a complicated potion, one that suddenly made her feel incompetent and unintelligible just be
reading through the execution. The second was that it took nearly two months to brew to fruition. If
Dumbledore intended for her to brew this, he was sorely ignorant to the current state of affairs. She
was on the run, and hadn't stayed in one place for more than two days. The nomadic lifestyle was the
only way to stay safe when you were one of the top Undesirables, after all.

She leaned back in her seat after thoroughly perusing the pages to the Per Cruor Visci potion.
“Professor, forgive me, but I'm not quite sure what all this means.”

“It is a potion that, shall we say, duplicates the intended and sends them back to a specified point in
time, allowing them to alter events to their choosing in a manner that will change the outcome- as
opposed to the way in which a Time Turner works- without tearing at the fabric of time,” he
answered, the glimmer in his eye growing mischievously, and she felt her stomach flutter with
unease.

“But...how is that possible?” Everything she had ever known about time travel contradicted this very
statement, claimed it was impossible to do so. There were multiple theories that stated it was
impossible, such as the Grandfather Paradox, or Hitler's Murder Paradox. Going back in time to kill
someone before they could rise in infamy, would eliminate the reason for having killed them in the
first place. In short, it was intrinsically paradoxical.

Dumbledore propped his elbows up on the table and steepled his fingers, pressing his chin onto his
thumbs. “This potion is unique in that he creates an alternate world, based on the same fixed events
but allowing for more...wiggle room. The previous world, however, is still prone to the effects of
alternating history and will...slowly fall apart at the seams.”

She was silent for a moment, considering and weighing his words. She wasn't certain how to
respond, or if he was even expecting one. Her head, which had throbbed with a mild ache since
waking, was now extra fuzzy, as though someone had grabbed hold of her and shoved cotton balls
into her skull before violently shaking her shoulders, her head whipping around with reckless
abandon. She pressed the heel of her palm against her brow in an attempt to ease the discomfort.

Painfully aware that the two men before her were in fact waiting for a response, she asked, “And you
want...me to...what? Change the way this war worked out?”

“I believe,” Dumbledore started, his voice low and soft, “it may be our only hope to win.”

“Even if it means this world being destroyed?”

“It is not worth saving anymore.”

She removed her hand from her head and turned to Snape, almost pleading for some sensibility. “He
can't possibly be serious?”

The Potions Master sneered. “I believe he is, Granger.”

“I know this may sound extreme to you, but I urge you to consider the potential. You're a smart
woman, Hermione, and I'm sure that, with some thought, you can see how this could be an ideal
arrangement. By sending you back, we can prevent this devastation from having ever occurred.”

She chewed her lower lip, thinking through his words. Was it truly possible to simply...create another
world? To start fresh and from scratch, just like that? And if it was, what would happen to this
world? Would it continue to spiral down the path it was headed, until mankind had waged war unto
itself for so long that mankind didn't even exist anymore? Or would it simply break down into
nothingness and chaos?

“This world should, according to Nickandros, slowly fade away as the new world is created. The inhabitants will merely be displaced,” he answered, and she was suddenly aware he had used legilimancy on her without her consent.

Scowling, she pursed her lips and asked, “So, what exactly is your plan for this potion? What time will you be shipping me off to?”

“1943.”

Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened. “That far back? What good am I to be if I go that far back in-” She stopped, suddenly realizing the importance of that year. 1943. The year Tom Marvolo Riddle opened the Chamber of Secrets and killed Myrtle Warren. For some reason, she had expected him to send her back to 1998, or perhaps even to the 70's, when Voldemort first began to make waves and exact his plan for total domination on the world. She had not at all been prepared to be sent back nearly six decades.

“1943?” she asked, looking at both men in turn. “And you'd like me to...kill Tom Riddle?”

Dumbledore shook his head, that annoying twinkle glowing thrice as bright as before. “No, my dear. I'd like you to join him.”
Chapter Two: Chess

'We can destroy what we have written, but we can not unwrite it.'

- Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange

Dumbledore shook his head, that annoying twinkle glowing thrice as bright as before. “No, my dear. I'd like you to join him.”

“I...what?!” Hermione started, her face contorting rather unattractively into one of utter confusion. How is joining the darkest wizard of all time going to- in any way- save their world?

“No truly join him, mind you,” Dumbledore explained, casting his gaze over to Severus and holding them there as he continued. “We will send you back so that you can join his ranks as a spy, and from there you will be able to perform damage control. Tom may not have truly risen to power until the 70's, but he began plotting and planning long before then. As I'm sure you know, his diary which was created at the end of his fifth year in 1943 was his first every horcrux...And I believe it was that year that Lord Voldemort came into fruition.”

His eyes finally turned to her, looking into her own rather pressingly as he added, “If you agree to this, then you will work alongside my past self, relaying any and all information you can receive. You will prevent any events that have been decided as providing him with too much power, and allow those that are deemed necessary to carry on under a watchful eye.”

She was shaking her head before he was even finished. “No. No. I can't...there is no way I can even pretend to share any ideals with that...that monster! He'll see through me in an instant and kill me on the spot!”

“We have a two month waiting period before the potion will actually be ready, and in that time both I and Severus”- he paused here to gesture to the younger man- “Have agreed to train you. Though you made our job rather easy, Miss Granger. I dare say you have achieved some level of skill with your occlumency?” He raised a knowing eyebrow, chuckling as she blushed. She had been careful to keep her walls up ever since discovering he was reading her mind, but she knew she was not nearly experienced enough to provide more than an inconvenience to him.

“I taught myself, from books,” she explained, ignoring Snape's snort and mutter of bookworm! “I'm not very good though.”

“We will make you better.”

“But, sir, wouldn't it just be...easier to kill him? If this potion truly does create an entirely new world, why even bother trying to mimic it?” she asked, still feeling uncertain of her ability to make nice with the future Dark Lord.

The elderly wizard frown. “Time has a way of maintaining itself, and Nickandros theorized that the universe will not allow for too much to change. He explains it as there being fixed points in time which regardless of how many attempts to prevent it, will occur. Killing Tom before he becomes Voldemort will alter too much, and the fixed points surrounding his reign will happen with or without him. It is likely that the universe- to prevent too much from changing- will create another witch or wizard to take his place. And with Tom we-”

“Better to have the devil you know,” she shrugged, and smiling, he nodded.
“We know Tom. We can predict his actions, and we can control the ones we already are aware of. In the two months, we will train you in your occlumency and other areas we find advantageous, all while picking through history and deciding which events must remain in tact in order to maintain Tom's position in the universe, and which ones can be discarded,” he said. “In fact, Severus here as even agreed to loan you his personal notes from his times as a spy to act as a guideline.”

She turned to look at him, almost laughing at the look of sheer contempt on his face. She had a feeling there was less agreeing, and more arm twisting than Dumbledore cared to admit.

“So, if I do change all of this, without killing him, when do you plan to have him...die by?” It was rather uncomfortable, discussing the strategic death of someone as though it were an idle game of chess. Even if it was Lord Voldemort, she couldn't help but feel anxious at the thought of playing God with someone's life. “What is the time frame I have to work with?”

“The Battle of Hogwarts.”

“So far? The war was already well into itself by then, sir!”

“Exactly,” Snape said, raising his brow at her. “Albus believes that our war is one of those fixed points, so we can't disallow it from happening. But ending it at the battle in 1998 will prevent the devastation from reaching it's current level.”

She was very lively now, her brain whirring into overdrive. She was receiving simultaneously more knowledge than ever before, and not nearly enough! The young witch longed to know more, practically jumped with the need to ask every who? What? When? Where? And why? She could. The questions she had were coming to her so quickly she couldn't stop them long enough to figure out the ones she wanted to ask most.

But before she could settle on one, Dumbledore looked at her with appraising eyes and asked, “So, what do you say Miss Granger, will you do it?”

Looking down at her hands on her lap, the fingernails dirty and covered in blood and dirt while the skin was cracked and dry. It was a tempting solution, she had to admit. The idea that she could save so many lives and prevent the war from gaining the momentum it did was appealing, and she allowed herself to briefly fantasize about what life would've been like had the war ended that night. Harry and Ron would still be alive, and perhaps married and settling down with children of their own. The Weasley's would still be the large family that they had been, instead of the two or so that remained, the rest having been killed off. And perhaps she could even save lives that had otherwise not been saved up until that point! Sirius Black, Cedric Diggory...even Lily and James Potter were just a few of the people whom she could potentially save from an untimely death. The ideas and possible outcomes were growing exponentially, and with a firm smile she looked at the former headmaster and said, “What have I got to lose?”

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Tom Marvolo Riddle sat in the parlor, his body reclining on a rather lovely and ornate armchair that appeared to be an antique. His dark blue eyes scanned the room, pausing on the bodies of his father, grandmother, and grandfather in turn. He hadn't meant to kill all three of them- he truly only wanted his father, the disgraceful muggle man that shared a face so similar to his own, to be the single death on his hands tonight. But they had all been in the room together when he entered, and after the intoxicating high and euphoria that came with casting the killing curse once...well, there was certainly no way he would stop at one when there were three of them.

His only regret was not enjoying the moment more. Oh, make no mistake, he had delighted in the
look of fear on his father's face (truly shameful, that was, to see what was essentially his own visage contorted in such a disgusting and pathetic emotion.) He had drawn that death out, alternating between taunting the senior Tom Riddle and using the cruciatus course on the man. He had never gotten the chance to use it before- unable to perform such dark magic in the school and knowing that even if he could, the trace of the magical signature of his wand would alert the authorities to his use of it. But outside of Hogwarts, and sporting the wand he had moments earlier stolen from his very own uncle, he was finally able to test it out.

And my, what a spell it was. He felt the wand vibrate with the force of the spell, his entire body thrumming with what he soon realized was dark magic and he didn't want the sensation to end. And then his father writhed, twisting his body in ways that seemed anatomically improbable as his head was thrown back and his mouth opened wide, a high pitched scream filling the luxurious sitting room. When he finally stopped the curse, the older man was perspiring heavily, panting out deep and ragged breaths as he twitched, the remaining effects of the curse leaving his body.

'Let's try this again, and this time, don't scream out in pain you filthy muggle,' Tom had said, finding it embarrassingly difficult to keep his voice measured and collected when he himself was feeling so positively giddy. And he had done it again and again, not stopping until his father could no longer scream, near unconscious with pain and exhaustion. 'That's better,' he praised patronizingly, before using the other curse he had been longing to try out. The green light pulsed forth, shrouding the room with it's blinding glow, and then he was dead.

He had never truly killed anyone before, aside from that Warren girl during the school year- and even then he was more or less responsible for her death. The basilisk had done the rest. At the time, he had thought that watching her die and knowing he was the reason for it, as he had set the beast on her and told it to act, was the closest he had ever come to joy.

But nothing compared to this, having someone moan in agony and beg for you to just please have some mercy as your very own wand was trained on them. After he had killed his father and the rush of dark magic flooded in his system, he couldn't help himself. He turned to the two other muggles he had bound with a petrificus and promptly killed them as well, eager to feel the surge of adrenaline and endorphins. Now, as he sat looking at their lifeless bodies, he realized he should have taken his time with them. He hardly got to bask in their fear of him.

'No matter,' he thought, standing from his seated position and smoothing over his impeccable robes. 'There will be more opportunities.'

Yes, he decided then and there, that this would certainly not be his last. There would be many more to come, and he would be sure that next time he would do it properly, with all the pomp and circumstance he deserved. But for now, he had to make his leave, having gotten what he wanted. It was growing late, and he would have to return to that abysmal orphanage. Besides, he had to pay another visit to his dear uncle.

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Hermione looked over her notes as Snape busied himself with the final stages of the potion. She was packed, her cloth satchel (fitted with an extension charm) was filled with everything she would need. A number of tomes and books that hadn't existed in the time she was about to head to that provided excellent information for his mission, some of them wizarding, others muggle. Snape's notebooks that he had unceremoniously tossed at her while bitterly muttering about that babbling old fool was among the luggage, as well as multiple blank journals that she intended to use for her own keeping. However one journal sat in her lap, opened to a page filled with her neat and concise handwriting. The page contained the many rules and things to keep in mind that Dumbledore and Snape had
ticked off to her.

Tracing a finger down the page, she read it once more as a plume of golden smoke emitted from the cauldron, vowing to commit it all to memory.

She had been disheartened to learn that she could not, in fact, save Lily and James Potter. It was too pivotal, Dumbledore had claimed. Without their deaths, Voldemort would have not been subdued for those years. Harry would not have had the power over him. And, as Dumbledore quickly glanced sidelong at Snape, who seemed to sour considerably with the turn of conversation, would have prevented an invaluable ally from joining them. She agreed with him, against her better want, and they had continued discussing what events she had to allow and which she could impede. It felt dreadful, scouring over history to see whose death was necessary and who could be spared. Drawing the parallels and following the chain of events was exhausting, and she was thankful Dumbledore and Snape had the knowledge and insight to be so thorough. Yet, it did nothing to relieve the dirty feeling she had, knowing she would allow many to die for the greater good.

Myrtle had to die, so that the diary could be created. If the diary hadn't been created, then Harry wouldn't have freed Dobby from Malfoy, and Dobby wouldn't have been able to rescue them from Malfoy Manor, still very much bound by their orders.

This was how the conversations would go, every possible situation being examined with a fine toothed comb. They had managed to whittle it all down, and she had her plan of action for the timeline neatly written down in her heavily warded journal.

The sound of rapid bubbling drew her from her reverie, and, depositing her journal in her endless bag and shuffling it onto her shoulders, she walked to Snape's side. He was slowly moving the wooden spoon in counterclockwise motions, the golden potion clumping into fine granules of sand within the pewter cauldron.

"Is it almost ready?"

He nodded. "Indeed. All we need now is a blood sample of the intended," he said, fixing her with a pointed gaze.

"Right." She pursed her lips as she unsheathed her wand and made a slicing motion with it down her palm. A small cut appeared across the pale skin, blood bubbling to the surface. Tipping her hand over the sand, she watched as the little red droplets fell into the brew, the sand momentarily turning a deep shade of burgundy before settling back to gold.

She pulled back, healing the cut as Snape set about filling an empty time turner with the sand. Her anxiety was building as she realized that in a mere matter of minutes, she would be displaced through time and meeting the younger version of Lord Voldemort.

"Do not fret, Hermione. You will do well, I am sure of it," Dumbledore said, clasping his hands reassuringly onto her thin shoulders and smiling warmly. "Just remember all you have learned, and all we have discussed."

She nodded. "I'm just...afraid he'll find out."

"He won't. Your occlumency is far beyond advanced now, thanks to Severus, and even if you weren't so well trained, Tom is still relatively new to the concept of legillimancy in this time. You have built up an admirable tolerance to veritaserum and you know well of what you have to do. He will have no reason to be more suspicious than he would be otherwise," he calmly noted, and she tried to offer a shaky smile.
“I just don't want to make things worse.”

No one said anything then, not wanting to pose the question they all thought to themselves. Could it truly be worse than this?

“It is ready,” Snape drawled. In the two months that they worked together, she had gotten rather good at reading his subtle expressions, and despite his best efforts to seem bored and inconvenienced, she could see the little nervous ticks and the emotions surfacing in his dark eyes. He was anxious, and hopeful, and anxious about being too hopeful.

She accepted the proffered time turner, noting how different it was from the one she had used in her third year. It had been made - as per specifications in Nickandro's text - specifically for this purpose. Pulling the necklace around her head, she held the little hourglass in her palm, examining the runic letters engraved around the perimeter of both circles. She took a deep breath and looked up to the two men facing her, both trying to conceal their nerves and trepidation.

“5 turns?” she asked.

Dumbledore nodded. Then, as an after thought, reminded her once more, “Do not forget your purpose. While the Voldemort you know has had his soul and mind corrupted beyond recognition and sanity, Tom Riddle was still very much in his right mind. He was a master of manipulation and the spoken word, and presented a very polite and affable front. Do not for a second buy it.”

She bristled, wanting to snap at him for thinking she would so easily forget about the tragedy she would suffer at his wand simply because he knew what to say and had a charming smile. But she had tried to tell herself he was simply trying to help. Besides, she had already hexed Snape after he told her to keep her “girlish tendencies in check”, implying she would, like many girls had, thrown herself into Riddle’s bed.

“I won’t, Professor.” Sending them all what she hoped was a confident look, she began to turn the dial.

One.

Two.

“Good luck, Granger.”

Three.

“Do not overlook the wolf inside the pretty sheep costume.”

Four.

Five.

The device heated in her palm and began to glow gold, and she looked up just in time to see them both begin to fade away as she felt a familiar pull and tug. Within seconds, she was gone, swept away from this moment, from this time.

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Things to Remember

1. Present yourself as intelligent and powerful, but not too powerful to be seen as a threat.
2. Do not be afraid to demonstrate your knowledge of Dark Magic, this will only increase his interest in you and encourage him to recruit you.

3. You are a half-blood, not muggle-born or pure-blood; this will allow him to see you as his equal and trust you more, as he too is a half-blood.

4. Albus Dumbledore is your second cousin, but you do not quite see eye to eye with him. Riddle admires Dumbledore's powers and knowledge, but despises his perceptiveness and sympathy. Use this information to your advantage.

5. You're family was killed by Grindelwald, and you were drawn into the war as a result. This will act as your excuse for being to as strong and capable as you are, as well as explain your scars.

6. Do not be over-eager to please, he will see you as weak and use you for no more than passing interests. Make him work for your support, which if you follow the above guidelines, he will.

7. Know when to submit to him. He will respect your strength to challenge him, but not your cheek and disregard of his power.

8. Do what you must to hold your place in his ranks. You are playing the role of a devoted yet strong-willed follower. Act as such.

9. Do not under any circumstances allow him to know of your origin. Do anything within your power to prevent this, as he will become obsessed with finding any and all information, regardless of the damage you'll suffer.

10. Do not forget who and what he is. No matter how polite, how tender or how caring he pretends to be, it is all just as much an act as yours is.
Chapter Three: Of Monsters and Men

“Murderers are not monsters, they're men. And that's the most frightening thing about them.”
-Alice Sebold, The Lovely Bones

“Please, Headmaster. It is important that I see him!”

“I'm sorry, but I have to keep the safety of the students in m-”

“He's my cousin! Just let me talk to him! Please!”

Hermione stood just within the gates to Hogwarts, pressing herself up on her tippy toes to look more intimidating to the current (or rather former) headmaster, Armando Dippet. She tried her best to look pleading and innocent, trying to make her large brown eyes even larger as the man in front of her sighed in frustration and uncertainty.

“And why, Miss-”

“Dumbledore. Hermione Dumbledore,” she said it matter-of-fact, as though of course she were a Dumbledore.

“Yes, Miss Dumbledore then, what exactly is the matter of your business here?” he asked. Solemnly, she held her head down and said in a low voice, “My family's been killed, sir. By Grindelwald.” She wasn't entirely surprised when her fake whimpers to try not to cry became real ones, the lie to close to the truth. But she couldn't dwell on the countless losses she endured now, though she didn't wipe away the streaks of tears on her cheeks as she lifted her eyes to meet Dippet's and plead quietly, “Please, sir.”

He chewed his lip, his expression torn between his duties and his sympathy for the crying girl before him. Studying her once more, in her strange and unique outfit and her short hair where the ends just managed to curl around her ears, and sighed. His mouth set in a solemn smile, he said, “Alright. But I will escort you to his classroom.”

Her shoulders fell with relief and she smiled, “I expected nothing less.”

As they walked across the cobblestone path that led to the front doors of the school, she looked out to the expanse of fields surrounding them, suddenly aware that the students who were spending their free periods outside had seen them. They were watching her now, looking curious, and she watched back, her eyes scanning through them to try to find Him. Not as though she would know who he was, the only identifying traits she had learned was that he was markedly handsome, with terrifying eyes, and was a Slytherin. It still didn't stop her from looking, her gaze lingering on any and all Slytherins for a moment longer as she appraised them.

Within moments, they were in the school and outside the transfiguration classroom, and Dippet traipsed in as he told Hermione to wait just outside the door. Curious, she glanced through the thin window carved into the stone. Students- perhaps second or third years- were watching Dippet duck his head down and speak quietly to a young Albus Dumbledore. She sucked in her breath, hoping that Dumbledore would at least give her a chance to explain herself before dismissing her.

As if on cue, the man in question looked up, his eyes connecting with hers, and for reasons she didn't quite know, she ducked back, pressing herself against the wall. She stood there like that, nervously
wringing her hands, for a near full minute before the doors opened and the students began to walk out, talking excitedly about having gotten out of class early. None seemed to pay mind to her, too caught up in discussing their classwork and what to do with their new found free time.

As the last of the students exited, she steeled her nerves and walked through the doors, marching to the podium where both men stood.

Knowing she had a role to play, at least as long as Dippet was around, she did her best to look familial with the transfiguration instructor- a task not entirely difficult for her. “Albus?” she inquired, looking hopeful. When he nodded, his face looking sober and tight with confusion. “Oh, thank goodness. I...Grindelwald he...he killed my parents. I didn't know what to do or where to go, but I remembered my mother talking about Hogwarts and how her cousin, a great and powerful wizard worked there, and I just...” She allowed herself to trail off, finding her eyes filling with all too real tears as her lip quivered. She had indeed lost her parents to a dark wizard, though it was not Grindelwald.

Her eyes met his own, the bright blue eyes with the twinkle that had diminished in her time, and she was suddenly assaulted by a dull throb as he used wandless legillimancy on her. And she responded by forcing images through, scenes of the war and all it's brutality, various shots of her reading newspapers with various headlines of “Ministry Overtaken” and “Lord Voldemort Invading Bulgaria”. And then finally, scenes of her speaking with Dumbledore, her Dumbledore, with his beard and hair long and gray and his face a surface of wrinkles, hills and valleys. And just like that, he retreated, eyeing her once more before speaking.

“Of course, my dear Hermione. I beg you forgive an old man's forgetfulness, as I haven't seen you since you were but a young tot.” If he was confused, he didn't show it, stepping down from the elevated dais and walking towards her, his hands clamping down on her shoulders warmly. “I am very sorry to hear what you have been through, but I am certain my cousin did all she could to protect you.”

Dumbfounded, she could only nod.

“Perhaps we can catch up over some tea, yes? Armando, if you wouldn't mind.”

The headmaster nodded, looking at Hermione now with an air of sympathy instead of suspicion. “Of course, Albus. If you need anything of me, you'll know where I'll be.” He retreated, telling Albus that he would cancel all of his classes for the day so he may have time for his personal matters, and then he was gone. Hermione, who had watched him leave, turned back to Dumbledore who was fixing her with a look of intrigue and distrust.

“I believe we have much to talk about.”

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Hermione reclined into the large, comfy armchair, a cup of soothing tea in her hands, as Dumbledore pulled back from the pensieve. His expression was unreadable, and she chewed her lip as she studied his younger visage, his gray and auburn hair and beard significantly shorter than what she had become accustomed to.

“Well, Miss Granger,” he started, settling himself down in the chair behind his desk. “Let me first begin by apologizing for all you have been through in your young life. You are certainly an extraordinary witch.” She blushed at the praise as he went on. “However, the memories you provided me, though heartbreaking, did not exactly explain to me what your presence here...in this time, is meant to achieve.”
She settled her cup down, and began her story, leaving out and tailoring what she had to in order to avoid sharing too much. She divulged into the potion that his future self would turn to, and what she was supposed to do. When she was finished, he looked very worried indeed, and thoughtfully began twisting his fingers.

“Am I correct in assuming that this Lord Voldemort is...”

She nodded.

He said nothing, though what looked like concern flashed across his features. “I see. And did my older self provide you with information on how to gain Riddle’s trust?”

“Yes, but I am certain I will need guidance.”

“Very well. I will assist you in all you need, and in return I only ask for your continued loyalty. I will trust that you are following the orders you have been given, but if I so much as suspect that your allegiance is not as it seems, I will sever all ties and you will be on your own throughout this endeavor,” he answered, standing up and walking over to the fireplace where he reached for a bowl of floo powder. She was taken aback by the sharp, almost threatening tone in his voice, but said nothing. She was lucky that he had trusted her even with modicum amount he did, as she had already told him that there were certain events she could not prevent- certain lives she could not save. He had sobered at that, but nodded his understanding. Time is a fickle mistress, he said.

“We will floo to Dippet’s office, where you will be sorted- make sure to ask for Slytherin, my dear- and we will start from there. We will meet weekly for tea, under the guise of reconnecting as family, but we’ll use that time to discuss and plan. Understand?” When she nodded, joining his side, he held out the bowl of powder, and together they left.

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The young witch sat on the sleek black leather sofa of Slytherin common room, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Now that all the technicalities had been set in place and she was officially a student of Slytherin house, her trepidation had returned full force. She was to meet Tom Riddle, the man responsible for all her suffering. And she was to join him, become his right-hand man, so to speak, so that she could alter the future and hinder and sabotage him from the inside out. Despite the two months of endless training she had gone through, she still felt ill-suited for this task. Her worries and fear were bunched up inside her stomach, tightening her organs and making her feel nauseous.

The clock made a loud chiming noise, and she felt the lump in her stomach tighten. She was sitting in the room waiting for Riddle, with Dumbledore suggesting to Slughorn that the young Prefect be the one to show her around and introduce her to the school. (‘He is her age, after all, and unlike Miss Parkinson, I believe he has a free period coming up’) Yes, he would be here any minute, and she tried hard to focus on the guidelines Snape had given her for dealing with him. Willing herself to uncurl from her position, she straightened herself and took a deep breath. She couldn’t appear to be afraid. She had to act as if she was in control.

The door to the common room swung open, and she glanced up, several students coming through the portrait hole. She watched as they found their way around the room, settling in with friends or sitting at tables to begin homework. None of them seemed to be there for her.

She exhaled deeply, letting out a breath she wasn’t aware she was holding. Just as she did so, one final figure made his way into the common room, the portrait swinging shut behind him. He quickly searched around the room, his dark blue eyes stopping at Hermione, and he began to walk towards
He was far more handsome than she had given credit for, his body long and lean and towering over her at approximately six feet. His dark hair was pushed neatly back, not a single hair out of order, with the front swooping off to the side in thick, still well managed curls. He had a well chiseled face that would make any sculptor envious with its perfect symmetry and beauty, and a long and prominent Roman nose. His cheekbones were high, casting dark shadows across his face in a way that most woman would find delightfully mysterious, and his dark blue eyes studied her with an intensity that made her want to squirm in discomfort.

Raising a brow, he asked, “Miss Hermione Dumbledore, I presume?”

Forcing herself to be confident and collected, as she was told to, she nodded, “Yes. Tom Riddle, then?”

He smirked. “At your service.”

His voice was deep and commanding, so different from the high-pitched voice that hissed and cackled. ‘But I suppose everything is different,’ she thought, realizing that Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort were in fact two separate entities. Tom Riddle- while he would now have one horcrux under his belt- was still more human, and therefore, susceptible to all the needs and wants and emotions of a human. Voldemort however, had torn his soul and his humanity to shreds. It was hard to imagine that either one of them could be human at all, but Dumbledore of her time had insisted that of the two, Riddle was the least animalistic. A thought that sent terrified chills through her body as she saw the menace in his eyes, the way the other students of Slytherin seemed to go rigid in his presence.

‘You battled him in his most terrifying form, spat in his face and defied him countless times. Tom Riddle should not be frightening to you,’ she told herself, and bravely she stuck a hand out. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

He looked down at her hand, grabbing hold of it and bringing it up to his lips where he placed a chaste kiss on her knuckles. “The pleasure is mine.” He dropped her hand, and she tried not to hastily wipe it along her robes. He smiled, and she noticed the way it didn't quite seem to reach his eyes.

“You are related to Professor Dumbledore?”

She nodded. His voice turned almost imperceptibly icy when he said those words, and had she not been looking for signs of the evil within, she would not have noticed. “He and my mum were cousins. Estranged, from my understanding,” she answered.

“Yes, Professor Slughorn informed me of that as well. I'm truly sorry for your loss.”

’I bet you are,’ she thought, amazed on how terribly...sympathetic he truly did look, his hard eyes softening and his head turning slightly to the side as he frowned. It was easy to see how so many could be fooled by his act. But it was just that. An act.

“It has been difficult. I was weary of coming here, but did not have anywhere else to turn to.”

“Miss Dumbledore-”

“Please, call me Hermione.” Forcing a smile that she hoped did not look too contrived, she waited for him to continue, his lips twitching slightly.
“Yes, Hermione then. I am an orphan as well, so you'll find I may understand a little bit of how you must feel. If you would like to talk about it, I am here,” he offered, and she bit back a wry laugh. She was positively certain the last person she would turn to to confide her feelings in would be Tom Riddle, but she smiled graciously nonetheless.

“Now, perhaps you'd like to get started on that tour.” He stuck his arm out, his elbow bent and waited for her to accept. Slowly, she moved closer, looping her arm through his and stiffening at the contact. He was so warm. “Right then,” he said, as though realizing her unease but choosing to ignore it. “Let's be off.” And he lead her across the Common Room, the eyes of the other students following them as they held a breath. She could just barely hear them all exhale in unison as they were out in the hall, the portrait door swinging shut.

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“And this is the Quidditch field,” Tom said, leading underneath the entrance and out onto the field, the two surrounded by the large towers and seats, the stand casting long shadows across them.

“Impressive,” she answered, unable to hide the bored tone in her voice.

“Not a fan of the sport?” he asked, smirking in bemusement as he released her arm and began walking up the steps leading to the Slytherin bleachers. Bouncing back and forth on the balls of her feet, as though debating between joining and running, she soon followed, having to make an honest effort to keep up with him as his long legs walked two steps at a time. Turning sharply to the left, he walked about halfway through the row and sat down. Hermione stopped at the end, looking at him cautiously.

Tom turned to face her and quirking a brow, smirked as he patted the seat beside him “I don't bite.”

By the time she was seated beside him, her posture too perfect to be casual, she heard him chuckle and realized, with amazement, 'I just obeyed his orders.' She cursed herself, she was already failing at her task and how she was to handle herself. Of course, it wasn't as if she meant to, or even that she knew it was an order. But it was, it was a subtle way of him dominating her. 'I call you to my side, and you follow.'

'I have to take control back,' she thought, wondering disparagingly, just how she would do that. He was insidious the way he operated, and something as simple as relaxing in an empty sports stadium was a power play for him.

“So if you don't enjoy sports, what do you enjoy?”

Startled from her thoughts, she sputtered, “Oh...I ugh...reading, I suppose. Learning.”

He straightened up now, in what she understood as partial interest for the first time since their tour had begun. With a raised brow, he asked, “Oh? And what subjects do you enjoy learning about the most? Charms? Matron Spells?”

“Of course not,” she snapped, sharper than she should have. She scoffed, muttering out disdainfully 'matron spells!' as though it were a nasty word that filled her mouth with a visceral poison.

“So then what do you like to study?”

“Anything- except matron spells, thank you very much!” She huffed, sticking her chest out in an air of dignity. Seconds later, her body language softened and she answered, “anything, and everything. Potions, transfiguration, ancient runes. At my old school, I took every class I could. They even gave me a time turner for one year, so that I could take more. It was a shame it was taken away, I would
have loved to use it some more.” Her eyes had glazed over, the way they did often when she discussed something she was passionate about. Namely, books and their contents. But she had a role to play, and as an after thought, added with a small smile, “I've also come into a recent love for the dark arts. Purely, of course, for academic reasons.”

He perked up at this, and she resisted the urge to smile. 'Hook, line and sinker.'

“Dark arts?” he inquired, and she recognized something akin to excitement in his voice.

Forcing herself to look abashed, she added, “Yes, well, I studied it as defense, you understand. My family was very aware of Grindelwald's growing presence, and I thought that I would be better suited for him if I-”

“Evened the playing field?” he interrupted, turning now so that he was twisted in his seat and his body was facing her. She nodded, noticing how he had discarded his robes and had them resting over his knee. It was a nice enough day out, but the uniforms from this time were rather suffocating, with the thick robe laying on top a gray wool suit. Underneath that was the jumper and button up shirt and tie, the same ones that had been in place for her years at Hogwarts.

“Yes, I suppose you could say that,” she said, tearing her eyes away from his uniform. She grimaced when she caught sight of his self-satisfied smirk, knowing he misinterpreted her intent. “Aren't those uniforms rather stifling?”

“Changing the subject, Hermione?”

She shivered, hating the way her name sounded on his lips, and hating even more that it made her heart pound with a pleasant flutter. Before she could respond, he stood, folding the robe over his arm and he said, “If I had known that you were more interested in books than landscaping, I would have shown you the library. I apologize for the indiscretion, and if you'd be so kind as to accompany me, I'll take you there now.” He extended his hand out to her, to help her rise from her seat. “You'll find that the library here is simply one of the best, and there are plenty of books to suit you....growing interests.”

Her spine went still at the slight sinister drip in his voice, and she made to reach for his hand but stopped when she caught sight of it. The ugly ring he had adorned on the middle finger of his left hand- an ancient gold band that wrapped around to hold a bold, geometric shaped black stone. The stone seemed to look dull and stormy, despite the brightness of the sun hanging over them, and with a choked gasped she realized what it was- and where he had gotten it from.

She knew she should have schooled herself, taken his hand, and continued their tour so that she could continue on with gaining his trust. But she simply couldn't, and she felt frozen in time, wanting nothing more than to say to hell with the fabric of time and use the killing curse on him then and there, be done with it all. Her fingers twitched with the need to leap into action, her responses honed from years on the run and in battles, and she knew that if she didn't leave, right now, she could compromise everything. She was disgusted that this evil man was parading around as a brilliant and eager student, and she was disgusted that she was letting him.

Standing up, she batted his hand away, unaware at the way his face darkened at the action. “While that sounds lovely, I find I've gotten rather ill all of a sudden,” she started, hating the way her voice wavered as she felt a sudden wash of nausea settle over her. She was going to be sick, she wanted to just drop down to her knees and vomit. It was the resurrection stone. Merope Gaunt's ring. The one he stole from his uncle after framing him for the murder of his father and grandparents. He was wearing it as a trophy.
'He's not just the young version of a future killer,' she thought, her head swooning as she side stepped him and began to shakily walk down the aisle backwards, nervous to turn her back to him. 'He is a killer.'

"Terribly sorry," she mumbled, though she knew it didn't sound sincere. Turning on her feet, she stormed down the stairs and out the stadium, not stopping until she had entered the tree line of the Forbidden Forest, where she leaned down against a large pine and gripped herself against the onslaught of memories. She had just made polite conversation with a man who had, only a month or so ago, violently murdered what was left of his family. A man who murdered her own, her friends-tortured her to a point that consciousness and sanity became nebulous and blended together. How on earth did Dumbledore expect her to be able to do this?

Her thoughts dragged her, unbidden, to Malfoy Manor, where she lay on the floor, panting heavily in pain and exhaustion of the tremors remained in her body, the side-effect of dark magic. Voldemort leaned over her, his hideous and distorted face twisting into one of pretend pity. 'It's a shame that you're a mudblood. You would have done well in my army, so intelligent. Your power would have been immeasurable, if you had been of better pedigree,' he hissed, tsking slightly as though it truly were a shame. 'In a way, we're similar, you and I. Intelligent, yearning to prove our powers and knowledge, friendless and parentless-'

'You're the reason I'm parentless, you bastard,' she spat out, fury and rage overcoming the pain in her voice.

He chuckled. 'Yes, another thing we have in common.'

She shivered, pulling herself away from the memory. She looked across her shoulder, where she could see Riddle standing just outside the Quidditch pitch. He stood there for a moment, looking about him as though searching for her, and not finding her, he walked back to the castle, shirking his robe back on as he did so.

She leaned back against the tree and reached into her bag, digging into it's depth until she found what she was looking for. One of Snape's notebooks. She pulled it into her lap and opened to the first page, the familiar spiky writing having an almost calming effect on her. Funny, how after all this time, Snape would be a source of comfort for her.

'Lesser of two evils,' she thought, as she began studying his notes, hoping for a guide on how to handle herself around Riddle. She would be better prepared for their next encounter, make no mistake.

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Tom Riddle was reclining rather languidly on his bed, the curtains drawn to allow himself the privacy he desired. He had removed the majority of his uniform now, wearing only the gray wool slacks and the button down shirt, his green and silver tie loosened. They were rather stifling, he had to admit, but he had an image to uphold in this school. He was to be ever impeccable and put together, not a strand of hair out of place.

The ring he had stolen from his Uncle Morfin over the summer sat in the center of his palm now as he examined it, wondering back to that strange Dumbledore girl. He had followed her line of sight, seen her eyes widen at the ring, before she suddenly flew into a...well he wasn't quite certain what she flew into. She didn't seem panicked, or even frightened. If anything he would say she looked rather repulsed, her nose crinkling as the nostrils flared and her frown deepening. But why did she feel the need to exit so quickly? And why did she find him- most sought after male at Hogwarts-disgusting?
'Not to say she wasn't strange before that,' he acknowledged, slipping the ring back on and folding both hands behind his head. Yes, there was plenty to consider strange about her. Her appearance— for one— made her stick out rather like a sore thumb. She wore jeans that were rather tight and form fitting, and a loose tank that displayed significantly more skin than what was common, even in the hot days of summer. She wasn't ugly by any means— quite pretty, in a simple, natural sort of way. But her hair was unusually short for what was considered fashionable, too long for a boy, yet too short for a girl, and as their tour progressed, he noticed it gradually becoming more wild and curly, indicating a cosmetic charm slowly losing it's efficacy. 'So much for not liking matron charms.'

That was another thing of interest to him. She seemed to have a true passion for learning, beyond what most girls— most boys, even— in this school seemed to have. Her eyes looked far off and dreamy as she spoke about her favorite subjects, the way many would look when describing an ideal spouse or whom they found more attractive that particular day. She had been put off— offended even— when he suggested that she desired to learn how to care for her home, and he realized that she wasn't like most of the students in this school. She had a fire in her eyes, even when she seemed to be at peace— something had hardened her. Her ambitions were far greater than standard for women in this world, and he wondered if had the intelligence to match.

And to have a school loan her a time travel? Remarkable.

He had felt enraged when Slughorn suggested he spend the afternoon being the welcome wagon to none other than Dumbledore's cousin, expecting to drag around a starry eyed twit who rambled endlessly and spoke in riddles as though she were doling out superb life advice. But now he was almost glad that he had been given the task instead Parkinson, or the other Prefects. It gave him the time to study her, examine the tiniest changes in her countenance so he could tear them apart and discover their meaning. She stiffened when he got too close, but he didn't believe her to be afraid. And had, truthfully, done nothing to cause her to be afraid (being related to Dumbledore, he had been more polite and friendly than he would have otherwise. He needn't have her running around and telling her cousin what a terror that Tom Riddle was). Perhaps, she had been more involved in the war than simply losing her parents to Grindelwald, making her naturally on edge? He wasn't certain if that were the case, but if it were...well his interest in the witch would grow considerably.

Putting his thoughts to rest, he began to don his full uniform to head down for dinner. He'd study her a little bit more, and the next time he saw her he vowed to use some of his newly acquired skills in legillimancy to see exactly what her experience with the war had been. But for now, she was nothing but a flighty girl with an even flightier cousin, and he wouldn't waste any more thought on the matter.
 CHAPTER FOUR: ENIGMA

'The Dark Lord is enigmatic in nature, I have come to realize. He looks to recruit followers with
great magical ability and knowledge so that they may form a suitable army, but is distrustful and
suspicious when his followers demonstrate too much. If it weren't for the fact that he prides himself
in being the most powerful wizard to exist, I would almost suspect that he was frightened that
someone too strong may dethrone him. However, that is not the case and I believe that perhaps he is
concerned that the naturally strong and naturally powerful will not be easily swayed by his promises.
They are unlike the weak and the unsure he recruits and he knows that he has little else to tie them to
him than his charisma and their desire to see a world where wizards come out on top...'  
-from the journal of Severus Snape, June of 1995

It was strange, Hermione decided, as she sat at the Slytherin table for lunch the next day. Several
spaces up from her and across the table, surrounded by whom she recognized to be members of the
Nott, Mulciber and Dolohov families, was Tom Riddle. She tried not to watch him, not wanting to
look like one of the many girls in Hogwarts who couldn't seem to keep their hormones in check
around the handsome dark wizard. So instead she would settle with quick, fleeting gazes over her
goblet of pumpkin juice, once again coming to the conclusion that this entire situation was very
surreal.

Something about Lord Voldemort engaging in activities as sustaining and human as eating had her
head reeling, and she wanted to slap herself in the hopes that her fascination with it would cease. She
had known that an effect of having so many horcruxes made someone less human, and therefore less
susceptible to human needs such as hunger and lust. But in this time, Riddle only had one horcrux,
and still very much required to maintain his life functions, no matter how banal they may be.

Pushing her plate away, she pulled out her schedule for the semester, pretending to look it over as
she continued her study. He preferred to eat heartier foods, she observed, rich and decadent meat,
mashed potatoes and hard rolls filling his plate. At breakfast, he had had slices of sausage and eggs
over toast, and with a mild pang in her chest she realized it was a result of the rationing his
orphanage had surely endured during the second world war. While the wizarding world seemed to
be only mildly aware of what was occurring above ground, too distracted by their own war, she
knew from muggle studies that all over Europe and the United States, food and common supplies
were being severely restricted. Meat, cheese and bread were hard to come by, and it seemed Riddle
wanted to reap the benefits of Hogwarts unlimited food supply while he could.

He was a very polite eater, taking small bites and chewing slowly, refusing to speak while he did so.
She could even see him cringe slightly when one of his housemates did not meet his level of
manners, laughing loudly and exposing his mouthful of half masticated food to the table. When he
was done eating, he pushed his plate aside and reached for a bowl of chocolate mousse.

'Strange,' she thought again, turning to her schedule and this time offering it her complete attention.
With an exasperated sigh, she laid her forehead in her hands. Advanced Potions was next, with none
other than a younger Horace Slughorn. She rubbed her temples. The young witch wasn't certain she
had the patience for him and his incessant questions today, knowing full well that bearing the last
name of Dumbledore would surely result in several. 'At least,' she thought bitterly.

Her thoughts were, quite literally, interrupted when she felt the familiar sensation of someone
nudging into her head. Her head shot upwards violently, and she was making direct eye contact with
Tom Riddle.
His dark blue eyes met hers in a challenging gaze, fixed piercingly in an attempt to break through the walls she had firmly in place. She wasn't surprised that he would use legilimancy on her, and had of course prepared herself for it, but she hadn't expected him to try so soon. 'Perhaps my freak out yesterday worked in my favor,' she thought wryly, continuing to maintain eye contact with the prefect. Raising a brow as if to say, 'Is that all you've got?' she smirked at a quick look of irritation that flashed across his face.

The prodding feeling in her head grew more incessant, yet her walls stood firm. Not able to stop herself from relishing in triumph, she pulled out her Advanced Potions book, reading the first chapter as the wizard tried to pry into her thoughts.

They went on like that for several minutes, and she could actually feel the murderous look being sent her way. Her eyebrows twinged as his attempts became more forceful, trying to resist the impulse to lay her head down as the ache began to grow. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction, knowing that she couldn't show any signs of weakness if she wanted him to become interested in recruiting her. Still, the dull throb became a rather aggressive stab, and she found herself wishing he would let up.

After what felt like an eternity, he did, slowly retreating from her mind and she looked up in time to see him giving her an unreadable face. His sculpted brows were raised, and his lips pursed in a tight line. He was standing now, getting ready to leave, and with a shocked yelped she realized that lunch was over, the food in front of her disappearing in one quick movement.

Pulling herself up hurriedly, she grabbed her bag off the bench beside her and slung it on her shoulder. Still feeling Riddle's eyes on her and tightening her book to her chest, she left the Great Hall, exhaling a deep breath and making a mental note to stop by the Hospital Wing for a headache tonic.

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Hermione couldn't help but roll her eyes when she walked into the Potion's classroom. A large, ostentatiously gold cauldron sat in the center above the rows of desks, a pleasant smell wafting to her where it stood. The potion bubbled calmly within, and from the distinct Mother-of-Pearl sheen, she knew that- just as he had in her sixth year- Slughorn planned on introducing the class to Amortentia.

'Some things never change,' she thought with a smile, almost feeling relieved with the nostalgia. If she closed her eyes and let her mind wander, she could pretend that Harry and Ron were beside her, their faces annoyed at having been forced into the class. She giggled at the memory, the familiar ache in her chest tightening with grief. As she sat down, she straightened the thick wool skirt that was customary for girls in this time, and closed her eyes. That's why she was doing this, she reminded herself. Nothing could bring back her Ron and Harry, or remove the pain that would linger long within her heart at their death. But as time went on and Voldemort came to be, hopefully her manipulations would save their lives before they were truly in danger, as well as countless others. It made her head ache, to think about the mechanisms of time travel and of the new world that she thought might already be in creation, so she laid the thoughts to rest for another time.

The sound of a chair scraping against the stone floor jarred her, and she turned to face Tom once more. He was smiling politely, yet his eyes were squinted in an uncomfortable manner. “Hello, Hermione. Do you mind if I sit here?” he asked, gesturing to the seat that he had already pulled out for himself.

She shook her head. “Not at all, Tom.”

She had barely finished answering when he sat down, placing his own copy of Advanced Potion
Making in front of him and she wondered if he, like Snape, had penciled in minor changes to enhance the efficacy of his potions; had dangerous dark spells of his own making written in the margins.

“Are you feeling any better from yesterday?” he asked, drawing her eyes away from the book.

“Oh yes, thank you,” she answered and then, turning her head to the side as she examined his still squinted eyes, asked, “Are you feeling alright? You're not suffering from a migraine, are you?”

‘If looks could kill, I would be dead,’ she thought ruefully, the young Dark Lord scoffing in indignation as he narrowed his eyes at her, this time in anger instead of pain. She almost grinned smugly in response, the child in her that never really had a chance to be a child wanting to indulge in a moment of immature superiority. But the desire flitted away just like that, the absurdity of the situation weighing in on her once more. Nearly nine months ago, she had watched her friends die at his hands, and now she sat beside him, baiting the evil underneath the surface with taunts. Feeling contrite, she turned her attention to the head of the classroom, her hands folding in her lap as she tried to recall the journal entries she had read last night and earlier this morning.

Snape had stood by the monster's side, tortured and torturing as it was required, pushing aside his humanity so that he could assist the Order and hopefully lead to the Dark Lord's undoing. She had it easy compared to him; Tom Riddle had not grown into the behemoth he would become and therefore relied on his charisma, not his large repertoire of dark spells, to gain a following.

If Snape could summon the courage to move past his moral obligations in favor of a true to form devil, she could do the same for the fallen angel.

“Quite impressive,” Tom spoke, not looking to her as he opened his schoolbag and produced a quill and ink pot alongside his parchment. “Your occlumency, I mean.” His nostrils were flared, and she imagined that praising someone for their ability was not something he was used to or enjoyed.

“I could say the same for your legilimancy.”

He grinned lazily, like a cat who managed to corner its prey and decided to prolong the inevitable. Without addressing her compliment, he asked, “Did your cousin tell you to study it?”

For what she imagined would be the first and only time she wouldn't have to lie to him, she said, “Yes, in fact. I learned from a former tutor I had, at his request.” He needn't know of course that Dumbledore wasn't her cousin, and that even if he was, it had been a Dumbledore from over six decades into the future that had made that request. Fickle thing, the truth can be.

Her answer seemed to cause even more annoyance, and she remembered one of the several instructions she had been given to endear herself to him. ‘Albus Dumbledore is your second cousin, but you do not quite see eye to eye with him. Riddle admires Dumbledore's powers and knowledge, but despises his perceptiveness and sympathy. Use this information to your advantage...’

With a shrug that she hoped look casual, she added, “He advised for me to study it, and to be ever vigilant with my mind. He can be a bit...well, batty, I admit, but I suppose he does have some merit.” Blushing, as though she felt embarrassed at having been caught speaking ill of a family member, she whispered, “But don't tell anyone I said that.”

He looked at her intently before smirking. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Feigning a sigh of relief, she sat back in her chair as Slughorn emerged from his office, just as stout and jovial as she recalled from her own time, though with sandy blond hair and and a smooth, young
“Welcome, welcome, students!” he called, extending his arms outward in emphasis of his statement, his rich jade robes swooshing with the movement. “Let me be the first to congratulate you all on your success with the OWLs, very well done indeed. But from here, we will only continue to study and create more advanced potions, so there will be no slacking in this classroom.” He paused, his beady eyes glistening as he looked at the total of eleven students before him. His eyes settled firmly on Hermione, and she resisted the impulse to swear aloud.

“Ah yes, our newest addition to Slytherin House,” he said, chuckling as he moved toward her. “Miss Hermione Dumbledore.” He sounded impressed, and she could already predict the invitation she would receive for the next Slug Club meeting. “Tell me, Miss Dumbledore, what do you believe this potion before you is?”

She didn't even look to study it, the aroma too enchanting to ignore. “Amortentia, sir. A powerful love potion. Or rather, an infatuation or obsession potion, as no spell or elixir has yet been created that could imitate actual love. The smell of it is different to everyone, and tends to mimic the smells of what you find most attractive,” she answered, and at his expectant look, finished, “For me, it smells like freshly cut grass, parchment, toothpaste and...” she frowned, her nose crinkling as she found a new scent she couldn't quite identify, something heady, that reminded her of the fall when the leaves fell from the trees and the air turned frigid. “Something I can't really identify.” It had smelt differently, during her sixth year in her own time line, and she was completely mystified as to its origin. When had it changed?

“Very good! Ten points to Slytherin!” Looking pleased with himself, Slughorn then turned to Riddle, who had stiffened and gone stoic at the mention of the love potion. “Ah, I see our best student has taken Miss Dumbledore under his wing- very good, my boy! Perhaps, you could tell us what you interpret the smell as?”

She saw the muscle in his jaw clench, yet he answered with no otherwise hint of anger. “I suppose I smell books, pumpkin juice and...lavender.” Slughorn said something in response, turning then as he moved around the room and continued asking his questions, but Hermione didn't hear it, too focused on Tom as the young man kept his gaze forward, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the cauldron of the seductive smelling potion.

He was lying, she knew. During both breakfast and lunch, she had watched as he opted for either water or apple cider to drink, avoiding the bowl of pumpkin juice in favor of others. And lavender was such a generic, feminine smell that it took all she had to not scoff when he said it. He had given the first answer that came to mind, not wanting to answer truthfully or even at all.

Following his line of sight, she too stared at the luxuriant steam that rose upwards and spiraled towards the ceiling. She remembered what Dumbledore from her time had shown her in his pensieve, the tragic story of Merope Gaunt and the conception of the most evil wizard in the wizarding world- all due to a love potion. She had almost felt bad for Riddle, as she stood unnoticed on the cold streets outside Wool's Orphanage, watching his mother die. It wasn't a wonder that he was incapable of feeling or appreciating love, considering his life. Conceived in false love, born into death, and raised alone. It was like the plot of some awful Greek play, the Gods of Olympus coming together to punish a mortal man for sins he had yet to commit. But it wasn't a play, and her sympathy would do no good.

Chancing a look back to Riddle, she saw that his eyes remained focused forward. And as Slughorn returned to the front of the class to begin instructions, she found herself wondering what on earth he had truly smelled from the potion that was responsible for his birth. Or if he had smelled anything at
A week had gone by, and she thought she was acclimating quite well to the new environment. She and Riddle hadn’t spoken formally since their Potion’s class with the Amortentia, despite having a very similar schedule at Dumbledore’s prompting. However, she continued to observe him and write down about it daily in her journals, feeling slightly like a stalker or a jilted lover. She was thankful for the privacy wards on it, preventing anyone but her from seeing its true contents.

Over the week, she had noticed little quirks about him, defining characteristics unique to only him— and the idea of Voldemort once possessing them was something that had taken some getting used to. She knew he disliked pumpkin juice, but had a particular affinity for chocolate— another ration of the war. He disliked being seen in any state of undress, so while their housemates would freely walk around in only their slacks and white button down during free periods, he would only ever remove the thick robe, if anything at all. And to her disgust, he would twist the ring around his finger whenever he was in thought, a worry stone of sorts. Her observations would normally end for the moment if she caught sight of him doing that.

Of course, she was well aware that he was just as watchful of her, and would from time to time try to prod into her mind once more, only to be denied access. It became a sort of game to them, him trying to catch her in a moment when her guard would be down— when she read, or was starting to fall asleep by the fireplace in the common room, an essay in front of her— and she would keep reinforcing her wall, impeding all his attempts to break through. He didn't seem entirely angry though, and she suspected he in fact welcomed the challenge, knowing that she had in fact succeeded in piquing his interests. And when she had ventured into the Hospital Wing one afternoon, requesting a headache tonic for the third time that week, she had seen him already there, Madam Malone clucking her tongue as she asked, “What on earth are you two getting up to that I’ve gone through so much of this particular draught?” He smirked knowingly at Hermione as he left, but not before trying to sharply delve into her mind, causing her to wince and clutch her head as the mediwitch returned from her supply room.

The young witch sighed as she stood in the lavatory attached to the girls' dormitories, preparing herself for another day of classes that were all too easy for her— having already completed them, of course. Standing in front of the floor length mirror, she examined herself in careful scrutiny. She had begun to gain some weight since coming here, something that was greatly necessary, as her eating habits had been scattered since going horcrux hunting in her seventh year. She was still not used to her short hair, which had grown rather considerably to the nape of her neck and at least seemed to respond better to straightening charms at its new length.

Grabbing hold of the wand she had set aside as she shirked out of her pajamas, she held out her left arm and pointed the tip to the ugly red letters carved into the soft, pale flesh of her forearm: mudblood. Muttering the incantation Dumbledore had shown her, the writing began to fade, the raised and inflamed skin soothing to match her natural creamy tone and softening down from the swollen state until the scar was invisible. Not bothering to conceal her other scars, she placed the wand back down and began to slip into the heavy uniform, having slight difficulty as her hands trembled with the memory of being tortured by Bellatrix at Malfoy Manor.

It was the only spell that could conceal the horrid mark, if only temporarily, and she made it a habit to use it daily, just in case, knowing that if Riddle were to ever see it he would immediately forget any notion to recruit her.

Once she was fully dressed, she made her way down to the Common Room, where several students
sat, chatting casually with their friends as they scrambled to finish their homework, some of them not
even dressed out of their sleeping gowns.

“Ah, Hermione,” a familiar voice called to her, and she looked to her right to see Riddle rising from a
table he sat at, the other teenage boys sitting with him watching her with matching smirks. She felt
her stomach flip in unease at the site, knowing that these young men were the beginnings of the
Death Eaters, and wondering what on earth they had in mind that caused such sinister expressions.

“Have I introduced you to my friends yet?” he asked extending out his arm to her.

She hesitated only slightly before slipping her arm through, walking back with him to the table. “No,
I don't believe so.”

“How dreadfully rude of me, then, Hermione. Let me introduce you.” Gesturing around the table to
each man in turn, he introduced them. “Antonin Dolohov, Randolf Nott, Garreth Rosier, and Milton
Malciber.” As he said their names, each of them reached out for her hand, pulling it to their lips and
placing gentle kisses on her knuckles, just as Riddle had done.

After all the introductions were made, he pulled an empty seat out for her, gesturing to it as he said,
“Please, join us for a moment.”

She bit her lip as she sat down, startling slightly as Riddle pushed her chair in for her before returning
to his own seat. She smiled in discomfort as the five men fixed her with a leveled gaze, anxiously
pulling on the hem of her skirt. “I hope you're enjoying Hogwarts. Tell me, Hermione, how did your
first week go?” Tom asked, his voice silky and she was in awe at his acting abilities. He seemed truly
concerned, truly interested to hear about her time here.

“No complaints,” she answered.

“I heard Professor Slughorn invite you to his little Slug Club party next weekend. It would seem
you've at least made an impression.”

She rolled her shoulder forward, smirking. “Only because of my lineage, I believe. Being a
Dumbledore and all.” She waved her hand in the air dismissively as she spoke.

Tom opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by a sharp, raucous laugh. Turning his attention
over to Malciber, he raised his brow in a threatening manner, giving him a chance to save face.
However, the Slytherin boy did not get the hint and proceeded to lean in towards Hermione, his
elbows pushing him off the table.

“Dumbledore's your cousin, right?” When she nodded, he began to laugh some more. “Bloody
blarmy, that one is. Quite the muggle lover too, though father says that that wasn't always the case
for the Dumbledore name, as I'm sure you know.” He winked crudely at her now, and she felt her
face flush as she fought the impulse to defend the Transfiguration teacher. She didn't get a chance to,
however, as the regal-faced boy continued. “Though Riddle here says you've just about matched his
scores in your classes, and that he can't use legilimancy worth a lick on you. Let's hope you prove to
be less of a waste of space than your cousin, now.”

Affronted, her mouth fell open in a large gape, unsure of how to proceed and struggling not to allow
her Gryffindor colors to show through her layers of silver and green. But before she could, Tom was
speaking, his voice lower and more intimidating than she had ever heard it, and she felt the hair on
her arms stand on end in response.

“Apologize.”
A simple command, spoken firmly and resonating around the room. And she was aware of the blanket of silence that fell over them as he said it, his voice seeming to magnify above all others. Looking around nervously, she saw that several younger students were watching in rapt interest, while the older ones seemed to be suddenly busy reading through their essays. She returned her attention to the group of men when Mulciber began to speak.

“What for? All I did was compliment her and—” he squeaked, drawing his body straighter in the chair as he stared straight ahead, clenching his jaw and swallowing hard enough for Hermione to see the Adam's apple in his neck bob.

“No,” Tom said, speaking slow and enunciating clearly, “You insulted her cousin. That is not a praise, and it is, in fact, rude and improper to speak ill of someone's family in their presence. Now, apologize to Hermione.”

She wanted to step in, to stop the pervading tension and the ferociousness laced within Tom's words. But she couldn't, her body had become frozen and she could not will herself to move. Her eyes flitted back and forth between the two, her heart beat pounding hard enough that she wondered if the others could hear the deafening thump-thump.

Wincing, Mulciber turned to her, and her eyes looked up to the sheen of sweat forming on his brow. “S-sorry, Hermione.”

“It's alright,” was all she could say, her voice a whisper.

“No, it isn't,” Tom said, and then, looking down his nose at Mulciber, “But it will do.”

She swallowed, suddenly aware of the quiet in the Common Room but not daring to look around her. She tried to make eye contact with the other men- Nott, Rosier, and even Dolohov- but the three of them sat with there hands clasped in their lap, eyes looking intently down at the dark surface of the table. She looked over to Riddle, but his glare still boring holes into Mulciber, the sweat now glistening on his nose and chin and the tops of his cheeks.

She knew she shouldn't say anything, that she should sit and wait until Riddle decided it was alright to move on with the conversation. But she squirmed in her seat, looking around at everything and nothing, as she waited and waited for the cue. The long scar that ran from between her breasts and to her hip- left behind from Dolohov during the Department of Mysteries battle- began to itch and she pushed her shoulders out and in, hoping the movement would relieve the discomfort.

After several minutes had passed, her unease had grown unbearable, and she made to stand, her legs shaking. “I-I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I need to run to breakfast so I can head to the library early—”

Her speaking seemed to remind Riddle of her presence, and he turned to her, his eyes immediately softer and warmer than they had been moments before. “Sorry to keep you, and I apologize for my friend here. He shouldn't have said those things, and I hope we didn't make you uncomfortable.” Mulciber whimpered as he shut his eyes tight.

“Er...you didn't,” she said, with an unsure shake of her head.

She was ready to leave, her bags slung over her shoulder, as he said, “The first meeting for the Dueling Club is tonight, and we were wondering if you would like to accompany us. Harmless fun, really, but it always helps to get extra defense practice in.”

She knitted her brows, eyeing him with a thoughtful gaze that he returned. He wanted to see her fight, wanting to appraise her abilities. Shuffling her feet back and forth, she said, “I suppose I could.
When is it?"

"4 o clock, and it runs until dinner. I'll meet you outside of Adalbert's classroom and escort you there."

She wanted to say that it wasn't necessary, that she would find her own way there, but something about the clipped tone in his voice said it wasn't something to be negotiated on. And this certainly was not a time to be petulant. She would follow this order, hoping that doing so brought her closer to him. "That sounds lovely."

He smiled. "I'll see you later, Hermione."

She began to walk off, not feeling steady upon her shaking legs as they tried to carry her to the entrance. She took one final look back over her shoulder, and could just barely see what looked like Tom Riddle holding his wand to Mulciber's abdomen, the sharp tip indenting hard enough for her to see the impression of his multiple layers. Riddle's wand hand shook, and she knew he was producing magic through it, the action hidden below the surface of the table.

-xXx-

The Room of Requirements was currently decorated in dark green and black furnishings, with large bookshelves tucked into the back and filled with tomes, each with sinister sounding titles. Tom Riddle crouched in the middle of the room specially designed for him, a cage of large and hairy spiders at his feet. A pale, brown wand, with a gnarly looking handle, was held delicately in his hand. It wasn't his own of course, merely his Uncle Morfin's that he had stolen over the summer. He was able to use it without incident so far, the wand no longer being tied to any magical signature, and had been using it to practice his dark magic. Of course, the wards around the school prevented the use of the Unforgivables, and as such he was forced to utilize the restricted section of the library and get creative.

His eyes glanced to the book before him, opened to a page that had a crude drawing of a man with his body caving in on him, deflating like a balloon. Clearing his throat, he uttered the incantation, aiming his wand at a plump, fist sized spider. Purple shot from the tip, wrapping around the little creature as it began to writhe. Like a ribbon, the light wound around it's hairy body and then tightened, the color absorbing inwards. The spider's body crumpled, his eight legs wriggling rapidly, for thirty-seven seconds- he made sure to keep count- and the form fell. It was dead.

He pursed his lips, chewing on his tongue as he pulled his journal closer and wrote down his observations, ink smearing the tips of his fingers. After, he closed it and began to pack up, having to head down to lunch.

He had to admit, he was quite excited for the dueling club this afternoon. He had grown bored with it long ago, when he was just a third year and realized that it offered no challenge to him. But Hermione...Hermione could add some interest to it perhaps.

When she had blocked his first attempts at legillimancy, he was relatively shocked, but still confident. As he increased his efforts and he still could not get through her barriers, he was, as much as he despised it, impressed. Granted, he was still new to the concept, but he prided himself in being a quick learner and a more then adept wizard. But the little witch had managed to pique his interest, something that was not easy to occur. Their class schedule was near identical, and she had demonstrated high intelligence in each, answering any question thrown her way (which there were many, with the professors wanting to test the academia level of their colleague's cousin.)

And now, he would get to see the full range of her practical knowledge of spells. Oh yes, he was
excited. He wasn't quite certain what he would do with her, should she prove to be as competent as he was beginning to believe she may be. But he would need to keep a close eye on her, that much was definite. She could prove to be a valuable ally, or a formidable foe. Up until now, his close circle of friends consisted of male classmates and he hadn't really ever given thought to extending invitations to females. Of course, he knew that someday for his plans to come to fruition he would need to recruit women as well. It was simply that he hadn't met a woman worth while. Many of the females in his house were from traditional pureblood families, and as such were setting their sights primarily on obtaining a man- ideally wealthy and powerful. None of them seemed to have the drive to hold power of their own, a trait he found truly despicable. It was weak to not seek power, but it was pathetic to seek secondhand power.

Hermione however could be different. He was eager to learn more, but was aware he had to be careful. She was closely tied to Dumbledore, and that prying old bat was sure to fill her head with warnings and words of distrust. He would need to proceed carefully, would have to build her trust and make her want to join his cause. He couldn't resort to fear, and even if it was an option, he found himself not wanting to turn to it. It was a challenge, he knew, and if she did join him, he would want the ability to gloat to the elderly wizard himself. About he had swayed the young, estranged Dumbledore to his side, not with threats, but with praises. Not with torture, but with promises of power.

He smiled darkly, the act making his handsome and sculpted face look twisted and deranged in the midst of the green flames cast by the Room of Requirements. He couldn't help but fantasize his World, his men and army running a strict and dominating regime over the weak, the muggles. Perhaps, when the time came to kill the babbling fool, he would pass the torch to Hermione. He had always imagined himself being the one to end Dumbledore's life, but there was simply something far too poetic about having her committing the deed.
We Shall Be Monsters

Chapter Five: We Shall Be Monsters

“It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.”
-Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

’No, no, no!’ Hermione thought in a panic, sprinting through the corridors of Hogwarts with a cat like agility she didn’t know she possessed. She had lost of track of time while writing a Charms essay, and had rushed into her dormitory to quickly change into a more wearable set of jeans and jumper for the Dueling Club. She wasn’t certain what time it was, but was fearful that she would be late to meet up with Tom.

She recalled with a shiver his treatment of Mulciber earlier that day, and she forced herself to move faster, hearing herself panting heavily with the exertion. He had been utterly terrifying in that moment, and his low and dangerous voice had caused gooseflesh to pimple her skin. So far, the young Dark had treated her kindly and gentlemanly, but she knew that the further into the snake pit she ventured, the more fang she would see. She had just hoped she could delay the attack some.

Rounding a corner, her feet slipped out from under her, and she fell hard onto the marble floor, the motion knocking the breath out of her.

“Hermione!”

She was being gently pulled up from the floor, Albus Dumbledore looking at her with concern- and slight amusement- in his bright blue eyes. Chuckling softly, he asked, “Any particular reason you were running as if the devil were at your heels?”

Her eyebrows shut upward at the accuracy of the statement. “Riddle is going to escort me to Dueling Club, and I just...didn't want to be late,” she answered, her face flushing. She heard him sigh gently, a whispered 'oh' coming between them.

“Well, it's 3:37 right now, where were you to meet?”

She relaxed now, placing a hand to her heart in relief. “Oh, good. And Adalbert's classroom, the club is meeting on that floor, I think,” she said, walking alongside Dumbledore as he turned in the direction she was to be going in.

“Ah, yes. I was headed that way, I'll accompany you. Did Mr. Riddle tell you that I am one of the professors running it?”

She turned to him, her eyes wide. “No, sir, he didn't.” She didn't want to admit how much better she felt knowing that he would be there, keeping a watchful eye over her and Tom. She knew he wouldn't hurt her- not seriously anyway- during a duel, as she was certain they would have one together. But she still her nerves on edge at the thought of it, and Dumbledore's presence would certainly help.

Looking around to make sure no one was in the area, he leaned in and said, “You're doing well in gaining his interest, if I do say so.” At her questioning look, he added, “He hasn't attended a meeting since his second year; I had assumed he lost interest in it due to the more...controlled environment of the dueling. The fact that he is suddenly attending must mean he wants to see you fight.”
He sobered here, pulling away as he said in a serious voice, “I will admit, I look forward to seeing you fight as well. I believe this is where I leave you, Miss Dumbledore.” They came to a stop outside of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and she could see the downcast heads of third years inside the classroom, dutifully taking notes as Professor Adalbert lectured on.

She turned around to face him, smiling airily. “Thank you, Professor. I must confess, I'm happy to hear you'll be there as well.”

“Don't worry, Hermione. I will not allow any harm to come your way, though I hope that you will be skilled enough that it shan't come to that,” he said, starting to walk away. “I'm afraid I must get going now, so that I may prepare the room for our meeting. I will look forward to seeing you there.” His eyes twinkled brightly as he grinned in her direction, winking over his shoulder before making his way down the hall.

Leaning against the cold stone wall, she dropped down to the floor and began to finish her Charms essay, deciding to make the most of her time and attempt to abate her nerves. Energy thrummed through her, coursing through her veins and blood and making her feel anxious. Adrenaline was already pumping aggressively, and she knew it was in response to the idea of battle. She had been sharpened and honed, her body acting as a weapon of war, and she only hoped she could keep her senses in check and remember it wasn't really war.

Not yet at least.

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“Allow me, Miss Dumbledore,” Mulciber said, leaping from where he sat and pulling out a seat for Hermione as he saw her and Tom walk through the double doors. The young man flinched, his forced smile wavering as Riddle approached, Hermione's arm looped through his.

“Yes, Milton,” she mumbled, uncomfortable with the idea that he had been tortured into treating her so graciously. Releasing Riddle's arm- rather quickly, he noticed- she sat down, Mulciber slipping back into his seat to her right.

Riddle removed his cloak, draping it across the back of his chair, before he sat to the left of Hermione, crossing his legs and straightening the lapels of his suit. She had to bite her lip, focusing hard on her cuticles as she tried not to laugh wryly. 'This is utterly ridiculous,' she thought. Here she was, the Gryffindor Princess, flanked by two incredibly dark and powerful wizards, and at the center of Riddle's power play. It seemed like the beginning to a bad joke. A Gryffindor, a Dark Lord, and his snakes are at a bar...

“That is an interesting outfit you have on,” Nott said, and then, with a fleeting look in Riddle's direction, “Not that it's bad, or anything. Just different.”

She pursed her lips. Before she left for this time, Dumbledore had insisted she change her wardrobe to one more current for this time frame, but it was one of the few things she refused to compromise on. Most women wore dresses and skirts in this era, and she simply was not a dress girl. They were uncomfortable and inconvenient, and she was far too practical to wear them. He had given up in convincing her, much to his chagrin, and she had happily packed all her jeans and jumpers in spite.

“They look like something a muggle would wear,” Dolohov muttered, his voice laced with disgust.

Involuntarily, she flinched at his revulsion, her lips puckering in distaste. She nearly, on impulse, made to defend herself and her world, but paused, her lips parted. She wasn't a muggleborn, she was a halfblood. And so was Tom. Her eyes flickered over to where he sat, picking a piece of lint off of
his pant leg as though bored. But she knew he was listening, and making her voice confident and assured, she stated, “Yes, well my father was a muggle.”

“A muggle?” Dolohov said, his nose wrinkling as he made a look of repulsion. Mulciber stiffened beside her, but remained silent, subconsciously rubbing near his naval.

“Do you have a problem with that?” she asked, sitting straighter as she puffed out her chest in pride.

“Yes, Antonin, is there something you wish to say?” Tom was leaning forward now, his body twisting to better face the crew, paying full attention to the conversation.

Cocking his head as though confused by his leader's reaction, he explained, “Well, it's just, half-bloods don't deserve to be in Slytherin.” At this, he fixed Hermione with an air of suspicion, as though her sorting process had been rigged and a Hufflepuff had somehow tricked her way into their fold.

She had to bite her tongue, forcibly withholding herself from revealing all that she knew of all the non-pureblood students accepted into his oh so noble house of Slytherin. Glancing up to the large stage that stretched from one side of the room to the other, a better idea came to her. With an assertive grin, she proposed, “If that's how you feel, than duel me.”

She heard Riddle chuckle from her side, but refused to break her gaze with Dolohov, who looked as though he were concealing a laugh. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, duel me. After the introduction, we'll volunteer for a duel. If you think being a Pure-blood makes you better than me, than prove it.”

His wide grin began to slip, realizing she was genuine in her offer. Both Nott and Mulciber were smiling, their eyes bright and cheerful as they looked between the two. Dolohov gritted his teeth, nostrils flaring as he answered, “Alright then, if you insist on being beat by a real wizard.”

“Haven't met a real one yet who was capable of such a thing.” Nott was practically giddy with her words, reaching across Mulciber to heartily slap her shoulder, seemingly forgetting about her blood status reveal. ‘Careful, Hermione, or they might start to recognize you're a Gryffindor,' she chided herself, unable to stop her playful grin from spreading on her face.

Suddenly, another, more careful hand was placed on her shoulder, and she looked to see Riddle leaning in closer, using her to prop himself forward. Willing herself to not shrug away from his touch, he asked, “May I have the honor of dueling the winner of this little war?” One brow was raised in question, the right side of his lips lifting up further than the left in a smirk.

Dolohov grinned. “I'd love to duel you, mate!”

At this, Nott was rubbing his hands together. “Brilliant. Care to join the scuffle, Mulciber?”

Before Mulciber could respond, Dumbledore called out to the room, drawing the attention of the fifty or so students in attendance. “Welcome to the first meeting of this year’s Dueling Club. We will begin with volunteers in a moment, but first,” the old wizard said, fixing each student with an intense look, “we must go over the rules.”

His voice echoed around the expansive room, enhanced by a charm, but she didn't hear any of it, as Riddle had leaned in and was whispering to her. “They say no dark magic, but they tend to not notice if you use the more mild ones. Personally, I think that they should allow us to use them- after all, It's not as if Grindelwald will be defeated with a tickling jinx and disarming spell.” Trying to ignore the heat of his breath on her ear and the shivers it sent down her spine, she was reminded of
Harry in their fifth year Defense class, and him using a similar argument against Umbridge.

'That was different, though,' she thought. 'We weren't learning anything practical.'

She felt Riddle shift so that he was leaning back in his seat, his hand still resting on her shoulder where the warmth of it made her skin feel as though it were burning. Her arm twitched with the restraint of not shrugging, and she managed to focus her attention on Dumbledore, who had finished demonstrating dueling forms and techniques with Professor Adalbert.

“Now,” his voice boomed, his blue eyes landing solidly on Hermione's. “Do we have any volunteers?” After a moment of silence from the students, he smiled wide and added, “Miss Dumbledore, perhaps?”

Tom pulled his hand away as she stood, striding confidently over to the left steps that lead to the raised dueling strip, Dolohov standing and breaking off to the right. One hundred or so eyes followed her movements, and she shifted under their scrutiny. A part of her almost felt bad, knowing that she was at a great advantage to Dolohov; after all, she was a twenty-one year old witch who had spent nearly ten years in a war, four of those years being more active than passive. Whereas this boy was only sixteen years old, with no experience to be spoken of. But her guilt receded quickly, knowing that once she was done with him, she would get the opportunity to fight Riddle. If he didn't consider her a valuable asset yet, he would certainly believe her to be when she demonstrated her dueling capabilities.

They now stood several feet apart, their wands raised in front of their faces with Dumbledore resting a hand on each one of their shoulders as he reminded them of the rules. “Use of dark magic will result in a penalty up to and including detention, banning from the club, and expulsion, depending on the degree of the spell. You are to walk seven paces in opposite directions, then turn. Attacking earlier will result in disqualification, and loss of house points. In order to win, you must disarm your opponent and capture their wand. Understood?”

They both nodded, and he stepped back, yelling to them to begin their march. After seven paces, she spun around raising her wand out as she leaned her weight forward, a stance she found quite effective while on the run. Dolohov was standing with his torso facing her, his body squared off, and his wand positioned similar to hers.

“Begin!” Adalbert called from his place beside Dumbledore.

“Expelliarmus!” Dolohov called, stepping forward. A stream of red exploded from the tip of his wand, and wordlessly, Hermione summoned a shield to defend against it. The air in front of her began to shine iridescently, snapping into colorful sparks as the force of his spell hit against it and was absorbed by the magic.

“Impedimenta!” he tried again, but she turned her body away from the light, raising a brow at him as if to say, ‘Is that all you've got?’

Taking a large step forward and shifting her weight, her wand jutting forward in one fluid motion, she prepared her offenses. “Avis!” Hermione shouted, watching as she summoned a small flock of birds from the tip of her wand, their beaks emerging before sliding their little bodies through and spreading their silver wings, glimmering with magic. Training her wand at Dolohov, she then cast a nonverbal oppugno! And watched as the birds began to swarm around his head, violently diving in to peck at him. Some clutched his dark hair in their locks and flew back, flapping their wings as they pulled his head in every witch way.

“Ge' off!” he said, waving his free arm around his head as he attempted to focus on Hermione, who
was biting her lip to stop her giggles.

The duel continued in like manner, with Dolohov loudly proclaiming each spell he intended to use and Hermione easily blocking and countering, the birds still diving in to attack the boy.

She knew that one day his talent would grow, had witnessed it first had, but she quickly found herself bored, wishing to move on with it so that she could fight Tom. With one final spell hurled in her direction, she decided to end the duel.

Producing another shield to block the spell, she raised her wand high in defense and cast several spells consecutively, nonverbal, which all headed quickly to the Slytherin. Multicolored trails of magic wound upon each other, static and brilliant, as one by one they pummeled into it, dispersing the crown of silver birds in fright.

Suddenly, he was in the air and flung backwards, his body twisting and rolling back before he fell with a loud thud to the floor, his hands grasping for purchase. But none came, as his right leg, pulled by an unseen force, rose up in the air as he was held upside down. His extremities hung lazily down, with only his one leg straight and erect, and he began flailing, his cloak draping down and the hem pooling to the ground only three feet below him.

“Accio Dolohov’s Wand,” she ordered curtly.

The slim, black wand with a cool silver coil wrapping around its handle was then ripped from his grasp, flying across the stage and into Hermione's outstretched hand. Settling into her palm, her fingers wrapped around it as both Adalbert and Dumbledore moved forward, clapping their hands at the performance.

“Well done, Miss Dumbledore. Extraordinary, the use of nonverbal magic!” Adalbert praised, resting his chin approvingly in between his thumb and forefinger, his green eyes wide. “Certainly well beyond your grade level.”

Her cheeks tinged pink. “Lots of practice, I guess.”

“Well, it certainly paid off, eh? Twenty points to Slytherin!” the young professor said, pushing back his mop of brown curls before turn to Dolohov. The birds had returned now that the cacophony of spells ended, and were flitting about his head angrily. With a barely suppressed laugh, Adalbert waved his wand and muttered a finite, the birds disappearing in a plume of silver smoke.

“Miss Dumbledore, if you would be so kind-”

“Oh!” she startled, forgetting herself. Stepping forward, she extended her arm, holding out the wand she had pilfered. Her gaze lingered on it, and she felt the magic pulse through it, tingling and burning her fingers as though protesting against her touch. When she had used Bellatrix's wand during the battle at Malfoy Manor, she could feel the evil in it, snaking dawn and around her wrist to clutch at her. It had been like the horcrux, wanting to taint and poison all it touched. And she could feel the heavy weight in her heart knowing that it had been used to kill, to torture. That it had been responsible for the torment done to the Longbottoms, had been the reason their minds were fractured and twisted beyond repair.

This sixteen year old Dolohov had not killed anyone, nor had he tortured anyone. But she knew the potential- the familiar itch prickling along her abdomen reminded her full well of what he was capable of.

The wand was snatched from her hands, causing her to jump as her eyes met the heated gaze of the
Slytherin, his jaw firm in anger and embarrassment. She tried to smile, the motion unsteady, but he turned and began walking down the steps. Her heart thudded in time with each pounding of his feet on the floor, and she swallowed hard.

Dolohov brushed past Riddle, breezing through the crowd and back to his seat beside Nott and Mulciber who were clutching their bellies in laughter.

“Ah, Mr. Riddle, would you like to take on the reigning champion?” Adalbert said with a wide, toothy smile as Tom walked up to the stage.

“If I may, professor,” he answered, watching Hermione with a predatory look in his blue eyes. Beginning the form to start the duel, she wondered at what point that had changed. At what horcrux did his eyes go from blue, to blood red? At what point did they cease being calculating and disarmingly brilliant, and become manic and filled with a lust for more power, for more control? At what point did his desire to be immortal, outweigh his need to be a person?

Their duel began, simple and easy enough. They took turns casting spells at one other, passing time before they would delve into more aggressive territories, darker spells. Several minutes went on in this manner, and she took the time to study his form.

He was stiff, and had the habit of standing firm in his spot, his feet planted to the stone with his right leg two feet in front of the left. He did not box his body, as Dolohov had, making the target for her to hit smaller and easier to miss. His wand arm tended to be the only thing that moved, and with a huff, she realized it was because this was automatic for him. He was barely engaged in their duel, simply going through the motions until he desired to turn it up notch. With a sneer, she decided to see if she could break his composure.

Purple light emitted from her wand, and suddenly Tom was flying backwards, landing six yards away as he skidded down the stage. With his eyebrows raised high, he countered back at her before even coming to rise from his feet.

She barely saw his swift movement, the slice of his wand going through the air, as he sent a nonverbal cutting jinx at her. The skin on her shoulder split open, making her wince. But it wasn’t deep, and with a hiss she fired back her own spell.

Red sparks fired off from the tip of her wand, jets of color spitting outward and wrapping together until they formed a ball of red heat, pummeling forward. With a flick of his wrist, the ball halted, twisting around on an axis before changing course and heading towards Hermione. She felt the heat of it, like fire on her face, and quickly cast a finite on it. The ball began to turn into ash, cooling as the gray flakes fell to the earth, smoke forming above the pile as they glowed like embers before dying out.

He was quick to retaliate, sending a nonverbal spell that made the ground she stood on begin to shake, knocking her off balance as large vines burst through the stage. Rubble fell to the side in a puff of smoke and the vines were suddenly wrapping around her ankles. Thorns pricked into the skin, and she winced in pain, trying to disentangle herself from them. But the more she struggled, the tighter they constricted, plunging the thorns in deeper. Rooting herself to the spot, she held her wand up.

Gold sparks emitted, followed by a large ring of flames. The air exploded, booming loudly as the ring collapsed upon itself, burning away to reveal a giant, fiery phoenix. The bird opened it’s burning beak, a low cawing sound filling the room and making the windows shake with the undulation of noise. Massive wings, several yards in diameter, spread out- a mixture of heated blues and yellows, reds and oranges, filling the large space with light and warmth.
And then it swooped down, smoke curling after its wake as the air seemed to come alive, pulsing with every flap of the magnificent wings. Looking rather unprepared, Riddle jumped back, ducking as he aimed his wand at it, a powerful jet of water ushering forward and attempting to extinguish the flames.

Bowing down, Hermione sliced her wand across the vines, her circulation returning as they, releasing a cry at being severed, retreated back into the gaping holes. Blood smeared her pale skin, and with a groan she saw her white socks were already saturated in red.

'Worry about laundry later,' she told herself, taking several steps back to briefly admire her handiwork as the phoenix fluttered above Tom, evading the liquid. It was a spell she had learned from George, one that he had invented to honor Dumbledore, and that he had hoped would become the calling card of the Order, similar to the morsmordre curse. Her throat tensed, remembering that she and Harry were the only ones to learn it, as he never had the opportunity to show others.

With a reignited vigor, she began sending a barrage of spells and jinxes at him as the Phoenix pulled back its golden head and screeched. The students around them covered their ears with their hands, making pained faces, as Tom flinched, trying his best to not get distracted by the bird and defend against the spells.

A bombardment of colors- greens, blues, yellows and reds- flew back and forth, the two Slytherins frantically trying to best the other. Occasionally, the sharp caaaw of the magnificent beast broke through the sizzling sound of magic cutting through the air, and on more than one occasion, Tom was hit by a spell as the high-pitched noise broke his concentration. But he only grew more relentless, beads of sweat forming on his brow as the constant exertion and heat of the Phoenix bore down on him, his mouth set in a grim line.

From across the stage, Tom watched as she panted rather heavily. Her hair had reached what he hoped was it's maximum state of disarray, frizzing and curling heavily as she began to sweat. The battle was going on longer than he had expected, but just as he had hoped. She was very talented and proficient, and he knew that if didn't steer it in a more...direct manner, they would continue until someone collapsed from exhaustion. He had of course wanted to see how she worked with dark magic, and if she would return in kind. There was something to be said about a witch or wizard who wasn't afraid to delve into the blacker arts, and he longed to know if she was willing to cross the line with him. Grinning in resoluteness, he sent a new spell at her, being careful to use the lesser known and least severe dark spells of his repertoire.

She fell to her knees, clutching onto her stomach as she gasped out. A pressure was forming on her lower abdomen, and she felt as though someone had grabbed hold of her organs and made a fist, squeezing down hard. Electricity shot up and down, her body trembling in aftershocks at the sensation. Her brown eyes squinted upward, catching sight of Riddle's rather smug grin.

With a grunt, she managed to send a spell his way, as the pain in her gut began to move downwards and cause a great ache in her hips and thighs that burrowed into her bones.

Tom seemed unaffected for a brief second, but he was suddenly gasping and reaching for his tie, frantically trying to remove it as the silk fabric tightened around his neck. Nails clawed at the skin of his neck as he tried to remove the noose of silver and green, to no avail. He choked, finally performing a small cutting hex and allowing the remains of the tie to fall to his feet.

Unabashed fury crossed his features, and he started sending a deluge of dark spells her way. She tried to move quickly, ducking behind hastily thrown up shields and trying hard to keep her wards up. But as she jumped forward, raising her wand to counter back, a stream of red smashed her hard in the chest.
Suddenly, she was in the air, her body raising as her spine twisted sharply. And then she was dropped, coming down hard against the marble stage. Her breath was knocked out of her, and she gasped heavily as a dull ache settled in her stomach. Before she could respond, her head whipped sharply back as another spell hit her. Feeling like a heated blade had come upon her head, she yelped in pain, her ears ringing loud and her vision swimming. The images before her flickered and blurred before, and just like that she was blind, her vision fuzzy and filled with a static image of black and white. Panic overcame her, and she felt her anxiety rise as one of her senses was stripped away from her.

Logically, she knew she was safe, that nothing would happen to her with Dumbledore around- and in fact she could hear him trying to call an end to the duel, but she couldn't help it. Her mind was tearing her away from the present and into the past, straddling the line between the here and now and the memories of her torture. She could hear Riddle's sure steps pounding across the marble, and thinking as quick as she could, she fired the first spell that came to mind.

“IGNeus Basium!”

He was on fire. He could see the flames rising forward, reaching outward and licking at his pale skin, and he could smell it, the burnt, acrid smell as the heat hissed away and melted at his flesh, his clothes. And oh god, he could feel it. He was engulfed in a heat that he had never experienced before in his entire life, and it was stifling. He couldn't breathe, every breath constricting uncomfortably and causing him to inhale the acerbic and stinging smoke that seemed to coat his nose and lungs, the fire eating him from the inside out.

He wretched his mouth open to yell, but no sound came out. Panic overcoming him as he tried to back away from the fire, but it followed him, and he fell backwards. Never before had he felt a pain like this, and he could feel his breath become ragged and he was no longer able to yell, the billowing clouds of smoke filling him and burning his insides.

And then it was over, the pain and burning receding just as quickly as it had come. His breaths were heavy and greedy, hungrily consuming the fresh and cool air around him as the sensation of being on fire faded away to a mere memory. He jumped as the phoenix above made a long and low cooing sound before folding the wings against its body, disappearing with a crack and sparks of fire. Ashes fell to the ground, coating his hair and shoulders like snow.

“Perhaps,” Adalbert started, his eyes wide as he looked between the students, each in varying state of disarray. “We'll call this one a tie, yes?”

Tom quickly looked over himself, pleasantly relieved to find that he was in fact not covered in burns or singed clothing, before looking over at Hermione. She was standing on shaking legs, her hand gripping tightly on Dumbledore's forearm for support as the man looked down at his cousin in what could only be considered pride. Her face was drawn into one of bewilderment, her eyebrows high and her lips pinched tightly. Blood was seeping through her shoulder, and he could see some of it rubbed along the delicate bow of her collar bone, the color looking harsh against her pink skin. Her eyes glistened in a way that set him on edge, a way that seemed to shine with power and magic, and they were lined with purple. Deep bruising encased her eyes- an effect of the blinding curse, he used- and the color looked horrific on her, making her face looking sallow and even more narrow.

And he thought she never more beautiful than in that moment, covered in blood and sweat, her power radiating off of her as she exuded it from her very being. He frizzy hair seemed to spark, just as her admittedly brilliant songbird had, and he was overcome by the desire- the need to have her.

“Well, unfortunately, I believe this meeting will have to come to an early end today, as we now have some repairs to make,” Dumbledore said with a chortle, his eyes bright with merriment. Indeed, the
stage had taken quite a damage from their battle, with several holes and rubble from where the vines had burst through. The stone itself was covered in a thin dusting of ash, the deep navy beneath looking dull and dirty under the gray. “I hope you all enjoyed today’s...demonstration, and come prepared to join us next week!”

The students began to leave, none seeming too put out that they didn’t get a chance to battle as they excitedly discussed what they had witnessed. But Tom paid them no mind as he ran a hand through his messy hair in an attempt to add order to the dark locks. When he was satisfied with his slightly less disheveled appearance, he walked over to where Hermione and Dumbledore stood, the two turning to face him. He smiled as he extended his hand out.

“You were certainly a worthy opponent, Miss Dumbledore.”

Her eyes flicked over to the Transfiguration professor before she reached out, her fingers slowly clasping around his warm hand. “You as well, Riddle.” He didn’t let go, holding onto her hand, and running his fingers over her callouses. He smiled as he felt her pull back, her hand tensing in his. But he still held on, thinking about how wonderful of an addition she would be to his band of followers.

-xXx-

“You really don’t have to, Tom,” Hermione said, her voice quiet as the two sat in the now empty Dueling Room. The students had left nearly half an hour ago, and now that the stage was repaired and cleaned, the professors had made way to attend dinner, once more congratulating the two on their exemplary duel.

Tom had pulled a chair out for Hermione before pulling one for himself, placing it opposite her so that they were face to face. He had yet to replace his robe on, and had resorted to using several cooling charms to settle down from the heat and sweat he felt from the duel.

“Nonsense, I insist,” he said, patting his lap expectantly.

Sighing in resignation, she slipped her shoe off and very gently placed her foot on his thigh, the cuts from the thorns stinging fiercely now as she settled down from her adrenaline high. Making a face, Tom pulled the sock off and grabbed hold, pulling her foot down as he examined her ankle closely. With a wave of his hand and a soft oh from Hermione, he wandlessly cleaned the area, the deep maroon of dried blood dissolving.

“I didn’t know you could do wandless magic,” she said, in awe. He truly was quite intelligent, she had to give him that.

“Can’t you?”

“Well, yes, but nothing big. Only small commands,” she said, watching in fascination as he used his wand to heal her cuts. With a wince, she realized they were deeper than she gave credit for. “Although, there was that one time when I was about six years old, and I apparently decided our housecat would look much better pink and purple.” She laughed at the memory, recalling how delighted she had been when her very own cat had turned into Cheshire, a character from her favorite novel at the time. “My parents were so confused and had no idea what had happened.”

Only when Tom turned to her with a sharp look did she realize her mistake. “But surely your mother knew why?” he asked, and she could feel him begin to prod once more into her mind.

“That’s rude, Tom,” she clucked, pointing to her head. “And my mother didn’t tell my father about me- well, us- until I was older and ready to start learning. He was shocked, but accepted it all the
same. Of course, she had to pretend for all those years that she didn't know why I was such a menace.”

He continued to stare at her, not once pulling away from her mind despite her catching him. Finally, he turned back to her ankle and went back to healing the cuts and bands of blue bruises. “That makes sense, then.”

'I'm a better liar than I thought,' her inner monologue prattled.

Feeling brave, the lioness in her purring, she asked, “You're pure-blood, then? Like Dolohov said, they're the only ones allowed in Slytherin.”

“You were allowed in Slytherin,” was all he said, and she accepted that as the only answer he would give. In her time, he had never revealed to his followers his true lineage, and she hadn't expected him to differ from that. But he knew what he was, and he knew what he thought she was. Hopefully he would, just as Dumbledore predicted, consider her more of his equal now that her blood-status was revealed.

Sitting back in her seat, she watched him with careful eyes. One hand had the heel of her foot while the other held the tip of his wand to it, her skin glowing gold as the bruises disappeared. She was ready to pull her foot back and off his lap, but stopped as the hand on her heel moved upward, gently rubbing her calf.

Her hair stood on end at the contact, and her whole body clenched. The feeling tickled her, and if not for her apprehension at the situation she was sure she would have kicked him in the face as she fell into a fit of giggles. But instead she was frozen, her mouth gaping open. His hand came around to the front now, pushing up the leg of her jeans some as he caressed her shin.

“Just making sure I got all the cuts,” he explained, seemingly aware of her body's reaction to his touch.

“You did,” she snapped, regaining her composure as she pulled her foot away and shook it, the jeans sliding back in place.

“What about your shoulder-”

“I can get it,” she answered quickly, cupping a hand over to where she knew the cut was.

He snickered at her, sitting straight in his chair as he said, “Alright. I am only trying to be a gentleman.”

She nearly cried out at that, knowing full well that he enjoyed watching her squirm in discomfort, recoil from his touch. A gentleman was the last thing he was trying to be. She stood from her seat now, cleaning her sock off and replacing it before slipping her foot back into her shoes. Tom had stood up as well, grabbing his bag as well as her own before proffering his elbow to her.

It was something she hadn't quite gotten used to, but she fell into it with ease, her arm coming through his as they locked elbows. He began to lead her- as he made sure to walk just slightly faster than her- to the Great Hall, leaving the Dueling Room behind.

“You know, that phoenix...I had never seen anything like it.” He said after a moment, cutting through the awkward silence that pervaded them since he briefly ran his fingers along her leg. He could tell that she was not quite comfortable around him, a fact that irritated him to no end. If he wanted her to join him, and he certainly wanted that, he would have to ease her into it. Seduce her into his world of night and darkness. Until she was ready to accept that her fate was now in his
hands, he would play with his prey in the meantime. It was amusing how frightened and confused she had looked, and he found it preferable to the way the other female students would have responded.

“A friend of mine created it.”

Turning his thoughts away from his plans to ensnare the little witch, he looked at her. She looked almost sad, in that moment, and with a shrug he decided not to push it for now, assuming that this friend had been killed by Grindelwald as well. One day he would get all the answers from her that he wished, but for today he was a gentleman, an academic colleague.

“Hm. Do you think it's possible that we could modify it?” he asked, and she felt herself frown at the use of the word we. Did he wish to work on a project with her, or was he merely using it casually?

“How did you figure?”

His eyes darkened, the spokes of blue and gray becoming stormier and more muddled as he smirked. Slowing his steps, he said in a deep voice of crushed velvet, “I rather think the form of a snake would do nicely, don't you?”
“All the other fairies fly, why don't you?” “I had wings once, and they were strong. But they were stolen from me.”

-Disney's Maleficent

“You know, Hermione,” Ron said, affectionately nuzzling his chin along the top of her head, the curls becoming displaced. “We would be dead without you and that brain of yours.”

The two laid together on a cot, their bodies pressed tight for warmth and security, something that had been hard to find as of late. The small, soft glow of an oil lamp was the only light within the cramped tent, sitting between the cot and a metal framed bunk bed that didn't even have enough room for the person on the lower bunk to sit straight without bumping their head on it. If she listened closely, she could hear the sound of Harry's heavy feet stomping anxiously outside on the forest floor as he stood watch, it being his turn to maintain a careful eye over their campsite.

Hermione giggled, shifting over so that she could look into his eyes and his lopsided grin. “You should really get some sleep. You'll regret it in two hours when it's your turn to take watch,” she said, trying her best to sound bossy.

He rolled his eyes before leaning in, pressing his lips to hers. They were chapped and dry, and the feeling was harsh against her own lips, but she pressed back. He was a dominating kisser, pushing forward quickly and greedily, the actions clumsy and out of sync with her own movements. It had made her laugh at first, how awkward he had been with their kisses and how he moved aggressively at her lips. But now it was frustrating to her, having been nearly eight months since the Battle of Hogwarts and their first kiss, and she attempted to assert herself in the kiss, hoping that doing so would allow them to fall into a rhythm. But he only responded in kind, placing a hand on her hip as he pulled her closer, a low groan emitting from the back of his throat.

CRACK!

They jumped, pulling apart as Hermione shuffled into a standing position, her wand already aimed and pointed at the zippered entrance of the tent. In a moment, Ron rose beside her, standing about a foot taller than her as he too extended his wand.

“Stay in here, Hermione,” he said, his voice cracking with nerves. In any other instance, this would have made her laugh and playfully shove him, but all she could manage was a sidelong glance in his direction, the mop of bright red hair the only source of color in the dim tent.

Slowly, she began to move forward, swishing her wand through the air as the tent entrance flew open, revealing the snow laden ground. The snow crunched beneath her feet, snowflakes falling softly from the sky and onto her hand, holding their brilliant form for but a second before dissolving from the heat of her skin. Just several yards ahead, she saw the back of Harry's head, the disheveled mess of black locks that Hermione had been intending to cut someday, as the ends of which were reaching his shoulders. He was huddled around something, his body rocking slightly, as she heard him murmur soft words into the frozen air.

“Harry?” she asked timidly.

He turned around, releasing hold of the form that had long, matted red hair. “Hermione!” Ginny
shouted, throwing herself at the other witch with a force that made Hermione huff out a breath.

“Ginny? What are you doing here?” Ron asked, approaching his sister who still maintained a tight grip on Hermione.

“George is here as well,” Harry said, motioning to a large tree. Sitting against the frozen bark and shivering at the cold, was George Weasley, his face covered in a myriad of cuts and bruising and his left leg splayed out in front of him, the knee bent at a grotesque angle with blood coating his pants. The viscous fluid stained the snowy bed of the forest floor, seeping into the white earth and tingling it pink.

Hermione gasped as she rushed to his side, gingerly holding his chin as she looked him over, muttering under her breath. “What happened? How did you even find us? Oh, this is bad- Ron! Get my bag!” she shouted, her words a hurried rush as she placed several warming charms over the wizard, causing him to sigh in relief.

“What happened?” Harry asked, echoing her question as Ron disappeared into the tent to get the beaded purse.

Tears welled in Ginny's eyes, her split lip quivering as she reached up to conceal them, rubbing at her eyes and cheeks. “The Order's gone. The Death Eaters found where we were hiding, and attacked us and...we couldn't...we didn't have time to rebuild, they outnumbered us,” she said, her voice strong despite the tragedy she spoke of. “We didn't even see the battle to the end, Dumbledore gave us this and told us to follow it,” she said, extending her hand outwards to show a a deluminator, similar to the one he had given Ron but deep maroon in color.

“Gone? Where were you staying?” Hermione asked. “The Order can't be gone if Dumbledore is still-”

“Everyone's gone, Hermione. Only some people managed to escape- I think I saw Fleur apparate, and Sturgis. Neville got away, so did the ferret Malfoy- we shaouda never let them join! To hell with what they did at Hogwarts; cowards! The lot of them. Everyone else was either dead or somehow still fighting when we left,” George said, hissing as Hermione ripped open his pant leg to further examine the wound. Ron returned now, clutching the bag as he held it out for her.

It was then that, with a soft and solemn voice, Ginny said, “Mum's dead. Dad too. Aberforth. Kingsley. Bill. Parvati. Dean. McGonagall. They all died.”

Ron made an unidentifiable sound, one that was a cross between a sob and a gasp, the noise cutting through the air and seeming to still the snowflakes in their place, suspended in the cold night sky. She winced, wanting to offer her support, but continued to work on healing George's mangled leg, trying her hardest to block out the sounds of anguish from behind her.

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With a huff, Hermione rolled over in bed, pressing her face into the soft pillow. She was quickly dwindling through her supplies of dreamless sleep, and had attempted to dilute her dose so as to have to hold off on making herself some more. Unfortunately, it had not worked, and she remained restless throughout the night, falling asleep only to be awoken by the ghosts of her subconscious and nightmares. She was thankful she made sure to cast a silencing charm on her bed, knowing that her roommates would not take too kindly to being awoken in the middle of the night.

It had been a week since her duel with Tom, and she was pleased to find she had made quite an impression on him, as she became the unspoken sixth member of his ragtag gang. He sat by her in
their shared classes, and would escort her throughout the corridors, his elbow looped around hers and her bag on his shoulder. When their schedule didn't quite match up, one of the other boys- Nott, Mulciber or Rosier- would take his place, ensuring that she never went about the castle unattended. Dolohov was the only one who seemed bitter at her presence, and she couldn't entirely blame him. A part of her suspected that Tom was angry to learn of the poor quality of his dueling skills, and the charismatic wizard had turned rather cold to his follower.

She hadn't quite seen much more of the darkness lurking within Tom Riddle, the past several days progressing without incident. She found that their closer relationship enabled her studies to progress in depth, and she felt slightly less voyeuristic. He was very magnificent at concealing his true self, but she was beginning to catch on to his little ticks.

His nostrils flared when he didn't get what he wanted, an expression Hermione had seen quite often. Following their duel, he had been very inquisitive of her spells and charms. Particularly of her Igneus Basium curse, a dark psychological spell she had found in Snape's journals. 'I've never read of such a spell...did your friend create that as well?' he had asked, and she could see his eyes light in a way that terrified her, a greedy and hungry look to them. She had nodded, swallowing hard as she watched the need in his eyes grow, wishing to devour all the knowledge and power he could. She knew he wanted to ask her how it was done, wanted to know the mechanics so that he could add it to his own arsenal of torture. But he wouldn't ask. He was still pretending. He was Tom Marvolo Riddle, promising young student with a tragic past but heart of gold. And Tom Marvolo Riddle had no use for spells of such a dark nature.

Yes, she found the facade much more preferable to the incarnation she had known in her own time. There were moments where she would forget herself, and laugh airily at something he said. She was surprised to find he had quite the sense of humor, witty and reminiscent of the brilliant Winston Churchill. She would feel guilty almost immediately afterwards, a slight repulsion growing within her chest as she realized she had giggled at something the Dark Lord had said. But she was pretending as well, pretending to be a confidante, an impressionable young witch who would be seduced by Tom's power. Despite her better want, she would have to act friendly and amicable with him, holding onto his elbow regardless of the way his touch seemed to burn her skin.

Rolling over onto her back and kicking the stifling covers down to her feet, she thought with a laugh at how she had grown into one of the most despised girls in the school, all in a week's time.

The other girls had taken notice of Tom's interest in Hermione, and became alight with envy. Many of the witches fancied the handsome Slytherin- the Gryffindors adoring his chivalrous charm, the Ravenclaws admiring his intellect, the Hufflepuffs delighting in his polite demeanor and the Slytherins respecting his power.

'They can all have him,' she thought bitterly, sitting up in bed finally as she began rubbing her eyes. She was so exhausted and wanted nothing more than to settle her weary body down and fall fast asleep, but her mind was working against her.

Her birthday would be here in a week and a half, and it would be the first she celebrated without any of her friends and family, not a single soul beside her who knew who she was and what she had been through. Their celebrations had been meager, falling to the wayside as the war grew in intensity, but they had always been together. Last year, they had celebrated by sitting outside of a warm campfire, hidden behind the many veils of their wards and protective spells. She sat beside Ron, his heavy and hot arm wrapped around her shoulder, with Ginny curled up in Harry's lap. George flitted about the circle, jokingly cuddling up to everyone in turn in a game of duck-duck-goose, the smile looking both familiar and out of place on his face. And they had spent the evening sharing stories, reminiscing about simpler times when they were whole and together. They passed
around various candies that Ron had procured from a small muggle shop in the United States, before Voldemort and his army had taken over the muggle world as well. And when the candies had reached George, they would eye them with suspicion, tossing them if they thought that the older boy looked too smug.

By the end of the evening, Harry's face had broken out in fierce tiger stripes, and Hermione spoke with a permanent high-pitched voice, as though she had inhaled helium with every breath.

She smiled at the memory, her eyes pricking with the start of tears as she thought of everything she would hand over to have that moment, to live in it for just a second longer. She was safe and comfortable here, within the walls of Hogwarts before they fell down and in a soft and warm bed that hugged her body in a sweet embrace. She had full and delicious meals every day, and didn't have to worry about turning the corner and being hit by a killing curse. And yet, she would give it all away if it meant she could sit on the cold hard ground, laughing with friends for the first time in an eternity. Forgetting the war, and themselves.

Wiping away at her tears, she reached over to the bedside table, pulling out her small beaded bag from the drawer. She drew the satchel onto her lap, tattered and worn from its use with stretches of missing embellishments. Her arm went in, all the way to her shoulder, as she fished her hand around, slowly pulling out the objects she was looking for as she came across them.

When she was done, she settled back against her pillows, shoving the bag to her side. Various trinkets sat before her, things she had collected over the years and things that she had kept hold of. Many of them were thrown into her bag for the convenience, and she had held onto everything for her friends. Candies, bright and colorful so as to draw the eye of a child were scattered about, goodness knew how old they were by now. Chocolate frogs in particular, with the cardboard box they came in peeled and torn from tossing about in her bag. They were a favorite of Ron, and she had never found the heart in her to throw them away, even though she knew they would be bitter and tasteless, and the charm on the frog would have long since faded. Still, she reached for one, opening the container to find the frog hard and stale.

The card was of Morgana, her dark eyes sultry against her pale skin as she winked up at Hermione from her place within the frame, tossing her black curls over her shoulder. Pushing the card aside, she bit into the chocolate, the candy crumbling against the grind of her teeth. It was just as tasteless as she thought it might be, but she continued to eat it as she went through the rest of the belongings. She had Fred's wand, something that George carried on him that he entrusted into Hermione's care, the stick narrow with a knotted hilt, multiple tiers of wood protruding around the core as it tapered upward. She wrapped her fingers around it, the wood cold and unresponsive to her touch. With a frown, she removed her hand, knowing that wands only became inactive in such a way after the death of their witch or wizard. It had been years since his death now, but there was something awful about knowing one's magic had left the world entirely. That nothing remained of them.

Her hands moved over to the crumpled sweater, the maroon yarn wrinkled beneath her touch. Ginny's sweater, handmade by Molly Weasley. She could just make out the deep golden color of the embroidered G, frayed ends of yarn sticking up, patches of the sweater threadbare. It was the sweater Ginny was wearing the night she found them in the forest, the night in which the order fell. The younger girl had passed the sweater to Hermione, her voice wavering as she said, “It's all I have left of my mum. Please hold on to this.”

Grabbing hold of it, she slipped the sweater on, warm and lovingly-made. She leaned back against her pillows as she grabbed the final item, the hefty photo album that had belonged to Harry, given to him at the end of their first year by Hagrid. She curled herself under the covers as she began to look through the book, pictures of Lily and James Potter, smiling and alive as they proudly showed off the
chubby baby between them, his little toddler fists jutting out to wave at her from the photo.

The deep green eyes of Lily Potter turned to her, and her red lips pulled into a small smile. A smile as if to say 'Thank you for doing this to save my son.' She wondered if somewhere, Lily knew what she had done. If Harry and Ron knew where she was right now, and why. She knew that, if she were to succeed and the war would come to an end at the Battle of Hogwarts, that the Harry and Ron of the new world would never know. The Hermione of the new world wouldn't either, and perhaps it would be better that way. She was certain that if someone told her at seventeen that one day she would sit with Voldemort and have lunch with him daily, discussing magical theories and laughing at his jokes, she would surely think them daft.

She continued to look through the album, more recent photos of her and her friends growing and aging with each turn of the page. Eventually, the book slipped to the side, as she fell asleep, her hands tucked under her head as she breathed softly.

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Rubbing her eyes, Hermione wandered out into the common room, stumbling slightly with the remainder of a deep sleep still wrapped around her body. She had no idea of how long she had slept for, but when she awoke, the dormitory was empty, curtains tossed open to reveal messy beds. 'Thank goodness it's Saturday,' she thought.

“Good morning. Or perhaps I should say good day?”

She jumped at the voice, snapping her head back as she looked at the sole occupant of the room. Tom Riddle was sitting on the sofa, a closed book resting in his lap as he chuckled at her. He pat on the seat beside him, beckoning her to come join him in front of the fire. She did so, sitting on the opposite side of the sofa before shifting closer to him, realizing he would only request that she do just that.

“Did I really sleep in that late?”

“I believe lunch will be served soon.”

She groaned, pressing the heel of her palm against her head. When was the last time she had slept in so late? She could hardly even recall a time, always a morning person ever since she was a little girl.

“If you're hungry, I know a way into the kitchen-”

“No, that's alright. I had some chocolate earlier this morning,” she cut in, laughing his face turned into one of confusion. Before he could question her eating habits, she asked, “So everyone is at Hogsmeade, then?”

He nodded. “Yes. I decided to stay behind and see if you were alright. Besides, I've been meaning to catch up on some reading, the quiet is rather nice.”

'Liar. You won't let me leave this house without someone to keep tabs on me,' she thought. “That was kind of you, but I'm alright. If you'd like, I can leave you alone so that you continue to enjoy the quiet.”

“No, that's quite alright. Hermione?” he asked, twisting his mouth in thought as his eyes looked down before coming back up to her eyes. “Why are you wearing a sweater that has a G on it?”

She blushed, raising her hands up to cover the golden letter as though it were something incriminating. She had completely forgotten she was wearing it, having slept so soundly for the first
time in what felt like forever. Chewing her lip, she decided that something as close to the truth was better than an outright lie, knowing that eventually she’d have a difficult time keeping track of so many.

“It used to belong to a friend I had, before I came here.”

He shifted in his seat, turning his body so that he was facing her, resting one leg up on the seat cushion. He tilted his head to the side, making a face of concern. “Did she...?”

“Yes, she was killed by Grindelwald as well,” she answered, her voice going quiet. It felt like a dishonor to Ginny's memory, lying about the way she went. To not say that the girl went down in a blaze of fire and valor, her last breath spent fighting against the man before her. Ginny had been killed by a Death Eater raid in a muggle city, her focus being spent on protecting a group of muggles fleeing in panic and fear. After her death, Hermione had seen something wither and die in Harry, and she knew that her death was what made Harry believe that they really didn't stand a chance anymore. That hope was a luxury, and not one he could afford anymore.

“I'm very sorry to hear that,” Tom said quietly, looking saddened for her. “You always seem so confident, I sometimes forget what you have been through, and everything you lost.”

Her lips pinched as she struggled to continue her charade. “I've been trying to remain strong. It's what my mother and father would have wanted, after all,” she said, keeping her tone measured against the growing bubble of anger within her.

“Forgive me for speaking out of term, Hermione, but why didn't your cousin do what he could to remove your family from danger? Surely, someone as intelligent and powerful as him could have seen the impeding danger you were in, and I know that if it were myself in his position, I would have ensured that you and your family were taken from harm's way,” he said, his voice growing deeper and lower, taking care to speak softly and delicately with her.

And just like that, the anger was gone, her brows furrowing at him. Was this it, then? Was this the beginning of Tom Riddle trying to sway her to his side, to use his silver tongue to make her turn against who he believe to be her family? She could feel her body vibrate with anticipation, a shiver that wouldn't end at the idea of the plan truly beginning to take root, growing to fruition.

“From what I knew, they didn't speak much,” she answered, licking her lips anxiously.

He propped his arm up on the back of the sofa and rested his head in his hand, his eyes watching her carefully. “I suppose I'm not entirely surprised, I have heard some rumors that the Dumbledore family- your cousins, side, specifically- is rather rife with problems. He and his brother Aberforth, from my understanding, have not had contact with each other since they were our age.” She knew this, of course. She had met Aberforth a handful of times, the younger Dumbledore hesitantly joining the order and assisting where he could when he did not feel he was too inconvenienced. It had been obvious of course that there was some manner of discord between the two brothers, but neither spoke- or seemed willing to speak- of what had occurred in their youth to cause the divide. She often thought that perhaps Harry had known, that Dumbledore told him during the stretch of time that Harry was gone, in the same instance he learned he had a horcrux within him his whole life. But he was not willing to speak of what occurred that night, and she had not pressed.

“Forgive me, if I said something to upset you,” Tom said, suddenly remorseful as he placed a hand on her shoulder, mistaking her thoughtful expression for one of resentment. She willed herself to press against his palm, her shoulder rolling.

“You didn't. I think...” she chewed her lip, downcasting her eyes as she hoped her acting skills were
up to par. “I guess I've always wondered why he didn't do something. He knew that my mother had transferred us to Bulgaria, years before Grindelwald took hold of it. And that we were right there, in the epicenter of it. He always acts like he knows something, but somehow he didn't know how to get us out? I just...” Her words hitched as she struggled over a sob, pushing the images of her real mother's body strewn about the floor, eyes wretched open in an unseeing gaze.

“She tried to contact him, to ask for help. I had always been told that he was this amazingly brilliant and powerful wizard, and I think she truly believed if anyone could save us it would be him. I don't know if he ever got the missive, Grindelwald's men were everywhere. But he had to have known we needed help, the Daily Prophet reported on him stationing there. I don't want to believe he ignored our plight, he is the only family I have left, after all...but I can't help...”

She was crying now, tears streaming down her cheeks. Partly an act, an embellishment to her performance of the young naive girl, her parents lost in a war and left in the care of someone she didn't know, someone she didn't trust. And partly because the parallel to her real life was so similar to her fake one, a young but strong-willed woman, who lost everyone she had in a war and thrown into a time where she was without someone who trusted her. She tried her best to not feel humiliated, knowing that if anything her tears would make her even more convincing, show Riddle how genuine she was.

But her cheeks heated up regardless as she quickly rubbed her eyes, hating how petty she felt whenever she cried. Her instinct was to laugh it off, to shrug half-heartedly and apologize for her overt display of emotions. And she did just that, her smile shaking as she said, “S-sorry, I didn't realize how bothered I-”

Before she could finish speaking, Tom had pulled her against him, her cheek resting against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her small frame. She stilled, her mouth snapped shut as her eyes widened like saucers as he held her in a firm embrace.

“Don't apologize, Hermione. I should be the one to apologize, I clearly upset you. Can you ever forgive me?” he spoke, the words seeming distant to her as one ear was pressed against the wool of his jumper, making his voice muffled. She was entranced by the way his words rumbled in his chest, the gentle vibrations against her cheek. Beneath all of that, she could hear the distinct, thump-thump of his heart, beating rhythmically as it worked in cohesion with the rest of the rest of his body, serving as nothing more than an organ to circulate blood and oxygen throughout. Steadying her breathing, she realized that she could not only hear it, but feel it too, the gentle fluttering of the muscle pumping beneath her ear.

Of course, it would be silly to assume that he didn't possess a heart. It was vital to live, and even half a minute without the reassuring beat of it could mean death. And despite all the sonnets and poems and songs that told otherwise, love and empathy were conjured up in the brain, the result of hormones and thousands upon thousands of years old regions of it, not the heart. She had a vague understanding of it all, and she knew that certain actions would trigger dopamine and oxytocin to flood the system, that the pre-frontal cortex can become lost in the throes of passion and cause your judgment to slip. Love was a series of manipulations, and that one could even hijack your brain into feelings of love with eye contact, hugs even. It was the way most love potions operated, the combination of it's ingredients encouraging the release of all those delightful hormones. The heart had nothing to do with it, was an apathetic bystander in the whole business of romance.

But still, the sound of his heartbeat was rather jarring and she found the noise to be an insult to all she had suffered, like salt in the wound. She tried to twist her body away, but his grip was too tight, and he held her in place. “I don't wish to trouble you, I was only concerned that perhaps you weren't receiving the support you need. I know he is your family, and I will always respect that, but I am
concerned about you. You have been through a great tragedy, and are trying to adjust to a new way of life. I just want to make sure you surround yourself with people who care about you and would do anything to ensure your safety, not just offer you solace when they failed to protect you properly,” he said, and she had to take a moment to admire his speech. He truly did have a way of exploiting situations, and she was certain that if she were truly Hermione Dumbledore, who moved to Bulgaria when she was ten, only to be trapped there with the start of the war and lose her family, that she would be stirred by his words. That any familial allegiance she had to Albus Dumbledore would surely be questioned. Why didn't he step in to help her and her family? He knew his cousin had moved to Bulgaria, and yet made no effort to help when a dark wizard overthrew the ministry there. Wasn't he intelligent enough to find a way to help them? Shouldn't he have tried?

But she was Hermione Granger, and his words meant nothing to her. She felt her heart race excitedly, knowing that the thoroughly calculated game of cat and mouse was beginning. It was all a matter of perception, of course, as the other saw themselves in the role of the cat, the mouse being unknowingly played by the opposite.

“I appreciate your concern, Tom, truly,” she said, her own voice echoing in her head as her ear remained pressed against him. She didn't need to look at him to know he was smiling, his lips curled upward in a grin. He believed he had her exactly where he wanted her, and she would allow him to think that.

She felt him loosen his hold on her, and trying not to move too quickly, she pulled back from him, watching as he made to stand. “Lunch should be served now. Would you like to accompany me? Even if you aren't hungry, I'm sure you would love some tea,” he suggested, his eyes glinting with the light thrown across the room from the fireplace. She frowned, knowing that he examined her quirks just as much as she examined his, and he seemed to take note of her preference for tea, the subtle notes of blackberries and sage wafting from the steaming liquid.

“Oh, of course,” she answered, though she didn't truly have a choice in the matter. “Just give me a moment to change.”

He watched her leave the common room, her bare feet padding silently across the floor. He noticed she had the habit of walking on the balls of her feet, her heels barely ever touching the ground, as though she were trying to make as little noise as possible. It was strategic, he knew- everything the witch did was strategic. In the past week he had spent by her side, studying and analyzing her under the guise of friendship, he had been surprised by the realization that she had quite the penchant for manipulation herself. She didn't say anything without first carefully weighing her words, and he would often notice that she would linger far too long on a page in her book, her eyes straying from the text as she perused her surroundings.

He had made a commitment to weave himself within her life, to slowly but surely lead this powerful witch to his side, where she would reside above the other pawns on the chessboard, an invaluable piece to his game. But with each move he made to get closer to her, the more her layers were pulled back- the more he realized she was a force to be reckoned with.

'She still doesn't like me to touch her,' he thought, thinking back to how tense she had been in his arms, how she recoiled in a way that seemed too slow to be natural. He had been as gentlemanly to her as he could manage, his cheeks practically sore from the constant smiles and grins he made sure to send her way. He had succeeded in making her laugh, had complimented her as often as the opportunity would arise and had given her all the attention any girl would want from Hogwarts' Golden Boy. And yet she still remained unswayed from his charm, looking guilty after each laugh, and angry after each praise. The girl was an enigma, one that he was intent on cracking.
'She better be worth all this effort,' he bitterly considered, already frustrated with the amount of work required in gaining the witch's trust. He smiled though, thinking back to the look of confusion that had overcome her features as he pressed her about Dumbledore's inactivity, making her question the old wizard who was supposed to be her caretaker. She had even been reduced to tears, thinking back to the death of her parents that surely could have been avoided if only her cousin had even tried to save them. She was in need of someone to be there for her in her time of loneliness, someone who would and could protect her, someone who would use their power to make her feel safe.

And he could be that person. He would show her he was that person, and instead of having to pull her into his arms, she would come to them willingly, would even beg to be wrapped within them.

She emerged from the corridor then, a pink jumper replacing the disgusting one belonging to her dead friend, and those strange slacks that clung to her legs in an uncomfortably form-fitting way. She hadn't bothered with any hair charms, allowing the halo of curls to take over, wild and frizzy.

“Ready?” she asked.

He smiled at her, reaching his hand out to rub along the top of her arm. His smile widened when she shivered under his touch. Yes, how sweet it would be when she would welcome his touch, would understand that he- and he alone- would be the only to protect and care for her, the only one who had to power to do so. When she finally recognized that the only way she could live peacefully and securely would be wrapped within the very hand she shied away from.

“Ready.”

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“I just don't trust her,” Dolohov said, leaning forward in his chair as he spoke in hushed tones to the other boys sitting beside him, his elbows propped up on the table. The dingy interior of the Hog's Head was filthy and dark, with the hiss and crackle of fire filling the silence in the room. Absentmindedly, Nott rubbed his finger over the tarnished surface of his mug, grimacing at the visible splotches coating the class. “She's keeping something from us, I just know it.”

“You're just sore because she kicked your arse at the duel last week,” Rosier snap, sounding exhausted as though he had grown tired of his friend's suspicions.

“And you didn't think her level of skill was just the least be strange? I mean, she's a half-blood girl, the same age of us, and yet somehow she was capable of all that?”

Nott sighed. “She is a Dumbledore. As much as Riddle would kill me for saying it, that doddering old man is talented. And it's likely it just runs in the family.”

Dolohov looked incredulous, his mouth snapping open and shut as he looked around the table at each boy in turn, hoping for just one of them to stand to his defense. Instead, Mulciber shrugged and added, “If there was something to be worried about, Riddle would already know about it. Maybe he's planning something right now, and is just waiting until tonight, after Slughorn's party, to tell us about it.”

Words of agreement rang out around the table. “Yeah, you know, Riddle. He somehow knows and sees all- if Hermione were hiding something, I think he would already be five steps ahead of you, mate,” Rosier chimed in. Suddenly, his expression grew darker as his eyes flitted around the room nervously. Pushing himself off the table and leaning forward so that he could whisper, he added, “That being said, be careful what you say about him. And Hermione, for that matter. Like it or not, Riddle's taken a shine to her, and I don't think he'd much appreciate you bad mouthing his newest
protegee. So, just lay off, eh?”

He clapped his hand on Dolohov’s shoulder before sitting back and taking another swig from his pint glass, making a face at the burn of the firewhiskey. Dolohov chewed the inside of his mouth, pursing his lips in indignation. After a moment, he forced a tight lipped smile. “Right, mate. We’ll just see what Riddle says at our meeting.”

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The potions classroom was decorated rather festively, with the desks and chairs pushed out of the way to make room for the students. One long table stood flush against the wall, a silver tablecloth draped over as it was loaded up with delicious foods and desserts, large bowls of pumpkin juice and butterbeer. Slughorn stood at the center, boisterously talking with several students, his face red with merriment and his laugh booming.

From where Hermione sat, at one of the tables with a goblet of butterbeer, she could hear parts of the conversation floating above the jovial music. “Mr. Malfoy, how is your father doing? Making waves in the ministry, no doubt.” “Longbottom, I hear talk your thinking of doing Auror training after you graduate? Good man, following in your father’s footsteps.”

She rolled her eyes, pressing her palm against her forehead. Tom was late to attend, and she had yet to see Dolohov all day- not as though she were displeased by his lack of presence. Instead, she had been escorted by the three other members of the group, who assured her that Riddle was very sorry he was running late, but that he would be down to join them as soon as possible. She hadn't given it much thought, quite thankful to have a moment of respite from him seeing as how she spent most of Saturday with young Dark Lord. But now, sitting beside a silent and forlorn looking Mulciber as Rosier and Nott flitted about, flirting and trying to court various girls, she wasn’t so certain that being trapped within his inner circle was much better.

“How was your trip to Hogsmeade?” she asked, trying to make conversation.

Mulciber looked at her, sucking his lip in anxiously. “Alright, I suppose.” And then he turned his attention back to the crowd of students filling the room, jovially dancing or talking excitedly amongst friends. Her fingers twitched, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. She rather wished she could have spent the evening huddled under her covers, the posters drawn closed to offer privacy as she continued her study of Snape’s private journals, a luxury that she had lost under the watchful supervision of Riddle. It had been made entirely too clear to her that her presence at the party was required, and she knew she shouldn’t push her limitations too far, that Tom would only tolerate her disobedience for so long. But it had been nearly an hour of sitting awkwardly alongside Mulciber, who was considerably jumpy and did not in the slightest seem up for casual conversation.

’Perhaps I could just sit out in the hall for a moment, catch some fresh air without my babysitter,’ she thought derisively, having to physically bite back a snort. She was beginning to feel rather oppressed, and having if only five minutes to herself sounded heavenly at the moment.

“Milton?” she said, her quiet and low voice still enough to make the boy jump. Looking at her with widened eyes, he grunted in response, looking visibly relieved.

Furrowing her brows for only a moment, and resolving to not ask any questions, as she wasn’t certain she wanted the answers, she said, “I'm rather thirsty, and I've finished all my butterbeer. Could I trouble you to fetch me some more?” She smiled as coyly as she could, hoping she didn't look as awkward as she felt.

He seemed to think for a moment, his eyes going between her goblet, her smile, and her two other
guards lost about the dance floor. With a heavy exhale of breath, he said, “Alright. Stay here, I'll be right back.”

She grinned, muttering a thank you, and watched his back as he made to move through the bodies surrounding the banquet table. As soon as she lost sight of him, she quickly rose from the table and strode purposefully across the room, hoping none of the others saw her leave the. She took long and quick steps, trying to slip through the door without opening it too wide. When she finally made her way out into the hall, the door closed behind her as the sound of music became muffled from within, she began to search for a closet, classroom or even an alcove to hide in, in case one of the boys came searching for her.

She traipsed through the halls, looking side to side in an attempt to find something suitable, when she heard someone call out her name. Groaning, she slowly turned around, wondering which of the Slytherin boys had seen her. 'Not even a second to myself,' she thought bitterly. However when she looked up, she was startled to see someone whom she did not recognize, a young man with a messy head of light brown hair and dark green eyes, undertones of gold and brown swirling around the iris. He was handsome, with a wide set strong jaw, the lines coming together to form a chin with a slight cleft in the center. His nose was tapered and angular, the sharp lines fitting in nicely on his masculine face. She could see the shiny surface of a Head Boy pin glinting from a top his robes, and she immediately recalled him, a seventh year Gryffindor named Joshua Crane.

“Please tell me you were running away from one of those Slytherins, and not because you saw me coming over to ask you for a dance,” he said, his smile crooked and wide and washing his face in a warm glow. Unable to stop herself, she smiled in response, finding his good humor to be quite contagious. Before she could answer, he stuck his hand out, saying, “I'm Joshua Crane, from Gryffindor. You're Hermione Dumbledore, right? Professor's niece?”

“Cousin, actually,” she said, slipping her hand into his and firmly shaking. Just as she pulled away, her hand falling to her side, his eyes widened.

“Oh, I'm sorry! I completely forgot, it's proper form to kiss the hand of a lady-” he stuttered, looking a cross between humiliated and apologetic, a look that made her laugh, the sound ringing in the halls.

“Yes, but don't worry, I much prefer not to have men kissing my hand every time we bid hello,” she said, watching as he relaxed slightly. After a second, she asked, “We're you really going to ask me to dance?”

He perked up, running his hand through his already untidy hair in a way that reminded her of Harry, her heart aching from the gesture. “Yes. I was actually hoping to properly ask you to attend the party with me, for some time now, but the opportunity never presented itself,” he said, shrugging his shoulder. “I must say, Miss Dumbledore, you have more security detail than the Minister himself.”

She could only force an unsteady smile, unsure of what to say.

“Though I suppose perhaps you and Riddle are-”

She blanched visibly at this, her cheeks turning a color of red that would rival the maroon on his Gryffindor tie. “No, no, goodness no,” she said, finding it difficult to not sound as repulsed as she felt. Shaking her head for added emphasis, she added, “Tom and I are just friends. He's been very cordial and welcoming to me since my arrival here.”

He looked at her for a moment, his head cocked to the side before slowly saying, “Well, then I know quite a few people who will be relieved to hear that he is still available.” He chuckled, and she had to force a smile, still finding it disconcerting how many girls wished to become the apple of Riddle's
“Yes, I have found myself to be rather unwelcome among the female populace.”

“Riddle’s a good guy, one of the only left in Slytherin House, so I’m glad you’ve found a friend in him,” he said. “Though, the same can’t really be said about the others, especially the ones he surrounds himself with. You haven’t had any trouble with them, have you? Nott and Dolohov and them, I mean?”

“No, they’ve treated me well,” she said, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. She was not used to having so many people check in on her, wishing to ensure she was left in good hands.

They talked for some time, and Hermione found that she quite enjoyed speaking with someone outside of Tom’s gang. There was no need for her to watch how she spoke, no need to analyze and pick apart everything that was said to her. For the first time since arriving here, she was able to relax her carefully constructed walls, feeling very much at ease. He was very warm and gregarious, and often spoke with his hands as he gesticulated wildly, and she found his grin to be endearing, the light dusting of freckles along the bridge of his nose and tops of his cheeks sweet. He was not overly formal or polite with her, as the pure-bloods of Slytherin were, and she wondered if he was perhaps a half-blood, or even a muggleborn.

She had completely forgotten about the boys she left inside at the party, and about Tom’s pending arrival, until she heard the sound of footsteps echoing through the corridor, Tom’s voice calling out to her.

“Ah, my dear Hermione, I hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” he said, approaching the pair with a large smile that seemed to barely even compare to Joshua’s, whose entire face lit up with the action as his eyes scrunched, little crinkles forming around them. No, Tom’s smile was very prim and proper, not quite matching up with the rest of his face.

He placed a hand on Hermione’s upper arm, turning to Joshua as he said, “Thank you for keeping her company. I should have known the lot of them would be unable to handle her vibrant personality.” He said jokingly, his voice hitching over a laugh as he implied that Hermione was too vivacious for the refined Slytherins, but she could just hear it- The darkening edge to his voice. She saw the way his nostrils flared, felt his fingers tighten slightly around her arm. He was furious that she was not where she was supposed, not with who she was supposed to be, and she felt guilt begin to gnaw at her chest.

“I’m afraid that’s my fault, Tom. I needed some air, and was feeling rather claustrophobic. Joshua and I ran into each other out here, I must have forgotten to tell Mulciber I was leaving,” she said, not quite sure of why she was bothering to defend them.

He looked at her for a moment, his grip tightening even more so. Fighting back the urge to wince, she asked, “Where’s Dolohov? Nott told me that you were running late because he wished to speak to you.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, he came to me because he was having some private concerns he wished to discuss. Family, and all that. I’m afraid that even after I offered him all my services, he was still feeling rather troubled and decided to turn in early for the night. He wasn’t feeling particularly up for a party, and I thought it best he got some sleep,” Tom explained, and Hermione felt her stomach knot, a weight pressing into her chest. Subconsciously, she took a step back from his touch, her eyes glancing down to his pockets where she knew he kept his wand. What had he done to Dolohov? Why?
“My gran always used to say that there's nothing like a good night's sleep to cure any ailment,” Joshua said, unaware to the true reason behind Dolohov's sudden plight. Tom's eyebrow twitched as he looked sidelong at the seventh year, his lips pursing in annoyance.

Her concern for Dolohov was quickly abated, turning over to the Head Boy who had no reason to suspect the harm Tom was capable of doing, no reason to notice the air going palpable with his tension as his magic pulsed between them. She swallowed what felt like a lump of bread stuck within her throat. Whatever had occurred between Dolohov and Tom, the latter was still quite furious about it, and had not worked out all of his aggression. “Per...perhaps we should find the others, let them know that you're joining us now and that Dolohov has taken the night to himself,” she suggested, hoping to diffuse and redirect Tom away from the innocent boy. She knew that he would not do anything to him with her around, as it would certainly hinder any of his attempts at winning her over, but she still felt a growing unease at the situation, her mind running through all the curses Tom could place on Joshua wandlessly and wordlessly. The image of Mulciber stiffening under Riddle's concealed wand, his face contorting in pain filled her mind's eye, and she shuddered. Yes, it would be best to leave.

“Well, I hope your friend feels better. As for you, Hermione,” Joshua said, fixing her with bright green eyes and a wide, toothy grin. “Will you be at Hogsmeade tomorrow? Perhaps we can stop by the Three Broomsticks and continue our conversation over some butterbeers? My treat.”

“She can't,” Tom cut in, his tone harsh and cold enough that even Joshua noticed it, his face falling into one of shock. “She has already agreed to spend the day with me, we both missed the opportunity to attend today, you see. She promised me that we would make up on lost time. Isn't that right, Hermione?”

Not trusting her voice, she nodded.

He smiled at her now, a patronizing smile that might have accompanied a pat on the head and a condescending cooing of 'Good girl.'

Green eyes looked between the two, and, crestfallen, Joshua said, “Alright. Another time, then. Good night.” Hesitating only a moment, his eyes lingering on Hermione as though uncertain if he should leave her there. She smiled at him, reassuringly as she bid him good night as well, hoping he didn't see the slight tremor her body shook with. With a sigh and a nod, he was gone, heading out of the dungeons and presumably back to Gryffindor Towers, leaving Tom and Hermione alone in the hall.

His grip didn't loosen on her arm, and she began to squirm under it, trying to shake his hold loose. Startled, he pulled back, blinking at her as she pulled her opposite hand up to rub along her arm. “I'm sorry, did I hurt you?” he asked. Just like that, he was back to being charismatic and concerned, his blue eyes almost shifting with the sudden turn in countenance and becoming lighter.

“Not really,” she muttered. Puffing her chest out, she asked, “So we're going to Hogsmeade then?” There was the slight edge of a challenge to her tone, not quite able to control her anger at having been so obviously bossed around, like a marionette who did as her handler commanded her to. But Tom did not look bothered by her show of independence, and instead looked quite pleased with himself.

'Of course he is,' she thought. 'He got what he wanted. I turned down Joshua's invitation because he told me too.'

“I'm sorry, Hermione, really. But Crane...he...well he has quite a reputation around here, and I would hate for you to wind up saddled with the rumors and taunts that would surely follow if you spent
time with him. I was just trying to look out for you, as always, my dear,” he said, looking as though he were genuinely distraught that she might find herself at the heart of gossip.

Part of her wanted to rise to his defense, just as she had done for Mulciber, but thought better of it. She had pressed Tom enough, and was still very much aware that somewhere Dolohov was recovering from having gotten on the wrong end of his wand. It would, as it normally was, be better to play along with his act. To pretend that she was honored, blessed even, to have such a magnificent wizard to come to her aid. A prince to protect her against dragons.

“I suppose you know this school better than me,” she said, following Tom as he began to walk to Slughorn's classroom, his hands in his pant pockets. “Thank you.”

He smiled, pausing as he grabbed the handle to the large wooden door. “Anything for you, Hermione.”
Chapter Seven: Afraid of the Devil

“The people on the edge of Hell were most afraid of the devil; for those already in hell the devil was only another and no one in particular.”

- Joanne Greenberg, I Never Promised You A Rose Garden

“Well now, Dolohov, you’ve had several hours to think about it. Come up with anything?” Riddle asked, his lean figure standing over the boy as the three others shifted uncomfortably in a circle around him. Dolohov was laying in the center of an ornate tapestry, one of many pieces of decoration provided to them by the Room of Requirements. His face was held in a tight grimace, his eyes squeezed shut as he gritted his teeth in pain.

When he said nothing, Riddle began to walk around him slowly, like a cat waiting to pounce in for the final kill, his prey already weakened. His wand remained trained on him as he turned about, a pole for his axis to move around. “You have had all of Slughorn's party to do some thinking, Miss Dumbledore is safely tucked in for the night- we have all the time in the world,” he said, his voice deep and velvety, almost like a purr.

Dolohov made a noise, a guttural sound from the back of his throat. Sucking in a breath of air that sent him into a fit of coughing, he stammered, “I...don't...I don't know...please.”

Riddle smiled, little half moons forming around his mouth as he dropped down into a squatting position, balancing on his feet as he propped his forearms on his knees. “Surely, Dolohov, you wouldn't come to me with such concern about who I was spending my time with, but offer no solution for me? It would be rather...irresponsible of you to suggest that Hermione has less than innocent intentions, but then expect me to figure out the rest,” he said, dragging the tip of his wand along Dolohov's neck, drawing invisible lines over the dip of his collar bone and around his adam's apple.

He pressed his eyes shut. “I...I never said that,” he whimpered, cringing as Riddle pressed the wand in to a particularly delicate area of his neck.

Feigning innocence, he said, “But oh, you did. Do you truly believe that just because I wasn't around to hear it, that it wouldn't come back to me?”

At this, the boy flicked his eyes around the circle, glancing between Rosier, Mulciber and Nott in an attempt to decipher which of them had betrayed him, which of them had told Riddle what he said to them in confidence. A low growl rumbled in his chest, as he struggled to sit up, casting the three with a menacing gaze. But he was quickly thrown back with a hiss, the sharp jab of the wand in his chest sending him down to the floor with a thump.

“Nu-uh,” Riddle taunted, wagging a finger in front of his face. “You will not even think to threaten my loyal followers. They have not turned their back on me, haven't questioned my judgment, not as you did.” His teeth chattered, but he remained silent, his brown eyes boring heatedly into the faces of his friends.

“Now,” Riddle continued, his voice dripping in an overly saccharine manner, “Tell me. If Hermione isn't to be trusted, what do you think I should do about it? Hmm?”

He grimaced, squinting his eyes. “I...I don't...veritaserum?”
Riddle rolled his eyes at this, before grunting as he pushed his wand in deeper. Sparks emerged from the sunken tip of his wand, heated silvers and blues of light crawling over Dolohov's body as he convulsed, gaping as he quickly inhaled and exhaled against the shock traveling up and down his spine. As he flopped on the floor, his fingers twitching with the throb of electricity coursing through him, Riddle said, “If she can prevent me from entering her mind with occlumency, I doubt that will be any more effective. Or has your intelligence taken the same path of your dueling skills and disappeared?”

As the effects of the curse left his body, Dolohov opened his eyes and fixed the older boy with a dark stare, his gaze hardening as he gasped out ragged breaths. “Torture her, then. She'll confess everything if you torture her. Then just obliviate her,” he hissed, his tone sharp.

Riddle raised a brow. “Clearly, I was correct in assuming your intelligence is gone. Even if I obliviate her, her mind will still bear the mark from the trauma of it, and she'll never trust me, though she won't know why,” he responded, sounding bored as he jabbed his wand forward again, the same little sliver of lightning emerging to snake around Dolohov. “Try again.”

“Bloody well drug her with some amortentia then! She'll do anything you say!” he snapped, his voice trembling as his body rocked with the waves of pain and shock. And suddenly, the curse lifted, his body flailing to the floor in an exhausted heap as his extremities twitched with the occasional aftershock. His breathing was deep and heavy, relishing in the feeling of air entering his lungs, in his body laying softly against the flat surface of the tapestry. How wonderful the little pleasures in life became after coming down from the height of agony.

Had he opened his eyes, he would have seen that the worst was yet to come, that Riddle had brought himself to his full height, his lips tightened into a line that was turning white from how hard he was pursing them. His brow was furrowed deep into a look of pure rage, his eyes looking near gray with the storminess within them. His tight grasp on his wand- his spare one, the one he had stolen from his uncle- caused his fingernails to plunge into the soft skin of his palm, and he was vaguely aware of the blood slicking the handle. Raising his dominant hand, he began to slice it through the air in quick succession, punctuating each cut with a venomously hissed word.

“Never.”
Slice.
“Suggest.”
Slice.
“That.”
Slice.
“AGAIN!”
Crack!

By the time Riddle resigned, his wand falling to his side as his chest rose and fell deeply with each exaggerated breath, Dolohov was littered in deep cuts, his shirt cut open as blood saturated through the fabric of his jumper. His nose was snapped in sickening degree, blood trickling down from his nostrils as he whimpered and gasp, rolling onto his side as his hands reached to cup over his nose. His shoulders shook with sobs, which only enraged Riddle more, to see a follower of his looking so pathetic. There was a fine line between weak and obedient, and he sneered at Dolohov's quivering
form in disgust.

'Hermione wouldn't be so pathetic,' he thought, stepping his long leg over the lump of flesh and clothes, careful to avoid the small patches of blood. 'Hermione is stronger than him- than all of them. She wouldn't even be dumb enough to get herself into this situation.'

He stood in front of the large, gaping mouth of the fireplace, the flames leaping toward him in all their brilliant emerald and jade colored glory. Dolohov would be fine; he had ensured that the cuts were only skin deep, much to his chagrin. He wouldn't have minded it much if the boy had bled to death at his feet, spending his last few moments of life grovelling for redemption and another chance, attempting to kiss the hem of his robe. But Tom would just kick him back, tutting him for being such a disgrace.

However, after the Warren girl died, another death would only encourage Hogwarts to close it's doors, and he would be sent back to that dreadful orphanage, away from his men and from the girl whom he hoped to make his. Dolohov couldn't die, and he had left him alive begrudgingly, the amount of effort required to not deliver a fatal blow almost enough to wear him out for the evening.

Behind him, he could hear the other boys rushing to his aid, batting around him as they all frantically attempted healing charms and spells. He smiled, knowing the level of skill his men possessed in the area. Dolohov would live, yes, but he would certainly bare some rather atrocious looking scars as a result of the ineptness.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he attempted to steady his breathing, the anger still teeming within him. The very thought of using such a vile potion on anyone was enough to make him want to be sick. He was better than the weak and lovesick excuse he had for a mother, a witch who couldn't even use her own magic properly, and he would never be as disgraceful to get what he wanted in life with the help of amortentia. Just the very notion of it made the bile billow up in his stomach, building in the back of his throat.

Pity, as it was perhaps the only way to get Hermione to confess to any of her wrongful intentions. Tapping a finger to his chin in contemplation, he wondered if there was any weight to Dolohov's suspicions, or if he was operating under bitterness. It was true, that she did seem to be rather off, and as he had come to realize, did not say or do anything without first careful deliberation. Honestly, he had written it all off as a symptom of being from the Dumbledore family, that being insightful and seemingly omniscient was something that came rather natural to the lot of them. But what if he had been too quick to trust her?

What if she was indeed working on ulterior motives, and she was playing Tom just as much as he was playing her? The thought stirred something within him, something alarmingly torn between anger and admiration. Between wanting to torture the girl for manipulating him, and wanting her even more for having the ability to do so. While it would certainly make her even more desirable to have beside him- someone who could rival even him in his intellect and power of persuasion was better left an ally than an adversary after all- it would also be cause for great concern. If she truly was able to influence him and the situation as much as Dolohov believed her to be, then he would have to put an end to it, would have to ensure that she did not have any upper hand on him.

But how? As he had told Dolohov, veritaserum would not work, and neither would torture. While amortentia just might be able to accomplish what he wanted, he would not bring himself to that level. So what was left?

He continued to stand there, lost in thought, as the others tried to heal Dolohov's wounds, the knotted clumps of flesh looking amateurishly sewn together. He let out a gasping sound and muttered several profanities beneath his breath as his nose was snapped tightly in place, the bone cracking and
slicking as it healed. Shaking hands reached up to poke it, pulling back as he winced. It was still sensitive and sore from having been broken.

Just as Dolohov was coming to a standing position, angrily slapping away the hands that tried to steady him, Riddle whipped around, smirking as his eyes twinkled in sinister delight. “I believe I just may have an answer to our problems,” he said, walking towards the group with his hands folded behind his back.

With a pop, a round, polished mahogany table appeared in the center of the room, the deep undertones of red running beneath the dark brown hues. Chairs appeared around it, sturdy and simple with clean lines and a soft seat made of green velvet. After only a second of hesitation, they all sat around it, hands in their laps as they waited for Riddle to proceed.

“It may take some weeks to finish, and that is with constant attention, mind you- I will expect each and every one of you to forfeit your personal time for this. But if Dolohov is truly so concerned that our darling little Hermione is up to no good, then as his friends we owe it to him to help alleviate his worry. Isn't that right?” he said, his tone no longer dark and mocking, no different from the way he would speak to them at the Great Hall during lunch. He was met with a chorus of agreement, eyes averting away from the resentful look on Dolohov's face.

“Excellent,” he said with a chuckle. “Well then, while none of your suggestions were suitable, I do believe I have come up with one more than adequate.” He paused for effect, ever the showman, before continuing. “She is skilled in occlumency, and as such can resist the effects of any and all truth serums. Something as barbaric as torture”—here he was interrupted by a snort from Dolohov, but only raised his eyebrow before moving forward—“Something as barbaric as torture may or may not yield any results, depending on her resolve, and she would never trust me again afterwards, no matter how many memory charms I fixed on her. I will not use something as silly and stupid as a love potion, so that is out of the question.” His eyes turned steely with the mention of the elixir, his voice dropping down several octaves as though in a warning.

“However, perhaps if we combine several attributes of a love potion with a typical truth serum, we can come up with something less vile,” he finished.

“You mean, create our own potion?” Nott said, scratching his chin.

Riddle nodded. “Unlike a truth serum, which can be fought against with skill—skill which she possesses, mind you—we will build one that will make her want to tell me. She won't fight against it, because by using some aspects of an amortentia, we will be able to trick her brain into thinking she has no reason to hide anything from me.”

“But...how? Isn't it really complex to just...make your own potion?” Mulciber said, eyes widening before he added, “Not as though you couldn't do it, but wouldn't we need at least months? And all the resources? You'd have to be a Potions Master in order to know how to combine it all successfully. Where are we supposed to get all of this?”

Tom leaned back in his chair, his fingers lacing together in front of him. “Leave that to me.”

-xXx-

Professor Slughorn rose from his seat, grumbling as he made his way over to the door to answer the rapt knock he had heard. “Better be Dippet,” he muttered, knowing that students typically avoided coming to his office during the weekend. Besides, he had just spoken to the Headmaster through the floo connection, demanding immediate attention be made to the fact that he had awoken to find his privates storeroom burglarized. He had been in the midst of compiling a list of all the stolen
ingredients and potions—nearly his entire stock of dreamless sleep potion, as well as the only vial he had left of felix felicis! “Surely some trouble makers, hoping to use the potion to get an unfair advantage in the first Quidditch match. Ruddy Gryffindors,” he continued to mutter, shaking his head. It was well known by now that Slytherin had just gained themselves a knew and worthy chaser, one who would hopefully prove a good enough match for that Potter boy Gryffindor procured as their keeper. Lions couldn't handle competition, he supposed.

Reaching the door, he twisted the handle as he pulled it forward, surprised to find Tom Riddle standing before him, a polite smile on his face.

“Mr. Riddle? To what do I owe the pleasure?” he said, straining a laugh as he eyed the boy with slight unease. He had become rather uncomfortable to be alone with him, ever since last year when he had come to him with questions regarding a certain manner of dark magic. But now, looking at him and seeing the shiny Prefect badge adorning his robes, he wondered why on earth that had ever been the case. He was merely an intelligent boy, too curious for his own good if anything. Teachers were constantly allowing him access into the restricted section of the library, it was no wonder he had come across that word in a book and, not finding a suitable explanation for it and his curiosity piqued, he sought out a teacher.

That was, of course, what teachers were for. Why would he ever feel the need to fault him for merely using his resources? For studying? He fought the impulse to laugh at himself now. Yes, he had been very silly to feel weary around him.

“Sorry to bother you on your day off, Professor. But I was up all night, thinking.”

Slughorn chuckled. “A dangerous prospect!”

Riddle laughed, smiling at him with a perfect set of white teeth. “Yes, I suppose it can be. However, I wished to speak to you about a project I intend to set out on. You see, I think I might rather like to become a Potion's Master when I graduate-”

Slughorn beamed at him, his face turning red with delight. “Ho, ho, my dear boy! How wonderful! The position would be perfect for you!” After a second, and not quite sure why he said it, but regardless he added, “Anything you need from me to help you on this journey- anything at all! It is yours!”

“I'm very grateful for that, sir. As you know, I'll need to come up with a thesis and develop my own potions in order to be successful in that endeavour, but doing that can take years. I was hoping I could get a head start on it, and that perhaps you'd be willing and kind enough to answer some questions I had?” he asked, chewing on his lip nervously as he walked further into the room.

How on earth could he ever say no to such a noble thing? 'If only all my other students were as hard-working and devoted to studies as Mister Riddle,' he thought, any feeling of unease or distrust completely forgotten, his smile stretching as far as it could. “Very smart of you. Many people underestimate the time and effort put into creating a potion, and I should have known you would be clever enough to use me while you still could, eh?” He winked, pulling the door shut behind him as he asked Riddle what type of potion he had in mind.

“Quite ambitious, sir. See, I was hoping you'd help me discern a way of almost combining two existing potions into one...”

-xXx-

Hermione strode through the grounds at Hogwarts, heading down the path with the rest of the
students towards Hogsmeade. She tried her best to hide her sour expression, but was finding it quite difficult. Tom was running late- 'Again!' she thought bitterly, unaware that the Dark Lord was such a truant- He hadn't even been at breakfast!. Had she known he hadn't planned on arriving on time, she would have spent the day to herself, basking in the quiet of her dormitory, knowing even Riddle had a way to sneak through the ancient wards preventing the male occupants from entering the girl's dormitories. But she had been herded through with the rest of the students, the attending teachers and prefects not even giving her a moment to turn back.

Just as the group came towards the large, wrought iron gates, she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned around to find a slightly out of breath Tom, his hair disheveled so that the normally neatly pushed aside curls hung in strands over his eyes. Eyes which she noticed were brighter than normal, the pupils dilated in a large way that seemed inappropriate for the sunny day. It was then that she also noticed the slight flush look to his cheeks, the way his lips seemed pinker. He smiled, the action truly reaching his eyes so that the skin around them folded and she reeled, taken aback by the genuine glow surrounding him.

'Why on earth-

And then she remembered where she had seen this before, this almost defiant display of eagerness and physical glow of delight. Harry had been the same way when he used the felix felicis in their sixth year, had been near giddy with the high of the liquid luck. And Tom was looking in quite the same state, his smile not wavering as he said, “Sorry I was late. I had to speak to Slughorn about something and got carried away with the time.”

She nearly groaned. What did he need from Slughorn that required the vial of potion? 'More importantly, how could a supposed Potions Master be fooled by it, not once, but twice,' she thought, resisting an eye roll. Being that the potion had its limitations- it was, after all, liquid luck and as such did not guarantee the promise of success, especially if it was used against a particularly strong willed individual- it was a wonder that the man fell for it so often. It would not work if the power of suggestion wasn't already in place, and it was truly astonishing that Slughorn could have such poor defenses.

“What were you asking him about?” she asked. She knew that it wasn't the conversation in which they had discussed horcruxes, that having occurred prior. So what could it have been then, where his typical level of charm was simply not enough?

“To get you these,” he said, producing from the inside of his robe a black velvet bag, the ends closed tightly into a knot. He handed it to her, and, dumbfounded, she reached for it, taking a moment to look at him in a leery manner before pulling the strings, undoing the knot. Peering inside, she saw a large amount of stoppered bottles, purple liquid sloshing around within the containers.

“Dreamless Sleep?” she asked, knitting her brows in question at him.

His smile, which hadn't faltered in the slightest and was beginning to unnerve her, grew. 'Strange, he's creepier when he's smiling legitimately than faking one,' she thought, tearing her eyes away to look into his still massively dilated ones. ‘I thought that perhaps the reason you slept in so late yesterday was because you might have some nightmares, after everything you've been through. So I stopped by Slughorn to fetch you some,” he said.

“And you needed felix felicis to do that?”

He laughed, a hearty, deep laugh that came from the center of his belly instead of the back of his throat like his laughs normally did. Again, the true display of emotion unnerved her more, and she tried to make some distance between him and herself.
“You would think he would recognize the symptoms, or at least not be so swayed by it. But I guess he’s a bit of a simpler man than you or I, my darling,” he said, bridging the gap between them as Hermione sighed and tucked the bag within her own beaded one. She hated to accept something under such dubious means, but she would also hate to turn down any chance at having a proper night sleep. It would take two weeks for her to brew her own supply of the potion, and even then she had considered possibly stealing some of the ingredients from Slughorn’s cupboard. At least this way bypassed the time she would waste.

“Well, thank you. I do appreciate it,” she said, though she made a mental note to analyze the contents of the potions to make sure he had not laced it with anything.

The group came to a stop just outside of Hogsmeade, the supervising professors turning to the group as they explained the rules, as well any consequences to poor behavior. When the speech was over, the students dispersed, a flurry of hair and colored jumpers, some wearing robes over their ensembles.

Turning to Hermione, Tom asked, “So where to first?”

-xXx-

Hermione wasn’t certain how much time she had spent wandering the aisles of Tomes and Scrolls, a finger up to the spine of each book as she passed, but it had been enough time for the effects of the potion to wear away from Tom, his giddy nature coming to an abrupt end. ‘Thank goodness,’ she thought. She could predict and work with Tom Riddle when she knew everything he said and did was a lie, but it was harder when he lost the veil of fallacies, for once not having to pretend a show of mirth. Still, she looked over her shoulder at where he sat and couldn’t help but to giggle. His head was being held in his hands, his elbows resting on his knee as he sat in one of the secluded areas of the book shop, two overstuffed armchairs with patches of mismatched fabric sewn sparsely over.

With a smile, she grabbed two books over from the shelf, dropping them down loudly on the table between the two chairs so that a thud ricocheted off the towering bookshelves. Peering up over his fingers, he looked at her through squinted eyes.

“Oops,” she said, shrugging her shoulders as she sat in the adjacent chair. His headache had been pervasive for some time now, only growing stronger as the day progressed. “It’s a shame you’re having such bad luck on our one day to spend in Hogsmeade,” she said, biting down on her lip to stop from laughing as she thought she heard him mutter a curse under his breath.

Pulling one of the books towards her, she began flipping through it, skimming the contents of it. “I'm sure one of these will have something for it,” she said. She hadn't entirely been surprised to hear that Tom had a limited supply of knowledge regarding healing spells, and had in fact probably considered them a waste of time. But even the few that she had in her arsenal- as well as the headache tonics she had in her bag- did nothing to alleviate the ache in his head. Harry hadn't responded like this when the potion began to wean out of his system, but then again, it was likely that, just as the potion made the drinker more adaptable to change and seemed to be pave ways for them, it would have the opposite effect when it began to wear off. Bad luck working in to balance out the abundance of good luck. Perhaps, a migraine was simply one of the workings of bad luck, one that would require more advanced mediwitch spells to heal.

'He wouldn't do this just for dreamless sleep,' she thought, looking over at him. His head was leaning back now, his forearm draped over it to cover his eyes and shield it from the light. 'That was a lie. And thanks to the potion, I didn't think to press him further. Damn it.' She was angry at herself, knowing that, if even in small ways, the potion had effected her. Up until it began to wear off, she had found that she was actually quite enjoying spending the day with him, unaware at the time that it
was due to the influence of the potion. 'The thing should be banned, I swear,' she seethed, her eyes finally settling on a chapter title that sounded promising.

Healing Ailments Caused by Over Use of Potions

“Oh!” she said, not realizing how loud her exclamation was until she heard a low hiss from her side. “Er, sorry,” she muttered, her eyes quickly going through the page. It was unlikely that he administered too much of the elixir, as he certainly had more than enough skill with potions to not make such a potentially disastrous mistake. But it was worth a shot wasn’t it?

“Alright, hold still,” she said, standing up from her place and moving so that she was in front of him. With a sigh, he let his arm drop away from his eyes, slowly picking his head up to look at her through little slits, not opening them all the way. She grabbed hold of his chin, smirking as he made a look of shock and irritation at having been so manhandled. Lifting his chin up, her fingers still cupping it, she raised her wand and pressed it lightly against his forehead, causing him to wince. Glancing back to read over the incantation on the open book, she whispered the spell quietly, deciding to take some pity on him and be gentle with her voice. A cool, silver glow washed over his face, and she watched as his features relaxed, sighing in relief. She could feel his jaw muscle loosen in her hand, felt him press his chin into her palm.

“Better?” she asked, slipping her wand pack into the sleeve of her jumper.

“Much,” he whispered, opening his eyes as he slowly pulled away from her hand. “Remind me to study healing spells more frequently.”

“I’ll also remind you not to use our good friend Felix on an empty stomach,” she said, pointing to the page in the book she had used that listed possible reasons certain potions caused ailments. “Let me guess, you’re discussion with Slughorn went right through breakfast, and you didn't get a chance to eat today, did you?”

He scoffed. “Felix isn't our friend anymore. He's the enemy.”

“Come on, let's go to the Three Broomsticks. We can get you something to eat there,” she said, picking the books back up in her arm and walking them back to the shelf. She had pulled one out and was reaching up to slip it back onto the shelf, balancing on her tip-toes when she felt a hand press down on the small of her back.

“Allow me,” Tom said, leaning over her as he grabbed the book and, reached over, slipping it back into place. He then grabbed the other from her hands as she stood there, her mouth slung open as his chest pressed into her back, his hand holding onto her shoulder to support himself. He was radiating heat, and she was surprised by the amount of effort it took to not lean back into him, welcoming the warmth. It was a human need, a desire to be close to one another, but she felt so ashamed in herself that she brushed him aside, her cheeks reddening as she grabbed hold of her bag that had been deposited at the feet of the table.

“Good to see you're back to your old self,” she sneered, stomping past him and trying to ignore the chuckle she heard behind her.

Catching up to her, they walked side by side down the winding staircase and out the door of the cramped book shop, sunlight bathing over them. “Well, I suppose my liquid luck has indeed run out then,” he said with a smirk.
I knew it would not be long before I was called to join the Dark Lord for one of his meetings occurring within the first few days of his revival. Sure enough, two days after Potter claimed he had returned, I felt the familiar burn of the mark, and the sensation of knowing that there was something of the utmost importance to attend to. All I had to do was focus on apparating, and the mark was able to do the rest. Seconds later, I found myself standing in what was for all intents and purposes, a condemned and run down house.

Perhaps lovely and a sign of great wealth in another life, the house was now consisting of rotting floorboards, overturned and musty furniture and a thick, pervading blanket of dust. I could strongly detect the pungent smell of mold, a dampness that never dried, and it was as if a grimy lens covered my eyes, making everything appear in sepia tones.

I stood in the center of a small circle, Death Eaters surrounding me. It had been thirteen years since I had seen a sight like this, and there aren't enough words to articulate the feelings of remorse and self loathing I discovered in that moment. If not for the fact that keeping a written record of what I'm sure will become an arduous journey for me proved to have its benefits, I would not even bother with what few articulations I can offer in these pages.

Regardless, I was immediately overcome with a distinct pain, one I had easily forgotten but quickly recalled: The Cruciatus Curse. I'm ashamed to admit that the shock of the curse as well as the agony it created brought me to my knees, where I stayed until the Dark Lord lifted the curse from my person.

I forced myself to look at his newly made body, a morbid fascination if you will. As the old muggle adage goes, seeing is believing.

And believe I did. He had not changed since I last knew him, he was handed back the same inhuman and horrifying body that had been destroyed. Skin so white it was almost fluorescent, red eyes, and a flattened down nose with long slits running in place of where his nostrils should have been. In my youth, I had not expected such a foul and hideous creature to be the leader so many spoke of him to be. I had wondered by what powers that be had made him look the way he did, and why anyone would set about to alter their own visage so drastically. I still did wonder, nearly twenty years after my initial encounter with him.

He spoke only one word to me, my own name, before delving into my mind.

I had dedicated a good portion of my time after the Dark Lord fell in honing my mind and magic to be the perfect weapon of espionage, a task that Albus had me promise to follow through with should he rise again. In the years spent, I had mastered occlumency even more than I previously thought was possible, and had even developed the much sought after ability to manipulate and create memories to fool any legillimens.

Despite all those years of training, I did not feel prepared for what certainly had to have been the Dark Lord ripping into my head- for surely no magic could create a feeling so intense, and so corporeal without having actually done it. I heard myself crying out in pain before I even realized it was I producing the god-awful wail- and I could hear cackling laughter growing around the room at
my pathetic display. But I was simply too focused on my memories- both true and false- to attempt to control that.

He sifted through everything, a blinding ache piercing through my skull as he did so. He went rather quickly through my childhood memories, slowing his passage through them whenever he saw something particularly wretched – my mother and Potter seemed to be of great fascination for him. As he approached more recent events, I was forced to pay more heed to them, altering them faster than he could see them. Thankfully, the changes were relatively small.

I imbued the memory of learning that he had returned with a sense of hope, cloying devotion and a hungry need for power. I managed to successfully erase any and all fondness I might have held for that brat- spurred only by those haunting eyes, mind you! As for the moment I had officially turned my back to him, going to Albus for help? I merely needed to change the tone, painting it with disloyalty and manipulation.

My mind was torn asunder by his perusal of it, and by the time his hold on me ended, I could have only hoped to have the dignity to stay on my knees. But I was overcome by waves of nausea, vertigo, and pain. The pressure was so great that had someone told me my eyes had popped from their sockets, I might have believed them. I could hardly see as it were, my vision fuzzy and a dissonant ring echoing in my head.

I could hear him though, as he spoke. “What use will I have of you? Why shouldn't I kill you?” His voice was ice cold and high pitched, the ‘s’ sound stretching as he spoke with a slight hiss.

Some might call it strength, but I rather like to think it more the power of loathing, but I was able to respond with admirable dignity, that I thought I would prove to be an excellent spy. That I had already gained Dumbledore's trust enough, was a close confidante of his. Make no mistake, this was not an act of courage, but one of deep seated hatred, for only when you despise someone the way I did that horrid excuse for a wizard can you bring yourself to rise above any physical pain and regain your gravitas.

It took several more excruciating hours of torture, at his wand and his mind, before he finally considered me worthy of the title, and allowed me to rejoin his growing band of followers. I agreed, kissed the hem of his robes once more.

I had betrayed her not once, but twice now.

There was a time when for some reason I was drawn to this man- this thing- before me, and had actually sought to be like him. Enouement is a term used to describe the bittersweet feeling of knowing the future, but unable to warn your past self, and I believe, in the end, it is the only word I can use to surmise my life, mistakes and all.

As for the Dark Lord? Ruthless would be too lenient a word.

-Excerpt from Severus Snape's Personal Journals

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Hermione was perched on the top of her bed, curtains drawn and her knees pulled into her chest. A cup of tea was balanced in between them, her hands cupping the smooth porcelain surface of it. She had been unable to sleep, and had thought a moment of conscious clarity would better solve her problem than dreamless sleep, although she now had plenty. She had made the admittedly poor decision to study some of Snape's journals before bed.
Hitherto, most of his entries had been of himself preparing for his assumed life as a spy, the training he underwent after Voldemort had fallen. She had skimmed around of course, her curiosity getting the better of her, and she occasionally read bits and pieces out of order, jumping around his personal timeline just as she had done her own. But now she had gotten into the heavier entries, detailing his first encounter with Voldemort since his return during the TriWizard Tournament, and the Death Eater Meetings that occurred there after. With a shudder, she had thrown down the slim black journal, the knowledge that they would only get worse from here on out unnerving her.

Her resolve had the tendency to bounce back and forth, her sense of justice persuading her to move forward, while her lack of confidence in herself urged her to pull back. Earlier in the day, after returning from Hogsmeade, she had stopped by Dumbledore's office to discuss with him her concerns over Tom and his illicit use of the felix felicis. Ever intuitive, the older wizard somehow was aware of her feelings of inadequacies and attempted to assuage them, praising her intellect and skills. Above all, her bravery and empathy.

“You may be in the snake pit, but you have the heart of a lion,” he had told, winking from behind his half moon glasses.

Perhaps reading Snape's journals was beginning to adversely effect her, as she had been none to thankful for his riddles and had glared over her tea cup at the bemused man.

With a sigh, she inhaled the earthy aroma from her cup, closing her eyes in contemplation. Dumbledore had thanked her for her information, and promised to speak to Slughorn about what had occurred between him and Riddle, though he had left unspoken the doubt between them. Surely, Tom had done something to cover his tracks, he was too careful for his own good and would never leave such loose ends. She had voiced her concerns, her unease rising at the idea that he was up to something, and she had no power to stop him.

However, he had merely insisted she continue on trying to weave herself further into the group, that Tom would not do anything too severely to harm another. He was far too afraid of the possibility that Hogwarts would be shut down, and he would be returned to that dreadful orphanage. Still, it did nothing to truly alleviate her growing anxiety, and she had been eagerly awaiting for any and all opportunities to prove herself to Tom.

Sometime passed, and she relaxed her head against the dark wooden headboard, listening to the symphony that was the gentle breaths of her fellow housemates, flitting away into the land of slumber. It was calming to her, even if the overall quiet of Slytherin was not something she was used to, having spent years in the always loud and rowdy house of Gryffindor. Not that the peace was unwelcome, but the gentle murmur of the water sloshing along the walls, the House being submerged under the lake, was considerably different from what she was used to.

The sound reminded her of the beach, and the summers she spent there with her family. Her mother curled up with a novel on a folding chair, and her father helping her build sandcastles, each one bigger and more grandiose than the last. She would wade into the water, the waves crushing forward before pulling back, the sand beneath her being pulled with it as the earth literally fell away. And she would fill her little bucket, made heavy by the weight of the water, and run back, losing half of it along the way. Sea shells were crests, sticks were poles that hoisted heavy and regal banners. Little shiny pebbles were ridged around the uneven parapets of sand, an attempt to beautify the gritty structure.

She smiled sadly at the memory, knowing that those moments were lost in the past. Or the future, as it were.

'I wish I could forget,' she thought, rubbing her eyes. 'Not everything, just the stuff that hurts the
most to think about. The stuff that made me who I am and made me want to do this, also make me regret doing this.’ She scrunched her face, wondering if she would even care then, if she lost her past and her drive. For once, thinking was proving to be too much of a chore, and her eyelids were heavy and aching. Reaching into the drawer beside her bed after carefully placing her teacup aside, her arm sneaking out through the curtains, she grabbed the velvet bag, the one containing all the dreamless sleep potions Tom retrieved for her, and pulled it into her lap. She grabbed the bottom of the bag and held it upside down, the round, ornament like bottles spilling out onto her deep green blanket. She looked over her bounty, doing careful calculations.

'Enough to last me until about...mid December.'

Pulling her wand out from under her pillow, she began to test each and every vial of potion, using several different incantations in turn. The elixir within would glow accordingly, gold, then red, then lavender, before settling back as she moved on to the next vial, satisfied with the results.

She stifled a yawn, the entire process taking about half an hour as she made certain that their was nothing dangerous regarding it. Her eyelids weighed down as the time passed, her vision becoming blurry with the tears of exhaustion lining her lids. She was relieved when she finished them, filling the bag up once more aside from one bottle, which she uncorked and held to her lips. Consuming the equivalent to one third of the container, she stoppered it once more and put it with the rest, depositing the bag before she rolled over onto her side.

She was asleep within seconds.

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The fire was hot on Tom's face, the greenish tint of the flames throwing an eerie glow over the empty Common Room, the sixth year boy the lone resident as the other students lay asleep in their beds. A book was held in front of his face, but his eyes were trained on the fire, just above the pages of the novel. The center of the fire was a dark, saturated green color, raising into a pointed tip that was bright yellow, the hottest part of the flames encased around a lighter green. Entranced, he wasn’t aware that he was no longer alone until Hermione was standing in front of him, her dark brown eyes looking glazed over with an unfamiliar darkness to them.

“Hello, Hermione,” he said slowly, turning his head to the side. The moment he recognized the look haunting her face, the slightly open mouthed and hungry expression that so often accompanied desire and lust, her hands were on his shoulders, pushing them back against the couch as he let out a sharp intake of breath. She moved herself forward, her knees pressing alongside his hips as she straddled his lap, her pink tongue darting out to lick her lips.

His eyes widened as he looked at the witch before him, a thin white tank top the only barrier between himself and her pert breasts, the point of her nipple visible beneath the fabric and the darkness of her areola discoloring the white. Tentatively, he placed his hands on her upper thighs, the tips of his fingers dipping beneath her satin shorts. Smirking in appreciation, he turned his blue eyes to her still darkened ones and said, “well, this is a pleasant way to spend an otherwise uneventful night.”

Her hands slid down from his shoulders and over his chest, massaging over his jumper. “I couldn't sleep,” she said, her voice sinfully low and sultry with passion. “I need you,” she purred, leaning over so that her lips pressed against his ear, her voice a whisper. A tremor ran through him as the heat of her breath warmed his skin, tickled at his sensitive lobe. He unconsciously inclined his head towards her mouth, enjoying the feeling of her lips and craving more. “I need you, my Lord,” she plead, nipping her teeth against the earlobe.
He growled, gripping tighter onto her hips as he pulled her closer to him, her breasts pressing against him. His nails dug into her skin, and she keened in response, moaning against his ear. One hand lifted up, grabbing a tight fistful of her hair and wrenched her head to the side. She let out a gasp as his head dipped down, his lips descending on the soft skin of her pale neck. His tongue lapped against her flesh, wetting the skin as his teeth grazed along the curve of her neck, encouraged by all the delicious sounds she made in response to his ministrations.

He continued in his travel of her body, his hand on her hip slipping up and under her shirt, caressing the soft surface of her stomach, as his lips moved along her collarbone, chuckling as she begged for more. He pulled his head back, but only for as long as it took for him to raise her shirt up and off, taking in the sight of her naked torso. Her skin was creamy smooth and unblemished, and he ran his hands up and down in appreciation. He bowed his head again, his tongue flicking along her nipple as his hand massaged the opposite breast, responding to each and every noise she made.

So intent was he on exploring her body, discovering what happened when he moved his tongue in quick succession, or kneaded his fingers slowly, that when he heard what sounded like a loud buzzer, he started, pulling back from the witch.

His eyes opened to the empty room, his breath coming out in embarrassingly heavy pants as he cast his eyes around him, the timer buzzing from where it sat on the work table.

He was in the Room of Requirements, not the common room to Slytherin House. And he was decidedly alone, Hermione sound asleep more than eight floors below him.

'That was a...vivid dream,' he thought, waving his hand in the air to silence the timer as he shifted uncomfortably. A vivid dream that had quite the effect on him, if the tightness of his slacks was any indication. Rising to his feet, quite thankful for the privacy, he walked over to where the large, gold gilded cauldron sat, the fire beneath it causing the pink tinted potion to bubble within.

Holding his wand over it, he slowly moved his hand in clockwise circles, the surface of the potion pulling as it followed his movements. 'Stir seven times clockwise, then add five rose petals,' he instructed himself, carefully counting with each turn. After seven has passed, he laid his wand down and grabbed five petals from the worktable beside him. Dropping them in, the potion hissed and turned a brighter shade of pink, a pleasant aroma wafting from the surface. He turned his back on it, setting the timer to go off in another hour when the next step was required.

The room provided for him was small and intimate, with a large, simple bed- the green and silver sheet set rumpled from his abrupt wake up call. Only about several strides away was the wooden worktable, covered in various ingredients and parchments with neatly scrawled notes scratched into the surface. Two large tomes were laying on the desk, opened to a specific page with a thin strip of silk saving the spot. The cauldron was directly adjacent to it, the fire beneath making the room almost unbearably warm. Of course, the fire was only partly to blame, the heat in his face brought on by a far more internal mechanism.

Dropping his body down on the bed, he stretched his legs out and draped his arm over his eyes. Perhaps attempting to sleep in a room that was filled with the scent and simmering magic of various love potions had not been his brightest move, but he had very little opportunity to work on it otherwise. Dolohov and Nott were well enough at potions, while Mulciber and Rosier were, in his opinion quite abysmal, but at such an early stage, he trusted only himself to handle the potion. As it were, it wouldn't be ready until about two months from now, and the ingredients were difficult to come by- some were stolen from Slughorn's cupboard, the others Slughorn had given to him thanks to the influence of a little bottled luck. He had only a small amount of felix felicis left, and he intended on saving it for when the time came to slip Hermione the finish potion, and he had to ensure
everything went his way. He didn't have enough to procure more ingredients easily, should the first batch become compromised.

“Hermione,” he said to the empty room, the name sounding hard and accusing on his lips. While he could not deny that the witch had definitely earned his respect- something that had yet to be accomplished by any other- he hadn't thought she was affecting him on such a carnal level. Any girls he had been with had been more or less out of opportunity, and what he considered a moment of weakness. He did his best to ignore the heat within him, the passion and desire for flesh against your own that so many indulged in. But he would only be able to control it for so long before it became all consuming, and he would work his charm to sway a pretty witch who seemed willing and was- as Rosier crudely said- rather loose with her legs. He had never sought out any witch in particular, and in fact considered the act more repulsive and unnecessary than alluring when all was said and done and the hunger within satiated for the time being. He was always angry and embarrassed that he allowed something as petty as sex to control his actions, make him operate on a whim, and had in fact been one of the reasons he was drawn to the concept of horcruxes.

The less human he was- the more he split his soul- the quieter the need would become. The less he would be distracted by it.

Unfortunately, he had only made one at the moment, and it could only do so much. And the puzzling and compelling woman was threatening to undo it all.

Rising to his feet, the ache in his groins much less prominent now, he walked back over to the worktable, opening the first drawer and producing a slim, tear drop shaped vial. The mother-of-pearl sheen of the potion inside was positively effervescent in the glow of the fire, the undertones of pink and blue shining through as he held it at eye level. Pulling off the cork, he brought the mouth of it to just below his nose, inhaling the intoxicating scent.

‘Books, pumpkin juice, and lavender,' he had lied, thinking back to the first Potion's class of the year. He hadn't any real reason to lie, aside from his need to keep his innermost workings private. He had been only mildly amused by the sudden increase of lavender in the halls, girls foolishly trying to trick his senses into believing that they were the ones his unconscious mind had yearned for. He had even laughed out loud when Hermione plugged her nose to the smell, muttering something about having a bad experience with the relaxing floral scent.

But now he felt himself grow lightheaded at the aroma surrounding him, engulfing him from the amortentia Slughorn had provided him for his studies before he obliviated the wizard, creating and placing entirely new memories that would cover any wrongdoing.

The books had not been a lie, and was in fact a smell that he had enjoyed since childhood when the orphanage would take weekly pilgrimages to the library down the street. Alone, he had sought adventure and stimuli from the many novels offered to him, and had spent most of his free time reading, anything from popular fiction to long forgotten tomes, the syntax and diction ancient and clunky on his modern tongue. It smelt like glue and ink, dust and leather. Decaying words and history, rotting fantasy.

The other smells were also quite familiar to him. The crisp punch of apples, a mixture of sweet and tart that made his mouth water. Decadent and luxuriant chocolate, rich with cocoa and earthy. And then there was the fourth smell, lying subtly beneath it all, hiding behind the hints of fruit and dessert, of penned verses.

At the time of Slughorn's class, he had not known what the smell was, but he was growing all too familiar with it. The herbal freshness of sage, the tangy note of blackberries. He smelt it every
morning when Hermione made herself a cup of tea, and whenever she couldn't sleep, somehow sneaking away to fix it up for herself when he was not looking. She had difficulty sleeping often, and he had grown rather acquainted with the smell.

He replaced the cork, the smell almost immediately dissipating from the room and he sighed, his senses clearing as well. He slipped it back into the drawer before he leaned against the table, chewing his tongue in thought.

'This is an interesting development,' he thought. For the first in a long awhile, he was feeling unsure of how to proceed.

The very notion of being attached to another being was far from ideal, and was even considered a hindrance. He worked for his own need, and his alone, and would be damned if he felt tethered to the wants and needs of a silly girl.

But Hermione was not a silly girl, far from it. She was, perhaps, the only one who could rival his own intellect, his own power, his own carefully orchestrated moves around the proverbial chessboard. She was the closest he had come to an equal, just as separated from the world as he was. And if the potion proved definitively that she could be trusted and loyal to him, then he would only be stronger with her. And if it proved the opposite? He would have to track her down after graduation and dispose of her, for she would be far too great a foe, and he could not allow her to move into the war he would wage.

He was surprised to find he felt the slight pang of disappointment at that idea. Not truly a sadness, as he had never been so attached to someone to feel anything less than mild inconvenience at their absence. But their was something within him that wanted her to be everything she seemed and more, something that didn't want to lose her.

With an angry growl, he raised his fist only to drop it back down to the surface of the table in a ferocious punch, a shock vibrating through the wood that displaced several of the items atop it. He had not accounted for this- whatever this was.

He would not be so naive to call it love, as it was and would never be something he was capable of. He had more than come to terms with that, embracing his indifferent view of the world, tinted with apathy. But this was not indifference, and he was furious that she had stirred something so new within him with nothing but her cleverness and skill.

And on top of it all? He could not get the images of his dream out of his head!

He punched the table once more before turning around, rubbing his temples in thought. No, he hadn't been prepared for this. But he could work with it. He did not like to, but he could adapt when needed. He would persevere, and in the mean time he would focus on maintaining his hold on her, all while carefully working on the potion that would definitively determine on whether or not he would add her to his collection, or use her betrayal and subsequent death to create another horcrux.

'Maybe a second one will attend to this nuisance,' he thought, deciding he'd rather prefer to not feel like this about another witch or wizard in the future.

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“I'm afraid it is as we thought, and Mr. Riddle has done away with Horace's memory of their meeting, placing instead a rather innocuous one about needing help with an essay and discussing his Prefect duties. And Horace believes them to be the true and only account of what occurred between them,” Dumbledore said as he and Hermione walked along one of the many trails winding around
Hogwart's expansive grounds.

He did not seem either disheartened or surprised, and neither did Hermione, huffing out a breath of air. It was exceedingly difficult to create new memories for others, and even more so to place them within the regions of their brain in such a way that they did not seem out of place to the owner of them. Advanced, even for Riddle, and she knew that it would not have been successful without the use of felix felicis.

“What do we do now?”

He rubbed the graying hairs of his beard, some remnants of the deep auburn color remaining throughout. “We move forward, as always,” he said, as they emerged from the gardens and into a section of the grounds less private, several students lazing about in the autumn weather, enjoying what they could before the September breeze gave way to October chill, followed by November frost.

“I suppose I'll just have to have some faith that everything will pull through,” she ground out, unable to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

He chuckled. “That's the spirit, my dear Hermione. A little faith can get you a long way,” he chimed, his eyes twinkling when her shoulders slumped in exasperation. She knew better than to press him for some more concrete advice, that she would only be met with rhymes and riddles. It was not as though he was trying to make it more difficult and arduous for her, in fact it was quite the opposite. She was well aware that, should she continue to grow closer to the pragmatic Dark Lord, eventually she would find herself in situations where she would not have the time to think it through, to turn to him for advice. Her reflexes and responses had to become intuitive, impulsive yet thoroughly planned through. She would not learn that skill if he handed her all the answers.

“Aside from your concerns, how are you faring? My colleagues are very impressed with your aptitude, and they speak quite highly of you,” he said, causing her to blush under his praise.

“Alright. A little dreary compared to what my old school was like, but I'll pull through,” she said, and he responded with a little 'ahh', as though to say he understood her concealed meaning.

After a moment of walking. Hermione tuned out from the world, the sounds of laughter and words becoming background noise to her. Dumbledore slowed before coming to a stop, calling to her, “I believe you have someone trying to get your attention.”

Her brows knitted, she fixed him with a questioning gaze. He smiled, nodding his heard to the right. Following the motion, she saw Joshua walking up the hill to approach her, his easy and contagious smile in place.

“Oh, hello, Joshua,” she said, her own lips pulling up as he joined the pair, his light brown hair even more tousled than usual from the whips of wind cutting through the air. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“I can say the same to you. Good afternoon, Professor,” he said, turning to greet the older Dumbledore.

“And what a good afternoon it is, Mr. Crane!” he hummed, his blue eyes glinting with a mischief that would make the marauders envious and proud in the same instance. “I'm glad to see that you have introduced yourself to my cousin. I think she could do with the influence of such a noble boy, from such a noble house.” He paused, tapping a long and bony finger against his lips. As an after thought and a quick wink in Hermione's direction, has asked, “Pardon me, for being so bold my boy, but for the sake of my being her proper guardian, I must ask: Have you taken a shine to her?”
She had to suppress a groan as Joshua faltered for only a moment, his grin slipping into an awkward grimace as he squinted his round eyes. But he recovered quickly, shrugging his shoulders as he said, “I’m not the only one. She is quite charming, after all.”

He chuckled. “Family trait, I must admit.” Looking thoughtful, he added, “Perhaps it skipped my generation.”

Joshua laughed before turning to Hermione, his green eyes warm and jovial as he said, “Anyway, I know we’re in different years, but I was hoping that perhaps you could help me study. See, I have to prepare for graduation, and was hoping to be entered into the auror training program. But I have to pass the entrance exam for that, and after your brilliant show at the dueling club, I had thought you’d be my best bet to study with.”

She felt her cheeks heat under his playful grin, unable to prevent herself from basking in how highly he spoke of her, a vice she could not shake. She had studied and fought tooth and nail to be as good as any witch or wizard, regardless of pedigree, and could not stop herself from enjoying any compliments as a result.

“I’d love to,” she said, turning her gaze to Dumbledore. As she opened her mouth to ask if it were alright that they stop their visit for now, he waved his hand at her dismissively.

“Pay me no mind, my dear. We will catch up another time. Besides, it would appear my old age is getting the better of me, and I have just now remembered that I left a rather unfortunate toad to act as a bar stool in my rush to meet you. I should transfigure it back, before someone sits upon the poor thing,” he said, clucking his tongue as though ashamed at his carelessness. Without another word, he nodded his head at the two before he brushed by, heading back towards the entrance of the castle.

She giggled as she heard Joshua whisper, “Strange, that one. Brilliant, but strange.”

“You have no idea,” she added, following him as he lead her to a stately tree, the leaves of which were a brushstroke of autumn, a palette of reds and yellows and browns.

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“So once it’s done, how do you plan on getting her to...you know?” Mulciber asked in a hushed whisper, his eyes darting around the lawn to make sure no one was in ear shot as he, Nott and Riddle walked down the uneven trail. Dark blue eyes glared at him, disapproving of his poor level of discretion.

‘I hope they get better at this soon, I can't keep cleaning up after their messes,’ Tom thought, eyeing the two followers with disdain. They were, ultimately, still children, not quite up to the level of calculative grace that Tom was. He had been born a master of manipulation- where they had spent years of spoiled pure-blood entitlement at the hands of their obscenely wealthy (and obscenely inbred) families, while he had spent his time before Hogwarts learning how to deceive, how to control, how to hurt.

“You do more worrying than you do thinking,” he snapped, effectively ending the conversation. Even with so much space between his gang of Slytherins and the various cliques spread throughout the grounds, he could not risk it. There was only so much cleaning up he could do before that meddlesome fool Dumbledore caught wind of his plans, and even Dippet would not be swayed by his charm. Drugging a student with an untested and unregistered potion was, after all, grounds for expulsion. He assumed at least, as it was not something that was ever explicitly stated.

“Are you sure she went out here?” Nott asked, turning to Mulciber.
He hung his mouth open, going slack-jawed as he often did when he thought back on something. “Yeah...said Dumbledore wanted to talk to her about how she was getting on, all that. Went for a walk,” he said, looking down at his feet as they began walking down hill, the surface of the lake glistening under the heat of the sun as it filled the horizon.

After a second, Nott whistled lowly. “Well, I found her, and she ain't with Dumbledore, that's for sure.”

Extending his hand outward, he pointed in the direction of one of the older oak trees on the premises, a mere fifteen or so paces from the rocky ridge of the lake. Beneath the crown of dead and dying leaves, backs pressed against the wide base, was Hermione sitting beside Joshua, her head thrown back as she laughed loudly. They were close enough that they could just hear the ringing sound of it, carried along the back of the wind that pushed against them.

Joshua was leaning close to her, his head bowed low to hers as he moved his hands in front of him, emphasis for whatever story he was telling that had Hermione in near tears from her laughter. Her small hands wiped away at her eyes, her shoulders shaking with the constraint.

Suddenly, Tom whipped around, trudging back up the hill at a pace that made Nott and Mulciber pant as they attempted to keep with him. 'I thought I had taken care of that mudblood,' he thought angrily, growing even more furious at the fact that he cared so much. 'That bloody dream has made me all out of sorts.'

"Where are we going?" Nott asked, his words punctuated by sharp intakes of breath as they entered the castle once more in a storm, cloaks billowing behind them as they struggled to keep up with Tom's long legs.

"Dolohov and Rosier won't be out of class until dinner, and Hermione is practically in the lap of that Gryffindor. Might as well show you too how to brew a proper potion," he ground out, trying to keep his tone leveled. How could the boy be so dense? Hermione was his, and only his. He would be damned if he lost his potentially greatest follower to the sensibilities and weak morals of that Gryffindor lot. But what was he to do? She had played along once to his possessiveness, had obediently declined Crane's invitation at his behest. Surely, he could not press his luck with her, not yet. She did not know who he was, what he was capable of doing at the present, and he couldn't very well show her for fear that she'd go running to her cousin. No, he would have to give her space, trust that she would not fall down that path and trade in her potential to be great, her power, for the silly sense of justice and equality that plagued the Gryffindor house since its fruition.

He would focus on the potion, and plan around the possible outcomes that would arise from when he dosed her with it. If Dolohov's suspicions proved to be accurate, he would plot her end, use her for what he could while in school- learn every dark spell she had retained in that head of hers that he did not know. He would continue to play the role of friend, of housemate, until after graduation, where he would swiftly sacrifice her to his cause.

And if she proved herself to him? Well, that was what he had to think about. He was growing attached to her, whether he chose to admit it or not. He was drawn in by her wit, her mind, her dueling capability. He enjoyed their conversations in the Great Hall, their debates in the Common Room over a newly published article from Potions Weekly or Charms, Hexes and More! He would go from bored to excited the second she entered the group, knowing that she would keep pace with him and hold her own. They had taken to exchanging essays for editing, and he found reading her concise and perfect descriptions to have a calming effect on him. She was always clear, without sacrificing information, and he admired her for her knowledge all over again. She was more than just a pawn, a follower to add to his side for the sole purpose of having another body.
Yes, he would have quite a bit to consider, not certain of how to go about this whole business of wanting her for more than just what she could offer. Wanting her for the company she provided, for the injection of entertainment she added to his days.

'But first, what to do about Crane?'
Chapter Nine: Indulge
“There is love in me the likes of which you’ve never seen. There is rage in me the likes of which should never escape. If I am not satisfied in the one, I will indulge the other.”
-Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

(One Month Later...)
“I hate the cold,” Hermione hissed, shivering as she wrapped her arms around her frame. It was now the second week of November, and her jumper was too thin to properly protect her from the cold, her silver and green scarf wrapped tightly around her neck with her chin tucked underneath, her mouth hidden behind it. She walked beside Tom on the frosted grounds of Hogsmeade, Mulciber and Rosier several meters in front of them while Dolohov and Nott had disappeared into various shops.

Tom looked at her trembling form, an elegant eyebrow raised. “I quite like it,” he answered, his cheeks rosy from the chilling air.

She snorted. “Good for you.”

He stopped, sighing heavily as he removed his wool blazer, revealing the dark gray sweater of his uniform. Stepping behind her, he slipped the jacket over her, smoothing down the shoulders of it. “Don't expect such kindness next time. I will expect you to dress appropriately from now on,” he said, his tone mockingly commanding.

“My hero,” she said sarcastically, quietly thankful for his offering. Tugging the jacket closer to her, the fabric thick and warm, she raised her chin as they began walking once more, her eyes narrowing. “Tom? Why are you always in your school uniform? Even on weekends?” she asked, her eyes flicking forward to the two boys in front of her, each dressed in their own pair of slacks and jumpers while Tom still sported the wool pants and sweater-button down combo of Hogwarts.

She could feel him grow rigid beside her, his jaw clenching. She frowned, opening her mouth to take the question back, knowing she had asked the wrong thing of him. But before she could hastily apologize for her tactlessness, he said curtly, “I don't have anything else. I wear a uniform at the orphanage, and I wear one here. Never really had a need for other clothing.”

“Oh,” she said, the word forming a puff of air in front of her, freezing before dissipating to nothing. “I'm sorry, I didn't think-”

“Quite alright,” he interrupted, but his voice suggested otherwise.

She stared at him for a moment longer, her wide brown eyes lingering on his still locked jaw, on the bright rouge flushing his otherwise pale skin. It had taken some time, but she was finally getting used to the idea of walking side by side the Dark Lord, of having conversations with him regularly. She had controlled herself enough to not flinch at his touch, to not betray herself to him simply because each press of his skin to hers was fire, burning on her flesh. It was quite a silly thing, she thought, and there were moments where she wished she had a friend in this time, someone who knew her in her previous life, just so that they could discuss the absurdity of it all. Gossiping over a cup of tea, perhaps share some embarrassingly stories of Lord Voldemort. 'Last week during Potions he was so distracted by something that he cut his hand while dicing dragonfly thorax! He was so flustered and angry that he hadn't been paying enough attention he wouldn't speak for the rest of class!'

“Can we head into Zonko's?” Mulciber asked, turning around to look at Tom with bright eyes.
“You can. We'll meet you at Hog's Head,” Tom drawled, sounding bored. The two Slytherins ahead of them were suddenly gone, losing themselves in the crowd of students forming around the joke shop. He sighed. “Good to know the future of this world is left in such mature, aspiring hands,” he muttered, causing Hermione to giggle.

“You're only young once, better to enjoy it when you can,” she answered with a shrug, her smile slipping somewhat. If there were ever a piece of advice she wished she could pass onto her younger incarnation, it would be that very thing. Slow down, she would say. Laugh at Ron when his clumsy and awkward nature messed something up, smile when Harry spoke loudly and hurriedly about Quidditch plays. Set the book down, live in the moment. Before you knew it, it would slip through your fingers, lost and buried within a thousand other moments gone too soon.

Tom looped his arm through hers as they crossed the cobblestone street, the Hog's Head just ahead of them. Unlike all the other shops and haunts of Hogsmeade, it was near empty of any patrons, the windows grimy and dark as though it were closed off. Go away. You are not welcome.

A bell rung as they walked through the door, the pug faced waitress turning to look at them as they entered, as did two other customers of the establishment, a drunken middle-aged man with straggly hair and missing teeth, and a younger, plain looking boy with a sour expression. A group of seventh year Slytherin girls sat quietly against a wall, their heads bent together as they discussed something heatedly. Hermione bit her lip, moving closing to Riddle and squeezing his arm tighter as the intoxicated wizard at the bar roved his beady eyes up and down her body, muttering softly to himself as he leered.

“Over here,” Tom said, pulling her towards a small corner of the bar. He released her arm, pulling a chair forward for her and waiting until she was seated, pushing her in as she whispered a thank you. He turned to the waitress, ordering drinks for them, before he sat beside her, running a hand through his hair to ensure it had not fallen out of place.

“Charming little place,” she said. She had meant to sound sincere, she truly did, but when Tom chuckled lowly, she knew she had failed in her attempt.

“Well, it's certainly less crowded than other places,” he said. The waitress came over, saying nothing as she placed a dingy tumbler of apple cider in front of Tom, a mug of tea for Hermione. The tea leaves were burnt, but she decided it best not to say anything, not wanting to make enemies with the already unpleasant looking witch.

They sat in silence, sipping their respective drinks, Hermione barely containing a laugh at the grimace Tom made after he first sipped his. The room wasn't much warmer than outside had been, and she idly began to button up Tom's coat, the fabric bundling around her tighter.

“How are you tutoring sessions with Crane going?”

She looked up from the buttons, fumbling with them clumsily as she refused to remove her gloves. “Um...alright. We just started on patronuses, but I'm not really the best person to teach that particular spell,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Why not? You seem more than capable.”

“I...used to be able to produce a corporeal one, but ever since...well, I just haven't been able to do it. Sort of the blind leading the blind on this one.” He gave her a peculiar glance, but chose not to press the matter further, running a finger over the smudged surface of his glace. After a moment, she asked, “How are your study groups going?” Study groups, of course, being a euphemism for his Death Eater meetings. Or so she had assumed, as any time she expressed interest in joining him and
the four other boys, he would shake his head, telling her perhaps another time. She had been disappointed, even though she knew it would take some time before he would extend an offer to her. Instead, she chose to cling to the hope in his words, that promise of perhaps another time she could join. It wasn't much, but it was something.

“Alright. Since your impressive defeat of Dolohov at the Dueling Club, we've been practicing just that. They're improving, so that's good. I would hate for them to fail any of their NEWTs.”

“Still can't join you lot, can I?” she asked teasingly, watching his expression carefully from over the cup of her mug. He smirked, his eyes lighting up.

“Another time, I'm sure,” he purred, his voice getting deeper. She had come to think of his deeper, seductive voice as the one belonging to a different person, his Dark Lord persona. She had gotten quite good at deciphering the Dark Lord stirring beneath the surface, of when he switched out his charming charade for his more sinister identity. His eyes filled with storm clouds, dark and chaotic, and would turn stony. His voice would drop an octave or two, a slight gravelly quality to it, and he would trade in his wide smiles for crooked smirks. A part of her was drawn to this identity, against her chagrin. He would come and go so quickly, and she would become upset, wanting to study him a little bit further. Thus began her careful cataloging of him, trying to find the triggers that called his Dark Lord forward and attempting to employ them.

'You wouldn't believe it, but I've taken up a new hobby of trying to lure the Dark Lord out of hiding,' she imagined herself saying to her nonexistent friend.

“I'm going to the bathroom,” she said, rising from her seat.

Riddle watched silently as she disappeared down the hallway beside the bar, her head raised high as though hoping the confident air would conceal her discomfort in the dirty tavern.

“So, are you and Dumbledore a thing?” a feminine voice called from his side.

He turned his head, inclining it in greeting to the seventh year Prefect of Slytherin, Athena Zabini. She had her hands pressed down flat on the surface of the table, leaning across it as she looked at him with expectant eyes. She was quite pretty, with dark, smooth skin and long black hair that fell to her waist in tight ringlets. Her eyes were slim and almond shaped, a light honey color to the iris. Her face was soft and rounded, with high, sculpted cheekbones and large, plump lips.

He rose a brow at her. “If by 'a thing' you mean tied together, no, we are not. She is just a friend,” he said, his eyes looking back to the hall where Hermione had disappeared.

“True, you've never really been one for tying yourself down to someone, have you?” she asked, raising her hands when he narrowed his eyes at her. “Not in a bad way, mind you. You at least have some class.” Her hand reached up and grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulling it out so that the curls unwound, strands of uneven hair springing free from her grip. “So, what's the deal with her? She's a little strange, but I guess that comes with the territory of being a Dumbledore.”

“Not being the product of inbreeding will have that effect,” he snapped at her, something growling in the depths of his chest. Since when, exactly, had he become so defensive of Hermione? Of course, he had been protective whenever Crane was involved, but that was different. He was certain the boy was using her for her knowledge, and had only allowed his near daily courting attempts to continue as he provided a suitable distraction to Hermione. She hadn't noticed him disappearing to work on his potion, which was nearly completed, and until it was done, he had conceded to allow Crane to pursue her. He would take care of him after, once his usefulness wore out.
But Athena was not Crane, and wasn't attempting to seduce Hermione away from his side of the chessboard. So why did he feel the need to snap at her?

Athena frowned. “I'm not a product of inbreeding!” she hissed, taking a moment to compose herself as she added, “So, is she with one of the other boys you hang out with then?”

“Any reason for this interrogation?” he asked, his eyes flitting back to the hallway. How long did it take to use a bathroom for Merlin's sake?

She smiled, batting her eyes coquettishly at him. “Well, I noticed that we were scheduled to do rounds together Wednesday night. I was wondering if maybe you'd give me a chance to see if the rumors about you had any truth to them,” she said, her voice breathy.

“Rumors?”

“The few girls lucky enough to be with you, well they talk,” she said, giggling flirtatiously. He had to resist rolling his eyes at the noise, wondering how a giggle could sound so different. Hermione's wasn't nearly as high-pitched, or forced seeming, and he found he actually enjoyed the sound when coming from her lips.

“I need to remember to start obliterating them after,” he muttered, making Athena giggle once more. She seemed to mistake his genuine sentiment for a joke.

“So, what do you say?”

He opened his mouth, prepared to say no- perhaps throwing in a cutting insult just for good measure- but paused, his eyes settling on her smug smile. Nearly a month after the dream that stirred the hunger within him, he was, regretfully, beginning to feel quite exhausted from the need. Just the other day he had cut himself in Potions class, so distracted he was by the curve of Hermione's bare neck, the supple flesh glowing in the light of the room, that he nicked his thumb instead of the dragonfly thorax. She spent the next five minutes asking him if he was alright, and what had distracted him so much. He was quiet for the rest of the class, angry at himself for his lack of his control. Being constantly surrounded by a brewing love potion- or at least some aspects of one- were wearing down on him, clouding his mind and judgment. He was becoming concerned, fearful that his anxious state would cause him to ruin his potion. That would certainly be problematic.

He looked Athena over, appraising her features. She was the exact opposite of Hermione; a voluptuous frame in place of Hermione's slim and petite one, narrow eyes opposite Hermione's wide ones. Tight and controlled curls, very much different from the loose and untamed ones framing Hermione's sharp and angular face- something to make any hairdresser scream in anguish. If there were anyone to abate his need, all while diverting his frustratingly growing attentions to Hermione, it would be Athena.

“I'm sure we could arrange something,” he said, allowing his voice to deepen to a purr, one that he knew caused delightful tremors down the spines of any woman to hear it.

She grinned. “Great. I'll look forward to it,” she said, pulling back. Her eyes bore into his, heated and passionate, before she walked off, joining her friends across the pub. With a sigh, he rose his glass of apple cider to his lips, pausing when his eyes fell on the empty bar. Hermione was still not back yet, and the inebriated wizard who was fixing her with a lecherous look since she walked in was gone.

Slamming the cup back down to the table, he quickly rose from his seat, pulling his wand from his pocket as he strode to where the narrow hallway was placed. His heartbeat quickened in his chest, a pressure filling him and threatening to make him explode, as he moved towards the end of it, two
doors on either side for the respective lavatories. He turned sharply to the left—the woman's restroom—and wretched the door open, uncaring that he was potentially invading the privacy of its occupant.

“Hey!” Hermione yelled, startled.

She was standing in the corner of the room, wedged between the dirty pedestal sink and the two walls meeting in a perpendicular angle. He wand was out, and a look of relief washed over her as he entered the room, his own wand at the ready. “Oh, Tom,” she breathed, placing a hand over her chest.

His eyes followed the point of her wand, looking to his right to find the plump and gray wizard unconscious, slumped against the wall. He stared at the form for a moment, his jaw clenching as rage filled him.

“He...he followed me in,” she said, her voice small. “I panicked and I...he's not dead, just unconscious,” she said, and he could hear the nervousness in her voice, the slight fear blurring the edge of it. Turning his gaze back to her, he saw that she was trembling, face flushed.

He crossed the room in two bounds, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into him, tucking her head beneath his chin. Her tuft of frizzy curls tickled him, and he could smell the clean scent of her shampoo, something generic and vanilla. She was hesitant and stiff in his embrace, but slowly she relaxed, her muscles unwinding as she returned the gesture, her arms clasping behind his back.

“You did well, no need to justify your actions,” he murmured into her hair, his breath whipping the strands around. “He was foolish to go after such a talented young witch, and deserved nothing less.”

She relaxed further at his words, sighing as though she were exhaling all of her concerns. He pulled back, holding her at arm's length as he inclined her head, her chin clasped between his thumb and forefinger. “Get yourself another cup of tea, Mulciber and Rosier should be here soon. Wait for them at our table, and don't talk to anyone. I'll make sure he gets out of here,” he said, his voice commanding.

Her brown eyes cast over to the unconscious man, chewing her lip in what looked like sorrow and deep thought. “Maybe just leave him-” she started, but he cut her off, speaking sharply and matter-of-factly.

“No. I'll make sure he stays away from you.”

She nodded, shrinking away from his harsh tone. Moving away from his touch, she slipped her wand up her sleeve, the tip of it disappearing in the coat, as she walked to the door, giving the man a long glance before walking through.

Tom waited until he was sure she'd be in the main room of the pub, out of ear shot from what would occur. Still, he took the time to place several wards over the area, a silencing charm and a locking spell included. After everything was settled and he was certain he would not be disturbed, he knelt in front of the wizard, his nose crinkling as the smell of stale firewhiskey and body odor filled his senses. A trickle of blood fell down the man's heavy, sloped brow, a result of the impact he made with whatever spell Hermione had used to fend him off. With his elbows propped on his knees, he jabbed the tip of the gnarled spare wand into his chest, muttering 'ennervate!'

A quick jolt ran through the body, the wizard jerking awake. Dark, beady eyes, rimmed red and bloodshot, sought out Tom's, his lips smacking together with cotton mouth.

“Who'ra?” he slurred, the acrid scent of alcohol growing more overwhelming.
Tom smirked, raising his wand so that it pressed deeply into his thick neck, the man gasping in pain with the action.

“I'm Lord Voldemort.”

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“I'm fine, Nott, really. Nothing happened,” Hermione said, her voice clipped as she sat between Tom and Mulciber on the sofa, opposite one of the many fireplaces in the Common Room. She had been surprised to discover just how worried the boys had been when she told them what had happened, with all but Dolohov treating her like a fragile China doll, asking her over and over again the same four questions. Are you sure you're okay? You're not lying, are you? You can tell us, if something happened, you know that right? Do you need more tea?

She had had, she thought, more tea within the past four hours than she had in her entire life, her teeth uncomfortably warm and fuzzy feeling, her belly full of the liquid. It was strange, to see such concern from individuals who she sometimes forgot to regard as humans, and, in a way that made her feel quite conflicted- she found their fret and their attentions rather endearing. People have often said that it takes great threat to life, a trauma, to rouse the monster hidden within a human, but it was almost always forgotten of how much needed to occur to rouse the human within a monster. And somehow, she had accomplished it.

“Should I get you more tea?” Mulciber asked, and she had to bite back a laugh.

“If I drink anymore I think my bladder might explode, but thank you,” she joked, making sure to give him a warm and gracious smile.

“Well, I'm glad you're alright,” Mulciber said, finally relenting.

“I assure you,” Tom spoke, not tearing his eyes away from the book he was reading, his head bowed as it sat open in lap, his right ankle crossed over his left thigh. “She handled herself quite admirably. He made a grievous mistake, attempting to attack our Hermione, and I am certain that, when he wakes up from his stupor, he will never attempt something so barbaric again.”

’He's dead, of course he won't,’ Hermione thought, her eyes lingering on Tom's face as she turned to him, his right hand holding his chin as he read. Back in Hogsmeade, when Hermione came back to sit at the table she and Tom had shared, it took only about a minute for the others to join her, Mulciber and Rosier coming in first, breathless and shaking, asking if everything was alright. Dolohov and Nott followed, with the latter assuming the role of her caregiver while Tom was away, his arm wrapped around her shoulder and buying her more tea and biscuits than she could reasonably consume. She had been confused at how they seemed to know to come to the Hog's Head at the same, exact moment, and how they had all seemed to know that something had occurred. But then she remembered that, while perhaps it was still in the early stages of creation, they had all had something similar to a Dark Mark hidden on their persons, and Tom had presumably summoned them.

The thought was enough to remind her that the dotting men around her were not quite as they appeared, and she sat stiffly for the rest of their time there, her quiet and rigidity being mistaken for shock and fear at what had happened. More tea was placed in front of her.

Tom was gone for nearly forty minutes, and when he returned, Nott moved away from her, Riddle taking his place as he sat close to Hermione, his hand wrapping protectively around her waist. He had told them that he dragged the drunkard out the back door, to one of the nearby inns in Hogsmeade. Had stolen the man's purse to pay for a room and told the innkeeper to make sure each
room was thoroughly locked, for good measure.

Twenty minutes beyond that, Professor Adalbert stormed through the doors of the Hog's Head, eyes glancing over the two groups of students within as he spoke to the waitress, bits of their hushed conversation being heard. "...No, no one has left. They've all stayed here..." 'I haven't heard or seen anything strange, isn't my business anyway...'

When they were finished discussing whatever it was, Adalbert rounded them up, informing them that all students were to return to within the safety of Hogwarts' walls, even the grounds around the castle were off limits until otherwise specified. There was a wild animal running around, he explained, and a body was found on the outskirts of town, mangled beyond recognition.

'How do we know it was an animal?' Violet Parkinson asked as he escorted them to the gates, her eyes wide in fright. Adalbert gave her a tight, forced smile in reassurance. 'It was rather gruesome, I don't think anything but an animal could do such a thing.'

He was right, Hermione knew. Only an animal could do something so horrific. But animals came in many deceiving shapes and sizes, and was, she had learned, an entirely too broad and general term.

"I wonder when they'll let us outside of the castle. I hope we can still go to Hogsmeade tomorrow, I didn't get to have any custard," Mulciber said, frowning in thought. Riddle looked up from his book, a look of both exasperation and annoyance on his face.

"Surely, you're not still thinking about how you missed out on such a horrid treat after everything else that has occurred today? I would think it rather selfish if you were," he drawled. At the sound of his voice, Hermione's body shivered involuntarily, her shoulders rolling, as they she often did when he spoke in that deep and velvety way. Blue eyes flicked over to her for a moment, and Tom reached over, his arm resting on her shoulders and pulling her closer, as he returned his gaze to Mulciber.

"N..no. It was just a joke," he said, ruefully.

"It wasn't a very good one," Tom chided, the words causing a vibration in his torso that Hermione could feel, his body radiating heat as it always seemed to do, quite contrary to what she had always suspected of him. Perhaps that was why he seemed to be so warm, not because he was particularly hotter than anyone else, but merely more so than her expectation of him. That he in fact wasn't ice cold to the touch, like a human being sculpted from hate and ice and stone.

She sighed, resting her head on his shoulder as the conversation, thankfully, changed, Dolohov talking about the products he had seen while shopping, the interesting artifacts he discovered. Tom began to drag his fingers over her shoulder, drawing lazy circles as he spoke about some books he planned on getting as well.

'I killed a man,' Hermione thought, the very weight of the implication pressing heavily on her so that she leaned fully on Tom for support, her face buried in the jumper of his uniform. She wasn't the one who held the wand, who watched as the last few ounces of life left the man's face and eyes. But she had been the reason he was dead, that even though she did not see the body or had known for a fact what Tom had done in the time he was absent, she knew he had killed him. Had done so to protect Hermione.

The though both thrilled and terrified her. Thrilled not that she had made someone kill for her, as that part was a fact that certainly fell into the terrified category. But, horrifically and against her better want as it stood against all her morals, she was thrilled that he considered her worthy of killing for. That he was becoming close enough to her to feel the need to protect her and defend her honor. Surely, she was succeeding in her plan if that had been the case.
But by the same token, she was terrified at the notion. That she had the power to have someone killed simply by Tom noticing someone meant her harm, that someone was trying to do her wrong. She berated herself, knowing that she should have left the room as soon as the man was unconscious, pretend nothing had occurred and that no one followed her. She should have known Tom would realize her extended absence, as she stood paralyzed in the corner of the room. She had not meant to stand, unmoving, for so long, but the moment the man had slipped in through the door, a demented look on his sloppy face, she had reverted back, just like that, to Hermione Granger. Prisoner of War several times over, Undesirable no. 2, second only to Harry. She was, rightfully, overcome by the need to defend herself and the means to do so, her wand slipping down from her sleeve and into her palm easily. Had she simply left, willed herself to come down from the high of reliving her place in the war, the man would still be alive.

‘But did he deserve to be?’ The thought was enough to silence her inner turmoil, deciding that this internal monologue was best saved for another day. She never liked the idea that sometimes, the world was better off without certain people in it, a part of her wanting to find the good within that had to exist somewhere in everyone. She liked even less that she was beginning to question a man’s purpose in the world, especially when she was snuggled up to perhaps the one and only wizard that most would unanimously declare deserved to die.

“Tired, Hermione?” Rosier asked, noticing the way she was slumped into Tom's side, her mass of curls concealing her face from view.

“Actually, yes,” she mumbled, lifting her head. “I'll think I'll turn in early tonight.”

“The reminds me,” Tom said, watching her as she stood from the couch. “Will you be needing anymore Dreamless Sleep?”

She shook her head, smiling gratefully. “No thank you, I should be good for another month.”

He nodded. “Sleep well, then. If you need anything you know where to find me,” he said.

'You've done enough,' she thought scornfully, but instead she smiled, bidding goodnight around the group before turning down the hallway for the dormitories. She had been the reason a man would not wake, the reason Tom Riddle had ensured that to be the case. She suspected there wasn't enough Dreamless Sleep he could offer her that would stop the nightmares from plaguing her.

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“You're not enjoying it,” Athena Zabini said, pouting her lower lip out at Tom as he opened his eyes at her. She had been, up until twenty minutes ago, patrolling the corridors of Hogwarts with Tom for their nightly rounds. However, they now sat within one of the empty classrooms that ran through the third floor, Tom sitting in a transfigured armchair that had previously been a tiny, wooden desk chair. Athena sat atop him, her skirt bunched up in her lap to reveal the skin of her upper thigh. Her cloak, wool blazer and jumper were all discarded in a pile on the floor, her green and silver tie lying across it all. Her white button up shirt was popped open, pulled out from her skirt waistband so that her chest was exposed, her large breasts covered by a lacy white bra.

Tom frowned from where he sat, his hands draped over the arms of the chair. No, he really was not enjoying it, to be perfectly honest, despite Athena being a more than beautiful girl. Much to his irritation, he found every noise the girl made grating on his nerves, that he was already beginning to regret how much he allowed his control to slip from him. That every time he opened his eyes, he was disappointed to find that she was not the little Know-It-All, with slightly buck teeth and hair doing a marvelous impression of a tumbleweed. He had never before been so furious at himself- for the first time in his entire existence, the need within him was specifically directed to another human being,
and it seemed it would not be fooled by another in her place. 'What on earth is she doing to me?' he thought, wondering how much of it was to blame on his constant preparation of the potion, and how much blame laid within his own mind.

Sighing, he reached up and cupped Athena's face in his hands, and she leaned into it, her eyes closing. Pulling her towards him, he placed a chaste kiss on her forehead, the thick tendrils of hair tickling his nose. “I'm sorry, Darling. I think my mind is elsewhere tonight,” he said, gently trying to push her off of him. But she did not move, folding her arms over her chest as she rose her chin at him.

“Then why would you even bother?” she asked, her tone sharp and angry. Suddenly, she lifted herself up from his lap, hastily pulling the hem of her skirt down to cover herself before she carelessly began re-buttoning her blouse, accidentally missing a hole so that the fabric was messy and uneven. Swooping over, she threw her robe on and grabbed the rest of the bundle of her clothing up in her arms. Turning to him with heated eyes, she said, “You can finish the rounds yourself, Riddle.”

She stormed out of the room, her cloak swishing behind her. Standing, he fixed himself back into his slacks and straightened his blazer. His cloak was hanging over the back of the armchair, the Prefect badge shining from the light of the torches around the room. 'That could have gone better,' he thought with a sneer, rubbing his hand over his face.

He shirked his cloak back on, flattening the lapels. In several weeks, the potion would be done, and he was certain that these impulses and desires would fade. He would finally be freed from the thoughts in his head that surely were not his own, the needs in the pit of his belly that were of course spurred by outside influences.

He wandered the halls, his footsteps echoing as the sound bounced off the large, stone walls. He did not truly care to finish his rounds, and was in fact taking the moment of peace to check on the very potion responsible for his current state.

As the completion of it approached, his mind was whirring with the possibilities of how he could use it, what information he would get from the girl. If his theories and calculations were correct, she would become enamored with him, and feel a pain-inducing desire to please him and give into him, and he would use that to make her withdraw her mental barriers, allow him access to her mind- her thoughts and memories. He would command her to answer his questions with honesty, and she would be forced to do so, the potion having wrecked havoc on her faculties on a deeper level than any veritaserum. The possibilities were limitless, and he had taken to writing a list of everything he wanted to glean from her when the time was right. He was meticulous in that way.

Of all the things he desired to know about her- and there were many- one stood out the most in his mind, the question burning embers: Why did she seem so constantly at war with herself, her eyes a conflict of anger and laughter, disgust and intrigue? In a single sitting he counted no less than twenty times he would see her eyes switch between emotions, changing them out faster than he could make out the reason. She was calm one minute, than overcome with guilt the next. She would allow him to place a hand on her shoulder, on her knee, without any indication she was upset, only to pull away moments later- as if she suddenly realized he was touching her and was horrified.

'It's a good thing she's such an accomplished occlumens, I can practically read her mind through her eyes alone,' he thought, entering the Room of Requirements to find everything the way he had left it. Yes, should she pass his test regarding the potion, that was one thing he would have to train her on. It did not do her much good if she betrayed herself so frequently, her eyes saying what her mind and tongue would not.

The room was filled with the smells of love and lust, apples and sage. It wrapped around him like a
blanket that should have been warm and comforting, but he instead considered stifling, suffocating. He approached the cauldron and looked at its contents, pleased to find the silver surface unperturbed and glossy. His head bent over, the smell was practically overwhelming, filling his head so that it felt like someone had replaced his brain with cotton balls and his throat with lead.

'If this is what love feels like, I truly pity those pathetic enough to be imprisoned with it,' he thought, having to move away from the effects of the potion.

He had used his time over the past weeks to truly ruminate over what it was that Hermione was doing to him, and had decided that it was not love, not in the slightest. Love was what made otherwise strong men into weak-willed fools, giddy with the hope and dreams and passions that accompanied it. It was what made you feel as though you were walking on water, swimming through clouds; Only to learn that water would not hold your weight, and you were pulled in to drown in the oppression. That you could not fly and you would plummet down, gravity and reality hitting you all at once as your body broke on impact. It was what made witches from otherwise noble pure-blood lineages trade away any potential for power, handing over real magic for the illusion of magic, for a nobody, a muggle. All in the name of an illusion that only lasted so long, dissipating in your hand like a snowflake that was brilliant and perfect until you yourself took hold of it.

That was love, the great and mighty force that Dumbledore claimed could heal all wounds. But what Dumbledore did not know was that, all to often, love was responsible for those very same wounds that it healed. Love was a sadist who inflicted pain and then sewed you up, kissed away your tears, only to tear you down once more.

No, he was certainly pleased to say that he indeed did not feel that way for the girl. What he felt instead was only an extension for his need of power, his need to dominant and rule. She was to him, as ice was to fire- opposing in how they burned, but burning all the same. She was the flame, impassioned and unbidden, her emotions and power unyielding and uncontrolled. And she complemented him quite nicely, he thought, their extremes colliding in a way that they fed off what the other could offer. He was certain that, unlike love, she could add to his potential, expand the possibilities before him.

And he could do the same for her. For when she let him- when she was ready- he could show her the euphoric high that came with dark magic. He could teach her the pleasures that came when someone laid before you, begging for mercy, their life and death held within your palm. That nothing- not the thrill of your first time holding a wand or even sex- could compare to the immeasurable amount of relief and joy you felt with each and every spell of dark origin you uttered. The darker the magic, the greater the delight.

People are born selfish, he had learned through his short time on earth. Sympathy and kindness for others were something that had to be taught to a child, something that society did endeavor to teach its children. They were taught to deny the part of their brain that lit up at being the sole source of anguish and agony, the part of the brain that reveled in the ability to hurt others and have them fear you. Society had tried to teach him that, had tried to cut off that part of him, tried to stopper his one source of true joy. But he did not bend, he was more intuitive than that. And even as a child he knew that they were wrong, that they were the odd ones out for denying themselves something so great.

And just like Hermione had been taught by her parents and society that she did not need to cause pain and suffering and fear in order to feel that rush of pleasure, he would undo it all. He would undo her.

He wanted her- needed her- not for something as paltry as love, but because he truly believed that she completed him, that she would bring to the table of his men and his army and his kingdom
something no one else possibly could. She was something special, and who was he to deny himself of someone so rare? She was fire, and he was ice. She burned with the heat of raw passion, and he seared with extreme cold, so frozen was he that it confused your senses into paradoxically believing you had came in contact with the flame.

-xXx-

(Three weeks later...)

Tom Riddle ladled the potion, deep purple in color, into several different bubble shaped vials, carefully filling each one with the use of a funnel. Two weeks ago, the horrid aroma and the drug like effects of it had since subsided, the room smelling unusually clear after so much time. There was a slight smell that could be detected, if you held the potion directly beneath your nose and knew to look for it. He wasn't worried though- after all, he had quite the assurance that Hermione would be none the wiser to it when she consumed the potion. Felix had that effect on people.

“Is it done?” Rosier asked, his golden eyes looking nervously over Riddle's shoulder.

The boy nodded as he began corking each vial. “First, we'll have to test it. Wouldn't do us any good if we send her to St. Mungo's,” he said, narrowing his eyes when Dolohov muttered something under his breath. Choosing to ignore it for the time being, feeling generous after his copious amounts of time and effort had finally paid off, he added, “We'll find someone to do a trial on, and if everything goes well, we'll slip some to Hermione.”

“You never did say how you planned on doing it,” Nott asked, his head resting in his hand.

Picking up a vial and giving it a shake so the the liquid sloshed up against the sides, he asked, “Look like anything specific to you?”

Barely missing a beat and with a growing grin, Nott responded, “Dreamless Sleep.”

Riddle nodded. “Some time ago, I gave her a large supply. I'm certain she had to have tested them before using them, and finding nothing wrong with them the first go around, she would have no reason to test them every night. It can be exhausting and draining to your magic to use such powerful detection spells, even Hermione wouldn't waste her time or power into it.”

“Brilliant,” Mulciber breathed, his large hands grabbing hold of one vial and bringing it up to his eyes to examine it, the deep violet color reflecting in the shine of his eyes.

“And you can't even smell the amortentia in it, not strongly at least. Thank goodness, I was feeling rather randy for a while there, after spending so much time in here when it was brewing. I was ready to court a tree up until a week or so ago,” Rosier said with a grin, an admiring look thrown in Riddle's direction.

Frowning, Riddle looked into the now filthy cauldron, congealed masses of his creation clinging to the golden gilded surface. A question that he rather not have asked fill his mind at the moment, a rather heavy weight settling into his chest. The effects of the potion on his and the other boy's senses had faded some time ago. So why on earth did he still find her filling his thoughts, closing his eyes to see her body writhing beneath his in not pain but pleasure as her eyes fluttered backwards?

'Peculiar,' he thought, but decided not to dwell on it. Within two days, he would have all the answers he needed. He would unravel the enigma that was Hermione Dumbledore.
Shrine of Your Lies

Chapter Ten: Shrine of Your Lies
'I will worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies...'
-Hozier, Take Me To Church

“Tommy, what are we doing out here? Can't we go back to the pub?” The middle-aged witch- Alice or Allison, Tom thought her name was- said as she shivered, wrapping her robes around her frame as she walked several steps behind him. Her breath huffed out from her thin, red stained lips and formed little cloud of vapor from the cold that dissolved within seconds. They were walking away from Hogsmeade, the brightly lit town that- being a Saturday night- was still lively and boisterous with laughter and singing. Though, it was well into the morning hours by now, the moon low on the western horizon, and was indeed Sunday at this point.

Tom bristled at the nickname, his jaw tightening, but instead he forced a smile at the witch, looking over his shoulder at her as he lead her towards the Forbidden Forest. “Don’t worry, Love. You’ll be safe with me,” he cooed, and he could hear her sigh behind him, the snow crunch beneath her steps as she quickened her pace to be closer.

She was drunk. On firewhiskey and falsified love, the bottled one he had brewed especially for Hermione and was now testing it out on Alice or Allison. He had given her two drops of it, pouring the amount into her drink when he, being a gentleman, of course, fetched her one. It had taken nearly twenty minutes for it to come into effect, but had now lasted over five hours. Five hours of Alice or Allison clinging to his arm, of her lovingly calling him Tommy, of her pouring her heart out to a man she did not know but loved and trusted more than could be measured.

Five hours, and he had just about had it.

'It should wear off soon,’ he thought with relief as they came into the sparse line of trees just before the forest grew denser and darker, the bright light of the moon washing over them and casting the world into gray-scale.

Alice or Allison looked around, chewing her bottom lip nervously. “I know I'll be alright with you, my darling,” she said, her voice airy and dreamlike as her words materialized before her as puffs of smoke. “But I just don't understand why we had to come all the way...out here.” She was frightened, he could tell by the slight hitch in her voice, the wide quality to her brown eyes. She jumped with each snap of a twig, each crunch of snow in the distance.

He smirked, allowing his voice to deepen as he said, “I thought we could use some more privacy.” He moved closer to her shivering form, placing a hand on her arm and smiling as she seemed to melt below his heat, a flirtatious grin growing on her face.

“What exactly did we need some privacy for?”

Tom lowered his head as he opened his robe, producing a silver pocket watch slightly smaller than his palm. The metal was chilling in his hands, so cold it burned, but he held onto it anyway as he looked at the face of it. It was seventeen after four. If everything had gone as he had planned, the potion would wear off in two minutes.

'Perfect. Then I can finally head back to Slytherin and sleep,’ he thought, feeling almost embarrassingly tired. He would have to be at least moderately well rested, for, if everything went over well tonight, tomorrow evening Hermione would be just as lovestruck and trusting as this witch.
“Lovely watch. Looks expensive,” Alice or Allison said, looking greedily between Tom and the device.

He frowned. “Family heirloom,” he snapped, slipping the watch back into his robes and away from her prying eyes.

“Did your father give it to you?” she asked, moving closer to him so that she was just inches away, her head tilted upward.

“You could say that.”

She stood up on her tip toes then, pressing her lips roughly against his own. Somewhat surprised, he stiffened beneath her slightly plump frame, his eyes widening as she continued to kiss him, rather aggressively and not at all in a pleasant manner. Her lips were cold and dry and tasted like alcohol, and attempted to pry his own lips apart. But just as quickly as she had started, she stopped, gasping as she pulled away from him.

Her eyes were no longer soft and warm, but were wild with fear and confusion. “W-who...who are you?” she choked out, loud enough that the words echoed off the trees and filled the freezing night. Her chest rose quickly and she was looking around her frantically, as though suddenly aware that she was standing in the Forbidden Forest with a stranger. A stranger with a dark glint to his blue eyes and a sinister shadow to his handsome face.

With only a second hesitation, she twisted on her heel, spinning around clumsily as she tried to run away. But Tom was prepared, and produced his wand in a swooping flourish. The trees came alive, the dead and low lying branches becoming animated as they snaked through the air, reaching out like tapered and knotted fingers to clutch onto the witch. She screamed as the tree limbs wrapped tightly around her wrists, her thick waist. Her wand made a soft thud as it fell from her hands, disappearing into the snow laden ground. With another flick of his wrist, her mouth snapped shut, her lips clamping together as muffled sounds were produced from behind them.

Slowly, Tom walked around the now chaotic mess of branches, moving in a circle so that he was facing her once more. Her eyes were wide, a ring of white surrounding her iris as she struggled against the trees that now stood frozen in place, the witch a permanent part of their structure.

“I'm not done with you yet,” he spoke threateningly, producing his wand once more. But he did not attack her, instead hovering the tip of his wand just over her quivering body, watching as a white glow formed around her. The glow lasted for three total seconds before settling into a lovely shade of gold, luminescent in the night. He performed several more diagnostic spells, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“I poisoned you,” he said, nonchalantly as though he were making simple conversation, his wand still moving across her body. “I created my own potion, but needed a test subject. You proved to be rather fitting for the role: you were alone, oblivious, and a little too trusting of handsome strangers offering to get you drinks. You were of excellent use to me- the potion worked, if you were wondering. I'm quite proud of it, I spent a great deal of time on it,” he said with a frown, sounding disappointed that she wasn't properly enthused by his success. “Regardless, I need to make sure it didn't cause any side effects. You seem to be in good health after it- your blood pressure is reading a little high, though.”

He paused, letting the wand drop to his side as he smirked at the girl. “I must thank you, my dear. This would not have been possible without you,” he said, his tone condescending and acidic as he snickered from deep within his throat. He turned around, walking several steps away before coming to a stop.
“Oh, one more thing,” he said, knitting his brows in concern as he turned to face her, his lips pursed. “A couple weeks okay a man was found dead a couple meters from here. Terrible, and incredibly horrific from my understanding. He was unrecognizable when they found him; they determined he was attacked by some wild animal. Thought so at least...they never found it, or even what it was. It's still wandering around here, I suppose, and I should think it to be a dreadful amount of misfortune should another poor witch or wizard run into the vicious beast. Don't you?” he asked, shaking his head as if he were truly concerned for the fate of said victim, that he truly found the former death so pitiful.

She was screaming behind her closed lips, guttural sobs and grunts emanating from her, as she looked at him, pleadingly.

But he did not seem to see the begging in her face, the fear in her eyes, as he added, “Anyways, do be careful.” He turned around again, and this time did not look back as he walked off, his footsteps falling through the snow as it collapsed under his weight. When he was just beyond the trees, he paused for a second as he rose his wand, twisting it through the air and pivoting on his feet just in time to direct the black jet of magic at the witch.

Alice or Allison screamed loudly, her agonized shout stabbing through the night like a dagger. But she was not loud enough, the raucous merriment of Hogsmeade drowning her out. Music from the weekend parties smothered her cries for help, and he knew within minutes she would be dead. The curse would eviscerate her, bleed her out, as well as call upon the local predators that stalked the forest to her.

He felt almost sorry for her. Her only real crime had been being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being naive and too quick to trust a friendly smile. She was not a deviant like the old man had been, nor did she commit any personal sins against him. But he needed a vessel to test on, and she was provided for him. He made do with what he could, and any amount of remorse he might have felt did not linger long as he smiled wide, glee overcoming him.

His potion was a success. It was worked exactly as he had intended, and would work just as well on Hermione. He was sure of it.

Casting a disillusionment charm on himself, he headed towards the closed shop of Honeydukes, the windows looking terribly dull and devoid of life when compared to the glow of the Three Broomsticks and several other restaurants in the area. All the better, though. He just wanted to get back to Hogwarts and sleep.

Tomorrow would be a long day.

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Hermione huffed angrily, the exhalation causing the strands of frizzy curls to lift upward for a moment as she grumbled something incoherent, scribbling out some words from her parchment. Raising a bemused eyebrow, Tom leaned closer to her from where he sat beside her on the table and raised a hand, pushing the loose hair behind her ears. Startled, as though she had forgotten she wasn’t alone, she looked to Tom, her cheeks tinging pink from embarrassment.

“Oh...sorry. I'm just feeling...frustrated,” she ground out, sighing in defeat as she laid her quill down and rose a hand to the bridge of her nose. “I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think all this studying is starting to burn me out,” she said with a sarcastic air. They- as well as most of the student body- had begun their studies to prepare for the mid-semester exams that would take place just before the Holiday break, and Hermione had been one of the more enthused of the lot.
“You? Burnt out from studying? In other news, an article in the Daily Prophet reported that Hell has mysteriously froze over,” he said, returning his gaze to his open notebook. He smirked when she huffed, muttering something rude below her breath. After a moment, when he did not hear the tell-tale sound of her quill scratching against parchment, he added, “Perhaps some chocolate will perk you up.”

She scoffed. “Chocolate is always the answer to you, isn't it? Kind of funny, actually. Reminds me of someone I used to know,” she said, sounding rather sad all of a sudden.

“That was a genuine suggestion, Hermione. Didn't Crane buy you some yesterday to thank you for your assistance in tutoring him?”

She blinked. “Oh. Yes actually.” She bent downwards, reaching to her bag that was deposited in between her and Tom and producing a nicely packaged box with dark blue foil wrapped around it, a Honeydukes label over the flaps of it. She tore into it, the sound crinkling rather loudly in the library. Popping open the lid to the box she produced a chocolate and settled it onto her tongue, extending the chocolates in his direction. “Want some?”

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I actually have to get going. Priscilla and I were going to meet up to discuss the schedule for this week, then we have a prefect meeting.” She shrugged, closing the box and dropping carelessly down on top of her school bag, turning her attention back to her schoolwork.

“Have fun. Parkinson seems like a real charmer. Tell Joshua I said hi,” she said, snorting in an unladylike manner at the mention of her roommate and Slytherin Prefect.

He only chuckled at her, bending over to grab his own bag that was settled firmly beside hers. He stood after a second, slinging it over his shoulder and turning to her. “As always, it was a pleasure to study with you and watch you assault a table in rage, but I have other matter to attend to. I'll see you later,” he said.

She heard him leave, the rustle of his robes and his gradually softening footsteps, but did not turn around or even look up at him. She was too focused on the practice exam Professor Hyder had handed out, the entire parchment paper written in runes. It wasn't that translating runes were necessarily hard for her, she had become rather fluent in such a task if she did say so herself. However, being that it was an Advanced Class, they had moved on from simple transliterations and the history of the characters and were now studying Runic spells, something she wasn't entirely familiar with. She had, of course, taken this very class back in her own time, but had never actually taken the final exams, the school shutting down early after the Death Eaters invaded the castle. After that, she had never returned, camping around the English countryside as they hunted the Horcruxes. It was the one subject she had never felt fully confident in, as she now excelled at Defense Against the Dark Arts thanks to her experience, and she was eager to learn the subject in its entirety.

Runic magic was, while incredibly exhausting on your magical reserves, the most powerful form of magic, and she would do well to master it.

“Ugh!” she growled, angrily scratching out her calculations on a spare piece of paper as she slapped the surface of the table. No, no...that answer wasn't right. The Thorisaz was reversed, altering the meaning in the spell. What was she thinking working with the non-reversed meaning of it?

Her elbows slid further across the table as she fist her hands into her hair, grabbing clumps of it at the roots in thought.

“Forgot my Potions book.”
She jumped, her knees knocking into the underside of the table as she swiveled around in her chair to face Tom, his eyebrows raised and a slight smirk tugging on his lips. Huffing something about making him wear bell, she looked over across the table and, finding his copy of Advanced Potionmaking, leaned over to grab it.

“Here,” she said, holding it over her shoulder as she continued to glare at her test, looking as though she wouldn't mind if it burst into flames at the moment. He took several seconds before grabbing hold of it, his robes rustling noisily behind her and then his bag, as he added the forgotten book to it. When the noises ceased, she felt his hands on her shoulders as he leaned over her, the back of her head pressing into his lower torso. After a second, he extended a hand and pointed to the current problem she was working on.

“You were right, actually, using Thurisaz. It's not a curse, it's a counter curse. I daresay using a reversal of that rune would make the entire spell a little redundant,” he said, pulling his hand back to rest on her shoulder as she sat staring at the rune in question, gasping when she realized he was correct.

“Oh...bloody hell!” she mumbled, huffing. With an aggravated groan, she covered her face in her hands. “The entire section is about counter curses, isn't it? And I've done them all as curses so far.” She sounded thoroughly distraught, her voice wavering as though she were only moments away from a neurotic bout and was attempting- failing- to keep herself calm.

Tom chewed his lip, clearly not wanting to tell her that yes, the past hour and a half she had spent on five problems was for naught, as she had misinterpreted them. When he said nothing, but began kneading his fingers over her shoulders as if he were trying to relax her, she let out a breathy, sardonic sounding laugh.

“I guess I should thank you,” she mumbled, though the way she said it suggested otherwise. Yes, he had helped her figure out the problem and had prevented her from handing in a failing practice test. But for the love of Merlin! An hour and a half- wasted! She wanted to cry, her eyes burning as she pressed the heel of her palm to them.

“Well, I've really got to get going,” Tom said finally, sounding somewhat nervous. She had to laugh at that, finding it rather amusing. He may be the Dark Lord, but she was the Gryffindor Know-It-All extraordinaire- who had just muddled up her entire study- on the verge of a breakdown. Her laughter was cut short when he spoke again. “I'll see you at Dinner?”

She shook her head. “No, I have too much work.”

“Well, at least make sure you sneak into the kitchens for some food. You won't do any good in your classes if you pass out,” he said, and she stifled a laugh, her shoulders shaking beneath his warm hands. He was rather concerned about whether or not she was eating, it seemed, and she couldn't help but appreciate the humor in it.

“I was going to stop by and visit my cousin tonight. I'm sure we'll have something to eat,” she said. His hands pulled away, returning to his side as he stepped back. “Alright. If I don't see you until tomorrow then, sleep well, Hermione. Don't underestimate the value of a good night's rest,” he said, the concern his voice sounding so genuine that she actually looked up at him, finally tearing her eyes away from her test.

He was looking at her with what indeed appeared to be worry, his brows knitted somewhat and his large blue eyes looking soft and bright. He truly was handsome, she thought, admonishing herself almost immediately after the appraisal came into her mind. This was Lord Voldemort, not some
kindhearted friend of hers with a strong jaw and perfectly sculpted visage. No matter how good-looking he may be, she knew it was all only a false pretense to what lay beneath, a pretty package for a horrid gift. No amount of high cheekbones and soft looking dark hair could make her overlook the fact that beneath it all he was distorted beyond belief, twisted and deranged and holding only part of a soul, a fractured one that he himself had separated. Had pried apart with his own two hands in the vile act of creating a horcrux. With this in mind, she spun around in her chair, her heart beat growing obnoxiously loud.

“Thank you,” she forced herself to say. He lingered behind her for only a moment longer before turning, leaving her alone once more.

Tom had become a great source of stress for her lately. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how friendly he seemed and how much time he spent with her, he seemed entirely unwilling to welcome her into his meetings with the other boys. Christmas was just around the corner, and from there the end of the year would be fast approaching. If she did not get herself into his inner circle soon, she would consider that she had, in fact failed. That Dumbledore was wrong. She was not the right person for the task, no matter how levelheaded she was, how intelligent and powerful she was. She was just not of interest to him, and the very idea of it caused a terrible ache in her chest.

All of this would be for nothing if he did not want her. She would be stuck, out of time and out of place, and forced to relive the war that had nearly killed her the first go around. She was so pressurized, bound to explode anytime like an active grenade. Her studies became, as they often did, her solace. They grounded her, and helped her think and relax, even if she had wasted hours solving the problems incorrectly. She dove head first into them, hoping that would provide a suitable distraction from the gnawing sense of failure that threatened to consume her more and more everyday as Tom continued to hold her at arm's length.

And at the end of the night, when she was alone with her thoughts, her regrets and her worries and the ghosts of her past- the memory of everyone she knew and loved, dead- she would feel a knot wind itself in her chest like a bundle of nerves and everything she had done wrong. They were dead and would always be dead if she did not succeed.

Dreamless Sleep potion had become a nightly routine, and she figured that it always would be.

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“I can't believe I'm doing this,” Lilura Black muttered below her breath and between her heated exchange with Randolf Nott, the handsome boy pressing her firmly against the wall, his hips holding her place as he assaulted her lips, nipping playfully at them. Her fingers ran through the golden blond hair, gripping tightly at the roots as her bruised lips pressed against his. Suddenly, he pulled away and she moaned at the loss of contact.

“Shall we...?” he said, indicating with his eyes to the door that stood to the right of them. He moved away from her, allowing her to access the door. She did so without hesitation, twisting the knob and opening the door to reveal the Sixth Year Girls' dormitories. Nott walked in, finding it to be in varying degrees of organized and messy, some of the green curtains surrounding the bed tossed aside messily, revealing rumpled bed sheets and comforters while other were firmly closed and hiding the contents behind them. Piles of clothes and robes sat to the side of several beds, two trunks at the foot of them open and their contents displayed to the room.

“My bed's the one over there,” she said, gesturing to the one in the center. The trunk in front of it was closed, but what looked like the arm of a jumper was hanging out from it, caught between the lid of it. The posters of the bed were open, but the pillows and blanket were arranged rather neatly, the silver sheets bright against the dark wooden bed. “I'm going to go to the lavatory real quick, alright?
I'll be right back,” she said, heading towards a small door to the left.

When she disappeared behind the door, he wasted no time in heading for the bed to the right, the neat looking one with a brand new, school issue trunk, the one often given to muggleborns who did not have one before coming to Hogwarts. Pulling aside the silk curtains to look into the neatly made bed, he smiled, his shoulders sagging in relief at the folded maroon sweater laying atop it, the one Hermione often wore to bed. The one she wore when she was feeling particularly sad or homesick he had noticed. Riddle had told them that the sweater used to belong to a friend of hers, one who died during the war, when they had inquired about it, finding the large golden G odd and confusing. The bed smelt like her, he noted. The vanilla smell of her shampoo and burnt tea leaves, like well-aged books and ink.

Pulling his wand from his robes, Nott swished it through the air, the trunk popping open and the drawers to the bedside table sliding out with a clunking sound. It didn't take him long to find it, the velvet bag of Dreamless Sleep nestled in the bottom drawer of it.

Reaching inside his schoolbag, he pulled out an identical looking satchel of potions, the vials within it clinking together as he swapped the two out, depositing the slightly lighter one from her drawer into his schoolbag. Taking a quick, final peak to make sure that it looked just as it had before he disrupted the contents, he closed the drawer.

“That's not my bed.”

Turning around, he saw that Lilura had stepped out from the lavatory, her gray jumper removed as she stood before him in only a white undershirt, the hem falling to the top of her bare thigh. Feigning surprise and embarrassment, he looked at Hermione's bed with heated cheeks. “Oh...I must've...well, that's humiliating,” he said, smiling a crooked smile in the hopes that she would not press him further, leave it be and accept it as a mistake.

“Why were you going through the drawers?”

Thinking quickly and donning what he hoped appeared to be a charming grin, doing his best to mimic the one he had seen Riddle use often enough, he said, “Even more embarrassing, I'm afraid. I suppose you could say I wanted to get to know you a little better.” He winked then, laughing as he added, “But I'm afraid I accidentally got to know your roommate a little better instead.”

She smiled then, believing the lie as she laughed with him. “Oh, well that you did. Now, close those drawers so that Hermione doesn't have a fit and come join me over here,” she said, her voice wrought with anticipation, coy and sweet as she moved over to her bed, seating herself on the mattress so that her legs dangled over the side.

He grinned, flicking his wand through the air once more and filling the room with a chorus of snapping drawers and thudding trunk lids. Taking several long bounds, he now stood before her, working himself so that he was between her legs, one on either side of him. He might as well treat himself, he thought, his task completed just as he had promised Riddle it would be. The witch before him was truly stunning, and he found her nervous lip biting and glances to the door to be quite endearing. He lowered his head, pressing his lips against her hairline.

“Don't worry, Love. Everyone is spending the last day off out and about, and all the Prefects and Heads are at their weekly meeting. No one will catch us,” he assured her. He began kissing her once more, softly at first, dragging his fingertips lazily over her bare arms.

Perhaps that was his biggest difference from Tom Riddle, the fact that he would enjoy someone's company far beyond their use to him. Riddle would have left, having gotten what he wanted. But
Nott would enjoy the spoils of his victory. The potions were exchanged, he had used Lilura to help him sneak into the rooms which would only open to a girl's touch. He had succeeded, and now, as he lifted the shirt above her head to see her in all her beauty, he would reward himself.

There were many similarities between him and Riddle. Both were intelligent, both were incredibly good looking and excellent charmers. They could be manipulative and cunning, and no one was ever the wiser to it, too friendly were the boys. But Riddle...well, Nott would be lying if he said there wasn't something a little off about him. He took everything to a previously unexplored level, was more calculative than any man he had ever known. He could be the sweetest boy one minute, winning over students and teachers alike, and just like that, he would switch, turning from wizard to monster in no time at all.

It was frightening, and he had been terribly alarmed when he had first seen the switch, during their fourth year of Hogwarts. Up until that moment, Riddle had been nothing but the silver tongued gentleman he often pretended to be, and like fools they all believed it to be his true persona, unaware of what lurked within. They had been drawn to him, like moths to a flame. In a world that was slowly becoming increasingly sympathetic to muggles and muggleborns, that was calling Grindelwald a bigoted threat to the Wizarding World, here came this boy. This boy with royal blue eyes and alabaster skin, who spoke to their fears, who knew exactly what to say. It started easily enough, with eleven year old Riddle discussing how unfair it all was, that Purebloods were being forced to step aside for these lesser beings, the false wizards with stolen magic. The foundation of their friendship was lain, with Pureblood pride and entitlement, with the need to make magic pure and clean again.

From there it grew, with twelve year old Riddle discussing a world, a different and better world, where Purebloods were in their proper place, the throne to a kingdom of lesser beings, coexisting with the muggleborns and muggles but still unequivocally better than them. The friendship continued to be built on this dream, this fantasy.

But it gradually, without anyone of them becoming aware to it, took a suddenly devious turn. The world went from being a Utopian like ecosystem, to a dictatorship. Riddle at the top of it, unquestioned and unopposed. Of course, the world could not run from the law of one man, and there would be other leaders, just below him. Those roles would be held by whoever he saw most fit, and would essentially be kings to rule over their own kingdom. Everyone else? It had never been said, but it was implied. Wherever the chips may fall was the term he used to describe the fate of those unlucky or stupid enough to not follow him to the edge of the world.

Despite the less than equal roles they had originally been promised, it still sounded ideal. They would still be wealthier than they could imagine, have more control than ever thought possible, and would once again be respected for their blood status. As the talks of such a world turned into plans of actions, to plots and schemes to set it into motion, Riddle changed. He tolerated less from them, he grew angrier at their failings. It became startlingly clear that it wasn't an ambitious dream for him, that it was a goal. One he hoped to attain and one that he would do anything within his power to make happen. And his power was ever expansive, they soon learned. They weren't children, playing pretend with their friend anymore. They were men, devising a plot for new world order under their leader.

If any of the boys had wanted to end their friendship with the devious Slytherin, they never did, too terrified were they to risk such a thing.

Two years had gone by since that first incident, the one that had made them realize there was more to Riddle than they could ever imagine, that he was capable of far more than they knew. The one that had resulted in Mulciber residing in the Hospital Wing for a week- an incident that had, since
occurring gone unspoken between them. It was never to be mentioned, but it was often thought of. Nott was deathly frightened of Riddle, but he was also smart. He knew the only way to hold his head above water, to not drown in the slowly oncoming tide, was to stay on good terms with the boy. He could play the game just as good- if not better- than anyone else could, and he would ensure that, should the world Riddle hoped for come to fruition, he would be the next in command, just below the megalomaniac he was certain the boy was. He could live with second place, he decided. Anything was better than last.

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Hermione pulled her exhausted body onto her bed, sliding between the comforter and sheets. She did not see Riddle again for the rest of the evening, something she was thankful for. After several more hours of finishing her Rune test, working well pass supper, she had joined Dumbledore in his office for some tea and sandwiches.

'It's strange, how different and similar he is,' she thought as she grabbed a vial of Dreamless Sleep from the bottom drawer. Time made a large impact on the wizard she had considered a friend and mentor, and while she certainly enjoyed the companionship and assistance of the younger version, he was a rather painful remainder that this was not the decade she had known, the people she had known. This Dumbledore...well, he was less trusting. There was a hardness to his eyes that had diminished by the time she met him, and he regarded her cautiously, often poking around in her head without permission or even telling her he was doing so. It irked her, the feeling of having her privacy invaded, but she tried not to let it get to her. She supposed that, if she were him, she would be just as weary. He had no reason to trust her, none at all, but he did, as much as he could.

So she allowed him access to her mind, knowing she had nothing to hide from him. 'I wonder what had happened to make him so distrustful. And what will happen between now and when I knew him to make him the Dumbledore of my time,' she thought, uncorking the vial and bringing the potion to her lips. Dumbledore was enigma, perhaps more so than Tom Riddle was, and she could only hope that he would let her in enough so that she could become privy to his inner workings. He was, after all, a brilliant man, and she could learn much from him.

She held the empty vial away from her, eyeing it slightly. It tasted a little...different than usual. A little bit sour, with a tangy sweetness. But it was subtle, and she wasn't even certain if the problem was that the flavor was off or if she had simply never noticed it before. It didn't taste bad, necessarily, and in fact tasted like something rather familiar to her, something she thought she might have enjoyed if only she could place it.

However, it was forgotten as she yawned, her mouth stretching into a wide 'o' shape as she stretched on her bed. It felt wonderful to close her eyes, even if she did still see runic symbols swimming in her vision from all her studying. She was asleep within seconds, the taste of apples on her lips.

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His kisses burned her flesh, the searing press of his lips to her shoulders like fire as her eyes fluttered close at the sensation. Hands were sliding up and down her side, the fingertips brushing along her naked body delicately, the whisper of a touch. Her skin was alive with the feeling, as though she had never in life been touched by another in such a way, that no one had ever explored her body with such art and precision. She felt as though she were being worshiped, as though she were the strong and sensual Goddess Aphrodite. She was desire and lust, beauty and romance.

He raised his head, his stream of kisses coming to an unfortunate end, and Hermione rolled her head forward, slowly opening her eyes to meet his dark blue ones. “Tom?” she asked, her voice heightening in surprise and fear. She had not been expecting him to be the one so gently caressing
her skin, and was suddenly pulling away, an arm wrapping around her chest to properly cover herself.

He smirked at her, reaching a hand out and pulling her back to him so that she was pressed flush against him. “Now, now, Love,” he cooed, his lips brushing softly along her jawline. “You and I both know you don’t want to do that.” As if in response to his words, she sighed and moaned softly as he descended down to her neck, nipping at her skin. Her back arched, pressing further against him as she was overcome by sensations, her skin pleasantly burning with the contact.

He was Ares, God of War. Raw and uncontrollably violent, impassioned and untamed. Their union was a sin, an affair that would bring about the fall of Gods, but she did not care, enjoying only the moment in which she was currently in.

Hermione awoke from her dream with a start, her heart accelerating as it beat against her rib cage it seemed, so powerful was each pump of it. Her breath was coming out in short pants, the erotic dream she had fantasized forgotten as she felt decidedly and horrendously out of sorts.

She kicked the covers away from her, suddenly overwhelmingly hot. Her pajamas- a pair of cotton shorts and a plain shirt, were clinging to her body from sweat, her hair a mass of frizz. She twisted around, the bed sheets shifting, as she sought for a more comfortable position. But none would come, and she wretched herself into a sitting position, placing her hand over her heart which was still pounding violently in her chest. Her entire body was on edge, pulsing with each beat of her heart as blood circulated throughout her, her vision slow and blurring as the noises around her seemed muffled and distant. There was a great pressure wrapping around her head, but not painfully so, and she slowly pushed the curtains surrounding her bed apart, pressing her bare feet to the cold floor.

As she stood, swooning somewhat and having to reach a hand out to support herself, grasping at the mattress, she was filled with a powerful need to be close to the handsome Slytherin boy, the one who had plagued her dreams: Tom Riddle.

The man of many names and non-names. Tom Marvolo Riddle Junior, in form. Tom. Riddle. Dark Lord. Lord Voldemort. You-Know-Who. For someone who was also known as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, he sure did have quite a many moniker. Yet each one of them sent a shiver of delight down her spine, made her knees feel weak. And standing in the darkened room of the dormitory, surrounded by the sounds of snoring from the two girls who had not quite mastered silencing charms yet, she said them all aloud, exploring the shape her lips made when she said them, counting the syllables and the way her tongue moved with them. Tongue taps to the roof of her mouth, to her teeth. She tasted the sound of each name, enjoying the way saying them felt like a sin. She decided Dark Lord tasted best, decadent and forbidden, and she said it several times over, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright.

Names were a funny thing, she decided. They could evoke fear or hatred, longing or love. And to her vague surprise, tonight, his many names evoked the latter, her heart fluttering as if it had grown wings and taken off, flying throughout her torso. She was no longer satisfied with just saying his name to silence, and with a wide and giddy grin, she padded across the room and to the large chamber door.

When she entered the hallway, she found the Common Room towards the end still filled with light, all of her senses telling her that a fire was still lit. If she were not so distracted, she might have fancied it odd that someone was still out and about in the Common Room, on a Sunday evening this late night at night. But she had only one thing on her mind, and as she entered the large communal space, she nearly squealed with joy that the very man invading her thoughts was the one occupying the space.
Tom was sitting in the window seat of one of the many large, cathedral style casements, his back pressed against the glass that provided a barrier between him and lake, the green glow it cast on him making him look seductively sinister. Her breath was caught in her throat as she raked her eyes over him, wondering how on earth she had gone so long without acknowledging- truly appreciating- just how beautiful he was. The image of him before her, watching as he slowly lifted his head at her presence, brought her back to the images of her dream and she blushed. It had felt so real, so vivid, that for a moment she had to consider if it was. But alas, much to her disappointment, she decided it was not real. She did not run her hands through his dark and luxuriant locks, caressed his chiseled jaw. But Merlin, did she want to.

“Hermione,” he purred, smirking in a way that suggested he was not surprised to see her, that he was in fact expecting her.

If she had thought his name sounded wonderful on her tongue, there weren't any words to describe the way hers sounded on his. The sound of it, the way he drew out the 'e' at the end ever so slightly, the way the first part of it sounded deeper than the others. It was distinctly his own way of saying it, and in the instant she knew that it would be the best way to say it, the way she would say it from now. Her name sounded perfected in his mouth. It sounded positively deadly, and yet she wanted more, wanted to drown in it. It would be a pleasant way to go she decided, and like the Lady of Shallot she would have a smile on her face.

“Couldn't sleep?” he asked, chuckling slightly as if he had told a joke.

She smiled, hummed slightly as she moved over to him. “Had a dream, actually. About you,” she said, suddenly feeling emboldened as she sat beside him, the heat of him pressing into his side.

“Come closer,” he beckoned, and she happily obliged, sliding under the arm that he wrapped around her. Without hesitation, she wrapped her own arms tight around his waist, finding him to be skinnier than she thought, the multiple layers of his uniform (she was beginning to suspect he slept in it) making him appear bulkier than he was. She pressed her body tight against his own and resting her head on his chest, she breathed deeply, enjoying the way he smelt. She nuzzled further into him, sighing at how nice it was to be in his arms. She stifled another giggle, imagining herself speaking to her pretend friend once more. 'Voldemort is surprisingly nice to snuggle. He smells warm and earthy, like sandalwood, and it's very pleasant, I assure you.'

She heard him chuckle, the sound vibrating throughout his body. “Good girl,” he cooed.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she knew she should have felt indignant. She should have been furious that he commanded her like a house elf, and that she listened. But her protests were silenced, suddenly fascinated by the sound of his heartbeat against her ear.

“I can hear your heart,” she said, her voice sounding small and innocent. “It reminds me of when you hold a seashell to your ear, and you can hear the ocean in it. Well, it's not the ocean, just a magnification of the sound of your blood in your head, but it sounds sort of like the waves. My dad told me once that the sound was actually sea monsters, and that if I wasn't careful they would come out through the shell and eat me. It terrified me so much, I cried for the rest of the day at the beach. My mum was so mad at him for it, she blamed him for any trauma I might have had of water after.” She paused, thinking for a second before she giggled and added, “If I wasn't terrified of water then, I certainly would have been after my fourth year when some brilliant wizard thought it a good idea to tie a bunch of us down in the lake for entertainment.”

She could have sworn she heard his heart skip a beat.

“What are you-"
She interrupted him however, unable to stop the stream of words from leaving her mouth. It was as though he had summoned her to speak and tell him everything she could, until she hadn't anything left. “It's alright, Viktor got me in time. Ronald was terribly angry about that, the prat,” she spat out, shaking her head in a lofty manner.

He sat up straighter now, ignoring the soft mew of protest Hermione made as he shifted their position. His body was practically thrumming with excitement, his pulse quickening as he was unable to contain his wide, greedy eyed look, licking his lips. She had never spoken of her life before Hogwarts, aside from occasional moments when she was feeling vulnerable. And even then, they were only fragments of her life, words clipped from her story that revealed only snippets. And now here she was, practically laying it all out for him, disjointed tangents that he would be sure to tie together, in time.

He was beginning to feel tremendous pride for creating this magnificent potion.

“I can't seem to stop talking,” she said, sounding far off. Distant. “Ronald had a word for this...something vulgar. What was it again? Ah, yes. Word vomit. A colorful term, I think, but then again Ron was never one to bother with tact. It irritated me to no end but a part of me found it a little endearing, I suppose. He always had this flustered little smile whenever he said something awful like that and I couldn't help but to love it,” she confessed, sighing at the memory of her friend, a small smile on her lips. “I haven't really thought of him a lot. I'm terrible for that, aren't I? I have a lot on my mind but I...I miss him.”

Tom furrowed his brows a bit, his nostrils flaring as he opened his mouth to say something, to ask her about this Ronald and what he had meant to her, when he caught something out of the corner of his eyes. He squinted, looking at the soft flesh of her arm, the underside pressed flat on his chest. “Give me your arm,” he said, grabbing hold of her wrist and pulling it out so the arm was stretched out in front of him. Scrawled in ugly and barely healed scars was the word mudblood, looking sloppy and a ghastly color of maroon against her pale skin. He cocked his head to the side, looking at the word questioningly, something in his stomach dropping. Had Dolohov been correct all along? Had this witch somehow deceived him, pretending to be something she wasn't? He heard her breath heighten in pain as he gripped tighter around her wrist, his nails digging into her hand.

Rage was building in him, faster than he had ever experienced before. He did not dare think of what he might he do if learned that this woman- the one he dreamt of, lusted after, respected!- was revealed to be a filthy little mudblood. Surely, he would destroy her. Any and all rational thought would abandon him, and he was certain he would kill her right here, surrounded by his fellow students who slumbered only meters away. He would wrap his hands around her thin neck and squeeze, he would count how long it took for her to stop to fighting, to lose consciousness. Count how long it would take her to die.

“Tom...please...hurts,” she said, her shaking voice stirring him from his thoughts that were rapidly becoming more violent, more seething. He ignored her, feeling her hand twist in his hold as she tried to pull her arm away, the circulation being disrupted by his fingers. With his other hand, he reached out to her arm, the tips of his fingers grazing the raised surface of the slur gently, a direct opposition to the rough way he handled her with his other hand.

She gritted in pain, exhaling sharply at the touch, and her eyes- which had become glassy from the effects of the potion- seemed to sharpen, darting from his face and then to the hideous scar, some sort of clarity overcoming her. Panic seemed to fill her, her chest rising and falling heavily as she shook her head. “No, no, Tom, it's not what it looks like,” she said, her voice shaking as she fought against him. Fought against herself and the desire she felt to tell him the truth, to please him with the
knowledge she otherwise deprived him of.

“What is it then?” he asked, his voice so cold that she let out a gasp, her body shaking involuntarily. It was so similar to the high pitched one Voldemort spoke with that her hair stood on end, gooseflesh prickling her skin. She did not know what to do, did not know whether to pull away and run or attempt to appease him, plead with him to not be angry with her anymore. Whatever he had done to her, he had made her feel a sense of undying devotion, a driving need to please him and make him happy at whatever the cost, to delight in his touch and his beauty. Her stomach was twisting into disgusted knots, from her fear that he had discovered the scar she would normally hide and from her own thoughts. The traitorous thoughts that told her to do anything for him.

“If you won't tell me,” he said, closing his eyes for a moment as he attempted to reign in his anger, breathing deeply. “Then I want you to show me.” Releasing hold of her hand- her fingers spreading in relief- he grabbed hold of her, pulling her onto his lap before cupping her face in his hands, holding her firmly in place.

She understood immediately what he meant by that, and to her horror, she allowed him into her mind, her mental wards dissolving in place as he broke through with unnecessary force. She winced and struggled, trying to pull away as her head felt like it were being split in two.

“You have nothing to hide from him. He wants to know, and you should show him. You showed Dumbledore without a problem,’ a voice within her head cooed above the chaos and pain, and, knowing she could not fight against his intrusion or her need to please him, she showed him anything and everything.
Chapter Eleven: Tell You My Sins

'...I will tell you my sins, so you can sharpen your knife'
-Hozier, Take Me To Church

Severus Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose in exasperation, snarling as Hermione held her head in her hands. “You're as bad as Potter!” he grumbled under his breath, fixing her with a steely look.

Hermione, swaying where she stood as a result of the excessive amounts of alcohol and veritaserum Snape had given her, frowned. “I can't! I already told you my occlumency was decent at best and you expect me to defend against the barbaric way you're entering my mind while drunk and drugged?” she snapped back, feeling her patience with the man at the end of its rope. She was quite certain the feeling was mutual.

Feigning pity, Snape rolled his eyes. “Oh yes, because I'm sure the Dark Lord won't really try to get into your mind at all when met with some resistance and when you kindly explain to him your insecurities regarding it,” he hissed at her, his voice dripping with sarcasm. After a moment in which he composed himself, breathing deeply through his nose and pinching his eyes shut, he added, “You're going about it wrong anyway.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Watch your cheek! Have you ever heard of the muggle expression that everything is best hidden in plain sight?” he asked, gritting his teeth as though it took all his effort to not end the session, tell her she was on her own.

She looked at him pointedly. “Yes?”

“This isn't ideal as it can be incredibly difficult to maintain- not to mention excruciating under the right circumstances- but if you ever think, for even the slightest second that your mental wards aren't going to withstand the Dark Lord, don't bother with them,” he advised, snickering as her eyebrows shot upwards, making her look quite comical.

When he did not add anything further, she finally asked, “I...what? What good would that do?”

“Don't waste your time and magic hiding them when he'll break through eventually. Instead, set about altering them as best you can. Change names, faces, little details to fit in better with your cover story. Make sure the clothing people are wearing in your memories is altered to resemble the fashion of the thirties and forties, change Potters name and give him a much needed makeover. But most importantly-” he said, his tone serious and forgoing any malice he had a moment ago. “-Most importantly, change the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters to something less familiar to him. Understood?”

She chewed her lip, nodding. “I just...don't know if I'm right for this-”

But he didn't let her finish, raising his wand to point it between her eyes as he yelled “Legillimens!” and began to tear through her memories as she frantically tried to alter them.

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When he entered her mind, clawing his way through with the ferocity normally reserved for a rabid animal, it felt as though he were falling over the edge of some cliff, as though he were being tossed
about by shuddering wind and thundering waves as he crashed through water. At first, he saw only darkness, surrounded by a pervading nothingness. He nearly growled in anger, believing his potion to have failed him, when he heard it, the sound of crying.

The noises came to him before the images, the sound of a beach and whipping wind, children laughing in the distance and birds cawing loudly. And the crying, the loud and blubbering crying of a little girl. And suddenly, the little girl was standing before him, her hair stringy and wet from the salt water as it clung to her head. She was very young, perhaps four years old, and was standing in front of a woman who he believed to be her mother. She had straight brown hair, neatly pulled into a braid that was swept to one side. She was wearing a modest bathing suit, navy blue and covering her entire torso, with thick straps over the shoulders and the hem of the legs coming to the top of her thigh. She had the same large brown eyes as her daughter, the same plump lower lip with a disproportionately thin upper lip.

Hermione's mother was frowning as she picked the crying girl up in her arms, granules of sand falling off her as she burrowed her head into her mother's neck. “H-he said that...the mon...monsters are gonna get me!” she cried, the words broken between her sobs.

She rubbed circles along her back, attempting to soothe her. “Sweetie, monsters aren't real, you know that. Daddy was just playing pretend,” she said, but as she mentioned the father, her brown eyes looked up and behind Tom, glaring sharply. Turning around, he saw who must have been Hermione's father, his dark blond hair tousled from the wind and the curls weighed down from salt, frizzy in the humidity. He looked apologetic from behind his large spectacles, holding a curved and luminescent seashell in his hand.

His contrite countenance did nothing to lessen his wife's anger, and a fierceness glowed in her eyes as she continued to lovingly hum to Hermione, the sobbing growing softer. It was almost laughable, how similar they looked in this moment, and he wondered if she knew just how much she looked like her mother, in appearance and spirit.

The memory began to fade, the grit in the air and smell of water moving with it as he moved forward in her head, and he found himself standing in a lovely garden. Neatly trimmed rose bushes, painted in yellows and pinks and reds, made a trail at his feet, a cobblestone path snaking through. The path ended at a picturesque wooden arch, the sides of it a light colored trellis, and it spilled out into a fenced in backyard, small and contained with a deck and little patch of grass. Hermione, a little older now, was sitting just beside one of the many rose bushes, giggling loudly. Her back was to him, and Tom had to walk forward so that he stood directly behind her, craning his neck to see what was making her laugh so much.

She was plucking off the silken rose petals, ripping them harshly from the center of the flower, and releasing them, laughing when they flew in the air instead of falling, as if riding on the back of an imaginary breeze. The petals fluttered, they were like wings to an undiscovered creature. They floated around her head, suspending in the air, and some got lost in her wild and knotted mane, others tickling against her, her nose bunching up as one brushed against her cheek.

The stems to about five roses sat at her feet, and her hands were scratched pink and white from the thorns. But they did not stop her, too amazed was she by her magic and the flying petals that she seemed not the slightest bit concerned about it.

The sound of a door sliding open broke her concentration, and the petals all dropped at once as she looked up to the deck, her mother coming out from within the brick townhouse.

“Hermione, dear, your-”
The little girl stood up quickly, the wrinkled skirt of her sundress not quite falling correctly, as she tried to hide the ripped flowers, looking quite guilty. But she was not quick enough, and her mother groaned, making an exasperated expression. “We've talked about this, Hermione,” she said, a confusing mix of angry and disappointed. “And my roses! Ugh- you've ruined them. Why would you do that?”

She chewed her lip. “The petals were flying and they looked like butterflies-”

“No!” her mother hissed sharply, stooping down to look at the patchy rose bushes. “No, Hermione, they were not flying. They don't fly. Why do you insist on doing this? They're very expensive.” She was sighing. She rose a hand, rubbing her temples in exhaustion. “You're dress is covered in grass stains and your father's guests will be here soon...get upstairs and change into something nice. Wash your hands too- they're positively filthy from tearing up my flowers.”

Looking properly admonished, Hermione nodded, slowly moving towards the house, her shoulders slumped.

“And don't,” her mother started as she began to pick up the remains from her daughter's play, “tell anyone about the flying petals. Lying will not be tolerated in this family.”

“But I wasn't lying!” she called back, looking quite distraught at the accusation.

“Enough!” the mother snapped, her voice wavering with desperation, as though she had this fight too many times. “Just...enough, Hermione.” The last sentence sounded defeated, broken, and the girl just sighed, nodding obediently as she turned around and disappeared into the house.

The memories went on in like manner, and he tried to move quickly through the more banal ones. Ones of Hermione experimenting with her magic, locked within rooms and closets. Spending lazy days lounging on a sofa as her father read books to her aloud, a smile permanently on her face. Of children teasing her horrendously at a muggle school, her plump cheeks ruddy with tears. Taunts of freak, ugly and horrid. Hands knocking her books from her grasp, feet kicking them away. He found that those memories caused an unpleasant emotion to swell inside him, and he tried to hurry through them, not quite able to put proper words to it.

He knew what it was like, being mocked because your peers didn't understand you. Because you were special and different and better, and they were cruel and wretched in their jealousy. The children at the orphanage had been the same, and he had, quite literally, silenced them. But Hermione did not, instead the young girl kept her chin high and would try to move beyond the students, a look of determination on her young face.

He passed through her older memories, of her attending the second Wizarding school within Bulgaria, a more modest and poorer school that allowed entrance to young girls, unlike Durmstrang. He saw her meeting her two friends, the Ronald she had mentioned earlier and another boy named Henry. He saw her encouraging them, rather forcefully, to study. Spending holidays with them in a warm and crooked little house, saw them laughing together over meals and homework assignments.

For the most part, the memories of her younger years were uneventful, and he flicked through, bored. There were memories of holidays and birthdays, more pleasant ones of her mother and father. Memories of her delving into magic- there was a particularly amusing one of her instructing Ronald on the proper way to perform a wingardium leviosa charm, something that the boy seemed less than thrilled with.

There were, of course, several moments that he found quite alarming, or ones that stood out to him, and he found himself slowing down through his perusal, examining them closer.
Hermione standing beside Henry as she raised her hands to her mouth, cupping them to form a circle as she howled into the night, drawing the attentions of a fierce looking werewolf. Her running through the woods and branches whipping at her face and body, snagging onto her jumper.

She was dancing, swinging around the ballroom in the arms of someone who spoke in a strong Bulgarian accent, his head dipping down to whisper into her ear. She would beam up at him, looking even more radiant with pink tinted cheeks and glossed lips, her hair pulled into a simple plait and cascading down her back in loose and perfect ringlets. She was stunning, Tom thought, as she threw her head back to laugh at something the handsome boy with the strong jaw had said. The familiar ringing sound seemed to absorb the sound of the party, the cheers and laughter of the other students become silent to her voice.

A silver otter, made entirely of air and mist, danced around her as she laughed, looking a cross between exhausted and relieved and happy- oh so happy that she had finally succeeded. Her laughter only grew when a silver dog- a terrier- began chasing the otter, barking voicelessly as she looked at Ronald with a knowing grin, the boy ducking his head as his ears tinged maroon.

She was lying, lying to a hideous witch with a haggard face, a witch threatening to use any means necessary to get information from Henry.

She was running through an unidentifiable enclosed area, the sound of her footsteps ricocheting off the large marbled walls, her breath hitching as it echoed around her. Her face was scratched and bloodied, bruising beginning to appear below her left eye as bands of light shot around her, spells heating the room with magic and making the air crackle. Her wand was raised, and she was fighting, her spells joining the bedlam of the others, when suddenly she was hit.

She let out a gasp, her eyes widening, before she fell to the ground, her body flopping as her shirt ripped open. Deep crimson spilled forth, her blood staining her clothing and looking unnaturally bright against her gray jumper. The memory faded as she lost consciousness.

She was surrounded by men, their cloaks dark as midnight and patches sewn onto their chest, patches that Tom knew bore the insignia of Grindelwald- a golden circle within a triangle, a line drawn through the center of it. Beneath that was stitching that read 'The Greater Good'. Grindelwald's men had captured her and her two friends.

She was screaming, the sound high-pitched and earth shattering and so loud to Tom that he could feel the vibrations, the sound thunderous and making him clasp his hands to cover his ears. But they did nothing to alleviate the noise and the pain it inflicted. He could feel his pulse quicken, his eyes widen, as he moved forward to better examine the scene before him.

Hermione lay beneath one of the same followers who had caught her, her body jerking as she was held down, a knee burrowed deep into her hip as her arms were held to the floor with a binding charm. The man was holding her forearm out before him, a tarnished dagger moving slowly across her skin as she continued to yell, her throat raw and coarse.

“You might as well be one. You're just as filthy. Half-Blood ain't no better than a mudblood,” the man said, his voice a thick, Slovak accent as he pulled back to admire his handiwork. Her fingers twitched, stinging with the fresh carving of the word on her arm. The man chuckled, the sound coming from deep in his throat, as he smiled, the motion pulling his gaunt skin into a wretched curve. Laying down the knife, he held his wand under Hermione's chin, jabbing it into the soft flesh.

“Crucio!”

She was screaming again, and the sound made Tom's stomach plummet, his throat tighten. He did
not like it, did not like it all. Unlike the screams he reveled in when he punished his followers for their wrongdoings, unlike the screams he had enjoyed thoroughly when he tortured his father- this made his bones quiver as though they were trying to break free from his skin. It sounded wrong, and for the first time in his life, he wished the yells of pain would stop. He wished that the wizard doing these awful things to her would be the one screaming, convulsing manically as tears filled his eyes and blood trickled from his nose.

He should be the one to suffer, marring her with such a heinous and ugly word. He could barely enjoy the moment of relief he felt, thankful to learn that she indeed was not a mudblood, and that she had been wrongfully scarred by someone too quick with a knife. He was so suddenly consumed with rage, and, unable to stop the man, he made certain to memorize his dull looking face, knowing he would hunt him down and kill him for what he had done to the powerful witch.

The memory shifted once more, and she was bursting through the glass ceiling of a building, on the back of a magnificent dragon. She was wincing rather harshly, the cold wind whipping at her face and the sharp scales of the beast digging into the tender flesh of her palms. But she held on, her two friends riding right along with her on the long neck of it. And then, suddenly, they were jumping, falling through the air and into the ice cold water below, breaking the surface with a loud splash that reverberated throughout.

Then she was fighting, the air on fire from magic and smelling like burnt hair, sulfur and rain. Her hair was stringy and rather filthy, her face dirty and cut in several places with a yellow bruise covering one cheek and a split lip, her face swollen. Despite the myriad of injuries, she had a fierce look, chasing down one of Grindelwald's men, the soles of her sneakers slipping over blood.

She was sitting outside a tent, looking ragged and exhausted. Ronald sat beside her, his head resting in his palm. “I'm not being negative, Ronald. I'm being realistic,” she snapped sharply, visibly frustrated by whatever conversation she was having with the boy. Then, she sighed, burying her head in her arms. Her muffled voice could be heard from where she sat, saying, “It's just...not a good situation at this point. You have to admit things are looking bleak. I don't know what to do and neither does anyone else.”

Ronald grinned, rubbing his hand along her back. “I know everything will be okay, though. I have you.”

She looked up then, smiling softly at him as she leaned into his side. He looked at her for a moment before pressing a finger under her chin and lifting her head up, bringing his lips to hers.

From where he sat, directly in front of the couple, Tom thought the kiss looked rather clumsy, and not quite as enjoyable for Hermione as it did for her male companion. He scowled, watching the scene play at for him as the kiss only deepened. From what he had seen of this boy, he didn’t quite think he was suitable for Hermione. He was awkward and fumbling, and despite being a Pureblood, he struggled to perform simple spells, hardly even bothered to get the enunciation and wand movement correct. He was crude and inept, and would often say things that Tom saw had hurt Hermione's feelings. No, whatever had occurred to separate Hermione from Ronald, he believed the girl should consider it a blessing in disguise.

She could certainly do better, he thought. She deserved better.

He was thankful when they finally pulled apart, breathless and blushing, and Hermione settled back into his side, a look of contentedness on her face.

She was sitting in what looked like the storage room of a library, books haphazardly piled around her in overwhelmingly tall towers, the lighting minimal with only a few torches on the dark and stained
walls and one flickering chandelier coated in cobwebs. It smelt musty, like the wet and moldy pages of books that had been destroyed by the elements. And from the looks of the tomes she was handling, all of which were written in Ancient Runes, he would say he wasn't too far off in that assessment.

Her hair was piled high on top of her head in a messy knot, and she was shivering despite wearing the sweater with the golden G on it, in much better condition than he had seen it. She was cross-legged, sitting on a spare jumper to avoid the floor that was coated in a layer of grime and dust, surrounded by a barrier of books as her finger traced down the page of one book held out in her lap. Her lips were moving as she read it, the words hardly audible to him even as he moved closer to her.

He stood there for he did not know how long, watching her read to herself and taking the moment to contemplate all he had seen so far. He sat down opposite her, cross-legged as well, and peaked at her from over the top of books, his nose itching from the dust.

She was not a mudblood, that was the first thing he considered. Almost immediately, he regretted how rough he had been with her, wishing he had controlled his anger better. She had not been lying to him, on anything it seemed, and he was feeling quite relieved about that. Though he never truly believed Dolohov's suspicions were grounded in anything other than prejudice, he had to admit it would be necessary to investigate her further before moving forward with any plans to recruit her. And it would seem that there was no longer anything standing between him and her, she no longer had anything to hide from him, and he felt that he could fully trust her. She would make an excellent follower; he had seen, first hand, her experience in battles, her quick thinking and her ability to remain grounded no matter what chaos was occurring around her.

He had seen so many different sides to her in the hours he had spent in her mind. And he couldn't decide which he found to be more beautiful, more alluring. There was the Hermione of the battlefield, strong and confident and covered in blood and cuts, her hair matted in sweat and clumped together. There was the Hermione he had seen at the dance, polished and stunning, a picture of feminine beauty.

Though, if he had to choose, he rather thought that this one, the one before him, was the more beautiful of them, lost in the words before her and unaware of the world around her. This was the only version of her he had seen in his own time knowing her, and he found it just as endearing then as he did now, smirking as her lips continued to move with the silent words. Strands of her hair had fallen in front of her face, but she did not seem to mind— or perhaps didn't even notice—absentmindedly rubbing her thumb and forefinger between the page as she readied to flip it.

She had just started to turn to the next page when she stilled, her brow knitting as she looked up, squinting at the chandelier. Following her line of sight, he watched as the candles placed within the tarnished votive began to shake ever-so slightly, dust flung from the fixture as it did so. And then he heard what sounded like heavy stomping from the floor above, the bookshelves quivering in their place.

“No,” Hermione muttered, her eyes widening. And then she was standing, flinging the book away from her with inhuman speed as she ran past Tom, pulling her wand out when she was at the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Intrigued, he followed her, his legs protesting somewhat as his body began to tire from how long he had been standing while in her thoughts.

He reached the landing, seconds behind her, and came to an immediate halt, his own eyes turning wide at the sight before him. The boy— Ronald— was dead on the floor, his eyes wretched open as they looked at them, glassy and unknowing, his body twisting rather uncomfortably as though he had simply been...tossed to the side, like a forgotten rag doll. The other boy, Henry, he thought his name
was though he wasn't certain, was pulling himself up from the floor, deep cuts covering his body as he slowly bled out, slipping in his own puddle of blood. The color was very rapidly draining from his face, and his entire body shook with the blood loss. But it was not the graphic image of the dying boy that had made Tom come to a stunned stop, his mouth slung open. It was the monster like creature standing to the side of him, a man of personified nightmares and horror.

He looked less like a human and more like a snake, an unholy combination that Tom thought was the most repulsive thing he had ever seen. His skin was so white it was near translucent, and he could see the deep blue veins beneath his skin as they roped up his neck and his face. His eyes were a dull shade of red, the dark iris looking like a pit into his soul, and where there should have been white it was instead a light shade of pink. The front of his face was flat, sloping only at the point of his chin and his forehead, as though someone had smoothed away his cheekbones and his nose, replacing the nostrils with deep slits that slanted at the center of his face. His ears were pressed against the side of his head and had no discernible lobe, the clump of folding skin surrounding his inner ear the only defining characteristic. And with the exception of his face and the front part of his neck, he was covered in scales.

They were white, but not a clean looking shade. They were dull and dingy looking, and the tapered edges were raised ever so slightly to create an interesting texture along his scalp.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered in disgust, his voice echoing in the caverns of her mind.

She did not hear him though, as she was frozen in place from the sight of the literal demon before her. What in the name of Merlin was this thing, this thing that turned to her and smiled with a lip-less mouth, his forked tongue slipping out to taste the air? He had never heard of a creature such as this, and had never read any records about a half-breed existing, an unholy abomination of man and serpent. So what could begot this horrid thing?

“Whaat a pleassssstant ssssurprissssse,” the thing hissed- quite literally- in a voice that made it feel as though someone had pushed him into the Great Lake.

“Run!” her friend gasped out suddenly between chattering teeth, sounding surprisingly strong even in the face of Death. He was no longer able to hold himself up, his face ashen and listless, and Tom knew he was seconds away from what would be his last breath, his final words a plea to his friend to run and save herself.

And she did, throwing herself back down the steps as she unknowingly ran right through Tom, his body shivering with the odd sensation of being moved through. She paused only to grab hold of her beaded bag, the one she still carried with her, and was expertly running through the winding maze of bookshelves. Every five meters she would push her wand out behind her, a pulse of magic knocking the shelves over and exploding them, the books and trinkets and boxes flying from their place and dissolving into torn pages and charred leather.

She ran through a back door, one that had been boarded up with rotting and decaying wood that she easily broke through by slamming her weight into them, stumbling somewhat as she fell into the snow piled up in front of it. She rose to her feet in seconds as she continued her trudging, turning around to give the abandoned library one final sad and longing look, the lids of her eyes wet with unshed tears, as she raised her wand.

A fiendfyre, white hot, tore through the building, growling and roaring like a dragon that had been rudely awoken. It came alive, like lungs expanding and contracting, and then something strange happened.

The memory began to flicker, blurring before him. And at first he thought that perhaps Hermione had
passed out at that moment in time, and so the memory itself was incomplete. But then he was all at once assaulted with other memories, disjointed and out of place. They were not clear in sound or vision, and made no sense in their placing. There were memories of her at three years old, and then the next would be her at eleven. It made no sense, and he narrowed his eyes, wondering if possibly the potion had worn off already and Hermione was attempting to eject him from her mind. Had he spent that much time in her head already?

The memories were swimming around him, and he could only catch quick glimpses of them. Memories of Hermione falling to her knees and crying out in anguish as her parents were murdered before her, her arms held tightly in the grip of Grindelwald's men. Muggles from the Bulgarian village she was trapped in with their lips sewn shut together in harsh black thread. A girl with fiery red hair and a determined look to her face, sporting the infamous sweater with the G.

And then he was forced out from her mind, his head throbbing with pain as he collided with the floor of Slytherin Common Room, Hermione above him and looking unnaturally pale.

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She felt sicker than she had ever felt in her entire life, her head was in such pain she could no longer see, her vision fading to black with hot pinpricks of light poking through. She heard nothing but the roaring of her blood as it rushed through her veins, her entire body thrumming with each pulse of her heart. She was coated in sweat, and could feel her hair and her clothing clinging to her, both of which were drenched, and her stomach felt as if it were doing loops, rising into her throat only to plummet to her feet.

She swayed where she stood, and could just barely hear Tom over it all.

“Hermione?” he asked, and despite the feeling of incredible sickness that was overcoming her, she was relieved to find he didn't sound mad. In fact, he sounded almost fearful, his words wavering in a way she had never heard before. It must have worked then, the altercations she tried to make to her memories. It had been difficult, and she knew that she failed towards the end, had allowed him to see the form of Lord Voldemort, a fractured soul parading around as a man. But she had done enough to at least appear innocent to him, as she was certain she would have been dead by now otherwise.

But the combination of maintaining the changed memories for so long, coupled with his assault on her mind, had left her in a terrible state. She hadn't realized she had fallen forward until she was already in Tom's arms, the boy holding a hand to her clammy face as she sighed under his cooling touch, pressing her cheek into it.

“Hermione? How much Dreamless Sleep do you take in one night?” he asked, concern lacing his words as he spoke them in a slow drawl, unsure.

“I have...a resistance to...it from using...it so often,” she said through pants, her breathing uneven as it felt like she could not take in enough air. “I drank a bottle...why?”

He cursed. “Merlin...that was eight doses,” he muttered, and then he was gently laying her down on the floor, pulling a pillow from the window seat to rest below her soaked head. “I'll be back,” he said, but she didn't hear him, slipping in and out of unconsciousness.

'Doses of what?' was the last thing she thought before everything went black.

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“Tell us again, Mr. Riddle, what happened?” Headmaster Dippet asked, stroking his short beard as
he looked at Tom with concern. Tom was sitting on one of the armchairs in the Common Room, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he was surrounded by the three elder wizards, Dippet, Slughorn and Dumbledore. The only sound in the room was that of the fireplace and of Athena, who sat to the side, nervously tapping her fingernails along a table she was seated at. It was eight in the morning now, yet all students were forbidden from leaving their dormitories in the aftermath of Hermione falling terribly ill, rushed to St. Mungo's after Tom went banging on Slughorn's chamber doors, yelling that she was seizing. She was hardly breathing when they returned, her lips turning blue as her body deoxygenated.

He swallowed hard, for once not needing to feign his shock. He couldn't believe how stupid he had been, making such a silly mistake as to not factor in her near nightly use of the Dreamless Sleep. He had been caught up in his own hubris, overconfident that everything would go exactly as he intended it to simply because he was deigned it so. He felt a genuine sense of guilt, knowing he might have fatally harmed the one witch he fervently sought after.

"She...wasn't feeling well," he started, telling the story he had come up with for the fourth time now, his hands trembling. "I had some homework I had forgotten about, so I was awake and in the Common Room when she came out of her room at about midnight. I could tell she was sick, pale and shaky, but I didn't think it was...that serious. I should have brought her to the Hospital Wing right away but...she didn't seem that bad and I..."

Dippet shook his head, raising a hand to quieten him. "Don't worry, my boy. No one is blaming you. In fact, if it weren't for you Miss Dumbledore might not have been as well off as she is right now. You said she suddenly took a turn for the worse?" he asked, silently urging him to continue as he smiled reassuringly.

Tom, looking grateful for the sympathy, said, "Yes. We..." he paused, chewing his lip as he looked awkwardly in Dumbledore's direction. "Well, suppose you could say we've become quite close, so we sat together, over there, and she was trying to sleep a little bit on my lap-" he gestured over his shoulder to the window sweat, turning his head with it to hide the smirk that broke through as the old Gryffindor visibly flushed, his eyes growing wide. "Anyway, we were cuddling a bit and then she just...couldn't breathe very well. Next thing I knew she was falling to the ground and I went to get help, and then..."

Dippet nodded, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "Good thing you did, Tom. I'm sure Albus certainly appreciates your quick thinking. You very well saved his cousin, you did," he praised.

Dumbledore hesitated a moment, his blue eyes cloudy with suspicion as he gazed at Tom over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Indeed, my boy. Thank you," he said curtly.

Tom nodded. Then, chewing his lips as he looked down at his clasped hands, the long fingers twined together, he said, "I know this may sound terribly paranoid of me, but, you see, I've grown very close to Hermione, and I consider her a good friend, so I wouldn't feel right not mentioning this, even if it does sound utterly mad. But you don't suppose that...this could have been the result of someone...poisoning her, do you?"

"Now, Tom, what in the name of Merlin would make you think that?" the Slytherin head asked, his beady eyes betraying his air of disbelief as they looked at the boy in rapt attention.

He shook his head, running a hand through his already tousled hair and displacing the dark brown
curls. “It's just...it was so sudden and she was fine all day. Or she was...until she had some of these chocolates, you see.”

“Chocolates?” Dumbledore asked, his voice soft with intrigue.

“Yes, from the Head Boy. Crane.”

Dippet inclined his head, his eyes looking sharp and sober now as he asked, “Surely, you're not claiming that Joshua Crane is responsible for this?” His tone suggested he was incredulous, but he waited for Tom to answer, waiting patiently for him to explain his reasoning.

“I know it sounds mad, but he's obsessed with her. Has been since Slughorn's welcoming party in September. It started out innocently enough, and Hermione turned him down on his invitation to go to Hogsmeade together. He seemed alright with it, I was there when the interactions took place, and neither one of us thought anything of it. So, when he asked her for help in Defense, she very kindly agreed to help him, thinking his feeling for her had...you know, lessened,” he explained, leaning back in the chair as he made a face of concern, of retroactive regret. “It was going well up until a little over three weeks ago. He started to try to court her, even after she told him she had no interest in him beyond a friendship. But he was insistent...It made her really uncomfortable. She told me in privacy, and I should have done something. Approach Crane or a teacher...someone who could help her.”

Again, Dippet shook his head, moving forward as he placed a firm hand on Tom's shoulder, squeezing it comfortingly. “You must stop blaming yourself, Tom. No one expects you to have known what danger could occur, you did your best to help and comfort, Miss Dumbledore, I'm sure. Now, go on,” he urged, not moving his hand as he smiled once more.

“She told him she didn't want to tutor him anymore, that he was being too inappropriate, a couple days ago. And then on Saturday he gets her this...box of chocolates. Real expensive, the gourmet ones from Honeydukes. Says it's to apologize, for his behavior, and to thank her for all her help tutoring him. She thought it was a sweet enough gesture, she's very trusting like that, always wanting to find the good in others, and so she took it. We were studying in the library together on Sunday, and she was stressed out over her Runes practice test. She had a couple of the chocolates to sort of...perk herself up. Said something about a friend she used to have who thought chocolate was the cure to anything,” he finished, shaking his head as he looked at the three professors sadly, his eyes large with what he hoped look like concern and fear for his friend.

“When she came out of her room, and I asked her if she could have possibly ate something to upset her, she said all she had were some sandwiches and tea with her cousin and the chocolates, even ate a few before bed.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, fixing Tom with an indiscernible expression as he said, “You know, Tom, these are very serious accusations you are making, of a very well revered student. If you are to stand behind this account, we will have to involve the Ministry. You are aware that you are claiming Crane is responsible for poisoning- and potentially attempting to murder- Miss Hermione Dumbledore, correct?” His blue eyes were challenging, daring Tom to move his pawn forward as if to see just how far the boy would go in his manipulations.

‘Very far,’ Tom thought as he frowned. “I know, and for both Hermione and Crane's sake, I hope I'm just being paranoid. The whole school knows how badly he's wanted to join the Aurors since I was a second year, and I wouldn't make such a bold claim knowing this could drastically ruin his chances.”

Dumbledore looked disappointed, though not surprised. “Very well. I will alert the Ministry, and I will contact Mrs. Crane to inform her of her son and the investigation to follow,” he said, tearing his
eyes away to look at Dippet.

The Headmaster nodded. “I know this is hard for you, Albus, being that he is one of your best students and she, your cousin, and I hope we can put this little matter to rest and have everyone back in class and moving forward. Until then, do you know where we might find this chocolate, Tom?”

“Last I saw it was in her bag, so probably with her belongings, in the dormitories.”

“Athena,” Dippet said, motioning to the witch who stood at her name. “Could you show Professor Slughorn to Hermione's area in the sixth years' room, perhaps help him find these chocolates? After that, I would like you to retire into your dormitory with the other seventh years until we need your services once more.”

She nodded slowly, looking upset to leave such gossip as she and Slughorn headed down the hall, turning into the sixth door down the corridor.

Tom did his best to avoid Dumbledore's gaze, hating how uncomfortable he felt under his scrutiny. The man had a way of looking through him, as though he could see behind each false smile and worried frown. It had been that way since he was eleven and the man was sent to Wool's Orphanage, expecting to tell a child of a wondrous place and instead finding something that looked like a child, but barring that was anything but. He had long since given up on trying to charm the man who had so early on become wary of him, and instead tried to make do, doing his best to go unnoticed by him. He did, however, quite enjoying ruffling Dumbledore's feathers with the mention that he and his precious cousin were close enough that she came to him for comfort and support, crawling into his lap.

But if he were being honest with himself, he was afraid that Dumbledore would enter his mind and see what he had done. He had never before used legilimancy on him, at least none that he could remember, but he would expect that desperate times called for desperate measures, and if it meant the safety of his family, he would have no qualms about invading Tom's privacy. He was certain his occlumency would be of no match, and he would witness everything. Tom creating the potion, instructing Nott to switch it with Hermione's private supply of sleep aids. Would see Tom grabbing hold of the chocolates when he dipped down to grab his own bag, carefully injecting a remaining batch of the elixir- not enough to equal a full dose, but enough to show up on scanning charms- into each one with a fork he transfigured into a syringe. Would watch as Tom dropped the chocolates back onto Hermione's bag as he went to retrieve the Potions book he had accidentally left behind.

He simply couldn't risk eye contact now. There would be no point in having crafted such a safety net for himself and then to give it all away with his own memories. It was bad enough he had to use it to cover his own miscalculations and to prevent any suspicion from falling on him when St. Mungo's would report she had overdosed on a bizarre and unheard of potion, the last thing he needed was to be caught in the act.

“Found it,” Slughorn said, entering the Common Room once more as he held out the box of chocolates, the wrapping around the box wrinkled. “It's about half full.”

“Excellent. I'll take it and keep it safe until the ministry can get some Aurors out here to investigate. Tom, they may need to speak with you about what happened last night, as well as everything you told us. Do you think you're up for that?” Dippet asked. “If you like, we can excuse you from your classes today. I'm sure you're sick with worry for your friend and wouldn't be able to focus anyway, without the nerves of taking part in this investigation.”

“Actually, I think I'd like that very much,” he said, knowing that he could use the time to catch up on the sleep he had sacrificed over the weekend. “I would be of no use anyway, not when I know that
Hermione's in such a dreadful state. She will be okay, won't she?” he asked, pursing his lips. He truly was concerned, knowing that a powerful witch who had just cleared of any suspicions on his part could be slipping through his hand at this moment, making all of his attempts to recruit her hitherto for naught.

“They expect her to make a full recovery. Though they are not completely certain yet what exactly caused her illness, they are making every effort to heal her and her prognosis is very strong,” Dippet said, smiling once more at Tom, who returned the gesture. “Now, thank you for you help, Tom, but I'm afraid we must be going now. If you need to talk, you know we are here for you.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate the support.”

“You did very well, and Miss Dumbledore is very lucky to have such an excellent friend,” Dippet added as he and Slughorn made for the door, the box of contaminated chocolate held tightly at his side. Professor Dumbledore however remained by Tom's side, nodding his head in his colleague's direction.

“If you don't mind, I'd like to have a word in private with Mr. Riddle. Properly thank him for what he has done for family,” he said, scratching his short, gray and auburn beard. “Would you be so kind as to escort Mr. Crane down to my office and wait with him until I get there, Horace?”

“Of course,” Slughorn said, bidding the young wizard goodbye as he and the Headmaster left the room.

Tom was left alone with Dumbledore then, nervously gripping onto his pant leg and casting his gaze to the floor, as though he was a petulant child who had been caught doing something naughty. After what felt like an uncomfortable amount of time between the two of them, he finally looked up, watching as the older man gingerly sat himself opposite Tom on a matching black armchair, his lavender robes looking glaringly out of place in the stark and somber décor of Slytherin.

“Have you heard anything from St. Mungo's?” he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, they sent me an owl not too long ago, I received it just before coming here to speak with you. They found some swelling in her cranial cavity, as well as some lesions. A lot of it was lost on me, not having a profound medical background I'm afraid to admit, but essentially they confirmed what you have suspected, that she had overdosed heavily on a powerful potion,” he said.

Tom narrowed his eyes, biting down on his lip. “And you kept this from Headmaster Dippet?”

“I wasn't going to. I had planned to discuss it in private after we had heard your side of the story. I had no time between learning of it myself and joining the Headmaster down here to pull him aside, and I had no desire to have rumors going around about someone poisoning the students. But you brought your suspicions up first, and I'm afraid I may have to agree with you,” he said, picking a stray piece of lint off the front of his robes as he smiled sadly at Tom.

The boy felt his jaw clench in anger. “Good to know I'm not crazy then.” He wanted to curse the man, wanted to dig the tip of his wand so far into his throat he would obstruct his airways. He had held the information from the others, not out of concern for the rumor mill or lack of opportunity, but to see if Tom had thought that far through, he was sure. To see if Tom would divert attention away from himself and frame another. Dumbledore had lain a trap, and in his own desire to protect himself, he had walked right through it.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said, his lip twitching somewhat. “Funny thing, it is actually. Are you familiar
at all with the studies of muggle psychology?”

Frowning, Tom shook his head. “No, sir.” What on earth did this have to do with anything?

“Well, it's worth looking into. What a lot of wizards don't know is that many fields in the Wizarding world actually overlap with the Muggle world. It makes sense, when you think about it. We may have magic, but aside from that we're the same. We have the same anatomy and physiology, and we use the same information when we construct potions and spells as muggles do medicines and pills. Have you ever wondered why say...amortentia works the way it does?” he asked, either oblivious to the way Tom's nostrils flared or uncaring.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple moving painfully with it. “No sir, I can't say I have,” he said, trying his best to keep his voice leveled.

“It works by hijacking, if you will, the way a person's brain operates. Similar to how muggle sleeping aids are very effective at making you drowsy by increasing the production of certain hormones, amortentia increases the various hormones the brain produces when you feel what we call love. Estrogen or testosterone depending on the gender of the drinker, adrenaline which causes that butterflies-in-your-stomach, palm sweating feeling. Dopamine, a pleasure hormone; all of this among various others are effected when someone drinks a love potion.

“Unfortunately, in excess, they can cause great ill. For example, muggle science hasn't quite caught up with wizarding studies, but we have discovered that too much dopamine can cause vomiting, muscle spasms, anxiety, insomnia. A great deal of awful symptoms. Fascinating, isn't it?” he asked, his fingers with the gnarled knuckles scratching his chin.

“I suppose it is, Professor, but forgive me; I'm having trouble seeing how any of this is relevant,” Tom answered, shifting in his seat as he forced himself to look Dumbledore in the eye, light blue against dark.

Dumbledore pinched his lips together, looking off to the side as he said, “Well, diagnostic spells found Hermione had very, very high levels of all these hormones. Dangerously high. If Crane is guilty of anything, it would be of slipping her a love potion, a much less punishable offense than attempted murder. So, while I appreciate your concern for my cousin and the excellent care you provided for her, I think it is safe to say that no one is truly out to wish her harm.” He smiled then, a smile that, like Tom's, didn't reach his eyes.

“I'm glad to hear that. Hopefully Crane won't have too harsh of repercussions, then,” he bit out, trying to sound sincere. He had initially only injected the chocolates in case he was discovered in his intent to drug Hermione, thinking that they would provide a suitable enough piece of evidence against Crane to pull eyes from him.

But then when she began to seize, her eyes rolling into the back of her head like that and he had heard that she was sick enough to be sent to the Wizarding hospital, he had then hoped that they, unable to identify the potion, would charge Crane with attempted murder and send him off to Azkaban. That would, quite effectively, get rid of the annoying Gryffindor who had outlived his usefulness. But a love potion- though morally wrong and illegal in some varieties- was not generally cause enough for imprisonment. He could only hope that Crane would at least be expelled, have his wand snapped. That would be enough, though not nearly as satisfying as knowing he would spend decades trapped in the cesspool of criminals.

It would be enough to keep him away from Hermione, leaving her all to Tom. He had nearly lost her after last night, and he would be damned if he lost her to some mudblood, not after he fought tooth and nail to have her, something he had never done for anyone.
“Yes, very good indeed. Though, I can't quite seem to figure out why Crane would add elements of a truth serum to the chocolates,” Dumbledore said, his voice sounding as though he wasn't speaking to anyone in particular, merely thinking aloud.

Tom felt his jaw clench, almost involuntarily, as he began to pull on his sleeves, fidgeting in discomfort in a way that only Dumbledore could make him do. “What makes you think he would?” he asked, needing a moment to ensure he did not betray himself with his voice. He knew. Dumbledore knew that Tom was the one behind Hermione's illness, and was looking for evidence to support it. But he wouldn't give him any- even if he went through his memories, that was not admissible in any trial. So he made certain to hold eye contact this time, staring at him in an almost challenging manner. As though to say I'd like to see you try to connect this to me. He refused to look guilty, to look admonished. He refused to look weak.

“She had neural damage, something that can occur from trauma such as a concussion. However, in the letter, they also informed me that they believed this to be the result of a truth serum gone badly. You see, memories are stored in your neurons, and truth serums work by tapping into them after lowering you inhibitions in other regions of your brain. She will be fine, in the long run, though I’m afraid some memories will be forgotten to her, or become a bit less clear. Nothing too serious, in the grand scheme of things,” Dumbledore reassured Tom, a smile on his face. “But perhaps you know why Crane might use such an interesting combination?”

“No, sir. None,” he answered curtly, not truly trusting himself to speak. He hated this feeling, feeling as though he had no control of himself or the situation. Hated that Dumbledore could make him feel like that eleven year old boy again, terrified and delighted as his wardrobe burst into flames while he sat in the cold room of his orphanage.

The older man stood then, sighing as he pulled himself up. Not wanting to have to look up at him anymore than he needed to, Tom stood as well, shoving his white hands into his pockets in an attempt to hide the slight shake of them, once again cursing himself for being so utterly pathetic. No matter how hard he tried, Dumbledore had a way of tearing him down, making him feel exposed for every insecurity and scrutinized for them.

“Well, I'll speak with Crane, and hopefully we will get all the answers we need. In the mean time, let us just hope Hermione will make a speedy recovery and return to us soon then,” he said, walking to the main entrance of the Common Room, with Tom keeping himself rooted in front of the chair he just rose from.

“Yes, let's,” was all he could say. The brilliant blue eyes twinkled at him from across the room, a taunt to the boy, as he smiled, and for only a second, Tom found himself having to admire the man. There was something to be said about someone who could fake such a convincing smile, something even he struggled with.

With that, Dumbledore bid him farewell, tipping his head in his direction as he left, the door clicking firmly in place as it closed behind him. Tom stood still for several seconds, his eyes unmoving from where the old wizard was standing moments before, when suddenly he twisted, pulling his wand from his pocket and aiming at the chair he had sat in. In a beam of light, the leather seat exploded, the stuffing bursting forth from it as metal springs fell to the floor with a loud clanging sound. The wooden frame, charred black from the heat of it, singed, filling the room with the awful smell of synthetic materials burning and melting, a metallic aroma suffocating him.

But he paid it no mind, stepping over the mess as he strode to his dormitory, punching the heavy door open with his fist.

His roommates- Nott, Rosier, Mulciber, and Dolohov- were awake and sitting on the ends of their
beds, discussing something in heated whispers when he burst in, nearly jumping out of their skins with his abrupt and noisy entrance.

“What...what happened?” Mulciber asked, his jaw dropping at the ferocious look on Riddle’s face.

“Clean that up,” was all he said, gesturing with his left hand down to the hall and towards the Common Room. He hardly hesitated, nodding so dangerously fast that it looked as though his neck might snap. He jumped from his bed and ran pass Tom, disappearing into the corridor.

The three remaining boys watched silently as Tom stormed through the room, pulling his robe off in a fluid motion as he plopped himself onto his bed in the center of it, the mattress creaking at the addition of his weight. They said nothing, glancing between them as they waited for him to speak, to tell them what had happened. If the potion had worked and why were they told by Athena to remain in their rooms hours ago?

But he said nothing, languidly stretching his long legs out over the covers as he stared at the ceiling, chewing the inside of his cheek in barely concealed rage.

Rosier, making eye contact with Nott, inclined his head at him, his eyes flicking over to Riddle. ‘Ask him,’ he mouthed, Dolohov nodding in agreement.

Nott sighed, rubbing his eyes, before looking over to Riddle, the boy's breathing filling the room as he attempted to compose himself, a meditation they would often not interrupt but their curiosity getting the best of them. “Did...did it work? Where's Hermione?” he asked, chewing his lip nervously, not entirely certain if he wanted the answer to his question.

Riddle said nothing. He was quiet for so long that Nott thought he might have fallen asleep or was ignoring him. But then he spoke, his voice measured. “Of course it worked. Poisoned her though, and she’s recovering in St. Mungo’s.” After a moment, he chuckled, the laugh deep in his throat as he added, “I could hardly believe it when Dippet told me they would be investigating Crane for poisoning. Never would have thought he would be the type to drug the chocolates he gave her.”

Nott's eyes widened at this, swearing underneath his breath as Mulciber returned, nervously looking around the room before closing the door behind him, sitting back down. He should have known Riddle would have set up a fail safe should something gone wrong. He never did anything halfway through, and it would appear Crane would be the one to fall for his actions.

“Did...you find anything out about her?” Dolohov asked.

Tom sat up now, shuffling up so that his back was against the headboard, his legs crossed at the ankle. He looked thoughtful for moment, regarding Dolohov with a calculating look. “I did. And I'd like to proceed in my plans to recruit her into the Knights,” he said, his sharp tone suggesting that it was not a matter up for a discussion.

Dolohov visibly slumped, his mouth gaping open before he promptly shut it, keeping himself quiet as Tom sent him a withering glance. Nott and Rosier gave no indication of their feelings on it, only nodding in agreement as Mulciber grinned, his cheeks becoming fuller with the action. It was well known that he had a soft spot for the witch, finding her politeness and kind heart a preferable change of pace from the normally stoic faces of Slytherin House.

“Anything you need us to do?” Rosier asked.

Tom thought for a moment. “Not at the moment, no. I think for now I'll just continue to build a friendship with her. She'll be devastated to hear that Crane, someone whom she trusted and
considered a good friend, would do something like drug her with a love potion. I'll offer myself as support when she returns, and from there it will only be a matter of time, I'm sure."

"Then we can initiate her into the Knights when she's ready. She'll make an excellent servant to you, my Lord," Nott finished, his voice businesslike as though he were approving something far more banal than manipulating a young woman to their cause.

"No," Tom cut in sharply, pulling his wand from his pocket and twirling it between his fingers, watching as it cut through the air. "She will be initiated, but I don't think her place is as a servant."

"If not a servant, than what?" Mulciber asked, his thick brow furrowed.

"I saw quite a bit when I was in her mind. And I think that, with the quick thinking and the magic I saw from her, she deserves to be held a little higher than others." The wand whizzed past his face, a blur of motion, as his knuckles alternatively gripped onto it, his eyes focused on the movement. "Since her coming here, she has intrigued me with all of these aspects, but it wasn't until this morning that I knew just how practical she could be. She fought brilliantly in battles, and saved the day with her intelligence. I would consider it a great deal of fortune to have her on our side, and believe that in order to keep her there, I will need to offer her an entire kingdom to fall at her feet. She deserves a throne if you will," he said, lifting his eyes up from watching his wand as he smiled, the left side of his mouth rising up higher than the right. "After all, what is a king without his queen?"

-xXx-
Sinking

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read and review this! You are all wonderful! If you would like, feel free to follow me on tumblr, for Harry Potter, Tomione, and my newest obsession: Star Wars and more specifically, Reylo. I am trash haha. Thank you.

My username on tumblr is ReneeHartblog.

Chapter Twelve: Sinking
'This is how easily the pit opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.'
-Rita Rove, “Persephone, Falling”

The woods were silent; an eerie sort of silent that seemed out of place. Not so much a quietness as it was an absence of noise and life, the trees stilled to an unnatural point and without the sound of wind whipping through their limbs. There were no scuttling feet across the forest floor, no birds cawing in the cold, winter air.

There was nothing to suggest that anything had ever existed in this corner of the world, and that Tom Riddle was the first and only person to explore it. He made no noise as he moved, no snapping from twigs beneath his impossibly clean shoes despite obviously stepping upon some, no crunch from the thin layer of snow under his weight. Even he was powerless to stop the disconcerting quiet, and he shifted uncomfortably. Where was he, and how had he gotten here?

He stopped suddenly, one knee bent somewhat as he paused mid-step. He could hear something, something that would otherwise go unnoticed in the general clamor of sounds. But it stood out in the obscene silence, and he began to twist his torso, craning his head to listen and discern the origin of the sound.

"Hello?" he called, his voice echoing. He was met only with the return of his own voice as it faded into the void, straining to hear more.

After a moment, he found the direction of it, and began to follow, using his hands to push aside the tree branches before him. The sound became louder and more defined, and he began to realize, with piqued interest and raised brows, that it was the sound of his own name, spoken into the uninhabited world. It did not take him much longer after to recognize the voice as Hermione's, low and soft but filled with everything she would not say. She tried to hide from him, but could only conceal so much, her eyes and her voice constantly betraying her.

She sounded frightened- frightened and in pain, the emotions making the sound of his name waver and tremble, and he frowned. He moved faster, slowly building up to a run as he moved closer to wherever Hermione was, her cries of pain meeting in quicker succession, the end of his name fading into the start. He hadn't even realized he began calling back to her, shouting out her own name, until he heard it echoed back to him, his voice sounding just as terrified as her own.

An eternity went by before he finally saw her, standing in a clearing that had been thoroughly trampled. She looked dreadful, her skin whiter than the snow that weighed down the trees, deep blue
bags beneath her sunken eyes. She was wearing her pajamas, crisp and clean over her bruised and bloodied form. She was shivering in the cold, her lips blue and visibly chapped.

“Hermione,” he breathed in relief, shirking his robe off as he approached her. What was she doing out here, so under dressed and in such a terrible condition? He wrapped his robes around her, the thick fabric nearly swallowing her as she looked up at him, her brown eyes wide and dull looking. Clasping his hands onto her shoulders, he frowned. “Hermione? What happened?”

Before she could respond, an explosion of green light filled the clearing, a static electricity charging the air around them. He closed his eyes against it, gripping tighter onto the witch before him as he felt her slump forward, her full weight pressing into him. When he finally opened his eyes, he looked down at her in his arms, her face looking unseeing into the cloudy sky.

“Her...Hermione?” he whispered, jostling her somewhat in the hopes she would awaken. But she did not, her head rolling to the side with the movement. His throat tightened with the realization that she was dead, struck by a killing curse. He had encountered enough lifeless bodies to recognize the listless glaze to the eyes, the sudden heaviness to their bodies.

A knot twisted in his chest, his jaw clenching in anger. No. He had gotten so close to her, had worked tirelessly for months to earn her trust, to seduce her so that he could make her his. And just like that, she had been taken from him, ripped away from his grasp. He growled low in his throat, whipping his head up to see who her attacker had been, who had killed the brilliant witch who he had deigned to be his.

Standing on the opposite end of the area, just outside of where the trees began to become denser, was the same beast he had seen in Hermione's memories. The half-man, half-serpent like monster, with his wand held out before him. His mouth pulled into a wry smile, stretching the taut, white skin unnaturally. It was then that he noticed the teeth, crooked and yellow and sharpened to a point, spaced out in his jaw in the manner of a snake. Tom grimaced in repulsion as he reached for his own wand, desperate to kill the man who dared to take his Hermione away from him.

But he could not find it, and he palmed helplessly over his pockets, panic flooding him. He always had his wand on him, where could it be?

His question was meant only by another flash of green light, and his heart jumped into his throat, suddenly- painfully- aware of the fact that he would die.

And then he woke up, snapping his body forward so that he was sitting up on his bed, his heart pounding hard against his rib cage. Before reason came to him, he was hastily groping over his bed sheets, his hand slipping under his pillow. When his fingers wrapped around the warm handle of his wand, he sighed in relief, his shoulders sagging. He ran a hand through his hair as he pulled the wand out from its hiding spot, allowed himself to gather his bearings.

He was not dead- thankfully. He was no stranger to nightmares and would wake from them on occasion, more often than not having them confront him with his own inevitable mortality. He despised them and the light-hearted feeling they would induce upon waking, when you realized you were in no harm all along, feeling powerless against whatever mechanism within you churned out your dreams. He hated anything that took away control of his emotions, something he worked so hard to maintain.

Pushing the curtain aside, he found that the room was empty, and judging by the light filtering through the windows, through the Great Lake, it was about midday. He had taken the opportunity to sleep through most of the morning while the other students attended their classes- he was simply too exhausted from his night to even entertain the idea of schoolwork. Of course, it shouldn't have been a
surprise when aspects of what he had seen in Hermione's mind worked its way into his subconscious, the image of a war-torn and bloodied witch and that terrible beastly thing that had killed her two friends. He shuddered, thinking back to the paper white face and the deep red eyes.

What on earth had that abomination been? He could not ask Hermione, not yet at least. The potion would cloud her memories of what had occurred under the effects of it, and it would only raise her suspicions if he asked her about what he had seen. He had designed the potion the way he did it so that, if he desired, he could still earn her trust afterwards, and revealing that he knew about her life before Hogwarts would certainly raise some flags for her. No, he would have to research it on his own.

He changed into his school uniform, deciding to visit the library. Perhaps he could find something in one of the many bestiaries provided to the school, and he could effectively put the mystery that was Hermione Dumbledore to rest.

He could hardly stop himself from smiling smugly, the familiar feeling of success warming him. He was not used to failure- for what Tom Riddle wanted, Tom Riddle got. And she had been no exception. She could hide nothing from him, and he could now rest easy knowing that he was not welcoming someone into the Knights who could not be trusted. All that was left was to continue to work on her and invoke the need to have power that resided within her- within everyone, for who did not wish to be feared and respected when the only other option was to be fearful? He would exploit her desire for power, her greed, and shape it to his own liking, just as he had done with the other sixth year boys. Of course, he would have to test her- something to prove that she would be capable of doing what was needed of her. But that would come in due time, and he was certain that with the right coaxing it would not be an issue.

He left the Common Room, a spring to his step as his strode purposefully through the dungeons, the air refreshingly chill as winter seeped through the stone walls. He felt more content and even joyous than he had in some time, feeling pleasantly at ease with the chaotic future before him. Crane would become a thing of the past, he was sure, leaving Hermione to be all his. And she would become the first additional body to his Knights, the first real recruit. He could skip with excitement, the anticipation of what could come when the barrier was dropped, when he could finally plan openly with her. What ideas could she bring to the table, what perspectives could she add to help them along in their path? No doubt, they would be just as thrilling as anything else she had to say- if not more. And in return for all her assistance, for the brains and the power she would bring, she would rule over the kingdom that would fall before them, by his side. She deserved no less than this, and he and only he could provide it for her.

There was no doubt in his mind that she would be his, that without Crane to get in the way she would have no one to distract her. She had no family, aside from Dumbledore who she already distrusted some and it would be easy enough to turn her against him. He would present himself to her when she returned from St. Mungo’s, protect and comfort her and ensure that she would feel safe with him so that she would never stray. She would be his, because what Tom Riddle wanted, Tom Riddle got.

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(Four days later...)

“Would you like some more tea, my dear?” Dumbledore asked Hermione from across his desk, gesturing towards the tea pot that sat on the tray between them. She shook her head, sliding her empty cup onto the desk before rubbing her eyes, tiredly. She had just returned from St. Mungo’s, her eyelids heavy in exhaustion and from the healing potions they had provided her, making keeping
them open a chore. Dumbledore had tried, without success, to have her sleep some before meeting with him, but she was determined to speak with him. She did not want to deal with Riddle without having spoken to the elder wizard first, feeling nervous about meeting the Dark Lord once more.

She did not recall much from that night, and in fact could hardly even remember falling ill in the first place. She knew that Riddle had indeed broken through her wards, and had seen nearly all of her memories, most of which she had altered. The only moment of clarity she had, was in the few seconds before he dove in, the time between him finding the scar on her arm and him tearing through her mind. She ran her right hand underneath the sleeve of her left arm, grazing her fingertips over the raised surface of the carved word.

Mudblood.

The wound did not heal, not thoroughly, at least. Bellatrix had ensured that to be the case when she scrawled it into her skin, cursing it. At the time, she did not hear what the curse was, nor did she recognize what it could have been, but now she was beginning to suspect that it may have been borrowed from the same curse used to create the Dark Mark. The moment Tom had touched it, her arm felt as if it had been consumed flames, and had been just enough to pull her from the high of whatever potion he had used on her. The pain had been fleeting, lasting only as long as his touch, but had been intense and her fingers curled at the thought of it.

She sighed, slumping forward in her chair. She had failed- even if she had successfully hidden her memories, she had allowed herself to become careless. Tom Riddle had poisoned her, and she had let him, getting distracted by her schoolwork- of all the things! If she hadn't been so disappointed in herself, hadn't been so caught up in relaying to herself of just how stupid she had been, she would have laughed. She could practically hear Ron now, the ginger haired boy rolling his eyes as he jeered. 'Homework would be the thing that got between you and defeating the darkest wizard of all time.'

“It is not your fault, Hermione,” Dumbledore said, startling her from her thoughts. She narrowed her eyes at him, accusingly, as if wondering if he too had simply strode into her mind. She did not trust herself anymore, as it were, and Dumbledore, seeming to sense this, rose his hands in front of him, his palms facing her. “You've barely said a word since you've arrived, and you look terribly upset. I understand you feel as though you've made an irreparable mistake, but I assure you everything will be alright.”

She snorted. “Alright? Everything will be alright? Because of me and my stupid mistakes, Riddle got into my head and saw who knows what,” she said. Then, with a groan, she slid forward, covering her face with her hands as she propped her elbows on her knees. “And Crane was expelled because of it.”

Perhaps that was the worse of it, knowing that through her attempt to change the future for the good, she had effectively taken away another person's future. She had been devastated when she learned of his expulsion, and had even tried to convince Dumbledore that she could contest it, say it wasn't Crane. But it would do no good- for if Crane were cleared then suspicion might finally- rightfully- fall onto Riddle. And if Riddle were expelled, the entire timeline might have been altered too much. No, Crane was yet another person who would have to take the fall for the Slytherin boy, who would have to sacrifice his future in the magical world for a cause that did not even exist yet. All because Hermione had selfishly befriended him, enjoyed his company and his friendly smile, and she had let him fall prey to Riddle's wrath.

Dumbledore sighed, smiling softly as he looked at her with kind, sad eyes over his half moon glasses. “Hermione, you are the brightest witch I have had the pleasure to know. Every day, my
colleagues inform me of your above average knowledge in the various courses, and I have personally witnessed a great deal of what you offer, both academically and intuitively. But you are making a rather silly mistake of confusing failure for being human,” he said, chuckling when she lifted her head from her hands, her brow wrought in confusion.

“Sir?” She sounded almost indignant, as if this were not the time for a performance appraisal. He could only laugh.

“You have suffered through a great tragedy, and despite all that you had lost and stood left to lose, you agreed to go through it all again in the hopes that it would help those you love. You have taken on an extremely altruistic act, one which offers little to gain for you personally, but much left to lose. In doing so, you left behind any friends and family you might have had and came to a time and place where you have none- for while I have grown quite close to you in our short time together, I also understand that I am a paltry version of the wizard you knew,” he started, shaking his head when she straightened in her seat, poised to defend him. When she snapped her mouth shut, he continued, “It would be cruel to expect anyone to not feel lonely in that standard. And you should not fault yourself for wanting something so human as companionship. You are, after all, human, and you will do as we do. Err.”

She frowned. “But I can’t err. People are depending on me, and I almost wasted all of their hard work,” she said, thankful that Snape and the Dumbledore of her time were not around to see her make such a grievous mistake. See her fail in the one thing they had warned her of most. Do not forget who and what he is. No matter how polite, how tender or how caring he pretends to be, it is all just as much an act as yours is. The words echoed around in the caverns of her head, and she winced at them, knowing she had become too relaxed around Riddle.

Her self-deprecating thoughts were cut short however, when Dumbledore spoke with a startling firmness and authority. “Listen to me: I cannot say for certain why you were the one chosen for this specific task, as I have not lived through that lifetime. But I can make speculations, and I daresay one of the reasons why you above anyone else seemed fit for this role is because of the very nature that you are condemning. You have a desire to love and protect, you are loyal and you yearn to be surrounded by companions. You are a dangerous person, not just because of your skill, but because of your ability to love, wholly and without malice. Love, friendship, comfort...these are human luxuries we all afford ourselves, and you should not be ashamed of wanting to take part of it, even if it results some slip ups.

“It is this need in you that separates you from Tom and his followers, and will keep you tethered to the light. No matter how close to their circle you find yourself, you will always be more powerful than any of them. You have made a mistake, but it wasn't because you were wrong for this, or because you are incompetent. It is because you are the exact right candidate for this task, and because you have the desire to trust and to be near those whom bring you joy. Please, do not denounce your humanity, Hermione,” he plead, his voice growing softer now, like a lullaby.

Leaning back in her chair, Hermione chewed her lip. She hated how much more at ease she felt, hearing his words. A part of her, the part of her that had a near compulsive need to be correct and had a terrible fear of failure, wanted her to continue to wallow in her wrongdoings. But what good would that do? Crane was gone and could not come back, and she could not risk Riddle being expelled. She had a job to do, one that she had strayed from when it came to a lull and it seemed as if she was making no progress. She would have to move forward, there would would be time for guilt later.

“So what do we do now?” she asked.
Dumbledore was silent, chewing his lip as he pulled a crystal candy dish in front of him. He gestured to it, silently offering her some, and when she declined, he shrugged, popping a candy into his mouth and sucking on it as he thought. Finally, he said, “I understand you do not remember much of his perusal of your mind, but I believe you provided sufficient enough evidence to have him not doubt you.” She opened her mouth, her brow knitted, and he smiled, interrupting her. “Tom is very talented, but still has much work to do in way of occlumency. I was able to skim the surface of his thoughts when I’ve seen him around the castle and in class, and it seems as though he has not turned against you. I know this has not been an ideal situation for you, but, looking towards the silver lining, I believe the plateau we have experienced will come to an end and that Tom will hopefully begin efforts to turn you against me so that he can have you properly join his following.” He seemed inappropriately delighted by that fact, as if the promise of being betrayed was something he took pleasure in.

“I hope so. I don’t know what we would do otherwise,” she mumbled. Suddenly, she snapped her shoulders back, looking at the older man with a determined glint in her eyes. “I promise, sir, that I’ll be more vigilant this time. I won’t let anyone or anything distract me from Tom.”

Dumbledore grinned, scratching his thin thoughtfully. “I trust that you will do well, Hermione. However, you’ll be of little use to us if you make yourself ill, so I must insist that you return your dormitories and sleep. You could certainly use some rest.”

Blushing, Hermione smiled, secretly grateful for the dismissal. She was beginning to feel light-headed in her exhaustion, and was having a hard time focusing her eyes. She stood from her seat, politely shaking her head when he offered to escort her down to the dungeons. With a softly said goodbye, she made her way over to the door, stopping when Dumbledore spoke once more.

“Hermione...Crane isn't the first student to be expelled due to Riddle's actions, is he?”

She paused, her eyes lingering on the smooth oak door as she chewed her tongue. She had seen Hagrid about the school grounds here and there, had resisted the want to run up to him and hug him, knowing that it would be best to keep her distance.

Twisting to look over her shoulder, she frowned. “No sir, he isn't.”

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes falling to the surface of his desk. “I suspected as much. Enjoy the rest of your day, Miss Dumbledore. I look forward to seeing you soon.”

“Good bye, sir,” she muttered, opening the door and slipping through.

The castle was quiet, classes were in session and students were busy preparing for the mid-terms coming up soon before winter break. She made it to the Slytherin Common Room without incident, greeting several ghosts on her way through but not encountering another student. She knew it would not be long before she would have to talk to Riddle again, would have to pretend like she was hurt by what Crane had done to her and as if she did not suspect Tom in the slightest.

And she would, she would play pretend as best as she could and would do whatever it was she had to to get on Tom's good graces. He wasn't the only one who could take control of a situation, and she would be damned if he had the upper hand over her, not again. It would only make it that much more delightful when the tables would finally turn, and she would bring about his demise.

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The library was surprisingly empty, considering the approaching exams at the end of the term. Several huddles of students were spread throughout the room, but the aisles between the bookshelves
themselves were relatively empty—particularly in the restricted section, where Tom Riddle was the sole occupant. His school robe slung over one arm, he slowly strode down one of the cramped aisles, having to walk in an awkward side step in order to fit comfortably.

‘I do hope we get a better librarian soon,’ he thought with a sigh, stepping over a pile of books that needed organizing. She was, without a doubt, one of the more abysmal librarians in existence, he believed, and it was near impossible to find anything in a neat and reasonable manner. As it were, he had spent over an hour between the clustered shelves and had found nothing of use to him.

Dark blue eyes pausing over the weathered spine of a black book. He reached out and pulled it from the shelf, flipping through the pages and scanning the various contents. 'This could do,' he thought, sliding down against the shelves so that he was sitting on the floor, his legs crossed.

The book was a collection of creatures and their origins, focusing on typically dark or half-breed varieties. The pages were thin and ink smeared his fingers as he leafed through the book, but he continued to scan through them. He had, hitherto, had no luck in his research since he had begun it four days ago, and he had nearly worked through every book provided to him. He had even briefly asked Professor Kettleburn if he had ever heard of such a creature, but the man had laughed it off, not quite taking Tom seriously.

After skimming over all five hundred or so pages, he closed the book, grunting in frustration. Nothing. Whatever this thing had been, it did not exist in documented history, and perhaps Hermione was the only living witness to it. It did nothing to ease his curiosity, of course, and he began pondering ways he could perhaps broach the subject with the witch when she returned, ways that would not suggest he knew anything.

He stood and slipped the book back onto the shelf, not being careful enough to ensure it was in the right place as there was no system to them anyway. Clucking his tongue once more at the disorganized shelves, he looked through the titles again, pausing when he came across one with a crisp and neat looking spine, as though it did not get opened often. Tilting his head to the side, he grimaced when he read the title, his nostrils flaring.

Crafting Original Spells and Potions Using Muggle Theory

Perhaps he was being paranoid, but he had the distinct feeling that Dumbledore had placed it there in the hopes that Tom would find it. It wouldn't have been out of the realm of possibility for the old fool, as he knew that Tom had a terrible habit of spending much of his free time in the restricted section.

He had to concede, as much as it pained him to do so, that there were certain benefits to muggle theory, just as Dumbledore had explained to him when Hermione had first become ill. It was essential to have at least a basic understanding of it in order to properly create a potion of your own, or any other charm or curse. But he certainly would not lower himself to look at the book, regardless of any benefits that could be derived from it. He would not give Dumbledore that pleasure as, once more, he was sure that the man had intended for Riddle to stumble upon it.

“I should have checked here first.”

Snapping his head to the left at the voice, he glowered, watching as Athena moved sideways through the aisles over to him, her lips pulled into a bemused smile.

“What do you want, Zabini?” he hissed, narrowing his eyes at the sudden intrusion.

She grinned, pouting her lower lip out innocently. “Why do you sound so angry?”
He did not answer her, merely frowned as he continued to move down the aisle and away from her. She was up to something, she had to have been. She had not spoken to him, or even treated him politely, since the failed night they had spent together. Not as if he could entirely blame her, but he did not at all appreciate the nasty rumors he heard about himself in the following weeks. He knew he should have obliviated her, but she stormed out so quickly he barely had the chance.

“I was talking to you. You might not want to walk away from me, I have some news you'll be interested in,” she said, and he felt his jaw clench at her words.

“I don't take orders from anyone,” he stated, turning around the bookshelf and into the adjacent aisle. Athena followed.

“No, you give them. Unfortunately, I'm not a little lap dog you can order around, and I won't do as you say just because I'm afraid of you, like the other students you have at your beck and call,” she said, her voice turning rapidly from overly-sweet to commanding. He paused, surprised momentarily as he had never heard her become so aggressive, but did not turn to look back at her, instead he continued to weave around the shelves. While it took a physical effort for him to not curse the girl for her rudeness, he had to admit a part of him was intrigued, not necessarily by the news she claimed to have for him, but more for the sudden domineering nature. He would allow it to play out for a little longer, curious to see where she was headed.

“They're my friends, and they're not afraid of me.”

She laughed now, throwing her head back and opening her mouth to show her perfectly white teeth, her dark curls falling down to her mid-back. “You're lying. And if you aren't, you're incredibly deluded. Everyone in Slytherin is afraid of you, and that's exactly what you want, isn't it?”

He frowned, attempting to looking distraught instead of proud. “Why in Merlin's name would I want that?”

She shrugged, looking as though she were merely having a conversation about the weather, bored and nonchalant. “You get off on it.” At his raised eyebrows, she smirked, smugly. “I can tell. I'm a lot more perceptive than you think, and you, Mr. Riddle, enjoy making your fellow students squirm.”

He finally came to a stop now, swiveling quickly on his feet as he rounded on her. He stood mere inches away from her, his head bowed down to look her in the eye as he stood almost half a head taller than her. He was close enough that his breath disrupted her hair, little curls swaying with each exhalation. She jumped at the swift movement, and he smiled, raising his hand up to her hair, grabbing a lock between his fingers as he softly tugged at it, twisting it around his fingers. “Now why, Miss Zabini, would I enjoy such a thing? You're making some awfully large claims about me, without providing much evidence,” he said, his voice low.

He could feel her shiver at his words, and his smile grew. Raising her chin in an attempt to not look as terrified as she felt, she said, “Because I've been studying you, lately. I've often wondered why someone like yourself hangs around with the lot you do, there's no reason for you to be friends. You're refined, charming and gentlemanly. Nott's alright, but the others are childish.” She paused then, licking her lips as she swallowed nervously before adding, “And they're careless. I overhead them talking a couple weeks ago. Something about a new world. One that you had promised them. And it doesn't sound quite as wholesome as you claim to be.”

He stilled, his fingers tightening around the hair he had within his grasp, and Athena grimaced at the pain but did nothing to stop him, her eyes wide. All of his muscles clenched, frozen in position, as he resisted the need to storm off, to find his supposed loyal followers and destroy them. Punish them for- once again- being so insolent and stupid. But first, he would have to deal with the girl before her,
erase her mind of whatever she thought she had heard.

But as he was reaching for his wand, she spoke again. “Whatever it is you're promising them, I want in on it too.”

He frowned, pulling away from her as he removed his wand from his pocket and trained it on her. She eyed it, nervously, but then returned her gaze to his eyes, a confident look to them. “At first,” she started, a slight waver to her voice. “I didn't think twice about it, I assumed that whatever world they were talking about was just a fantasy built out of Pure-Blood loyalty. I didn't think you were capable of doing what they said you could. But then, a couple days ago, I saw you hide over there, and watched you fill a box of chocolates you stole from Hermione with something,” she said, gesturing over to one of the many alcoves of the library, hidden by two pillars and a bookshelf coated in dust from little use. “And then you turned it on Crane. You got him expelled for what you did, and no one even questioned it. No one would ever think that you were capable of something so awful- they decided that between you and the Gryffindor Golden Boy, he was more guilty. And then I got to thinking that maybe Crane isn't the only one who you've used as a cover up. That you maybe make a habit of framing innocent Gryffindors.”

He laughed, the sound deep and gruff and not entirely genuine. “If you're suggesting that I'm the one who killed that girl last year, you're daft. Hagrid was housing a dangerous creature in the school, and for that he suffered the consequences.”

“You don't have to lie about it. I never liked Warren. I for one was quite elated when I heard the news of her death. So for that, I applaud you. Do not misinterpret my intentions here, Riddle. I'm not going to turn you in. In fact, I admire you. You have the entire school eating out of the palm of your hand. My father always said actions speak louder than words, and if your actions prove anything, it's that there's something to gain from being in your company. And I want it,” she said, stepping closer to him. “When the boys were talking about this world, they mentioned that power would once again be regained to Pure-Bloods, no more of this...mudblood sympathy. My father lost his job at the Ministry at the start of the school year- they said that his prejudice was unbecoming of a Ministry official and that they needed to separate themselves from anyone who might agree with Grindelwald. Do you know who they hired in his place? A mudblood.”

Still keeping his wand aimed at her, he raised his other hand to his chin, tapping it thoughtfully. He had never considered recruiting anyone other than Hermione, as she was the only one who had sparked his interest. And while he did hope to grow as large a following as possible, he did not dare to risk it just yet, concerned that someone would turn him in. Yet, he had never seen this side to Athena, and he had even slipped into her mind, had perused her thoughts while she spoke. He quite liked what he saw in there. Perhaps there could be something to gain from considering another recruit.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn't obliviate you right here, right now,” he demanded.

She smiled. “Because unlike your current group of misfits, I had the forethought to cast a silencing charm on us before we began this discussion, so no one can overhear us. Because I have top marks in most of my classes and am decent with a wand. Because my family, in a last bid attempt to save their name and their wealth, is trying to marry me off to the Malfoy boy who graduated some years back. Someone who has quite a lot of ties to the Ministry, and quite a bit of money. Whatever it is you plan on doing to start this world of yours, you'll need both, and I can get it for you. Abraxas was very charmed with me, and I'm sure he would be interested in your endeavor. Interested enough to sponsor you,” she said, her voice low and excited as she spoke, her dark eyes bright with need and want.
“Malfoy? You expect name-dropping that family of blonde aristocrats is going to win you any favors?”

“Say what you will about their reputation, but they practically own the Ministry. And they're one of the wealthiest families in all of Britain.”

He chewed his lip. She had thought this through, and she wasn't wrong- there could be something to gain from having such a large and well known Pure-blood family on his terms. Still, he would not open his Knights to just anyone, not yet at least. He had standards to maintain, he had everything to lose if he were compromised.

He pocketed his wand once more. “You have one week to prove your worth to me. If you fail to do so, I will punish you for wasting my time and then erase any and all memories. I will not be gentle either, and you should fully expect a lifetime spent on St. Mungo's psychiatric ward should you disappoint me. And do not think you could turn on me, I have more than shown that I am quite adept at manipulating a situation to my need, and I will not hesitate to throw you in front of a train if I suspect any disloyalty. Understood?” he proposed curtly.

She nodded vigorously, her curls fluttering around her head with the motion. “I understand, Riddle.”

“My Lord,” he corrected.

She hesitated, looking somewhat uncomfortable. “I understand, My Lord.”

He smirked. “Good girl. Now, what is this news you had for me?”

She jumped. “I almost forgot! Dumbledore's back. She's in the dormitories now, my brother overheard Parkinson mention it at lunch,” she said.

His eyes widened. “You'll take me to her, then. Open up the door for me since I can't get in myself. Come,” he said, turning suddenly as he made a quick exit from the section. She followed, having to maintain a jogging pace to keep up with his long strides. He would deal with his followers later, would teach them what it means to be responsible and cautious. But for now, he would spend all his focus on Hermione, would use his signature charm. She was his priority.

When the pair had made it into the dungeon, the corridors empty and eerily silent as it often was, Athena asked, somewhat breathless, “Is the Dumbledore girl...is she one of them? And if so, why did you try to poison her?”

Tom hesitated. “It was not my goal to poison her, and not yet. But she will be. And, should you still have a brain in you by the time that happens, you better have the sense to address her properly,” he barked, clearly not too pleased with the dismissive way she referred to Hermione.

“And what way is that?” she asked with a raised brow as they came to a stop outside of the door to Slytherin, her chest rising rapidly as she tried to catch her breath.

Tom did not look at her as he walked through the entrance, only smirking as he said, “Should you not disappoint me, I will be your Lord, and she, your Lady.”

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Tom stepped into the room and walked towards the bed to the far right, with the curtains drawn tight around it. The door clicked shut behind him, but he ignored it, moving forward and grabbing hold of the green silk in his fist. Pushing them to the side, he smirked at the sight before him.
Hermione was curled up on top of the bed, the covers rumpled from beneath her and her knees tucked into her chest. One hand was fisted somewhere underneath her pillow, and the other was curled under her chin, her hair fanning out around her and forming a halo. Her lips parted some as she breathed rather heavy in sleep, a strand of hair in front of her face moving with each inhalation and exhalation.

He had hoped that she would be awake, as he had the tendency to be rather impatient and still had some work he had to get to, especially with the knowledge Athena had given him. But he thought better of waking her up, partly out of fear that she would become startled or angry with him, and partly out of finding her peacefulness somewhat charming. He nearly laughed then, his eyes widening at that. He had never found anything to be particularly charming one way or another, least none that he could remember. Yet she had a way of breaking through those barriers, he had learned. He quite enjoyed the soft sound she made with every breath, her tousled hair resting carelessly across the pillow.

But it was growing rather late into the evening, and if he wanted to finish his homework and fit in an impromptu meeting with his Knights, she would have to wake up.

Settling himself gently on the mattress, trying his best not to disturb her with his added weight, he reached a hand out to her shoulder, whispering softly.

“Hermione.”

He shouldn’t have been surprised that she was a light sleeper. And he really should have expected nothing less than for her to jump up from her sleeping position, taking only a second to find her wand and point it at him in a panic. But his eyes widened nonetheless, pulling his hands back in a gesture of surrender. “It’s just me. Tom,” he said, watching as recognition came to her, as she realized she was not in danger.

“Oh, Tom,” she said, lowering her wand to her side. Then, with a frown, she asked, “How did you get in here?”

He ignored her, only smirking in response to her question. “Oh, what does it matter?” she muttered to herself as she stretched, the hem of her shirt rising with the motion to reveal a sliver of creamy flesh.

“How are you feeling, Hermione?” Tom asked softly, shuffling closer to her as she drew her knees into her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She blinked the remaining sleep from her eyes, rubbing the heel of her palm into them before running it over her hair and trying to smooth out some tangles.

“Alright, I guess,” she answered slowly, eyeing him through narrow slits.

He frowned, but said nothing as he pulled himself forward so that he was sitting beside her at the head of the mattress, slinging his arm over her shoulders and holding her into his side. “I was terribly frightened that night. I thought I might have lost you,” he said, idly tugging on her curls in a delicate manner. He wasn’t necessarily lying, he had indeed been very concerned for her well-being. It was something of great strife to him, and he was still very conflicted over it all, of the feelings he had toward the witch. She had done what he thought was impossible, and had endeared herself to him. Much as he hated to admit it, he was beginning to appreciate her presence in his life. Over the past few days that she had been gone, he had been not only less tolerant and more prone to rage-filled outbursts, but was also devastatingly bored.

Before her arrival, he was content and even preferred to be left alone with his thoughts. He had
companions for no reason other than the necessity of it. He was building a following, and maintaining friendships was, at the moment, a tedious part of that. He had hoped that eventually he would grow to be so well known, so well respected, that witches and wizards would flock to his side to serve below him, just as Athena had done moments earlier, and he could do away with the guise of friendship. They would join him because they admired him, and they would obey him because they feared him. Not because they found him charming and thought he could assist them in their Potions assignments.

Nott and the others were never more than the start to his following, and he could hardly care less when he sat in silence for hours while they passionately discussed Quidditch. But when Hermione came to them, she brought with her a like mind, conversations to be had and an intelligence to meet and debate with his own. They would argue over differing opinions, have entire conversations about potential unexplored uses of various herbs and plants. She was a near constant presence to his side, and with her sudden absence he had learned that, much to his surprise, that perhaps he wasn't entirely content with being alone.

“I'm fine, Tom. Honestly, no need to dote,” she said, shirking away somewhat from his embrace. He furrowed his brow, wondering if she might be feeling a little off due to some potions they had given her to heal.

He shrugged. “Not doting. I'm simply being a friend,” he said, but he moved away from her, settling his hands into his lap. “I couldn't possibly understand what you're feeling. You must be so hurt and betrayed, having someone you trusted do something so heinous to you. I only wish I could have done something, perhaps helped you sooner before you became so ill.”

She pursed her lips, sighing after a moment in resignation. Then she was leaning into him, her head laying on his shoulder as he felt her short hair cascade over him, tickling his neck when some fell into his shirt collar. He could hardly stop his growing smirk as he once more wrapped an arm around her waist. She considered him a friend, she trusted him and would rely on him from here on out. Him, and only him.

'No Gryffindors to get between us now,' he thought with a smug grin, gripping onto her side protectively. Possessively. She was his.

“I really don't want to talk about it, Tom,” she muttered, and he nodded, resting his own head down on top of hers, the thick cushion of hair like a pillow.

“Of course, we'll talk about something else,” he said, then after a moment of thought, added, “Perhaps you'd like to hear about the schoolwork you missed out on? You can borrow my notes, they're very thorough, and I'd be happy to help you study them. When you're feeling up to it, that is.”

She hummed in response, and they sat in silence for quite some time, Tom tracing circles on her arm as she pressed into him, her breathing soft and even. Thinking that she had fallen asleep, he let his hand slip from her upper arm, grabbing hold of her bare forearm and turning it over, the red and angry looking scar just as he remembered it, messy and unhealed.

Mudblood.

He made to touch it, his fingertips caressing over the spiky tip of the M, when she hissed, pulling her arm tightly against her stomach. “Don't,” she said, her voice high. “It hurts.”

He frowned. “Why? When did you get it? Shouldn't it be healed by now?” he asked, twisting so that he could look at her.
She hesitated, pursing her lips before explaining, “It's cursed. It won't heal, and it still hurts if someone touches it. I've tried everything on it, but nothing works, so I just try to deal with it as best I can.”

“That's dreadful, Hermione. I'm sorry,” he said, wrapping his arms tighter around her. Yes, he would find the man who did this to her, and he would torture him slowly. Maybe he would even take Hermione with him when the time was right, and he would let her exact her own revenge. He could only imagine how beautiful she might look in that moment, high on the euphoria of dark magic. With the rush of power that came from taking the life of another person, from acting as the one true decider of life and death.

He pressed his lips to her head in a loving manner, smirking when she grew still in his arms, and then rested his chin on the top of her head. He could hardly wait.

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Chapter Thirteen: In All My Dreams I Drown

The Captain howled "Heave ho, heave ho"/ And tied me up with sheets/ "A storm is brewing in the South"/ "It's time to go to sleep"/ His berth, it rocks, heave ho, heave ho/ The ocean gnashed and moaned/ Like Jonah we'll be swallowed whole/ And spat back teeth and bones/ He said, "Now hush love, here's your gown./ There's the bed, lantern's down."/ "But I don't want to go to sleep; in all my dreams, I drown."

-Terrance Zdunich, “In All My Dreams I drown” from “The Devil's Carnival”

“What exactly is Slughorn having a meeting for?” Hermione asked as she and Tom traipsed through the corridors in a hurried manner, late for whatever it was Slughorn was hosting in the Common Room. Her arm was looped through his, as was customary by now, and he was unknowingly pulling her, causing the witch to occasionally skip to keep herself from falling.

“Every year around this time, he has a meeting with the sixth years to encourage them to start considering careers and life after Hogwarts, then schedules private meetings for his guidance. That sort of thing. It's an abhorrent waste of time,” he responded in a clipped manner.

Hermione laughed. “Everything that man does is a waste time,” she muttered under her breath, loud enough for Tom hear.

He smirked, then came to an abrupt stop. Hermione, unprepared for this, tripped over her feet, Tom's tight hold on her arm the only thing that kept her upright. He raised a brow, but chose to ignore her clumsiness, instead saying, “That actually reminded me, of something I wanted to ask you. Next week is the last week of school before the Holiday break.”

Frowning, she pulled her arm out from the inside of his elbow and crossed her arms over her chest. “I suppose it is, I think I forgot with everything that went on. I still have some shopping I need to do for the holidays, now that you mention it. When we go to Hogsmeade tomorrow I’ll have to finish it.”

“Yes, yes, that's fine. But not what I was talking about. Slughorn will use any event no matter how banal to have a party, and Christmas is no excuse. Unfortunately,” he said, looking quite displeased as he mentioned the joy-filled holiday. She bit down on her lip, suppressing a laugh at how miserly he seemed “Anyway, he is having one next week and he will not take no for an answer. He expects everyone from his little Slug Club to attend. And I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to go with me.”

She squinted her eyes in confusion. “Who else would I go with? I always go with you to his little get togethers.”

Tom looked at her curiously for a moment before chuckling, once more slipping his arm around hers and pulling her closer into his side. With a smirk, he looked down at her as he said, “No, I meant as my date, Hermione.”

She inhaled sharply, her eyes widening to what had to have been a comical point as her lips parted, surprise evident on her face. A noise, something between a grunt and the start of a word, left her throat, and Tom cocked his head to the side in response, his brows knitted.
“Are you alright?”

Blinking, she nodded. “Yes, I... I just wasn't...” she started to explain, but trailed off. Perhaps she had heard him wrong, or misunderstood his intent. Surely she had not just been asked out by Lord Voldemort... had she?

Seeming to sense her trepidation, Tom said, “Forgive me for being too forward or presumptuous, but I had simply thought that with everything that happened with Crane still so fresh, that perhaps you'd like to ensure you'll be attending with a friend. Someone who cares deeply about you and can protect you, is all.”

“Oh, alright. I don't see why not,” she answered slowly, feeling simultaneously relieved and uneasy. There was something terribly chilling about having Tom Riddle claim to care for you, to want to guard you and keep you safe. Whether it was genuine or not- and she severely doubted it to be- there was something dangerous about literally having his arm entwined in your own, not for her but for others. He had killed for her, and would, surely, kill for her again if the need arose.

It was best to stay on his good graces, to walk beside him and press into his side than to stray from him. She was safer that way, and so were others.

“Delightful,” he said, smiling wide, and they resumed walked once more, still having two floors to move through before they were at the door to Slytherin House. “I suppose you'll be needing a dress then? It is formal attire, but nothing you can't find at Gladrags when we head to the shops tomorrow.”

She hummed in response, nodding her head as he spoke. Perhaps shopping with Tom would be less painful than when Ginny had taken her to the clothing store, and they had spent the better part of an afternoon arguing over which shade of white looked more flattering. Hermione hadn't even been aware of the fact that white could come in different shades, but she still stood by her decision in that it was brighter looking one of the two. She giggled at the memory, sending Tom a sideways glance as she did. “Tom... what color dress do you think I should get, then? Bright white, or a slightly darker shade of white?”

He turned to her with a scowl. “Wouldn't that just be gray?” he said, sounding somewhat lost and not amused.

“That's what I had thought,” she said with a shrug, laughing when he continued to stare at her, perplexed. He mumbled something, but she ignored him as they came to the entrance for the Common Room. The door swung open as the two stepped through, arm and arm, and they were met with the eyes of their classmates as all the sixth years turned to them.

The lot was sitting in one of the seating areas of the Common Room- as there were multiple- and Slughorn stood at the head of it, directly in front of the fireplace with the green embers that cast a sickly glow onto his golden robes. He was smirking at the pair as they came to the entrance for the Common Room. The door swung open as the two stepped through, arm and arm, and they were met with the eyes of their classmates as all the sixth years turned to them.

Hermione smiled shyly, ducking her head as Riddle lead her and himself to the empty side of a sofa, sitting beside Nott and Rosier. When they were settled, Slughorn clapped his large hands together, addressing the group.

“Now, as I am sure you are all aware of, I have called you here to this meeting to discuss your futures outside of Hogwarts. There is only a year and a half left before you will be graduating, which
I promise will fly pass you in the blink of an eye,” Slughorn began excitedly, reciting a long and flowery sounding speech that Hermione only partially listened to. Instead, she looked around the room, specifically watching the four other sixth year boys. They had been acting rather off all day—all of them were late to breakfast in the morning. In the brief interactions with them she had had, she noticed that Dolohov was walking with a limp, and Mulciber was nursing his side. Nott was considerably silent, while Rosier was constantly gritting his teeth in what looked like pain when he moved. She could not say for certain what had caused all four of the Slytherin boys to be in so much pain, but she would bet every galleon she had to her name that Riddle was the one responsible.

Turning her head, she looked up to the wizard in question, found him focusing his gaze on Slughorn in rapt attention. His arm was slung around her shoulders, his fingers loosely splayed on her upper arm, and she was tucked into his warm side, once again surprised by just how comfortable he was. Whatever the boys had done, it had infuriated Riddle—enough for him to harm them all. She hated not knowing what it was, what anything that happened at their meetings was. The more paranoid part of her would wonder how often Hermione Dumbledore had been discussed—had they planned her poisoning together? Had one of his followers been the one to come up with the idea, or had Riddle been the mastermind of it? Though she had agreed with Dumbledore in that Riddle had cleared away any suspicions of her, and would hopefully once more resume pulling her deeper into his following, she was becoming rather impatient to the whole prospect.

The idea was laughable. Hermione Granger—Gryffindor Golden Girl, best friend to Harry Potter, Mudblood Know-it-All, wanted desperately to be initiated into the Death Eaters.

It wasn't until Tom looked at her with a frown that she realized she might have in fact laughed out loud, or had at least stared at him for too long and he felt her eyes on him. Offering what she had hoped was a reassuring smile, she forced herself to press into his side more, and eventually he turned his focus back to the Slytherin Head who was now off on a tangent about vacationing in someplace or another. It was strange, how accustomed she had grown to Riddle, to his touch. Only months ago she would flinch when he moved too close or too quickly, her knees would grow weak from his gaze. But now she was growing more comfortable in her role, in the false life of Hermione Dumbledore.

'You'll have to be comfortable anyway, if you don't want to draw suspicion to yourself. This is what Snape would have wanted you to do,' she thought to herself, feeling a need to defend against her own actions as she was snuggled into the Dark Lord's side. It was the only way she could prevent herself from becoming consumed in the feeling of betrayal she felt— as though she had betrayed her friends and her family, her very own principles. It was what she had to do, and it was simply better to accept it and carry on than to fight it at every turn.

Her entire life was a balancing act now, like a handstand in which she was offered no reprieve. She was required to do everything she could to grow close to Tom Riddle, would accept whatever role he offered to her so long as it allowed her access to what she needed to complete her mission—even if that role was locked in his arm, held in an embrace. At the same time, she was to keep her own sanity, to remind herself that she was a spy acting the part and not some trollop who spat on her loved ones at the first sight of a handsome man with a disarming smile. Who turned her back on everyone she knew so she could rest her head on his shoulder, cling to his arm. And throughout all of this, the blood was rushing to her head as she tried to remain perfectly straight, making sure not to fall too far to one side.

She was never very good at gymnastics, as it were.

“Within the coming week, I will schedule appointments with each and every one of you to discuss, in more detail, your personal plans for your future, and how to get you there. The appointments will
be scheduled once school has resumed in the new year, so you will have several weeks to consider your options and the opportunities before you,” Slughorn finished, beaming brightly at the students before him. With a nod, the meeting was dismissed, and the professor took the time to catch up with several students, asking them about their respective family members and the like. Hermione could only roll her eyes at the antics. At least some things would be constant in her lives within the past and the future.

“What about you, Hermione? What do you see yourself doing after school?” Tom asked, twisting his body so that he was facing her.

She shrugged, not really certain of how she should answer. In her own time, she might have worked as a Ministry official, not so much out of a desire for the job so much as a passion to right the wrongs and mend the corruption left behind from the war and the Death Eaters. That certainly would not do as a response now, so instead she said, “I suppose I haven’t thought much about it. I have a lot of thinking to do over the next few weeks.”

Tom nodded at her, then turned his gaze to Nott, looking at him expectantly.

“Politics, like my father,” Nott answered, avoiding eye contact with Tom. And then Tom moved down the line, looking next to Rosier who chewed his lip nervously, as if trying to think of the correct answer.

“I guess...like Nott...politics,” he said.

“I believe Nott intends to work in the council of the Ministry- do you wish to work there or in another department?” Riddle prompted, and Hermione could swear she saw the poor boy begin to sweat profusely at this. When he said nothing, his eyes flicking around in thought, Tom said, “I think the legal department would best suit you. You’re very persuasive and level-headed, you’d be excellent at campaigning for new, more fair laws.”

Visibly relieved, Rosier nodded. “Yes, I had always considered working there.”

The question then moved to Mulciber, and Hermione was dreadfully aware that he was grooming them to his needs. Was placing his men in the Ministry, was beginning to infiltrate the government as early as he could and was picking the paths that best suited the personality of his followers- the paths that would benefit Lord Voldemort and his cause.

“Perhaps you would enjoy working with the Magical Creature Relations Committee. Doesn’t that sound exciting, Mulciber, corresponding with giants and vampires? I know you would be positively bored, sitting behind a desk all day. With that position, you’d get to travel and work towards a more...symbiotic relationship with our magical brethren.”

“Dolohov, I hear that with everything going on with Grindelwald at the moment, a new department is being opened in the Ministry- Slughorn was telling me about it just the other day. It's going to be a branch of the Auror department, but focusing on removing dark artifacts and literature from the public. You’ll be able to study it all, and keep society safe all at the same time. Sounds quite ideal, considering your strengths?”

And with each suggestion, the boys would nod dutifully, agreeing with their leader. Yes, in fact, that sounds exactly like what I’d enjoy doing. Thank you for suggesting it, I’ll explore it later with Slughorn.

Ignoring the chill that settled into her bones, Hermione turned to face Tom, her eyes narrowed. “What about you, Tom? What will you do?”
He pursed his lips, casting his gaze down to his legs. He picked a piece of lint off of his pant leg, flicked it to the side, before saying, “I think I’d like to travel a bit, do some independent research. There’s still much in this world to learn, and I’d like to try to know as much of it as possible. After that? Maybe I’ll try my own hand at politics.” Then, he laughed, a hollow laugh as he lifted his mouth in smirk, his eyes dark and cloudy as they met Hermione’s. “Who knows, perhaps I’ll be the next Minister of Magic?”

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“Do I really have to wear a dress, Tom? I’m certain no matter what I wear Slughorn will be the belle of the ball, don’t you think? Who am I to even try to compete?” Hermione teased as she and Tom walked through Hogsmeade together, her green and silver scarf wrapped around her neck and covering her chin. She had laughed for a near minute when she put the hideous thing on, thinking that she was indeed losing her mind now as she looked at her reflection. It didn’t look nearly as awful on her as she thought it might, suiting her complexion rather nicely.

Tom smirked at her, his own scarf loose around his neck. He never seemed quite bothered by the temperature- whether it was stiflingly hot or frigidly cold. It was a small aspect on the grand scheme of things, but it unnerved Hermione none the less. She even began to wonder if he was capable of feeling such things as heat or the absence of it, though she knew that was silly.

“Well, it’s no fun if he’s just given the title. You have to make him work for it,” he countered, and she frowned, knowing she would not win. It wasn’t necessarily that she was so against the idea of wearing formal clothing- even she enjoyed dressing up once in a while- it was more or less the fact that it was a frivolous purchase, and that she only had limited funds to work with.

She had come to the past with a modestly filled coin purse, one that had enough to last her for approximately two and a half years. She had even managed to work Christmas presents into her budget, though she had only planned to purchase small gifts more for the gesture of it than anything. But a dress, one she would only wear once, was not worked into her carefully arranged system, and she did not wish to spend her limited cash on one. She had even tried to craft a decent enough dress out of a spare school robe she had, but she was rubbish at matron spells and now she was without a dress and down one robe.

She opened her mouth to say something, but was promptly interrupted by a familiar voice.

“Tom!”

The two turned around at the noise, and Hermione raised her brows as Athena Zabini approached them, towing by her side a handsome, regal looking man.

“Hello, Tom, Hermione,” the girl said, smiling in each of their direction. Then, gesturing to the man at her side, she added, “Hermione, this is a friend of mine, Abraxas Malfoy. He graduated a couple years ago, a fellow Slytherin, so he and Tom have already met.”

“Oh,” was all Hermione could say, her eyes widening at the man before her. She knew that, genetically, it would be impossible for every generation of Malfoys to look the same, with gray eyes and platinum blond hair. But she had always sort of envisioned that each member of the Pure-blood house would sort of be an older, more regal looking version of Draco.

Abraxas was still blond, but it was a darker shade, the color of golden wheat and straw. It was smooth and straight, curling at the ends around his jaw. His eyes were light brown, nothing really magnificent about them either in color or intensity, and really the only identifiable trait of a Malfoy was his sharp, angular face with the pointed chin.
“Pleasure to meet you Miss Hermione. Dumbledore, right? Athena told me you were a refugee of the war. Terribly sorry to hear about that, but I'm glad you are alright. Hogwarts is the safest place in the world though, and you are in good hands,” he said, shaking her hand firmly as he smiled at her. She could only nod, still reeling from how un-Malfoy like he was. Or perhaps all Malfoys were this congenial when you were not a muggleborn?

He didn't seem to notice her discomfort though, as he then turned to Tom and shook his hand as well. “And Riddle- good to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Tom said, slipping his hand back into his pocket. “To what do we owe this surprise visit?”

Athena answered now, looking at Tom was a gaze that Hermione thought seemed a tad bit pathetic, as though she were waiting for praise and accolades. “I had written to Abraxas the other day, asking for him to stop by so we could meet up in Hogsmeade. We got to doing some talking, and I mentioned that you were interested in joining the Ministry. Abraxas was kind enough to offer to speak with you about it, pick your brain a bit to see if he can offer his guidance to you.”

“I see. How generous,” Tom said, his voice lowering somewhat, halfway between Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort. Hermione knitted her brows, looking between him, Athena and Abraxas, the distinct feeling that something more was going on, something hidden beneath the niceties and handshakes.

'Is...Athena a Death Eater? Or Abraxas?’ she thought, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. No, that couldn't have been. From what she understood, Abraxas wasn't particularly active in the war, Lucius was the one who had invested the Malfoy name into it. And the Zabini family did not join until much later, nor did they play an entirely large part of it. Unless she had unknowingly altered something, had sped up the process in which Voldemort would recruit. She made a barely concealed groan at the thought of that, wondering how much more she would mess up.

She was dreadful at this.

“Perhaps we can head over to the Hog's Head, discuss this more over some drinks. I can answer any questions you may have, or ask a few myself, more comfortably than out in this cold, hm?” Abraxas said, gesturing down the street to where the dingy pub stood.

Tom smiled, clasping a hand down on Hermione's shoulder. “That sounds wonderful, however I promised my dear Hermione I would help her find a dress for the upcoming party. Unless of course Athena would like to take my place? I think she may be more better suited for the task than myself,” he said, though Hermione did not know whom the question was posed to: her, or the seventh year witch.

Thankfully, Athena was the one who spoke, nodding enthusiastically. “Oh of course! We might be gone a while though, Hermione is so lovely it will be hard to find the one that looks most flattering,” she said, and Hermione frowned. The praise was not so much directed to her, as it was at Tom, who smiled and nodded in agreement at her. What was going on, and why was she being ushered into a play date with a Slytherin who had until now never a word to her?

She did not argue though, deciding that this would be one of those moments where it was best to not press, not to demand to stay with Tom. But as she was being pulled away by an excited Athena in the direction of Gladrags, she couldn't stop herself from looking back on Abraxas and Tom as they tipped their heads together to whisper before heading in the opposite direction.

'This is a business deal,' she thought, turning her head to face forward as she wondered exactly what
role Athena was playing in all of this. She did not know much about the prefect, only that she was intelligent and athletic- she was one of the chasers to their Quidditch team- and that she did not particularly like Hermione. Or Tom, for that matter, as she would catch her sending sour expressions in both their directions during meals. She never understood why, especially considering the sudden change in countenance she had seen.

No, Athena was certainly trying to win Tom over, and Hermione pursed her lips as they entered the boutique. The fingers to her right hand slipped into her sleeve, tugging onto her wand securely. Just in case.

But Zabini was nothing but pleasant, and seemed to enjoy tossing dress after dress at her. She had been, thankfully, less stubborn than Ginny had been, and would relent if Hermione said she did not like a particular gown. In the end, they had settled on a simple green dress- of course it had to be green- and had surprised Hermione by adding the purchase to her family's tab.

“My father will hardly even notice, and besides, we are family anyway. Slytherin prides itself as being a home away from home, which makes us all family,” she had said, waving Hermione away as she signed the slip from the saleswitch despite her many protests.

They then made their way throughout the quaint town, stopping for some custard and butterbeer. She engaged in friendly conversation with Athena, even if it did on occasion feel forced, and whenever the girl would laugh a little too hard at her jokes that weren't really all that funny, or agree too vigorously with something she said, she would wonder once more what her end game was. She had purchased Hermione's dress when it was too expensive and Hermione had gaped at the price tag, she had been overly sweet to someone she had no report with, and she had complimented her. No, she hadn't complimented her. She complimented Tom, about her.

'She's using me to get to Tom, and he's encouraging it,' she thought, sputtering her butterbeer with the realization. That had to have been it, there was no other way. She was not funny enough to laugh with, was not remarkable enough to spend money on. But she was, as everyone saw it, the only girl to ever hang on Tom's arm for longer than an evening, the one he would hold protectively. Just as Nott and the others had become friendlier to her when Tom grew closer to her, so was Athena.

It was a troubling concept to realize, that others viewed you as the in or out to Tom's circle. There was a part of her- one that was morbidly fascinated and morally reprehensible that wanted to test this theory, wanted to see what would happen if she claimed someone had mistreated her. She quickly shooed those thoughts away, at once feeling guilty for them. She did not need to test it, she had proof enough that should she tell Tom of a grievance she suffered, the one who hurt her would be far worse off.

She felt all at once uncomfortable with the power she had, and made an effort to be as friendly as she could with Athena, going out of her way to laugh as well, to compliment her. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to be harmed because of her, for Tom to mistake her confusion and cautious nature as a sign that there was a problem. She did not want any more blood on her hands than necessary, even if the girl before her was trying to win her way into the Death Eaters.

How had that come about anyway? Could it, in anyway, be tied to whatever occurred between Tom and his current followers, whatever happened to make him torture them? She didn't know, and wouldn't know until she herself was finally allowed access to the heavily guarded group.

With their bellies full of butterbeer and sweets, they left the Three Broomsticks, and Athena followed Hermione around as she finished her Christmas shopping. Her cheeks hurt from the cold and from forcing a smile, but she figured she would get used to it, over time.
It wasn't until the Hogsmeade trip had come to an end that she saw Tom again, though Abraxas had left for the evening. Eventually, they met up once more with the other members of Riddle's gang, and together they walked back to Hogwarts.

Tom in the center, with Hermione, Nott and Athena on his right side, Dolohov, Rosier and Mulciber on the left. She tried her best to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach, tried her best to look relaxed and content as Tom held onto her waist. Tried her best to fight the lead weighing her down, the panic that made her adrenaline rush unreasonably. Tom was beginning to gain more followers, faster than he had in her own time. And she had to be next if she wanted to slow him down.

-xXx-
(six days later...)

That was it. That was the last book left on magical beasts and creatures in the entire library. And not a single one detailed anything of man and serpent descent. He wanted to destroy something in his frustration, but instead, Tom let out a sharp breath of air, closing his eyes as he tried to think clearly. He was alone, sitting on the floor of the restricted section, a ball of light floating by his head. It was after hours, as now that Hermione had returned he did not afford himself the privacy needed for his research, and had taken to sneaking into the library to accomplish it. A simple matter of a disillusionment charm was all it took to remain unnoticed, and even if he had been caught, he was confident in his abilities to explain himself to any teachers who might have found him.

Perhaps the only thing keeping him so composed was of the rather fortunate luck he had been experiencing lately. It seemed almost as though his water supply had been replaced with felix felicis and he never went without, as everything that could go right in his life the past week, had. Crane was gone, Hermione had returned and was closer to him than ever. His followers were as useless as before, but he could overlook that for the moment, now that he had so many new potential followers to add to his collection.

He had been surprised when Zabini approached him, had been perfectly prepared for- and even expecting- to have to wipe her memories clean. But she had, much to his chagrin, impressed him. Over the past several days, she had forced herself by Hermione's side, posturing herself as a friend and confidante for the girl she had previously mocked. She was smart enough to understand his subtle commands, to read his intentions without him having to say it, and would act on it dutifully. And, she had connected him with Abraxas Malfoy once more, something that had proved to open many opportunities for him.

They had not gone to the Hog's Head as mentioned, and Tom had instead lead the Hogwarts Alumni through the Forbidden Forest, to where only two weeks ago he had killed that poor witch. Annie or Amy or something like that, he hadn't been bothered to remember. They had not discussed too much, as Tom had little trust in the Malfoy name and would not divulge too many of his secrets just yet. But it had gone over well, nonetheless, and he had even been invited to spend the month of August at Malfoy Manor, to further discuss possible 'mergers' as Abraxas had called it.

'I have business to attend to that will keep me out of the country, but I will return in the end of July and you're more than welcome to spend the rest of the summer at my estate. That will give us all the time and the privacy to discuss this merger of ours, as well as sponsors. You can even bring along that little bird of yours. Dumbledore, correct?' he had said, and Tom's eyes had hardened when he spoke of Hermione, of the condescending tone to his voice. But he was a Malfoy, and expecting him to not be pompous was like expecting a troll to not be ugly. Some things would not be changed.

'Hermione, and I wouldn't say a bird is the best way to describe her. I'm sure we can arrange something, though I don't know what her plans are for the summer.'
Malfoy laughed, an unrefined one that made him seem slightly more tolerable. 'Well, I suspect she will be spending the summer with the only family she has left, and Merlin help her if that is so. On second thought, I encourage you to bring her along- I would not be so cruel as to force her to spend an entire summer with that doddering old fool.'

He still wasn't entirely certain of how he felt about Malfoy, but he could not deny that his plans for independent studies and research would be much easier with the funds to do so. And certainly a month spent at Malfoy Manor would be preferable to the dreaded orphanage he would otherwise while away in. Perhaps it would even be a pleasant way to pass the summer, with Hermione there and access to the infamous Malfoy library, a library that Abraxas promised housed more practical books than Hogwarts would even dare to consider. Books of dark and unsavory magic.

He had yet to bring the idea up to Hermione, but would in due time. No doubt, she wouldn't hesitant to join him. He had, after all, hoped to have her initiated and turned against her caretaker by then, in which case she would eagerly agree to leave behind Dumbledore in favor of the Manor.

Of course, Hermione didn't quite seem to like to abide by his schedule and his wants, something that was beginning to try his patience. He had very little of it to start off with, and he was doing everything he could to speed the process along. She had looked absolutely mortified when he had asked her to attend Slughorn's party as his date, and he had been astonished by that. The very quality that had intrigued him to her- the fact that she did not drop at his feet to worship him- was now working against him, and he was growing very tired of it.

He had never before had to really try to win someone over, that sort of thing came naturally to him. Perhaps he wasn't thinking grand enough. Tapping a finger to his chin, he wracked his brain, trying to think of something- anything- that would end this little came of back and forth. That would effectively end any doubt in Hermione's mind of him.

It was at that precise moment that his eyes fell on a book, one of the many on the shelves before him, and he instantly recognized it from its brightness, its neat and not-at-all creased spine. Crafting Original Spells and Potions Using Muggle Theory was placed on the shelf immediately ahead of him, at eye level with his current position, and if he hadn't been paranoid before, he most certainly was now. For how else could this particular book seemingly be exactly wherever he was looking? He wasn't sure how, but Dumbledore had to have charmed it, made the book haunt him wherever he ventured in the library.

He sneered at the red leather binding, wondering if the old man had also charmed it to be indestructible. Reaching out, he tipped the book off the shelf and pulled it into his lap, not quite certain of why he felt compelled to look at it first before blasting it to bits.

It was a thick book, with thin pages that held tiny print so as to fit as much information as possible. He flipped through, not entirely paying too much attention, until he saw the chapter title inscribed on the top of one page, and he paused, shuffling backwards through the book until he saw the start of the chapter: Creating a countercurse to injuries caused by dark magic.

He chewed his lip, looking around him briefly before he began reading, skimming through the words. There was something to be said about knowing how to create your own spell, your own potion. Something that, in order to do, you had to have an understanding of the muggle science behind it. Otherwise you might use dittany when you really should have used the root of Wiggentree, which could drastically alter your potion, making it ineffective or disastrous depending on the other ingredients. It was not a skill many possessed, as it required extensive knowledge beyond just that of the magical world, but it did have certain advantages.

Maybe he could even create a countercurse to properly heal Hermione's scar, the one she still hid
from him and winced whenever his hands would accidentally graze over it. He frowned, pursing his lips as he considered the possibility. It could be what he needed, to earn her trust. He knew that if he were in her position, he would greatly appreciate anyone who could come up with a solution to ease the pain, to banish that horrid word from where it was etched. He could make her new again.

Taking a quick look around the dark and empty library, he tapped his wand to the cover of the book, charming it to change into something more innocuous. When the incriminating title had been altered to something not of muggle studies, he shrunk it down in size and shoved it into his pocket. No one would miss it, he imagined it could be gone for years before someone even became aware of its absence. He would return it when he was done and he had studied it enough to create the spell for Hermione, perhaps even several more spells he could create for his own arsenal. Just because it totted muggle science did not mean he couldn't pervert it for his own uses, after all. He couldn't go to Slughorn for everything, and even then, making a spell of his own creation was leagues away from combining two existing potions into one. Slughorn would certainly be no help in that regard.

He stood then, smoothing out the wrinkles in his slacks. It was late, and he had to be getting to bed. Tomorrow would be the last day before the school took pause for the holidays, a day filled with tests and ending with a party in the dungeons. One that he had big plans for, as far as Hermione was concerned.

He was never very patient.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your amazing comments and all the kudos! You are all so wonderful and I am so grateful to you! Follow me on tumblr at ReneeHartBlog for any information for fics, or just general fandom insanity of Harry Potter and Star Wars! Thank you again!
Chapter Fourteen: Rotten

The Malfoys have fallen out of the good graces with the Dark Lord— he was none too pleased with Draco's inability to assassinate Albus Dumbledore. Thankfully, I was able to persuade him away from killing them for their oversight, and managed to encourage him to keep them as slaves to himself and the other Death Eaters. It is far from ideal, in their perspective, but I would be remiss if I did not take any opportunity to spill as little blood as possible.

Albus has gone into hiding, as the Ministry has fallen and the Dark Lord taken over. He has plans to have me reside as Headmaster over Hogwarts, a task I loathe as I know that the Carrows will be joining me on the staff. I can only hope they do not take too much delight in their position of power, and that without Potter and his group there to incite rebellion that the students will not place themselves too frequently within harm's way.

As for Potter, the boy is now taking on the task of hunting and destroying each horcrux. I am concerned that his extremely limited intellect will draw out the process and that we will fail long before he succeeds. But Albus is confident that he— along with his band of Gryffindors— will be able to take care of them. As much as I hate to admit it, the Know-It-All Granger may finally make herself useful, though I already suspect I will have to help guide them in the right direction from time to time.

While Albus has not confided in me the specific objects he believes were used to create these four remaining horcruxes, I have my suspicions and will do my best to locate them, or find any information that could lead to where they are hidden. I do not trust the lot of them to shoulder this responsibility on their own, and hope to handle one or two of them myself.

As for the Dark Lord, learning of his horcruxes— and just how many he possessed— has certainly explained a lot. The effects of having your soul ripped in half so much has not been explored before, though I can't imagine a great deal of what makes him so monstrous isn't to be blamed on it. Though I suspect, based on what I have learned from Albus's memories, that his soul— even while whole— was never very good. His soul has always been rotten.

-excerpt from Severus Snape's Journals, August 7, 1997

“You know, Hermione, you actually have quite wonderful hair. It's healthy and thick—” Athena said, running her fingers through Hermione's knotted mane and frizzy curls.

“And a mess and horrid, and adds about a foot to my overall height,” she cut off with a laugh, batting the girl's hands away. They were both sitting cross-legged on the floor of the sixth year girls' lavatory, various cosmetic potions and makeup between them. Slughorn's party would begin in an hour, and Athena had taken it upon herself to get ready with Hermione, had even offered her help in an area she was more or less clueless on.

The girl had been practically inseparable from her since the Hogsmeade visit, and, much to Hermione's surprise, she found she did not entirely mind her presence. She knew nearly everything that she said or did was disingenuous and only a means to an end for her. That she was spending time with Hermione because, for reasons she did not know, that was what Tom wanted, and Athena was trying to win him over. But, budding Death Eater or not, she did quite enjoy having her company, to have a reprieve from the boys of Slytherin house.
Athena sighed, pulling her hands away. “I like it though. It may be wild and unruly, but it's a nice change of pace. Any girl can have neat and shiny hair, but you're different,” she said with a shrug as she twisted around her and grabbed hold of brush. “It's one of the many things Tom likes about you.”

She laughed as she grabbed the brush offered to her and began to run it through her hair, wincing when the teeth caught on her knots. “I highly doubt Tom could care less about my hair,” she said, trying to ignore the way Athena flinched as she watched her work the brush painfully over her head.

Suddenly, the prefect stood, walking over to where the two dresses were hanging from a hook on the wall, and she ran her hand over the silk of Hermione's gown. Looking over her shoulder at her, she said with a smile, “He likes you, you know. Or I guess you don't, you're about the only one who doesn't.”

She paused, the brush midway through in it's downward pull. “What do you mean?”

“I've known him for six years, Hermione, and not once have I- or anyone- seen him pay any girl the amount of attention he pays you,” she said, taking one final look at the dress before turning around to face her. “He adores you.”

Slowly, Hermione extracted the brush from her hair and settled it down, pulling herself up. She was laughing now, her brown eyes wide with humor as her shoulders shook. She doubted that. Lord Voldemort did not adore anyone. It was a fact made very clear to her by Severus Snape, Dumbledore, and from her own observations during her time. Yes, the Voldemort she knew was less human than this one, and possessed only one sliver of the soul that he did. But that was not the deciding factor in whether or not he could adore anyone or anything- he simply did not.

“I don't think so,” she said.

But Athena ignored her, smiling wide as she moved closer. “I'm not really supposed to tell you this, but he has a surprise planned for tonight. For you,” she said.

Her heart skipped a beat.

“A surprise?” she said slowly, so as to prevent herself from stammering. She did not like the idea of the Dark Lord having anything for her, the least of which a surprise. The last thing he surprised her with had been a potion that was nearly her undoing. No, she didn't like the way this sounded at all.

The other witch was none the wiser though, nodding emphatically, completely unaware to Hermione's trepidation. “Abraxas helped him with it, I guess. When we were shopping, something must have come up that prompted Tom to ask about it, and Abraxas set it all up for him. They're becoming rather fast friends, as it were,” she said, then after a moment, added, “Just like us.”

Hermione's lips twitched into a nervous, unconvincing smile. “Yes...like us,” she said, wondering if she should feign an illness to get out of the party. Perhaps she should run to visit Dumbledore, try to be proactive to the possible danger ahead. 'No, I can't. He's out on business,' she remembered with a frown, the missive he had sent her earlier that day that explained his absence still residing in her pocket. He would not be back until tomorrow morning, to see the students off. She tried to think of another excuse to leave, but before she could think of any, Athena had placed her hands on her shoulders. She turned her so that she was facing the large mirror before her, her thin face lost among the tangle of curls shrouding it.

“Now, what should we do with your hair?”
“How do you think you did on your midterms, mate?” Rosier asked to no one in particular as he fiddled with the silver cufflinks to his dress robes, the sleeves unrolled and sloppy. The five boys sat at one of the tables in the Common Room, with Riddle at the head- as always- and examining his cuticles with a bored expression on his face.

“I failed transfiguration, that's for sure. I couldn't conjure up any of the required objects, except a handkerchief. Doesn't matter though, the class is rubbish as far as I'm concerned,” Mulciber said with a slump of his shoulders.

Dolohov sneered. “Hardly your fault. Dumbledore is a dreadful teacher. My father has tried more than once to have him removed from his post but to no luck,” he said, sounding quite disappointed in his father's lack of success.

“Speaking of Dumbledore,” Rosier said suddenly, craning his neck to look in the direction of the girls' dormitories. “Those two are taking their dear sweet time. By the time we leave, the party will have ended and will be needing to board the train to head home.” He laughed then, but the sound died short on his lips when Nott gave him a scathing look before turning to Riddle, his brow furrowed.

“What exactly is the deal with Athena now? Is she...going to be joining us more frequently?” he asked quietly, his voice in a low whisper.

Riddle finally looked up from the careful scrutiny of his hands, giving Nott a calculating gaze before saying, “Well, she's already done more for me than you lot. It only seems fair.” His tone was sharp and curt, and Nott frowned. Clearly, he was still angry at them for allowing Athena to overhear them. Or rather, Dolohov and Rosier, as they were the only two discussing it between themselves. But Riddle did not care, and he blamed all of the them for the crimes of a few.

“I still don't think we should mix in with Malfoy though. There's something about that family I never liked, and I don't know if we should trust them,” Dolohov said bitterly. Suddenly, Riddle pounded his fist down hard on the table, in front of where he sat. The boy jumped, slumping back in his chair with his dark eyes wide as he turned to look at him.

In a voice so calm that it betrayed his aggressive actions, Riddle said, “I don't know if you've come to realize it yet, but I do not care what you think one way or the other. You have disappointed me far too often for me to put any stock into what you say, and I will not make decisions about my future from your gut-feelings. Quite frankly, I'm growing very tired of having to listen to it.”

An indiscernible look flashed across Dolohov’s face, his eyes darkening as he chewed his lip. He looked quite torn between saying something to him, taking a stand against the terrifying leader, and keeping silent so as to protect himself. In the end, he nodded stiffly, casting his eyes down to the table. “I apologize,” he muttered, but Riddle had stopped paying attention to him. He had stood from his chair and was now moving through the Common Room.

Hermione and Athena were walking towards them, each dressed in their respective gowns. The Seventh year girl wore a simple white slip, one that hugged close to her generous curves and draped over her in away that reminded Tom of Greek Goddesses, of her namesake. Her dark curls were pulled into a braid that rested over her shoulder, the knots thick and luxurious. But he only offered her a brief glance before turning his gaze to Hermione, a smile that he could not stop forming on his lips.

She looked just as radiant as he imagined she would, if not more, from the glimpses he had seen of
her from within her memories. She wore a silk dress of the deepest emerald green, the bodice form-fitting with a cinched waist, a black ribbon wrapped around. The skirt of the dressed flared out, the hem swaying with each motion she made to reveal the black petticoat beneath it. Her hair was not restrained, something he found himself to be thankful for, and had only been tamed somewhat into neater curls, ones which did not frizz so uncontrollably. Instead, her thick locks fanned around her face and tumbled in waves to her shoulders, the ringlets more defined than usual.

“You look lovely, Hermione,” he said, his voice soft as he reached out and grabbed her upper arm, rubbing circles with his thumb.

She blushed, ducking her head at the praise. “Athena deserves the credit. I'm not very good at any of this,” she said, making a broad gesture to herself.

“A painter only excels when he is given the proper tools and muses to work with,” he said, smirking when she chuckled nervously, a light rouge coloring her cheeks. This was what he was used to, this exchange of kind and loving words that would evoke an embarrassed smile, a blush. He had never been able to accomplish such a feat with her, to sway her with his words. He quite enjoyed it, he thought, resolving to draw out more of this, the humbly bashful side of this extraordinary witch.

“We better be off to the party. You know how Slughorn can be when he thinks he's being forgotten,” she said in a huff, swallowing hard as he continued to watch her, his blue eyes bright with something she could not quite place.

After a second of appraisal, he smiled, holding his elbow out to her. “Indeed. Nott, perhaps you can escort Miss Zabini to the party?” he said. The boy nodded dutifully, rushing over to Athena's side and extending his own elbow to her. She smiled at him, looping her arm through his, and together they left the Common Room.

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“For what it's worth, Hermione, I think you may have usurped Slughorn of the belle of the ball title,” Tom joked, one hand pressed against the small of her back and the other clasped with her own, held at eye level as the two waltzed around the room. The classroom was decorated in the over-the-top manner only Slughorn himself could manage, the entire area a blinding mix of golds and silvers. Every surface seemed to shimmer in the generous amount of lighting, and the ceiling was charmed so that snow fell from the beams above. A fine dusting of magical snow covered the floor- it did not melt, nor did it chill the air or freeze the skin. Snowflakes had already settled over Tom's head, clinging to his ebony locks and wide shoulders. She did not dare to imagine how many were stuck in her own hair, trapped within the somewhat managed curls.

She sighed in mock exasperation. “Well, I can't say it's deserved. We all know that if Malfoy still attended this school he would surely win the crown. But I accept,” she said, focusing harder than she cared to admit on her footwork. She was never very good at dancing, and she struggled to keep up with Tom's grace and expertise. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was talented in this particular field as well, yet she was, unprepared for his swift and smooth movements when she settled his hand in his, allowed him to sweep her around the room.

“He is a little bit foppish, isn't he?” Tom said, smirking down at her.

“Yes,” she answered. Clearing her throat and readying herself, her stomach doing tumultuous somersaults, she asked, “You and him are becoming friends, then? Athena mentioned that you were still communicating after she introduced you. Or is it merely him mentoring you in politics?”

He frowned, thinking for a moment before he spoke. “I suppose for now, mentoring. As I'm sure you
know, I do not have much to my name, considering that I am an orphan. Politics require funding, and should he decide that he shares my beliefs and whatnot, he could provide that for me.”

“Oh,” she said. That was it then. The Malfoys were one of the wealthier Pure-Blood families, and he was looking for their support, both financial and otherwise. During the First and Second War, Voldemort and his Death Eaters had used Malfoy Manor as their primary headquarters, operating from the estate safely from both the heavy warding and the fact that no one ever poked around in the Malfoys' business. Any time they fell under suspicion, they would merely buy their way out. A system that Tom Riddle did- and would- take advantage of.

“In fact,” Tom started, drawing her from her thoughts. “Abraxas offered for me to spend part of the summer in his manor. It would provide us with more than enough time and privacy to cover any specifics.”

“That's kind of him,” she hummed, not paying complete attention to him as she got lost in her reveries once more. In the mere short months she had been there, Tom had gone from four followers to six. And surely that number would only increase once Malfoy was more firmly on his side. The man had power and authority, and more importantly- connections. He would garner all the interest Tom would need, all without drawing the attention of anyone who might frown on their cause. She chewed her lip, wondering if perhaps she should suggest that the Order of the Phoenix be formed earlier than it otherwise would. It did not fit with the time line, but neither did Tom's current moves around the chessboard. If he was forming his army ahead of schedule, why shouldn't they?

“Do you think you would like that, Hermione?” Tom asked, and she startled, suddenly aware that she had missed some important part of the conversation.

Pursing her lips, she said, “I'm...sorry. I didn't hear you?”

He slowed to a stop, the song that they were dancing to fading as it came to an end. When they stood still, in the center of the dance floor, he let the hand that was intertwined with hers fall to her hip, the other remaining on the small of her back. “I said that the invitation was extended to you as well. And I'd like for you to join me,” he answered, watching her curiously.

It took her a moment to understand what he was referring to. “Oh! You mean...spend the summer with you at Malfoy Manor?” He nodded, and she felt a sudden surge of confusing emotions all at once.

Had this been the surprise Athena was referring to? If so, than she was certainly relieved. This was a much preferable surprise to what she had been envisioning. Particularly considering that it had to have meant she was making progress with him. After all, he wouldn't invite her to join him if she wasn't, would he?

Yet, the very thought of the manor set her nerves alight, made her windpipe tighten so that she felt like air was suddenly in short supply. It was the very same manor she had been tortured in, not once but twice. The one she had narrowly escaped from on both accounts, the first time with the help of friends, the second, alone. She couldn't imagine spending the summer there, surrounded by Riddle and the Malfoys. She had been hoping for a break to seek respite in the two months between years. But it would be selfish, she knew, to not take the opportunity when it was presented to her so nicely. For once she did not have to work for this, and who was she to turn this down? Deep down, underneath the green and the false life she was living, she was a Gryffindor, and she was as brave as they came.

“I suppose I could. That sounds pleasant,” she choked out, hoping it did not sound too forced.
He smiled. “I'm glad. I look forward to it. I have another surprise for you as well,” he said, and she frowned, her brow knitting. Another? What on earth could it be, and why?

He pulled away from her, reaching a hand into the inside of his dress robes. He then pulled out a rather large black velvet box, slightly larger than his palm, with a delicate silver bow wrapped around it. With a grin, he held it out to her, his lips rising as she slowly reached out for it.

“Tom, what—”

“I never did anything for your birthday, back in September. A terribly rude oversight of mine, and I thought that I should redeem myself,” he said.

She shook her head, feeling decidedly uncomfortable all of a sudden. She did not like this side of him, the one who offered her gifts and waltzed with her. It was unnerving, and something about the glow in his eyes, the way he had been looking at her all night, had her on edge. Inhaling sharply, she slid the bow off the box and gingerly opened it.

Her fingers stiffened around the gift, eyes widening. Placed delicately within the silk lining of the box was a garish and familiar locket, a heavy gold pendant with green gems inlaid to form an 'S', one which looked like a winding serpent along the oval frame. She swallowed several times in quick succession, her jaw clenching as she looked at it with distrust, with anger and fear. This was the locket that had burned into her flesh, had turned and tainted her thoughts. The one that whispered to her so evilly, a seduction to darkness that made her blood run cold.

She wasn't aware that Tom was talking until after he had already started, the roar in her ears settling as she attempted to focus on him, his words suddenly coming to her. “- I had mentioned it to Abraxas at one point during our discussion, and he said that he actually knew the witch who had purchased it after it was lost. He was kind enough to get it back for me, being a family heirloom and all, and I decided I'd like you to have it,” he was saying.

She felt her throat constrict even further, her words coming out strangled. “Why?” All at once she wished she hadn't asked him, because then he moved closer to her, his hands settling on her hips and his face only inches away from hers. So close she could see each and every individual eyelash fanning over his darkening eyes.

“I've come to care for you a great deal, Hermione. In the short time I've known you, you've managed to spark my interest on more than one occasion. I enjoy your company, and I was petrified with fear when I thought that I had lost you when you fell ill. And I've decided I don't want to lose you again, not to anyone or anything,” he said, and she could feel his breath on her face, the puff of air as he spoke on her cheeks. Her hand was clutching onto the box now, her nails digging into the soft fabric cover of it. “I'd like you to be mine, Hermione.”

And then he was kissing her, his lips pressed against her own and she froze at the contact, her spine going rigid. She was overwhelmed by the sensations, hypersensitive to everything that occurred within that moment. To the tight grip he had on her hips, his nails digging into her and pulling her closer so that she was pressed against him. To the surprising softness of his lips, the urgent way he pressed them against hers, his teeth grazing along her lower lip. He would nip down on them every so often, gently at first, but growing more aggressive with each one. Then one hand was cupping her face, holding her still as he deepened the kiss.

He tasted like chocolate, dark and rich chocolate. Like decadence. And more disturbing than the feel of his mouth on hers, than the knowledge that the Dark Lord himself was kissing her in a room filled with people, was the fact that a part of her enjoyed it. A part of her sighed before she could stop herself, opened her mouth to him when he ran his tongue along her lips. He was a skilled kisser,
his lips fit so nicely against her own, slipping into place as if they belonged there. She did not kiss back, but she did not stop him.

When he finally pulled away, she let out a breath she did not know she was holding, her lungs burning. He was still looking at her, his blue eyes darker than usual, and she felt dizzy, her head too heavy for her neck.

“I need to get some air,” she blurted out, partially as an excuse to leave, partially the truth. For she was not breathing, not properly at least. Her lungs were expanding and constricting, her mouth slung open and inhaling sharply, but she did not feel as if she were actually getting any oxygen. She felt entirely suffocated.

Shoving the box with the necklace back into his hands, she twisted on her heel, near sprinting for the exit. She was vaguely aware of Athena walking towards her, but she brushed past her, dodging through the crowd until she was standing out in the corridor, wrapping her arms around her tightly. She did not stop running until she felt she was a suitable distance away from the classroom, pressing her forehead against the cool stone wall. The chill calmed her somewhat, helped to ground her.

She felt nauseous, felt bile rising in her throat as the reality of the situation hit her with great force.

He had kissed her. She had snogged Lord Voldemort. The very thought made her stomach wretch, and she dropped to her knees, her head still pressed to the walls. She took several deep breaths to calm herself, trying to clear her thoughts so that she could properly examine them. Tom Riddle had kissed her. He kissed her after asking her to be his, after inviting her to spend the summer with him.

She had not planned for this, had not even considered it to be a possibility. She had been told that he did not love, did not even care to pretend to love. He had a heart, she had felt it beat within his chest, but he did not love. This she knew to be true. There had to have been a reason for him to want her in such a way, an ulterior motive. One that was surely insidious.

This was not how she thought it would work when she held the time turners in her hands, when she had impulsively agreed to this outrageous plan. She was supposed to become a Death Eater, become his most trusted follower so that she would become privy to any information, so that she could easily sway him in the path of her choosing. She had certainly never intended for this, and the very memory of their kiss made her groan audibly in displeasure, pressing her face further into the wall. Squeezing her eyes shut so hard that starbursts filled the blackness with light, she tried to think of what to do next, of how to handle the situation. She could not turn to Dumbledore for guidance, as he was not there, and even if he was, she knew what he would say. That it was her decision to make, the same thing he said to her with every damn obstacle that presented itself. This Dumbledore was decidedly less helpful and comforting than the one who had sent her back, and there was an ache in her chest at that revelation, the longing for someone who did not exist yet.

No, she was alone. More alone than she had ever been in her life. No Harry or Ron by her side, and even if they did exist in this time, they would want nothing to do with her. The very thought of their faces, of the disgust she would see on them when they learned that she had been kissed by Voldemort...for the first time, she was actually happy she did not have them here with her. She would not have been able to bear the feeling of betrayal they would feel towards her. She could hardly stand it herself, the bile still a prominent lump in her throat.

She did not know how long she sat there for, the grooves and textures of the stone wall imprinting on her forehead, the damp smell filling her nose. Her thoughts were jumbled together and seemed to shout at her deafeningly, and she winced at the ache in the back of her head.

“Hermione?”
She jumped, twisting around as she ungracefully rose to a standing position. Athena was moving closer to her, the hem of her white dress swishing around her ankles. She sighed at the intrusion, wishing to just have a moment of peace. But she would never have that, not so long as Tom was around and wanting to court her. Court her. The words in her mind seemed to reek of treason, and she felt her shoulders shake with the restraint to not heave, her stomach twisting. Tom Riddle had chosen to court her, and she was left in the very precarious situation of having to either spurn his advances and invoke whatever consequences may follow, or give into him and play the role she needed to, knowing that each kiss would just be another crime against those she loved who died at his hands. She certainly did not have the time or the desire to socialize.

“Are you alright?” Athena asked, placing a small hand on her trembling shoulder.

She shirked away from it, having to bite down on her lip to stop the scathing remark. She wanted to yell at her, to tell her to leave and run back to her precious Dark Lord. To no longer pretend to be her friend for her own benefit. But instead, she hissed through a tight-lipped smile, “Yes, I just...needed some air and time alone.” ‘Take the hint, and leave me be,’ she thought.

“No, he didn't. I just...wasn't prepared for that. It took me by surprise. But really, everything is fine and I'll return-” she started, only to be cut off.

Athena smiled sympathetically, slipping her arm across Hermione’s shoulders so that she was giving her a soft, side hug. They way you hugged someone when you did not truly mean it, when you did it more for pity's sake than to actually comfort the other. “Oh of course! You've been through a lot lately. Why, in the past few months you've already lost your whole family and came to a new and strange place. Then, one of the few people you did trust nearly killed you by accident! It's dreadful, it really is, and no one blames for you not knowing if Tom's feelings towards you are genuine or not. But I assure you, they are. You have no need to not trust him or feel uneasy towards him, he really only wants what is best for you,” she said, her tone sweet and warm as she continued to awkwardly hang from her side, the arm still clasped over her shoulders. “And, if I may be so bold as to say, I think what's best for you is to be by his side, with him. It is a place many girls wish they could be, and yet he only has eyes for you, Hermione!”

She stepped away from her, the weight of her arm falling from her shoulders as she narrowed her eyes. Could that be a warning, perhaps? Had Tom mentioned to her and the others that he intended to court Hermione, and that, should she deny him, something awful might befall her? “Why do you think he's what is best for me?” she asked, then after a second, added, “I just...don't know who to trust anymore. I feel so overwhelmed and lost. I don't want to get hurt again.” She did her best to sound confused, like someone looking for advice from a good friend they knew would not steer them wrong.

Athena responded warmly, her eyes softening as she looked at her. “Tom wouldn't hurt you. Honestly, you'll be safest with him. Abraxas and I both feel as if Tom really has what it takes to make it far, to change the world. We think he could be the next Minister of Magic, and from there-who knows? But if you're with him, you'll be able to reap all the benefits. Plus, think of how much you could change too! Surely you'll do just as much for our world as he will. You'd make a brilliant pair, don't you think?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said quietly. Perhaps Athena did have a point, misguided as she was to Hermione’s intentions. After all, she had wanted to become his confidante, the follower he would
turn to first. She wanted to replace Bellatrix Lestrange, dethrone her as the Dark Queen that she paraded herself to be, knowing that she was the one who Voldemort considered his greatest ally. Wouldn't she be guaranteed that role if she did allow herself to be courted by him? Surely, even Voldemort would value the opinion and knowledge of his own significant other over any other, wouldn't he?

“I don't know why you seemed so surprised, I did warn you today,” Athena mentioned suddenly, her words sounding laced with some bitterness. “I told you that he adored you, and you chose not to believe me.”

Hermione closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose as she breathed deeply. Her patience was wearing thin, and she just wanted to settle into silence so that she could contemplate the new position she was in, consider her options carefully. “I know, I suppose I just...didn't see it for myself.” Did she, though? Did she not truly acknowledge to herself that Tom seemed to care for her- or pretended to, as it were- in a way that was different from his other friendships? Did she truly not once consider that he may see her usefulness beyond what she could offer as his servant, and did she not vow to do whatever it took to remain in his kinship?

“Well, you've been gone for some time now, and I think that Riddle is practically sick with worry. We should head back now-” Athena said, stepping forward as she grabbed hold of Hermione's wrist and tried to pull her away.

“No!” she said, louder than she meant to so that the word reverberated off the walls and high ceiling. “No, I don't think I want to return to the party. I'm too overwhelmed by all of this, and I'm feeling very tired. I'm still on a strict regimen of healing potions, and they wear me out so easily. All of this excitement...I think I just need to get some sleep to properly address this.”

Athena scoffed, her own impatience quite clear. “What do you need to properly address? We talked about it, and decided that Riddle is-”

“Riddle can wait until tomorrow,” she ground out, her voice strained. Athena looked stunned by her assertion, her eyes wide and glistening in the dim torchlight. Her lips- painted a brilliant and sultry red, parted somewhat at her statement.

“I don't know if you really want to keep him waiting. He's worried and-” she said, her voice lowered into a soft, almost pleading whisper. She grasped onto Hermione's hand, trying to pull her once more down the corridor and back to the party. But Hermione resisted, snapping her arm back and storming down the hall to the direction of the Common Room.

“Tell him I'll speak with him tomorrow, and I'm truly sorry for the way I acted,” she said, quickening her pace when she heard Athena's footsteps join hers. “But I'd really like some time to think and sleep. I feel very weary, surely he'll understand.” She did not turn around or come to a halt, not when Athena's footsteps slowed and then stopped, not when she finally approached the entrance to Slytherin House. Not when she rushed through the dormitories and into the thankfully empty lavatory, where she found an unoccupied bath room.

Slipping through the door and locking it, she turned to face the small room, composed only of a moderately sized in ground tub and a bench. The floors and walls were all one continuous slab of marble, a light gray color with streaks of darker grays and silver coursing through the polished surface. It was too clean looking, too pristine, she thought, and she hardly ever used the baths for that reason. But there was something calming about the room, with the ceiling an open window to the lake that encompassed the House, the sound of the water sloshing up against it rhythmically.

Peeling the dress off and tossing it to the floor, she settled her body slowly into the empty basin,
turning her attention to the faucet which spouted hot and steaming water. There was only only one soap option, unlike the Prefect bathrooms, and she turned that on as well, filling the tub with warm water and soap that billowed up into large plumes of clouds. It smelt like vanilla, a lovely and welcome contrast to the starkness of the room itself.

She laid back in the tub, her back pressed against the porcelain curve, and leaned her head so that she was gazing up into the blue green waters above her, a school of fish passing by. She closed her eyes, timing her breathing so that it matched up with the rush of the lake over top her, exhaling as it roared with a wave. She would clear her mind, for now. She would try to relax and stop thinking, something that had always been difficult for her. She had all night to think it over, to consider the two options she had: possibly be shunned by Tom Riddle and have to work twice as hard as before to gain some place in his ranks, even if at the bottom, or to accept his offer and play the role of his lover, to hope it would pay off in the end.

She could still feel the ghost of his lips on hers, the burn from them imprinted there, like a branding. With a frustrated sigh, she slipped under the surface of the water, holding her breath as long as she could until her lungs roared with embers and her chest begged to expand with oxygen. Every part of her was on fire, and she felt as if the feeling would never truly recede.

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“I told you to bring her back here, not return alone,” Riddle growled under his breath as Athena sat beside him, a worried look on her face. She was chewing her lips, wearing away at the lip stain, and darting her eyes between him and the faces of his friends who sat around them, their eyes fixed on their interaction.

“I couldn't force her! She said she wasn't feeling well and I didn't think you'd like it if she passed out and cracked her head open because you wanted to see her right away!” she hissed in her defense. A silence filled the group at her words, as Riddle leaned back in his chair, his lips pursed together. His eyes remained on her form, unwavering, and she swallowed at the piercing look he sent her, suddenly aware of her mistake.

Shaking her head, she said, “I didn't mean-”

But Riddle stood, the chair behind him skidding across the floor with the quick motion. Straightening the lapels of his jacket, he looked up to the other members of his following. “Perhaps we will take this party to the room on the seventh floor. I believe we have put off Athena's initiation for far too long- haven't we?”

Slowly, they nodded their heads, rising from the seats as they avoided any and all eye contact with the now frightful girl. “What do you mean? You're not mad are you?” she asked as Riddle grasped onto her upper arm, pulling her up and leading her through the door.

Leaning in so that his mouth was only an inch away from her ear, he said, “You're going to learn what it means to work for me. The good, and the bad.”
Chapter Fifteen: One of the Devils

“If you were going to live in hell on earth, there was something to be said for being one of the devils.”

-Joe Hill, Horns

Hermione did not know how long she sat in the warm water of the tub, her senses overcome by the smell of vanilla and cleanliness. Though the water never lost heat due to the charms on it, she had occasionally emptied the basin only to refill it, the quiet feeling like hands around her neck. The sound of the water rushing through the pipes, sloshing against the tub as it filled with a heaviness was soothing to her, and more importantly, broke up the pervading stillness. Her skin had long since wrinkled and shriveled from the exposure, but she did not seem bothered by it, sinking further under the surface of the water.

Her thoughts were only becoming more muddled as time went on, not any more clear. The warmth in the air, coupled with the early hours of the morning, made her dizzy with sleep and lack of clarity. She was no closer to a decision than she had been in the corridor with Athena lazily clutching on to her. She had made a vow to do all she could, and to not allow anything to get in her way. But was she truly willing to go this far?

She frowned, sitting up some and resting her chin on the side of the tub, her gaze trailing upward to look at the lake. Perhaps it would be safest for her. She knew that he had a penchant of harming his followers when they failed, or perhaps even breathed for all she understood, and maybe he would practice some restraint if he felt tied to her. At least she knew she would be safe from the other Death Eaters- surely none of them would dare harm her if Tom stood beside her. She shook her head of the thought, hating to think something so awful. The fact that there was anything to be gained from being with him, to her own advantage, was not something she wanted to take pride in.

’Ron and Harry would never forgive me,’ she thought, pressing a warm hand to her sweaty forehead. Then again, if she did everything correctly, Harry and Ron would never know that their Hermione would have been involved in the Death Eaters. But of course, their Hermione wouldn’t.

It was something she avoided thinking about, her future. There was once a time where she had carefully laid plans, had organized lists and notes of her goals and how to get to them. Dreamed about her life after Hogwarts, of landing a job in the Ministry to correct the laws that had been corrupted during the war, to marry Ron. Perhaps have a child or two. With a snort, she realized that none of that would be a reality now. She had long since accepted it, but had never considered what her future would be like in its place. If she did succeed, than she would once again be alone in the world, but this time without a purpose. Once Voldemort was killed and his Death Eaters disbanded, she would have nothing left for her. She could not maintain any relationships, and would have no one to keep her company when the world began to rebuild. That was if she survived long enough. A part of her, the reasonable and logical part that so often guided her, believed that the spell would not allow for two Hermione’s to exist together, even if one was from a separate universe. That one of them would eventually die, and that she, being the intruder to this world, would be the one to go.

She would die, leaving nothing behind but the memory of her to a select few, her fingerprints on the world unseen and unknowing to what she had done. If accepting Tom's proposal meant that it would only make her job easier for her, and no one but herself and Dumbledore knew about her betrayal,
maybe it was the more ideal course?

But she would still know. She would know, and she would have to kiss him. Would have to pretend to enjoy his touch and caress. Would have to lay with him in bed. The thought made her squeeze her eyes shut, ducking her head once more under the vanilla scented water. The smell was starting to become too much now, was making her exhausted and made her bones feel unnaturally limp. 'I should get out. Go to bed,' she thought, still holding her breath under water as her hair swayed about her. She did not want to go to bed though, did not want to go to the room of sleeping Slytherins. Snakes in repose. She longed to curl up on the lumpy and well-worn sofa of Gryffindor tower, with the knitted blankets thrown over the arms and the equally frumpy throw pillows that had been worked into just the right balance of unevenly distributed stuffing, so that her neck was cushioned enough and her head not too much when she laid down. The gaping mouth of the fireplace with the red and yellow flames flickering. She had grown quite tired of Slytherin, and she did not think she could spend another night within the green and silver prison.

She was no longer welcomed in Gryffindor, but perhaps Dumbledore had returned by now and would be more than happy to discuss this new development over tea.

Emerging from the water, she finally stepped out of the tub, throwing the dress over top her still soaked body. It clung to her uncomfortably, sticking to her skin, but she did not mind. She would change out of it shortly.

The lavatory was empty and dark, and so was the dormitory when she stepped into it, the curtains of her roommates' beds drawn for privacy. Their soft snores and heavy breathing were drowning out the sounds of the water against the windows, and she tiptoed quietly to her chest. She changed quickly into her pajamas, slipping on her shoes before leaving the room.

She made it all the way to the first floor before she realized the silliness of her actions, that even if Dumbledore was back, he would not want company at this time of night. Or morning. She was definitely losing track of time, among other things.

But she still moved to where his office was, not wanting to return to the dormitories just yet. There was always the chance that she could run into some good luck and that Dumbledore would in fact be there. There was only one way to know.

The door was unlocked, something that surprised her immensely. The older wizard was always very careful, and she did not think it like him to make such an oversight. Perhaps he had indeed returned, and left the door unlocked in the off chance she came to him. He always did have a preternatural sense of the future, one that seemed to border on divination without ever quite making the plunge. With renewed hope, she opened the door and took a step in, frowning when she saw no Dumbledore.

The office itself was dimly lit, with a small fire roaring in the fireplace, and all at once she felt more comfortable, more at ease, even if she was still alone.

Her eyes roamed over the space before settling on the powerful form of the Phoenix from his perch, his tail of golden feathers bright in the space. His long neck craned, cocking his head at her curiously. The rumble of a caw vibrated in his throat as he reach out to her, slipping his head beneath her hand. She laughed then as she scratched her fingers along the maroon feathers, earning a soft coo from the magnificent bird. “You remind me of the cat I used to have,” she said, running her hands down his neck. “Is Professor Dumbledore still not back yet?”

Opening one eye that had been closed, Fawkes clucked his beak, shaking his head roughly from side to side as if to say no. She sighed, chewing her lip. “Well, it was worth a shot then. I guess I'll return
to Slytherin.” But before she could even so much as pull her hand away, Fawkes stood taller on his perch, extending the large, golden wings out in a stretch. Kicking himself off from the stand, he flew into the air, swooping through the small yet homely office before diving towards a nook nestled into the wall, a bookshelf encased within. His clawed toes grasped onto one of the dark oak shelves as he bent his head down, anxiously pecking at one of the tomes.

“What is it?” she asked, moving forward to look at the book in particular that was inciting him to act so strangely. But she could not read the title, as Fawkes did not cease his head bobbing at it, and she reached out to pull the book away. “What's all this about, Fawkes?” she murmured into the room, but as she held the book out before her, she got her answer when the bird flew away just as the bookshelf began to twist. She stepped back, her eyes wide as the floor shook slightly with the force of the large chunk of the wall moving to the side to reveal what looked like a sitting room. Dumbledore's private quarters.

She couldn't help but to laugh. She had only seen secret bookcases in old horror movies, and there was something terribly charming about them existing in the magical world as well.

Tentatively, she stepped forward into the room, chewing her lip as she looked around her. The room reminded her at once of Gryffindor House- of home- with a large overstuffed sofa placed directly in front of the fireplace, a small table sitting between them with several different tea sets cluttering the surface, as well as a few candy dishes. Two equally overstuffed, but unmatching, armchairs were placed to the sides, facing each other, and had more pillows on them then they could bear- in fact one had appeared to have fallen to the floor. Bookshelves lined the walls, and were messily filled with a variety of objects and trinkets that whizzed and whirred quietly amongst the crackling of the fire. But her eyes were drawn to the excessively sized mantle of the fireplace, the ornate carvings of the wood overhanging by several inches. Stepping forward, she inclined her head at the few pictures sitting atop its surface.

There were several unremarkable photos, ones of Dumbledore meeting an official and smiling congenially at him as he shook his hand. One of him as a younger man standing outside of Hogwarts, a large grin in place as he smoothed his robes down, his nose straight and not crooked as it was now. His graduation day. The picture made her smile, giggling somewhat as his blue eyes seemed to sparkle even from the black and white film. It was strange, to acknowledge that Dumbledore had once been her age, and younger at that, but it was a comforting notion nonetheless. And she wondered just how little she truly knew about him that the idea of him in his youth seemed so novel, so laughable. He never mentioned a family, aside from his brother Aberforth. Nor did he ever seem to spare any anecdotes from his childhood. Perhaps he truly was the odd man in his family, as the Slytherins had suggested to her. Could it be possible that he was disowned from them for his kind ideals? They were, after all, a prominent pure-blood family, and it was likely that he was alone in his muggle sympathies.

Feeling decidedly filthy with rummaging through his things and examining his private life, she quickly turned her thoughts and attentions to the only other photograph left, one that had been placed within a delicate and pretty frame as opposed to the simple ones the others were in. A young girl was the sole occupant of the picture, and she eyed Hermione with a sweet, if not distant look from beneath the glass. Her straw blond hair was pulled back with a black velvet ribbon, and her eyes, a little too sunken into her skull, bore a striking resemblance to Dumbledore's own. She smiled with her thin lips at her, a small one that wavered somewhat with the motion, and Hermione couldn't help but to smile back, the girl reminding her of someone she could not quite place but knew she found endearing.

She straightened up then, forcing herself to look away from his private things. Fawkes had let her in here, perhaps because he knew Dumbledore would return shortly, not so that she could snoop
around and go through his belongings.

Sitting herself upon the couch, she leaned back, forgetting that her hair was still wet, and looked up at the beams running across the ceiling. No, this was not the Dumbledore she knew, and would never be for a long time, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a companion to her could he? There was so little that she actually knew about him, and she thought that she'd quite like to change that. He had so often been revered as one of the more all powerful, all knowing wizards, that nearly everyone would come to him for advice and assistance. But, and she was ashamed to admit it took until just now for her to realize this, did he have anyone he could turn to? Surely, he was just as prone to feeling lost and confused as everyone else, and yet she had never really made a conscious effort to ask if he needed anything, if there was anything she could do to help him. 'How terribly rude,' she thought, yawning as she settled back in the couch. She did not think any more of it, as she was asleep within seconds, the thoughts of Tom Riddle and his kiss long forgotten as she dreamed of the girl with the golden hair and listless eyes.

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"Don't worry, darling, it's almost over," Tom said with a smirk as he grabbed hold of Athena's left hand, pulling it sharply towards him. She gasped out in the pain, wincing as she rolled closer to him from where she lay on the floor, her body trembling. He settled the hand in his lap, tracing his fingers gently over her bare forearm. He was never one to care about what was considered fair or not, as nothing in this world worked in such a manner so why should he? You did not experience good will simply because you lead a just and pious life, and you did not experience only misfortune if you were harmful and unloving. Life wasn't fair, gods weren't fair, and neither was he. Yet, he had gone harder on Athena than what was truly necessary, taking out his aggression and anger on Hermione on the witch.

Hermione! Never before had he felt such hatred and rage toward her! She had spurned him- embarrassingly- in front of half the school. And she just left him there, like a fool, to not return for the rest of the evening, holding his gift to her in his hands after she had rudely thrust it back. Not even when he thought that she was a filthy mudblood did he want to harm her so, to grab hold of her neck and not let go until she fell limp and dead in his arms. His fingers had twitched with the desire, and he had needed to restrain himself from following after her.

His jaw clenched in wrath as he revisited the moment from earlier that evening, his finger following the path of Athena's blue-green veins visible beneath her skin. To think he had tried to bequeath Slytherin's locket to her- his rightful locket! She did not deserve it, did not deserve to use it for what he had intended. She barely deserved to be somewhere within this castle, walking around and ignoring the fact that she had just made a terribly grievous error.

Hastily, he pushed the thoughts from his mind as he grabbed hold of his wand, placing the tip firmly on Athena's forearm as she groaned in response, expecting another curse. He would deal with that later, deal with Hermione later. If she did not come to her senses soon, he was afraid he might make some terribly impulsive decisions regarding her.

Muttering the curse beneath his breath, he held Athena's arm tight as she began to flail around, trying to pull her hand back from his clutches. She screamed out in strangled pain, her throat dry and raw, and he only shushed her, his ears ringing from the assault. "Almost done," he cooed mockingly, watching as the angry red tattoo emblazoned itself upon her skin, the smell of burning flesh pungent in the air. The scarred area rose, swollen, in seconds, puffing up as some blood broke through, trickling down the curve of her arm. Of its own accord, the scar moved around her skin, forming the shape of an openmouthed skull, a large snake protruding from the gaping jaw. Her screams turned to whimpers as he settled his wand down, still holding her arm taut.
After several minutes went by, he finally released his hold, and she curled inward, caressing the injured arm delicately while she cried silently over it. Mulciber was at her side in an instant, handing her a large glass of water. “That's the worst of it, really. It will heal in no time, you'll see,” he said encouragingly, smiling at her as he brought the edge of the glass to her lips and helped her sit up so she could drink.

Dolohov grinned. “Well, except for when you're needed. It will burn twice as bad,” he said, chuckling when Nott sent him a withering glare. “What? No sense in lying to her. She should know what she got herself into.”

“Don't be a prick,” Nott muttered as he moved to Mulciber's side, conjuring a handkerchief that he used to wipe the sweat from her brow. “If I recall, you were none too graceful when you received yours either.”

This silenced him, his mouth snapping shut as he scoffed, turning his focus back to Riddle. “So, that necklace...was that really Slytherin's?” he asked, his tone greedy as he moved closer to where Riddle sat now at the table, his eyes fixated on the grains running up and down the surface of the deep red finish.

He looked up, his brow quirked. “Yes. It is a family heirloom.”

Dolohov snorted. “And you were just going to...give it to her?”

Riddle straightened at his tone, pressing his back against the chair as he pursed his lips, looking down at him. “Yes, I was. It belongs to me, and I decide what happens to it. Besides, I wanted to give it to her for a specific reason.”

Athena was standing now, being led over to the table by Nott and Mulciber, Rosier pulling the chair out for her. But when Riddle turned his gaze to her, she stood taller, raising her chin as she slapped their hands away. She had a lot of pride, something that he had to admire in her. She had even gone a considerably long time before she started screaming when he tortured her, her mouth remaining firmly shut as curse after curse acted like lightning on her spine. She sat down now, placing her still shaking hands on the table in front of her. He nodded at her, smiling when she returned the gesture. Yes, perhaps Athena wasn't the worst addition after all.

“What reason is that? Is it charmed? Cursed?” Dolohov asked, leaning forward in his chair with interest.

Riddle smiled. “No, not yet at least. I have hope that Hermione will realize the error of her decision to run away, and that she will change her mind. I may still accept her, as I am not foolish and acknowledge that she will still be a more than worthy witch to be by my side. Though, she will soon need to learn that she can't disobey me, or act so volatile. If that is to be the case, that she returns to me, than it doesn't seem very fitting if your Dark Lord is immortal, yet your Lady isn't. I had hoped to use the necklace to change that.”

“You mean,” Rosier asked, one brow raised in question. “You wanted to make it into a horcrux? The necklace?”

Athena gasped audibly at this, her brown eyes widening as she looked at Riddle with new consideration, slight trepidation. But he ignored her, shaking his head. His hand slipped into his robe pocket where he pulled out the box containing the necklace, opening it and pulling the jewelry out from within. He held it above him, the thick silver chain tight in his fist as the large locket swayed, the gems reflecting the light from the fire. They waited for his answer, but he did not give any, his eyes following the movement of the pendant as if hypnotized.
When he had learned of the locket, he had intended to claim it as his own to create a horcrux. But he had thought some over it, and had decided that it would be better served otherwise. Hermione would be needing a horcrux, after all.

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Hermione awoke to the sound of porcelain clinking together, to the roaring of flames and what could only be described as ethereal, melodious music, like a call to her from a sweeter and more pleasant world. Her eyes fluttered open, the calm that the song had settled in her gone just as soon as it had come when she realized she was not sleeping in her bed.

Jumping up into a sitting position, she looked around her, her wild and alert brown eyes meeting bemused blue.

“I apologize, Hermione. I hope Fawke's song didn’t wake you. It is quite beautiful, though loud and inconvenient,” Dumbledore said, sitting down on the bright pink armchair with a cup of tea in his lap, the liquid stirring itself as steam rose from the surface.

She blushed, embarrassed at more things than she could count. Having broken into his private chambers, slept on his furniture, wearing only her pajamas- she wished that she could disappear from this moment right then and there, her cheeks tinging a bright maroon. He seemed rather unperturbed by her delinquent behavior however, chuckling as he raised the tea to his lips. “Fawkes gave you the tour, I take it?” he asked. Dumbfounded, she nodded.

“I...I'm terribly sorry, Professor. I just...I thought that you might have returned and I had something I wanted to speak with you about and the door was open-”

He raised a hand to silence her. “Hermione, the door will always open to you.”

She paused, her jaw slacked open. “I...what?”

“I would not have allowed you in if I did not want you to. The door to my office will never prevent you from entering, and Fawkes took it upon himself to give you a place to rest. You must have been in quite a state if he though you were so distressed to need sanctuary. That being said, what did you need to speak with me about?” he said, his tone sobering as he looked at her with concern.

But she didn't know what to say, her mind still lost on the fact that he had given permission to the castle to allow her entrance to his office, that he trusted her enough with this. Feeling all at once grateful- and even more repentant for not being more careful to offer her own proper friendship to him- she could only smile at him, running her hand through her still damp hair. “Thank you...Professor. You don't know what that means to me,” she said. He nodded, though did not say anything, waiting patiently for her to speak as he reached over and began fixing her a cup of tea.

“He kissed me,” she said suddenly, unsure of how exactly to broach the topic. The clinking of the spoon in the teacup stopped as Dumbledore rose his head to look at her, an expression of surprise on his face that he quickly concealed.

“Tom did?” Biting her lip, she nodded. “Well, that certainly was not what I had been prepared for. Forgive me, but is there any more context to be given regarding...” he starting, making a broad, flailing gesture that made her laugh. He seemed to have been just as blindsided by this turn of events as she was.

As he handed her the cup of tea, she began to explain the events of the night before, slurping the drink awkwardly during the pregnant pauses in which she did not wish to continue, too embarrassed
by how foolishly she had acted. And she truly did, running off like that. For all she knew, Tom was considering severing all ties with her because of it, that she had lost her opportunity. When she finally finished, she settled the tea down, glancing up at Dumbledore nervously.

He had a pensive look on his face, running his fingers through his short, still somewhat auburn beard as he clucked his tongue in thought. “Well, this is an interesting development. Have you considered what to do next?”

She shook her head, running a hand over her face. “I thought all night about it, but I still just...logically, accepting his offer seems like the better move. Athena was right, I'll be safer that way. I'll have more access to information. Plus who knows what consequences might befall if I don't? He could shun me entirely,” she said, raising her arms up and then swinging them down as if in defeat. “But I just...don't know if I can. It sounds so petty, but...I can't...” ‘Kiss him, knowing those same lips would utter the curses that would take my closest friends away from me. Hold his hand, knowing those are the same ones that hold his wand,’ she thought, resting her elbows on her knees and cupping her face.

“I understand, Hermione. It is hard enough for someone to accept that they love someone who may have unsavory characteristics. It is near impossible for someone to know full well of them and to try to pretend to love them regardless. And I would never expect you to do something like this if you did not feel comfortable with it, understand that.”

“But he'll be angry. He might even...I don't know, punish me for it. It just seems like there's more to lose than to gain, and I would hate to be back to where I started.”

“Perhaps then, don't think about it in terms of whether or not to ugh, shall we say, tie yourself to him? Look at all the other aspects besides that, and make your decision based on what you have left. Though I do agree, that certainly one path will require more work on your part than the other,” he advised, and she frowned at his words. She knew he would not make the decision for her, but a part of her wished he would. So that she could free herself of the burden of having to decide, and subsequently blame him should anyone be displeased with her course of action. But that was selfish, she knew, and he would never sign her into something that she would be uncomfortable with.

She brought her hand to her mouth, chewing on her thumb. “Ron and Harry would be repulsed by me, but they would never know about it. And even if they did, why should it matter? It's not as if I can be friends with them after this is all over. I'll be old enough to be their grandmother!” she said, laughing derisively. She would never have her friends back, or her family, not really. At the time, she hadn't been bothered by this fact, knowing that them being alive and safe and the world new and whole was worth everything she could give, especially when she had seen the alternative. But now there was a hollow ache in her chest as she began to realize that there was no use basing her decisions on what they would have thought of her. That this was her life now, and if she ever did see them again, it would only be in quick glimpses as their paths crossed. “I can't keep using them as an excuse for why I can't behave the way I need to. I've tried not to think on it, as it was too horrid to imagine, but I'm not stupid. I know that when I do join him, I will be expected to commit crimes. To torture people. I'll have to kill. I agreed to this whole plan perhaps a little quicker than I should have, but really, I would have agreed to it all the same. Because I had nothing left anyway.”

Her voice stumbled over her sobs, a large mass blocking her throat and making swallowing difficult. Her vision became blurry from her unshed tears, and she reached up to wipe them away with the heel of her palm. “I think that, if I am to continue as a spy, a good and proper one, I'll have to do this. I'll have to let them go so that I can get them back,” she said, pinching her lips tightly as she raised her chin at him, trying to smile despite the emptiness in her voice.
Dumbledore sighed, looking at her with something akin to pride and sorrow, as he reached across the distance between them and grabbed her hand, wrapping his fingers tightly around hers. The gesture alone was enough to make her shoulders shake with the strain of her tears, make her tilt her head so he would not see. But he used his other hand to reach out, cupping her chin as he raised her head and met her wet brown eyes. “I'm sure that they would be honored to know just how much their friend sacrificed for them. Surely I don't have to express to you the amount of courage that is required to move forward from this, and onto where you plan to go. But I will be with you every step of the way, Hermione. And so will the memory of those you have loved. You are never alone.”

She laughed, bitterly. “It feels like I am.”

Dumbledore paused, his eyes roaming around the room in thought as he pulled back suddenly. “I had rather hoped to save this for Christmas, but I think that now is the more opportune time. Besides, I won't lie and say I'm not the least bit relieved to have one less responsibility until then,” he said, rising from his seat with an urgency as he left the room through a door to the side, no explanation offered. Furrowing her brow, she stood as well, looking at the door curiously as she wiped away her tears.

“Er...Professor?”

He appeared then, as if summoned, slipping through the room with his arms folded over his chest, the large sleeves of his navy blue robes covering his torso. “Merry Christmas, Hermione,” he said, pulling one arm away to reveal what she could only assume was a small ball of fur. Her lips parted somewhat as he moved closer, the ball moving now as it began to mew softly, the sound muffled from his robes.

“A cat?” she asked, her voice high-pitched. It startled the kitten, who unwound itself and poked her head out to look at her, a mane of black and white surrounding her small face.

Dumbledore laughed as he held the creature out to her, the young witch readily accepting the bundle into her arms as she giggled in delight, forgetting her troubles momentarily. “Kitten, technically. A friend of mine recently had a litter, and I recall you saying you once had a cat for a familiar. I cannot offer you your familiar, nor companionship besides my own, but I often find that the love of those who cannot speak or judge you is sometimes the best to surround yourself with,” he said, watching with bright eyes as Hermione scratched behind the cat's ears, running her fingers over the soft fur.

“I love her, thank you,” she said, looking up to him with perhaps the largest smile she had made in some time, her cheeks tacky with the dried tears. “Does she have a name?”

He nodded. “Ishtar.”

A new round of tears began again, but this time for an entirely separate reason. It was not the same, no, as having another person to befriend. But that had proved to be dangerous, and really, when would she have the time for maintaining friendships? It was simpler, though lonelier to do without. But a cat- what a perfect idea! She hadn't thought of getting herself another familiar- and in fact she would have felt somewhat ashamed that she would be replacing Crookshanks if she had. Yet, she was sure the ginger feline would understand, and she held the kitten closer to her, the feeling of her body vibrating as she purred making her immediately feel comforted.

Before she could tell herself not to, she reached forward, slinging one arm over Dumbledore in the tightest embrace she could manage without disturbing Ishtar. “Thank you, Professor. You have no idea how much I needed this,” she murmured into his cloak, preparing to pull away until she felt him return the hug. It was not awkward and stiff as their first one had been, when Dippet escorted her to him under the pretense that she was in trouble. When he had hugged her- not knowing or trusting her
in the slightest— for appearance's sake, to give her the opportunity to explain herself. This one was filled with all the familiarity that had grown between, of all the admiration they both held for the other.

Finally, they broke apart, and Hermione apologized, embarrassed. She was truly a mess, breaking into his chambers in the veil of night, making herself right at home and then flinging herself towards him over a gift. But really, it had been very thoughtful, and even now she was already feeling concerned that her own gift was not enough. How do you repay someone when they give you just what you needed, just as you needed it?

She did not stay for very long after that, sipping another cup of tea as she and him went over the details of what she was to do next, one hand holding the cup to her lips, the other stroking Ishtar as she curled up in Hermione's lap. It was already rather late, she learned. The students who were returning home had already left for the remainder of term, and she had slept through lunch. When he told her this she practically ran from his room, her belly sinking with the realization that she had not only made Tom wait all night, but half the day. She did not dare to think how cross he would be with her, and she bid a quick farewell to the Transfiguration teacher as she hoped there was any chance to redeem herself.

It wasn't until she was already in the dungeons, surrounded by the damp and dreary stone walls and the echo of her steps, that she realized she had already forgotten her promise to be more supportive to Dumbledore instead of simply asking for his support. She cursed under her breath, sighing as she looked at Ishtar with a frown. “I'm very bad at this, aren't I?” she asked, the cat responding with a high-pitched mew, not quite a full meow. She smiled down at her, scratching under her chin as she continued to make her way down to Slytherin Common Room, hoping Tom would not be too terribly angry at her.

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The Common Room had always had a silence to it. The students were never very rowdy, though if they were, the high ceilings and large space would make the noise thrice as loud. For the most part, they kept to themselves, to their small and secluded groups of friends as they huddled over their respective spaces. They were never the sort of house to throw parties, or needlessly celebrate things. Any game of Quidditch that was won, any holiday, never resulted in any of the night long parties that they heard Gryffindor would have. No one brought in a contraband bottle of firewhiskey and spiked the drinks, no music blared loud enough to shake the walls with the undulation, to work them in a frenzy. They were simply a silent house that went about their business and did not try to pry into the lives of others, including their own housemates.

So to say that the silence was overbearing, that the long stretch of the room with no one but Tom occupying the space, it was disconcerting. He preferred silence, but even this level was too much, he thought, his gaze moving around the room. All except four students had left to return home for the holidays— himself, Hermione, the third year Prince girl, and a first year boy. Goyle? He wasn’t certain, he was never good with names, particularly when he did not care enough about the person to commit their identity to memory.

Yet, there were no sounds in the room. Prince often hid herself away and, unlike most students who gathered in the Common Room during their free periods, she chose to spend her time in her dormitory. Goyle had long since left, off to harass one of the few Gryffindors left no doubt, leaving Tom alone. Even the water seem to still, not wanting to disrupt the perfect silence shrouding the house, and he could hear nothing but the turn of a page in his book every so often.

He was sitting in one of the window seats, his legs stretched out in front of him with one knee bent to
hold his book up for him, his side pressed into the glass of the window. He was not really paying
attention to any of the words before him, and in fact he had already read this book before, but instead
his mind wandered, unable to focus in the heightened quiet.

Hermione was nowhere to be found. She had not been in her dormitories this morning, and as far as
Lilura Black could recall, she had not returned at any point in the evening. She had not been down to
have breakfast, nor did she make an appearance to see the other students off. ‘Maybe you've finally
scared her off,’ Dolohov had joked, a clumsy attempt to mask his hatred of the girl with a laugh.
When lunch had come, and she was nowhere to be found on the one long table that they insisted on
using in place of the proper four, he was beginning to grow worried- much to his chagrin- that
perhaps she was in danger.

His fingers twitched as he closed the book, leaning his head back against the wall. He wasn't even
entirely sure what danger she could find herself in, considering that the school was at its lowest
capacity. But it was always a possibility wasn't it? Scoffing in indignation, he ran a hand over his
face, wondering how on earth he had gone from being consumed with rage at her, ready to drag her
into the Room of Requirements and torture her until her throat bled from her own screams, to
concerned for her. Although, maybe concerned wasn’t the right word. Regardless of her actions, he
had every intention of claiming her for his own, and he would not tolerate anyone laying a hand on
what was his.

He folded his arms over his chest, chewing his bottom lip. This was why he did not often allow her
to roam the castle without someone to escort her. You never knew what danger could lurk around
the corner- especially in Hogwarts, as he himself knew what beasts lay just beyond the walls- and
though he was certain she was competent enough to handle any danger she may face, he still did not
want to take the risk.

Turning to look at the where the clock sat above the mantle to the fireplace, he growled in frustration.
It was one! One in the afternoon, and still no sign of her. Where on earth could she have gone to?
Did she not care, even in the slightest, that he may have been expecting her? She did, after all, tell
Athena that she would speak with him on the matter in the morning, and yet morning came and she
was nowhere to be found. For someone who seemed to portray herself as thoughtful and polite, she
had the tendency to be quite discourteous, and he would not tolerate it much longer.

Settling his book to the side, he stood, deciding that he should perhaps try to find her, see if she had
fallen into harm's way. He hated it, that she had managed to lure this side out of him. He had never in
his short time on this earth worried about someone, and yet she had succeeded in throwing him into a
fit of it twice. If he did not know better, and did not know just how underhanded she could be when
the need called for it, he would suspect that she was far better suited to Gryffindor, with how insolent
and brash she could be. But he dismissed the thought as quickly as it appeared, not wanting to
associate her with the house of moderately well trained baboons. It was an insult to her intelligence,
and at the very least, she would make a proper Ravenclaw over a Gryffindor.

He was just steps away from the door when it swung open, the very girl in question stepping
through. She gasped, jumping somewhat at the sight of him, and he smirked at the response before
eyeing her rumpled appearance. She was wearing pajamas, a strange enough site considering she had
just stepped out from the halls, and her hair looked somewhat damp, pulled back into a quick bun.
But the strangest thing- and what drew his attention away from her- was the small kitten held in her
arms, a longhair with sleek black fur along his body and a white underbelly.

“Is that a cat?” he said, raising a brow as she settled the...thing onto her floor, the creature arching her
back as she pressed a paw on Hermione's foot before darting off across the room, swatting at a
crumpled piece of parchment left under a table.
She grinned, shakily. “Kitten, actually. My cousin gave her to me as an early Christmas gift. Beautiful, isn't she?” she said, beaming up at him with sheer joy.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, only saying it as he knew it was the response she was looking for. She seemed pleased with this, humming softly as she watched the kitten bounce over the green and silver rug, pouncing on the parchment with not even a modicum of grace. It wasn't necessarily that he hated animals, he just didn't really see the need to keep one as a pet. They were quite useless, and got under foot far too much for his liking. Though snakes were an exception, he thought.

In his youth, he had taken in several snakes to the orphanage, much to Ms. Cole's very amusing fright. But that was different. He could communicate with them, hold actual conversations with them in which they would respond back. And when he told them to coil themselves up in the caretakers loafers, or settle underneath her covers before she turned in for the night, they would, and he never grew tired of hearing her scream in terror at them. He had only stopped asking them to do such things when she killed one—a bright green garter snake only six inches in length—by swiping it against the wall with a broom. It wasn't funny anymore, after she did that.

Turning his attention back to Hermione, his eyes hardened, his anger returning to him in terrible crashing waves once more now that his worry was abated. He felt quite silly in fact for even being worried at all. She had left him wallowing in the dungeon so that she could play Santa with that daft old man?

“Where were you?” he snapped, his tone as icy as he could allow. She jumped at this, turning to him with eyes so wide her iris was outlined in white, her jaw dropping. She was shaking, almost instantly, and he felt a purr of pleasure in his chest. She may not know just yet of why she should be so frightened of him, but it pleased him all the same that she should know she should be. And she certainly was in this moment.

“I...after the dance, I was suddenly feeling very ill. Nauseous and dizzy...so I went to take a bath. I only felt worse afterwards, so I visited Madame Malone in the infirmary. I, stupidly, missed a dose of my medicine, and fell sick as a result. She wanted me to spend the night though, and then my cousin requested I visit him for lunch. I'm sorry Tom, I tried to leave so that I could speak with you about last night but...he enjoys his stories,” she said, frowning as she stepped forward and looked to him with pleading eyes. He did not soften his expression, his jaw tightening as she spoke. With a sigh, she added, “Sometimes it's hard to believe I'm related to him. No wonder why my mother sought to distance herself. If I didn't know any better, I would think he was trying to keep me away from you.” She laughed then, shaking her head with the thought.

“Do you? And why is that?” he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him, but still he did not relent in the cold way he regarded her.

She shrugged flippantly, laughing some more. “It's ridiculous and...well, don't tell anyone this, but for some reason he thinks you're bad news. He has for some time actually. Kept telling me to not get involved with you. He was the one who encouraged I meet with Crane in fact, his attempt to widen my social circle, as it were,” she responded, brushing past him and moving towards the window seat he had sitting at. She sat down, picking his book up and flipped it over to read the inscription on the back. “Is this yours? May I borrow it?”

He nodded, suddenly terribly eager for her to continue. Of course it came as no surprise to him that Dumbledore distrusted him, and would even try his best to keep his family away from his influence, but he wasn't aware that he was trying to impart any of his feelings towards him to Hermione. What did he say, how much did he know? And more importantly, why did Hermione seem to so easily toss his judgment to the side?
Moving towards her and sitting beside her, he asked, “I don't believe I've done anything to earn his suspicion. Has he told you why he thinks so unkindly of me?” He made an effort now to soften his tone, to sound distraught by this knowledge. There would be plenty of time in the days to come to remind Hermione of her wrongdoing, but he did not know if she would ever be so open with him about this again. He needed to know.

She laughed softly, looking at him incredulously. “He's paranoid is all it is. He won't expand on any of it, but he thinks you're trouble. Ridiculous, really, considering the fact that you did save me. Personally, I think he's sore that his little attempt to play matchmaker ended so poorly. Some judge of character he is,” she said, leaning her head against the wall and shifting so that she was facing him. “I know he's family, but I think you may have been right. There's something...well, I just don't trust him.”

He offered her a sad smile, trying to appear sympathetic to her plight. “You shouldn't, I don't think. But you can always trust me- I won't ever let anyone harm you. Not like he did,” he promised, knowing that it was true. He pitied to think about the poor soul who might next try to take advantage of his witch. Being expelled would be the least of their worries.

“I know you wouldn't. I do trust you, and I wanted to apologize for the way I acted last night. It was terribly rude and unnecessary, and I'm so embarrassed by the way I acted. I just...my life has been tossed around so much in the past few months. I feel so lost and alone, and I panicked,” she said, looking down at her nails in shame, her voice airy as she spoke. “But I thought about it all night, and my feelings were certainly solidified after having to listen to him drone for hours about how he knows what's best for me, even after he nearly got me killed. He doesn't though, but I do.”

She looked at him, biting her lip as she said in a whisper, her eyes looking to his warmly, perhaps even lovingly, “If you'll still have me, I'd be more than honored to be yours, Tom.”

He considered her for a moment, leaning back to study her more astutely. He had thought that, when she did finally return to him, he would make her work for his forgiveness, wouldn't settle until she was begging, pleading to be his. But with everything that had come to light, he supposed it was possible he had sprung too much on her too quickly. She was a strong and powerful witch, but still fell prey to a current of distracting and feminine emotions. While he did not entirely understand why it had been such a momentous decision for her- seeing only the analytical aspect of the situation, that she would be safer and better off with him- he did understand that she was torn between every other rush of feeling she had. Entirely too many emotions, he thought. He did know that he was different from most of his peers, more superior in a way, though, in that he did not struggle the way others did. She, just as any other person he meant, was constantly battling between her heart and her brain, a feeling he knew nothing of- thankfully.

He wouldn't forget her oversight, not at all. But for now, he would overlook it. She was still fragile, and looking to him for support in such a confusing moment in her life. It would be irresponsible to his own cause if he gave her any reason to distrust him now, and so, he smiled at her, looking relieved. “Of course I'll still have you, Hermione. I wouldn't have it any other way,” he said.

Reaching a hand out to her, he placed it on her cheek, running his thumb over the warm skin before slowly moving forward, pressing his lips to hers. She tasted different from any other girl he had kissed. She tasted like yellow, a concept that seemed confusing yet made perfect sense to him. She tasted like sunshine, like the feeling of its rays on your skin. Like the flame of a lone candle in a darkened room, like tea on a cold and rainy day. Blackberries and sage was on her lips, her flavor of choice.

He kissed her, and this time, she kissed back.
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Apples

Chapter Sixteen: Apples
“He had, they said, tasted in succession all the apples of the tree of knowledge, and, whether from hunger or disgust, had ended by tasting the forbidden fruit.”
-Victor Hugo, The Hunchback of Notre-Dame

Hermione awoke on Christmas morning to an empty room, frowning somewhat. She had half hoped for magic, to wake up and find herself in the Burrow, Ginny shaking her impatiently. The delicious smells of Molly Weasley's cooking wafting upstairs. Warm and sticky syrup, hearty sausage and eggs, all the aromas filling her head as she rushed to get ready, bumping into Ron and Harry in the hall. But of course, even magic had its limitations, and she sighed, reaching out to just above her bed, where she knew Ishtar had taken to sleeping. But the cat was gone, her pillow still warm from her small body.

“Useless cat...wandering off,” she muttered as she slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes. Indeed, she did have quite the habit of disappearing on her, though she did not know where. She didn't pay it much mind however, Crookshanks having been the same sort of indifferent to her. The kitten provided well enough company, and more than anything, she enjoyed the feeling of a warm body resting on her breast as she read, vibrating with gentle purrs.

Stepping from her bed and pulling the curtains aside, she started, a soft oh escaping her. A modest pile of presents sat to the side of her bed, some settled on her bedside table, the others placed carefully against it on the floor. Some of them were large, some small, but all were wrapped minimally in forest greens and steely grays, one or two sporting a large black ribbon. Her eyes roved over them as she stood slowly, her fingers grazing over the name tags of the giver as she idly picked one up at random. Athena, Mulciber, Rosier...

She hadn't been expecting any gifts, she didn't think she had really formed enough friendships in this era to warrant it. Though, she had been Tom Riddle's girlfriend for a week now, and in hindsight she imagined that the others knew of his plans to court her long before he actually succeeded. It was quite likely that he had required his followers to send her a gift in lieu of the ones she would receive from her friend's and family, perhaps in an attempt to make her feel more comfortable with them. Less isolated. In fact, considering that she even had a gift from Dolohov- who was unable to hide his disdain for her- made her certain that that had been the case.

The thought made her feel uncomfortable, and she placed the present she had been holding down, sitting back on her mattress. Not much had changed since she had accepted his offer, Tom not being overly affectionate. Though, she didn't really except him to be. He would kiss her from time to time, and she found that it was becoming easier to reign in the sudden quell in her stomach at his lips on hers, to not flinch from his touch. He was always touching her, though it was more out of possessiveness than anything. Whether it was an arm around her waist, a hand resting on her thigh. It was as if he was marking his territory, claiming his stake to her.

She had thought nothing of it at first, chalkling the behavior up to him playing his act and playing it well. It wasn't until three days earlier when she realized what his actual intentions had been, when she and Dumbledore were conversing politely over lunch at the one long table of the Great Hall. Tom had made his way over to her shortly after, a dark glint to his eyes as he swooped down, kissing her firmly on the lips before he sat beside her. He proceeded to spend the rest of the meal acting uncharacteristically loving, pushing her hair from her face, placing chaste kisses to her temple. He would run his finger down her arm, leaning in to whisper something just loud enough for
Dumbledore to hear, his brow raised.

'You're mine, Hermione. You're so beautiful, and you're all mine. I'm so happy you said yes.'

Dumbledore had played his own part admirably, sending Hermione looks of weary concern, sighing loudly during pregnant pauses. But she could see below the facade, could see the look of intrigue in his eyes as he studied Tom, clucking his tongue. He was just as fascinated as she was in Riddle's sudden and unexpected turn to court her.

But it was exhausting to think on what his intentions could be. She had simply decided to take it all in stride, to keep her guard raised high and focused on performing her own act. Returning his embraces, his kisses. But for the most part, their evenings had consisted of sitting side by side, reading their own respective books in silence. Eventually, they would become more intimate, but for now, she was enjoying to the best of her abilities the slow pace of their relationship forged on lies and manipulation.

However, she was surely in no rush to meet up with him, and so instead she began to grab hold of her gifts, opening them with great care.

"It is Christmas, after all," she said to the empty room, feeling at once silly. She really wished the cat had not chosen today of all days to vanish. She felt significantly less crazy if she could at least talk to her instead of the nothingness.

Tom had to have forced his followers' hands in buying her gifts, as they were certainly more expensive than anyone would purchase for her willingly. Boxed chocolates and candies- which she tossed immediately in the rubbish bin- had been plentiful, and each box seemed to contain another luxury. Perfume from Dolohov (which had also been tossed, fearful that it was a topical potion of ill will, particularly considering the giver) and a lovely leather journal, embossed with emeralds on the hardbound book from Mulciber. Rosier had given her a quite elegant set of crystal earrings, and from Nott she received a hefty stack of books. With a frown, she ran her fingers over the gilded titles, recognizing them as tomes that leaned towards the Dark Arts. Her grooming had begun, it seemed.

She scowled when she opened Athena's gift, a truly beautiful set of a hand held mirror and brush. They were silver, the backs of which contained ornate carvings- depictions of wildflowers and butterflies and they were hefty in her hand, the metal weighing them down. The girl meant well, but could be rather tactless, she thought, touching her hair worriedly.

Setting the gifts aside- least the ones she had kept after examining thoroughly for any alterations to them- she frowned, looking at the final gift left. It was from Tom, she recognized the neat and spindly writing almost immediately. She could tell it was a book, the tell-tale rectangular shape and heft to it as she picked it up giving it away. She could feel the spine of the book beneath the gray wrapping, the slight concave of it on the opposite side where the pages were.

Certainly, it would be dark, and her stomach flipped sharply at that. She did not know exactly what route Tom would take in his plans to recruit, but she was entirely torn. Part of her sought desperately for purchase on the past, to delay the process as much as she could. The other, more cynical part was growing impatient. 'Let's just get it over with,' she was urged on, a strange defiance to her defeat. 'The sooner we get on with it, the sooner I can ruin him.'

When had she become so terribly vindictive?

She grabbed hold of the gift, shoving it into her beaded bag. She supposed the polite thing to do was to wait until he was with her to open it, even though her mouth became suspiciously dry at the thought of it. The last gift he had given her was the necklace, and though he had not mentioned it
since she thrust it back into his hands, she became instantly uneasy at the idea of him handing her anything else.

She stood then, organizing the gifts carefully and stowing them away. She paused on the three tomes she received from Nott, chewing her lip as she began skimming through them. They had been purchased with the intent to read them, and she didn't want to give Tom the power in thinking he would have to lead her into such darkness. 'Besides,' she thought, picking up the one that she thought was the more dubious of them all, the sides of the pages a deep maroon, like blood shining under a light. 'Perhaps if he sees me reading this on my own, he'll speed this whole thing up a bit.'

Still, doing it of her own volition did not stop her from shuddering terribly as she continued to look through it, her fingers running over the pages. 'Practical Use of Dark Arts Application' was the first chapter, and it alone was a terrible glimpse of what would come from the rest of it. It was like ducking her head into a tub of ice cold water, the burn from the freeze biting her face, sending a shock down her spine. It was better this way though, to start off on something dreadful. It would make the rest easier to stomach, more palatable.

Adding the book to her bag to read during the day, after she found Tom and played the role of loving girlfriend on a holiday, she moved to get ready for the day, startling when she sent something flying across the room after unknowingly kicking it. The object—another gift, she thought—had collided with a wall, ricocheting off it and landing some foot away, just under a roommate's bed. She looked at it curiously, raising a brow at the red paper wrapping. Surely, no one from Slytherin would have taken such care to use anything other than green and silver wrapping.

So then who could it have been from?

Moving closer to where it was, she knelt down to inspect it, a small smile growing. Not only did it have a vibrant red wrapping, but it was tied down with a gold ribbon, the top of it a plume of the curled strands, winding over top. She picked up the present, plucking the end of one ribbon and pulling it taut, only to release it sharply as it bounced back. A canvas of colors against the gray and green wrapping of her other gifts, this one was surely another gift from Dumbledore. Perhaps he felt that he had to give her an actual gift on Christmas as well?

“And to think I only got him some socks,” she muttered, opening the gift box. They had been exquisite socks nonetheless, seven in total and all of them unique. One sang when they became dirty, another turned from a spectrum of colors in relation to one's emotional duress. She had thought they were quite fun, even Athena had taken delight in tossing pairs at her when they were shopping together.

It was a jewelry box, perhaps for a ring or earrings. It was small enough for her to hold it in her palm, curl her fingers over it. She pushed the lid open with her thumb, smiling at the sight that greeted her. A ring was nestled in the velvet lining, a small and subtle ring, nothing too garish or stately. The band was slim, gold, and little prongs rose from the center of it, clasping tight onto a polished ruby. It was clear, the surface brilliant and shiny, and she pulled it from the cushion, stopping herself as it was brought to the tip of her finger.

How foolish of her! She chided herself, shaking her head as she slid her wand down from her sleeve and began testing it for any curses. She could not afford to become careless—any second she spent not being vigilant could mean losing everything she had strove for! Would mean everything would have been for naught. Perhaps that thought was the most convincing of them all. She had accepted that she would have to play lover to Voldemort, but she did not intend for it to be in vain.

“I sound like Moody,” she said, a warmth of familiarity to her voice. But the ring was free of any tampering— as all of her gifts had been— and with a sigh she settled it on her finger, holding her hand
out with the fingers splayed to examine it. It was pretty, and brought a large smile to her face. A reminder of where she came from, of who she was when she was being forced to become someone she wasn't.

Dumbledore certainly deserved more than socks.

But Dumbledore could wait, she thought as she grabbed her bag and wrapped it around her before dressing and exiting the room. She did not know how Tom celebrated Christmas, or even if he celebrated it at all, but it would not bode well for her if she ignored him. She couldn't misstep, not now, and so, after not finding him seated in the empty Common Room- a fire roaring and the smell of delicious fresh baked cookies in the air- she moved to the Boys' Dormitories.

She hesitated in the long hallway, walking slowly and counting each step as she moved, for no reason other than to take her mind off the fact that she was walking towards Lord Voldemort's bed. The room the murderer slept so peacefully in, undisturbed by the weight of his actions. Or did he sleep? It felt childish, to question the certainly necessary biological functions of another being, but really, it was so strange to think of him sleeping. Just as she still hadn't quite gotten over the sight of him eating, this notion was just as inconsistent with her vision of the Dark Lord. Surely, he did not stay up all night, steepling his fingers as he plot world domination.

Was he light sleeper? Or a heavy one? Did he toss and turn a bit, ravaged by nightmares or, perhaps less likely, the guilt of what he had done? Or did he sleep soundly, like a pacified baby after a warm bottle of milk?

Her stomach contorted, and a surge of anger worked through her at that thought. She hoped he suffered in the night, she really did. She had hardly gotten a proper night's sleep- having disposed of the Dreamless Sleep and vowing to refrain from it as long as she lived- and it didn't seem fair that he should be given the luxury he would eventually deprive her of.

She took her aggression out on the door, twisting the handle sharply and pushing it in as she stepped through, the door slamming against the wall. She flinched before realizing that it too was empty, the curtains to all bed but one pulled back.

"Tom?" she called, wondering if he was in the attached lavatory. But no one responded, and she took a hesitant step forward, all the while screaming at herself to leave. He would not- boyfriend or not- like knowing she took it upon herself to go through his belongings, but she no longer had control over herself, her curiosity ebbing away at that part of her brain.

And before she could stop herself, she was standing beside what she concluded was his bed, impeccably neat with a pair of folded pajamas over the green duvet. Her fingers reached out to it, touching the cotton shirt before suddenly pulling back, her common sense returning to her. He would notice, she was sure, if anything was so much as an inch out of place. She wouldn't have been surprised if he spent a good portion of his morning routine simply staring at it all, committing his placement of things to memory.

It was jarring though, to know he even owned clothes other than his school uniform. Of course, she wasn't so daft as to think he slept in the overwhelming layers of wool and an oxford- though really she only acknowledged he slept at all about a minute or so again. Had he been wearing pajamas the night he poisoned her, when she sought after him under the need to please him? She couldn't recall, her head fuzzy with the barely there memory.

"Leave, leave now, Hermione," she said under her breath. And she did so, vacating the room quietly and standing outside the hall. She wanted to go back to her own room, to sulk a bit as she pretended to forget that today was once a favorite of hers. But she was better than that- she was stronger than
that. She would not sulk, not anymore. She had wasted enough time on that.

So, she set out with a sigh, running through a mental list of where she might find Tom. That was, if he wanted to be found. It was very possible he would shut himself away from the world, and from her. He did not like this time of year, that much she had discerned from his increased agitation over the previous week. And he did seem like the type to allow for the occasional sulk.

If she didn't find him in any of his usual haunts, than she supposed she would simply have to wait. She did, after all, have a book to read. All the better for her if she was caught reading it by Tom. She simply couldn't wait for him to introduce her to his world.

Couldn't wait to tear it down from the inside out.

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“Take it back,” Tom hissed, his voice deep and low as it stirred Hermione from her sleep. She gasped, frightened as she shuffled up into a sitting position on the sofa, her book falling to the floor. Her eyes were wide, and there was an imprint on her cheeks from where they lay on the seams of the cushions, embedding a red welt across her face. Hair stuck to her lips, and she sputtered comically, hastily pulling it back.

“What are you—” she started, narrowing her eyes as he held out an arm, the scruff of Ishtar's neck clenched in his grip.

The kitten offered a mew of protest, kicking her hind legs wildly in the air. “Take it back. This thing has been harassing me at all hours of the night, and I tolerated it for your sake. But it impeded my studies today and that is where I draw the line. I am not your cat sitter,” he said, releasing hold of her so that she fell in Hermione's lap. She winced as her claws scraped across her thighs, the angered feline peeling away from them to rest on the arm of a nearby chair.

She gaped. “That's where she's been running off to?”

“Stop napping the day away and watch your familiar,” he grunted, sitting down beside her and rubbing his eyes.

“Napping the...Tom! Where have you been! It's Christmas and I've been waiting for you since I woke up!” she retorted, scowling at him as she twisted to better face him. He could only smirk at her anger, childishly wanting to remind her of when she had left him waiting for a whole day. But he decided against it. She could be quite ferocious when she wanted to be, and while he normally enjoyed drawing it out of her, he had other matters to attend to. More pressing matters.

Frowning sympathetically, he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry, Hermione. I hadn't been able to sleep, and I went to do some studying while I waited for you. I lost track of time though. I'm afraid I've ruined your Christmas morning,” he said, reaching out to rub her arm.

She chuckled wryly. “It was ruined long before then,” she muttered. He sat quietly, hoping she would not take some time to bemoan the loss of her family once more. He was growing quite tired of late with her bursts of moping, and he hardly had it in him to seem caring in regards to it. She was not the first or the last person to lose their family untimely, yet she almost acted as though she was, alone in the tragedy of the world. She was far too emotional for his liking, and rather high on his list of priorities was to help her rid herself of such frivolities. He had too much planned for her to have her tears get in the way.

Thankfully, she turned to him with a resigned, if not forced smile, as she said, “Well, did you get my
gift at least? I gave it to Ruthie, she said she would bring it to your room for you to have in the morning.” He nodded. The house elf loved Christmas more than Slughorn himself, and took great joy in delivering gifts for the students, placing trays of colorful sugar cookies in the Common Rooms of each house and decorating spaces if she did not think them jovial enough. In fact, he had awoken not only to Hermione’s present sitting on his bedside table, but a miniaturized tree, silver tinsel strung over the dark green pines and glimmering red orbs placed brilliantly on the branches. Ruthie disapproved of the lack of decorations, it seemed. He had destroyed it though, used it for some target practice before cleaning the remains.

Pathetic little creatures, to spend your days willingly serving those around you.

“Yes, thank you. Did you get yours?”

She bent over, grabbing her beaded purse from where it sat on the floor. Marvelous little invention of hers, he thought as she dug around through it, pulling it up to her shoulder as she sifted within it, a look of concentration on her face. Finally, with an aha, she pulled the present out from within, settling it on her lap as she huffed. “I need to clean that thing out,” she muttered as she pulled at the ends of the wrapping paper, being careful not to tear it too much. She was dreadfully slow, and his mind quickly wandered, eyeing the curve of her neck with a growing smirk.

He reached out, wrapping his fingers around a chunk of her hair and began running them through, her hair surprisingly soft despite its frayed and mangled appearance. He let his fingertips graze over the back of her neck, lightly tracing circles over her skin. He could feel the muscles tighten in response as he sought out her tendons, gingerly running up and down the pliable structure of her throat. He smirked when he heard her breathe quite loudly, knew she was attempting to steady herself one inhalation at a time.

He enjoyed her neck, enjoyed the softness of her flesh there, enjoyed knowing just how delicate it was. He could kill her, if he wanted, very easily. He was not a terribly muscular or large person, but he was still stronger than her, his hands wide enough that he could overpower her, wrap them tight around her neck and squeeze the life from her. And yet, he could also bring her great and immeasurable pleasure. Could make her moan and beg for his touches by running his tongue down the slopes of it, biting down on the point where her neck met her shoulder, nip at her jugular. He could undo her, could make her whimper his name in a stream of barely comprehensible words. He could make her whimper in pain or in pleasure, and was that not the ultimate form of control over another? To be their end, and their beginning?

She cleared her throat, leaning away from him slightly as she finished pulling the crinkly wrapping off the gift, balling it up before she tossed it onto the floor. He let his hand slip from her neck, coming to a rest on her arm as he moved closer. She was not very appreciative of his touch, and he would respect that, would take his time with her. He did not want to lose her, not when he had begun to carefully stoke the flames beneath her, calling to the need he knew existed within her. The need to be powerful, that need that existed in the hearts of many but was ignored by most, those who would not take what they wanted. Whether it was by choice, or they were to weak to do so.

“A book on legilimancy?” she said, drawing him away from his thoughts. She was holding the book up, turning her head to the side as she flipped it over and back again.

He smiled. “Yes. I know you've already mastered occlumency, and I thought that perhaps you'd like to learn the other aspect to it. I can teach you, but I know how you love to have a book to reference. This one is one of my favorites, but isn’t available at Hogwarts. There is a passage or two in it that delve into uses of legilimancy, ones that border on the line of Dark Arts. Not terribly gruesome, I assure you, but enough for the librarian to not feel comfortable offering it even in the restricted
section,” he explained as she opened it, skimming through the pages. He had to lean forward, incline his head somewhat to see her face, her chewing her lip nervously as she seemed to seek out the darker passages in question, quickly flicking through. He pressed his palm down on the book, right over the seam, to prevent her from turning the page. “I haven't used it myself, but evidently one can use legilimancy to alter a persons memories or perceptions of reality, certain things along those lines. I have no use of it, and it requires one to be particularly advanced, which I am not. Don't worry, darling. I wouldn't give you a book that I thought would upset you.”

As if to prove his point, he moved his hand from holding the book open to her cheek, softly smoothing them over the curve before settling on her chin. Holding it firmly in his hand, he turned her head towards him, leaning in to kiss her softly. He spoke against her lips, brushing against her with his words as he said, “That is, if you'd like to learn legilimancy?”

She pulled back, wriggling her chin away from his hand. She smiled, gratefully. “Actually, I had wanted to learn it alongside my occlumency, but there wasn't enough time and it was more important that I could prevent anyone from getting in,” she said, tapping a finger against her scalp.

“Excellent, I look forward to our lesson, Miss Dumbledore,” he purred, leaning back on the sofa so that he was half way pressed into the corner of the arm, the silk throw pillow softening the angle. Looking down to where her other book had fallen, the one she had fallen asleep reading, he raised a brow, gesturing towards it. “I see the more unsettling parts of my gift shouldn't bother you, seeing as how you're reading that. I did not know you were interested in the darker arts.”

She took a moment to understand his implication, grabbing hold of the tome and cursing as she tried to smooth the pages, bent from when it had fallen. Of course, he had known the book would be in her possession, he had requested Nott offer it to her as a Christmas present. Though, he hadn't quite expected her to read it on her own, or at least not so soon. Of the three books Nott had procured for her, it was surely the worst in terms of its contents. If he recalled correctly, the first chapter contained a spell that would cleanly eviscerate a foe. Not something he had thought Hermione would consider light reading.

‘She's always full of surprises,’ he mused as she laid it on the coffee table, a top the other.

“I was a gift, from Nott. He bought me several, but this one caught my eye,” she said slowly. Hesitantly. She bit her lip, wringing her hands in her lap. “I'm not...well, I don't intend to use any of it. But I have a bit of a fascination with it- purely academic, mind you,” she said suddenly, defensively, rounding on him with wide eyes as though she feared he would turn her in, report her to Dippet. But instead, he smirked, nodding in agreement.

“I understand. After all, how can one truly know how to defend against their enemy if they don't know what they may contain in their arsenal, as well as the proper counter to it? Ignorance isn't always bliss. In fact, it can be quite lethal,” he said, this speech well versed and prepared like neatly organized notes in his head. “How does your cousin feel with this fascination of yours?”

She scoffed, drawing her legs up as she moved along the couch, pressing into his side so that she was resting on his chest, her cheek buried into his jumper. “He doesn't know. I didn't think it was best to tell him, considering he already thinks you're trying to possess me or some other nonsense. He'll think you're brainwashing me, I'm certain of it,” she said, forcing a breathy laugh at the suggestion.

“That's a bit ridiculous,” he said, bringing a hand up to grip the base of her hair, tugging lightly on it. He had taken a great deal of delight in Dumbledore's aghast response to their relationship, to Tom paying such special attention to his dear cousin. There was something thrilling about how it all came together, how he managed to ensnare himself such a powerful witch- one brimming with potential to be a worthy Dark Lady- and deliver perhaps the greatest blow to the old man's ego. He was not
infallible, as he thought he was, and he was not the great protector. He had let his very own cousin slip through his knobby fingers and into the lap of a wizard he did not trust. A wizard whom he surely knew was going to be great, in due time. Terrible, but great.

Still, he did not know just yet how he wanted to proceed. Her connection to Dumbledore could prove very useful indeed, and he was never one to carelessly toss away opportunities. “Perhaps you should give him some hope that I haven't completely spoiled you,” he said, in what he hoped was a playful tone. “You'll have to spend half the summer with him, and it would be a dreadful time if you were not on good terms. I'd hate him to think I was driving a stake between you and him, he certainly wouldn't like me any more.”

She was silent for a minute, and if he did not know better he might have thought she had fallen asleep. Or was at least teetering on the cusp, too drained to respond. But then her voice - alert and disappointed- filled the room. “I suppose you are right. He is all the family I have, and I shouldn't spurn him. My mother spoke highly of him for a reason,” she said, humming softly in his chest. That was the end of that discussion, and he resumed his gentle pulls on her hair, turning his gaze to the ceiling.

What to do with Dumbledore would be tucked away for now, to be perused at a later time when his head was more clear on the matter. For now, Hermione would be his focus. He would begin teaching her Legilimancy, something he was certain she would flourish in. He had considered briefly- though again had not properly examined it from all angles- keeping Hermione in a position between himself and the old wizard. She would come to him, of course, at the end of the day and into his arms. But Dumbledore wouldn't know that. Dumbledore would think she remained untainted by the consuming darkness that was Riddle, and hopefully might even accidentally feed her information. Information she could relay to him, that he could use to his advantage. And even if he did not speak openly to her, he may surround her with people who did know, who could not properly occlude their minds.

And he would teach Hermione to steal from their thoughts, deftly and without notice.

It was a skill that would be handy in any circumstance, really, whether he decided to have her sever ties with the Gryffindor or retain them. Regardless, he didn't think anything could cause him to regret acquiring this little witch. She truly did have it all. Power, and the intellect to use it. She was more than a weapon to be honed, than a pawn to wield for his disposal. She was so easily controlled really, once he had broken through he heavy walls. She was fiercely loyal, he had learned, and would not deviate from him once he had her. And he had her, oh and he would never let her go.

He would train her, help her reach her full potential. Watch her flourish under his guidance. And she would rule, she would be ruthless once he taught her to quiet the yell of her conscience, taught her to put herself before others for the first time in her life. And, he thought, his eyes looking to the book on the table, one bookmarked almost a quarter way through it's dark and grotesque contents, she was already pulled into the dark, if only a little. If only through her carnivorous need to learn everything she could. It would be easy, though he would still have to tread carefully.

Pressing his lips to her head, to her dark brown curls, he placed a kiss, smirking against her. He whispered, not certain if it was really loud enough for her to hear, “You really are so perfect.”

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“I swear one of these days he'll kill me,” Mulciber said with a deprecating sigh, a half hearted laugh that died on his lips. Rosier turned to face him, a brow raised as he settled the object he had been holding back on the shelf. It was the day after Christmas, and Rosier had surprised him with a visit to his small home, the two standing in Mulciber's room. It was considerably smaller than what Rosier
was used to, with dark wooden panels running up the walls and one large window that took up nearly a whole wall, as if to compensate for the light being consumed by the rich wood. Emerald green curtains flanked the sides of it, pushed back into a bunch to allow as much of the light in, and there was plenty, reflecting off the bright pillows of snow surrounding his home. His bed sat in the center, the white covers rumpled and tossed about, the sheets untucked from the corners as though he had had a dreadful nightmare the night prior and never set his bed right. Brooms hung over the bed, various types of different makings. Some elegant and soft curved handles, others rustic and chipped. It looked as if he kept each broom he had ever received, from a small one he had used as a toddler to a sleeker, adult sized one.

“Riddle won't kill you unless you give him a reason to,” Rosier said with a shrug, smirking when Mulciber made a disparaging sound.

His eyes wide, he said, “I always give him a reason to. He terrifies me. I wish I could go back in time, stop myself from ever becoming friends with him. I wish I could...just leave now. Maybe I should.”

Rosier narrowed his eyes, frowning as Mulciber sat on his bed, propping his elbows on his knees as he covered his face. With a heavy sigh, he moved across the room, sitting beside him. “You know you can't. So stop saying stuff like that. Remember what he did last time you asked to leave? Imagine what he'd do if you actually tried,” he said, his voice soft and pleading. His typically high pitched voice, joking and playful, had been traded over, concern and genuine care seeping through, lowering it.

Mulciber winced, subconsciously rubbing his fingers over his chest as if suddenly recalling the pain of his torture. “He hates me though. Barely tolerates me. If he doesn't kill me, he'll blast away so much of my memory he might as well have killed me. It's only a matter of time,” he moaned, running a hand over his face. Riddle had made promises of power to them all, but it was quite obvious that some would receive more than others. As it was, Mulciber was at the bottom of the pecking order. Always had been, and he was sure he always would. And why should it change? He really was useless. He wasn't good at much.

He was quite thickheaded, too. He tended to be oblivious, often said or did things that were always wrong no matter the context. Always, without fail. If Riddle had known ahead of time how absolutely pathetic he was, he surely would have saved himself the trouble and not recruited him. It would have been for the better, for the both of them. He was getting quite sick of being tortured.

“I hope Hermione turned him down. Perhaps I should try to send her a letter, telling her to avoid him. Slowly stop speaking with him. I'd feel awful if she got hurt by him when I could have warned her,” he said, looking to Rosier with hopeful eyes, the other boy chewing his tongue nervously.

“Use your head, mate. What if Riddle finds the letter? What if Hermione tells him about it? Is that really what you want to come back to after break? I know you like her, but she's plenty old enough to make her own decisions about what is or isn't the best for her. Besides, it's probably already been made and your letter would do no good. Only harm- to you,” Rosier said, causing Mulciber to thump his head with the heel of his palm.

He grunted. “See? That's what I mean. I don't think things through well, and I get us all in trouble. He's been saying it for some time now, but one day he'll mean it. He's sick of cleaning up after us, and I'm sure of it. He'll kill me the second we get out of Hogwarts. I really should just leave-”

“Then stop messing up, mate! It isn't that hard!,” the other boy said, exasperated. Then, taking a deep and steadying breath as if to compose himself, he said, calmer, “Look, the fact is, Riddle is the best person for us. We're...well, we aren't exactly embraced in this society with open arms. People would
treat us like a leper if they knew, and he's the only one who will stand up for us. He doesn't care about that, all he cares about is your loyalty. He will succeed, I know he will, and when he does, we won't ever have to worry about that, so long as we don't stray from him."

Mulciber seemed less than convinced, grimacing solemnly as he folded his arms across his chest. “Listen, if you're really that worried that Riddle will want to get rid of you, then we'll just have to raise you up a little in his eyes,” Rosier said flippantly, swishing his hands through the air.

He quirked a brow. “And how do we do that?”

“By tearing others down,” he answered simply, standing once more to wander the room. This earned a scowl from Mulciber as he slumped down to his bed, laying down as he gazed at the ceiling above him. He hated that system, the system of turning on the other in order to bring good favor to yourself. Indeed, he had hoped to accomplish much in this world, and would work tirelessly to get there. But he didn't see the point on stampeding through those in your path, tossing them aside as if they were rubbish. After all, what good did accomplishments make if you accumulated enemies along the way? What was to stop them from doing the same to you?

Riddle often called him a Hufflepuff for this, but he did not quite agree. After all, wasn't self preservation one of the many traits of a Slytherin? He had that in abundance.

“You know that's not me, Garreth. Besides, if Dolohov even thinks I'm trying to set him up he'll go mad. He's on a rather thin thread as it is, what with Hermione and all. I really hope she said no...” he started, trailing off.

“Dolohov is doing a right good job on his own of getting Tom to crucio him around the block and back. I'm just suggesting we...push him a little. In the right direction. Stoke the coals beneath his ire. He'll do the rest for us, I assure you. Maybe we can knock Nott down a little too. He's a prat, thinking he's Merlin's gift to us all. What makes him so special? Just because Riddle had chosen him to be his second. I understand he's the more competent one, but really, that isn't saying much. Have you met us? We're all quite dreadful. No wonder he was so quick to claim Hermione,” Rosier suggested with a laugh, Mulciber joining him as he propped himself up on his elbows. He was always good at that, making him laugh even when he was at his sorest. Even when laughing was the furthest thing from his mind. “So what do you say? I'll do all the work, take them down a few so you can claw your way up. In the meantime, why don't you ask Hermione to help you study? I have a funny feeling that Riddle got her, you know, and if that's so, there's something to be said about having his witch like you. Win her over, and you'll win him over.

“How's that sound? You get your safety net of being his least favorite, all without getting your hands dirty,” he said, smiling encouragingly.

Mulciber shrugged, rolling his shoulders slow. It still didn't sound ideal, to be quite honest. But who was he to argue? There was no backing out now. He had wandered too far into the spider's web, and there was no way he could turn around and just leave. So he had better make himself at home, learn to play the game that others around him played so effortlessly. “Yes, I suppose. Just...don't be stupid. Don't let anyone know you were behind it, they'll only seek revenge,” he warned, though he knew he had no reason to. Rosier was quite smart, smarter than most gave credit for. He knew that sometimes the best way to become noticed by the pragmatic leader was to be as unnoticeable as possible. He did not rile feathers in public, he did not speak much in conversations aside from polite chatter. Not because he did not want to, or did not know what to say, but because Rosier knew that if he was quiet and forgettable, others would ignore him. And when they did, he could do what he wanted, no one suspecting Rosier because really what did he do aside from making some rather goofy remarks here and there and provide moderately intelligent conversation?
“Good. I'll get a plan going, tonight, after supper. I have a meeting with some witch, one my parents want me to court I think. From Beauxbatons, mum said. Pretty thing, it would be a shame if I was late to meet her, so I best get going,” he said, turning around suddenly as he wandered back over to Mulciber's bed, sitting himself down on the floor ungracefully. Craning his neck over to look at the other wizard, he grinned. “Will you be my best man if this pulls through?”

He snorted. “You'll make a lovely bride, how could I say no?”

Feigning a look of hurt, he pressed his hand flat against his chest, scoffing. “You wound me, Milton.” He then stood, brushing his trousers off. “Anyway, I'll see you back at King's Cross. We'll discuss everything in more detail some time after term starts again. All you'll have to worry about though is making a good impression on Hermione. If she likes you- and once she sees how smart you can be when you aren't panicking about Riddle punishing you- she'll pass the word to Riddle, I'm sure. Don't underestimate the power of having the right connections, especially when she is so...pliable. Besides, if you want to protect her the best place to do it is from the inside,” he said.

Mulciber was nodding, rapt focus evident on his features. “Right,” he answered, though he hoped he wouldn't have to. He was awful at protecting people, especially not when Riddle was the one they needed protecting from. Hopefully he would spare her the punishments he doled out so easily, not wanting to harm Hermione. He did not know if the boy could really care about someone in that way, but he begged that he could, somewhere deep down, beneath all the ice. If there was anyone Riddle would feel that way about, surely it would be the talented witch?

She really was very nice, he didn't think she deserved to be hurt the way they were.

His thoughts were disrupted when a hand settled beneath his chin, pulling his face up. Rosier was leaning over him, smiling softly. “Relax. Everything will be alright, and eventually you'll be thankful you didn't run away. He may frighten you, but he'll do great things for us. For anyone who joins him,” he said comfortingly before lowering some more, pressing his lips to Mulciber's.

He softened to the kiss, instantly at ease. That was what had attracted him to Riddle in the first place, wasn't it? His promise of protection, of sanctuary. Even when he did not deserve it. Purebloods were a dying breed, and even the most well known of the few remaining would probably find some bumps in the road, some point in time where their genealogy twisted for someone of a lesser pedigree. For all he knew, it was likely there weren't any real Purebloods any more, each having some part of them- however small- from a muggle relative.

And how incredibly selfish it was to not try to continue the Pureblood name, his family's legacy. He didn't have any siblings, and only one cousin with the name Mulciber. No, not many Pureblood's did have large families though, an effect from their limited gene pool. Fertility was a gift, and was quite hard to come by (with the exception of the blood traitors, who consorted freely with muggles and muggleborns), and yet here he was, throwing it all away. If anyone knew of it, he would be disowned, not just from his family but from society as well. He would never get very far in the Ministry, and neither would Rosier if he was ever associated with him in such a way. The Magical World, for all its advancements, was still very traditional in that manner.

That was where Riddle came in. Charming and passionate in a subdued, enthralling way. Riddle who made him believe that there could be a world where he was not persecuted for whom he loved, where he was not just seen as a Pureblood wasting his place in this world by making them even more endangered. 'Follow me, and you will never worry again what others think of you. You will have power over them, and they will fear you, respect you,' he said, and he had been so enticed he hadn't bothered to explain that fear and respect were quite separate entities and did not go hand in hand like he spoke of them. But who was he to split hairs? Not only would it make his own future- his own
life—better, but surely it would help others like him, caught in the similar place between heart and traditions.

He wasn't a martyr, he was not some foolhardy Gryffindor. Nor was he altruistic in any sense of the word. But he quite liked Riddle's vision of the world, and even though he suffered often for his oversights, he would defend it to his death. He didn't really have anything else otherwise—Riddle had threatened to expose him if he faltered. Yet, if he remained loyal, not only would Riddle keep the secret to himself, but he would only be better off. It was confusing, to be so torn. Society, as a whole, condemned him, whether for traditionalist values or Pureblood ones, and he knew that despite this, he was expected to function civilly. How could anyone expect him to not be drawn to Riddle, when the boy simply didn't care about that?

When forced to choose between the allegiances wrought in him through years to his community—a community that did not return it—and the allegiances he forged on his own, with his own safety and happiness in mind, how could any of it really be bad?
Chapter Seventeen: Fool

“Now you’re looking for the secret, but you won’t find it, because of course you’re not really looking. You don’t really want to know. You want to be fooled.”
-Christopher Priest, The Prestige

“How did you discover this room?” Hermione asked in awe as she walked around the perimeter of the Room of Requirements, stopping in front of the towering bookcases.

Tom smirked, coming up behind her and gripping onto her arms. He leaned forward, over her shoulder, as he shrugged. “I suppose the way people discover anything they want,” he whispered, running his fingers down her arm as his worlds curled around her like a chill. He felt her shiver beneath his touch, her posture becoming suddenly sharp, but she did not shirk away as she sometimes did. In fact, she sidled closer to him, so that she now rested fully against his chest.

Her question was so silent, that he almost did not hear it. “What is it that you want, Tom?”

He had to stop himself from laughing, a loud barking laugh of a deranged man. What did he want? Quite a loaded question, if there ever was one. To be the ruler of the world, magical or otherwise? To control an army built upon the outcasts of society, the spares tossed aside as if they were spoiled? To never be questioned or commanded again? Or, he supposed, it was likely that she was being a tad bit romantic. That she was hoping he might make grand declarations of his undying love, asking for her hand and her heart.

'She is sorely mistaken,' he thought with a wry grin as he turned her around, still holding tight to her shoulders. “I want to begin these lessons,” he said, suddenly pulling away from her to stand on the opposite side of the room. “Hopefully you'll do better than the others. I tried to teach them once and it was a like teaching a cat to swim.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping as her posture returned to her normal slouch. “Now,” he started, his tone becoming sharp, instantly begging to be listened to. “Legilimancy is often considered the opposite of occlumency, and vice versa. I would like to assure you that this is far from the case, and that in order to properly wield both distinct entities, you will have to respect their differences above similarities...”

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“It’s a slap in the face. We’ve been friends with him since he came to this school- have served under him and vowed to continue to serve under him. He's tortured us, and we've thanked him for it after he was done. It's just...it's unfair! Some chit who wandered in here some months ago and we're expected to just treat her like a queen?” Dolohov snarled angrily, gesturing broadly around him. He was sitting in a spare classroom, the desks pushed against the walls with the chairs loaded up on top of them, leaving a large expanse in the center of the room. He was taking full advantage of it, storming around the room with a furious air, rustling his hands anxiously over the sides of his head. He moved in a circle, with Rosier sitting at the front where the teacher might if the classroom was still being used, legs propped up on the grimy desk surface and a forgotten tome laying open in his lap.

Rosier frowned, his hand covering his mouth as he watched Dolohov stomp around the spare classroom, occasionally kicking the leg of a dusty desk. “And she's been here since September, has done nothing but bat her eyelashes and suddenly she's the one who will rule beside him? She's his
second in command? She hasn't even been initiated into the Knight's, yet he has her entire future with it laid out, tossing us aside as if we've done nothing for him."

The boy paused, exhaling sharply as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair. Slowly, he shook his head, pursing his lips. "And she's a...half-blood," he uttered, his nostrils flaring at the word in disgust.

Rosier leaned back from where he sat, folding his hands behind his head. "It's not...entirely without reason. She is rather impressive-" he started, snapping his mouth shut when the boy ceased in his pacing to fix him with a venomous glare, his lips raised in a snarl. Rosier raised his hands in front of him in surrender. "I'm not the enemy here."

"Stop acting like it then," he hissed. He spat then, coming to a stop in his pacing before he shoved his hands in his pockets. "I still don't trust her either. I don't know what he sees in her," he scoffed derisively. "She isn't that smart is she, if she doesn't see him for what he is? She's quite ugly, too."

"Hard to believe he can have anyone he chooses and he picks her," Rosier agreed, skewing his face in thought. He was quiet a moment, humming softly before he added, his voice dark and low, a whisper into the empty room, "But you know...maybe if we show her a little bit of what he is...of what we are...Well, we can get her to leave on her own."

Dolohov started, looking up at Rosier with a questioning look on his shadowed face. "What do you mean?" he said slowly, a slight pause between each word as he struggled to make sense of Rosier's wide grin, the mischievous shine to his golden eyes. He shrugged easily, standing up from where he sat. He ran a hand over his pant legs, his grin only widening when Dolohov snapped at him in impatience. "What I mean is...say we happen to get her alone one day. And we happen to show her...well, a little bit of what it's like to serve under him. Nothing bad mind you- she's not worth risking our arses over because we couldn't resist the temptation to curse her- so get that thought from your head!" he said, wagging a finger playfully as Dolohov scowled further, crossing his arms over his chest as if to say get on with it. "Just...frighten her a little bit. She just got out of a war you know, she's bound to be jumpy and none to eager to go back into that mindset, so it shouldn't take much. We'll scare her, and she'll want nothing to do with us. Or Riddle."

The other laughed, rolling his eyes. "And when Riddle finds out? Or when she runs to her bloody cousin?" he barked, shaking his head. "Really, you're a lot dumber than I thought," he muttered, turning away from the boy to continue his pacing.

Rosier pouted at this as he took long strides to catch up with him, following him as he continued to move in a circle. "We'll threaten her. Obliviate if we need to. You know as well as I do that even if a memory is removed, the mind still retains any emotions attached," he said, pointing to his temple. "If we scare her enough and then erase it all, her brain will remember that she should be afraid of us, just not why. And no one will expel us because of that. It's actually quite brilliant. She'll leave him to get away from it, and we won't ever have to deal with her again. Who knows, maybe Voldemort will even want to take revenge on her when she does. You know how he hates to lose his toys."

Dolohov considered this now, pursing his lips in thought. "But...he rarely ever leaves her alone. Especially not with me," he said, snorting ungracefully. "For this exact reason, if I'm not mistaken."

"I've thought of that too," he answered, raising his hand in front of him as he examined his dirty nails with a bored expression. "You'll just have to pretend to like her. Or at least not actively dislike her. If Riddle gets suspicious, just tell him it's because you would never disrespect your Lady or something like that. Eventually he'll trust you a bit more with her. As for leaving her alone? We can plan that as
well. It may take some time, but we can make it happen, I assure you. It will just be all the sweeter.”

A long silence spread over them as he ruminated over the suggestion, sucking his lower lip between his teeth. It was foolish, incredibly foolish. And risky. But Rosier was smarter than he acted, and was never given enough credit for his ability to twist a tale. It wouldn't have been the first time he kept something from Riddle, he knew, though he couldn't fathom how he did it. Nothing ever escaped Riddle's notice, yet Rosier seemed to have a strong enough handle on it.

“If we get caught, you know he'll kill us.” It was said with so much certainty that the word punctuated the air between them, like a knife digging into the fabric of the world. Despite the heaviness of it, and its implications, Rosier seemed nonplussed, laughing quite joyously.

“We won't get caught. Besides, Riddle will surely thank us when he realizes we did him a favor. She's a Dumbledore, I don't think she'll be as easy to sway to his side as he thinks,” he said, waving a hand flippantly through the air.

Dolohov did not seem entirely convinced, however, his shoulders sagging as he moved towards a desk, cleaning it properly with magic before sitting down atop it. “Maybe we should take this to Nott. He must be furious, he was fixing himself to be Riddle's right hand man and now he's been dethroned. Maybe he can talk some sense into Riddle or...I don't know.”

Raising an eyebrow, Rosier said, “I don't know if Nott's the one you want to turn to. Especially right now. He would never hesitate to tell Riddle when someone was up to something before, he would do anything to get back into his good graces now. He would tell Riddle about how distrustful you are of his intended, and how you questioned his judgment faster than you could blink. And we all know what will happen if Riddle knows all of that.” He paused, taking a moment to look pointedly as the boy. He shrugged then, letting his legs fall back to the floor. “Perhaps just sit back and hope Nott manages to dig his own grave.”

Dolohov frowned, scratching his chin in thought. He was never good with waiting, he much preferred for things to be done swiftly. But Rosier did make a brilliant point. At the end of the day, Nott would do only what he thought would improve his own standing to the charismatic Slytherin leader, and he wouldn't hesitate to make sure Dolohov remained towards the bottom of the hierarchy, a place he was dangerously close to occupying since oh so long ago when Riddle first learned of his distrust of Hermione.

Suddenly, he stilled, his spine going rigid as he knitted his brow, chewing his lip. “Rosier...tell me. Who was the one who spoke to Riddle about what I had said in the Hog's Head?” he asked, his voice low. He had, up until this moment, believed Mulciber was the one with the loose lips, as the boy was rather jumpy and guilt ridden for the days that had followed, and wouldn't even make eye contact with him when he was being tortured in the Come and Go Room. But, if he were being honest, Mulciber had always been the sort to turn away rather easily when things became uncomfortable for him- the boy had once been taunted for a week straight in their third year after he became terribly sick during a study in dissections. It was, in hindsight, easy to believe that he had misconstrued his actions for guilt when in actuality, they were only the actions of someone with a weak stomach.

The boy before him sighed, smoothing out his wrinkled pant legs. Without lifting his eyes from his lap, he said, “You mean to tell me you've made it this long and are just now realizing Nott was the one responsible for that?”

Ignoring the condescending tone to his voice, Dolohov stood up quickly, the desk skidding behind him onto its back legs with the motion. “That slimy, no good...ugh!” he yelled through gritted teeth, pulling his wand out from his pocket as he began to rapidly send reducto curses around the room,
bursting various pieces of furniture in white hot light. Splinters of wood shot forth from the center of each explosion, twirling dangerously around the room and causing Rosier to duck three times as large fragments pummeled towards his head.

“Ant, calm-”

“NO!” Dolohov barked, swiveling quickly on his feet. He pointed the tip of his wand in Rosier's direction, jabbing it forward aggressively as he spoke, using it for emphasis. “If Nott is going to betray us without a second thought, then we're going to do the same to him. He thinks he's something special, being Riddle's favorite. Not for long though. I'll make sure of it. I'll make sure he'll have to crawl through glass at Riddle's feet to even earn back a modicum of the power he had before. Just you wait.”

The other wizard moved around the room, nervously avoiding the threatening way each word was enunciated with a thrust of the wand. He smirked, his eyebrows raising. “You know, if Riddle could see you now he would probably demote Nott on his own. He appreciates a certain level of controlled madness,” he said, guffawing loudly as he grabbed his belly. “Just don't get too unstable on him, you know how much he hates it when he has to clean up after us.”

Dolohov said nothing, he was out of breath from his momentary tantrum that had left the room in shambles, a fine layer of sawdust settling over the floor and billows of smoke slowly dissipating from the air. His chest rose in heavy breaths as he pushed his black hair back into place, slowly pocketing his wand once more. “We'll work on tearing Nott down after we take care of Hermione- get rid of her so that she's barely the dirt beneath our heels. Her rightful place. Until then, let's keep this between us, eh?”

The other boy nodded. “Of course. A secret between friends,” he said, smiling wide. Of course, the discretion would surely be short lived once Dolohov realized he was only being betrayed once more. It did not weigh on Rosier's conscience however- it was all really a game, one that he knew Riddle took an almost obscene amount of joy in witnessing. There was nothing their leader loved more than watching them turn on the other for his favor, like a God watching the mortals before him fight over who was the more righteous. And Rosier was never one to deny the man a good show.

He had been correct in his assumption that Dolohov did not need much prompting, and was only one persuasive nudge away from forever nestling himself in the bottom wrung. But perhaps he hadn't been prepared for just how easy it would be to provoke a fit of such unhinged fury- to the point that the room was torn apart at even the mere mention of treason. Something deep within his stomach was curling at that, as the smell of singed wood and chaos filled his nose, like a snake coiling into itself for protection. He wouldn't live through it if Dolohov turned on him, seeing through his not entirely subtle attempts at manipulation.

'No, he's too thick headed,' he reassured himself, knowing that the poor boy wouldn't realize he had been set up until it was too late. Forcing his lungs to fill with oxygen- tainted by smoke- he tried to remain confident. It would work out in the end, he knew. He would control him like a marionette, and he smiled as he envisioned it like a play being performed for him.

Dolohov would foolishly try to attack Hermione, to do just as Rosier told him to do, unaware of the fact that the Slytherin would make sure Riddle would come in on time to see his follower harm his lovely little witch. If there was one thing he knew for certain about Lord Voldemort, it was that he did not like others touching what was his.

There would be no redemption for Dolohov after that, and Mulciber would finally be able to relax some in the security of not being the most disposable. And with any luck, Dolohov would take care of Nott on his own, leaving Rosier to sit back and watch it all unfurl.
The Dark Lord wasn't the only one who enjoyed a little entertainment.

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“Favorite color?” Hermione asked after a moment as she placed the half eaten piece of her sandwich back on the plate before her. She sat on the floor of the Common Room, her legs curled under her as she leaned over the surface of the coffee table, her book pushed to the side as she ate. Mulciber was opposite her, his own plate resting atop his parchments strewn before him. They had decided to spend the lunch break tucked away in the quiet of the empty space, with the other Slytherins feasting in the Great Hall while they continued their studies. Tom had, of course, insisted on accompanying them, quietly keeping to himself from where he reclined in the sleek black armchair, reading a book while one hand leisurely ran over Ishtar's coat, the cat having taken a hobby of harassing the young Dark Lord.

'Good kitty,' she thought with a chuckle, her eyes tearing away from the sight of the kitten sprawled over Tom's lap to look at Mulciber.

When he was finished chewing, he said, “Blue, I guess. Yours?”

Her grin only grew. “I've always been fond of red,” she said simply, laughing when she heard a soft snort come from behind her. “Do you have a problem with that, Riddle?”

He lowered the book, smirking at her mocking tone. “Not at all, Darling. How is the tutoring going?” he asked, shifting somewhat so that he was leaning forward in interest without upsetting Ishtar. The action did not go unnoticed to Hermione, and she struggled to tame her smile, finding the entire image terribly cliched. It was the stuff of muggle films, the shadow faced villain sitting sternly in a chair, one hand petting a cat while he spoke of what harm would befall the hero, the protagonist who would escape at the last moment to save the day.

She bit down on her lip, squeezing her thumb hard in her fist as she tried to not laugh aloud. “Wonderful, actually. Milton really is quite smart, he just gets a little nervous and it effects his performance. Nothing we can't work on though, and I'm sure once we do he'll excel,” she said, causing the boy to blush at the praise, ducking his head somewhat.

Tom turned to Mulciber then, cocking his head to the side as he quirked a brow in intrigue, his features becoming hard, thoughtful. “That so?” he asked, though it was not really in search of an answer- the sort of question that did not expect anything to follow.

She frowned, wondering if perhaps she had something wrong. She had spent months in preparation for her role, had studied Tom Riddle from what little memories Dumbledore had retained in his possession after he vanished from the world. She had heard all the stories, and had read and reread all of Snape's journals as though they were scripture. She began her own studies of him when she stormed through the doors at Hogwarts, an orphan of war and in hysterics from her loss. She had her own journals filled with her observations, with every quirk and habit she examined in him. And yet, there were still some moments where she was at an utter lost, when he inclined his chin in just the right way and looked down at someone in a manner that she could not decipher.

“Here, take a look at this essay I had him write me,” she said suddenly, pulling out a sheet of parchment and handing it over to Riddle, watching nervously as he began to read over it. Mulciber was perhaps the kindest of all his followers, and she would often find herself wondering how on earth he had gotten himself wrapped up in all this business. He certainly didn't want to say something to Tom that might otherwise lead to him being harmed- he may have been a Death Eater, but he was still a boy. A boy who was turning a terrible shade of green, his lips pursing as though he were about to vomit.
She leaned across the table, reaching a hand out to grab hold of his own. “Relax. It's an excellent essay, you should proud,” she reassured him in a whisper, knowing that the Slytherin was working himself sick at Riddle's perusal of his work.

“Indeed,” Tom said sharply, startling Mulciber who promptly pulled his hand out from under Hermione's, throwing himself back so that he was leaning against the sofa. The edges of Tom's mouth lifted somewhat into a small, half smirk, before he added, “I must say. I'm quite impressed, Mulciber. Are you certain you wrote this?”

Hermione flinched at the harshness of the words, narrowing her eyes. “Of course he did,” she snapped, sitting straighter as she reached for the other half of her sandwich. It wasn't until after the words left her lips that she knew she had, just then, said the wrong thing. She could see him stiffen from the corner of her eye, heard Ishtar meow indignantly as he ceased petting her in favor of fixing Hermione with a dark glare. She vaguely heard what sounded like Mulciber inhaling a sharp breath, as if he was expecting a curse that never came, and she knew that had the situation been different, that would not have been the case. She would have been cursed in an instant if she were his follower for that sort of quip.

Or would she have? Really, it was a very confusing and entirely new territory that she found herself in. After all, in her own time- at least to her knowledge- the Dark Lord did not have a Lady who presided with him. Would she be safe from any punishments he might otherwise offer freely if she were just another hooded and masked figure? Did the more intimate bond and title between them protect her from such behavior?

She would not know for certain until he finally and wholly welcomed her into his group, the beginnings of his Death Eaters. The Knights of Walpurgis. Tom Riddle was, after all, a gentleman who would never harm a woman, least one who hung on his own arm. Lord Voldemort on the other hand, was a brute and unpredictable. And yet, as the days passed spent in moderate boredom, clinging to Tom's side as she desperately tried to urge Lord Voldemort out of hiding, she was practically humming with anticipation to meet him.

She was sick of having to play the role of innocent and clueless girlfriend, and was longing to move forward in her pursuits. To finally play the role she was born to play, the role of the spy, of a loyal and trusted servant.

She was never good at pretending to be clueless, after all. It went against her very nature.

“Mulciber, why don't you finish your lunch with the others in the Great Hall?” came Tom's silky voice, drawing her out from her thoughts. “While I'm glad to see you're already making such progress in your tutoring sessions, I'm afraid they take away quite a great deal of my own time with our dear Hermione.”

He sighed heavily with relief at this, shaking his head earnestly as he rose from where he sat, grabbing his things in a flurry. “Alright, I'll see you later then,” he mumbled, pausing only for a second to smile shakily at Hermione. He was out the door before she could return the gesture.

Her eyes stayed focused on the door, even as she heard Tom move from the chair to the sofa opposite her, his hands patting down softly on the leather cushion in a beckon for her to join him. “Tom,” she started, slowly standing and moving towards him, her gaze finally meeting his. “He's afraid of you a little bit, isn't he?”

Again, it wasn't really a question, and he did not seem inclined to answer it either way, sighing as she sat beside him and fell into his side. She knew, of course, that Mulciber was very much afraid of Tom. Everyone in Slytherin House was, at least to some extent. The older students were more
reserved in their fear, sidestepping around the boy with a grace that could almost be mistaken for
difference, avoiding eye contact with him as if he did not exist. The younger ones were less subtle
though, eyes wide as saucers watching him nervously from behind books they pretended to read,
flinching sharply if he moved too suddenly. And she had long since wondered why that was- Lord
Voldemort was, she was learning, a particularly difficult entity to lure out, and she was never
presented with more than the charming and handsome prefect before her.

So what could they have done to draw out such malevolence?

“Hermione,” he said, his tone terse. “This is Slytherin House, the House that prides blood purity over
anything else. And Riddle isn't exactly a Pure-blood surname.”

She frowned, chewing her lip. “Well, no, it isn't. But what has that got to do-”

“Dumbledore may not be the most respected name around here, but it's still a Pure-blood name. You
didn't receive quite the warm welcome I did,” he muttered, the bitterness in his voice silencing her.
She let her head fall onto his shoulder, and he brought up a hand to smooth away her curls, letting his
fingers run through her hair. “They doubted my magical ability, and it was my burden of proof to
show them otherwise, is all. I'm afraid though, that rumors tend to be grander and far more long
lasting than their source, and I have quite the reputation among the younger students thanks to the
exaggerated story.” His fingers paused in their travels through her hair, caught on one of her many
knots, and she blushed in embarrassment at it, even as he worked through it and continued to tug
lightly on her tendrils. “I'm not proud of it, but sometimes you have to assert yourself.”

“I understand,” she answered softly, though she really didn't. She had never tortured anyone for their
assumptions on her. “When I was in my third year, at my old school, I punched a classmate for some
choice words he had for me.” She felt his chest bubble with laughter as he pressed his lips to her
head.

“Good girl,” he murmured, and she fought the impulse to yell at him for speaking to her in such a
way, as though she were a dog. Instead, she forced herself to sigh, sinking deeper into him. His
fingers moved from her hair to her arm, the heat of them permeating through the sleeve of her oxford,
leaving a trail of cold behind them.

“So, what about you then?” she found herself asking before she could stop herself, the words
slipping from her unbidden.

He stillled somewhat, tapping his fingers on her shoulder. “What about me?”

“Blood purity. All of Slytherin raves about it- what about you?” she asked, sitting up so that she was
looking at him. It was never something she could quite get used to, the handsome visage she awoke
to every morning, the man who Lord Voldemort was before he traded it all. Leaving behind the
robust, peach flesh for the translucent gray skin, the eyes that varied between azure and navy for
blood red.

A part of her had liked to imagine that he was nothing but a personification of evil, a man made from
hate and deceit and false promises. That he was wrought in nothing but, and therefore was unaware
that the world offered more. He was chaos, wishing for nothing but to spread it like a disease over
the populace for no reason than that he could. To make others suffer, to make others bleed and beg.
Incite a war against peace and reason because he could. Because he was bored.

But she had spent far too much time by his side to truly believe such simplistic summations of him.
He was complex, just every other being had the right to be. And yet it was frustrating that he did not
have the decency to be as she thought, to be a cartoonish caricature of evil. He had no right to be so
handsome and seductive, to have such lush lips and thick chords of wavy dark hair. He should have been foul and loathsome, just as he had been in her own time.

Though, with a frown, she recalled the few excursions she had made to attend church with her family when she was younger. She recalled the priest speaking high up from his lectern of Satan, of the exalted angel full of wisdom and ambition and pride. The anointed cherub, the most handsome and trusted of all of God's angels. Satan who was so well spoken and deceitful that he forged a third of Heaven into an army.

“Well,” Tom started, his eyes piercing into her own with an intensity that made her pull further away, wet her lips as they became terribly dry. “As someone who has lived in both the muggle world and the magical one, I feel quite confident in saying that our world is more advanced and...superior than what the muggles possess. Merely an observation, on my own part.” He was choosing his words carefully, dipping a toe into the water so that he could see where Hermione stood on the subject before he dove in. And who was she to disappoint?

“Yes, I suppose you're right in that,” she said, willing herself to move closer but unable to look away from his eyes, turning darker with each passing second. Her breathing hitched with it, with the realization that this was it. This was the moment that would be the catalyst for him introducing her to Lord Voldemort. “I...know it sounds dreadful, considering...well, everything. But- in theory, at least- I sort of agree with Grindelwald's creed. I mean, it's undeniable that he's a dark wizard and has done some terrible things- I'm proof of that!” she said, pausing to give Tom a shaky grin. “He does have a point though. I lived in the muggle world for eleven years before I even knew I was witch and there's...so much that we could offer them to make their lives better.

“Think of all the illnesses we could cure, all the lives we could save. Sure, it may upset the balance that the muggles have in place, in terms of their economy, but not entirely too much. I don't think they'd be all that bothered by it when they see all the advantages to us sharing our world with them,” she said, licking her lips. Tom was leaning in now, his brows raised in interest and his lips parted somewhat as he listened keenly to her words. But she didn't quite know how to continue- it was difficult to pretend to agree with someone you did not, to see the reasoning in something you did not. And she was left uselessly waving her hands in the air, a visual to how she was simply drawing a blank.

Tom smirked.

“I think I can agree with that, though Grindelwald certainly lacks a lot of class, don't you think? Stamping through countries, slaughtering the masses. That's hardly how one builds a PR campaign,” he said, and she wasn't entirely certain if it was a joke or not.

Knitting her brows, she asked, “And what is your suggestion then? How do you think is the best way to run a war?”

Storm clouds filled his eyes, swirling around the pupil like the winds of a tornado. He smiled then, one hand coming up to cup her cheek, the other dragging his knuckles softly along her jaw. His voice was low, rougher than usual, and made the little hairs on her arm and neck stand on end “If you're polite and charming enough, the world will practically hand itself to you on a silver platter. No one will hesitate to fall before you, at your feet, if you ask them the right way, and they'll happily go about their enslaved lives if you have a nice enough smile. We're terribly superficial that way.”

Her breath caught in her throat, and her chest burned as he pushed some of her hair behind her ears, pulling her face closer as he kissed her roughly. He truly was evil, in its purest and simplest form, and yet he was anything but simple. He was a human being, just like herself, who, while she did not agree with it, surely had to have had his own reason and motives for doing what he did, what he
would do. He had his own thoughts and emotions, though he kept them well buried, and perhaps some of them were good. He couldn't be entirely evil - not one person could be. There had to have been some cavern in his heart reserved for something. Had that been the cavern that Nagini had made home in her own time?

He was simple, yet complex. Evil - devastatingly so - but there was a part of her that firmly believed there had to have been some good in there, some redeeming factor to prove he was not a devil on earth.

But even then, the Devil did fall from grace, and so would Tom, in the end, no matter what his reasons were.

So where did that leave her?

-xXx-

"Can't we go back to legilimancy lessons? I'm already good enough at dueling," Hermione whined, wincing as she pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead. She had an awful headache, all thanks to a terrible stinging hex Tom felt the need to send her way. They were dueling, the Room of Requirements changing into a long and narrow room - not unlike the one it had provided for Harry when they were holding their lessons for Dumbledore's Army. Her own reflection - and that of Tom's - were thrown around by the many mirrors hoisted on the walls, broken up only by the gaping mouth of eight total fireplaces.

She was sweating, hair clinging to her neck and face as it frizzed despite being pulled back into a loosening ponytail. Half of her uniform had been tossed to the side, wearing only her oxford and skirt. Her robes, blazer and jumper all sat at a pool below the dais, alongside Tom's own outer clothing, as even he could bear the heat no longer and was in a similar state of undress. Something she had to marvel over, considering he had never removed more than his robe prior.

Tom shook his head, his own hair disheveled as the smooth curls fell out of place. "You can never be too good at dueling. Especially not when you refuse to use dark magic." He rose a pointed brow, one side of his mouth raising. She pinched her lips at that, haughtily inclining her chin at him.

She had a staunch refusal to using the darker curses, only using them when he would prompt her and he could see the panic settle on her face as the memories of the war she lived in previously fill in her mind. And if he was going to have her as his Lady, she would have to be the one to land the first blow, no matter how dark the origin of the spell. He did not like mercy, and he would not have Hermione stooping so low as to engage in it.

Raising his wand high above his head, he jabbed it in her direction. A violet light streamed forward, like a sentient being as it dodged her shields and wound around her defenses until it smacked against her, knocking her to the ground with a huff.

She groaned, sitting up slowly as she shook her head and glared at Tom.

He laughed, pointing his wand in emphasis to his words. "If you don't use dark magic when I do, then you are imposing disadvantages on yourself." He barely finished his sentence when she retaliated, a bolt of white hot lightning singing the air around him.

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(Two Months Later)

A hand reached out, pulling Dolohov aside as he departed from the crowd of students shuffling
towards the gates to Hogsmeade, the cold air fading with Winter's frost as it became muddy and dreary with the first touch of Spring. He slipped in the soft earth of the ground, catching himself on the same person who had tugged him away from the group. Rosier.

“Today's the day, I think,” the boy whispered, looking over Dolohov's shoulder to where he could see Hermione walking arm in arm with Tom, twisting around to laugh as Athena told a joke. Dolohov followed his gaze, his lips twitching into a smirk as he did so. “Riddle told me he has some supplies for potions he has to get, and from my understanding there's supposed to be a terrible storm this afternoon. We'll offer to bring Hermione back to the castle- she hates getting caught in inclement weather- and when the time is right- strike.”

He loosened his hold on him, began walking back so as not to become too separated from the group of students. “Got it?”

“Yeah,” Dolohov answered, pursing his lips. “I'll try not to hurt her too much.”
Chapter Eighteen: Rose

'But where can we draw water,'
Said Pearse to Connolly,
'When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.'
-William Butler Yeats, The Rose Tree

"We should really turn back for the castle. It's pouring," Mulciber said, his voice louder than usual as he fought to be heard over the torrents of rain that fell from the heavens upon them, sheets of it filling the cobblestone road and turning them a metallic sheen in the dim light. The group was standing just outside of the Hog's Head, where they had headed for first thing after arriving at Hogsmeade, only to hear the sound of thick and heavy raindrops clanging on the patchy roof half way through their lunch.

They were pressed flat against the exterior walls to the pub, just shielded from the rain by the overhang, the fronts of each of their shoes wet and glossy. Hermione frowned as she shivered at the Spring chill, pressing herself closer to Tom's side. "I think I might agree. Some hot tea and a book sound rather lovely about now," she said to him, her words broken up by the subtle clatter of her teeth.

He quirked a brow at her, sighing as he shirked off his outer robe and slipped it over her shoulders. "Make sure that book is about dressing appropriately for the weather, my love," he snapped, his lips skewing into a deeper frown as she only smirked somewhat victoriously.

Three months had gone by- rather quickly- in which Hermione acted the role of his lover. Three months of what she had come to consider to be a comfortable routine. She would awake, dress for the day before she sought out Tom- though there wasn't much seeking to be had, as he was always waiting for her in the Common Room, regardless of how early or late she was in the morning. After a good morning kiss and some breakfast, they would head to the Room of Requirements for her legilimancy lessons- of which she was doing quite fair in, though she had not made any success in breaking through his wards.

Occasionally, he would engage her in a duel instead, would taunt and jeer her for her reluctance to use dark magic. It was a game to him, one that he was trying to turn to habit, and she did not appreciate it much. She rarely used anything heavier than minor curses, and would only delve deeper into darker arts when she felt threatened, when her common sense and reason fluttered into the back of her mind and her feral instincts took hold. Tom was not pleased by that, and just as she was trying to lure Lord Voldemort out from hiding, he was trying to lure her own darkness out. But it was too little success- she was stubborn and headstrong, and would resist in using the curses he begged her to if only to frustrate him more. Nevertheless, their duels were exhausting and few and far between for that reason.

Classes followed, with a pause for lunch, and then they would spend the time between classes and supper in the library, studying together. She would tutor Mulciber in the Evenings- sometimes Tom was present, book in hand as he sat none too far away from the two. Other times he would be absent without reason, and she never requested one. But regardless, no matter how late she stayed up studying with Mulciber, or how long it took Tom to return from whatever it was he had been doing,
they would always spend some time in front of the fire, pressed into one another, before they would retire for the evening.

In short, dating Lord Voldemort was terribly mundane.

Of course, she did not expect any sort of fanfare, nor did she expect her life to immediately become havoc with turmoil and chaos. Surely, it would all come later and in due time. But she certainly did not expect something so...domestic. She did not anticipate the nights where they would open one book between them, leaning their heads together as they read quietly to themselves the same story. She had not predicted the times they would sneak into the kitchen when they became lost in their studies and missed one of the allotted meal times. And she certainly was not prepared for Tom to have been a moderately skilled cook.

'In the orphanage, we all had jobs to do,' he had explained one late night as he deftly diced potatoes, his long fingers treating the ingredients with a care Hermione could not even manage for potion ingredients. 'For some time, my job was to cook for the other orphans. Eventually, though, I was transferred to laundry duties after a terrible illness fell upon my peers. The matron suspected me of poisoning them, as it were.'

She did not know if it was the truth or one of his many twisted jokes, and she did not care to ask. Some things were simply better left unknown.

And yet, as domestic as they became, he had not made any untoward advances to her, he had hardly even become any more loving or affectionate. Though, he had started to add such endearments as 'My Love' or 'Love' to his list of pet names for her, so perhaps that was his way of moving forward in the relationship. Not quite an admission of love- or even an illusion to such a thing- but she didn't really suppose he ever would confess to it. That was, of course, if he felt it to confess in the first place.

No, Tom Riddle and love were about close to each other as two parallel lines, running in the same course but never once coming to meet- even if to diverge. And it was only giving her a headache to think on it.

“You lot can head back the castle if you like, but I need to visit the apothecary. I have much to study, and even Slughorn will take notice if too much from his private stores goes missing.” Tom said in a clipped tone, his hands slipping into his pockets as he looked out tentatively at the veil of rain before him. It practically obscured the opposite side of the street.

Athena sighed quite dramatically, running a hand through her hair. “I'll come with you. We have to create our own potion for our NEWTs, and I'm quite stuck. Perhaps I'll find some inspiration, or can at least speak to the shop keep about it,” she said with a huff, pulling her robe tight around her.

“Maybe Tom can help you with that. He's quite adept at potions, I imagine he can assist you in creating one,” Hermione said before she could stop herself, bitterness filling her words as her cheeks flushed at the memory of the potion he nearly killed her with. Her father always did say her ability to hold a grudge would be the death of her.

If Tom had thought her comment strange though, he did not show it, instead turning to her with an expression of confusion. “I assure you I cannot. Why would you think something like that, Hermione?”

She only shrugged. “I merely assumed. Well, it may be your wish to catch pneumonia and spend a perfectly dreary weekend in the infirmary, but it is not mine, so I think I will return to the castle. I'll make sure to ask Madame Rorin for any books she might have about how to dress oneself, though,”
She said, smiling at him as she began to pull her hair back into a messy bun.

He smirked. “See that you do, or it will be you with the pneumonia and not I,” he joked, before turning his sights to the other boys, his tone becoming colder and deeper as it often did when he went from addressing Hermione to the others. “Would one of you gentleman like to escort her back to the castle?”

Rosier was the first to speak, clapping a hand heavily on Dolohov's shoulder. “We will. I just remembered I have an essay I've been putting off for some time now and our dear Dolohov will simply melt if any water touches his precious face. Isn't that what the muggles think at least?” he asked with a grin, playfully reaching out to pinch Dolohov's cheek. The stern looking boy swatted his hand away, scowling.

“If that were the case I would have tossed you into the Black Lake long ago, you prat,” he mumbled under his breath as Nott walked through the two of them with a sigh.

“I'll meet you in the Common Room then, I wanted to spend the day in the bookstore, and I do not need the sun for that venture,” he called to them as he departed the group quite rapidly, his figure almost disappearing through the heavy water. Rosier muttered something, though Hermione couldn't quite make it out over the pattering of the roof. But it was quickly forgotten as she was suddenly pulled into Tom's arms, her chin falling into place on the hollow of his neck.

“I will see you later then, Love. Have a cup of tea ready for me upon my return, I think I shall need it,” he said to her before he pressed his lips to her ear, kissing her softly. And then he was gone, moving so quickly that Athena startled, her eyes wide as she looked around for him before she took off, her footsteps splashing as she stomped through.

A hand came to rest on her shoulder. “That just leaves us then,” Rosier said, grinning widely at her. “I'd offer to keep you dry with a few charms, but I'd have to perform them near twenty-”

She shook her head, smiling gratefully for his offer. “It's alright. It will just be easier to dry off once we're back home,” she said.

He waggled a brow at her suggestively, winking in an exasperated, almost cartoonish way. “Or don't. I'm sure Riddle would quite enjoy coming back to find you all wet for hi-”

She gasped, storming off from him before he could even finish his sentence. She kept her head lowered, even as he guffawed at her, ignoring the messy sound of his footsteps joining hers. She could feel her face heat from the blush, made more obvious by the cold in the air, and she tried her best to ignore the chatter between Rosier, Dolohov and Mulciber. ‘Really, who would have thought the Death Eaters could be so juvenile!’ she thought, as though she should have expected better from them.

So intent was she on trying to block out the noises of the teenaged boys behind her, that she did not realize that Mulciber and Rosier had slipped off to the Quidditch supply store, leaving Dolohov the only one alongside her. She did not notice the noise of their conversations and laughter had stopped, as the rain already provided a more than substantial sound barrier for her. And she certainly did not notice Dolohov pulling his wand out from his pocket, gripping it tight as he stalked closer towards her.

She did not notice any of it, not until she was already thrown down a deserted alleyway, a jab to her shoulder knocking her to the ground while a firm kick to her stomach pushed her down the slight hill behind the vacant buildings to Hogsmeade. The expelliarmus yanking her wand out from where it was hidden in her shirt sleeve, pulling behind her.
The hill came to a plateau, a bed of gravel in a fenced in area, and Hermione groaned in discomfort as her hands spread out to catch herself, the little pebbles embedding in the soft skin of her palm.

Loose strands of her hair stuck to her face from the rain, and she wiped her knuckles across her face, trying to clear her vision as she looked up around her. She sputtered, her lips slick as she tried to pick herself up, only to be knocked back down when something collided sharply with her head. Stars burst in front of her eyes, like fountains of technicolor sparks, and she fell flat on the gravel again.

"Muggles are quite useless, for the most part. But I must agree that there is something far more fulfilling about such a barbaric way of handling disputes, wouldn't you say?" a familiar voice taunted over the roar of the rain, and she growled low. Dolohov. Of bloody course.

The boy had become gradually friendlier to her over the past several months, and initially, she had thought that it was so as to appease Tom. After all, it would not bode well to openly loathe the other half of a dark lord. But of course, nothing within the noble and bloodied House of Slytherin was simplistic, nothing was as it seemed. She had made the mistake often enough to feel foolish for it, had believed that Slytherins were like Gryffindors. A lion could not hide their intentions, they were not one for pretend. But snakes on the other hand...

It was in their very nature to deceive, and she had been stupid enough to be deceived by one.

"I should have suspected you were only growing nicer to me under dubious pretenses," she said, laughing wryly. "But really, I would have at least thought you were not so insecure so as to attack someone unawares. Afraid of me that much are you?"

He scoffed, kneeling down beside her so that she could finally see him through the rain, his black hair sopping wet and clinging to his angular face. Her wand was twirled between his fingers, the dirty and short fingernails digging into the soft wood. An ugly sneer was twisting on his face, and she had to force herself to not bite her lip anxiously, to not betray herself with panic. But how could she not?

He had her wand.

She gripped into the earth below her, dirt and broken chips of rocks lodging underneath her nails as she mentally berated herself. Why had she not taken the time to train her wandless magic? At least to a point that she did not feel so utterly helpless.

"I'm hardly afraid of you, you filthy little mudblood," he hissed, his eyes becoming terrifyingly sharp in the haze surrounding them. It was not the sharpness of someone astute, someone who was focusing in on something as they studied it more thoroughly. It was the sharpness of a mad man, one with conical vision that allowed him to see one thing and one thing alone: prey.

Her throat tightened, making it hard to swallow as she looked from the deranged glint in his dark eyes to her wand. She would have to unwind him, coax and distract him long enough until she could get her wand back from him.

"I'm not a mudblood," she countered, turning her voice as hard as she could. She would not confess to anyone- least of all herself- that she was in fact doing her best to imitate Tom's own commanding tone, the one he used when he was teetering the line between harmless wizard and malevolent Dark Lord. Dolohov seemed to notice this though, his eyes widening in recognition before he let out a high-pitched cackle of a laugh, a broad grin twisting his thin face into a caricature of himself.

"How absolutely darling. Like a kitten trying to be a wildcat," he taunted, mockingly wiping away at his eyes as though his laughter had brought about tears. "Really, how adorable that you think you
can mimic a roar.” His voice became harder as he spoke, snapping at her viciously in direct contradiction to his almost adoring and amused words. But she was paying it no mind, her fingers inching out so that the tips were splayed in the direction of her wand. She was trying to call to it, to her magic and to the well within her that she had long since forgotten had existed. The well she had accidentally tapped into so often in her childhood before she had a wand to act as a beacon, before she learned to channel it. It was the core of her magic, of the very thing within her that made her what she was: a witch.

For regardless of what Grindelwald, Lord Voldemort and Dolohov had to say about it, her blood was no dirtier than their own, and even if it was, it would have no bearing on her magic. It existed beyond what made one whole, the flesh and the tissue and the cells. It existed somewhere- deep within the warm pit of her core- and she knew that with a little bit concentration she could draw it out once more. At least enough to call her wand back to her. She just needed to prolong whatever it was he came here to do, long enough for her to break through into her own inner magic.

“Tom will be furious with you, when he finds out,” she said, hating to sound so pathetic. It was not in her to be so needy, to essentially be threatening to tattle-tale on someone. She was competent- she was powerful. She could take care of herself, without having to call in her knight in shining armor to rescue her. But Dolohov could not know that; he needed to think her useless and piteous. Even as her fingers warmed with her magic, her eyes closing as she tried to collect it all.

“Tom isn't going to know about it. This is going to be our little secret, even if I have to tear it away from your brain like scum from the bottom of my shoe,” he threatened, leaning closer to her so that his face was only inches away from her. She could see each individual eyelash, each drop of water as it slid down the slope of his face and off the tip of his nose or chin.

She laughed now, raising a daring brow at him. Her hand was practically on fire now, and she was clawing like mad at her magic, unable to quite grasp onto it. Why had it come so easily to her as a five year old, yet she struggled with it now? “You really think Tom won't be suspicious of you? That he won't put two and two together? It's easy to see why you weren't placed in Ravenclaw, that much is certain.”

She heard the slap of his fist against her cheek before she felt it, the initial punch of it numbing in the cold before it turned to a smarting sting, a slight pulse to it. The blow was hard enough that it twisted her head unexpectedly, muscles in her neck pulling and stiffening and she grimaced against the pain as she tried to turn back to him, not wanting to lose sight of him or her wand.

“What an awfully smart mouth for such a stupid girl. Though I'm sure Riddle has found quite a few better uses for it- none of which require you to speak,” he teased, and her grimaced turned to a thin, straight line at that, her eyes narrowing. “I don't know why, but he's under the delusion that you could be of any use to him, beyond warming his bed at night. And he expects us to all just fall at your feet, as if you were worthy of any of it. As if you were something instead of nothing. As if you weren't a worthless little mudblood. As if you weren't just his little whore-”

There was a loud hiss of her magic pulsing through the air, of bones cracking as her wand was forcibly pried from his hands and into her own outstretched one. Her grip on her wand was so fierce that her fingers turned white, her nails digging sharply into the soft palm so that warm blood slicked the handle.

And she lounged, shedding the snake skin in favor of the lion's coat she had neglected so long. She had been mocked- often enough- by Snape about her Gryffindor tendencies. ‘Brash and foolhardy imbeciles who were always sticking their wands into places before they even thought the next few seconds through.’ She had heard all of this, and had dismissed it. That wasn't her, she would say. She
was smarter than that, she was more reserved than that. She would never do something so bold without giving herself time to think.

And then in a second she had proved herself wrong, lounging forward with a ferocity she did not know she even possessed, her free hand flying to Dolohov's neck as the other trained her wand above his heart. She was on top of him, a knee at his side and another digging sharply into his soft torso, the wand being jabbed more aggressively into him. He stared at her- shocked and dazed- as he reeled, his head having smacked hard against the ground and disorienting him.

She was speaking through her teeth, gritting sharply as if it took all her restraint to not bend over and tear his throat out. “Don't you ever speak of me in such a foul way,” she hissed, forgoing her impression of Tom as she found her own voice, an icy tone that made her rasp somewhat, her typically soothing words becoming like jagged glass. She felt him squirm below her as her pitched changed, felt him go rigid with it. She was no longer mimicking a roar now.

“You may think so little of me that you believe I am only good for a decent shag, but I assure you that I am far more than that. I have seen and battled death himself, I have experienced that which your worst nightmares could not produce. I have been cursed with spells you didn't even know existed, and have walked out of those fights with my head held high. So let me ask you this, then. Do you really think I'm a useless mudblood whore? Do you really think that Tom would keep me by his side after all this because I'm a convenient shag?”

Her hand holding the wand was shaking now, and her jaw was clenched so hard she wondered if it were possible to break it in such a manner. Her body was impossibly alive with adrenaline, her form quivering as it coursed through her, and she felt her mind slipping, lost within the cracks of all she had done to come to this moment.

She did not witness the death of those she loved so that she could be attacked off guard by some coward.

She did not nearly break her neck during her escape from Voldemort so that she could be threatened by someone who had no idea what true pain was.

She did not sacrifice her own virtues and life to begin a relationship with Tom Riddle so that she could be demeaned.

She had spent her entire life being dehumanized for the very blood her heart pumped throughout her veins, and she would be damned if she was dehumanized for doing what she had to to spare others of that life.

And, like the foolishly brazen Gryffindor she was, she shook away any semblance of reason she had possessed, her heated emotions and indignation taking over. And she knew- for the first time- what it was like to see red. She had heard the expression, had assumed that it had some truth to it. But she had never experienced it before- the soft crimson shrouding around her like a widow's veil, her anger crashing into her like tumultuous waves on a beach.

How dare he- of all people!- insult her integrity! He, who was the very reason for the marring scar that dominated her chest. He, who did not hesitate to fall to his knees at the feet of a monster. He, who had tortured so many others without thought or care. He, who had been the one to kill her father after hours of torture.

And all she could hear was Tom's soft voice, the gentle urging in his whisper, as it said, 'If you don't use dark magic when I do, you are imposing a disadvantage on yourself.” The lines were blurred, her head becoming fuzzy in the heat of the moment. The past and the future molded together, becoming
one in the same as the words left her lips before she even thought them.

“Crucio!”

-xXx-

“Riddle!” Rosier called in a panic, bursting through the doors of the apothecary, his clothes clinging to his body. Startled, Tom swiveled around from where he was standing, his eyes widening at the disarrayed appearance of the young wizard. Mulciber approached then, coming up close behind Rosier and looking terribly ill, his face sallow.

He cocked a brow, opening his mouth to inquire about the dramatic entrance, but was interrupted by Mulciber's reedy voice. “Dolohov’s attacked Hermione! He kicked her into an alley and there are wards and we can't get through!”

They were shoved to the side- quite violently- as Tom ran past them, a look turning his handsome face ugly. A look that made Rosier lean against the door frame in a moment of hesitation, wondering if he had perhaps made a terrible mistake.

-xXx-

She was vomiting when Tom and the others arrived, bent over in a corner of the small secluded lot, trembling with the force of her retching. Her stomach was in clumps, lurching into her throat, and she was brought to the ground with the force of it, her chest rising and falling with her ragged breaths.

The cruciatus curse.

She had used the cruciatus curse.

She knew it would come, eventually. That one day her hands would be tied and she would have no other choice but to perform the Unforgivable to please Tom. And yet, she had done it- all on her own and without Tom pressing her, purring in her ear like the devil on her shoulder. She did not need a devil to speak to her, it seemed. She had one within herself.

She did not realize that her breathing had become sobs until Tom was in front of her, shushing her softly as he cupped her chin and turned her head from side to side, examining her face. She could feel it throb, felt it begin to swell. Pebbles were pressed into her forehead, and she had blood...somewhere. She did not know where, or even how, but her senses were filled with the metallic liquid, like rust. Tom ran a thumb over her chin, the pad of it covered in diluted blood that was quickly washed away from the rain.

She did not know how long she had Dolohov under the curse, how long she resisted against his thrashing as he tried to free himself in his agony. But slowly, the red receded, leaving her as she-with startling clarity- realized what she was doing. She pulled away, gasping out in horror at her own actions. And Dolohov had not hesitated to retaliate, snarling as his eyes rolled back in his head, shoving her off of him. He cursed her then, something she did not hear because she was not listening for it.

She couldn't hear anything over the thoughts in her head. A continuous stream of 'how could you? How could you? How could you?'

Hermione did not remember how it was exactly that she found herself in the corner, huddled over and clutching her belly. She did not remember what effect his curse had had on her, and she did not know what curse she had responded with. It was all forgotten in the swirl of guilt, of the sickness growing within her as bile coated the inside of her mouth.
'How could you? How could you? How could you?'

They were moving around her, conversing with Tom who did not tear his eyes away from her, did not release his tight hold on her upper arms.

“Dolohov said she crucio'd him...”

“...Aurors will be here soon...”

“...We need to do something...”

He finally looked away, breathing deeply as he bit down on his lip in thought. He turned back to her then, his dark blue eyes softening, like clouds shifting away to reveal the night sky. His hand reached out to hold the side of her face, his touch feather light to avoid hurting her. “Darling, I need you to follow my lead, alright? We’ll discuss this further, later, but for now we need to make sure you’ll be okay. Don't worry, I won't let them take you from me.” It took her a moment to realize who exactly he meant by them. The Aurors. She could curse herself in her stupidity, curse herself for behaving in such a terribly Gryffindor manner.

She had used an illegal curse, in an area that had multiple wards in place in order to track down the caster.

She could very well spend the rest of her days in Azkaban, she realized with a large gulp of air that did nothing to expand her ever shallower chest. 'No, Tom won't let that happen. He'll protect you,' a voice stirred within her, and she startled at it. No, she was not allowed to take solace in his protection- she was not allowed to act recklessly simply because he would be there to keep any harm from coming to her.

She was not allowed to see him as a protector.

He pulled her up then, wrapping an arm over her as he pulled her wand from her hands, shushing some more when she yelled out in protest.

“No! I need it!” she growled, her heart pounding harder, more certain, as she reached out for it. But Tom was already handing it to Rosier, giving him clear and succinct instructions. Toss it. Throw it away nearby, try to hide it under something. Return to the apothecary, tell him what to say. Make sure he understands that in no uncertain terms is he to tell the truth...

Later, when her mind had cleared and she had regained her composure, coming down from the high of adrenaline and the shock of using such a terrible curse, she would take the time to truly marvel at his ability to twist a tale. It was art, pure and simple, and he worked his words like an artist did a brush, a sculptor caressing marble. He was the Shakespeare of manipulation, a playwright to lies.

What would this tale be filed under: a comedy or a tragedy?

It was no wonder that he got away with as much as he did, she thought, as he dragged her to Professor Adelbert, his voice laden with concern and even fear, a curious emotion to be found in Tom Riddle, even if it was just a front. “I was in the apothecary, when they came running in. Someone attacked her when the others went into the Quidditch shop, she couldn't see who. The rain was coming down too hard and he blitzed her. Took her wand. We tried finding it, but we can't and she needs to see a mediwitch.”

He was rambling, intentionally sounding hurried and overwhelmed so as to appear the appropriate amount of frightful, the right amount of flustered. He had been so good at it, in fact, that Adelbert had gripped onto Tom's shoulders tightly, telling him to relax. That everything would be okay, that
Hermione would be alright and that- in a worst case scenario- her wand could be replaced.

He escorted them to the Hogwarts infirmary then, Hermione being ushered into a bed as the elderly witch gasped at her appearance, shaking her head sadly. “Oh my goodness, you poor dear,” she had whispered consolingly, and in a detached way, Hermione wondered what she had to have looked like to warrant such a response. She still had no memory of what occurred after the red dissipated from her vision, after she finally stepped away from Dolohov, knocked over by the force of her regret. She did not know what he did to her, or what she did to him after that, and she honestly didn’t even know if she was in pain.

She was numb, her body feeling nonexistent even as her mind admonished her for that notion. Of course her body was there and corporeal, what a silly thing to think.

And yet, she felt nothing. Not the beat of her own heart within her damp and shivering chest, not the sting of her broken bones or bruised flesh. Even her stomach had settled into nothing, having vomited up all she could before. She felt numb, and it was a terribly suffocating feeling, her mind too busy focusing on her emotional pain to even begin to address the physical, so it stored it away for later use, until the screaming in her head was sorted out.

‘How could you? How could you?’

She swallowed, feeling the lump of nothing travel down her nothing throat. “No, no, no!” she muttered under her breath, running her hands through her hair. She was vaguely aware of people calling her name fretfully, of several hands fluttering around her. But she ignored them, continuing her mantra until a vial of potion was forced between her lips, the warm and luxuriant liquid filling her mouth. A calming draught.

’I must look mental,’ she said to herself. Perhaps the only clear thought she had had since before Dolohov had attacked her.

Dolohov...what happened to him? Surely, he would need to see the school nurse as well. And when he did, she would undoubtedly see the after effects of the cruciatus curse, the spasms of his ravaged muscles.

Another potion was pushed towards her then, and she clamped her lips shut, suddenly alert as the fog surrounding her mind cleared away, her rationale slowly returning to her.

Pulling away from the potion, she blinked in quick succession, allowing the scene to truly unfurl, her eyes finally taking in and processing her surroundings. She was in the hospital wing- that much she had known- in the far back of it, with the thick white curtains pulled around to create a mock exam room. She could just see, a little beyond and partially out of sight, Adelbert speaking with two stately looking wizards, ones she had never seen before. Aurors, she realized, though her heart rate remained neutral due to the tingling lull of the calming draught. Madame Malone was standing beside her, fixing her with an appraising yet warm expression as she held the second potion to her hip, allowing Hermione a moment of lucidity before she would try to force whatever it was down her throat- for that she was thankful.

And then there was Tom, who was standing on her opposite side, his arm settled like a pressing weight over her shoulders, his other hand holding loosely onto her own. Her mouth went dry as she looked to his face, her eyes finally allowing her to perceive and experience the world around her instead of impassively viewing it in her hysterics.

His face was unreadable, a conflict of more emotions than she even thought he was capable of feeling at all, let alone at the same time. His lips were pursed into a tight, thin line, turning white from
the grip of it, and his eyes were looking at her with a terribly piercing quality to them, one which made her feel naked and exposed. They were darker than she had even seen them, near black with the intensity of his thoughts, little pinpricks of black holes against the milky white surface of his cornea. They were narrowed at her, though not in a suspicious or unkind manner, and it wasn't until they flicked slowly over her face that she realized he was scrutinizing her injuries, cataloging them.

Feeling immediately self conscious, a hand reached out to cover her face, but before she could, he had grabbed hold of her wrist and held it away, cocking his head to better see. Uncomfortable, she shifted, wishing that he would look away. But he did not, not until a long minute or two had passed did he sigh, settling back in the chair beside the bed.

“Don't worry, Darling. The Aurors are speaking with Professor Adelbert, and they'll find the man who attacked you,” he said softly, his fingers wrapping tight around her hand.

She swallowed, nervously looking between him and the huddled group just beyond her bed. “What...what happened?” she asked, doing her best to sound daze. The unspoken questions settled between them however, implied by the wideness of her eyes, the heaviness to the mottled brown iris. 'Do they know it was me? Did they believe the story? What about Dolohov?'

He clucked his tongue sympathetically, standing only for a second as he moved from the chair to her bed, sitting beside her. She fell into his side as his weight created a dip in the mattress, and he only held her tighter, squeezing her for support. “I'm not surprised you don't remember, you were in quite a state of shock when we found you. When Rosier and the others came out from the Quidditch shop and found you, you said a man attacked you- stole your wand. It hasn't been found yet, they're still looking, but they think that he took it so that he could freely curse another wizard. An unforgivable tripped the alarm in Hogsmeade, and alerted the Ministry, but by the time the Aurors got here, he must've left, probably with whoever he cursed.”

His voice was soft, surprisingly soft, like a fleece blanket being wrapped around her to fight a winter chill. It was likely that it was the effects of the calming draught on her, but she thought that it was the softest he had ever spoken to her, concern weaved through his words in a way that she believed seemed rather genuine. His hands even shook somewhat, a slight tremble to them as though he had been anxious for her safety.

What havoc a simple potion could wreak on her perceptions- surely, she was imagining it all.

“Hogsmeade visits have been put on a hiatus for an indeterminable amount of time, I'm afraid. With all the attacks that occurred earlier, and now an actual student?” he said, huffing out a breath of air as if shocked that someone would have the audacity to be so bold. “They're not certain, but they're investigating to see if Grindelwald is involved somehow. They think that maybe he's learned that you've come to Hogwarts and wants to finish what he started.”

'Lies,' she thought, shivering as she could not help but admire it. 'Such pretty lies.' Let it never be said that Tom Marvolo Riddle could not effectively clean up any mess he found himself in.

Mistaking her shiver for one of fright, he wrapped his arms tighter around her, pressing his lips to the top of her head. “Don't worry, they're thinking of having some Aurors guard the school, and Headmaster Dippet and your cousin have all been alerted to the risks,” he said. Moving his lips down so that they were close enough to her ears to feel his breath, hot and moist, he added in a whisper, “I told you, I won't let anyone take you from me.”

She was thankful when Madame Malone cleared her throat, smiling at them sympathetically. “Tom, Dear, you can come visit Miss Dumbledore tomorrow, but I still need to perform some diagnostics and heal her up. Head back to your Common Room with the others, they might need your help with
the younger students- everyone's a little bit panicked,” she said.

Tom pulled away from her, and she sighed in relief as he stood up, his arms returning to his side. She could not stand it any longer she thought, his words of protection sounding so close to a threat, his arms holding her like a prison. It was too much, she thought, considering her stomach still sank like lead with the knowledge of what she had done.

'How could you? How could you? How could you?'

"Of course,” he said, his voice returning to his saccharine school boy tone, light and lofty. “I'm sure everyone else is eager to hear that she got here safe and sound. Dolohov in particular was torn up about it.” His eyes flicked over to her, a flash of something dangerous lighting them before blinking out. And just like that, her stomach began contorting again, snaking what little contents it still had up her esophagus.

That was a threat, though not to her. She wanted to reach out, grab hold of his hand and beg him to not kill the boy. It was unfair, a part of her argued, screaming louder than the other part of her that claimed indifference. He had attacked her after all, she was provoked.

She swallowed, shaking her head at the turn of her thoughts. No, she would not allow herself to think like him. She would not develop the philosophy of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. It was the philosophy of someone she did not wish to become.

But Riddle was gone before she could beg him to have some mercy for the boy, and moments later the curtain parted as someone else stepped through. Light blue eyes from behind half moon spectacles looked down at her, and for the first time in a long while, Dumbledore fixed her with a look of distrust.

'He knows,' she thought, averting her gaze from him, hoping he would leave. He did not though, sitting at the chair that Tom had sat in minutes earlier, his eyes not once straying as the mediwitch ran her wand over her, speaking encouragingly. She did not detect, amongst muttering her healing spells and applying the bruise salve, the tension between the two cousins, her focus elsewhere. She chatted on, quite cheerily, about how Hermione would be good as new within a few days time, and that she would just need some rest.

All the while, the young witch kept her gaze on the wall behind her, closing her eyes to the pressure filling her head. She cursed when the healer left, knowing that she could not ignore Dumbledore's presence much longer. He knew that Hermione had not been attacked, at least not by a stranger, and he knew that Grindelwald was not out on a mission to find the witch who escaped him. He knew that no one stole her wand, that she and she alone had cast the Unforgivable. He knew it all, saw right through Riddle's lies as he always did.

And when he asked her, his voice a whisper despite the silencing charm he had cast on their small corner of the infirmary, 'Did Riddle make you do it?' She knew she could not lie as well. It would do no good, and the truth was bound to come out.

Choking around the solid lump in her throat, she said, “No...he wasn't even there.”

With what could only be described as a disappointed sigh, he left her alone, the words he did not say filling the room like smoke from a fire, drying out her lungs and scorching her airway.

'How could you? How could you? How could you?'

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An eerie silence had settled over the Room of Requirements, all noise seeming to have been sucked forth in a vacuum. Even the fireplace was suspiciously quiet, not wanting to encroach on the taut atmosphere of the room. A large table sat in the center of it, all chairs except two filled as nervous and frightened faces looked around to one another. Mulciber was slumped over, his head buried within his arms as if he had all but surrendered, murmuring incoherently every so often. Nott and Athena continued to gaze intently on the surface before them, hands in their lap, while Rosier leaned over to whisper to Mulciber, his face the only one that was not sporting an awfully grim expression.

Yet no one looked nearly as worried or pained as Dolohov, who could not even still at the table. Instead he was pacing, a slight limp impeding his steps as he frantically ran one through his hair over and over again, as he held the other bruised and broken hand to his chest. His dark eyes were wild, feral, absorbing the light from the fire and reflecting with just as much intensity.

“What were you thinking?” Athena snapped, breaking her concentration on the table. Her face was stern, her plump lips pinched together.

Dolohov stopped at her words, scowling at the reprimanding tone. “Me? It was Rosier's idea!” he hissed, gesturing to the boy who stood at the accusation.

“What? Don't you dare drag me into this! I had nothing to do with it, and Riddle will see through your pathetic attempt to drag me down with you!” he said through his teeth, leaning across the table as Mulciber finally looked up from his arms. Dolohov met his gaze, black eyes connecting with gold, and skewed his lips together, a look of dawning lighting his face.

“You son of a bitch,” he growled, his hands balling into fists at his side with the realization that he had been set up, that he had played a role he was not even aware he was performing.

He took one long step towards the table, his fists raising as if ready to strike Rosier, when the door burst open with such force that it slammed against the wall. Riddle stormed through, his wand raised as the heavy oak doors disappeared, leaving no escape in the room.

“My Lord-” he started, raising his hands to defend himself. It did no use however, as Riddle stampeded through the room, grabbing Dolohov by his collar and slamming his full body weight in the bookcases lining the wall, the power of his collision upsetting the shelves and causing several heavy tomes to fall to the floor. He was writhing in pain in seconds, the tip of Riddle's wand digging sharply into his neck as his screams broke through the silence.

-xXx-
Threat

Chapter Summary

I'm not dead.

Yikes, it's been awhile. There was a small write up on my Tumblr about my absence, though nothing very telling beyond that I should be back in working order. Thank you to all your patience for this (very long awaited) update, and the next chapter is on it's way soon enough.

Chapter Nineteen: Threat
“When did the future switch from being a promise to being a threat?”
-Chuck Palahnuik, Invisible Monsters

The screams ended abruptly, alarmingly so. One moment the room was filled with the cacophonous yells and pleas, loud thuds as more and more heavy leather tomes fell from their place on the shelf as Dolohov squirmed against them. The next- it was silent, the slightest echo bouncing around the stone walls offered to them by the Room of Requirements. Dolohov was on the floor now, his knees pulled tight into his chest and his shoulders huddled as though he had attempted to disappear within them.

His eyes were clenched together so that ridges formed in the normally smooth skin of his lids, before he carefully blinked, peering out from beneath his lashes at Tom. He pursed his lips, his throat constricting as he muttered, “My Lord...?”

Tom snarled, unappreciative of the epithet as he raised a tightly clenched fist and swung back down, his knuckles making a terribly loud clunking sound as they made contact with Dolohov’s jaw. Teeth sunk into his lower lip and he emitted a low groan, his mouth puckering as blood began to flow down his chin. It was uncouth, Tom knew, even as he drew his fist back once more only to drag it back down through the air like a sledge hammer in a clumsy arc. This behavior was barbaric, something that existed only within the dingy and nicotine ruined walls of a pub. He was a great and powerful wizard participating in a muggle style brawl.

And yet, even he could not deny the thrill such cheap and dirty tricks inspired, the satisfactory crunch as bones splintered beneath his sore hand. It was worth the bruised fingers and swollen flesh to feel Dolohov’s nose give way with a crack, the soft yet sturdy wall of resistance that his punches were met with.

So enraptured was he by the sounds of anguish, that he hardly registered the pleas and claims, the words slipping between split and tumid lips.

“It's Rosier's fault! He told me too!”

Tom paused only for a brief second, raising a brow with his fist in mid-arch, his elbow pulled back like a trebuchet launcher- taut and strained. He allowed himself one more punch, hard in the soft flesh of the bruising wizard’s abdomen before he stood back, straightening his now disheveled robes. One hand made it's way through his dark hair, pushing the stray strands back into place as he said, “That so?” If not for the stern line of his brow and the dark undertone to his voice, he might have
sounded amused, a parent humoring a child telling an only partially-listened to story.

Dolohov hesitated only a moment before uncurling from his tightly wound ball, wiping a sleeve across his chin and smearing the blood. He nodded, his eyes turning hard and glinting with indignation at having been tricked and manipulated as he pointed a single, accusing finger in Rosier’s direction. “It was his plan- from the very beginning! He hates her and he came up with this to get rid of her and to keep his own hands clean!” His voice quavered only slightly, growing stronger still as he pushed himself up from his elbows to a crouching position.

Tom sneered, slipping his wand out from inside his sleeve and flicking it in Dolohov's direction. The air seemed to wind itself into a ball, launching itself forward and into the unbalanced wizard, knocking him down once more and into the shelves behind him. What little books remained fell with the force of it, landing on top of him as he began to convulse, his muscles twitching as the curse triggered a post-Cruciatus fit.

Despite the pounding of Tom's heart in his chest- a not so gentle reminder that yes, he did indeed have one, thank you very much!- and the rush of everything within him wanting to wreak pain and havoc, he knelt down beside the panting and whining form, a small, proud smile pulling at the corner's of his lips. He had been surprised- pleasantly so- when he learned of what Hermione had done to him. It didn't even bother him in the slightest that he had to once again set in motion, cleaning up any signs that he had played a hand in this, that anyone close to him had a played a hand in an Unforgivable being used. The lie had come easily enough to him, had seemed likely and more then probable even, considering Hermione's dodgy past with dark wizards. It had worked- why wouldn't it though, when poor Albus Dumbledore's precious cousin couldn't possibly be guilty of such heinous acts?- and all that lingered now was an overwhelming rush of success, the intoxicating feeling that came to him whenever he was besting others. He was turning her against the Great-and-Pious wizard, he was encouraging to act in a way that came natural yet was treated like it was some sinister force. She was his.

He forced himself to return to the moment, for the dizzying euphoria to fade into the background as he examined Dolohov's sunken and discolored face, an ugly watercolor rendition of what he and Hermione had done to him in the past few hours.

“And yet, you're the one who did it, aren't you? You're the one who assaulted Hermione- like a coward, nonetheless- and you're the one who tried to what exactly, hmm? Scare her? Hurt her? Kill her?” His voice was calm, terribly calm. Like a snake in repose, settling onto itself for leverage before attacking.

The tremors that overcame his limbs like jolts of lightning rocked Dolohov to his core, and he swallowed hard as he looked at Tom. He was at his most frightening when he was a strange mixture of barely composed serenity, when he straddled the line between at peace and at war. He was a dichotomy of beast and man, slipping into either persona as though it were a mask to flaunt at will. Man to deceive, Beast to consume.

He reached out, jabbing Dolohov sharply in the ribs where he knew some of them were broken, having watched the wizard favor them. He hissed in response, but Tom did not relent, wriggling his finger harder into his side. “You weren't quite prepared though for her to fight back, were you? You always were rather stupid, though I didn't think you were that stupid.” He paused, smirking down as he continued to wince and squirm beneath the prodding. “I've been practicing with her as well. Training together, teaching her how to embrace the dark arts and wield them with finesse. So I suppose, in a way, I should be thanking you in giving her a more practical lesson. Because of you, I know just how much she truly has grown.”
Finally pulling his finger away only to replace it with his wand, the bone-white tip of it dimpling into Dolohov's skin, he added, “But I don't appreciate traitors.” He twisted his hand as he cursed him, Dolohov screaming for several long, drawn out seconds before he was unable to, a wet gurgling sound bubbling in his throat. He rolled to his side, grimacing as a thick glob of dark red blood fell in a clump from his mouth.

Tom frowned, his nose wrinkling in disgust as bile soon followed, stepping back. It would be some time before the effects of the curse lifted, leaving the wretched wizard fairly incapacitated for the time being. It was a simple curse, by no means the worst one in his arsenal, merely a slow acting curse that would cut and wound him internally and then seal him back up before the damage became fatal. Painful? Certainly. A bad way to spend ten minutes? Of course. What Tom Riddle wanted to do most to him? Not even close. But he would be remiss if he allowed him even a second of peace while he attended to other matters.

Standing to his full height, he turned towards Rosier, twirling his wand between his fingers as he often did when he was in deep thought. That was something new to consider, however. The possibility that Dolohov had been pushed over the edge by an otherwise quiet-as-a-church-mouse Slytherin. Had the circumstances been different, this would also have been a cause for pleasant surprise, for the swell of pride to rise like helium in his chest. Despite his claims to the contrary- that they were like a family, a team working for the same goal- he truly did find entertainment in their individual ruthlessness. All the better when they proved to be quite competent in it- he enjoyed knowing each strength and weakness of his followers and what he could expect of them. It made his own manipulations that much more efficient.

If Dolohov was telling the truth and Rosier was behind this, he was certain that he had his reasons for doing so- they always do. Slytherins are not known for the foolhardiness, after all and were very careful before following down a specific path, no matter how wayward. Yet Tom simply did not care what his motivations could possibly be, the knowledge that Hermione had been nothing but a pawn in his scheme and had been caught unawares by people he had employed had been enough to diffuse his normal hunger for information. He always needed to know the hows and the whys, thirsted for knowledge like a man in search of oasis. And yet, knowledge seemed like a trivial reward for such a garish act of betrayal. For what he had done to Hermione.

Anger burned in him, slipping down and warming him like a gulp of firewhiskey, his extremities tingling at its presence. Frustration was causing his own head to ache dully, a fist slowly releasing and unfurling as dots speckled his eyesight. He had no patience for games, his nerves frayed and jolting with electricity. He had never felt so present, his body alive with vigor and rage and a need to hurt. Run down and ragged from the assault of emotions, tightly wound together and coming at him more furiously than he had ever experienced. To have gone from the horrid sense of dread, of concern and even fear- if he dare name it as such- when he had learned of Dolohov's attack on Hermione, to relief and pride and adoration. Only for it all to come crashing down in an instant, snapping him into a blinding rage of treachery. He had never felt so many things at once, in such short succession, and he was beginning to truly pity others who lived each day in such a plight.

Ignoring the guttural sounds that Dolohov made in pain, Tom strode forward, grabbing hold of Rosier's chin in his hand, his fingers curling over his jaw. He made a squeak in protest before he was yanked from his chair, pulled to a standing position as Tom maintained a vice like grip on him. Chairs scraped along the floor as the others stood, moving away from the table and flat against the wall as if dispersing from the flames of a wildfire.

Using his free hand, Tom tapped the bone-white tip of his wand to Rosier's forehead, smirking as he said, “You've been awfully quiet. Have anything to say in your defense?”
He swallowed, opening his mouth several times and snapping the lips shut before he answered, “I've nothing there to hide. Check for yourself.”

“I will,” Tom replied simply, nudging his wand in between Rosier's eyes as he added, “Legilimens!”

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Despite the dazing daze placed on her by the myriad of potions, Hermione managed to sneak out from the infirmary and back into the comfort of her own bed, the posters drawn shut and sealed with several wards for privacy. It had been no easy matter of course, and she had paused at length three times on her journey to catch her breath and hold her head when the room began to slip away from her vision. But she had arrived in one piece, waving off the swarm of questions and curious looks thrown to her by the other members of her house before traipsing through to where she sat now, a strewn of parchment and journals- filled and empty- spread out before her.

Tom had yet to return, a fact that she had suspected before it was confirmed. Nervously chewing on the feathered tip of her quill, she sighed, aggravated but too exhausted to do anything more. She knew- or rather, convinced herself into believing it with certainty- that Dolohov would not be harmed too terribly. It would only add to the growing suspicions Tom had levied against him, and with the many aurors know keeping post just outside the walls of Hogwarts, it would simply be too moronic to harm him gravely. He would be safe, at least for some time, hinging only on the protection offered when one had to keep their head bent low and their hands clean.

Though, the end of the school year was fast approaching, and she would not put it pass Tom to use the opportunity for an elaborate-and-oh-so-tragically-unpredictable-accident. 'No,' she told herself firmly, more to quiet the chaos of her one conscience than because she believed it to be true. 'No, he wouldn't kill one of his followers- not when he was still vying for them. He needed all the support he could at the moment, he's too weak and Dolohov's family is too affluent and powerful.'

It was starting to drain on her, the constant tumble of her thoughts as she tried to make sense of it all, tried to justify her actions and predict the possible actions of an angered Dark Lord. And as more and more questions and concerns bubbled within her, filling her to the brim with worries and doubts, she neatly locked them away, turning her attention instead to the parchment on her lap, backed with a book for a sturdy writing surface.

As if atoning for her sins, for allowing herself to slip into so much anger and revulsion that she used an Unforgivable before she even realized what she was doing, she was revisiting the timeline she had created before arriving to this era. The timeline of what she could and could not change, and scouring through for any variables that she could safely alter, variables that had not been considered as they were not vital, but would weigh in her heart and balance out for her crimes.

“Remus Lupin was attacked by Fenrir Greyback in the Summer of 64-” she mumbled to herself. Surely, him being a werewolf had no baring on the Wizarding War, and she wouldn't drastically alter the flow of time if she managed to prevent that from happening. “Would he still be our teacher though?” she said aloud with a frown, tapping her quill on the paper and marking it with ink. “But-oh...” she said, raising her hand to her face and covering it as though slapping herself in her stupidity. The Marauders only learned to be animagus because he was a Werewolf, and it was that same talent that kept Peter Pettigrew in hiding, and allowed Sirius Black to escape Azkaban. Damn it.

She was really starting to appreciate how nuanced Time Travel really was, and how quickly the little and small acts of one being can grow and alter an entire world. She was also starting to get very annoyed by it. As though every good she could offer the world with her knowledge was useless because the bad had to happen. As if the only good she could really do was stop Voldemort from reaching the zenith he had in her own world and hoping that he would fall. At the end of it all? Lily
and James Potter would still be dead, Harry would be an Orphan, Sirius Black would be convicted of crimes he did not commit and die before he could be given the proper honor he deserved...Not to mention the countless others. The Longbottoms, the Weasley's...

What good was she, really, when in the end there would still be devastation and destruction?

Shoving the journals and mess away from her, she leaned back against her pillows, swearing under her breath that Ishtar had abandoned her in favor of whatever it was the mangy feline liked to do. She was getting quite fat on the many rodents that roamed the dungeon and just beyond to the gardens, and she suspected that that had something to do with her frequent disappearances. “Lousy cat,” she said, though really she wanted nothing more than to bury her face in her long and soft fur, to hear the soothing sounds of her purring against her like a reassurance.

She knew that Dumbledore had had his reasons for not wanting her to simply end it all- another dark wizard would surely rise in his place if she were to kill Tom Riddle. But the part of her that longed to make a difference that actually mattered, that saved lives instead of trading some for others, wished that it could be so easy. That she would slit his throat in his sleep and have it all just be over with.

A hand rushed to rest on her stomach, overcome with nausea and a sudden sinking feeling at the thought of that. She was inexperienced at taking someone's life, something she considered to be a welcomed thing to be amateur at. During the height of battles, she had thrown some killing curses of her own, not always looking to see if they landed but wary of the comforting coolness that wrapped around her as the curse stole from her magic. The giddiness that threatened to take control of her, begged her to utter the words more and more until she was awash in the euphoria.

She would never be able to kill someone in the way she would have to kill Tom. It was easy to add one more jolt of light to a battlefield, to add yet another curse into the resulting fireworks of war. But to purposefully approach someone at their weakest and kill them without any provocation? The very thought wound her stomach into tight knots, and she wondered how on earth anyone was capable of it.

Though, why did Tom have to die for her ideal world to be born? He was smart- frustratingly so, as she couldn't stop herself from comparing her own scores to his- and was more than proficient with a wand. Surely, if he were to be on her side of war, with Dumbledore and Harry and the countless others, they would be unstoppable. No matter what evil rose to take Voldemort's place, they would be ready and able to bat it down.

She clamped a hand over her mouth to silent a sudden peel of giggles, laughing at the thought of Tom having any hope of redemption. She had been raised to believe that everyone had good in them- somewhere, underneath any defenses of cruelness and bitterness. Her parents had made sure to teach her to never judge unless she knew the whole story, to be quick to forgive and nourish whatever humanity and good existed within someone. And yet, even she struggled to find that in the young Dark Lord. That beneath the admittedly handsome and polished surface was something putrid and rotten, nothing to be salvaged.

Her giggles were short lived, as she raised a hand to her swaying head, blinking away the dots that overtook her vision. A short of prickling heat warmed her nose as it began to heal, the slow process setting root. She winced as tiny, barely audible cracks filled the small space enclosed around her bed, the bones sliding back into pace, her jaw making similar sounds soon after. Bracing herself against the minor pain- more nuisance than anything, she waved her hand through the air, the mess over her duvet righting itself into a tidy before sliding back into her heavily warded case. She simply didn't have the ability to think anymore, she decided. And even if she did find any variables she could safely alter, it would certainly not be while she was so drugged and near sleep.
She tucked the case back into her trunk, shoving a heap of clothes atop it before pulling out a set of pajamas. Perhaps a shower before bed, to soothe her aching muscles and help unwind her constantly frayed nerves. Showers were something she had certainly come to appreciate after her time on the run- cleaning spells were efficient enough, for short periods of time. But there was only so long someone could go without a proper wash, and over time the charms did little more than to stave of bacteria and infection from poor hygiene.

She gave her trunk one final check to make sure it was secure and warded before nodding in satisfaction, tucking her clothes under her arm and entering the attached lavatory- pushing away her concerns of Dolohov and Tom Riddle for the moment.

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Banal- boring, even- memories came to greet Tom as he tore into Rosier's mind, each one simple in its structure. Lazy nights passed away with a game of exploding snap, rolling in great, dizzying arches through the sky on his broom. Tom waited for only a moment, lingering in the images presented to him before he dismissed them and moved on, searching for one in particular. Yet, if any such memory existed- whether to prove or disprove Dolohov's claims- it was nowhere to be found, dancing out of reach of his grasp as though he were stumbling through a darkened room.

Tom felt his hold on Rosier’s chin tighten, his forehead pushing against his nose as though physical proximity would unleash the memories he sought for. “Show me!” he growled, his jaw clenching in frustration as Rosier struggled against his hold, slowly relinquishing what the Dark Lord wished to see.

The scene unfurled around him, nebulous at the edges and tarnished looking, proportions seeming slightly off as though Tom were watching from the reflective bulge of a silver spoon instead of at the two wizards themselves. Dolohov paced around in frenzied circles, gesticulating wildly as Rosier sat, nonplussed by the erratic behavior. Entertained, even. “You’re being paranoid. You have nothing to fear of Hermione- our Lord will favor anyone who stands with him,” Rosier said, his voice sounding distant, like the trail end of an echo as it died on the wind that carried it. Tom dug his nails into the chin he held as he pressed forward, unaware of or unconcerned by the slow stream of blood from the little cuts. There was something...not quite right about this, and with a sinking feeling in his gut as though his stomach had suddenly turned to lead, he thought he knew why.

“I’m not being paranoid. She’s distracting him, she’s hiding something and I know it!” Dolohov asserted, coming to a stop within arm reach of where Tom stood in the recollection, unseen.

'The false recollection,' Tom thought to himself, only somewhat aware of Rosier making pants of pain as his hold tightened, blood trickling down his fingers as he dug too deep into the wizard's chin. Yet he remained inside the memory, bulbous and distorted as fake memories tend to be when crafted with an untrained hand. He watched, in a state of cold calculation, as the false figment of Dolohov continued to stomp around the room, degrading and disparaging over Hermione while Rosier remained to be the voice of reason, growing angry with the young man's refusal to see sense.

Tom had recalled when, some time ago, he had fruitlessly attempted to teach the lot of his how to guard their minds while also seeking to reach into others', greedy hands looking through thoughts and memories as though they were the candies at the bottom of a Christmas stocking. It had been abysmal, to say the least, and he had- in order to save himself the migraine of dealing with those too inept to learn- simply not pursued the subject further.

'But someone's been studying,' Tom thought as he looked around the room within the memory, raising a brow to it. He was almost amused that Rosier thought so highly of his occlumency to truly believe Tom would not suspect a thing. That he would be able to manipulate behind the scenes while
their Lord would be none the wiser to his mechanisms, even upon perusal of his mind. It was the sort of unashamed, unearned pride that would rather suit a Gryffindor than one of his Slytherin followers.

With a lurch, he pulled himself away from the Rosier's memory so roughly that it catapulted the wizard across the room. He fell to the floor, gasping as his back collided hard with the stone and he rolled to his side while groaning.

Dolohov was in a similar state, his body still twitching with pain, broken fingers seeking purchase and then pulling back when the pressure of supporting him bore too much on the swollen limbs. Yet despite the obvious agony he was in, his eyes remained surprisingly alert, looking to Riddle expectantly. A child waiting for his caregiver to give fair and equal punishment to the other child who fought with him in the schoolyard.

But Riddle did not offer any assurances to him, his eyes never straying from Rosier as he slowly began to stand, keeping his head bowed out of either fear or respect.

It seemed like ages had passed, decades creeping by in the span of seconds as the room waited for Tom to speak, for his judgment to fall down on either- or both of the wizards at play. His jaw was clenched, a sure sign of barely contained rage, and his eyes burned so furiously that an outsider might suspect he was attempting to Avada someone with his eyesight alone.

“In any other situation, this might have been pause for celebration,” Riddle finally spoke, his voice surprisingly loft and airy despite the tension of the room, the dangerous peels of magic coming off of him settled into a deep pervasive hum around the room.

He waited then, as if for Rosier to speak in turn. Licking his lips and straightening his back, he said surreptitiously, “It is?”

“In any other situation,” Tom started, his words spoken more slowly and with purpose, enunciating each and every syllable and injecting them with malice. He voice grew sharper with anger, switching the airiness of earlier to the weight of a stone. Several strides carried him around the room as he added, “In any other situation I would have been pleased that one of you had succeeded long enough in not being blithering and useless idiots to actually learn something that I would consider worthwhile.” He came to a stop when he reached the shirking form of Mulciber, placing a hand on the quivering shoulder. “Something like occlumency, perhaps?”

Rosier swallowed thickly, understanding creeping on him as he grimaced in expectation of what was soon to come. “I...” he started, only to trail off when he came short of anything to say. “I hadn't meant for him to hurt her,” he finally settled on, though the twisting smirk that Riddle contorted his lips into had told him that that had certainly not been the right thing to say.

“No, you hadn't meant for me to find out,” he countered. The hand that was clenched on Mulciber's shoulder tightened, and he pulled the short boy away from the wall he and the two other Slytherins had pressed themselves against. With a great heave, he pushed Mulciber away from him so that the wizard tripped over his own feet, barely catching his balance. He was quivering, a piggy sort of whimper racking his plump frame as if he was doing everything within his power to not let out full squeals of fear.

“He had nothing to do with it!” Rosier said in his defense, suddenly fearful for what Tom had planned for him.

“And neither did Hermione!” His voice had become strained and high pitched, an entirely different tone than what any of them had been accustomed to. In all of their years by Riddle's side, as friend or follower, whether proceeded with joy or consumable rage, they had never heard a sound such that. It
seemed far too unhinged, far too unrestrained to belong to the manipulative and cunning wizard. Typically, his voice became lower, smoother with his punishments, as if he were speaking through gravel and honey all at once. But this foreign voice was cold as ice, causing them to visually shiver as if chilled by the unfamiliar pitch. They shrank away from him, unnerved by the slip of something different. Something entirely not Tom Riddle.

Raising his wand, he finally released Dolohov from the unending torment, and the wizard's body stilled, save only for the ragged rise and fall of his chest. “You're lucky I've found a new toy for this evening,” Tom said, his voice returning to the proper--more recognizable octave. “Though you should hardly consider yourself safe.”

If not for the way Dolohov's eyes flicked up to meet Tom's, and the slow blink of acquiescence, one might have thought that he had slipped from understanding, a state between death and life punctuated only by the clanging breaths he made.

“Tonight, I think I'd like to try a game,” he said, but there was no amusement in his voice as he rounded to Mulciber. “You lot seem to think it appropriate to use my intended as if she were merely a pawn in your way, I see no reason why I shouldn't do the same. Won't you agree, Milton?”

“I...I suppose,” he mumbled, turning a sickly shade of green.

“I knew you would,” was all Tom said back, clasping his hands onto his shoulders once more as he leaned forward, practically resting his chin alongside his ear. “There are two ways this game can play out. Either you,” he said, using his long index fingers on either hand and thumping them up and down for emphasis, “Either you can torture your dear Rosier, or you can allow him to throw you properly under the train--as he so gracelessly did to another--and let him lay his wand on you.”

“What?”

It was Athena who spoke this time, the question slipping from her before she could barely stop herself.

Rather than being perturbed at having been interrupted, Riddle seemed delighted for the opportunity to further explain.

“It's really quite simple, if you could all follow along. For whatever reason, Rosier thought to ensnare Dolohov into attacking my Hermione, and falling prey to his own hubris--that is, thinking I would be so stupid as to fall for some shoddily pieced together memories--” he paused here, snarling the words as he leveled Rosier with a withering glare. “Whatever reason motivated him to play the strings of manipulation--if one can call such awful, awkward fumbling playing--he seemed to not care for how Hermione fared.

“I don't know about you, but it gets rather old being the only one here ever doling out punishments, don't you think?” Using a hand to cup Mulciber's chin and sharply pulling his head in his direction to look him in the eyes, he added, “So, I'll say it again, either Mulciber will curse and torture Rosier into he's screaming out his name--and not like that--or Rosier can further cement his position as a traitor and turn his back on his lover like he did Dolohov.”

If the others were surprised at the admission of such a well guarded secret, it didn't show, though Riddle surmised that it was less out of being privy to the knowledge than it was out of interest for how the rest of the night would proceed. He had never before allowed others to assume his role before, preferring to curse them himself as his own need saw fit. It was simply the best exercise, he found, in relieving his personal frustration with whatever grievance they had incurred.
And perhaps it was because it was Hermione that they had decided to drag into their own personal feud that he found he was leaning towards handing over control in return for something a tad more entertaining. Tom Riddle was hardly a romantic, but even he couldn't deny the poetic justice of turning the two lovers against another.

“Well, which one will we get the pleasure of watching beg tonight?” he said, looking between Rosier and Mulciber with a look often seen on a hungry wolf, salivating as it circled around some plump sheep. Mulciber was shaking his head before Riddle had even finished speaking, muttering the word no under his breath as though it were a prayer. He tried to back away from it all—where he planned on running to, he did not know, but he didn't get far as it thumped into Riddle's chest, the dark wizard chuckling as he flinched away at the contact.

Rosier was looking at his lover, biting his lip as he took several steps back himself. It did not escape Riddle's notice that while neither had readily rose their wands, the two did not seem likely to let go, their respective grips tightening as if waiting for the other to attack.

'Perhaps,' he thought, 'It will be just as joyous to watch my men torture each other into submission as it is to hold the wand myself.'

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There was something to Mad-Eye's shouts of 'Constant vigilance!' Hermione had begrudgingly acknowledged fairly early into the resurgence of Lord Voldemort. Turning over in your sleep and attempting to catch even a few more minutes of rest could prove to be your undoing when there was no guarantee of safety and when darkness crawled over the earth. She had gotten quite good at awaking at the slightest noise out of place, at jumping into attention when something seemed off. Yet, there were no Death Eaters to stay wary of—least not in the way she had been expected to before arriving in the past—which is perhaps why it seemed like a bit of an overreaction when Hermione jumped from her bed, wand in hand as Athena had attempted to pull the curtains surrounding her bed apart. Raising her hands in front of her as if to show she meant no harm, Hermione blinked in recognition, realizing that it was Athena who stood before her in the darkened dormitory and not the likes of Fenrir Greyback or some other unsavory sort.

“Oh,” was all she said, lowering her wand as she attempted to shake the remainder of sleep from her eyes. After her bath, she had fallen into bed, practically asleep before her head hit the luxurious pillows and definitely asleep before she could even wriggle under the duvet. “What time is it?” she asked.

Athena shrugged, her eyes trained intently on Hermione's wand and shining with...was that fear? Was someone actually afraid of the bushy haired know-it-all?

'Of course she is,' the admonishing voice from earlier said. 'You used an unforgivable without thought on one of her classmates. Why wouldn't she be afraid?' She felt all at once awful for that—and even more awful for the stirring that caused within her, a deep satisfaction at having scared a Slytherin into stepping away from her and eyeing her like she was something quite dangerous. What was becoming of her, honestly?

The thoughts were too much for one already eventful day, and she firmly shut them away just as she slid her wand up her sleeve, causing Athena to meet her gaze.

“It was well past midnight, last I knew,” she finally answered. “Sorry to wake you, but Riddle wants
to see you. Make sure you're alright.”

Seeing Tom was not necessarily something she had planned for the night. She wanted nothing more than to fall back into bed and sleep for the next hundred years or so. Though she suspected even a century of sleep would not ease the restlessness she felt.

“Can't you just tell him I'm fine?” Athena's eyes glimmered with fear once more, but this time it wasn't for Hermione's quick hand. With a sigh, Hermione shuffled from her bed, not wanting to subject Athena to Tom's cruelty for showing up without her. She had harmed enough people for her liking in one evening, no need to add to the tallies even if indirectly.

Relieved, Athena silently led the way to the boys' dormitories, Hermione nervously chewing on her lip as she followed. She had thought that Tom would be waiting for her in the Common Room, not in his personal rooms. 'A power play,' she thought, knowing that he was intentionally drawing her out and away from any shared comfort zones and into his den. Honestly what she wouldn't give for a moment of respite from this game of cat and mouse.

When the door swung open, Hermione was forced to squint her eyes as she was assaulted by the sudden bright light that filled the room. A fireplace roared from one corner, throwing a pale green light across the chambers while torches dotted along the wall did the same. The room looked like a mirror image of her own in the girls's dormitories; five beds of black wood with deep emerald curtains and matching duvets. The adjacent corner to the fireplace had a large window, shuttered away in a preemptive effort to block the morning's sun when it should rise, filtered through the lake it may be.

Tom sat at the bed opposite the door, in between the fireplace and window, standing when Athena moved aside so that Hermione could enter. Nott stood as well from what she assumed was his own bed, situated beside one with the curtains drawn. Mulciber was the only other one in the room, remaining seated at his bed and staring at his hands with such fascination that Hermione might've thought that they contained the secret to the universe inscribed on his soft palms. The bed beside him was empty and the curtains set aside.

Before she could even consider where the missing Slytherins were, Tom had crossed the room and was pulling her into a surprisingly tender embrace, ever careful of her injuries. He said nothing, gently entwining his fingers through her still damp hair before settling one hand behind her head at the base of her neck, lowering it to rest on his shoulder. She returned the hug, her hands overlapping as they settled between his shoulder blades. They stood like that for a moment, Hermione shifting her weight from one foot to the other when she heard a soft meow.

"Ishtar!" she said, practically accusingly as she pulled away from Tom and headed towards where the cat sat perched on his pillow. “This is where you've been all night?”

“She's always in here,” he ground out in frustration, following Hermione to his bed. He sat down on the edge of it, reaching up to grab her hips and give her a tug, asking her to join him. The mattress dipped with the addition of her person, and Ishtar gave one big stretch before curling up in her lap.

Hermione might have laughed at his obvious irritation with her cat, if she hadn't looked about the room once more, the heavy and foreboding mood weighing down on her like a woolen blanket.

She attempted a shaky smile, but it did nothing to relieve the tightly wound knot in her stomach and she quickly dropped it. “Where’s...Dolohov? Rosier?”

She could have sworn she heard what sounded like a muffled cry come from Mulciber, but when she turned to look at him she found that he was still intently staring at his hands. What had happened
when she had been separated from the group?

Tom’s expression hardened at the mention of the two absent wizards, waving a hand in the direction of the curtained off bed. “Rosier is sleeping off a rather rough night, and Dolohov is alive,” he answered simply, his tone suggesting that the matter wasn’t up for discussion. Like he ardently wished for the opposite to be the case.

Of course she knew that he would be alive; her concern lay in precisely how close to the spectrum of alive he was settled in.

She was pulled from her thoughts when she felt a warm hand on her cheek, fingers softly running over her skin as Tom tipped her head back so he could better look at her. Her injuries, while certainly better than they had been hours earlier, were still nowhere near perfect, the bridge of her nose tinted yellow as the bruising settled, the tip of it still somewhat crooked as the bones continued to pop back in place. One eye was swollen, the lids of it puffy and red and surrounded by a light blue bruise. Her chest ached with each breath, her ribs healed and whole but still sore as the effects of the healing potion wore away, and she was unable to ignore the slight rattling sound that accompanied each intake of air as she hissed through the pain.

The firm, straight line that Tom’s lips were compressed in quirked suddenly, slowly morphing into what she thought might have been a proud smirk, his eyes softening. “You did well, Hermione.”

“I...thank you?” was all she could say, pulling away from him somewhat with a furrowed brow. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but praise wasn’t entirely high on the list. “You’re not...mad?”

He smiled wide now, dark blue eyes alight with mirth. “Mad? Why would I be mad? You held your own very admirably, displayed your brilliant dueling capabilities for me once more, and even used dark magic to take back the power a foolish wizard attempted to strip you of. Why would I be mad?”

The way he bit out the word foolish made her flinch; she didn’t have to be in his inner circle to know that Dolohov was now firmly rooted on the lowest position offered by the small group.

“However, this afternoon has certainly brought to light some concerns I have,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her flush against him. “I think perhaps its time that we make more of an effort as a group to spend time together, foster friendships as your cousin might say. I would hate to see any animosity arise between my friends.”

Understanding dawned on Hermione, and she was practically trembling with excitement as she looked at him with wide eyes. Had she finally earned his favor? Was using an Unforgivable enough to coax the Dark Lord out long enough for him to extend a formal invitation to his most private meetings?

Mistaking her trembling for an entirely opposite emotion, he held her tighter, pressing a kiss to her wild curls as he said, “Don’t worry, Love, you’ll be perfectly safe, there is no need to worry about anyone stepping a toe out of line again.”

Worry? Ha! Worry was the furthest thing from her current deluge of emotions. Elation, pride and relief were swelling within her as though they were balloons trying to work its way through her esophagus. The guilt she had felt from earlier, the inner turmoil of her own heinous actions were all but forgotten in the wake of the forward leap her progress had made after months of standing still. It was the promotion she had been vying for, the reason she had spent many nights curled to Tom’s side some like wanton schoolgirl enamored by his devilish charm and looks. If not for the fact that she would surely find herself in a private room at St. Mungo’s, she would have danced around the room, singing and clapping in a way that would have made even the rowdiest of Gryffindor’s embarrassed on one of their celebratory nights.
Swallowing her smile, she buried her face in Tom's chest so as not to give herself away in her enthusiasm. “Oh, I'm not worried,” came her muffled response, shortly followed with, “I'm certain I taught Dolohov a lesson he won't soon forget as it were.”

She felt the reverberations as Tom chuckled, “No, he certainly won't. But it is growing late, and I rather think it is time we all retire for the evening.”

A chorus of agreements filled the room, Nott and Athena looking for all the world as though they had been holding their breaths for this very moment, waiting for his permission to sleep the taxing day off.

Athena offered Hermione a quick farewell before disappearing through the door. When she rose to follow her to return to her bed, holding Ishtar in her arms, Tom grasped onto her robe to stop her. “Hermione, why don't you spend the night with me? I was terribly worried about you, and I'm not quite ready to have you leave me just yet,” he said.

Around the room, the curtains were drawn as Nott and Mulciber silently settled in, leaving only Dolohov's bare bed and Tom's open to the room. “But it isn't allowed-”

She was cut off by his chuckle as he pulled her back down the bed, standing himself as he began to remove his outer layers in preparation for bed. “I don't suspect that will be a problem. I'll be back shortly,” he said, leaving to what she assumed was the lavatory to change into his nightclothes.

With a sigh, she pulled the blankets back and settling underneath them. It certainly wouldn't do to disobey him now when he had finally deemed her fitting for a meeting with his Knights. Though really, she wasn't sure how she would sleep when she was so anxious. 'Dumbledore will be so delighted-' she thought, the idea dying almost as soon as it had blossomed when she recalled the last interaction she had had with the Transfiguration teacher. He was hardly pleased with her, and she felt that balloon of bubbling happiness suddenly deflate before sinking like a rock to her stomach. She had forgotten about the look of disappointment he had when he left her to the infirmary, and even the memory of it was enough to take all the winds from her sails. It was no secret she had a terrible fear of failure and of disappointing those she looked up to, and she was split between the two of them. How could someone celebrate such success when perhaps the one they respected most had practically run away in shame?

She said nothing as Tom rejoined her in bed, wearing flannel bottoms and a soft white shirt and nearly half the size as when he was donned in his school robes. He wrapped his arms around her small frame, pulling her into him so that her head nestled neatly in the crook of his neck. Fingers once more found their way into her curls, pulling them taut and then releasing them so that they sprung back. “Try to get some sleep, Hermione. Everything will be alright by tomorrow, and I'm sure you'll find that no one will question you again,” he murmured, waving a hand so that the curtains shut firmly close.

She practically snorted at the irony of that statement. It seemed she had traded in the trust of one for the distrust of another. Forcing her eyes closed, she eventually fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming of dark curses, masked faces, and bright blue eyes deep with disappointment.

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Chapter Twenty: Distrust

'What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?'
-George Eliot

Hermione wasn't certain how long she stood outside of Dumbledore's office for, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as her fingers nervously twisted the piece of parchment she had received into a terribly crumpled state.

She did not sleep well at night, twisting and turning as much as she could, being trapped as she was under the heavy arm and broad shoulders of one Tom Riddle. Each time she kicked and flopped, groaning in a cold sweat, he would respond only by holding her tighter to him, not lovingly or supportive but in an attempt to keep her still. His heat, which had been comforting at first, had become overbearing, and she was bent at a funny angle, leaning away from him but still connected at the hip where his arm lay unmoving. She could hardly breathe, suffocating in it all, and had at some point tossed aside the duvet covers.

It seemed entirely too soon when the others were grousing awake, mumbling incoherently as they began readying themselves for the day, Rosier still hidden behind his curtains and Dolohov nowhere to be seen. She lied when Tom asked her how she slept, pretending as if she hadn't clenched her teeth and chewed her lip enough to draw blood during the nightmares she had during the few moments of actual sleep. Nightmares of Tom discovering she was in fact the most traitorous of them all, that she had been devising his downfall from the moment she came screaming and crying to the gates of Hogwarts. Him torturing her until her words become nonsense sounds and Dumbledore watching on with those sad, disappointed eyes.

When she had finally pulled herself together long enough to head to the Great Hall for breakfast, any sort of appetite she had had vanished when a fat, tawny owl dropped the letter on her lap in the familiar scrawl of Albus Dumbledore's excessively curly hand.

'Please see me after breakfast'
-Dumbledore

“Probably worried about you, you did sort of break out of the infirmary,” Mulciber had mumbled in an attempt to assuage her growing anxiety, the first words he had spoken since they had been together in Hogsmeade. But she had known better than that- this was not a simple call for well wishes. And so, forcing herself to eat a slice of plain toast, if only to stabilize her stomach for fear it might somehow fly away, she soon found herself standing in front of the door, wishing for once in her life that he would make the hard part easy on her and open the damned thing himself as if sensing her presence.

But of course he wouldn't make this easy on her. Why would he? She was lucky he hadn't turned her over to the authorities.

'For all you know, he still could. Doesn't a real student take precedent over a fake one?'
“Shut up, for once,” she muttered, placing a thumb to the center of her forehead. Thank Merlin it was a Sunday, after this all she wanted to do was crawl into bed (her own, preferably) and sleep the day away, studies be damned.

Summoning all of her once infamous Gryffindor courage, she finally rose a small fist to the heavy oak door and knocked, not surprised when it swung open readily after two taps. Stepping into the office of Albus Dumbledore, she blinked when she saw that he already appeared to be entertaining company.

“Oh! I'm sorry, sir, the letter—”

“No need to apologize, Hermione,” Dumbledore said as he rose from behind his desk. Extending a hand out to the woman sitting before him- an impossibly lovely woman with eyes as green as moss and deep ebony hair that fell in enviably smooth curls- he added, “This is a friend of mine, Antheia. She is a collector of all things unusual and interesting, though she has a predilections for one-of-a-kind books. She was simply dropping one such tome off for me. I've been in need of some light reading you see, and I'm afraid there isn't much that our expansive library can offer me at this point.”

“Hello,” Hermione said, trying not to let her confusion at the unexpected show in her voice. It would hardly help an already difficult discussion if she had arrived and been rude to his guest. “I can come back later if it's more convenient.”

The light in his eyes dimmed some, though not quite extinguishing as though he had finally recalled the reason for her visit. “No, now is actually most convenient. You see, Antheia will be assisting me with something that I'm afraid involves you.” He gestured for the empty seat beside the witch, and she hesitated only a moment before accepting it, her confusion still evident on her face.

How could they discuss something that was intended to be between them if Antheia were involved? 'Unless she's escorting you to Azkaban,' she thought. Before she could stop herself, and in a hasty attempt to prove her worth to Dumbledore still, she said, “I believe I've been invited to a meeting. Tom intends to have it Friday, saying it is a study group. But it seems like an awful front.”

Taken aback by her sudden outburst, Dumbledore allowed his features to soften, leaning forward so that he could steeple his fingers on his desk. “Hermione, allow me to make one thing clear: I have no intentions of ending this arrangement we have. I have seen your world, not through my own eyes but yours, and it is not something I will allow to befall us, certainly not over something as benign of what I imagine to be one of many, many dark curses.” She visibly relaxed, slouching back in the cushioned chair. He offered her a small smile here, only for it to slip away as he added, “But I am worried, Hermione. You are a wonderfully talented and brilliant witch who is privy to far more knowledge than what anyone should bare the burden of. And I'm afraid I can't lose that.”

The conversation did nothing to lessen Hermione's confusion. “Of course you won't.”

He was silent here, fixing her with the look that made her feel terribly raw and exposed. She shifted about in her seat, trying to maintain eye contact but finding it exceedingly difficult.

“Hermione,” he started, taking a deep breath as though what he was about to say took a great deal of strength. “In order for our arrangement to continue, I'm going to ask that you make an Unbreakable Vow with me.”

She felt her mouth sling open, felt herself gape like a fish. An Unbreakable Vow? Did he truly trust her so little that he felt the need to tie her soul and life down to him? Force her hand into behaving what he believed to be appropriately?

Did she trust herself to place her life within the constraints of such a dangerous magical act? “You're a smart girl, Hermione, and I'm certain you understand that I need to be able to trust that your loyalties have always been and will always be with me. Wouldn't you do the same in my position?” he asked, imploring her to see reason with those damned blue eyes of his.

She recalled how Snape had made his own Unbreakable Vow with the wizard, so uncertain was Dumbledore that the traitorous Death Eater was true to his word instead of simply looking for an out. Had her actions been so abhorrent that he felt similar to her, but in reverse?

She was speaking before she realized it, her gaze falling to her hands that were wringing the parchment into nothingness. “My family was murdered by him. My friends. The man I thought I would marry...I have lost everything I have ever held dear and loved to him, and you think that after
a of couple kisses that all will be forgiven? That I will allow him to sway me enough that everything I have sacrificed to protect will be the thing I seek to destroy? Do you really think all of that, simply because I acted too boldly when attacked by another student? In my defense?” She knew there was never a good reason to use an Unforgivable, but even still she felt the need to mention that it had only been in defense. It wasn’t as if she simply awoke that morning wondering what it would be like to use one of the most illegal spells in her lexicon.

Dumbledore said nothing, which in and of itself said everything she had asked of him. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she said in as calm a voice as she could, “And Antheia is here to perform the ceremony for you?”

She didn’t need to look to know that Dumbledore had nodded.

Rising to her feet, she swallowed a hard lump in her throat, narrowing her eyes at him. “Fine. But if you are going to make your stipulations of me, than I shall do the same of you.”

One brow rose, as if questioning what she might demand of him. “And that is what, Miss Dumbledore?”

“In my own perspective of you,” she started, carefully choosing her words so as to not give too much away in case Antheia was only partially aware of the situation. “You are not so innocent yourself when it comes to matters at play. You treat your men much like pawns on a chessboard, and while I am aware of this fact and have been from before I even accepted this task, it was something I was willing to accept in light of a greater opportunity for our world.” She took a breath, looking away so as to not lose her resolve. It was a terrible thing, feeling as though you were turning against the one true ally you had whilst still working towards the same goal- and the curious look of his bright blue eyes was making her want to curl into a ball and cry like the child she never got to be. She was essentially blackmailing her highly respected teacher, a man who had gone from a wondrous, whimsical myth, to very real, very flawed human being capable of his own misdeeds in the span of a few short years.

“However,” she started again, hoping the tremor in her voice wasn't too noticeable, “If you are going to require my magically bound obedience, then I am going to require you to vow that you will not manipulate me without at least making me aware of all your intentions. I was- and still remain to be-wholly prepared to be used as you see fit, and in light of your waning trust, I ask to be disclosed of all your intentions for me. I have already accepted my role as a pawn, that doesn’t mean I am to be ignorant of where the chess master deigns to place me.”

Her speech over, she finally turned her gaze back to his, his face as unreadable as she had every seen it. Perhaps he was surprised at her bold demands, or at the fact that she had all but called him a manipulative bastard to his face. But after a moment, he stood once more, leveraging himself off the surface of the desk and moving around it so that he stood in front of her. “Very well,” he answered softly, extending his wand arm out to her.

She took it, gripping at his elbow as he did the same. She vaguely registered the sound of pillows decompressing as Antheia stood, preparing to begin the ceremony. Finding it too difficult to look him in the eyes, Hermione instead stared at their locked arms, knowing that it was the start of something new between them. No longer a partnership, a friendship based on making the world a better place. It was instead a very much one-sided relationship between a master and his servant.

And for the life of her, she struggled to find the difference between the invisible chords of magic wrapping around her forearm and the sinister pact of the Dark Mark.

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A near full week had passed since the incident that left a permanent mar on her relationship with her former headmaster. A near full week since a very, very permanent spell had been placed on her and cradled her very life in its hands.

It was Friday now, and Hermione sat in her Ancient Runes class, eyes glazed over as she stared out one of the large, tapered windows. Tom was- as always- situated beside her, taking diligent notes in between worried glances at the young distracted witch. She pretended not to see him however, even as his left hand settled on her knee under the table, giving it a tight squeeze that never let up.

She had not spoken to Dumbledore since that Sunday, and had avoided his gaze even when she felt
his own burning into her at meal times and during classes, begging her to look at him. She was being petulant, and she recognized it, though made no amends to fix her horrid behavior. Logically, she knew he had done the right thing, and that, yes, he was correct when he stated that had the roles been reversed Hermione would have requested the Unbreakable Vow of him as well. But logistics be damned. It seemed wrong- as it always had to her when she first learned of it- to bind a witch or wizard to a promise not by trust or respect, but by dark magic. For surely something that promised to kill you could by nothing dark magic. It was the removal of free will, the forcing hand of obligation, that had made her uncomfortable with the very thing. Even the Devil championed for free-will, did he not?

The hand laying over her knee began shaking it incessantly, and she startled, looking up to see her classmates and professor looking to her expectantly. “Oh..” she mumbled, her gaze sliding over to Tom’s for assistance. His lips were set in a firm line, his dark blue eyes narrowed somewhat as he opened his mouth to whisper before being interrupted.

“Can you tell me what this runic spell might do, Miss Dumbledore?” a very young Professor Babbling asked, saying each word slowly and quirking a brow to suggest that this was not the first time she had asked it.

Her eyes found the spell in question on the board behind the professor, and she squinted as she mouthed the runes to herself. She ignored the barely concealed laughter around the classroom, of the tapping of Babbling’s leather heel. After what amounted to a minute of translating in her head-something that would have gone much faster had she not let her damned mind wander- she finally answered, her cheeks a light shade of crimson as she ducked her head.

“That is correct, but I still expect complete focus in my class. Ten points from Slytherin.”

The few Slytherins in the course grumbled at that, but the class continued otherwise without incident, Tom’s hand never leaving her leg. If anything, she swore he had rose it some when she wasn’t paying attention (not a difficult feat) and was now rested neatly an inch above where her knee was. She shifted underneath it, wanting to slap him the way she had McLaggen when he let his hands wander without permission or even warning under her skirts. But that was out of the question, for many reasons that would be too daunting to list- though she covered a hand to her mouth to cover a snort as she imagined slapping the Voldemort of her own time. Red slit eyes watering at the sharp touch.

She was spiraling further down into madness. 'Sauntering, more like,' she corrected, her shoulders shaking this time as her laughter became harder to contain. She waved off Tom’s curious looks, doing her best to seem focused on the runes appearing on the board.

She had been off kilter for the entire week, her professors patient at first before eventually growing annoyed with her dazed expressions. She had tried to stop herself, but was unable to and in very un-Hermione like fashion, decided her coursework was the least of her concerns and allowed herself to indulge in her thoughts.

Tonight, after supper, she would attend her first meeting. She had been flitting between excitement, trepidation and slight fear at the prospect of it. Most of her joy had been quickly tempered down, if not by Dumbledore’s sobering request than by the sudden and severe paradigm shift that occurred between Tom’s ranks. She had been expecting Dolohov to be largely shunned by the group, but was surprised to see that Rosier did not follow far behind him in that matter. She had concluded that, though he did not hold the wand, he must have had something to do with her attack to warrant such treatment.

She had been somewhat fond of Rosier, if only for his rowdiness that reminded her of the Gryffindors on a good day, and his general happy and playful demeanor- a welcome change of pace from the somber she felt was too prevalent in the group. But when he finally rejoined them- Sunday evening around supper time- he had deep purple looking bags under his bloodshot eyes, moving slowly and tenderly as if in pain. When Hermione asked him if he was feeling alright, his eyes sought out Tom’s as if asking permission before answering her in a clipped tone and growing silent once more. She hadn’t tried speaking to him again, getting the distinct impression that he was not allowed to engage in any discussions.
He did not seem to become any more favorable as the week progressed, still only speaking to Hermione when Tom gave him a barely perceptible nod of the head. Otherwise, the head of the group did not pay him any attention, and the others followed in his lead, with the exception of some looks thrown by Mulciber that could only be described as guilt-ridden.

Still, he had not fallen below Dolohov on the totem, who only emerged within the last few minutes of Monday morning breakfast, grimacing as he attempted to sit upon the bench as gingerly as possible. He walked with a limp, and one arm was nearly always wrapped around his right side, holding it while also squirming away from his light touch. He hardly ate anything, nibbled on the corners of some dry toast, and making pained expressions with each swallowed lump.

It was with his presence that she learned that being ignored by Tom was not the worst thing he could subject you to. Far from it. A week had gone by, ample time in the wizarding world to heal from most non-lethal injuries. And yet he never seemed to improve, though he did alter. Limping on his left foot one day, to his right foot another. He wasn't confused, she knew. There was a two hour block in her schedule when she was not glued to Tom's side- her own freedom being whittled down as he had insisted each night that week that she join him in his own dormitories- and she would not have been surprised to learn that he had been using those two hours to punish Dolohov some more. He was terrifyingly efficient that way.

Dolohov did not speak at all- if he asked for permission it was not granted- and she was beginning to feel worried about him, her Gryffindor tendencies rearing their ugly head once more. She wanted to ask him if he was alright, offer him a small smile as an olive branch of sorts, but something told her that that would only make his situation worse, Tom's wand more alive with curses, and so she did her best to play ignorant to his presence.

She hadn't realized class had been dismissed until Tom's hand pulled away from her thigh- had it moved higher?- and he was standing, packing up his and Hermione's bags. “Are you sure you're well, Hermione?” he asked, slinging the straps to both bags over his sturdy shoulders. “I'd say it isn't like you to be so out of sorts in class, but I surmise that you are well aware of that fact.”

She shrugged, locking elbows with him as he began escorting her from the classroom. “Just a lot on my mind, is all. But I feel well, really. Better than ever,” she said. It hadn't necessarily been a lie; despite her hesitation of what was to come, she was excited to attend the meeting and come one step closer to the status she longed for.

Tom simply smirked at her, the lopsided tilt of his mouth looking a bit too sinister for her liking. “Well, hopefully you keep yourself in good spirits. I'm afraid I shall have to make my leave however; there is a matter I must attend to. I'll come to escort you from the library for supper?” he asked, pulling her in the direction of said library. It had become a routine for them this past week. He would drop her off before flitting away, returning hours later only to walk her to the Great Hall. Of course, it was rather difficult to study knowing that said matters were most likely the continued torture of Dolohov, but she forced a shaky smile nonetheless.

“Alright.”

When they came to their destination, he followed her to where he knew she preferred to sit- a quiet table set aside from the rest, yet close to a large window that looked out to the courtyard- and placed her bag on the table. She had reached to pull her chair out from the table when he grabbed her roughly by the arm, leading her away and behind the columns and rows of shelves.

Panic filled her chest at the swift change in his behavior, exploding when she realized that her wand still had yet to be returned her, under investigation by the Aurors with the promised it would be hers again as promptly as possible. She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he was considerably strong for his slight frame and within moments he had her shoved into an expertly hidden alcove. Shelves of books containing the more daunting and less desired texts had hidden them from view, and she briefly wondered if he had somehow learned about her intentions and had been planning to seek his revenge in a place she considered to be her safe haven.

“Tom?” she said, trying to keep her voice level but finding it difficult when his hand was bruising her upper arm and the sinister looking smirk from before was lighting his face. But just when the fear was blossoming like a rose, he lowered himself towards her, kissing her with
such force that her head smacked against the stone walls. She paid no mind to the pain, sinking into
the kiss out of relief that it wasn't an attack like she had thought. His hands grasped tightly onto her
hips, the same bruising grip that had only seconds earlier held onto her arm, and pushed her further
into the alcove. The uneven texture of the wall ground into her back, and she was unable to move
from it as he had used the entire length of his body to hold her in place, pressed so tightly against her
she could feel the lean muscles of his chest against her own despite the thick uniforms.
His tongue prodded at her lips, not asking but demanding entrance and when she obliged he
somehow managed to move deeper against her. She hardly knew how to react, her hands laying
uselessly by her side as she tried to mimic his aggressive and passionate kiss. He never kissed her
like this, the sort of needy and desperate kiss that left her breathless and disoriented. He was always
so reserved, so tender and gentle, as if she were glass and he didn't want to shatter her. Yet, this was
well...a snog. She was being snogged by Lord Voldemort.
His tongue played roughly against her own, stopping only when he sunk his teeth into her bottom
lip, leaving it swollen and red. One of his hands had moved from her hips to settle behind her head,
cradling it from the wall while also keeping her in place as his soft lips sucked on hers, alternating
between that and playful nips. She was horrified when she heard herself moan softly against him, the
sound pulling from her unbidden and it only seemed to fuel him, his kisses lapping up her sounds to
savor them. Heat pooled low in her stomach, a familiar sensation that made her shirk away in
revulsion.
When she finally managed to end the kiss, she was panting, her chest rising and falling faster than
she cared for as a new feeling settled deep within her. An ache that she had no intentions of abating.
She was disgusted by herself and her traitorous body, at the obvious arousal she felt and that she
knew was written plain as day on her face if Tom's telling lopsided grin was anything to go by. He
was breathing heavily as well, though she imagined she looked far worse off. He pulled his hand
from her hair, cupping her cheek for a moment before letting it fall to grasp her wrist. She winced at
the movement, knowing that her hair was surely more of a mess than usual.
Swallowing hard, she gave him a shove as she stomped out of the small, enclosed space, huffing and
smoothing over her clothing. “You had me bloody terrified! If your intent is to snog me senseless,
then a warning would be appreciated. You're lucky I don't have my wand yet or I might've cursed
you to the dungeons and back!”
“I'd like to see you try,” he challenged, running a hand through his loose curls to push them back in
place. He followed her to her table, swooping in for one final kiss before leaving for his unnamed
errand, a very flustered Hermione in his wake.
“Bugger,” she mumbled, crossing her legs tightly together and hiding her red face from view.
-xXx-
Nott was knelt beside Dolohov, several potions of varying colors at his feet. His own repertoire of
healing spells was slightly vaster than Riddle's and so he was tasked with healing the boy when his
injuries became too severe throughout the week of his punishments. He was murmuring quietly to
himself, one arm holding him up as the other dragged his wand over the prostate body. Dolohov's
dark eyes were closed, but flickered enough that Riddle knew he was still conscious. After a
moment, Nott reached down and grabbed a vial of thick purple liquid, popping the cork and hoisting
Dolohov up some as he brought it to his bloody lips.
Tom was no longer attentive to the wizards though, having had his fun, and was now perched upon
a desk, his back to the two. His legs were crossed and he was staring at the pages of a book, though
not reading the words. His jaw clenched with the memory of his kiss with Hermione, his fingers
wrapped so tightly around the thumb of his right hand that the skin was turning white.
By the time Sunday morning had arrived, and the constricting feeling in his chest had finally ebbed
away, he was very much aware of the young witch in bed with him. He had felt terrible throughout
the rest of the day following Hogsmeade, even through the highs of cursing Dolohov and the near-
savage delight at watching Mulciber shakily train his wand on Rosier, there was still that twisting
feeling. A pressure in his rib cage that expanded against his bones, only deflating when he finally
saw his Hermione, safe albeit bruised. By the time he awoke, it was gone entirely, replaced by
something wonderful.
Her hair smelt lovely, clean and not overly fragrant and the frizzy, wild curls tickled his chin and nose. Fingers trailed over her soft, supple skin, and she was pressed so perfectly against him that it was as if they were always intended to fit in place together. He had greatly valued his privacy and personal space, and yet in that moment he decided he never wanted to wake another day without her body curved along his. And he hadn't since, the witch gracing his bed every night since.
It was undeniable that he was aroused by her, the need of it only growing stronger after her display against Dolohov. He was drawn to power, and she exuded it. Dark magic suited her, he decided, and he was driving himself crazy with the thought of her wielding it. He was hardly able to focus, his eyes diverting to her at every possible chance, a sudden and unyielding desire to explore her body. To touch her.
He placed his hand on her knee in Ancient Runes initially as reassurance, a comforting gesture, but found that he enjoyed the feel of her leg beneath his palm. He moved it further along, testing the waters of his touch, but she was too distracted to notice. By the time they had arrived at the library, he was impatient with her ignorance, and the sight of the well hidden alcove tucked away was entirely too tempting. She was entirely too tempting.
She had no idea how delectable she really was, with her soft moans, swollen lips and untamed curls, flying around her thin and freckled face no matter how much she tried to restrain them. If she hadn't pulled away from him, he might have taken her right then and there, hidden by the oft forgotten and dusty books. Honestly, a romp in the library, surrounded by shelves upon shelves of texts seemed entirely too appropriate for the bookworm.
It was not a feeling he was used to, this need that went further and deeper than any other need he had experienced. She was under his skin, and he craved everything about her. Her sweet, tasting-of-tea kisses, her hair in his face as she slept in his arms, her body writhing beneath his. It was such a complete need of all of her, and he was overwhelmed by it. He wanted her, wholly and truly.
“-Riddle?”
Turning around at his name, he saw that Nott was standing at the desk, looking at him with a curious expression. How long had he been trying to get his attention? “They'll be serving supper soon,” he said after a moment. “I can escort Hermione if you're too-”
“No,” he snapped, his eyes hardening at the suggestion. “I've just finished,” he lied, closing the book and setting it aside. “We'll return here afterwards for our meeting. Remember, she'll be joining us for this one, and I don't want to scare her away. You better be on your best behavior,” he paused, letting his gaze linger on Dolohov, who remained crouched down on the floor, looking less broken then Nott's healing magic. “Pass that along to the other three, will you? I don't want to push her too far in one day.”
“I'll let them know,” Nott said, grabbing his personal rucksack and hoisting Dolohov up to his feet. Together, the two left the Come and Go Room, leaving Tom to his thoughts.
And what confusing and lovely thoughts they were, filled with honey colored ringlets, deep brown eyes and moans that he breathed in like oxygen.
-xXx-
“You won't be needing those, Hermione,” Tom said with a smirk as she bent down to grab her books from her bag. Supper had passed, and she was now seated between Tom and Athena in the Room of Requirements, a new chair having appeared just for her at the round table. The Knights of Walpurgis. Death Eaters.
Finally, she was here.
She quirked a brow, committed to her role. “But I thought we were studying?”
“Riddle's a better teacher than anything you'll find in there,” Athena supplied, leaning towards Hermione. Tom gave her an approving smirk, and she seemed to beam under the unspoken praise. Hermione settled back in her chair, matching his smirk with one of her own. “And what, pray tell, gives you the authority to teach? What can you teach me that no book can? Got a desire to mold young minds, have you?” she challenged, folding her hands in front of her.
He was quiet, introspective at her words. He looked up to the high, vaulted ceilings, uncrossing his
arms from his chest. She took a second to look around the table. To his other side sat Nott, stony faced as always, long fingers drumming on the surface of the table. Mulciber was next, looking like he might be trying to eat his own lip with how furiously he was chewing it. Dolohov was wedged between him and Rosier, and she had realized that it was thoughtful and intentional placement- it was the furthest he could be sitting from her at a circular table. Looking back to Tom, she swallowed at the intensity of his dark blue eyes, that crooked smile of his. It seemed he never smiled with his full mouth, only one side at a time.

“What can I teach?” he echoed, leaning towards her.

“I can teach you things those books of yours couldn’t- wouldn’t- be able to. How to hold the upper hand against any opponent, how to turn that wand of yours into a tool of potential. Potential for power, glory, fame...infamy. How to take whatever you want, however you want it. That nothing is impossible if you simply desire it enough,” he started, his voice barely above a whisper and she found that was leaning closing to him, to his words. She had stopped breathing, as if the slight action of doing so would somehow break the moment. “What is it you want, Hermione? Knowledge? Control- of self or others? Revenge?

“You're the victim of a terrible war, having lost everything you knew. Your life was taken from you, everything that made you you is now gone. That Hermione has ceased to exist- Grindelwald killed you the night he killed your parents, and I can teach you how to live again. To regain everything and more. I can teach you to be empowered, to never have to fear for that sort of death again. To, in effect, live forever. You can be immortalized, if only you so want it. I can teach you to command a crowd- a crowd to cheer your name, or whisper it.” She was shivering now, despite the heat of roaring fire, the thick cloak wrapped around her shoulders. No longer was she pretending to be a doting new follower, her brown eyes wide in genuine intrigue.

“People only have power over you if you allow it, you and you alone are in control of your destiny, your legacy. People will love to tell you that you will amount to nothing more than another cog in society's machine. Not to make waves, merely move along with them even if they force you into the undertow.

“What I can teach, what I can offer, is the opposite of that. I can teach you to be what causes the tsunami, not the one dragged along in its path. The question is, Miss Dumbledore,” he paused, pulling away from her, the edges of his lips quirking when she followed after him, nearly at the edge of the seat and unaware how close to it she was perched. “Are you willing to learn?”

She licked her lips, nodding her head slowly and blinking as if awaking from an enchantment. “Yes,” she said, her voice far smaller than she wanted it to be, diminished to practically nothing. He smiled, a hand raising as he tucked a loose curl behind her ear, letting the tips of his fingers graze along her jaw. “I want you to think most about what you out of life, Hermione. And when you know, I will help you get it. One way or another.”

She swallowed thickly, nodding. She knew what she wanted, though she would never tell him. He settled down, turning from him and addressing the whole group now as he asked them about what it was they hoped to make of their pathetic lives.

'What do I want, Mr. Riddle?’ she thought to herself as he spoke, her inner voice cruel and foreign even to her. 'I want to absolutely ruin you.'

-xXx-

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: My kink is Tom Riddle being so new to love that he can't figure it out or identify it when he feels it. And is that smut on the horizon?
Follow me on tumblr (reenehartblog) for previews to chapters, tomione (and other trash ships) love, and for any answers to questions.
Chapter Twenty-One: As Others Saw

“From childhood's hour I have not been. As others were, I have not seen. As others saw, I could not awaken. My heart to joy at the same tone. And all I loved, I loved alone.”
-Edgar Allen Poe

Hermione retreated from her attempt to penetrate Tom's mind, his mental blocks too sturdy for her to break through. She was breathing heavily from the exertion of it, hands gripping her knees as she bent at the waist, closing her eyes as a dull ache throbbed against her temples. “Bloody hell,” she cursed under her breath, picking herself up long enough to throw a glare at Tom when he snickered.

The school year was approaching it's end, and she was running ragged with her growing tasks and responsibilities. Between classes, preparing for the finals that she was still expected to pass less Tom reconsider her value to him, the study gatherings held as a front for the fledgling Death Eaters, and her tutoring sessions- to Mulciber or from Tom- she felt like taffy, pulled and stretched in every direction. She hardly had time to sit with Dumbledore, though their formerly cordial meetings had become far more efficient since her anger had yet to abate and she never sat for a cup of tea or chat.

“Let's take a break,” Tom said, though if she had to guess, she was certain that he was as frustrated as she was with her legilimency. Or lack there of.

Following him to a plush, emerald sofa in front of a fireplace, they sat together, his arm draping over her slim shoulders. There had not been many meetings, her induction to the group being handled with such delicacy it took all she had to not grab him by his shoulders and give a shake, roaring at the top of her lungs that she knew. She bloody knew already so cut the act. Yet even still, she could appreciate the insight it gave, the enraptured Slytherins gazing up at Tom, at his lovingly spoken lies and empty promises. She could appreciate the nuances of his performance, his portrayal of benefactor and savior. And they swooned for it, eating it up like they had spent months famished and ill with hunger. Any fear, and trepidation, that she could so easily see in their eyes throughout the day would be gone instantly, replaced with hope and respect and adoration. Even Dolohov's eyes, permanently shrouded by yellowing skin and typically downcast, were alight with childlike wonder.

“You'll get it, eventually. It'll just take practice,” Tom murmured into the room, and she shifted, pulling away from him so that she could better face him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He looked at her for a moment before answering. “I can't promise I will answer.”

“When we had our first study group, you asked me to think about what I wanted most in life. Do you remember?” She knew he did, as she was certain it was a speech he was well acquainted with, yet he paused, giving it thought as though searching for the memory. When he slowly nodded, humming in response, she added, “What about you then? What do you want more than anything?”

She was genuinely curious. Perhaps it was unhealthy to think of the two entities- Tom Riddle and Voldemort, respectively- as being separate from one another, but it had become a coping mechanism
of sorts. And while she knew what Voldemort of her time wanted most—power, to cheat death—was she so sure that Tom Riddle wanted the same?

He smirked, playfully pulling on her curls. “I asked you first, and since I have yet to receive an answer, I’m afraid I will have to withhold mine out of integrity,” he said, his smirk only growing at her scowl. Not giving her the opportunity to ask again, he grasped her tightly, pulling her to him and wrapping his arms around her as he kissed her. His lips met hers deftly, one hand entangling itself in her curls while the other weighed heavily over her waist, fingertips pushing the hem of her jumper up ever so slightly to skim over her bare skin, his touch burning her terribly. Wonderfully, yet terribly.

She sighed against his mouth, mumbling that he was a stubborn git only for her words to be smothered. One of her hands ran to his hair, enjoying the feeling of his soft, loose curls. She was ashamed to admit, if even to herself, how much she reveled in his attentions, the way her body responded to his kisses and caresses. It was undeniable that he was skilled, drawing and coaxing out little moans and sighs that she was unable to conceal. She was not daft—she knew where his intentions were, where his mind would wander when he experimentally splayed his hand on her thigh during classes. He was a young man—only missing a fraction of his soul instead of the multitudes that he had carved him into a parody of his former self. He was still very much in tune with his wants, needs...desires.

And she was very much aware of her own, conflicting though they were, and while she knew she would eventually have to submit to it, it was a thought she liked to tuck away whenever it was presented itself. Some thoughts were better left unexamined, especially if they involved shagging the Dark Lord.

She was startled from her reverie with a huff when Tom reclined fully along the sofa, pulling her with him so that she was laying atop him, her slim hips wedged somewhat uncomfortably between his thighs. The hand on her waist had ridden up, taking her jumper with it, and was now rubbing lazy circles over her spine. The hand she had wound in his hair balled into a fist at the sudden movement, the tight grip tugging on his hair. He groaned at it, the sound coming from deep in his throat and she thought it even surprised him. He deepened the kiss, his tongue pressing against the insides of her cheek, chasing after the taste of her.

His hips bucked against her, and she shivered, pulling away and sitting on his knees when she felt his clothed erection pressed into her lower stomach. She was by no means a prude or a virgin, but she simply wasn't ready to entertain him in that manner, even as her own center begged for relief and she bit her lip in frustration.

Though her frustration was nothing compared to Tom's, from his dark eyes narrowing dangerously at her from his mussed up hair, the curls voluminous from her tousling. His lips were set in a tight grimace, swollen and red, and his hands were held up in the air from the memory of her presence against him. His chest rose and fell unevenly, any sort of control he had over himself waning thin.

“Let's try legilimancy again,” she said, hopping up as if innocently unaware of how disgruntled he was. She was in the center of the room, hands clasped behind her when he finally stood, purposefully taking his time straightening his uniform. His oxford and jumper had been pulled from the waistband of his slacks, and he scoffed indignantly as if the rumpled state of his clothing was hardly worth it. She thought she heard him muttering something about ‘bloody teases', but bit on her lip to stop her retort. Perhaps it was best to not instigate a sexual frustrated Dark Lord. Though she was unable to not roll her eyes when he was finally satisfied with his appearance and strode towards her, having made a show of it.

'Pompous git,' she thought, raising her wand as he stood before her.
“Legilimens!” she called, surprised when she attacked his wards and after some forceful shoves, broke through. She was spiraling through his mind then, being pulled into it like a vacuum at her navel. His thoughts and memories passed her by in a dizzying blur, damp and dreary in their coloring. But they were slowing down, forming distinct shapes and bits of somewhat coherent sounds until she was standing in something resembling a solid memory. Or so it had seemed.

Her brow crinkled, lips twisting in thought. She was standing in the same room she was in- or rather, her corporeal form- the very same room created by the Room of Requirements for their study sessions. ‘But I thought I succeeded in-’ she thought, disheartened that her intrusion to his mind had failed when she heard a moan from behind her.

Whipping around, her eyes widened at the sight before her.

Well, the sight of her.

She was on the couch she and Tom had been in just minutes before, except she was naked, straddling an also very naked Tom. One hand gripped on her hips, using it as leverage to move her up and down along him, the other gripped in her hair, holding and pulling her head back. His mouth was devouring her bared neck, his pink tongue poking out and trailing along the curve of it.

She was coming undone, moaning nonsensical words in between the sound of his name tumbling from her plump and wet lips. Her hands were wrapped around Tom's neck, pulling him closer as he trailed kisses down to her breasts, capturing one rose colored nipple into his mouth.

Her cheeks aflame with humiliation, she propelled herself out of Tom's mind, gripping her wand clinched in her grasp as she pursed her lips so tight they were turning white. “You let me in on purpose to show me that, didn't you?” she seethed, the slight high she had experienced at the belief she had succeeded in her attempt crashing back down.

“Oh, he said, not sounding repentant or sincere in the slightest, smirking unabashedly. “I guess I was distracted by something.”

Her lips pinched tighter at his amusement, her cheeks a deep shade of red. ‘What an arse!’ she thought, her rage at his trick making her petulant and growling lowly from behind her teeth. She wanted to slap the smirk from his handsome, too perfect face.

Raising a shaking hand, she barked out, “Legilimens!”

The last thing she saw before crashing against his mental wards was his blue eyes widening, absent of any humor or mirth. Then she was trapped in a flurry of thought, like she was stranded in a blizzard, dragged to and fro as she fought to remain upright. The wind of his resistance battering against her.

When the storm peeled back, retreating just as easily and suddenly as it had come, she had been transported to a gray, familiar room. Familiar in the way that a long ago dream was, second-hand familiarity at having seen the memories before when they were not her own.

“I can speak to snakes, too,” the calm voice said, the young boy oblivious to her presence from where he sat. “They find me, whisper to me.” He spoke like he was unsure of how to speak just yet without sounding too dissonant, not trained in the subtle art of manipulation, the mastery of control. There was something unsettling about the calm to his voice, the lack of inflection. He did not know yet how to pretend, how to mimic niceties and laughter. Dark eyes were settled on the form of Albus Dumbledore, the older man clearly uncomfortable with the conversation he was having.
The image receded again, replaced by the flurries from before, large gusts of wind trying to force Hermione back and out, a throbbing in her skull as Tom tried to evict her. But she was resilient, standing firm and unmoving until the storm settled down again, revealing a different, unique scene.

She was outside now, but the world was no less gray than back in Tom's room at Wool's Orphanage. Even the green of the grass seemed less substantial in its vibrancy, a facsimile of what it should be. Tom, slightly older than before but not by much, his face thinner and less rotund than it had been in childhood, the edges that were his strong jaw and angular cheekbones in their infancy still. He was standing up against the gate that wrapped around the bare courtyard of the home, fingers wrapped around the wrought iron poles. Following his gaze, she frowned, a small parade of soldiers marching along the cobblestone. Ruddy, sardonic faces hidden below the brims of hats, army fatigues looking too heavy for the summer yet still not enough for the chill that pervaded the air. They held guns against their chests, handling the weapons with care.

“There were raids up north,” a voice spoke from her right, and she turned to see another orphan off several feet from Tom, his own hands grasping onto the fence. He stood beside a young girl, no older than seven. “Had to evacuate everyone. Increase patrol around here, jus' in case. Reckon it's only a matter of time before we get hit, eh?”

He teased cruelly, rolling his eyes when the young girl pouted, her lower lip trembling as she ran away from him. “I'm jus' being honest!” he called after her, unrelenting. “Haven't got any families to take us away.”

Turning her attention back to Tom, she saw that he was doing his best to ignore the other boy, his jaw clenched tightly as he continued to stare at the soldiers and officers. One of them, catching sight of his gaze, offered him a small smile, waving only for his gesture to go ignored.

She swallowed, the raw emotion he had attached to the memory hitting her all at once, the force of it almost enough to knock her over. Fear. He was terrified, living in the epicenter of a war zone, faced with his own mortality startlingly young. Having been born in mortality, born to death and abandonment, no mother or father to speak of to hush his worries aside.

Voldemort had been obsessed with his desire to avoid his own death, tearing apart anyone who might threaten his quest to live forever. She had simply chalked the desire up to vanity, to his desire to rule and submit others to rule over for eternity. It had never occurred to her that perhaps those fears were grounded in something more complex than a need to conquer Death himself. More complex than a need for chaos, but still incredibly simple all at once. He was a child surrounded by death, who simply didn't want to die.

The image was slipping away again, but she had grown used to the feeling of lingering in his mind, was less surprised and more prepared when he tried to remove her. She stayed, weathering through the brief storm of his thoughts when it settled again. Except...

Her brow furrowed in confusion, gazing at the unmistakable face of Tom but...older.

It was the same visage she had grown well accustomed too, as she awoke to it every morning and slept beside it each night for nearly six weeks now. But there were distinct wrinkles bunched at the corners of his bright blue eyes, parentheses around his lips. An ever so slight stubble grazed his chin and half of his cheeks, while Hermione wasn't even entirely sure her Tom could grow enough facial hair to achieve such shadows just yet. And his thick hair had streaks of gray, clusters of it at the temples where they were near silver.

He was lying on the floor, prone and prostate, a thick sheen of sweat over his smooth, pale skin, a
barely perceptible rise to his chest.

'How is it that poss-

The thought died before it could even fully form when a streak of green light blinded her, colliding the impostor hard in the chest so that he rose with the force and then slumped back to the floor, eyes unseeing. “Oh,” she said aloud. It was Tom Riddle Senior, the father of the man who had destroyed her world, the man who begot the eventual ruin of humanity.

She made to move, to further examine the memory, but she was stopped, eyes bulging as her hand flung to grasp around her neck, an unseen pressure wrapping tightly around her windpipe. It felt as if invisible hands had settled around it, pressing down and crushing her throat. She couldn't breathe, her mouth opening to take in air that was unable to fill her lungs. She choked, unsure of what was happening until the hands around her neck tugged her suddenly, throwing her back and out of Tom's memory.

She stumbled, the only thing keeping her upright were the now very real hands that had moved from her throat to the juncture where her shoulders and neck met. Tom was staring at her with a hardness to his eyes, fingernails burrowing into her skin as he slipped underneath her loosened shirt collar. His jaw was clenched, nostrils flaring, and she struggled to look into his eyes, the intensity making her knees weak.

“I...” she started, the words dying on her lips. Would he kill her? Not only had she just penetrated his mind, going further than she was certain he ever anticipated she would, but she had seen him commit murder. Killing his own father the very same night he killed his grandparents after hours of torture. Would he kill her too, simply to tie up loose strings?

She swallowed, wincing at the lingering pain of his bruising touch. Forcing herself to meet his eyes, she said, “You killed your father.” It wasn’t a question, and she forced herself to seem unfazed by his tightening grip on her, her eyes flicking down when his Adam's apple bobbed once before meeting his eyes. He said nothing, his glare bearing down on her, challenging her.

‘Merlin, he might really kill me,’ she thought, standing straighter against her mounting worries. “I’m sure you had your reasons,” she said, hoping to diffuse the situation. Wouldn’t it be a damn shame if she finally made it so far, only to be murdered to keep his secret safe? The thought was enough to almost make her laugh humorlessly.

“What if I told you that I didn't?” he asked, his words a low whisper that she strained to her over the crackles of the fire, her own heartbeat pounding in her head. He was still fixing her with that look, the one that stripped her of all her faculties and securities, her skin prickled with goose flesh. “What if I just did it because I wanted to?”

She bit her lip, considering her words carefully before choosing them. “I'm not in the business of tattling on capable wizards, if that is your concern. You say you don't have a reason, but I'm sure you do, and I am not one to debate whether or not it was reason enough for you to do what you please.”

The edges of his eyes softened at that, his grip slacking some as one end of his lip quirked into a smirk. “Are you afraid of me, Hermione?”

Her heart was practically in her throat, the soft muscles constricted uncomfortably. The white-knuckled grip of her wand tightened, ready to lunge forward and attack if necessary. “Should I be?”

He regarded her, his eyes moving from her own to her lips and back again, before he shook his head slowly. “You shouldn't be,” he answered before capturing her mouth in a kiss, the emphasis on the
word 'you' sending a jolt of something foreign down her spine, settling at the base. So was she safer than others then, held above any other witches or wizards who would fall at his feet to kiss his cloak? Would he offer her protection, even from his own wand, because she was his lover?

The feeling prickled over her flesh, and she wrapped her arms around herself to fight the sudden chill. Her position was still so indeterminable, unpredictable. Whether she would simply be a follower whom graced his bed at night, or a proper Dark Lady to his Lord. She hardly knew which one she preferred, though she would be daft to deny that being his Lady would have too many benefits to count - in influence and power. It was enough to allow him to kiss her, to touch her; enough that she could ignore the quake of guilt in the pits of her stomach in favor of the warmth of pleasure at her most intimate core.

“Is that why the others are afraid of you? Dolohov and them? They know what you did?” she asked, pulling herself away from him so that she was bent an awkward angle.

His full lips tilted into a smirk as he reached up, pushing a strand of hair behind her ears, careful to not get the curls caught in the metal clasp of her earrings. “Among other things. Just as I vowed to help you, Hermione, I have vowed to help them as well. But such things do not come for free, and I require their assistance in turn. Sometimes,” he paused, shrugging his shoulder nonchalantly and waving a hand in the air dismissively. “They disappoint me. That is all. They should be serving supper now, and I don’t know about you, but I am feeling rather famished. Besides, we should celebrate- you’ve finally mastered legilimancy.”

He changed the topic abruptly, slipping his arm around her elbow before she could ask any further questions, a discontented sigh slipping through her lips. He chuckled low in his throat, placing a kiss on top her head. “Has anyone ever told you you're very impatient?”

“Every day of my life since I was four,” she mumbled in response, allowing herself to be led to the Great Hall. Another time then. He would reveal everything to her in time.

-xXx-

She was not afraid of him.

Not really, at least, Tom thought as his fingers idly massaged the soft underside of Ishtar’s belly, the long fur admittedly pleasant to touch. He was stretched out on his bed, his ankles crossed and the cat sprawled out on his lap, the lithe body vibrating in its contentedness. The room was empty, the other occupants having attended the last Quidditch game of the year, and he could hear the sound of the shower as water pelted against the stone walls. Could hear the slight hum as Hermione wistfully muttered to herself in the lavatory, a quirk of hers he found rather endearing.

She was not afraid of him. She had seen one of his more monstrous memories, if only a small glimpse of it, and she did not shy away from him, only shirking away from the pressing grip of his hand on her throat. She did not ask him for any reason, any justification for such a horrific crime. Instead, she simply trusted him, believing wholly in him.

It was strange, to have someone trust you so completely - not out of fear of punishment, or respect of power, but simply because of who you were to them. Was that what it was like to love someone? To place what you believed of them above what was true of them, favoring the pliable sways of the heart over the logistics of the mind? Did she love him? Did he love her?

The thought was enough to make him pause, his fingers mid-stroke along the sleek black fur. She mewed in protest, snapping forward to look at him with accusatory green eyes. But his own gaze had strayed, blue eyes wide as they looked to the door of the lavatory, a thin line of light emitting from
the small gap between it and the floor. Letting his gaze move further around the room, it settled at his bedside, at the porcelain cup she had placed down only moments before leaving to shower. The light coral imprints of her lips were pressed against the smooth dish, only a small sip of cold tea remaining in the well. Dark colored tea leaves, fat and swollen with the saturation of the water, clung to the curved walls. He smelt the tea everywhere it seemed, from his own bed. Tasted it on her lips, the tart taste of blackberries lingering on his mouth long after they parted.

He had first been introduced to the aroma from the amortentia at the very beginning of the year, and had come to know what it was and recognize it from her. He was hardly one to put stock in romantic drivel, but surely it couldn't have been entirely a coincidence.

What had she smelt? She had said there was one smell she couldn't quite identify. Had that changed at all? Was it a smell that she recognized now, in the tangles of his sheets? The crook of his neck?

He was surprised by the quell of his stomach, at the hope he felt at wanting that to be the case.

No, it wasn't a matter of want. He needed it to be the case. She would not find it among anyone else, she would never turn to anyone else. He simply wouldn't allow it.

The sound of the water streaming from the shower head came to a sudden halt, followed moments later by the shifting aside of shower curtains. He leaned back against his pillows, running his hand through Ishtar's fur once more.

Perhaps he was incapable of love. Perhaps he only craved her for what she could offer him, for the possibilities her continued presence in his life could offer him. But wasn't that all love really was, at the heart of it? The self-serving want of another person, the selfish need for them?

Perhaps he was capable of love, and if he were, he was certain she was the only one who could evoke such feelings within him, stirring like a dragon from a deep slumber. He supposed if there was anyone to love, she was the most deserving of it. She was intelligent, powerful, confident...She was no fool, and never played ignorant- even when she had clearly seen him murder his own father, there were no bashful lies, no pleas to not harm her if she promised not to tell. She did not pretend to have not seen, to have not understood what was before her in favor of keeping the image she had of him untarnished.

'You killed your father,' was all she had said. She had said she was certain he had his reasons, and that had been the end of it, as if learning of her boyfriend's murderous past was a fairly regular occurrence for her.

Just when he thought he could read her with ease, she managed to surprise him.

It would not be long before he would reveal to her his true self, the dangerous alter ego he carefully kept away from her. And he was growing more and more confident that she would not run from him, instead falling into his open arms, as she always had.

His plans for his future were vague, a jumbled time line of things he wanted, sought after. Power, authority. For others to bow before him, a kingdom to fall at his feet. But, more than anything, he wanted to live forever- for to die was weak, be it a violent death at the hand of an assailant or to give in to an illness or age. He was not weak, and not even Death itself could conquer him.

His plans for his future were vague, but among the haze and cloud of rubble was the clear image of his immortality, of Hermione by his side forever. He would live forever, and he had no intentions of doing so without her.
The door creaked open, and she stepped through, bare feet padding across the floor as she made her way to his bed. She was braiding her hair, fingers deftly pulling strands around each other at the nape of her neck. Her cheeks were pink from the heat of her shower, droplets still clinging to her lashes.

“The house is so quiet with everyone gone to the match,” she said in a huff. “Perhaps we should study while the moment is opportune?”

“Actually,” he started, moving Ishtar from his lap and shuffling towards her, swinging his legs over the side of his bed and wrapping his arms around her waist. He pulled her tight against him, her slim hips squeezed between his thighs. “I have a different idea.”

She said nothing, her eyes widening imperceptibly as she placed her hands on his shoulders for balance. Her breath caught in her throat, and the top row of white teeth began kneading onto her bottom lip. “Hermione, do you want to know something?” he started, one hand sliding under her jumper to caress her hot skin, radiating warmth from her shower.

“I...suppose?” she answered, unsure. He chuckled at her uncertainty, at the knot of her brows in concern.

“I lied, that day in Potions. When we studied amormentia,” he said, smiling as the knot only deepened.

“Oh?” she said, confused at the bizarre path of conversation. After all, it had been nearly nine months since that class. He hummed, hoisting her up without warning so that she gasped in shock and he pulled her onto his lap. He shifted her around, adjusting her so that her knees pressed into either side of his hips, her fingers gripping onto his shoulders through his oxford. When he was satisfied with the new position, he once more allowed his hand to roam over the smooth expanse of her back.

“I'm a private person, and even something as...inconsequential as what scents came to me was not something I wanted to divulge to the entire class. So I lied,” he said.

“You do that often,” she responded, in the same, deadpan tone she used after exiting his memories. 'You killed your father.' Not bothered by the information she offered, simply stating it as one would the weather of the day.

He smirked at her. “Perceptible, as always, my dear Hermione. Nothing gets passed you, does it?”

“So what did you smell then?” she asked impatiently, leaning towards him as his fingers trailed down her spine.

He paused a moment, appraising her. From the loose strands of curls that slipped out from her plait, defying every attempt to tame it, to the golden brown freckles dusted across her cheeks and nose.

“You.”

She pulled back, propping herself against his knees, her lips skewing in frustration. “You're lying again,” she insisted, a barely there tremble to her voice.

“I assure you, I'm not, Hermione.”

She pursed her lips then, her eyes narrowing as she looked at his, as though trying to determine if he was being honest. He felt the gentle nods against his subconscious, her intrusion still young and invasive and not at all well practiced, though her natural ability with occlumency and wandless magic seemed to have aided at her progress. She was not strong enough though to break through his wards without the assistance of her wand though, and he had no intention of letting her waltz around his mind unbidden again. Handing her the memories she sought for, of the potion and the aromas and
of the earthy yet fruity smell of her preferred tea, the smooth undercurrent of honey that she added to it when she was craving something sweeter. The way he had practically memorized all of its notes, kissing her harder and more intensely whenever he tasted the remnants of it on her.

She seemed to grow unsteady, leaning back too far on his knees and forcing him to move her back against him, using the arm wrapped around her waist as leverage. She was looking at him with a strange expression, her lips slightly parted and her eyes dark and heady. Her face was as indiscernible as ever, her thoughts too far buried to be found by his own prodding into her mind, hardly able to skim the surface before she halted any further passage.

“Why...” she began, regarding him carefully. “Why did you show me that?”

He chuckled at her confusion. He supposed it was fair, after all, to not believe that a Slytherin, particularly him, would confide anything with her unless there was something to be gained. Some sort of advantage one could hold over the other. “Is it really that bizarre for someone to tell his girlfriend that he loves her?” he said, glossing over the minor fact that he did not love— not properly any way. A lie of omission, yet still grounded in partial truth.

He loved her, in his own way, he decided. A selfish and unromantic love. There would be no sonnets, no bouquets of roses or constant mutterings of how he could not live without her. But he couldn't, could he, when he really considered it? He couldn't live without her in the way that a diseases couldn't live without a host to infect, someone to fill and poison entirely with himself. It was a chaotic and destructive love, of ice so cold it burned you and fire which did the same. It was scathing, consuming.

He lurched forward, one hand slipping behind her head, cradling it as he brought her mouth to his. He kissed her, tongue trailing after hers as she kissed him back with more fervor than he was used to, her grip on his shoulders loosening as she wrapped her arms around his neck. It was as if something carnal within her had been ignited, and he groaned as her fingers wound into his hair, pulling it from the meticulous coif and grasping it by the roots. His own hands had found their way to the hem of her jumper, bunching the fabric up slowly at first and when she did not stop him, pushing it up and over her breasts, the two separating long enough for him to pull it over her head.

He made to toss it to the floor when something caught his eye, and he paused, placing a hand on Hermione's shoulder to steady her as he leaned back. She wore nothing but some jeans and a plain black bra, the same golden brown freckles spattered over her bare shoulders and upper arms. She had scars, small, white lines of newly joined flesh cutting against her cream colored skin, some long and thin, others short and wide, the divide between them like woven threads of scar tissue. But they were not what caught his attention, and he spared them only a brief glance before focusing on the one prominent scar that slashed against her chest. The tapered ends of it starting at just above the separation of her breasts, partially concealed by the fabric that bridged the gap, and the other grazing over her left hip. The skin was puckered, like it was poorly and hastily healed or simply too disastrous for even a skilled mediwitch to manage. The glossy flesh of the scar tissue seemed to glow in the green tint of the room, a waxy sheen mimicking the color.

“It's-” she started to say, blushing in embarrassment, but he shushed her.

“Remove this,” he said, gesturing to her bra. She shivered at the silky baritone of his voice, the current of rage and gravel below the surface of it. But she obliged, reaching back and twisting around before letting the piece of clothing fall between them, chewing her lip under his scrutiny. He discarded of it, tossing it and the jumper to the floor before bringing his hand to the scar. Dragging his finger from the tail of it, his hand brushing along her small breast, he traced it, taking his time to commit the texture to memory. The tough feel of the lumps and clustered flesh below the pads of his
fingers.

Her chest rose unevenly, and she shifted, uncomfortable with the attention he paid to what she surely considered a flaw, an ugly and hideous mar that she did her best to forget existed. It wasn’t a matter of vanity so much as the memories of war, of curses and pain and fear. He was dizzy with anger, muscles in his chest knotting with rage and the protective desire to curl her against him whilst torturing anyone and everyone who had ever laid a finger on her. Laid a finger on his Hermione, making her scream and cry and-

“Who did this?” he asked, blue eyes finding hers and startling her out of something. The past, perhaps.

“Oh...I...I don't know,” she said, her voice small. “One of Grindelwald's men.”

“Is he dead?”

She narrowed her eyes, as if not sure of the answer to the question before settling on, “No, he's alive.”

“Nothing we can't remedy,” he said, letting both hands settle on her hips. If she was surprised by his bold declaration, the nonchalant manner in which he spoke of murdering another wizard, she did not show it.

Because she trusted him.

That thought alone was enough to stir him once more, his rage and need to hurt evaporating as he dipped his head, kissing her roughly before allowing his mouth to wander down her neck. She shuddered when his tongue began trailing along the path his fingers had just traveled moments earlier, his hot mouth sending jolts of electricity along her scar. She grasped tighter at his hair, moaning softly as his hands settled over the soft mounds of her breasts, his feather light touches prickling her skin with the need to feel more of him.

Her hands fell to his shoulders, clumsily pulling at the buttons of his oxford. She huffed with impatience when she struggled to properly grasp them, and his chest vibrated with his laugh. Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he stood, turning around and placing her gently down onto his bed. Ishtar, who had settled on the pillows, jumped with a disgruntled meow, and Tom sneered at it, grabbing the feline and walking it to the other side of the room. He dropped her down in the corridor, closing and warding the door against any intrusions before turning back to Hermione.

Her hair was fanned around her, practically undone from her braid and forming a halo over his emerald green pillow sham. Her limbs swollen and red from his kisses, dots along her neck and chest that shined with his saliva in the low light of his dormitories, each one like a blossoming rose in color. She was breathing erratically, her eyelids heavy with lust and desire. Not since using the cruciatus curse had he experienced the sort of deep-seeded euphoria he felt in that moment, that sort of joy that deprived you of your senses except the ones needed in that instance and that instance alone. He could see nothing but her golden skin and wild hair, hear nothing except her breaths in the room, as if the swell of the water pressing against the glass windows and the roar of the various sources of fire had been muted.

He was ripping off his shirt as he made his way back to the edge of the bed, the fabric falling to join the small pile on his floor. His slacks were not too far after, fingers expertly tugging at the belt before sliding them and his undergarments down, his erection springing free.

Her eyes slid down from his, taking in the sight of his lean muscled chest, the trail of dark curls that
began just below his navel and lead to his manhood. Her jaw clenched- then unclenched- and her breathing seemed to quicken as she pressed her eyes closed tightly together.

“Everything alright?” he asked as he joined her in his bed, hovering over her with his palms placed on either side of her head to hold him up.

“Yes, it is,” she said, smiling up at him, any lingering hesitation gone as she propped herself up on her elbows to kiss him.

Dismissing any thought he could have on the matter, so overwhelmed by the clean smell of her shampoo and soap and the feel of her against him, he was undoing her jeans, shimmying them down with her kickers as she rose herself up off the mattress. When she was properly nude, he fell against her, pushing her into the bed and the rumpled duvet as she adjusted her legs around him. She gasped at the feel of him, his fingers slipping in between her wet folds, massaging the small bundle of nerves that made her legs press tighter against him.

His lips wrapped around one nipple, his tongue slowly pressing against it so that it became engorged with the attention. He was painfully aroused, the need and desire that he often ignored in favor of retaining his sense of dignity blinding him, taking away any smoothness he might have had if it were any other witch he wandered into bed with.

But this was not any other witch, it was Hermione- his Hermione who trusted him and was not frightened away by the monster that he was. Trusting him despite any evidence that should have lead to the contrary, resolute in the face of a murderer. She was powerful, and she was not afraid of power and the very thought was enough to take him off kilter, for him to move too fast or too slow as if he was inexperienced in pleasure.

But despite his awkward fumbling, the too rough way he covered her mouth with his in a desperate need for her, she continued to moan, his name falling from her lips in between kisses and groans of pleasure.

His ugly, muggle name had never sounded so delectable.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: If the ending is awkward it's because this Franken-Chapter became entirely too long and I had to splice it into two. (Also, while we're on the topic of awkward endings, we're nearing the end of Part One and I was wondering what would be most convenient for you, the readers: to have the two other parts as the same story as it exists, or completing this one and creating a new story for each part, respectively? On one hand, I like the idea of keeping it all in one place, but on the other this part will be at like 200,000 words alone and that seems excessive. Thoughts?)

Poor Tom. He has no idea he's being played like a fiddle. I almost feel sorry for the psychotic guy (Now is a good time to mention that this is in no way a healthy representation of a relationship?)

More smut on the horizon, along with some casual request for horcruxes and dark marks. Yikes.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Crooked
'There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile. He found a crooked sixpence against a crooked stile. He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse. And they all lived together in a little crooked house.'
-Mother Goose, "There Was A Crooked Man"

Power can make a person do strange things. Strange and horrible things. This was a fact that Hermione knew well, something she learned of from an entirely too young age. It can make you turn against your closest friends, people you vowed to protect. It can make you become a vessel for a sinister force, nothing more than a source of fresh blood for a parasite. It can make you kill, torture, betray. It can make you a monster.

She hadn't, however, been prepared for what power could make her do; the power of having successfully manipulated and conned the Dark Lord so completely that he had confessed his love to a woman who did not exist. Offered love he never had to offer to someone who was a lie, a fanciful daydream. Or rather, a nightmare.

Power can make a person do strange things, serving as the well from which Hermione found the strength she did not previously believe she had. The strength to toss aside the guilt and the disgust and the little damning voice in her head. The strength to grasp onto Tom's bare shoulders and with a great shove, roll him onto his back as she settled on top of him, his gasp of pleasure as she slid down onto his erect cock creating a flurry of delightful sensations that started at her breasts and ran to the base of her spine. Where once she cringed away from his hands, she now welcomed them, relishing the feeling of his palm as she held it to a breast, one arm propped up to maintain her balance as she met him thrust for thrust. Where once she despised the sound of his moans or sighs, she now drank them in, the thrill of her name on his lips igniting her.

Tom Riddle loved her- if only in his own perverse and caricatured version of love. There would be no more clouds of doubt, no more second guesses. For if she had succeeded in something as impossible as securing his love, there should be no reason she couldn't secure anything else. His trust, second-hand power. If she had tricked him enough to be rewarded with something so rare, surely, she could trick him enough to sway him where she needed. To lay the groundwork that would lead to her success, his failure.

It was enough to tuck everything else away, to focus only on the heavy breathing within the dormitory, the feel of him sheathed within her, full and yet not nearly filled enough. One hand sat on her hip, a tight, sturdy grasp that helped to direct her in her movements, his thumb digging into the curve of her hip bone. The other had fallen from her breast, dragging fingernails into the skin of her back.

His curls were in disarray, pulled away from his forehead by Hermione's own frantic hands, and his dark blue eyes were hooded, masked with lust and pleasure from beneath his lashes. His jaw was
clenched tightly—all his muscles were. She could feel him flex his bicep involuntarily from where her hands were placed against him, see the indent of it along his upper arms, his thighs lifting in an attempt to bring her closer to him. An attempt to make every thrust deeper. The fingers that had dug into her back had moved now, tracing a path across her waist as he settled it at the very top of her inner thigh, his thumb seeking out the sensitive nub hidden within the dark wiry hairs.

She groaned when he found it, careful to avoid grazing his nail against it, at the same time his other hand reached up to pull her hair band loose, her frizzy ringlets cascading over her shoulders. His hand wound into her hair, tightly gripping clumps of it so that she was forced to throw her head back, her eyes cinching shut in pleasure.

"Her...mio...ne," he groaned, the syllables in her name broken apart by his shudders, punctuated with his moans. "I'm going...I'm close." His words only spurred her, and she clenched her muscles around his cock, her own inner thighs tense and shaking with the strain.

The hand that had remained gripping her hip finally moved, wrapping around her as he rose into a sitting position and held her in place, moving faster and less rhythmically into her. His face was buried into the crook of her neck, his chin pressed sharply in-between her breasts. She felt him twitch, pulse with his release as he moaned against her, his chest rising and falling rapidly with heavy, uneven breaths.

Both his arms were now wrapped around her as his movements slowed to a still, a limp embrace as they remained seated in that position. Hermione's legs ached from the awkward way she was now bent, only partially supporting her own weight, Tom's own muscles quivering from the exertion of holding himself up entirely on his tailbone. He was still within her, her center damp with her arousal and the evidence of his. Yet he seemed to have no intention of moving, his head languidly falling from her neck to rest against her chest, one hand coming to settle along her waist as his fingertips brushed her scar once more.

"Beautiful," he whispered against her, his words tickling her skin as they expelled a puff of hot air. Before she could say anything, he shifted abruptly, rolling her back to the mattress and reaching for the wand he had settled on his bedside table, finally withdrawing himself from her.

With a muttered charm and quick flick of his wand instead of his usual flourish, he had cleaned her off before setting it back down once more, lying beside her so that he was propped up on one elbow on his side. His free hand pressed against her face, cupping her cheek as he bent down to kiss her. It was tender and slow, as though he didn't have any more passion to give after have expelled it all, his lips gently enveloping hers. When he pulled away, it was only to place his lips along her neck, suckling gently on her skin that was prickling with cold as the heat of their frantic sex and his body against hers was removed. He continued to move further until his tongue was again being dragged over her breast, circling slowly around her nipple.

It was as if his own need, now satiated and controlled, was no longer bogging down his caresses and touches. He was slower now, more methodical, and her body responded to him, her eyes fluttering closed and her back arching to meet him when he did not give her enough. She felt the vibrations as he laughed quietly, his tongue still teasing her nipple. "Patience," he said, the baritone of his voice—back to its typically restrained nature—only made her shiver more with her own unfulfilled need. "I am not a selfish lover, Hermione."

She made to sit up, wanting to tell him that it was all right and she was tired—it had been one thing to make him come undone, to watch as any sort of control or restraint he had over himself disappeared with every sigh and moan—it was another thing to let him be her own undoing. But as she bent her elbows to propel herself up, his lips finally wrapped around her nipple, sucking gently, one long finger slipping between her folds. She exhaled sharply as his finger entered her, curling
against the velvety contours of her to reach angles that he otherwise could not, experimentally moving within her. He was plucking away at a foreign instrument, familiarizing himself with her to learn what he had to do to make her moan low and heady, or to hiss through her teeth in pleasure.

A second finger joined the first, his lips moving down the planes of her stomach, taking his time with that as well. As if the underside of her breast might taste differently than the soft flesh below her navel, and he was intent in knowing every taste she could offer. She placed a hand on his shoulder, meaning to use it as leverage to hoist herself up, but instead she grasped tighter, nails digging into him, as his fingers bent within her in such a way that stars burst behind her eyelids, her breath coming out in pants.

Any thoughts she had had at having him stop—if only to quell the voices of guilt that had once again become loud and condescending—were replaced, forgotten entirely as she began moaning his name, stuttering over the letters with every twist of his fingers. Her hands wound in his hair as his mouth seemed to reach its destination, lips wrapping around her clitoris and sending jolts of pleasure flowing throughout her entire body. To her breasts and her toes and the ends of her fingertips.

"Please... T-Tom," she stuttered, her entire body quivering on the edge of something wonderful and thrilling yet just beyond her reach.

And suddenly she was over it, falling into the depths as her hips bucked and brilliant lights bloomed in her vision. She pulled her hands away from Tom's hair, fearing she might tear it out, as she settled on the duvet instead, pulling it from where it was tucked and bunching it around her.

She felt weak yet exhilarated, her nerve endings on fire with too many sensations. From the sweat clinging to her skin, to the silk of the blanket, to Tom's tongue slowing down as her orgasm began to ebb away, her mind full and cluttered with the intoxication all of it created within her. She practically melted against the mattress, her head falling into the pillows that seemed so much more luxurious and inviting now, sudden exhaustion pervading her senses and chipping away at the hum of energy within her. She hardly moved at all, even as Tom pulled himself up from between her legs, chuckling as she attempted to steady her breathing.

He stood up from the bed, only to join her again moments later, lifting her body enough to free the blankets and settling it on top of them as he laid down on his back, pulling her against him. She slung a heavy arm over his chest, fingers running through the sparse hair between his pectoral muscles. She nuzzled her head into his neck, his body warm and sturdy yet soft and delightful.

If any of the voices tried to speak up, condemning her for bedding Lord Voldemort before enjoying quite the orgasm at his tongue and fingers, she did not hear them. The inebriation of everything—the confession of his tainted love, the power of her winning the upper hand over him, and the physical toll of an admittedly delightful shag—were too much, and she was practically asleep before any further thought could be given to it.

Power can, after all, make a person do strange and wonderful things.

-xXx-

"The student has already bested the master in legilimancy, what more can you hope to teach me at this point?" Hermione teased as she wandered around the Room of Requirement, sunshine streaming in from the large windows that could not possibly lead to anything but an illusion given its placement within the castle. Still, it was a fairly convincing illusion, and she gripped the edge of the windowsill and pressed herself against the glass, one lazy tentacle breaking the surface of the Great Lake. "It's so beautiful out, I'd much rather study outside than be in here." Even if she had been thoroughly embarrassed at breakfast, her cheeks turning a scarlet so red she thought she might have to go to the Hospital Wing.
'The next time you two plan on hogging the dormitories for a shag, a little warning would be nice. Spent the night sleeping on the Common Room sofa, got a crick in my neck now,' Rosier had jested through a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

'I was more worried that you and Mulciber were going to rut right there,' Dolohov had interjected, sending a biting glare in the other Slytherin's directions. Hermione had promptly choked on her tea and excused herself as the two began spitting colorful insults back and forth that involved where one could properly shove it and the wrong end of a blast-ended skrewt.

"I see you've retained your humility," Tom mumbled as he stood to join Hermione by the window, leaning against the frame and crossing his arms over his chest. The sleeves of his jumper and oxford were rolled up to his elbows, revealing his forearms, and his lips were skewed into a smirk. "We've got some other matters to attend to—that don't involve a foray into my innermost thoughts."

"Well, what's even the point of it then?" she joked, turning around to gaze at the room he prepared for them. It was set up as a makeshift potions lab, with a large pewter cauldron sitting over an unlit burning station. A table beside it had various vials and ingredients, bundles of herbs wrapped in ribbon surrounding an open book. "We're making a potion?"

He gave her a disparaging look, dark eyes wide. "I don't intend on having children, Hermione, and unless you've got another way to obtain a contraceptive, then yes, we're making a potion," he said, returning to the table and leaning over it to peruse the potion in question.

She felt her cheeks flame. She had thought of it, meaning to stop by the Hospital Wing for a vial of some contraceptive when she had a moment, not realizing that perhaps policies were different fifty years from her own time. It would be slightly scandalous, she supposed, for a school of any sort to offer sexual protection in this era.

Following him to the table, she sat in front of an empty space as he handed her a bundle of stone seed root and mortar and pestle. She began grinding them, knitting her brow as she turned to Tom.

"Why don't you intend on having children?" she asked, biting back a laugh as she imagined Voldemort of her time strolling through the park with a pram and several snake faced babies, each one wailing. "Not as if they were something I cared for either, but I'm curious. Humor me."

He shrugged his shoulders, not bothering to make eye contact with her. "They get in the way," he said.

She waited a moment, narrowing her eyes at him. "Get in the way of what, exactly?"

He did not answer, his focus unwavering from his work station of Queen's Anne Lace and ginger root, dexterous fingers working the potion ingredients with admirable finesse. She returned to her own tasks, a comfortable silence settling over them as they worked. No, children certainly did get in the way, she agreed. The last thing she needed was to be distracted by motherhood when her priorities and responsibilities were already so mountainous. And she highly doubted shared custody with the Dark Lord would be a picnic when it was revealed that mummy was plotting his demise all along.

She snorted at the thought, waving a hand in the air to dismiss Tom's curious looks. There weren't enough galleons in the world to pay for that poor child's therapy.

An hour had passed as they worked together, silent for the most part. The fire beneath the cauldron had been ignited, and Hermione had pulled her hair back as the curls frizzed in the heat. She let her gaze stray from her paring knife that was splicing down the middle of a root to look at Tom, who now stood in front of the cauldron, one hand gripping a ladle that slowly shifted the contents in a clockwise direction. His lips were pursed in concentration, the muscles in his neck rigid at the odd way in which his head was angled. She blushed, hastily turning back to her root as she thought back.
to the night prior, a warm twinge coiling in her stomach.

It was strange, how her perceptions had begun to shift the more time she spent in this era. When she first arrived, it had been hard to disassociate the man from what he would become, looking to Tom only to see the ghost of Voldemort. That if she looked hard enough she could see the bone colored scales, the maroon eyes. They were one in the same, one of them just a simple manifestation of the monster he had always been but kept well hidden.

Now, she had realized how complex it all truly was, how much of the monster Voldemort had been was forged when he split his soul. That every little aspect of humanity—not just the physical—had been stripped from him with every horcrux. Tom was Voldemort in thought and ideals only, at the moment, and it was a distinction that she wasn't sure she should have made.

It took effort now, to remind herself that the man before her was the future Dark Lord, a wizard so feared no one dared to speak his name. She would catch herself leaning into his touches, sighing into his kisses, genuinely enjoying them and the feel and the flutter they caused in her chest. Perhaps it was better that way—it made the task before her easier to handle, it made the idea of being the Dark Lord's lover and servant more tolerable. Bite sized pieces of tragedy to swallow, her own inner protests going silent as acceptance fell into place. She should have been repulsed by herself, should have been sick and pale and angry with the thought that she had done something so traitorously intimate with the man who would kill and destroy everything she loved.

But she wasn't. And it worried and disturbed her more than anything else ever had.

"Tom?" she said suddenly, her voice soft against the bubbling potion and the sound of him flipping through pages of a text. Without meeting her gaze, still looking at the book he held over the potion now, he hummed in response. "I think I know what it is I want. To answer your question from weeks ago, I mean," she added.

He finally turned to look at her, eyes bright with interest. "That so?"

"Mhm." She leaned back in her chair, placing the knife down on the table. "I've lost everything, you know. Family, friends, my home. Things I thought I would never have again. I was frightened and helpless and alone and I hated every bit of it. Of how powerless I felt. But then I met you," she began, fiddling idly with scraps of uneven root and discarded herbs. She took a pause for dramatic effect, allowing herself to look starry eyed and wistful. "And you made me feel as if everything could be whole again. Like I've never missed out on anything. And I don't intend to lose you any time soon. So I suppose what I want most, is you."

His focus was entirely on her now as he closed the book and settled it back down on the table, striding around it until he was directly at her side. He settled the palm of his left hand down on the surface of it, leaning his weight against it as he gave Hermione a curious look. His right hand rose to her face, fingers brushing along the line of her jaw, tracing across her lips before settling them under her chin. "I don't intend on losing you either, Hermione. You don't have to worry about that."

She shivered, swallowing hard. Was it meant to sound so much like a threat?

"Last night, you said you loved me. And it was terribly rude of me to not use that opportunity to tell you I return the sentiment," she said, blushing as she recalled the rush of power she felt at his confession, the triumph coursing through her and fueling her bravery. She was winning, and nothing would hinder her now.

"Say it, then," Tom requested sharply.
"I love you, Tom Riddle," she said, smiling at him.

He smirked in return, swooping down to kiss her, his hand moving from the table to her shoulder to support himself. "And I love you, Hermione Dumbledore," he said, his lips still close enough to hers that she felt them as they moved with his words, his breath tickling her chin. He pulled back slightly, still close enough that she could see every individual eyelash, black and long and wispy at the ends as they fanned over his dark blue irises, threaded with gray like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. "Do you trust me?"
"Of course," she answered.

"And you meant it—you never want to lose me?" His voice was at a slightly higher pitch, as though his excitement was making it harder to keep it leveled and controlled.

Her brow furrowed, wondering what had him so inquisitive. "Yes, I meant it." He smiled, but said nothing in response, pulling away and scooping up the diced pieces of her root before walking around the table to deposit them in the cauldron. Her shoulders slumped, huffing slightly in disappointment. He worked on the potion for several minutes, seemingly unaware or uncaring of Hermione's waning anticipation, the nervous chewing of her lips. When he was satisfied with it, he removed the ladle and turned his focus back to her.

"It will have to simmer for an hour, then it will be ready for you. We can store the rest for more convenience next time," he said. She nodded, knowing that sex with him would now be a regular thing in her life, and it was wise to be prepared. She was surprised to find she wasn't entirely distraught over that fact.

"Hermione," he started, looking at her with half lidded eyes, a mischievous glint to them. Or perhaps carnal was a more appropriate word for it. "Do you know what a horcrux is?"

She blinked, her surprise evident on her face before she could mask it. Had he really asked her about a horcrux, so casually—as if he were asking her when their Potions assignment was due? More importantly, why was he asking her? Did he... intend to tell her about his own? Her hands gripped the edge of the table, fingernails digging into the rough wood, as she leaned forward. She knew she must look like a mad woman, her eyes bright with excitement and her tongue poking out to lick her lips before they parted.

"Horcruxes?" she said, sounding innocent and perplexed despite her mounting fervor. "Yes, I've read of them before...why?"

He smirked, seeming pleased with her prior knowledge of them. "There is much I wish to do with my life, Hermione. I will not settle for any less than what I want, and I'm afraid my ambitions are a bit..." he paused, searching for the right word. "Grand. And many. There is much I wish to do, and little time to do so in, objectively."

"So you made a horcrux, then? Or plan on making one? To buy more time?" she finished, and his smirked transitioned to a smile, an incomplete one that didn't quite match his eyes. He was proud of her. Proud of her for her intelligence in the dark arts, her perception, and—perhaps more than anything—the fact that she didn't look horrified. That she didn't run screaming into Headmaster Dippet's office. Instead, she was leaning so heaving towards him in intrigue that the table was pressed into her chest, constricting her breaths, honey colored eyes wide with wonder.

"Yes, precisely." It was a lie of sorts, she knew. It wasn't so much that he was a visionary hoping to change the world and a little dark magic here and there hardly mattered in the grand scheme of it all. He was terrified of death, of the weakness he believed it to be. He wanted nothing but to consume everything into an eternity, to live forever among the rubble of his destruction. But he wouldn't tell her that, she knew. Not yet. One thing at a time and, if she were being honest, his admission to experimenting with horcruxes was of greater interest to her. After all, it was his horcruxes she needed
to curtail, to steer him away.

"Is that why you killed your father? To use his death as a ritual?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. She knew she was testing him, prying too much into his deeply guarded mind and secrets. But she'd be damned if she let the conversation end now, Tom deciding to withhold from her as he often did, seeming to get off on her anticipation only to squash it with a change in subject.

He regarded her carefully, his mind reaching into hers and nudging against her wards. His eyes widened slightly, astounded by the amount of exhilaration she was radiating, as if he had not expected her to be so thrilled by the prospect of him sacrificing anyone to his cause. Surprised, but pleasantly so, as he smiled wider at her, displaying his set of perfect white teeth.

"You really are perfect, Hermione," he muttered under his breath before his right hand wrapped around his left, pulling the ring from his long finger and settling it down between them. "It's a family heirloom. And I was intending to make it a horcrux."

She waited, with bated breath, to see if he would mention the diary. Mention the fact that yes, he had already created a horcrux and when that was not enough, he sought out to make more. But he did not say anything about the diary, and with a sigh she reached out, touching the metal band of the ring to find it was still warm from his hand. "It's..." she started to say, trying to find the proper word to describe the ring without being impolite.

"Ugly, I know. But the sentimental charm of it outweighs the garishness of its design, I think," he supplied for her. He certainly was sentimental, in an odd, perverse sort of way. 'Most sentimental people don't trap their soul in an object of personal value,' she thought, pulling her hand away from the ring so that he could replace it on his finger.

"I've read the process of creating one. It's... well, it's certainly an undertaking," she said, clenching her jaw. Repulsive. Inhuman. Monstrous.

"The positives outweigh the negatives, I believe," he said dismissively, unfazed by the terrible process of creating something so dark. "Not for the faint of heart, but once it's over, one can rest with the certainty that they will be stronger. Safer." His eyes rose to hers, the same shadows that accompanied them when he was feeling lustful and drunk on desire. But the shadows were not for her, not at this moment, but for the power and promise of his future. "Which is why, if you need me to, I will assist you with yours."

All of her weight crashed into the table at his words, the edge jabbing into her ribs so that she exhaled sharply, gritting at the pain. It was rather easy to ignore, however, her eyes wide as she hissed in a low voice, "Assist me with my what?"

He did not waver, resolute in his decision. "Your horcrux. Hermione, my intent is to live forever, and I won't have any other forever except one where you are by my side," he said, drawing out the words as if her apprehension were merely the result of a misunderstanding and not of the heinous thing he was asking of her. He added with a wistful smirk, "You did say you didn't want to lose me, and I don't want to lose you as well. They weren't just words."

"I'm... not making a horcrux," she said, her brows knitted and her voice high in disbelief.

"You will. I'll help you with it, do what I can to make it less," he paused, pursing his lips in thought. "Less traumatic. I can't help you with everything, however. The sacrifice."
"I'm not splitting my soul in two, Tom!" she barked.
He seemed affronted, his lips twitching in irritation. "Think about it, Hermione. It's the most logical step-"

But she interrupted him again, standing up so forcefully that the chair kicked out from behind her, legs scraping along the floor before crashing to it. "Logical step?!" She was laughing, mockingly. "Tom, a horcrux is anything but logical! It's not as if they can be studied properly—who knows what may happen to me? To my magic? To yours?"

He rose now too, the muscles in his jaw visible as he seethed, slamming his palms down in front of him. "You're being hysterical for no reason! You have nothing to lose!"

"Except half of my soul, something I consider to be rather precious," she bit back, her chest heaving with her own indignation. There were many things she would do to complete her mission. Torture, murder, literally sleeping with the enemy. But a horcrux was where she drew the line, knowing full well of the monsters they wrought.

Tom closed his eyes, pinching his nose as he breathed heavily, trying to compose himself. She swallowed then, distinctly aware that this would be a moment where he would have cursed her if he were at liberty to do so. If she were anyone else, he would have cursed her. Speaking in a much calmer voice, his hand falling from his face, he said, "This is not up for discussion, Hermione." And then he turned his back to her, gripping onto the edge of the cauldron and looking at the sea-green colored potion within.

She hated being ignored, perhaps more than she hated being ordered around.

"Ugh!" she roared haughtily, drawing his attention as he looked at her over his shoulder. "I am not a puppy you command! I am my own person, Tom Riddle, and you will do well to respect that!"

He scoffed. "Or else what?" his voice low, lower than she had yet to hear it and she was ashamed to find it made her quiver, the little hairs of her arm and neck standing on end. She said nothing, knowing there was no other 'what'. He could command her around like a puppy. She had no choice in the matter, had signed a figurative contract to tie herself to him and his followers for as long as it would take until he was dead, in every way imaginable. She was stuck.

"I have to get some air," she muttered, storming from the room as quick as she could, her wand gripped tightly in her hand.

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Tom had followed her. Not at all a surprise, give she had run off after having received some very damning information. But she was quite good at running and hiding, having had years of experience in evading the very same man, and so when she found herself in Dumbledore's office, she was rather pleased to say it was after many successful maneuvers and with not a single student in sight. Not even Tom.

"Everything alright?" Dumbledore asked at her sudden and hasty entrance, rising from where he sat at his desk grading papers. Wrinkles scrunched in his forehead in worry, placing a hand on her shoulder for comfort as he came around to greet her. "Did Tom do something? You aren't hurt, are you?"

And perhaps it was because she was exhausted, having spent the past twenty-four hours experiencing far more than what was healthy in terms of emotions. Perhaps it was because she was exhausted from her constant defense and guarding herself whilst pretending to be someone else entirely. Perhaps it was because he sounded so concerned for her and that despite it all he still cared for her and she so very much missed him and what he offered, the connection to her own time and the wisdom and—
She had wrapped her arms around him before she could think any further on the matter, her face practically disappearing into his auburn beard. It was soft, not scratchy or coarse, and she felt that it was very fitting and very Dumbledore, fists clutching his violet robes.

He returned the embrace, not saying anything as he let the young witch calm down, her breath slowly becoming more even and controlled. "I can't do this," she mumbled, her voice muffled and soft. "He... he wants me to create a horcrux, and I can't! I simply can't!"

"He wants you to have one? Why?" he asked abruptly. When she opened her mouth to explain, he stopped her, raising a finger in the air before turning to his bookshelf. "We'll discuss this in my sitting room, more private that way," he muttered as he opened it, the hidden doorway swinging open. "Come, come," he said, ushering her in and leading her to sit on the sofa. Sitting beside her, he waved a hand, beckoning over a tea tray from the corner that landed with a soft clink on the coffee table.

"Now, tell me," he said, beginning to fix a pot of tea.

"He told me he loved me," she said, not sure exactly of where to start and that seeming as good a place as any. He paused, the lid of the tea pot in one hand and the other on the steel canister of loose leaves. He placed them back down, waving his hand in an opposite direction to summon an amber bottle of brandy and two crystal glasses. "Perhaps this will be a more appropriate beverage," he said with a chuckle, offering her a cup. She almost admonished him for it—she was after all, as far as anyone was concerned, a seventeen year old witch in school. But she simply didn't care in the moment to uphold the facade, accepting the glass and taking a small sip. It tasted faintly like peaches, the drink chilled yet leaving a warmth in her mouth and esophagus and belly. A pleasant warmth, quite unlike the burn of firewhiskey.

"He told me he loved, and I think he meant it. As much as Tom can love someone anyway," she began again, and Dumbledore nodded, rolling his own glass of brandy between his palms. "It emboldened me, and I started to see how much I could get him to confide in me." She blushed, ducking her head to look at her lap as she jumbled the timeline a bit. There was no reason he needed to know what in particular happened after his confession of love. "He told me about his horcrux—or how he plans to make one. Left out the diary bit. And then told me he would help me make one of my own."

"And you said?" he prompted, his voice void of any emotion that might betray his thoughts.

She grimaced. "I argued with him. Ran away. I reckon he's still chasing me through the castle, probably convinced I turned him in," she admitted, relieved to see that Dumbledore was not mad at her. He was smiling at her in sympathy, nodding.

"Well, I'm sure you understand that even for the task at hand I can't condone making a horcrux. Surely, together we can think of a proper alternative that will also please Tom," he hummed. "For now, just try to clear your head."

They sat quietly, sipping on their drinks until Hermione had finished hers, settling the cup down on the table. The warmth had radiated into her legs now, and her limbs felt quite heavy and relaxed.

"I told him I loved him, too," she said, eyes closed so as to not see the questioning look in those light blue eyes.

"Do you?" he asked, sounding neither upset nor worried. Simply curious, his voice soft even for him.
Her eyes snapped open, fixing him with an accusatory glare. "Absolutely not. How could I ever love
him knowing who he is?" Her voice sounded harsher than she meant them to, and she immediately
shrunk at it. It had been so nice to be on pleasant terms with the older wizard once more, after
everything that had transpired with the Unbreakable Vow, she didn't want to spoil it.

Instead, he smiled at her, a sad sort of smile that seemed out of place on his kind face. "Hermione, it
is possible to love someone for who they could be—who you know they have the capability to be,
somewhere if fate's hand played different cards for them—while still despising everything they do
and what they represent. It is a complex dichotomy, but love is rarely ever anything other than
complex," he said, and she softened at that. Dichotomy. It seemed like the perfect word for her. Her
entire life was a dichotomy.

"It's a shame, you know. That the Tom Riddle he presents to the world isn't real. I quite enjoy him,
when he's like that," she whispered, as though she were sharing a compromising secret that even the
walls or books couldn't be trusted to keep safe.

"It truly is a pity," he agreed, sounding sincere.

She wrung the fingers settled in her lap nervously, unable to stop confiding in him now that she had
begun, as if the weeks she had spent being nothing but professional with him had led to pent up
words that needed to break free. "Sometimes, I can forget completely who he will be. Who he is, I
mean. And that terrifies me because he really is very charming and funny and...I'm surprised by how
much I enjoy his company. And by the same token, I'm sad to know that the Tom that I have—who
isn't even the proper Tom—will be even less so in due time. He'll have to make more horcruxes,
eventually, and I...I don't want to lose the Tom I have for someone even more horrid. Does this make
me a bad person? The fact that I'm not repulsed by him anymore?" she asked, looking at him with
desperate and pleading eyes. She really shouldn't have told him so much, and she was sure it only
made his doubt in her grow, but she wanted—needed—confirmation. For someone to tell her that
she wasn't losing herself like she had vowed not to do when she accepted her task.

"I believe you are being a very adaptable person, Hermione. And a very kind one, at that. It takes a
great deal of courage to do what you are doing, and it would only hinder you if you could not see
through your revulsion of Tom. Furthermore, it takes a great deal of kindness to see what good exists
within someone, even if it's not obvious or easy to find," he said and her shoulders slumped with
alleviation.

"There isn't any good in him to be found, I'm afraid," she muttered.

Dumbledore smiled as he gazed at her over his half-moon spectacles, eyes twinkling. "When I first
met Tom, I was certain that he would be capable of many things. None of which was love. You have
proven otherwise. He cares for you, Hermione, in his own admittedly unhealthy and obsessive way.
He has good in him, where you're concerned, and I believe that counts for something." She blushed
under his appraisal, looking away from him and at the pictures placed on his mantle. Her eyes found
the eyes of the girl with the straw colored hair, and she sighed.

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through your revulsion of Tom. Furthermore, it takes a great deal of kindness to see what good exists
within someone, even if it's not obvious or easy to find," he said and her shoulders slumped with
alleviation.

"I can't make a horcrux," she started, returning to their original conversation, her gaze not once
straying from the portrait. "And I need to make sure Tom only creates three of them. Two more.

"The cup and the diadem were what we settled on," she continued, finding it a bit strange to mean
'we' both literally and figuratively. It had been with Dumbledore she decided this with, just not this
Dumbledore. "Three in total. Enough to preserve the time line until the Battle of Hogwarts, but
destabilize his soul enough to create the fourth horcrux in Harry... and we need to keep the
Apparition Wards up. Someone in the Order of the Phoenix must prioritize that this time around." That
had been where it all went wrong. When power and energy went into maintaining the defenses
and offenses of the school under siege, no one maintained the wards barring apparition and Voldemort had been free to leave. Leave and make heaven knows how many more horcruxes.

She was thinking aloud, reciting the structure of her plan as a form of coping. It felt bizarre, dissonant, to be discussing so bluntly the death of someone she had been rolling in bed with just fourteen hours before. "We keep fighting until, hopefully, we win." It had been so long since she thought of the war, and yet if she closed her eyes she could see everything as if it were happening for the first time before her. Blood on fresh snow, listless and dead eyes. Ron dead on the floor, Harry dying, the acrid smell of burning flesh and skin and air searing her lungs as the library was engulfed in flames—their final tomb.

She startled, sitting straight as she blinked at the young girl in the portrait. The library.

"Your friend, Antheia," she said, turning to him with a feverish glow in her eyes. "She's a collector of books... is she a good finder of them as well?"

His mirth mirrored her own sudden swell of it, as if he were in on her plan without discussion. "I'm sure she can with adequate information and time. Why?"

Producing her wand from her pocket, she flicked it in the air, conjuring a parchment with a quill and ink set. She began writing, excitedly, her penmanship sloppier than usual as she wrote down everything she could to describe the tome that sat in her mind's eye. "The library, in Moscow. I was simultaneously researching and seeing if there would be any information that would be catastrophic if Voldemort ever got his hands on it. There was. One in particular was a potion." She pulled back, rereading the statement she had written up to make sure it was coherent and legible. "I may have just bought us the time we need for the horcrux ordeal. If Antheia can find it, that is. At some point during one of the wars, books were moved around for protection, so I haven't any idea where it would be now. Not in Moscow, not yet."

Satisfied with it, she handed it to Dumbledore for him to peruse. "I don't recall the name or author of it, unfortunately, there were too many. And the potion is less than ideal, still dark but preferable in this situation."

"I believe this should be more than enough of a clue. She loves a good challenge," he answered with a knowing wink. He rose from the sofa then, straightening his robes and tucking the parchment within a concealed pocket. "While I am never adverse to your company, Hermione, I'm afraid you should go find Tom before he starts threatening the portraits for any information to your whereabouts. Meanwhile, I will pay a visit to Antheia to see what she could do for us, hmm?"

She stood, grinning widely. "Yes, of course, thank you, Professor." He followed her as they re-entered his office, leading her to the door that opened to the corridor before she turned to him, nervously biting her lip. "For what it's worth, sir, I'm sorry if I may have disappointed you. I know you're worried about me falling for his charm and if I'm being honest with myself, so am I. But I made a promise, not to you or myself or to him. But to everyone I loved who died at his hand."

He smiled, that warm and wonderful smile that made her feel like an eleven year old girl again. "And I'm sorry if I insulted your integrity, my dear. It was never my intention, and for that, I am truly sorry. The light is lucky to have you on our side," he said, his brows furrowing in thought. "Or—what was it you called it, again?—The... Order of the Phoenix, was it?"

She nodded eagerly, laughing when he chortled to himself.

"At least I don't ever lose my flair for the dramatic in the future."
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Follow me on tumblr at renheehartblog for any questions, sneak peeks to stories and chapters or for any requests! Hope you all enjoyed!
Chapter Twenty-Three: Miles to Go
"These woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."
-Robert Frost, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Tom's fingers drummed erratically on the cloth covered table, an empty silver plate sitting in front of him. Lunch was being served in the Great Hall, students beginning to shuffle in in their leisure wear for the weekend, teachers taking their respective spots at the long table at the front of the hall. Platters full of heaping whipped potatoes, warm rolls, thick and juicy slices of roast beef all appeared before him, yet he was hardly hungry, his stomach twisting into knots and coiling uncomfortably. He had spent the better part of an hour storming through the castle in his attempt to find Hermione, looking uncharacteristically frenzied and harsh to the other students. He had even taken twenty-five points away from a startled pair of Hufflepuffs he found snogging in an abandoned classroom, the two fifth years shrinking back in fear as he practically snarled at them.

She had run off, and she was faster and wiliier than he gave credit for, evading him with ease and she was out of his sight within moments. The defiant little witch had certainly earned his ire, and he was awash with anger. He wasn't concerned that she would tattle—not entirely. After all, she hadn't been frightened when she learned how he murdered his father, or that he planned to make a horcrux. She was simply affronted that he wanted her to make one.

Still, she had been gone for some time, enough that he could feel the bubble of doubt in his chest. It was never good to trust someone with so much and then not be able to find them.

"Riddle," Nott said in greeting, stirring Tom from his thoughts as he sat to his left, Mulciber beside him. Athena, Dolohov, and Rosier sat on the opposite bench, earnestly filling their plates before they had even sat down. Nott rose a brow, looking at the noticeably empty spot to Tom's right.

"Hermione not joining us?"

He pinched his lips, brows twitching. But before he could even consider what to say, Athena jabbed her thumb towards the entrance. "She's coming in now."

His gaze followed the direction she was gesturing in, easily landing on the form of Hermione as she slipped past several students. Her hair was still held back, strands of curls had slipped from the band and were framing her face. Brown eyes met his, and she smiled, her steps quickening to meet him as if all was forgotten.

He hadn't forgotten though, rising from his seat at the table and taking long strides to meet her. Her smile slipped from her face, nose scrunching when was standing within two feet of her. "Tom?" she
questioned, but he said nothing, wrapping one hand around her upper arm in a tight grip as he pulled her away. She skidded, walking backwards at first before she swiveled around on her heels so she was facing the proper direction, her arm weakly resisting his. "Tom, you're hurting me," she said, her voice firm.

He remained quiet, dragging her away from the Hall and down several flights of stairs until they were in the first level of the dungeons. The air was, appropriately, already damper with their descent, smelling of water and earth and bedrock. Slowing, he pulled her along to the right side of the corridor. Placing a hand to her shoulder, he pressed her flat against the wall before releasing his hold to lay his palm along the textured surface, effectively trapping her in. She looked at him, her eyes sparkling with something he couldn't quite place a finger on—not quite fear, not quite apprehension. A little exhilaration.

She was a curious little witch.

She said nothing, eyes following two Slytherins as they walked pass them and up the first flight of stairs, on their way to lunch. When they were out of sight, their conversation only a dying echo that vibrated among the stone confines, she finally spoke. "I didn't say anything, if that's what you think. As I said, I don't want to lose you, and having you shipped off to Azkaban would be rather unproductive in that endeavor," she said, letting her head rest as she looked up at him, a playful smirk in place.

He ground his teeth, slowly rolling the muscles in his jaw. "Where did you go, then?" he asked. She visibly tensed at the deepness of his voice, no longer the purr it often was but dripping with venom.

She winced. "Well...to see my cousin but!" she hastily began, raising a hand between them as if in defense. "It was because I believe I've come up with a compromise to our...disagreement."

"I don't compromise, Hermione."

He wasn't sure what he had been expecting. The young witch before him was many things, and predictable was certainly not one of them. Still, his eyes widened in slight surprise when she bolstered against him, standing straighter and taller as her chin rose defiantly. "You can boss around those friends of yours to great success, and I quite admire your ability to do so. But you will find far more resistance if you try to get me at your beck and call. I don't quite like being treated like a common house elf, and you'll find I'll be far more agreeable when treated with the respect I deserve," she said, her voice steady and commanding.

"You believe you deserve respect?" he countered, his interests aroused at this new facet of her and wanting to bait it further.

"I demand it," she said simply. "I will do many things for you, Tom Riddle. And I suspect the depths of my commitment to that statement are still revealing themselves to you. You would be shocked to learn the lengths I would go to remain in your favor, but that is not one of them."

He considered her for a moment, eyes flicking down from her face to rove down the body he had become quite familiar with. The constellation of golden freckles over golden skin that dusted her shoulders and chest, the multitude of scars sliced into her where once she was split open. His stomach quelled at the memory of her bare skin beneath his, the warmth as she enveloped him and the sound of his name tumbling from her swollen lips. It stirred him, and he cursed the power she seemed to have over him, that she could awaken something within him with nothing but a half-lidded gaze, the proper lilt to her voice.

Fighting to retain control of the situation, he reached one hand to her face, pushing some errant
strands of hair behind her ear and letting his fingertips graze across the protrusion of her jaw. She leaned into his touch, and he smirked, dipping his head to whisper in her other ear, "Tell me then, Hermione, would you kill for me?"

She did not hesitate, turning her head to meet his so that her forehead brushed against his nose. "In a heartbeat," she said confidently. He smirked at that, pleased, as he rose his lips to press a kiss along her hairline. It was dangerous, a voice deep within him said, to allow anyone to have so much sway over him. But he was not a simple-minded boy who would grin and slobber over a pretty woman, and Hermione was not simply a pretty woman. She was powerful and knowledgeable, and despite her many claims to the contrary, she was pliable. She would do as he said if he purred it nicely enough, tangled within whispers of sweet nothings. She simply liked the illusion of dignity. And he could give it to her, letting her win the little battles along the way until he built up a large enough defense for the war.

"Very well, what is your proposed compromise?" he asked, pulling away from her. He smirked when she seemed to startle out of a trance, her lips parted slightly and a blush creeping up from the collar of her shirt. At least she was just as affected by him as he was by her.

"Oh, well," she began, looking around to make certain they were alone before casting a silencing charm around them, the air shimmering for only a moment as it settled in place. Then she turned to him, her eyes darkened in a way that only stirred him further, letting the hand that had been trailing along her jaw fall to her hip and pull her against him.

She faltered, but continued. "Not too long ago I had been doing some independent studies for a class in Bulgaria. I came across a rather sordid text. Much of it was standard, highly unethical and somewhat illegal but otherwise rather unremarkable," she said, pausing to take a breath. She did that often, talk so quickly—particularly in academic conversations—that she forgot to breathe and was forced to take one gulping breath when her voice became strained. It was a quirk of hers he had come to enjoy. "Except, one potion. It requires some...difficult to come by ingredients."

"By difficult you mean unethical and illegal?" he interrupted, a brow raised in amusement as he repeated her words.

She nodded. "Very. But if one can successfully obtain those ingredients, you can brew an elixir that can slow aging. It's uncertain at exactly what rate you will age, as it's been banned by most magical governments, but it has a history of prolonging the life of a handful of witches and wizards in history. One of the users of it was said to have lived to be over seven hundred years old!" she whispered excitedly, losing herself in her dispersion of information, as she had forgotten entirely why she began talking in the first place. "No proper records exist to document this, as much has been lost either due to improper registration or for fear of it being made public, but it certainly holds up in my own research of it."

"Fascinating," he said dryly. "And how does your cousin fit into all this, precisely?"

Her eyes snapped wide, suddenly recalling why exactly she was speaking of such an elixir. "He has a friend I met before, a collector of the strange and peculiar, especially of the rare. I thought that if anyone would be capable of finding it, it would be her, but I needed to speak with him about it. Don't worry, the doddering old fool is so trustful he probably thinks I intend to use it for bedtime stories," she said with a sharp laughter, one that almost sounded cruel and foreign on her tongue. He decided he liked the sound of it.

"So he's going to help you find this book? Despite it's contents? So that you can make this potion for yourself?"

She nodded, grinning widely. "Visiting her as we speak. I told him it was purely for my own
He had to admit—he was impressed. She was almost as good as spinning a tale as he was, subtly pulling the strings of a marionette into the desired direction. And her continued relationship with Dumbledore, and the pull he had in the magical community, was of great interest to him. He could only imagine the things he could have access to through her, if she batted her eyelash and smiled innocently at the old man.

A horcrux would, undeniably, be better than this supposed potion. He was going to live forever, and seven hundred years old was not forever. He had the witch in his grasp, and he would let nothing, not even death—delayed though he may be—take her from him.

She was engaging and brilliant, luring him in like a moth to a flame. He had even been so taken by her, so drunk on her moans and quivers that he sought out the taste of her, fulfilling her own need long after his had been abated. He had been lying. He was in fact quite a selfish lover. And yet she, as always, drew out a different side of him. A side he did not know existed. A side that could love—twisting and tormented—and a side that wanted to please her, so long as it kept her mumbling his name between breaths.

Aging slowly, five or ten years for every one, was not enough. There would always be an expiration date on it, and he almost feared her death as much as he did his own. Another new side to him.

The potion was not ideal, but it could give them some time—time to find a more suitable replacement for a horcrux. Or to convince her to make one. Given enough time, he was sure he could convince her of anything.

"Very well. I suppose it will do," he said, and she visibly sighed in relief, smiling up at him. He reached into his pocket then, pulling out a vial of potion that he held in front of her face. "Here, you left before it was finished."

"Oh!" she said, jumping to grab the potion, uncorking it with her thumb. "I had completely forgotten!"

He frowned. "A reassuring sentiment."

She swatted at him as she downed the contents of it, grimacing in disgust. "Tastes lovely," she sputtered, and he laughed, slinging an arm through hers and pulling her from the dungeon.

"The book said to eat with it, so we better get to lunch."

He would get her to make a horcrux, eventually. He was persuasive, that way. And what Tom Riddle wanted, Tom Riddle got.

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"Thank Merlin those exams are finally over," Rosier said with a sigh as he sat down in his chair around the table, slinging an arm across the back of Mulciber's. "How do you think you did on them?"

Mulciber smirked. "Not too bad, actually, but Hermione's taught me a lot and that helped," he said, beaming across the table at her.

She opened her mouth, words of encouragement dying on her lips as Tom came around, settling a
hand on her shoulder as he sat beside her, a vicious twist to his mouth. "Mulciber has proven to be quite deft with a wand, when given the proper shove. A surprising efficiency in curses are of note," he taunted with a cruel pitch to his voice. The smile fell from Mulciber's face, his eyes falling to his lap as Rosier twitched, shirking away to wrap his arms around his torso.

Whatever hand Rosier had played in Dolohov's attack on her, Tom had yet to forget his wrath, treating him in a detached manner whilst goading Mulciber. Hermione had asked once, her curiosity getting the better of her, only to be told that it was a forgotten matter, handled and slipped away. She doubted that, but said nothing, her own perception providing enough of a picture. Whatever he did, Tom saw fit to make Mulciber dole out the punishment—the first act in what would be many of his followers dirtying their hands for him, torturing their companions for his entertainment. Why Mulciber had been selected above the others—particularly Nott, who was the favored one of the group—she had not worked out.

Dolohov was still not permitted to speak with her, even if she pointedly spoke to him, and often remained silent when either she or Tom were present. He was no longer being tortured though, a remarkable coincidence that had not escaped her notice. 'I wonder if Dolohov will ever heal properly,' she said aloud one day as she sat beside Tom in the empty Common Room. 'I'm starting to feel a bit remorseful, if I'm being honest. Paid his due, and all that.' She had said it experimentally, wondering what Tom would do. He did not seem to delay in his often violent response when someone had harmed her, all but vowing to kill the one who laid a finger to her with ill intent. And she had become curious with what sway she had over him when she favored someone, what he would do when she offered praise or sympathy to another.

Dolohov had been healed by suppertime that same day.

"Your NEWTs, Athena?" Hermione asked, turning to look at the other witch. "How do you think you did?"

"Hopefully well enough to be accepted into the Unspeakable program in the Ministry," she answered worriedly, wringing her hands. "I don't know what I'll do if I don't get in, I've been hinging on this since I was a fourth year."

"Certainly an interesting career path," Tom said, his eyes practically glowing. Perhaps with all the secrets and research he would be made privy to with her placement in the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione shifted in her seat, Tom placing a soothing hand on her thigh as if to settle her. "Hard to believe the year is over. Tonight's the last night in the castle," she said, to no one in particular as she looked to the vaulted ceilings of the Room of Requirement. And though she was frustrated to be impeded with her progress for a little over a month, she was also eagerly looking forward to relaxing some. It would be the only reprieve she would be allowed.

That is, until Voldemort's fall when he killed the Potters. But that seemed like a lifetime away.

"It is the last night," Tom began, his tone curt and business-like, "so we better get on with it then." He was unusually on edge, Hermione noted, beside himself and anxious, less controlled than what was typical of him. Tomorrow he would be setting foot on the train in Hogsmeade, only to return to perhaps the place he hated most: a muggle orphanage. The prospect of it had him wound tight, like a ball of metal wire that was ready to spring loose at any second, cutting through whatever stood in its path.

The topic then turned to the future, to the new year waiting on the horizon and what classes they would take to meet the prerequisites of their intended careers. What they planned to do beyond that, all eagerly divulging of their plans and ambitions. All, of course, except Tom, who seemed to be
only passively listening, his chin resting in his cupped hand as he stared off at the wall above Nott's head.

Taking advantage of the pause in conversation, she cleared her throat, catching his attention. "You know, Tom, you never answer me when I ask for what your future plans are. Nothing other than vague, meaningless snippets—I must say you sound a bit like my cousin, in that regard," she said, smirking when he scowled at being compared to the Transfiguration teacher.

He leaned back in his chair, chewing his lip in contemplation as he began twisting the Gaunt ring around his finger. The room was silent, the others leaning heavily against the table with bated breath, waiting to see how much he would tell her.

"How familiar are you with Muggle history, Hermione?" he asked.

She resisted the impulse to snort, frowning instead. "More familiar than most, I would say."

"So then you know of the persecutions between the fifteenth and eighteenth century? The Salem Witch Trials in America?"

She nodded.

"And you have heard of an Obscurus, haven't you?"

Again, she nodded, a bit slower this time as confusion settled in. "What does that have to do with anything? There haven't been any reports of an Obscurus since..."

"Since Witch trials fell out of fashion. Specifically after the Statute of Secrecy was signed into order, and followed closely by the amended Clause 73. With the fear of being hunted and tortured—killed—by muggles taken away, we lost less and less of our children to the parasitic nature of their own magic. But in doing so we lost something else," he explained, flourishing a hand through the air as he spoke as if conjuring up his own words.

She rose a brow. "And what might that be?"

"Freedom," he answered simply.

"I haven't any clue what you're on about. I've got all the freedom I could need," she said, unable to hide the frustration from his riddles as she snapped back.

He smirked in response. "Well then, if that's so, why don't you go into say...Muggle London. Perform a bit of magic for them."

She shifted in her seat. "You know very well I'll be—"

"Arrested?" he finished, a wolfish grin in place as if he had just done something very clever. "Consider how many muggles might be witness to it, all the exhausting work the government officials will have ahead of them, needing to wipe clean their minds. I'd say that would warrant at least a life sentence in Azkaban, if not more...extreme sentencing. After all, we take the sensitive securities of the muggles very seriously."

"Of course," he continued, frowning deeply. "That's provided the muggles don't get to you first and exact their own sort of justice. They have a history of not handling well that which they don't understand."

"People aren't burnt at the stake anymore," she said, somewhat incredulously. The Witch Hunts had
occurred so long ago, history had been learned and it was now considered one of the many black ink stains in their timeline. Surely, muggle society would not degrade so quickly.

"No," he answered, shrugging a shoulder. "We persecute enough witches and wizards on our own, and without the need of a pyre."

She said nothing, her lips pursed. She...had never truly considered that, if she were being honest. The very finite limitations on her that were in place, not for the safety of the community or others, but for her own safety. For the safety that would befall her should the Ministry believe she was compromising their hidden world. A world that was hidden entirely for safety at what the muggles might do. What they had done.

"So, you're grand ambition then is to what? Overturn the Statute of Secrecy?"

"Among other things. Hermione, why should we—the more superior version of humanity—be confined to the shadows? Our world is larger than life, compared to the muggles, filled with more color and magic and power than they can even comprehend. And yet, geographically speaking, it's so small. And our population has still never recovered from their relentless hunting. It's only fitting—proper—that power be handed back to us," he said, his voice smooth and deep and wrapping his words in a way that made them seem so correct.

"Muggles aren't the only ones who can hurt what they don't understand. My mother made me change my name to Dumbledore, believing it to be safer to have a name associated with my magical ties than my muggle name. And all that at the fear of persecution—at Grindelwald," she challenged. "It sounds like all you plan on doing is continuing his work. And I had firmly believed you to be an innovator, not a follower."

She had almost forgotten about the presence of the other Slytherins in the room until she heard them collectively inhale, the sharp hitch of their breathing as they each pushed away from the table, as if ready to jump out of the line of fire. She was aware that this was perhaps the first time anyone had goaded their Lord, belittling his words instead of falling at them in a heap of adoration.

But Tom merely rose to the challenge, quite literally, as he pulled himself up from his seat to hover over her, one hand gripping the back of her chair, the other supporting his weight as he leaned into the table. "No," he started, his voice terse and restrained as if he was holding back from something. Like he wanted to harm her—or someone—for questioning him but had thought better of it. "I plan to make his work better."

He pulled away suddenly, moving from her and pacing around the room as eyes followed. It was not a nervous pace, but a confident stride as he spoke to the room as if speaking to a vast audience, a crowd. "Grindelwald is a brash and boorish fool, and he will fail. I will not." Hermione had contorted herself quite painfully now, her torso pressed against the back of the chair as she gripped it so tightly her knuckles turned white. Her legs ached in protest as they hung at an odd, awkward angle. But she ignored the searing in her hip as she waited, breath in her throat as if the simple act might disrupt it all. Shatter the moment before her.

The moment where Voldemort finally came out to play.

"We've become subservient to the muggles," he spat out the word as if it was poison on his tongue, forgetting about being seductive and charming as he instead became cold, bitter. "It's unacceptable. I plan to create a world where we neither live in secret, hiding as if we aren't fit to inhabit this world freely, or are hunted and sent to the gallows. Everyone will exist within their proper place, with us at the top of it like the apex predators we are."
He came to a halt, spinning on his heels to look at Hermione with wide, manic eyes, his lips set in a firm line. Blue eyes boring into hers with electricity, a magnetism to them that made it impossible for her to look away. "Of course, there will have to be one person maintaining this new world, ensuring that we don't lose sight of the values and principles which have been forgotten in favor of muggle sympathies. A minister to a new, international Ministry of Magic."

"And you are to be that person," she said, a statement.

He smirked, the gesture so wide that it caused the skin to dip slightly over the dimple on the one side. "Naturally. It's only fair, being I'll be the one to herald it in."

"I didn't take you to be so anti-muggle, Tom," she said, shifting her legs now so that she was sitting with them tucked underneath her, her full body facing him now.

"Are you opposed?" he asked, inclining his head to her in interest as his body stiffened. He seemed to know just how fragile this moment was, that an entire year's worth of work and dedication on his part could prove to be all for naught.

Slowly, she shook her head. "It's the heart of it all, isn't it? Muggles? Wherever our problems are, they seemed to be involved," she said. "I wasn't opposed when she had to do it, change my name. Though my cousin is a bit batty, Dumbledore certainly does carry some weight to it. Better to be known by that than my previous, unremarkable muggle surname."

He relaxed at this, taking several long steps so that he stood exactly before her, his voice quiet now as if he were speaking only to her. "You changed your name so as not to be confused with muggles, and I have every intention of doing the same," he said, his words like ice against her flesh. "And what name is that? Do you plan on borrowing one from another family?"

"No, Darling," he said, his hands raising from his sides to settle over her own from where they were still gripped on the chair. "I've fashioned one all my own. I don't want to borrow from the legacy of another, I want to create an entirely new one. A name that will belong to me, and only me." He paused, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead before pulling back again. "One day, every witch or wizard—young and old, from here to the farthest corners of the world will know the name Lord Voldemort better than they know their own. It will be their new gospel, their new prayer."

"Lord Voldemort," she said, as if feeling the name on her lips for the first time, experimentally rolling it around as it left behind the taste of dirty pennies, vinegar on her tongue. He grinned, eyes glinting darkly as shadows filled them, liking the way the foreign name sounded on her mouth.

The hands that were over her own gripped them then, pulling her up and giving her a moment as she stepped onto the floor with numb legs, falling against his chest. "I think, that perhaps we should end the year with something rather special, don't you?" he asked.

A chorus of agreements came from around the table.

Before Hermione could ask what exactly was meant by special, Tom had pulled her chair aside so that it was separate from the table, sitting her back down in it. "I have a gift for you. And I think now is a perfect time to present it," he said, fingers wrapping around her left wrist as he knelt before her, elbows resting on his knees. He rolled up the sleeve of her jumper, bunching it at her elbow before tracing his finger down her forearm, following the path created by her blue veins. He was careful to avoid the ugly word carved there, red against her flesh.

"Stay with me, Hermione, and no one will harm you again. No one will be able to take power away
from you, no one would even dare," he said, producing his wand in one hand as the other still held on to her thin wrist. Placing the tip of the yew wand against the scar, he cleared his throat as he said, "Rursus Unom."

A golden ribbon emitted from it, rising into the air until it was the appropriate length before wrapping around her arm, glittering like gold in the light of the room. Like a bandage, it tightened against her, warm and prickling, before it seemed to mold into her skin, settling in as the glow dimmed until there was nothing but a faint golden impression on her unblemished forearm. Not even a trace was left of the slur.

Her jaw fell open, her head shaking in disbelief. "I...I've tried everything to get rid of it. How did you...?"

"I created it," he said, examining her wrist as he smiled in satisfaction at his work.

"Well, thank you," she said, trying to pull her hand back to her side only to have his fingers tighten over her wrist. Not with the intent to hurt, simply to keep it in place.

"You know, Hermione, we've always considered ourselves a bit of a family here, haven't we?" he asked, turning his attention to the table of Slytherins long enough for them to agree emphatically. "Once you've found your way into this family, we protect each other. We're always there for each other, to support and defend. And no family is a proper one without a seal. Don't you concur?"

Her mouth went dry as he began pressing down on the still-sensitive skin where the scar once sat, her lungs empty and unable to expand as all the oxygen seemed to leave the room. She nodded, numbly, unable to make a sound. "Another spell I've created...specifically for this family," he began to explain, something very much like lead plummeting in her stomach. The anticipation was enough to make her sick, and if not for the tight clench of muscles that prevented any spasms, she thought she otherwise would have tossed her dinner up on his shiny black shoes in that moment. "It's a tattoo of sorts, but a special one. It will act as a form of communication between us, calling us to your side if you're ever in need. If anyone were to be so stupid as to harm you, you'd have us at your side to show them just how foolish a move that was indeed. And you would be giving the same commitment to us."

"In a way, we're stronger than family. A family forged by magic and ink, our own special covenant, with this as our bond," he said, his eyes finally lifting from the pale expanse of her forearm to meet her own. "I'd like to give it to you. A going away gift, if you will."

When she said nothing in protest, her chin nodding stiffly once in acquiescence, he placed his wand against the soft, underside of her arm once more. "I'll try to be gentle, but it will hurt I'm afraid," he said. And she trusted him, knowing that if there were anyone he would try not to harm, it was her. He loved her. He loved her and she was different than the others to him.

He said the spell then, but she didn't hear it, the effects of it practically preceding the verbal command as pain ruptured on her arm. Instinctively, she jerked it back, trying to pull it from his grasp but his hold was too tight. He was murmuring something—words of apologies and encouragements—but she couldn't hear them above the roar in her head, like she was being crushed by the waves of an ocean. It was as if acid had been injected into her veins, fire filling her from the inside out as it coursed through her, spurned on by each pulse of her heart. Her fingers twitched with the want to curl her arm into her, cradle it to her ribs, but Tom's grip was too tight.

Tears pricked at her eyes. Her skin felt as if it was corroding, the air pungent with burning flesh,
acrid and only inspiring more tears to spring forth. Suddenly, she was being pulled from her chair, spun around before being settled into Tom's lap, arms wrapping around her as he made sure to keep her arm straight. He brought his lips to her ear, whispering into it but she could only hear small snippets of it, still drowning in the crashing waves.

"Darling, it's...terribly...enough," his broken words came in and out, like a radio caught between a station and static. A hand came up to her forehead, smoothing her hair back from her head, slick with perspiration, before wrapping around her waist, holding her to him.

"Breathe," she heard him say, and she tried, inhaling air greedily through her nose, expelling it in haggard breaths through her mouth. Her legs twitched from where they were splayed, and she tried to focus, concentrate through the fire as she attempted to steady her breathing.

1...2...3.in...1...2...3...out...

It went on in such a manner, until her fingers stilled and the only pain came from the air against her arm, the spread of the curse that went through her veins settling into a lively hum. She was panting, her eyes closed so tightly they ached.

"Hermione," a voice said, and she slowly opened them, blinking as her vision blurred over the image of Mulciber leaning before her, a goblet of water outstretched to her. She wanted to reach out for it, but her arms were too heavy, like all the bones and muscles had been removed, replaced with stone. Finally releasing her wrist, Tom reached out, taking the proffered glass and raising it to her lips. She drank from it, slouching forward and inclining her head back as the cold water—not too cold, thank Merlin—rushed down her throat, soothing the dryness that had settled in from taking such large gulps of air.

The goblet was downed quickly, and Tom pulled it away long enough for Mulciber to refill it with his own wand before he brought it back. She reached out now, feeling stronger by the second, leaning away from Tom as she drank the second goblet, slower than the first. She vaguely felt Tom pulling her hair back, tying a band around it to keep the erratic frizz from clinging to her sweat slicked skin before massaging his hand over her shoulders.

"There, that wasn't so bad. Let me see," he said, tapping her left elbow. Handing the goblet back to Mulciber, she peeled her arm away from him, extending it out for him to examine. Where once sat the angry scrawl—Mudblood—was now something far uglier. Stark black against her skin was the Dark Mark, a skull with the jaw detaching as a large snake slithered through, twisting and moving to form the infinity symbol. The ink was alive, squirming over her skin—red and blistered with beads of blood pooling from it, some smeared from where she held it to her torso.

"Beautiful," he breathed, pressing his lips against her temple. "I'll be able to feel you, if you want. When you touch it and call to me with your mind, I'll know where you are. And I can do the same for you," he murmured against her hair.

Mulciber helped to pull her up, leading her back to her chair and refilling the goblet for her once again before placing it in front of her. "Is there anything else I can get for you?" he asked, then, after a quick glance over to Tom who had rejoined them, added, "My Lady?"

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"Did you have to bring that thing with you?" Tom asked with a scowl, raising a brow as Hermione held Ishtar up to her shoulder, the cat irritated by the chaos as students filed into the open doors of the train.
She smiled teasingly. "She wanted to say goodbye to her favorite person," she said, twisting around so that Tom could see the cat's face as it nestled into her hair, green eyes peering out.

He rolled his eyes, but still reached out to scratch her twice behind her velvet ears. "Remind me to thank your cousin for gifting her to you, when I get the chance," he said sardonically when she turned to face him once more.

"However will she get on, having to wait until we visit Malfoy to harass you?" she taunted, running a hand over her sleek fur.

"I'm still impressed you were able to convince that man to let you stay with us. His precious cousin spending several weeks with me and a Malfoy—no doubt his worst nightmare," he said, sounding quite pleased that he had won half of the summer away from Dumbledore, luring the man's cousin further and further from his sight.

"He thinks you'll corrupt me before school commences," she said, stooping down to usher the feline back into her carrying case.

Tom smirked, chuckling from the base of his throat. "My darling, you were corrupt long before I got to you. I just had to do some coaxing," he purred, leaning against the stone wall of the train station, his luggage at his feet. Hermione would not be boarding the train with him, staying until Dumbledore left the following morning after the graduation ceremony for the Seventh years. His restlessness of the previous night had ebbed away some, no doubt feeling like a cat who got his cream after officially initiating Hermione into his Knights.

They had stayed behind when the others had left, and Tom had told her about the group she had just been bound to—nothing she hadn't known before. 'Knights of Walpurgis,' he called them, and like she had with Voldemort, she said it aloud, the word forcing her mouth into odd and unpleasant shapes. He told her about Slytherin, about how his Wizarding family was descended from him.

But he still remained suspiciously silent on many things, never telling her about the Chamber of Secrets or its basilisk that still lurked within the walls, probably begging to be set free to complete its task. He did not talk about his selfish intent, did not tell her that he didn't so much believe in the subjugation of muggles as much as he considered it a platform in which to campaign from. He hated muggles with more or less the same fervor he did of anyone else who stood in his path to greatness; his blind need for power.

And then, when he had given her all the information he could, he hoisted her up only to deposit her down on a bed that had appeared with a pop for them. He kissed her, needy and feverish and bruising as he undressed her, memorizing the curves of her body and the placement of each freckle, each little silver scar before departing for the summer. He had made sure to bring her to orgasm first, his tongue and fingers doing a more than adequate job before he tossed her knees over his shoulder, entering her with a moan.

No, he was certainly in a much better mood today, and she blushed knowing that she was entirely the cause of it.

"Will you write?" she asked.

"Haven't got an owl, can't exactly keep that in the orphanage, can I?" he said, his mood souring at the mention of the muggle home.

She cursed herself silently. How stupid of her. "Of course, then I guess I will have to wait until August," she said, twisting her hands together. Her arm still throbbed, sensitive to the touch and she had settled on wearing a light cloak over her t-shirt, the light fabric touching the burning mark as little.
"Until August," he said, tipping his head before standing in front of her, hands settling on her hips. He kissed her until they were pulled away by the harsh horn of the Hogwarts Express.

"You better get on it," she said, smiling at him.

He exhaled, looking perhaps the closest thing to sad he was capable of. He gave her one final kiss, kneading her lips with his tongue, and then turned, leaving to board the train moments before it left in a hiss of steam, gears chugging with a metallic clang over the rails. She waited until it was out of sight to breathe, her shoulders sagging as a great and mighty weight was lifted from them.

She grabbed Ishtar's carrying case, charming it to be weightless despite the growing girth of her familiar and began walking up the path to Hogwarts. She had not yet had her opportunity to meet with Dumbledore, and she was certain he would be more than pleased to hear about her progress from the night before.

She was no longer just a possible recruit, hanging desperately on Tom's arm until he deemed her worthy enough. Yet she was also not a Death Eater, or rather a Knight. She was something far greater than that, and she was in a tizzy at the prospect of the future, and the role she would have in it. She had to admit, being the Dark Lady did have a certain ring to it.
Whispers

Chapter Notes

Hello! So a guest reviewer had asked if there was an update schedule for this, and now that I'm back into the routine of writing, I settled on one. Every other Monday is when this story will update. If there are any changes or delays to it, I will post about it on my Tumbr. Anyway, I hope you enjoy! A huge thanks to everyone who has supported this story with reviews and kudos and the like. And a huge thanks to Chroniclogolepsy for beta-ing it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24: Whispers

"It will be like Potter's scar," Snape explained, his arm extended as Hermione scrutinized the Dark Mark, her eyes following the snake as it writhed within the skull, alive. "It's a connection, and when he feels intense emotion, you will too."

"Even with occlumency?" she queried, curiously looking up at the dark eyes.

"Occlumency won't help. It isn't a connection of the mind or soul, just magic. He can't read your mind or memories though, only insert thoughts to you. There's nothing you can do but get through it. Don't make him wait for you when summoned, or you will regret it," he warned, and she fought against asking him further on it, certain the wizard was already bitter about having to divulge so much. He was speaking entirely through his teeth, the words strained from his grit.

"How much power does it give him?"

He scoffed at the question, rolling his sleeve down to hide the unsightly thing. "More power than you want. There's a reason people don't default from his legion. He can find you. He can hurt you through it even. He can target specific people, if he likes. How else do you think he summoned Pettigrew to... assist him? That rat would've been halfway to Australia if not for the fact that he forced him to help restore him," he said, talking of the disgraced Gryffindor with such malice that she recoiled.

"Forced?" she asked, clinging to the word with a wince.

"Or perhaps coerced. He was rather weak at that time, perhaps too weak to really make him suffer. But he was very silver-tongued. Promised him all the power and fame that pathetic waste of air could ever want, communicating in his head through the mark," he corrected tersely.

Hermione shook her head, setting her pen down as she cracked her knuckles, fingers aching from her notes. A shiver ran up her back at the idea of having his voice inside her head again. She had already had a taste of it when she wore the locket around her neck, had heard Tom Riddle whisper to her, growing louder the longer the pendant burned on her chest.

That would certainly be the worst of it, letting him have access to her mind when she joined his ranks. Letting him whisper to her, beckoning at her to follow his orders, promising pretty lies in favor of her servitude. If it was anything like the locket, she would do whatever she could to forget the
words he said. The whispers that had sounded so wonderful and tempting. Those were memories she never wanted to examine again.

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Dumbledore's cottage was, more or less, exactly as she had pictured it would be. Nestled in a wood surrounded by birch and oak trees, a dirt path leading through hanging foliage and over a creaky wooden bridge over a small stream into a quaint muggle village. A large, towering willow cast a constant shadow over the home, soft and green tendrils swaying over the surface of a small pond. The cottage itself was made of red bricks, surrounded by a matching brick fence that separated only to be conjoined by a white picket gate. Slate stones of purples and greens and grays led up to the steps and the teal colored door, paint chipping and peeling away to reveal the drab and gray color of the wood beneath it. An impressive gable jutted out above the entrance, steep and grand, with white lattice work the entire length of it. A garden of pansies and daffodils and daisies was just below the bay window that looked into the sitting room. An ornate bird bath sat at the center, mosaic hummingbirds inlaid with colored glass in the bottom of the well. The image was distorted by the water that sat in it.

"Charming," she said with a wide grin as she approached the home, her luggage floating behind her.

"You know, when I was younger, I always wanted to live in a fairy tale," he said, eyes gleaming as he opened the door into the cottage and held it for her. "Specifically, Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

She gave him an odd look as she moved through the threshold. "Of all the ones, magic or muggle, why that?"

He pointed a long index finger in the air, jabbing at her for exclamation as he said, "Because something would always be just right for me."

Before she could question his logic, a crack filled the air, a small puff of smoke dissipating to reveal a house elf. Bright, cheery eyes bulging from its leather skull, one ear clipped forward and wobbling as she animatedly bounced about. "Welcome, welcome, Professor!" she said excitedly, her voice high and wheezy.

"Hello, Wispy. I hope you are having a wonderful day?" he said with a congenial smile, bending over at the waist to meet the creature at eye level.

She nodded earnestly, the one bent ear making whooshing sounds as it spliced through the air. "Oh, yes yes! I came directly from Hogwarts to clean up all the dust and cobwebs! Nice and clean now, for you and the missus, Professor!"

'Ah,' she though, smiling at Wispy. 'Dumbledore must've employed her for the summer.'

"Hello, Wispy, I'm Hermione," she said, bending to extend her hand out to the elf. She eyed it with large, yellow eyes before taking her hand and giving it a jarring shake. She would have to get used to house elves, and to witnessing their abuse while biting her tongue, lest she jeopardize her future as the Dark Lady. If she couldn't tolerate one being treated well for several months, she surely had no business acting as a spy.

"Yes, Missus Hermione, Wispy will get your bags," she said, flouncing over to them and giving them a quick tug. Ishtar hissed from where she sat in her carrier, jostled by the motion, and Wispy leaped back, eyes even wider than what could really be possible. "Ah... Wispy did not know there would be a monster in them," she muttered to herself, her voice comical despite the disgruntled
nature, and Hermione stifled a laugh.

'A house elf Tom might like,' she thought, reminded at once of Tom’s irritation with her cat. She felt a small twinge in her chest at that, something she recognized easily as the feeling of missing someone. She had long since grown accustomed to that familiar ache, though curious it should be brought on by the one most responsible for why she felt it. She dismissed the thought, however. Of course she was bound to feel off, having tasted the first bit of freedom from him since arriving in this time. Perhaps it simply felt as if she should miss him, considering how common a fixture he had become in her life.

Reaching out to grab Ishtar's case, she settled it on the ground and waved a hand to open it, the cat intrepidly stepping out, black nose rose as it sniffed the air. With another crack, Wispy and her bags disappeared, the sound scaring Ishtar as she hissed, bolting back within her case. Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes as she followed Dumbledore into the house. "Fine, stay out there if you like," she muttered, entering a small corridor.

Dumbledore chuckled as he came to a stop in the middle of the hallway. "Wispy is preparing your room. She will also be cooking our meals, as the last time I attempted to make soup I dare say it took three wizards to put out the blaze," he said, and Hermione wasn’t entirely sure if he was joking, though it was hard to imagine the great wizard failing at anything. Even domestic tasks. "Now, for the tour!" he began excitedly, gesturing to the arched threshold to the right of the entrance.

She peeked in, smiling at the cozy sitting room that looked much like the one in his private quarters, though not as polished. A stone fireplace—a little dingy, with cracks in the stone—sat in the center of two overfilled bookshelves that covered the entirety of the far wall. Pictures—the same ones from his chambers, she believed—were placed over the mantle, arranged with care. The one in the delicate frame with the girl with straw hair and sad eyes given a special place here as well.

There was a sofa pressed against the wall, two chairs opposite it that flanked the window. They were a bright yellow floral pattern, one of them looking considerably more worn than the other. She wondered if it was new—if he had conjured up a duplicate armchair just for her, and she felt a rare, wide smile fill her face at the kind gesture.

"The kitchen is right over here," Dumbledore said, swiveling around to the room opposite the living room in the hallway, a similar arch carved into the wall. There was a table and some chairs sitting beside a bay window, a tea set atop the surface. There was a door in the back of the kitchen, leading to what appeared to be a small vegetable garden, a too-narrow spiral staircase beside it.

"Up there are the bedrooms," he said, gesturing for her to lead the way. She did, ducking her head to avoid the winding steps hanging above her. When she finally came to the landing, she shuffled forward to allow Dumbledore room to join her, but he merely stood halfway up the stairs, enough to poke his head up. "Yours is to the right. I hope it is suitable for you, it has it's own attached loo for your privacy."

She smiled graciously. "I'm sure it will be more than suitable, thank you," she said.

He smiled in response. "Wonderful. I will be in my study—it is the room at the end of the downstairs hall. It is not explicitly off limits, though I do ask you respect my privacy in not going through my belongings. Of course, you are more than welcome to enjoy the rest of the common spaces as you please." She thanked him again, watched as he disappeared with the sound of creaky wooden steps, before turning into her bedroom for a portion of the summer.

It was just as cozy and cramped as the rest of his home, with only enough space for a wardrobe, desk and bed. There was a window above the desk that looked out into the garden, the rays of the sun glistening on the surface of the small lake. A narrow door led to the lavatory, a bare pedestal sink
with a mirrored medicine cabinet. There was also a clawfoot tub and a white shower curtain with bright red poppies wrapped around it. It was more than suitable, and certainly preferably to the cold gray stone of the lavatories in Slytherin, with warm sunshine filtered in through a window beside the sink.

Satisfied with the arrangement, she turned to her trunk which Wispy had deposited at the foot of the bed and began unpacking. She hummed as she did so, a song where half the words had been forgotten but the melody remained intact.

She was free of Tom Riddle, if only for a few weeks.

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Tom tucked a fist under his chin, closing his eyes against the clamor in his head. He had a pulsing headache, and the terrible, rotten children were only making it worse, screeching needlessly, clanging metal spoons against their plates. Every sound seemed amplified in the spacious dining hall of the orphanage, bouncing off the ceilings and around the tables as they squirmed in their seats.

It was his first night back, having only just arrived from King's Cross several hours ago, and he was already shaking with nervous energy, a need to move, to hurt, to leave. He was given ample berth, the orphans placed on either side of him having pulled their chairs so far they were practically on top of the other boys, they're bodies leaning away from him, tense and rigid. And yet, he still felt crowded, like a caged and cornered animal with hackles pulled back in warning. It was suffocating, to say the least, the room and orphanage was oppressive and suffocating, unlike the halls of Hogwarts. There was no warmth, perceived or physical, a constant draft seeming to find its way in from the less than idyllic weather of London. There was no magic present, save his own, to envelope it, reaching out like a hand to find purchase on nothing.

There was something pleasant about being around other magical beings, a sense of familiarity that managed to quell the churning waves of his magic. It was what—if he were a hopeless romantic—he imagined love might feel like.

But he was not a hopeless romantic, and instead of a heartbroken sigh it only set him on edge, made him ill-tempered and raw feeling, spurning from the isolation instead of reveling in it.

What a cruel mistress, Fate was, to introduce him to a wonderful world that he had a very rightful place in, only to take it away from him for a portion of the year. Had he not been deprived of it enough?

His rumination came to an end when he heard a clattering sound that reverberated in his skull, drawing his attention with a wince. Some feet from where he sat, a young girl was sprawled on the floor, her dinner plate and all its contents spilled before her.

'Tough luck,' he thought with a sneer. Food was proportioned out very, very carefully, with nothing ever leftover from meals. Dropping your food often meant a very pathetic meal of a hunk of bread, slab of cheese, and a piece of fruit if the supplies were high enough. What an inconvenience, muggle wars were.

"Abigail," Mrs. Cole hissed from between teeth, coming around to hoist the girl up. She must have been new, as Tom had no recollection of her from before he left for the school year. But new additions were not an uncommon thing.

Again, muggle wars were very inconvenient.
Abigail waved off the matrons hands, pulling herself up with an indignant huff that almost made Tom laugh. She was a proud girl, arms folding over her scrawny chest as she pursed her lips. It was all Tom could do to not raise a brow at that, finding that she had a rather uncanny resemblance to another hotheaded and proud girl. Her ebony hair was—to put it bluntly—a rat's nest of curls and frizz, sticking out from her thin face at odd angles, wisps of it moving seemingly of its own accord, a splattering of hardly visible freckles beneath dark brown eyes. She wasn't an ugly child, nor a very handsome one.

"It's not my fault, John tripped me!" she said accusingly, leaning over her chair to narrow her eyes at the boy sitting at the table behind her.

"I didn't!" he said back, talking through a mouthful of dry chicken.

"Settle down, Abigail. I'll make you a sandwich. We've got some cheese—"

"I don't want a sandwich," she said, her mouth opening wider than necessary around the words. "I want that!" She pointed to a plate, gesturing to the meal of nothing special at all. Chicken, rice and soggy string beans. Nothing to really covet.

Mrs. Cole's mouth pinched into a thin line. "Well, stop being so clumsy and dropping every meal you get and you might get something other than a sandwich one of these days," she countered, moving to turn into the conjoined kitchen.

She stopped when she saw Tom stand from the corner of her eye, his own plate in hand. The meal was hardly what he could consider appetizing—it was difficult to even look at after having only that morning sat for one of Hogwarts's splendid feasts. The pounding in his head had yet to subside, and seemed to be leading his stomach in a revolt anyway—he was certainly not in the mood to try to keep down the inedible food.

"Here, I'm not hungry," he said, placing the plate down in front of the girl. Her eyes turned large as saucers, tongue greedily licking her lips in anticipation. It was more food than she had been given on her own plate—he was, after all, much older and larger—and she readily picked up her fork to dig in.

"Don't!" Mrs. Cole hissed, stepping forward to grab her wrist in hand. Her gray eyes met Tom's, a conspiratorial glint to them that made one side of his mouth twitch. She was terribly paranoid.

"It would just go to waste," he said, widening his eyes in a manner that made him look innocent, eyebrows raised in concern. "And a growing girl can hardly live on cheese and bread." His voice was a purr, that one that he used when dealing with Professor's during the school year. The charming one that made them swoon and marvel at how well-mannered and kind this young man was. It didn't work on her, however. Nothing ever really did. She was stubborn in her beliefs in him, never mind the lack of evidence—he was always careful to never leave any.

Without breaking eye contact with the matron, he reached for the plate, plucking a piece of chicken from where the protein was portioned off. He brought it to his lips, pausing a moment before settling it on his tongue and chewing it slowly, pointedly. It was just as awful as it looked, parched and stringy with not a single bit of flavor. But he swallowed it nonetheless, quirking a brow. "See? Perfectly bland and fine."

She said nothing, and his twitching lips finally formed into a proper smirk when he heard the sound of fork prongs dragging across porcelain from below him. He turned on his heel, leaving the dining area behind as he headed up the stairs, groaning under his weight. He had never given Mrs. Cole any reason to believe he was cruel to the other orphans, but he had never gone out of his way to be nice
to one of them either. It was inconsequential, in the end. He would be done with this muggle world once and for all when he graduated, and there was simply no reason for niceties. No need to protect himself from accusations that might tarnish future plans.

If he were not in more control of himself, he might have let out a bubbling laugh at the horrified expression on that haggard face. She was so frightened of him that even his kindness was worrisome to her, believing it to be an ulterior motive to... what? Poison a girl whose name he'd already forgotten? It was funny, truly funny.

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"What are you reading?"

Tom looked up from the page of his book—a library book from school, charmed to look like a muggle text. Books really weren't allowed outside of the castle, but Tom Riddle was such a bright student, so responsible. Surely he could be trusted to take care and return a book when his future was so promising.

He scowled, a look of irritation flitting over his face. It was that girl from dinner the other evening—Amelia?—and she was looking at him curiously, ignorant to the dangerous gleam in his eye.

"I've read all the books three times over—they never get any new ones," she lamented with a sigh. "Yours looks different, though. Is it from the library here?"

"No," he snapped. "It's mine."

She took a step back at his brusque tone, but raised her little chin nonetheless, a daring smirk on her thin lips. "Fine. Looks boring anyway," she said. "You've got horrid taste in books," she added after a moment, as if making sure her insult was understood.

He raised a brow in amusement, admittedly entertained by her haughty nature. There was something familiar about it, reminding him of another curly-headed stubborn girl. He thought fondly to Hermione, a clawing sensation within his chest. It was maddening, not being able to have what was his. Like an impatient child who knew they were getting precisely what they wanted as a present, but having to wait until Christmas morning to actually get their hands on it. He had tried to reach out to her with the bond forged by the Dark Mark—gently, of course, being that it was so fresh and he didn't want to harm her. But she had yet to call back to him, perhaps unsure how to. Perhaps not aware of his presence, unable to discern it from her own.

Plus, he was bored. He had been spoiled by her company and conversation, and without her there he found his own mind didn't hold up quite as well as it once did to occupy him. It hardly debated with him in that fiery way she did, chin raised and eyes sparkling as her hair crackled with her excess magic, brimming at the surface.

"You wouldn't like this book anyway. It's not a story," he said, wondering why he didn't just tell the girl explicitly to leave him alone. It was a lesson she was not learning on her own, clearly.

She huffed, resting her elbow on the arm of the chair he sat in, her fingers curling around her chin. "I've read everything!"

He closed the book, hands gripping the arms of the chair to lift himself and head to his room for some privacy and quiet. But he stopped short of the motion, eyes raising to connect with Mrs. Cole's pensive look. She was sitting in the corner of the parlor, a pen limp in her hands as paperwork sat before her. A boy sat on the floor beside her, cross legged and pouting from his supervised time out.
He grinned—a wide, taunting gesture—before turning his attention to... Andrea? No, Abigail. Abigail, yes that was right.

"I can tell you a story, if you like," he said, sliding from the chair to kneel in front of the girl, forearms resting on his knees. He smiled at the sound of a chair scraping over wooden floorboards, papers being shuffled hastily.

"What sort of story?" she asked, skeptical that it would be very good.

"The best sort. The kind with dragons and magic, and a king and queen," he explained.

She grinned, revealing a row of crooked teeth too small for her mouth, some missing. "I like those kinds!" she said excitedly.

Of course she did. What little girl didn't? Taking her hand, he lead her to a cushioned bench placed below a large window, waiting for her to get herself situated before sitting on the opposite side. Resting an arm along the sill of the window, he looked over at Mrs. Cole once more, the woman standing and leaning on the table as she looked at them with interest. With concern, straining to hear the conversation.

"Once upon a time," he began, and he told her a tale that made her eyes widen in childlike joy, her cheeks pink as she laughed at the absurdity of it. Of dragons who ate fire over piles of gold, and daft wizards who spoke in rhymes. About a search for magic, immortality, and a king taking over the throne to his rightful kingdom, a wild-haired queen by his side.

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Hermione studied the Mark, holding her forearm up to her gaze as she watched the inky eye of the serpent slide around her skin, the flesh twinging at the charmed effect. It was different from the Dark Marks she had examined in the past—from the rudimentary theory behind it that she had implemented for the DA, to the actual one Snape had showed her, snarling all the while she studied it. She couldn't quite place her finger on it though, on what about it was different.

As if answering her question, heat spiraled up her arm, winding over the appendage as the tattoo flared to life, looking darker and more menacing as the snake reared back its head, hissing as the tongue poked out to flick the air.

She gasped when fingers curled around her forearm, the familiar ugly ring in place.

Looking up to meet dark blue eyes as she instinctively tried to pull her arm pack to her side, only to have Tom Riddle tighten his grip on it.

"What did you do?" she asked. "It isn't like the others."

If he thought it bizarre that she seemed to have prior knowledge to the mark, he didn't show it, using the other hand that wasn't grasping her forearm to hold her chin, fingers brushing lovingly across her jaw. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to her ear so that his hot, moist breath tickled oddly against the shell of it. "You're mine, Hermione. Don't forget that."

She shivered against his words, swallowing a lump lodged in her throat. A pleasant heat was radiating from the Mark beneath his clasped hand, a heat that pooled in her belly and at her core. It traveled up her arm, like fingers dragging tauntingly over her skin, and she was unable to suppress a moan, her head leaning back as she tried to find Tom's eyes.
Her moan turned into a yelp when crimson red eyes looked back.

"Missus!"

Hermione jumped up from the desk, her head snapping back. A book which had laid open on the table was tossed to the floor, falling upside down so that the spine crinkled. She blinked, the last traces of sleep vanishing from her blurry vision, as she focused on the sight of Wispy. The house-elf was nervously wringing the tea towel she wore as a dress, looking quite distraught. "Is Missus okay? She was making funny noises in her sleep."

She nodded, a blush warming her cheeks, knowing at least one of those noises had been a pleasurable moan. "Yes. I just... had a dream, is all," she said, turning over her arm to look at the underside. She felt her breath hitch in her throat as she saw several distinct bruises forming on her skin.

Were those... finger marks?

"Does Missus need any potions? Should I get the Professor?" Wispy queried, hopping closer to Hermione as the witch hastily rolled her sleeve down, concealing the mark and thin, purple imprints.

"No, that won't be necessary, thank you."

The house-elf withered a bit, as if eager to help and assist her. "Very well. Wispy came up to tell the Missus that she has company. Waiting in the kitchen with Professor," she said. Hermione frowned at that, her brows furrowing.

Company? That couldn't be. She hardly knew anyone in this time and with the exception of Riddle's merry band of ne'er-do-wells there wasn't anyone who might want to visit her. And even then, she doubted that any of them would trip over the opportunity to spend an afternoon with her. It's not as if Riddle was here to see to make it worth their while. Perhaps Antheia had luck with her search for the tome? No, Antheia would have no reason to visit Hermione, it was a favor Dumbledore had asked of her, keeping the other witch's name out of it. So then who was her company?

"I'll be down in a minute," she said.

Wispy nodded eagerly. "Wisy will make the company some tea and biscuits!" With the proclamation, she snapped her fingers, disappearing with a crack.

Alone, Hermione leaned back in her chair, running a hand through her hair before picking the book up from the floor and smoothing the crinkled spine. She had been researching the Dark Mark some more, her curiosity spurned by the twinges she felt behind her eyes, the sudden quell of elation. Of bitterness. Emotions that would bubble and crack through the fissure before dissipating as quickly as they had come. She had known that there would be a link between her and Voldemort, but it was far more intimate of one than she had been lead to believe.

Her dreams the past few nights had been... vivid to say the least. Some were chaotic, a blur of colors and emotions moving too fast for her to clasp on to, to further examine. A clash of terrible and disconcerting things that mingled with her own arsenal of nightmares, making her wake with a start. Other dreams were... well, she was just pleased that she was in the habit of soundproofing her room each night, the tips of her ears turning pink at the thought of being overheard. They seemed entirely too real, and she had—on more than one occasion—awoken to change her knickers before settling in bed once more.
Rolling the sleeve of her jumper up to her elbow, she examined the mark once more, tracing a finger over the bruises left behind. It had been a dream, hadn't it?

Or was it a dream in the way that Harry had dreamt of attacking Mr. Weasley? Sinking imaginary fangs into tissues and muscle only for none of it to have been imaginary?

She knew he was able to cause pain through the mark, to announce his displeasure, but this was different. It was possessive, and it did not hurt despite the discolored skin. The exact opposite of pain in fact, recalling the tingle at the base of her spine and the sultry moan she could not contain.

Her lips pinched at that realization that Tom had to have altered the spell for her. Surely he would not maintain a connection with his other followers that would allow for something other than pain and control. No, this one was laced with magic that connected her on deeper level to him, beyond their magical core, but not quite mind and soul.

'Manipulative arse,' she thought with a huff of frustration. She knew nothing about the new stipulations placed upon this mark, and she hated the lack of control she felt. She fed off his predictability, and really, if she had thought about it, it made sense he would have tailor made her a Dark Mark. He wasn't just marking her as a follower, keeping tabs on her and implicating her in case she sought to betray him. He was marking her as his. Property of Lord Voldemort.

'You're mine,' the words purred at the back of her skull, and her jaw clenched instinctively.

"Arse!" she spat out, this time to the empty room. He was lucky he wouldn't see her for a few weeks, as she was certain she might not resist the temptation to slap him. She huffed out a laugh at that, imagining the incredulous look if she were to do such a thing. It would surely be more satisfying than punching Malfoy had been.

The sound of chairs scuffing along the floor, laughter wafting up the stairs, reminded her that there was company she was meant to attend to. "Bloody great timing," she hissed. All she wanted was to continue the research she had fallen asleep in the middle of, to discuss the matter with Dumbledore and see what he could determine of the nature of this new Dark Mark. Not play hostess to someone who couldn't be bothered to owl her.

Getting up from her desk, she smoothed her curls in place, wincing when her fingers snagged in some knots. Using a few quick charms to straighten her appearance, she left the room and descended down the spiral staircase. She came to a stop halfway, her jaw dropping at the familiar wizard sitting with Dumbledore in the kitchen.

"Joshua?" she asked.

Joshua Crane turned to face her, grinning as he set his tea cup back on the saucer. "Hello, Hermione."

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"Stay away from her," Mrs. Cole said, placing a hand on Tom's shoulder as he made to move passed her in the corridor. He looked up at her, a curious look in his blue eyes. But it was not genuine curiosity, it was indulgent curiosity. It was all pretend, he knew exactly what she had meant, and yet he hid the recognition behind wide, innocent eyes and a frown.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," he said, his voice soft. Pleasant.

Pretending.
She narrowed her eyes. "Don't play coy!" she hissed, stepping closer to him so he could hear her over the sound of children playing below. "Abigail! You've taken an interest in her, and I don't like it. She's impressionable, her father's at war and she hasn't got any other family. The last thing I need is for her to be returned to her father traumatized!"

Tom shirked his shoulder from her grasp, his eyes sharpening as he fixed her with a heated glare. "That's if she has a father to return to. Last I checked, war isn't exactly the sort of thing you can just come and go from as you please. Tends to have a mind of its own," he said, his voice not once betraying his act. Still pretending, his words spoken like silk despite the dark implications of them. It was unsettling, and she stammered for a moment as he continued to move down the hall, his gait purposeful. Confident.

Finding her voice, she said, perhaps a bit louder than she really should have, "If I found out you've touched even a hair on her head—"

He came to a halt, twisting around to face her as he interrupted her hollow threat. "You'll what?" he asked, impatiently. As if he were bored waiting for her to continue, as if her intimidation was just an inconvenience for him. He took several long strides so that he stood in front of her again, a hand raising and curling around the ornamental ball of the railing of the stairs leading up to the fourth and final floor of the orphanage. He quirked a brow as if in emphasis of his question.

When she did not answer, he scoffed, that terrible, lopsided smirk in place that made her wish she had tossed him and his freak of a mother back out all those years ago. That smirk that said what he would not, malicious in a way that he was careful to never show. "I thought you were under the impression that I was mean to the other kids? That I was a bully? And here I am—being kind to one of them—and you take just as much offense to that? It would appear I can't win your favor either way," he said, in that perfectly cool and level tone that she despised, the one that mocked her. It was a contradiction to what she knew he was capable of, the sort of voice that gaslighted you, telling you in placating tones that you were delusional and crazy all while confessing to what you accused him of.

"You're too kind to her," she said, knowing even before she said it that it was ridiculous. It made her sound more paranoid than she knew she was already being.

He shrugged a shoulder. "She reminds me of someone from school I'm rather fond of. Someone I miss. Is that so awful of me?" he questioned, and there was something genuine to it. A grain of truth. It was more unsettling than a lie. She wasn't certain what sort of person could attract the fondness of Tom Riddle, but she truly felt sorry for them. Nothing good could come of it.

"You better not have done anything to her," she said, tearing her eyes away from him. She turned, stepping down the first step of the flight of stairs, when his voice made her stop.

"What exactly are you accusing me of?" he asked, but he wasn't pretending anymore. His voice was deep, clattering like iron with malice and his lips were skewed in repulsion. In disgust. His careful mask of indifference, his smirk of mild amusement at others discomfort, was replaced entirely by something cold and vicious. Something sinister as his nostrils flared, and she was instantly reminded of a cobra, coiling around itself before launching at its prey.

Her mouth was dry, and there was nothing to say. What could she say? She didn't have anything concrete, any clear indication of what he may have done. He always hid his tracks very well, and all she had ever seen was him telling her stories in the parlor. It had unnerved her, seeing him go out of his way to treat anyone was kindness, and she was certain there had to have been a reason for it. An intent.
"I'm not accusing you of anything, Tom," she said as she went down several more steps. And really, what was she accusing him of? She wasn't even certain. It wasn't as if she thought he was he was a degenerate, some sort of pervert trying to take advantage of a young girl. No, she just didn't trust him. Where there was trouble or tragedy, Tom Riddle was not far behind, and she would be damned if the girl were to fall into his path. Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop had never recovered from that trip to the beach all those years ago, when he was a simple child. Now he was nearly a man, and she shuddered to think of what he was capable of.

She was halfway down the stairs that lead to the second floor, where it looped around into another set of stairs leading to the first, when the sound of splintering wood filled the air. There was a creak, then a groan of protest before a large, splitting crack! Several of the wooden beams that rose from the stairs and connected to the sloping handrail split from their base, the railing wobbling for only a moment before falling to gravity. She was thrown off balance, seeking purchase that was not there, stumbling with the force of it before she was flung over them. She let out a piercing scream, coming to land on the set of stairs below that one as she protectively pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them.

She tumbled down the steps, groans alternating between exhalations of air, sharp breaths pulled from her as she fell onto the wooden protrusions.

When she came to a stop, she uncurled from the ball she'd folded into, crying out in pain as her ribs and arm protested. There was a loud buzzing in her head, louder than anything else, and it made it impossible for her to hear the questions being tossed at her as various caretakers came running to her aid, several children pausing in their game to see the commotion. Hands fluttered around her, and she whimpered as they clumsily prodded at a sensitive or sore area.

"I'll phone a physician!" a young caretaker said, and she was aware of someone moving from her side.

Steps creaked as someone walked down them, large hands with slim, long fingers tenderly picked up her head, cautious to not jostle her. So very cautious and gentle.

"Try not to move her, you could make it worse," a familiar, deep voice said.

Eyes fluttered open, and she groaned when she looked up into Tom Riddle's dark blue eyes.

The other caretakers moved away, corralling the curious and frightened children to go into the play room until further notice, to behave and sit quietly. Tom took the opportunity to lean forward, whispering so only she could hear, "You had better be more careful, Mrs. Cole."

Where there was trouble or tragedy, he was never far behind.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I hope you all enjoyed this, despite it being more of a set-up chapter than anything else. I couldn't resist adding some Creepy Tom (he's my favorite Tom).
I'm an awful, garbage person, and didn't finish this until this morning after being sick all week. So this chapter is, as yet, unedited. I'll upload the edited version once my beta has finished it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Five: War

‘If we don’t end war, war will end us.’
-H.G. Wells

Hermione sat in the garden, her legs stretched in front of her with one ankle crossed over the other. She watched as Ishtar batted at a gnome, the creature shaking its large head in displeasure as it wobbled on too small legs. Joshua sat beside her, balancing a plate of freshly baked biscuits on his lap. He held one in his hand, half eaten, as he chewed slowly and thoughtfully.

“So how have you been? I haven’t...” she started, pausing as she looked down at her hands. She bit her lip, “Well, I guess I should say I’m sorry first.”

“Sorry?” he parroted, grinning at her. “Why should you be the one to apologize? You were poisoned, don’t be daft.”

She pursed her lips, hardly finding the humor in it. “I know you didn’t do it but I couldn’t convince them to believe me. And you got expelled because of it! You missed out on so much—” she rambled, nervously plucking at a strand of hair and entwining it around her finger. “You’ll certainly never get to be an Auror! And it’s all my fault!” Both of her hands had risen now, entangling into her hair as she bowed her head. All the guilt that she had repressed, forgotten about when she was distracted by the matter at hand, by ensuring her place alongside Tom Riddle, had come at her like a stunning hex. A sharp pain centered at her chest that sent tremors down her limbs.

She still couldn’t believe how stupid she had been! As dreadful as it was that Crane had been subjected to Riddle's manipulations, how fortunate that he was the only casualty when the entire world stood on the precipice of destruction. Just as easily as sands slipped through fingers, so could any hope the Wizarding World might have of surviving the reign of Lord Voldemort. And all because of her.

“Hermione,” he said softly, reaching out to grab her hands and pull them away. He had risen to his knees, settling the plate of treats down beside them. He moved closer, his knees pressing into her thighs as he wrapped his hands comfortably around her wrists and pulled them down to her lap. He entwined his fingers with her own, leaning forward as he said, “Really, Hermione, there's more to life than academics. It certainly isn't ideal to have not been allowed to graduate, but that doesn't mean my life is over. Far from it.”

He grinned then, winking conspiratorially as he added, “I've got more than enough opportunities regardless.”

“Opportunities?” she queried, a brow lifting.
He shrugged. “I only wanted to be an Auror because I wanted to help people. You know, do some good. But you don’t have to be an Auror to do that. There are plenty of ways I can help. Perhaps it’s better that way, no bureaucratic tape to get in my way,” he explained vaguely, giving her a knowing grin that seemed entirely too reminiscent.

She stared at him, one owlish blink before her eyes widened at the information that wasn't really complete information at all. And then she laughed.

It started out as a tickle in her throat, lips quivering as they flicked back and forth between a smile and a frown. Then a giggle peeled as she looked at him apologetically, knowing it was terribly inappropriate and rude but unable to help it. And then her shoulders were shaking, her eyes squeezed shut as they stung and tears pricked from the clenched together lids.

“You Gryffindors—” she started, pausing as she tried to stem her laughter, finding it difficult to speak over the bubbles of unfitting mirth—“always find—” some more raucous laughter filled the space between them, a hand rose to wipe away the tears that made her cheek tacky with their salt—“a loophole!”

Icarus himself would shudder at the hubris displayed by the Gryffindors she had known in her life. From Sirius- ignorant to his own mortality and treating battle as if it were a game of Quidditch with nothing greater than shame at losing on the line, running headlong into a trap- to Harry and his almost remarkable ability to justify his actions, to twist around rules and even laws as they best suited him. While she struggled to determine the line between what was right because it abided by and followed the strict limitations set for them by authority figures, and what was right because it served to help and stood against injustices- Harry freely traipsed over it, not a care in the world and nothing but a cutting remark when questioned. He did what he believed was the right thing, what was good, regardless of what was supposed to be.

Joshua was laughing himself though- thankfully, as it really was impolite- and said, “Say what you will, but we get things done.”

Reigning in her laughter, she looked at him fondly. Tenacious though they were, Gryffindors certainly did get things done, and there was something warming about it. Something familiar about it that made her want to spend the rest of the evening beside him, to rekindle the spark within her in the way that only foolhardy and headstrong lions could. It felt like home, where home was not a place to be or even a specific person that made you feel secure and loved, but the feeling of security itself. The feeling of knowing who you were with certainty, free and unmasked.

“Well,” she said, huffing out a breath that was trailed with some remaining giggles. “So do Slytherins. And I dare say we do so without having to find a way around bureaucratic tape, as you put it.”

He snorted. “Gryffindors aren't subtle enough for the Machiavellian ways of you lot. We prefer something a little more assertive,” he said.

“So, what exactly are your plans then? I don't have to alert the authorities about you, do I?” she teased.

“I probably shouldn't tell you, but I doubt you'll tell anyone seeing as how your cousin is the coordinator of it all,” he explained. Ah, Dumbledore. She should have known that man would have something to do with all this.

After reassuring him that no, she certainly wouldn't tell- after all, she really was getting quite good at secrets- he leaned forward, ducking his head towards her so that strands of hair fell in front of his
face. “He's got a friend, I guess. An Auror who's been leading the charge against Grindelwald and his men. Some of the uh, well missions he operates are a bit more covert, and they sort of blur the lines of jurisdiction, being that he's in Bulgaria. He's sort of taking me under his wing, I suppose you could say.” He paused, grinning a bit so that the skin around his eyes folded. “Funny, actually. He's the best Auror in the business, and I never would have gotten to work with him otherwise.”

Hermione's jaw slacked open, eyes widened. “You're fighting against Grindelwald? Without a wand?”

“I've got one. Moody would never send me out-”

“Moody?” she interrupted, brows furrowing at the name.

Joshua nodded eagerly. “Gregor Moody. He and Dumbledore are good friends, and he pulled some strings for me. I'm not sure exactly what Dumbledore said to convince him of it, but sure enough Moody was eager to employ me in his service. He's nice enough, a bit gruff at first but-”

“I'm sure he's a lovely person, once you get to know him,” Hermione finished, her voice soft. She propped her elbow on her knee, curling fingers around her chin as she looked to the garden spread before them, lips slipping into a frown. She had lived nearly a full year in the past, and had met the parents and grandparents of many people she had known from her own time. She would be spending the summer with none other than Abraxas Malfoy, after all!

And yet, there was a twinge of something in her chest at the mention of the name- of the family of Aurors that had already in this point become renowned for their excellence in the field, for their strong sense of justice and bravery. A remembrance of someone gruff yet soft, a wonderful juxtaposition of the traits, a fierce protector and a loyal man. A remembrance of a wizard falling into trees as the air came alive with magic, heat slicing through the night sky, clouds billowing around the streams of red and bright, brilliant green.

“Hermione?”

She jumped at the sound of her name, blinking up at Joshua's furrowed brows and frowning lips. “Sorry, I didn't mean to daydream like that,” she said apologetically. “So tell me then about what it's like to work aside the Great Gregor Moody! I'm sure he's taught you a lot.” She winced at the strain in her voice, at the far too-chipper-to-be-natural tilt to it that made him narrow his eyes at her in an unspoken question. But she continued to smile at him, and after a moment, he began to talk about his experience with the man- about the spells he had been learning and all of his failures and successes. He could not tell her about the specifics of his tasks, and she did not ask- instead she only half paid attention, enough to know when she should nod or react appropriately.

She had gotten so use to seeing the beginnings of the Death Eaters, and had had so little interaction with anyone on the other side of the war. Of course, she had seen them- glimpses of red hair and freckles- had heard the name “Longbottom!” shouted out in the corridor of Hogwarts. But they were intangible, not very present in her life and were- as far as she was concerned- unseen faces in the many that wandered about the castle. She had not sought them out, and had in fact been quite resilient in doing the opposite.

And yet, to hear that Gregor Moody- the father of none other than Alastor Moody, Mad-Eye himself- was good friends with Dumbledore, and was teaching Joshua everything he had to offer-

It struck a chord, and that chord hummed, vibrating deep and painfully within her.

And it hurt even more, knowing what she did. That Gregor Moody would die in a battle in the First
War against Voldemort, by the Dark Lord's own wand.

And she would be visiting that very same Dark Lord in only a handful of weeks, once more falling back into the role of his girlfriend, his lover-

“Ow!” she hissed, her thoughts interrupted by a searing pain along the soft flesh of her left forearm. She pulled the hand towards her- how long had Joshua had his hand placed over hers and how had she not noticed?- and cradled it against her torso, fingers twitching as acid thrummed through her veins.

“What?” he asked, immediately coming to an abrupt halt in his story and extending a hand out to her. Something within her knew that letting him touch her would not be a very wise idea, and she twisted out of his reach.

“It's nothing,” she said as she attempted a shaky smile. Her fingers were throbbing with pain, as if the tendons and the bones and the capillaries themselves were poisoned and turning against her, attempting to consume her from within. Forcing herself up on trembling legs, she said, “Stay here. Dumbledore's got a potion for me. I'll be right back, alright?”

She left before he could say anything to her, disappearing into the small kitchen and turning into the hall beside it. The door to Dumbledore's private study was somewhat ajar, a thin stream of golden light emitting from the crack between it and the door frame, and though it was so close, she paused, resting against the wall. Her breath was coming out in haggard gasps, and curls clung to her sweat slicked forehead and neck. Her vision was swimming before her, and she clamped her eyes shut tightly, opening them in the hopes that the room had settled, that all the shapes and colors were back to where they ought to be.

But they still shifted, the door becoming two and three and four different doors, the ghost of an image that faded into the other. “Dumbledore!” she called out, her voice a surprising croak that crackled over the syllables of his name.

Within moments, the wizard emerged from the room, eyes widening at the sight of her pressed against the wall, flushed and trembling. “Hermione?” he asked, approaching her and gripping her shoulders in a tight grasp, lowering his head so that his bright blue eyes met hers. “What's happened?”

“Arm,” was all she said, chest heaving with the effort to speak. He understood immediately, however, and being careful to not release her- knowing full well that he was the only thing keeping her upright- he lead her into his study, ushering her into a plush armchair beside a bookshelf as the door shut and locked behind them.

Fingers wrapped tenderly around her wrist, turning it so that the underside of her arm was parallel to the ceiling, and pushed up the sleeve of her jumper. She hissed as the fabric brushed along the mark, making to pull her arm away but was unable. She watched Dumbledore's face, trying to focus on the impossibly blue color of his irises as if doing so was all she needed in order for her vision to steady and for him to not dissolve into several fading Dumbledores. It was unreadable, though his lips pressed together into a bit of a grim line.

“Wispy,” he spoke, followed by a crack of magic as the house elf appeared. The sound made her shudder, her face crumple into a grimace as it racketed around in her skull. Why did everything seem so loud all of a sudden?

Dumbledore recited a list of potions he needed the elf to procure for him, and she cringed at the high pitched response of her voice, of feet padding eagerly across the floor and into a cabinet on the
opposite side. Glass vials clinked together, and within moments they were held to her lips, the leathery pads of finger tips on her chin. The viscus liquid slipped into her mouth, and she frowned at the bitterness of it, even as she swallowed it in one large gulp. The taste lingered on her tongue, through several more administered potions, her tongue feeling coated and heavy from the remnants.

But she felt better, the ache in her head subsiding as the colored specks in her eyesight dissolved away, the room settling. Wispy stood on the right arm of the chair, an empty vial in her long fingers as large eyes blinked up at Hermione. “Is missus alright?”

When she nodded, the elf let out a deep breath of relief, her own, large head bobbing. “Good, good! Wispy will go make some food, then. That lovely boy will help!” she said, disappearing with a snap of her fingers.

“How’s the mark?”

She turned at the sound of the soft voice, eyes flicking down from Dumbledore's face to her bared forearm, his hand still holding onto her slim wrist. She sucked in a sharp breath, sitting a bit straighter as she pulled her hand from his hold, bringing her arm up close to her eyes to better examine it. It still ached, the cool air singing a bit at it, but it was nowhere near the fire it had been- like a snake had sunk fangs into her flesh so that venom coursed through her veins.

The mark- which had only hours earlier been fine, an inky black tattoo on her skin- appeared to be diseased, infected. Skin bubbled around the lines of it, red and irritated and looking quite bruised, and blood pricked up from where the lines were the thickest- from the curve of the serpent's body and the bone jaw falling open. The four bruises wrapped around it were no longer a light impression, but a hideous violet color, the center of the marks turning to black as if her very flesh was decaying.

“What happened to it?” she asked, though she already knew the answer. Somehow, she simply knew, as if it were being whispered to her from a detached and disembodied voice. Joshua had held her hand, holding onto them and pulling them from where she had entangled them in her hair and he had never let go, fingers smoothing circle over her knuckles.

“He had touched her, and the mark had punished her for it.

She bit her lip, teeth digging into the soft flesh until she tasted vinegar and dirty pennies, the taste positively abhorrent as it mingled with the remaining taste of the elixirs. “That possessive, rotten, distrusting-” she began to seethe, the words trailing off as she huffed out a breath of air in frustration, raising her right hand and running it through her hair, catching her fingers on knots.

“Do you think he knows you were visiting with Mr. Crane?” Dumbledore asked as he stood from his knelt position, settling down in the leather wrapped chair in front of his desk.

“No, I don't. I was told it was like Harry's...a bit like a horcrux, I guess. He can sort of communicate with it, but that's all. It's one way, and his Death Eater's couldn't communicate with him. Though...this one is different,” she said, not once stopping in her perusal of the snake coiled on her arm, slipping from the jaw as if it were the Basilisk emerging from the sculpture of Slytherin himself. It was, in appearance, exactly the same as any other mark she had seen. But this one was charmed differently from the others, tailor made specifically for her. And like a horcrux lashed out, protecting itself from destruction, so too did the mark, burning her at the touch of another man.

“Tom wanted to be certain I would remain loyal to him. In every way,” she said, surprised by how leveled her voice was, as if resigned. It wasn't as if she cared- she didn't exactly have the time or even the mental fortitude to maintain an adulterous relationship on top of everything else. But it wasn't as if she had been shagging him- it was an innocent touch! He held her hand, admittedly for
some time, but that was all.

Dumbledore hummed in thought, tugging lightly on his beard as he leaned back in the chair so that
the leather crinkled. “I wonder just how much he is privy to, then. I daresay that should be your
priority when you return to him. Find out exactly the limitation he has on you. Hopefully you are
correct in that he is unaware to Mr. Crane's presence. He believes he got rid of him, and it is best to
not disrupt that notion,” he mused.

Hermione nodded, knowing that Tom's ire would be monstrous if he learned that Joshua was still
wandering about the world with a wand, still keeping in close contact with Dumbledore and by
extension her. And if Joshua were assisting Moody with Grindelwald, he was certain to be in
possession of sensitive information.

Her eyes widened, sudden realization dawning on her as she sat straight in the chair, her spine
becoming rigid as her mouth slung open, fingers curling into her palm. “Oh my gods,” she
whispered, startling Dumbledore out of whatever thoughts were running through his head. “That's
why you arranged for Joshua to train with Moody.”

If he was surprised by her knowledge of Joshua's activities, it didn't show, hidden as always within
his indiscernible eyes, peering up at her over the half moon spectacles. “He's very talented, and I
thought Gregor might appreciate a ward to assist with Grindelwald-”

“You're training him to be a soldier against Voldemort!” she accused, clutching onto the arms of her
chair and hoisting herself up so that she towered over him. He said nothing in his defense, and his
silence only made her angrier, indignation burning in her chest. He was using Crane. Just as he had
used Snape, and Harry, and her. “You don't care about making sure he lives his dreams, you just
want to start building up your army.”

He steepled his fingers together, resting his wrists on his stomach as he said, “Many would consider
working under Moody to be the privilege of a lifetime. He and his wife are the best Aurors the
Ministry has to offer, and I'm certain that after Grindelwald is defeated and Moody can attest to
Crane's assistance, they may make an exception to allow him acceptance into the Auror program.
The Ministry has been known to bend rules in favor of rewarding those essential in times of war.”

Hermione sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. “You're
justifying your manipulation,” she said through gritted teeth. He was right, of course. She had studied
about the fall out of the war in History of Magic, had learned that the Ministry had instated many
witches or wizards to positions they might have been otherwise unqualified for for their service.
Criminals were pardoned, and some witches and wizards were offered prominent titles. It was not
outside of the realm of possibility for them to expunge Crane and forget his expulsion if he proved
essential enough. But he was still being trotted around like a marionette, seen first for his power and
potential and his humanity last.

“That may be so, but Crane has always wanted to be an Auror. And I dare say that if things had
turned out differently, he would join the Order on his own. This is a path that- one way or another-
he would take and I hardly see how I'm exploiting that by offering him the best teacher in the
business,” he said. He smiled then, a sad, small smile as he added, “This is war, Hermione. It is
messy and unfair, but it is also how you win. And I have every intention of winning this time.”

“So do I,” she agreed, sighing softly as she settled back down in her chair. It was war, the brewing of
it at least, and she supposed that it was better to be prepared, even if those being groomed and
prepared were none the wiser to their intended role. Joshua Crane would join the Order, fighting in a
war that did not yet exist. A war that he would wonder how it came about, so soon after the defeat of
Grindelwald. A war that no one had seen coming, and that- as far as he was concerned- no one could
warn him off. It was messy and unfair, but it was war.

“He's got a wand still,” she said after a moment, raising her arm up and looking at the mark. It seemed to heal some, the flesh pink and tender and only somewhat swollen, the finger marks a deep and painful bruise. “He shouldn't have a wand. How does he still have one?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You know Gryffindors, my dear. They were never one for following the rules.”

Brown eyes flicked up, one brow quirked. “Sir, you're a Gryffindor.”

He seemed amused by the insinuation, blue eyes twinkling. “So I am.”

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Joshua stood outside the door to Moody's office, the heel of his palm pressed against his head. He had left Dumbledore's cottage not too long ago, after ensuring Hermione was alright and after some quick goodbyes. She had fallen quite ill, and was unable to rise from the chair in the study to even so much as shake his hand. Not as if he was upset by the fact, his own head becoming heavy and clouded and aching, something pulsing within him that made his ears roar, his temples throb.

It was strange, he thought, raising a hand and pressing it flat against the wall to steady himself, a wave of dizziness and nausea crashing against him. He had felt fine- wonderful even. It was a beautiful day and he was in a good mood.

He certainly wasn't wonderful now. Not even fine.

He lifted his hand, rapt his knuckles against the door as he squinted at it, head swooning as if independent from his body, attempting to roll off his shoulders. The door opened sharply, and the familiar face of Gregor Moody appeared before him, wand raised in front of him protectively. When he saw that it was only Joshua- and after some prodding around in his head to be certain it was him and not an impostor- he lowered the wand, looking at him expectantly.

“I think I'm feeling some belated effects from a curse,” Joshua managed to say, his throat clenching tightly around the words as if he was being strangled, hands wrapping around his neck. He had been in a battle the previous nights, was struck by several hexes and curses. He had thought he was fine, a bit of stinging here and there (nothing a tonic or two couldn't fix) and thought nothing of it.

He took a step forward, removing his hand from the wall, and immediately collapsed into a heap, his head stopped by a spell from Moody only seconds before it could bounce off the stone floors.

“Do you know the curse?” Moody asked, his voice a thick, Scottish accent, pulling him into the office and dragging him onto a worn sofa. He pressed the tip of his wand against Crane's temple, attempting diagnostics. But he was unable to detect the presence of a curse, growling ferociously as he continued to examine the younger wizard.

Crane shook his head, unable to speak as he reclined fully back, gazing up at the ceiling. Fingers turned his wrist over, pulling it up. “What did you touch?”

“Huh?” he murmured, lifting his head some so he could meet the dark green eyes. Moody held his hand out so that he could look over the palm, his other hand raising the wand up to it.

“You touched something that was cursed,” he responded gruffly, a bit displeased as if disappointed in him. Surely, his protege knew better than to just manhandle potentially dangerous- fatal- objects before ensuring they were not cursed?
“I didn't-” Joshua began, his words dying on his lips as Moody turned his hand over. Blisters coated his palm, white, translucent skin bulging outward from his red and burned hand, fingers twitching. A blister had burst, and there was pus dripping down his wrist, tinted red from blood. He shook his head, swallowing thickly. “But I...I didn't touch...any...”

His chest heaved, straining as if he was out of breath and there wasn't enough oxygen to fill his lungs. The room continued to spin, shapes fading from view as blackness encroached on his vision. He felt his hand being placed down, felt Moody moving around him as he began casting healing spells after sending for a mediwitch. He closed his eyes, the lids heavy and weak, and within seconds, he gave in to the lull of the illness, slipping into a deep slumber.

He would awake nearly twelve hours later, panting and unable to breathe with the memory of the entirely too real nightmares. Tremors shaking his body as the images flickered before his eyes, of rabbits kicking frantically as they hung from rafters, jets of emerald green light exploding before him, and an impossibly large snake with large, yellow eyes.

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The rain came down in thick waves, Hermione's hair sticking to her neck and forehead as she blinked rapidly, raindrops clinging to her lashes. The warming charm she had placed on herself was efficient enough, her gray peacoat warm despite the sodden state, hands tucked into the satin lined pockets as she nervously jumped from foot to foot. She stood beside Dumbledore, the man looking odd in a gray muggle suit with his long auburn beard draped over the front, humming a song to himself as they waited at the door of the orphanage.

“And you're certain the caretaker will just...let you sign him out early?” she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the swooshing sound of the rain.

He grimaced at that question, bending down so as to keep his voice low when he said, “I believe Mrs. Cole will have no qualms in that regard.”

Before she could ask any further, the door opened, a young and mousy looking woman standing in the foyer. She stepped aside, allowing them entrance as she closed the door behind them. “Sorry about that, hope you weren't waiting too long,” she said, her voice clipped and measured as she laced her hands in front of her.

“No a trouble at all. By any chance, can we speak to the Matron of the establishment? Mrs. Cole?” Dumbledore asked. With a quick nod, the woman disappeared, and Hermione took the opportunity to step forward and look around.

A large staircase was nestled to the right of the corridor, a closed room at the end of it. There was a parlor to the left, and some children milled about, a group bowed around what appeared to be a game of marbles. To the right was an empty dining area, with a tall and scraggly teenage boy moving about with a broom, the straw making scraping sounds along the wooden planks. A girl- of perhaps fourteen- with wispy strands of blonde hair in front of her face- was wiping the tables down with a rag. She could see, just beyond that, what she assumed to be a kitchen.

Despite the distinction of the walls, the rooms seemed to bleed together. Matching in their dullness, with the same wooden siding laid halfway up the wall in a dark stain, with weathered wallpaper that may have once been lovely when they were first placed. Now it was just as dingy as the rest, the green of the vines in the design faded to a hideous olive color.

It was certainly a dreary place, and Hermione wrapped her peacoat tighter around her as if overcome by a sudden chill. Her own childhood home- while not as lively as what she had seen in the
Wizarding World- was still lovely and warm, with pictures of vacations, sandy foreign beaches and the brightly colored borders of shiny roller coasters gracing the walls. The dining table was dressed in lovely lace, with a golden colored vase constantly filled with fresh flowers. 'A home isn't alive unless there is something living in it,' her mother would say as she came from the garden, a bundle of freshly clipped flowers cradled in her arms.

But perhaps it wasn't the presence of flowers or loving photographs that made her home so much more appealing than the orphanage. Perhaps it was the presence of a mother and father, stories told at bedtime and kisses to a fevered forehead.

She was startled from her thoughts when Mrs. Cole arrived, a stern looking woman with a sour expression on her face, short gray hair that curled around her jaw. She was walking with a stiff limp, her hip jutting out painfully as she walked with her weight on one foot. Her arm was held against her in a sling, fingers gripping onto the white linen of the device. She seemed to recognize Dumbledore, lips skewing into one of utter malice as she came to an abrupt halt.

“Oh...you better not be here to tell me he's been expelled!” she hissed, hands wrapping into clenched balls. “He'll be eighteen at the end of the year and he'll no longer be eligible for room and board. Out in the streets faster than you could say 'happy birthday.'”

Hermione's spine straightened at the brusqueness. How cruel, to toss someone so easily aside!

“Actually, we are here to take him from your hands earlier than anticipated,” Dumbledore interrupted, nonplussed by the woman. “There is a trip planned, a privilege reserved for the seventh years, and I intend to take guardianship of him so he does not miss out on the oppurtunity.” He began fidgeting with the bag he brought along with him, producing from it several blank sheets of paper. They were not really blank, however, least not to a muggle such as Mrs. Cole. She looked through them stiffly- quickly, as though not truly reading them- and handed them back with a satisfied huff.

“Everything seems to be in order,” she said, the charmed papers having met her qualifications. “If you'll follow me,” she began to add, trailing off as her gaze fell to Hermione, as if seeing her for the first time. “And who might you be?”

She raised her chin. “Hermione, ma'am.”

“She is Mr. Riddle's ah...paramour, and will be helping him pack, if that is alright?” Dumbledore explained.

Mrs. Cole pursed her lips, eyes hardening in distrust and apprehension as they flicked over Hermione's petite form. She sniffed, taking a step back. “Patricia will escort you,” she said in a clipped voice, inclining her chin in the direction of the same woman who had opened the door.

“Right this way,” Patricia said, brushing past Hermione and up the stairs. She hesitated for a moment, before looking back and adding, “Be careful. With the railings.” And then she continued up them, the steps creaking below her weight.

Hermione followed after, tentatively placing a hand on the railing and finding it quite sturdy. Still, she did not lean against it, even as they went up one...two...three...and finally a fourth flight of stairs. Patricia waited for her at the landing, wringing her fingers in front of her. The stairs opened up to a corridor, doors lining the walls down the entire length. “Go down here,” she said, raising a hand and pointing to the right of the hall. “Take the turn down to the other corridor. It's the very last door on the left.”
Before Hermione could say another word, she descended back down the stairs, taking them rather quickly, a hand pressed against the wall as she clung against it.

‘Hardly the friendly sort,’ Hermione thought with a raised brow. Or perhaps it was simply because it was Tom Riddle she was coming to see that she was treated like a pariah, held at arm's length. He never did have a very good reputation at the orphanage, not like the one he had cultivated at Hogwarts.

She followed the directions, curiously glancing into the few rooms that were open. Some were more sparse than others- the furniture was all uniform, a small metal bed frame, a simple wardrobe and a desk and chair. But while some had a plain white bedspread, others had soft and worn looking quilts, made with great thought and care and affection. Some rooms were adorned in framed photographs, personal trinkets placed along the windowsill or desk. But they were all clean- whether the blankets were an institutional white or hand stitched or crocheted, they were all tucked under the mattress, and there were no clothes discarded on the wooden floor.

The final door on the left was closed, and she stood in front of it nervously chewing her lip. She raised a fist, bringing it to the slab of wood but holding back against knocking. The mark had healed itself quite nicely over the course of a few weeks, and even the finger marks had disappeared. And yet, she was still uncertain of how much Tom would know, of what exactly the mark could communicate to him. The dreams had continued- either torturous nightmares or incredibly vivid and passionate dreams. He was attempting to reach out to her, she had determined, and surely he wouldn't be doing so if he had known of Joshua.

Or at least, he wouldn't reach out to her in anyway that could be considered pleasurable. He could dole out pain and punishment through the mark, and she had not been subjected to that.

Still, her fist hovered in front of the door, hesitant to rejoin his life once more. He had been a presence in her mind the entire summer, a cruel twist of fate considering he would otherwise be a very physical presence in her life. She would forever be tied to him, to Tom Marvolo Riddle. Lord Voldemort. And now there would be no reprieve. School would commence, and then they would graduate, and surely he would keep her close after that as well. Perhaps she would even live with him, spending mornings at a small table in a kitchen, over coffee and breakfast and smiling despite the fact that her days were dedicated to ensuring he did not move too far in one direction. Ensuring he would die when the time was right.

The door swung open, and she let her hand fall to her side, smiling somewhat sheepishly as Tom stood before her.

His hair was somewhat disheveled, as if he had run a hand through it and had never bothered to set it right. He was wearing what she had surmised to be the uniform for the orphanage, plain gray slacks, a white oxford, and a dark gray sweater.

His lips twisted into a smirk, and he reached out, placing his hands on either side of her hips and tugging her into the room. “I was wondering exactly how long you planned on standing out there for, but I'm afraid I got a bit impatient waiting,” he said, chuckling as the door closed behind them as if by an unseen hand.

Heat crept up from the collar of her shirt. Of course, he was seventeen. Capable of using magic outside school and had- no doubt- set some wards around his room that had alerted him to her presence and her hesitation to enter. “Oh,” was all she said. His hands were still gripping onto her, his thumb pressed into the dip of her hipbone, and he used the leverage to lead her backwards until her back collided with the door and he pressed his body against her, gazing at her with a curious expression in his dark blue eyes.
Hermione shifted underneath it, shaking her arm somewhat so that her wand slipped within the sleeve of her coat and she could curl her fingers around it. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, and she wondered if he would say anything. If he would know that the mark attacked her, poisoned her, and why it had done so.

But then he leaned forward, one hand moving from her hip to cup the side of her face as he pressed his lips against hers. She felt her shoulders slump in relief as she eagerly kissed back, her lips parting as he pressed his tongue against them, requesting entrance. He chased after the taste of her, kissing her passionately and heady, teeth nipping onto her bottom lip.

She could hardly breathe, he was pressed so tightly against her and kissed her with such need and desire that all breath was stolen from her. She slid her hands up, settling them on his shoulders and pushing him away, breaking off the kiss that seemed to go on for eternity. “Tom, I can't breathe,” she said, her voice airy and winded as evidence.

He smirked. “I've missed you,” he said, not quite moving away from her, his body still holding her in place against the door.

“I've missed you, too, but I came up here to help you pack, not to be snogged senseless,” she said with a laugh, and he finally pulled away from her, taking a step back into the small room.

“I'm mostly packed as it is. I don't really unpack over the summer,” he answered with a simple shrug, and she looked about his small room.

It was sparse, with nothing except the same pieces of furniture seen in any other room. Except the mattress was bare, the sheets and blanket folded atop it and tossed into the corner of the headboard. His school trunk was on the bed as well, gaping open to reveal his folded clothes and school books tucked within, a small pile of several clothes placed beside it that he began folding meticulously and placing within the trunk. There was a piece of paper on his desk, and she moved forward to look at it, furrowing her brows.

It was a child's drawing, done in crayon, with what appeared to be a crudely drawn castle-mote and drawbridge and all- with a large winged dragon soaring through the bright blue sky. Her lips quirked into a grin, grabbing the piece of paper and holding it up to Tom. “I didn't know you were a budding artist,” she teased, and he turned around, eyes flicking over to the drawing.

“It was under my door when I woke up. I believe it was meant to be a goodbye present,” he said dismissively, turning back to the trunk. “Just leave it.”

“Goodbye present? From who?” she asked. From what she understood, the orphans gave him a wide berth, frightened of the dangerous boy who could do strange things. Why might one of them, particularly someone so young, take it upon themselves to make him something?

But Tom did not answer, twisting to look at her over his shoulder as he asked, “I tried to reach out to you, you know. Through the mark. But you never responded.”

She placed the drawing back on the desk, shrugging her shoulders. “I didn't know how,” she said simply.

The lid of the trunk slammed close, and Tom secured the brass locking mechanisms before he turned to face her, reaching out to grab her left hand. He shoved the sleeve up as much as he could, bunching the thick wool fabric just enough so that the very bottom of the mark was revealed. The jaw of the serpent, practically unhinged, poked out from the black coat, tongue flicking outward between two long fangs. “Just touch it, and think of me,” he said as he grabbed hold of her other
hand, placing it on her forearm so that her fingertips grazed the slightly raised skin of the tattoo.

She did as he instructed, finding it a bit odd to think of someone fondly as if they did not stand in front of you. Heat radiated from the inky lines, a pleasant heat that tingled and prickled her hair to stand on end.

“You'll get used to it, and as it heals the effects will get stronger. It's still relatively new. It will take a bit of doing, but eventually you'll be able to call out to me for help if you need it. Among other things,” he said, his fingers still wrapped around her wrist.

“It's different, isn't it?” she asked, looking up at him, her brown eyes wide and questioning. “It's different from the others.”

He smirked, chuckling as he released her wrist and let it fall to her side. He considered her for a moment, folding his arms over his chest. “Yes, it is. You didn't think I would give you the same mark as the others, did you? As if you were just another common servant instead of my proper Lady?” he asked, his tone playful, teasing, even as he said the word servant with such disdain, as if disappointed that anyone might be so weak to bow at someone's feet.

He grabbed hold of the trunk, hoisting it up into the air as if it weighed nothing, charmed to be as light as feathers and just as cumbersome. “We should get going. Your cousin is undoubtedly done convincing that terrible woman to release custody of me, and we're to meet Malfoy in Diagon Alley within the hour,” he said brusquely, the door to his room opening in an unspoken command as he waltzed through it. He paused just beyond the threshold, standing out in the corridor, before he turned back and held out his arm, the elbow bent at an angle as he proffered it to her. “Shall we?”

She closed the distance between them, slipping her arm around his elbow and hooking it so that her hand pressed against her breast. He lead her through the halls and down the stairs, and she couldn't help but to notice the warmth coiling around her left arm, the heat building in her very center. It was delightful, dizzying almost, like the feeling of a glass of wine as it warmed you, filling you with intoxicated pleasure.

The feeling mixed with her own dread, like something heavy was plummeting through her and dragging her down. Just as the mark would punish her if she was in anyway disloyal to Tom, the mark seemed to reward her when she showed him the proper level of adoration, purring like a satisfied cat.

‘Gods,’ she thought, groaning internally. 'What have I gotten myself into?'

Chapter End Notes

I swear guys, I love Dumbledore. I really do. But he's so manipulative and conniving and honestly that's half the reason I love him so much (I'm a sucker for morally ambiguous characters).

Next chapter will take us to Malfoy Manor, and Hermione will learn the truth about the mark (and perhaps murder Tom. The end?) I hope you all enjoyed!
Chapter Twenty-Six: Pillars of the Temple

“And stand together, yet not too near together: For the pillars of the temple stand apart, And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.”

-Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

Malfoy Manor was far more beautiful than Hermione had remembered, the manor of her own time tainted with the blood of innocents, walls echoing with the tortured souls of those unfortunate enough to be captured by the Death Eaters. There was a somberness about the home, as if stepping throughwards so that the magic crashed against your chest and wound around you, compressing you. The curtains had always been drawn, and there were no warming fires or enchanted paintings. Darkness blanketed the entire land owned by the Malfoys, and not even the sun could properly permeate the thick fog that wrapped around the stone and the trees.

But now, before the Malfoys had offered up their home to the war, inviting in death and hate and cruelty, the manor was almost unrecognizable. It sat on a great stretch of land, surrounded by carefully groomed gardens that were sectioned off by manicured hedges, two large fountains on either side of the path that led to the doors. And they opened to a large and lovely foyer, bathed in golden light that bounced off the marble floors and was thrown across the room in glittering fragments by the crystal pieces of a giant chandelier.

It was entirely familiar to Hermione, and she hesitated in the threshold, fingers curling into her palm. Familiar, and yet completely different, and she was surprised by the amount of effort required for her to see it, her eyes narrowing and her teeth chewing on her lip as she looked around. In the room just beyond, to the left, she could see the very chandelier that Dobby had sent- or would send, rather-crashing to the floor, the spot before the fireplace where she had been tortured, a hideous word carved into her arm. Somewhere below them was a cellar- perhaps forgotten in this moment in time, or simply used for storage instead of imprisonment.

“Lovely, isn't it, Hermione?” Tom spoke, and she turned around at that, nodding her head a bit too eagerly.

“Oh, yes. Lovely,” she answered, hoping she sounded convincing as she turned to Abraxas with a polite smile.

Abraxas offered them a quite smug grin, gesturing for them to follow as he led them through the first floor in a meager tour, chattering incessantly about the history of the home. “It's almost ten centuries old, a stunning example of the architecture of that time. Standards have become so low since then, it's a wonder certain buildings don't just collapse at the slightest breeze,” he said, traipsing down the hall and opening a door on the right. It opened into an expansive parlor, with an intricate rug covering most of the marble floors. A fire crackled in the wide, gaping mouth of a fireplace, and sitting just before it, brushing the hair of a porcelain doll, was a young girl of perhaps eight or nine.

“This is my younger sister, Edora,” Abraxas said, the girl turning to look at the visitors, smiling wide. She pulled herself up, tiny hands gripping onto the skirt of her dress and extending it outward as she bent her knees in a curtsy, bowing her head so that strands of fine, silvery blonde hair tumbled over her shoulder.
“Pleased to meet you!” she said, and Hermione shifted, a bit uncomfortable. Was she...supposed to curtsy back? She had done her research of this time very thoroughly, and from what she had understood, curtsying had long since been outdated in the magical community.

“Edora, this is Tom Riddle, a former classmate of mine, and this young lady is Hermione Dumbledore. Tom is here to discuss his future with the Ministry of Magic with me, and we are not to be bothered. Is that understood?” Abraxas ordered, his tone surprisingly cold while addressing the young girl.

But she was hardly bothered by it, nodding her head as she said, “Yes.”

Abraxas smiled, turning to Hermione as he added, “I thought you might enjoy spending time with Edora. There is a bit of an age difference, but she is quite intelligent and I'm certain she would be delighted if you were kind enough to perhaps read with her and teach her magical theory? I'm afraid I simply don't have the time and—”

“I'm not a babysitter,” Hermione interrupted, incredulous, her brows high as she said the words before she could even think against it, the surprise and indignation evident on her face. She had not agreed to spend the summer here so that she could tutor a Malfoy while the two wizards discussed information that could potentially alter the very course of her history. That could rewrite the war in its entirety.

He blinked, surprised by her opposition to the idea. “Miss Dumbledore, from what I understand you are one of the best and brightest students in Hogwarts, a remarkable feat considering you've only just recently joined the school. Despite that, you have continued to garner a reputation for yourself that I believe Edora would benefit from greatly,” he said, his voice terse, absent of the jovial mirth and pride that often made it bubble. It was the same voice he had used when he ordered Edora to not bother him, and her cheeks flamed at the realization, eyes widening.

“I came here under the premise of sitting in with you and Tom, as his future has a direct impression on my own and I believe that I would benefit greatly from being privy to such,” she countered. Her gaze turned to Tom, his dark blue eyes looking at her with something dark and heavy; a warning.

She pinched her lips. This was not Hogwarts. Tom didn't have the command he had, not yet. Malfoy did not yet know what he was capable of, that lurking beneath the facade of a charming and promising young wizard was something sinister, something that was not afraid to hurt or to destroy or to break. And he would not know, not for some time- Tom wanted something from Abraxas, and he was not foolish enough to curse his way through it, preferring instead to rely on his charisma and manipulations.

And it would not look very good if the witch he was courting spat on Malfoy's commands.

“Miss Dumbledore,” Abraxas started, lips twisting in disdain as he spoke, “I suppose you could say I'm a bit of a traditionalist, but I don't believe it is appropriate for a witch to worry herself with the business deals of wizards. It is none of your concern, and being the lady of the house at the moment, I expect you to take care that my sister attends to her studies.”

Hermione inhaled sharply, speaking through her teeth as she said, “Of course.” The words were strained, and hardly comprehensible as she could not move her jaw from the clenched position it locked in. Still, he seemed to hear her well enough, and his smug smile returned once more, triumphant.

“Good. Edora has yet to have incidences of accidental magic, something most Malfoys have experienced by now. I would like for you to work on coaxing that out,” he explained, turning to
head out into the corridor before flicking his eyes over her form, frowning. “And the old fool you call your cousin may be alright with you dressing like a muggle, but I am not. Edora, make sure one of the elves fetches her some proper clothing, yes?”

He did not wait for a response, exiting the room and into the corridor where his footsteps fell silent on the rug that ran down the length of it.

“Don't worry, Darling, I'll be certain to tell you all the details,” Tom assured. His own voice sounded on edge, the irritation evident. He was not used to having to follow orders, to remain silent. He did not enjoy his loss of power anymore than Hermione did, and she could feel his own anger growing in her chest, humming the bones of her rib cage. “Once I get what I need from him, he'll be taught how unwise it is to speak to you in such a way,” he whispered, his head bent low to ensure that Edora did not hear the threat made against her brother.

He pulled away then, leaving the parlor and following after Abraxas.

“You can call me Edie,” a small voice said from behind her, and she turned to face Edora- Edie- her gray eyes sparkling. “Mummy's got some dresses that will look quite lovely on you. Can I help you pick one out?”

Hermione sighed, nodding in resignation. The little girl wrapped her fingers around her own, pulling her away and heading towards the grand staircase. 'Wonderful,' she thought, frowning as Edie prattled on about the vacation her mother and father were taking, and all the gifts they promised to lavish upon her when they returned. 'Lord Voldemort is in a meeting that could irreparably change the world, and make all of my efforts useless, while I become a living doll for a Malfoy.'

-xXx-

Hermione sat alone in the library- an admittedly lovely and large study that made her eyes widen and was almost enough in abating her anger. She had spent the entire day and well into the evening with Edie; she hadn't even had the opportunity to see Tom for supper, the house elf that served her and Edie claiming that they had opted to take their meals in the drawing room. It was maddening! She did not traverse time and universes themselves to while away the hours like she was some shrinking violet, left to take care of the children while the men discussed important matters.

She groaned, pressing the heel of her palm against her forehead. She wouldn't last the summer if this was how it was meant to be- playing dress up with a Malfoy between tutoring her during the day, and exploring the vast collection of dark and sordid magic once Edie had gone to bed. She had to find a way out of this, a way to convince Abraxas that she had every right to sit with him and Tom.

Her hand curled into a fist, still pressed against her head. Pity that Tom didn't yet have the power over Abraxas that he would have in time. He certainly wouldn't question her then if he knew what harm would befall him at insulting the Dark Lady.

“I thought I might find you here.”

She looked up at the words, at Tom approaching her with his hands in his pockets, a somewhat apologetic look on his face. But the apologetic look faded almost immediately, lips quirking into a smile. “Lovely dress,” he said, his smile widening when she scowled at him in turn, slamming her book shut and settling it aside as she crossed her arms over her chest, hiding the lace detail of the bodice as best as she could.

“There was nothing wrong with my muggle clothing,” she muttered below her breath. There really
wasn't. Why on earth did Purebloods insist on wearing such frilly numbers when her clothing was far more practical?

He sat beside her on the sofa, slinging an arm over her shoulders and pulling her into his side. “I truly am sorry. I know you wouldn't have come along if you thought for even a second you would be babysitting. And I certainly would not have agreed to spend time with a Malfoy if I didn't think there would be nothing to glean from it. Your day wasn't too awful, I hope?” he asked.

She scoffed, shrugging her shoulders dramatically. “Well, the reading part was nice. I figured I should read as much as I could now. Doubt there will be much time to do so in between caring for my five children and rubbing my husband's feet,” she spat venomously, her displeasure weighing down her words.

Tom chuckled, the action vibrating his chest as he said, “I’ve already told you, I don't intend to have children. But I certainly wouldn't be opposed to an occasional massage.” His laughter turned into a grunt of pain as Hermione pulled her arm back, jabbing his ribs sharply with her elbow. He rubbed at his side, frowning down at her. “If it helps to heal your pride a bit, we discussed the many opportunities at the Ministry I could pursue.”

“What sort of opportunities?” she asked, her eyes closing as she gave a contented sigh, his presence and touch once more stoking the calming flames of the mark.

“I've inquired about the International Office of Magical Law, but it's a bit tricky to get into. More political than the other branches and department and would rely far too heavily on campaigning than I'd like. But it would be the most beneficial, I believe. Abraxas suggested petitioning for the office of the Ministry itself, hopefully be able to secure a spot as the Junior Assistant to Minister in several years,” he explained, his voice somewhat gruff, tilted at the edge as if mocking something.

She rose a brow. “You don't like that idea?” She tried to make the question sound light, nonchalant as she examined the beds of her fingernails, chewing her lips. As if she didn't truly mind whichever path he chose to go through, even as her blood quickened and roared in her veins. She couldn't think of anything more disastrous than Lord Voldemort being placed within a power of authority.

“It's certainly something to consider. It would be an excellent opportunity to make connections, and if I find the right circle, well, it would allow me to have access to sensitive information I might not have otherwise. Not to mention the influence I could have in regards to laws and regulations...” he trailed off, waving a hand through the air.

She shifted against him. “Why don't you take it then?” she asked, the words a whisper.

“I'd be starting from the bottom tier. Grunt level work. I've never been one for grunt level work,” he said, his voice laden with disgust.

Hermione hummed in relief, finding herself for once grateful for his God complex. “You need people to work below you, not to work below people,” she stated, and he nodded in response.

“Exactly, Darling.”

“Perhaps it would be better than to pursue something else? Let others do the work for you. That's why you have them, isn't it? Those servants of yours? If you collect enough of them who are already implanted in the Ministry, it would leave you time to devote to more important matters than climbing up the political ladder.” It was what he had done in her own time, and it was the path she had intended for him to adhere to. More control, less variables.
He bowed his head, placing a kiss onto her curls. “Great minds think alike, don't they? Still, it will be some time before I can reach that level of success, unfortunately. I plan on traveling and continuing my research, I will need a job to fund such endeavors, and so it's still something to consider,” he said, a finality to his words that indicated it was the end of the discussion. There wasn't anymore to discuss, only decisions to be pondered and considered and made.

They sat in silence then, Hermione sinking further against him, her head nestled into his chest. His fingers entwined in her hair, pulling the curls taut and releasing them so that they sprung back, and the calm was so thick, so palpable within her that she might fall asleep right then and there. It was the effects of the mark, she knew; that whatever he had done to it made his touch and his presence like the strongest calming draught; a draught which she drank readily and hungrily.

“Tom, back in the orphanage, you said the mark you gave me was different. But how?” she asked, her words somewhat slurred. She blinked, pulling herself away from him and shaking her head as if to shake off the intoxication, blue eyes meeting hers with a dark, shadowed look to them.

“I've told you. You're not a servant, you're my Lady. It wouldn't do-”

She shook her head. “No, I mean how is it different? What did you do to it to make it special from the others?” When he said nothing, the muscles in his jaw creating dimples as it clenched tightly and released, she added, “You're hiding something from me, but whatever it is, it's fine. Everything else you've hidden from me, when you finally told me, it was fine. Just tell me. Can't be worse than murdering your own father can it?”

He exhaled a laugh, his gaze not wavering from hers as he moved along the sofa so that his back rested partially on the arm, creating a greater distance between them. “I'm afraid you just may consider it worse than patricide, yes.” He was quiet, but there was a playfulness to his voice, an almost challenge to them. Whatever it was he did, he knew she would not pleased, and it was as if he was bracing himself for her wrath.

But how bad could it have been, really? He did not know the depths of her insight, that she had seen everything he had done, everything he would do, and everything he was capable of. She was a bit harder to shock than he gave credit for, and she leaned forward, resting an arm on the back of the couch to support her. “I love you, you already know that. I'm certain that won't change,” she said.

Quiet, once more, fell between them, and just as she was ready to open her mouth, practically begging for him to just tell her, he sighed. “I changed the incantation for you. It took some doing, but I was able to combine the spell for the mark with several other preexisting charms.”

She licked her lips. “What charms?”

His eyes flicked upward, gazing at the ceiling. “The first was a binding charm. The original incantation already has trace elements of a binding charm to it, but that one is only to your magic. The one I added was one that bound souls,” he finally confessed, his gaze settling back down on her. His expression was thoughtful, as if searching her face for a reaction.

“A soul bind?” she parroted, chewing her lips. She had studied them once before, though not that extensively. They had simply fallen out of fashion somewhere in the late seventeen hundreds, with only several varieties used at present. Some incarnations were more dangers than others- the Unbreakable Vow being one of note.

A nasty one in particular stipulated that if one of the two soul bound were to die, the other one would follow. But she would bet all the galleons she had to her name that Tom would not use that one, not wanting to hinge his survival on another.
“That would explain the dreams I've had,” she said, more so to herself than Tom. Not to mention that pleasantness that enveloped her, her soul reaching out to the soul that it was bound to. “You said the first. What was the second charm?”

He did not hesitate this time. “Fidelity charm. Loyalty is very important to me, and I will not be made a fool of.”

“Fidelity charm? What sort?” she questioned, trying to sound offended, as if she was hurt by the very accusation that she might be unfaithful to him. Hurt, instead of curious, wanting to learn what the stipulations were of the contract she had unknowingly signed.

“Nothing to worry about, Darling,” he said, grinning wide. “I don't think that it is something you'll ever have to concern yourself with.”

She wanted to argue with him. Tell him that anything that involved her was certainly something to concern herself with. But she bit her lip on the words, deciding to let the conversation fade. It would be too suspicious if she asked too much about it, and so she would wait until a more opportune time.

“You look exhausted. We should retire,” he said, standing up suddenly and extending his hand for her, grinning wolfishly as he added, “And if you aren't properly exhausted yet, I can assist in the matter.”

Her face fevered at his words, her lips pinching shut. She scooted to the edge of the couch, settling her hand in his and allowing him to hoist her up. “Were there any more charms? You said I would consider it worse than patricide but those aren't bad at all,” she asked as he began to lead her through the library, walking slowly and carefully as he traipsed backwards, not breaking his eye contact with her.

“No, those were the only two. You have my word,” he said, coming to a stop as he pulled her flush against him, his hands settling on her hips and gripping into the smooth silk of the gown. He kissed her, tenderly and slowly, evoking a moan from deep within her throat.

He had always been a talented kisser- a disturbing prospect she tried not to think too further on- but the effects of the soul bond seemed to amplify the caress of his tongue on hers, his lips against her own. Her nerves were erratic, responding to the heat of his body and his touch eagerly, sending jolts of electricity through her spine. Heat pooled deep in her center, her nipples hardening and she rose her hands to tangle them in his soft hair.

Yet through the lust filled haze and the pleasure of his touch, there was something in the back of her head, something prickling at her. Those two charms, in combination...there was something about them. It tugged at something within her mind, fingers reaching out into the outskirts of thought and forgotten information. Her eyes narrowed, nostrils flared. They meant something but-

“Wait,” she said between panted breaths, pulling away from Tom and the dizzying feel of his kisses. “Did you keep the magic binding in the incantation as well, or did you replace it with the soul binding?”

“You're thinking too much about it. Let's get to bed-”

Soul bindings, magic bindings, and fidelity charms were only ever used in conjunction with one thing, and her jaw fell, eyes wide as she used the hands she had settled on Tom's shoulders to give him a mighty shove. “You unbelievable arse!” she screeched, hands balling into fists as Tom stumbled back, waving an arm in the air to steady himself.
“You didn't replace the magic binding with the soul one when you gave me the mark, did you?!” she yelled, her magic peeling off of her in waves that made her hair crackle with static. “Did you?!” she yelled again, when he had yet to answer.

“No, I didn’t,” he finally responded, his tone cool and unfazed and only making the anger unfolding within her greater.

“You mean to tell me that you married us then? And that you had no intention of telling me?” Her own shouts echoed in her ears, so loud and piercing that it became discordant noise, blaring incoherently.

He married her.

He told her he was giving her the Dark Mark, and instead he bloody married her! Tying their magic and their souls together whilst placing a fidelity charm for good measure on top of it all. Soul magic was almost entirely out of practice, except for during vows- of matrimony or the Unbreakable sort- and wedding ceremonies and bloody hell she was going to strangle him.

But she halted abruptly, lips pinching as she narrowed her eyes. “Was it a fidelity charm or a fidelity curse, Tom?” she hissed, icy and cold.

“It shouldn't matter,” he countered, his voice no longer the pleasant timber but the dangerously cold voice of Lord Voldemort.

“It does matter. A charm will merely alert you to my infidelity. A curse will kill me!”

He smirked, but it was not a kind or playful one. It was cruel and taunting. “Then I suppose it's in your best interest to not test the boundaries, isn't it?”

She scoffed, raising her hands only to entangle them in her hair, gripping around the strands and pulling at them in frustration. She was married. To Lord Voldemort. She was shaking with rage, with the indignation. “I didn't agree-” she began, words trembling as she attempted to contain her anger. The spells wouldn't have taken if she didn't agree, if she had been coerced into it. She hadn't even known!

“You did,” he interrupted. “You agreed to the mark. I'm hardly to blame because you neglected to find out all properties of a charm being used on your person.”

Her jaw clenched, swallowing thickly and painfully as if something was lodged in her throat. There had to be a loophole. “The spells wouldn't take unless the marriage was consummated within twenty-four hours,” she said, closing her eyes as she remembered the night she had received the mark. When the others had left and they had remained in the Room of Requirements, when he finally offered her all the secrets he had kept from her before lifting her up and making love to her. When she spoke again, it was a whisper. “You tricked me into marriage. You're a monster.”

He chuckled, the sound mocking and making her cheeks flame further. “You're just now learning this? How selfish you must be, to be so ignorant to my cruelty until it is aimed at you.”

She hadn't thought about it. The actions came before she could even examine what she was doing, her arm raising and jabbing her wand forward in a sharp, prodding motion. A bright light shot forth from the tip, colliding into Tom's chest before he could react, brows raised and blue eyes wide in surprise that she had actually attacked him.

He fell backward, landing on the floor with a thud and clutching at his chest, wincing from the effects of the stunning hex.
Just as quickly as she had acted, her reflex working faster than her reason, did the regret hit her, the immediate realization that she had just done a very stupid and dangerous thing. “Tom, I'm sorry—”

But she couldn't finish her frantic apologies, her wand ripped from her hands and flying through the air in an arc to land in his outstretched palm, looking absolutely murderous as he stood. She took several steps back as he rounded on her, moving impossibly fast, lips pulled into a snarl. He was in front of her, hands wrapping around her neck and giving it a firm squeeze, constricting her throat so that she was unable to breathe. She gasped out one final breath of air, struggling against his hold and stumbling backwards only for him to follow after her until her back collided with a towering bookcase.

He shoved her against it, and she winced in pain, her hands reaching up to his own and prying at his fingers, clawing desperately to pull them away. She was unable to, and her vision was swimming, his face blurring out of focus even as he leaned forward and his nose pressed against hers. “Make no mistake, Hermione. I am a monster. I have spared you the brunt of my monstrosity for so long, but test me and I will not continue to be so kind.”

She sputtered for air, and after several long drawn out seconds where he continued to crush into her windpipe, he finally stepped back, letting his hands fall to his side. She gasped, air stinging as it filled her lungs and she slid down to the floor, her knees drawn into her chest. He stepped back to give her more space, and when her breathing had finally evened and she was no longer taking large, greedy gulps of air, her wand was tossed at her feet, clattering on the floor.

“It's late. I'll be in our chambers if you care to join me, Mrs. Riddle,” he spat, lips curling into that lopsided facsimile of a smile, eyes glinting maliciously. And with that, he had gone, the door to the library slamming shut behind him.

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Hermione groaned in frustration, hands shaking for a moment before she swiped them across the desk, causing the tower of precariously placed books to fall to the floor. It was a sight that might have concerned anyone who knew her, the sort of thing that would make someone place a palm to your head, make certain you were well. Neither Hermione Granger nor Hermione Dumbledore treated books poorly, and she always took care in making sure they were placed back into their proper place on the shelf.

But, she supposed, she wasn't either one of them anymore. She was Hermione Riddle and her body was teeming with anger, exhaustion and the unfulfilled feeling that came with being unable to find your answers no matter how hard you looked. Her jaw ached from her clenching, and she had spent the better part of five hours grinding the crowns of her teeth together. Her mother would admonish her if she could see the damage she had done!

She stomped away from the desk, running a hand through her curls and growling to the empty room. She could kill him. How dare he think that he have the right to do such a thing without her permission! Without even her knowledge!

How long would he let her go on, unaware that she had been married? Did he intend to tell her at all?

Her hand fell from her hair to her neck, fingertips brushing over the tender and bruised flesh. She should be excited, really, that he was growing more comfortable with her. That he was revealing more and more of his true colors to her by the day. And she knew that it would be foolish to think that she may be untouchable, that he would not harm her even when his temper blossomed and exploded. She may be his Lady, but she was still a servant of his, and just as he would punish them if
they failed him, she too would face his wrath.

She whirled around, her wand extended as a bolt of red shot out from it and crashed into the desk she had been sitting at. The air boomed, crackled, followed by the sound of wood splintering as the desk exploded, broken pieces of it falling to the floor with a clatter. Dust and finely ground flecks of wood created a billowing cloud, coating the rug and marble tiles. Her chest rose, expanding with a deep inhale as she closed her eyes, releasing it slowly in a hiss.

Destroying antique and heirloom furniture was perhaps not the most productive coping mechanism, but it certainly felt good. Especially knowing that it all belonged to the Malfoys. It might have been petty of her, but she could hardly care.

After a moment of composing herself, trying to steady her breathing and pressing a palm to her head and the growing ache, she extended her wand once more. The desk righted itself, fragments of it spinning through the air and combining with others, fitting together like pieces of a puzzle. Legs noisily clanked on the floor as it totted once, twice and three times before settling.

It wasn't perfect- if she looked closely she could see little fissures in the grain of mahogany, fault lines from where her hex had shattered it. But it was still handsome and she was certain that none of the Malfoys paid attention well enough to any of their many possessions to notice.

She knelt beside the pile of books, waving her hand in the air and sending them flying back onto the shelves. It would be daylight soon, and she had no intention of leaving the library until she knew exactly what sort of bonds were placed on her. Surely, one of these books had to have the answer.

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Abraxas Malfoy drawled on about the business he attended to the month prior, oblivious to Tom's waning interest as he flourished his hand through the air. It had something to do with legislation passed in America in regards to werewolves and other half-breeds, a hearty bulk of limitations placed on their freedoms and autonomy in regard to registration. It was met with great outcry from the few groups founded in the hopes of liberation, but was ultimately passed, and it had inspired Malfoy to push for similar, more restrictive laws upon his return.

“It's honestly absurd, how much our Ministry lets them get away with. Personally I think execution would be the best approach, of course. Better them than our children, wouldn't you agree? Not to mention all the added work it pushes onto our boys in the Muggle Liaison Office. Pity, really, how much effort we put into ensuring that the muggles are safe from those monsters while some of our own are forced to work alongside them. Live beside them, even! Could you imagine?” Abraxas prattled on, though there was hardly a point in answering any of the questions he lobbed off. They were nothing more than ornamentation for his words, not quite an invitation into the conversation as it was a show that yes, he was aware that someone else was in the room, but that he found anything they had to say far less interesting than what he had to share.

It was grating, really, and typically Tom would rise to the challenge, wedging his own words in between the spaces of his question marks and the trail that led to a new thought. But his mind was distracted, and he found himself thankful for the reprieve in idle talk and ego smoothing.

He had not seen Hermione since the incident in the library, and her refusal to seek him out was wearing on his patience. He could feel her, her lingering anger and betrayal within the pit of his stomach, buried so deep within his chest that if he were not a wiser man he might have surmised it as being the effects of hunger and nothing more.

Perhaps it had been a bit of an oversight to not tell her of his plans, making certain she understood
what exactly he was casting upon her when he did. If he were being honest, it was really only a matter of convenience. Soul bonds and fidelity curses were far more efficient when there was a mark that they were bound to, something physical and tangible to act as an anchor for the various charms. And he couldn’t imagine that if he had done it properly—getting down on one knee and all that other degrading nonsense—that she would have been foolish enough to spurn him.

Really, he wasn’t entirely certain why she was so angry to begin with. It was a matter of practicality and efficiency, and if she ever managed to find which bounds and charms he used in particular (because it wasn’t even a doubt in his mind that she had spent the past evening and day perusing the library for answers) she would surely agree with him. It wasn’t as if she was the romantic sort, fantasizing all day long about a gown of virgin white and trailing veil, cooing over golden bands topped with glittering gems. Did she even care for the cliches of it, weddings and all the pomp and circumstance? He hadn’t really thought she would, if he were being honest.

And yet, she was still furious with him, the emotions coiling around his ribs ever so slightly. She was furious and indignant and acting far too dramatic about it all. She was married, not dying. Surely, accepting the Dark Mark and all the expectations that came with it was far more of a commitment. She had already signed away her soul and future to him, what did it matter at that point if she was to hand him everything else?

“-Anyway, have you considered the options we discussed? In regards to the Ministry positions? I know you were wary of them, though I’m not entirely sure why. There are certainly a great deal of perks to be had, not to mention you could rub elbows with many an influential wizard. It never hurts to make friends in high places. That was something my father used to tell me all the time when I was growing up—he worked in the Ministry as well, though he resigned after all the sympathy for muggles business—” Abraxas began, drawing Tom’s attention away from his thoughts of the fiery witch.

Tom rose a brow, interrupting the unending parade of words as he said, “No, I’m afraid I still am not certain of it. I don’t quite fancy having to kiss the shoes of lesser men.”

Abraxas smirked, bringing a glass filled with amber liquid to his lips. “Lesser men though they may be, many of them have the right strings and sway to get what you need. Kissing shoes is a small price to pay for that sort of elitism,” he said, settling the rim of the glass onto his mouth and taking a sip.

Tom said nothing, looking into the fireplace and at the cracking, yellow tips of the flame. There was a grain of truth to that statement, he begrudgingly admitted. But how long would he be required to bow down before them upon the dirty floor until they bowed to him? A year? Five years? A decade? There was no time stamp on it, no guarantee that the right positions would be available at the right time for him to make his climb through the ranks (with as little feet kissing as possible, thank you) and it would perhaps be a bit suspicious if the occupier of a title or position just happened to die at the exact moment Tom became a prime candidate for it.

There would be many opportunities for him, if he joined the Ministry, but also far more eyes watching his every move.

He never liked to be under close watch.

The door to the drawing room opened, and both men turned at the sound of it, brows raising as Hermione closed it behind her. She looked a state, her hair an awful frizzy mess, clinging to her sweat slicked skin, and her face was pale, a sickly sheen tinting it. A tongue poked out, running over chapped and white lips. Yet despite this, she was grinning widely. Smugly.

“Is there a problem with Edora?” Malfoy asked, annoyed by the intrusion.
Hermione’s grin did not falter, even as she stepped into the room and moved towards them, settling down on the dark leather sofa that sat between the two armchairs. “Edie is fine. An absolute delight, actually. She just settled in for some supper- we spent the whole day studying in the library,” she answered, sounding entirely too chipper.

Tom narrowed his eyes at her curiously, cocking his head to try to catch her gaze which she ardently avoided. She was up to something- that much was certain- and he found himself intrigued by the innocent batting of her eyelashes as she looked to Abraxas, her hands clasped over her knees. She had changed back into her muggle clothes, smoothing fingers over a plain and unadorned skirt and her toes curled underneath worn plaid socks. She held a book against her, at her side, tucked protectively under her arm, and Tom skewed his lips as he strained to see it.

Abraxas frowned. “And what exactly are you doing here, then?”

She sunk back against the cushions, thumbs twiddling over each other as her grin became even wider, hollowing out her cheeks so that it looked painful. “Well, I've felt absolutely terrible all day. I asked Pippy for some potions, but none of them seemed to do the trick. Of course, when I finally realized why I was feeling so ill, I immediately felt ridiculous for not seeing it sooner. I left Edie in Pippy's care, and came to join you lot, as it were. Doctor's orders, I suppose you could say,” she explained, her words sing song, the way a child might speak when they felt like they just did something very clever.

“And why might coming here be a better decision than consulting a mediwitch? Or merely heading to bed?”

Her shoulders squared, eyes gleaming as if this was what she had been waiting for and anticipating. “Well, I'm not sure if my husband had the opportunity to tell you-” she began, pulling the book out from under her arm and into her lap, flipping it open to a page that was marked by a thin, leather strip.

“Husband?” Abraxas repeated, eyes widened, incredulous, as he spared a glance at Tom.

He nodded. “Yes, husband,” he said in confirmation, his own curiosity getting the best of him. What exactly was she planning?

“So he didn't tell you then?” she asked, sounding not at all surprised by the fact, tongue clucking behind teeth. Though why would she be surprised? He didn't even tell her about it. “We married just before the summer. Though I suppose I can't be mad at him that he didn't tell you. We intended to keep it as quiet as possible, of course. If my cousin knew about it he wouldn't stand for it at all. He would have me shipped off to some school in Australia before I could even finish the invitations.” She was lying, flawlessly, glancing at Abraxas with playful eyes and making wild gestures.

“But that is besides the point. When we married, we chose to use the Cassavetes Soul Bind instead of something more modern and- I'm sorry, are you not familiar with that?” she paused midway through her explanation, brows furrowed in question. She sounded contrite, but Tom knew better. She was mocking Malfoy, hiding behind long lashes and wide eyes so that the man was none the wiser.

Abraxas gritted his teeth. “No, I'm not-”

She handed the book to him then, ushering it into his hands as she spoke rather quickly, her words pitched and breathy. ‘It's a very old bond, one of the first of its kind. It was unique from the other soul bonds of the time, as it didn't bind two people mortally. An answer to a growing problem. As witches become more independent and relied less on their spouses, they demanded to have more
liberation with their mortality as well. Some called it a desire to live as widows, but that's incredibly ignorant, as just as many men were susceptible to die with their spouse as a result of soul bounds. This was made particularly worse when one factored in the increased chances of death occurring at childbirth, resulting in many orphaned infants.” Abraxas looked from the pages of the tome to her, the sound of stiff and old paper being turned crinkling through the room.

“The Cassavetes Bond corrected this problem. It did, however, have the unfortunate habit of making the witches and wizards tied with it quite ill. While it wasn't a mortal connection, it was still a very deep one, and it caused great distress during prolonged periods of separation, particularly turbulent fights or simply mutual distress. Some could even die as a result of it.”

“Forgive me, Miss Dumbledore-”

“Mrs. Riddle,” Hermione corrected, lips twisting into a smirk.

Abraxas pursed his lips, looking as if he just sucked on a lemon. “Mrs. Riddle, then. But what does this have to do with your intrusion on our private meeting?” he asked.

Tom spoke now, clearing his throat. “I believe she is referring to a law passed in 1256. Making it illegal to detain information from someone regarding their spouse. The law stated that doing so caused the soul bound to become distraught—literally sick with worry, if you will— and was often considered cruel, not to mention the unnecessary risk it posed.” When Abraxas only blinked in response, his brow furrowing, Tom added, “It was never abolished, even when more modern soul bonds fell into fashion that eliminated the need for such protective laws. In other words, she's claiming that you keeping her from these private meetings is harming her, and you can be held responsible for it.”

Hermione finally turned to look at Tom, her brown eyes blinking, lips curving into a small smile; thankful, perhaps. It was a lie of course— he hadn't used the Cassavetes Bond at all, not even for reference. And he was certain she knew that.

But it was a lie, a well spun one, and if it got her what she wanted, who was he to step on her toes? If he were being honest, he quite enjoyed her show, the faux innocence of her wide and curious eyes, the patronizing tone she had laced quite nicely around her words. Not to mention how well she sold it all, lying with ease.

Plus, it had the marvelous effect of making Abraxas sputter and glower, and Tom had brought his own cup of tea to his lips to hide the tilt of his smile.

“Why exactly did you choose such an archaic and dangerous soul bond when safer, more modern ones exist?” Abraxas asked, his tone terse.

Hermione twirled a curl around her finger, her head ducked down towards her lap to hide her grin. “I suppose you could say we’re a bit traditionalist.”

Tom laughed into his tea, turning the sound into a cough.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I've been so excited to get Abraxas into the story as a permanent fixture because I always intended for him and Hermione to bat heads and I just enjoy it so.
Drag him, Hermione. I'm also excited to finally have Hermione begin to properly manipulate Tom's future to her liking, with no secrets about his intent between them.

Up next: Hermione and Tom have a much needed chat and she receives a package. And upon their return to Hogwarts, they attract some rather unfortunate attention.
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Vulnerable

“Have you ever been in love? Horrible isn’t it? It makes you so vulnerable. It opens your chest and it opens up your heart and it means that someone can get inside you and mess you up.”
-Neil Gaiman, The Kindly Ones

Hermione sank into the curve of the large, porcelain bath, her head resting against the lip. Much like the luxurious tubs in the Prefects' lavatories at Hogwarts, the one attached to her chambers at Malfoy Manor was also sunken in, a well in the floor as opposed to a standing fixture. It was entirely too large for simply one person, and it might have taken an hour alone to fill if not for the numerous faucets around the basin, dividing the circle into quarters and dispensing water as if it were a stream, bubbling miniature waterfalls over boulders.

There were soap dispensers as well, scented like lavender and vanilla and eucalyptus, and she considered them, a finger to her lips before finally settling on basil, the fresh, earthy aroma wafting around the tiled room within moments. She inhaled deeply, swishing her legs through the water and creating ripples unseen beneath the surface of foaming bubbles.

Tom and Malfoy's meeting had ended only moments earlier, the latter of the two terse and irate through the remaining hours of the conversation, sparing Hermione sharpened glares. She was hardly bothered by it, of course, lips clamped into a tight line to prevent them from rising into a smug, triumphant grin. She was not a babysitter nor a tutor, and it was best for all parties involved if Abraxas learned better than to treat her as such.

'Serves him right, the prat,' she thought, turning at the sound of a solid oak door swinging upon brass hinges. She scowled at Tom, her eyes narrowing as he entered the lavatory, closing the door behind him and coming to stand just beside her. It irritated her, that she had to tilt her head back so far to meet his gaze, the ends of her hair- held up in a hairband- dipping into the frothing tufts of bubbles. She slung an arm across her chest, attempting to seem less vulnerable, less naked and exposed.

“I'm still mad with you,” she said, her words tight and clipped.

He looked down at her, his frown looking deeper than it was from her angle, and he shifted, sitting down beside the tub and crossing his legs, hands settling where his calves met. He was silent, eyes glancing around the room introspectively- to the arched casements of the stained glass windows, to the marble tiles that covered the floor and scaled the walls, glossy and reflective in the light from the chandelier that hung in the center, right above the tub.

When Hermione was just about ready to huff in annoyance, he said, “I can get you a ring, if you'd like.”
She blinked, lips parting. “I...I don't want a ring, Tom.”

He sighed, a sound of irritation. “Well then, a proper ceremony, if you want. You'll have to plan it though- I haven't got time for-”

“I don't want that either,” she interrupted, her tone lilted, incredulous. “I don't want any gifts, or a party. I want an apology. I want you to treat me like a person instead of a possession for you to mark your territory on.”

He pursed his lips. “Surely, you've spent enough time researching it to know that tying the same binds to a physical mark- such as the mark I gave you- make them all far more potent and efficient.”

“I did. Though I'm having a bit of trouble in seeing how that impeded you from asking me first?” Tom Riddle might have been one of the most intelligent students Hogwarts had ever seen, he might have been wonderfully talented at pretending to be anything other than the monster he was, but he was abysmal at understanding the emotions of another. No matter how convincing his portrayal, no matter how masterfully he acted, he was simply incapable of it.

She should have been angry- insulted- and yet, it was sad, if she really thought about it. He wasn't just unable to feel love, he was unable to feel anything at all. Not sympathy nor empathy, not happiness or joy or the desire to celebrate. She could not even begin to fathom why- whether it was because he was conceived in lies and manipulations and false love, whether he was raised without a mother or father to smooth his hair, to kiss away his tears. Or perhaps it was simply just a cruel hand of fate, a luck of the draw. In the same vain that some people are born with unprecedented ingenuity, one in a hundred thousand child prodigies.

It might have been all these reasons, or none of them at all. But nothing except anger and hatred and jealousy twisted within him, his heart a sad and pathetic thing behind the prison bars of his ribs. They would contort him, distort him until he was just as hideous and terrifying on the outside as he had always been, every smile the ghost of something fleeting. No horcruxes or worship could never capture the feeling of happiness or triumph for too long.

Perhaps that was why he had continued his unending quest to rule the world in her own time, chasing after anything that brought him even a sliver, a modicum of euphoria. No matter the juggernaut he would become, he would always be a little boy, foreign to the two worlds he straddled between and all the humans, magic or muggle, and the multitude of emotions that might as well have been an unsolvable puzzle to him.

She raised a hand, pressing it against her forehead, a bead of water sliding down the bridge of her nose. “You should have just asked me. I would have said yes.” It wasn't as if she was in any position to say no.

“I apologize,” he said, and she nearly snorted at the insincerity of it. “I simply thought it was more practical. Not to mention a proper ceremony would have required documentation.”

“Merlin forbid anyone knows you married a Dumbledore,” she muttered, swishing a hand through a cloud of bubbles. “Though I suppose I understand the necessity of it. You still intend for me to be a spy on my cousin, and a marriage license would put a quick halt to that. Not to mention how easily a marriage could implicate me in your endeavors. Neither of which really explains why you couldn't at least tell me before hand. Arse.”

Tom chuckled. “Name calling will you get you nowhere, Mrs. Riddle.”

“It will make me feel better,” she mumbled, sinking further into the water and finally turning to look
at him. “It makes you no less of a monster, however.”

He rose a brow, lips quirking into a small smile. “I believe the fact that you love a known monster says more about you than the monster in question.” His smile grew, dark blue eyes flicking down before returning her face, a mischievous glint in them. “Of course, if you'd like, I'm sure we can think of some creative ways I can make it up to you?” A hand reached out, fingertips gliding over shoulders, and she shivered despite the heat of the water and the billows of steam emanating around her. He chuckled at how responsive she was, his hand slipping over the curve of her breasts and disappearing beneath the bubbles on the surface, fingers pressing flat over the plane of her stomach.

She huffed, irate that he believed something so serious could be swept under the rug. That all would be forgiven once the bed sheets were rumpled and they both lay prone and satiated. Yet, there was no point in maintaining distance or her grudge; there would be no sincere apologies or understanding of what he had done wrong. He would only grow more furious, and his fury was not something she wanted to be subject to if she could help it. She winced at the remembrance of his fingers clasped around her neck, bearing down on her with all his might while she gasped for air.

No, best to choose her battles where it mattered. Some causes simply weren't worth fighting for.

His hand had slipped further down her body, the water saturating the sleeve of his oxford that had been rolled to his elbow as his fingers lightly massaged the dampened curls at her center. He had leaned forward, propped on his knees and braced himself against her with his other hand clasped over her shoulder for support, his lips brushing against the shell of her ear. “Mind if I join you?” he asked, the words warm against her ear, the spark that ignited a bolt of electricity to shoot down her spine, pooling in her stomach. She bit her lip, silencing a groan. There was something decadent about his voice- the soft timber, the command the lurked beneath.

She nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak, worried that her voice might waver with the anger that had yet to abate and the burgeoning arousal.

He pulled away from her, the air of the lavatory feeling suddenly colder without him pressed against her. She heard the sound of his clothes falling to the floor, the metallic clang of his belt buckle as it hit against the tile. And then he was slipping into the tub beside her, the water swooshing against her and curved edge as he disrupted the stillness, tufts of scented bubbles displaced, turning to froth. In another swift movie, he was before her, a knee slipping between thighs and nudging them apart, making room for himself between her legs, his hands gripping onto her hips.

“I know this isn't the honeymoon you may have imagined, but we can make arrangements after graduation, if you'd like.” He pulled her tight against him, settling her on his lap, his head bowing as he traced his lips along the curve of her neck. She let her head fall to the side, allowing him better access as her eyes fluttered close. She could feel his erection wedged between them, and after a moment of hesitation, rubbed herself against him wantonly, grinning smugly when he groaned lowly.

She moved in slow, languid motions, relishing in the way he tensed beneath her, nails digging into her skin as he struggled to maintain his even composure.

“I think it's the least you could do for your wife,” she muttered bitterly, barely loud enough for him to hear her.

But he did hear her, and he chuckled, dipping his head down further to place soft kisses along her collar bone, slick from the water. “Don't worry. Soon enough, I'll give you the world, my love.”

-xXx-

The tip of Hermione's quill brushed against her chin, the plume of the feather tickling her. She could
hear the sound of water droplets colliding with tiles, echoing in the spacious lavatory. It was early morning, their chambers in Malfoy Manor awash in the golden and orange hue of the sun as it rose over the horizon. The large, arched windows that made up the entirety of one wall allowing as much light as possible in, and Hermione had found herself drawn to it, charming the writing table and chair to sit pressed against the center window instead of where it had been tucked into a corner, forgotten.

A leather bound journal was placed on the table, open and glimmering with magic, charmed to hide the words written within its pages so only she could decipher them. To anyone else, it would appear as some idle musings, thoughts that were grasped and captured and written down on page before they could run away, to-do lists and doodles and notes hastily written down from independent research. Nothing of concern, nothing of interest.

But to Hermione, it was more concise. Large chunks of paragraphs under dates, the exact details of everything that occurred within the marked day, of every conversation shared between her and Tom, between Abraxas. Every opportunity considered, every path laid before the Dark Lord.

'August 17. Abraxas has spent the majority of the day at the office, not arriving home until nearly eight in the evening. There was an attack in Berlin, lead by one of Grindelwald's most trusted follower, a wizard named Artemis Lent. A total of seven casualties, five of which being our own men. Two Aurors from our Ministry, three from another. The Auror department is woefully undermanned, and Abraxas asked Tom if he might consider such a position as opposed to more political pursuits. Tom did not seem pleased with the idea, but we were unable to discuss further as Abraxas made an abrupt leave and Tom wished to retire...'

She sighed, placing the quill down as she leaned back in her chair and rubbed a hand over her face. She doubted Tom would even consider working among Aurors- there wasn't much leverage to be gained from such a path, least not the sort he wanted. But that didn't mean it didn't have perks of its own. Access to all sorts of dark artifacts, to dark witches and wizards whom he could manipulate, who would sympathize with him and his ideals and could be coaxed ever so easily down the precipice to his side. He could familiarize himself with the mechanisms of the department, the strengths and the failings, could control and distort crime scenes to his liking.

They hadn't discussed any of this, but she would bet every galleon to her name that Tom had already considered all of this to himself. Perhaps he was thinking of it now while he showered, weighing each option with care and thought against the other.

They had been at Malfoy's for over a month now, and he was no closer to making a decision than the day they arrived. She wasn't certain if that was necessarily a good thing. After all, the sooner he made a choice, the sooner she could plan around it.

There was a tap on the glass of one of the windows, and she startled, looking out to see a fat, tawny owl hovering just beyond the partition, struggling with the weight of a large package. "Oh!" she exclaimed as she jumped from her seat, flicking the latch forward and shoving the window open. The owl swooped in, bringing with it a gust of cold morning air on his wings, feathers flapping noisily. He came to a clumsy landing on the bed, shaking indignantly, the feathers on his neck ruffling with the burden of his package. She rushed towards the creature, untying the parcel from his legs, muttering thank yous followed by apologies for not having any treats for him. He hooted in response, shaking his head at her as if to chide her for her impropriety before flying back out through the window, becoming nothing but a slim silhouette in the sky in a matter of seconds.

She turned her attention back to her delivery, the package wrapped in brown papers, a letter taped to it, her name written across the envelope in elegant, familiar script. Dumbledore's writing.
She plucked the letter from it, sliding a finger under the lip of the envelope with ease and tossing it back down on the bed as she unfolded the parchment.

My Dear Hermione-

I hope you are settling in well and that Malfoy is offering you the appropriate amount of hospitality. (She snorted here, lips quirking into a grin.) Let me begin by saying that this letter has multiple charms placed upon it, and that the true contents of it will only be revealed to you and myself. You do not need to worry about prying eyes.

Now, the package, as I'm sure you have assumed by now, is the book you have requested of Antheia. I perused it myself, and thankfully nothing within it appears to be of any concern should Tom take it upon himself to give it a read. Antheia, however, needs it returned to her as promptly as possible, as she had to pull quite a few strings to procure it. Due to the nature of the book, it has been charmed to prevent any copies from being made of its text, so I'm afraid you will have to hand write anything of interest. When you are finished doing so, please send me an owl with it in tow.

Also, I'm sure you haven't given it much thought considering everything you have on your plate, but at the start of term you will be required to select a course of study for your future plans. Might I offer the suggestion of a mediwitch with a specialty in dark curses? Certainly Tom will see the value in having an accomplished healer in his ranks, and our side would benefit greatly as well, especially seeing as how you will have first-hand knowledge of what curses we might be up against. Just a suggestion, of course.

I look forward to seeing you in just a few weeks. I'm sure we will have much to discuss, so please attempt to meet with me on the first few days of classes for tea and biscuits. Wispy has learned this new recipe that is an absolute delight and you must try them!

I hope all is well.

-A.

P.S. Ishtar is doing well, though she has a bit of a mean streak I'm afraid. Haven't seen a gnome in some time. I suspect they are either in hiding or have been the unfortunate victims of a massacre. She is considerably plumper.

Hermione smiled at that, setting the letter down on the table and casting an incendio on it, flames bursting from the center of the parchment and easily consuming the rest of it, the corners curling in the heat. Charmed though it may be, there was no reason she needed to tempt fate any further by leaving it around. Best to cover all her tracks within a pile of glowing ashes and embers.

She cleaned up the evidence before turning to the rest of the package, tearing the paper away to reveal the tome. It was in much better shape now than it had been in her own time, the spine neat and not yet creased, only one corner had worn away at the leather, revealing the frayed and sturdy board that held it all together. The lettering- silver and embossed- was entirely intact, and she could read the cover and author with ease. Ancient Runes and their Efficacy with Magick and Potions.

“What's that?”

She rose her gaze to see Tom standing just outside the lavatory, wearing nothing but a towel tied at his waist. He was still soaked from his shower, too curious to the sounds of her unwrapping something to dry himself off with a quick wave of his hand, his hair in dampened wisps that curled against his forehead. His torso glistened with the beads of water, and she blushed, scowling when he rose a brow and smirked.
“Nothing you haven't seen before, darling,” he said, taking several strides towards her and reaching out to grasp her wrist, turning it over slightly to see the cover of the book. His eyes instantly gleamed, a sharpness to them. “Is this it then?”

She nodded, allowing him to take it from her as he began to flick through the pages, scanning them quickly before turning it over. “I believe it was Marloff's Elixir of Everlasting Youth,” she said, craning her neck better to see each page as he flipped through. Every so often, he would take a bit longer to turn the page, his hand rising to the top right corner and bending it down to mark it for later examination before he would move onward. Thank Merlin Dumbledore had the foresight to read through it before sending it over; she would have driven herself mad trying to hide it from Tom until she was certain it was safe.

“Ah,” he muttered, his hand coming to rest in the center of the book, holding the middle of it down with the heel of his palm. She leaned forward, settling a steady grip on his forearm as she read through the introduction of the potion. She hadn't realized she was reading aloud, under her breath, until Tom narrowed his eyes at her, hissing in annoyance before pointedly flipping the page when she had not finished it.

She mumbled an apology, but it went unnoticed as he rose his chin, frowning at her. “You find this preferable to a horcrux?” The question was punctuated with raised brows, an incredulous look in his eyes and a lift to his voice. Mocking, condescending.

She folded her arms over her chest. “What's wrong with it?”

“What isn't? It's incredibly daunting and time consuming- six months to brew, Hermione, really? Incredibly difficult- not to say I couldn't do it of course, but it would certainly be a testament to my ability. Plus the ingredients...unethical and illegal is merely the tip of the iceberg. I haven't even heard of half of these, which is enough to tell me that they aren't the sort of things one can come by easily. And the ones I have heard of?” He paused, exhaling a breath though his nose as he shook his head. “You know what they say about consuming unicorn's blood, of course?”

She snorted ungracefully at his words, unable to stop her eyes from rolling at the irony of it all. Who was he to chide her about using unicorn's blood? “That I'll live a cursed life? I think I'm already quite cursed, seeing as who I have for a husband and whose home I'm currently in. I never would have taken you for the superstitious sort,” she said, thankful that he had smirked at her tirade instead of responding in anger at her words.

“I don't put any stock in silly stories, of course. The only curses I believe in are the ones which I employ quite readily, thank you.” He closed the book shut, specks of dust floating through the air, golden and brilliant in the light and he handed it to her. “It will do for now once we've researched the other ingredients, but I still insist on a horcrux. Far more efficient. Remind me to recruit a Potions Master. Certainly they'll come in handy in many aspects.”

She pursed her lips, teeth digging into the soft flesh as she held the book to her chest. Carefully collected pawns, lined up in a row in a game of chess. Commanded outward to battle, ready to fight and die to protect the King and Queen. Her stomach clenched violently, and she was thankful that she had not eaten yet, that there was nothing to expel.

He disappeared back into the lavatory, not bothering to close the door. It wasn't as if there was anything between them to hide anymore. Husband and wife. Lord and Lady. For better or worse. Til death would they part.

She followed after him, wrapping her fingers around the doorknob and resting her shoulder against the dark mahogany framing of the door. He had tossed the towel aside, had used a wandless drying
spell on himself and was in the process of tying a belt around his trousers, cinching them on his narrow hips.

“Tom,” she began, and he hummed in response, not bothering to look at her as he continued to dress. “What do you think of me studying to become a mediwitch?”

Dumbledore had been correct in his belief that she had not given it much thought—she was far too occupied with which career Tom would set his sights on to even begin to explore her options. There were far more important things than herself and her place within the world.

He finally met her gaze, pausing in his buttoning of the clean and pressed white oxford. His hair had turned into a state she was certain he would never allow anyone but her to see, defiant curls falling out of their usual place. It was messy and untidy by his strict standards, and she quite liked it. It made him look innocent. Normal, even. Like the proper seventeen year old he was, concerned only by school and friends and witches with ample breasts and demure eyes.

Was this what he might look like if he had not become the man he was, the rotten and hideous monster lurking within the shell of someone beautiful? Was this what Tom Riddle might look like if he was anything but Tom Riddle, wild curls to match her own? Easy smiles that were not a front for something else, something insidious?

“Mediwitch?” he asked, his tone cold and sharp and immediately shattering any illusion she might have had of him being normal. Of a world where he and Lord Voldemort were not synonymous.

“You are always saying that you need a healer. And I'm certain the others wouldn't mind having someone a bit more accomplished than Nott to tend to their wounds after you've been let loose on them,” she said with a small smile.

“We can get a healer elsewhere. Wouldn't you rather put your skills to something else?”

“Healers do require a lot of skills. Potion making, charms, knowledge of curses and their counters, transfiguration. Besides, it would appease Dumbledore, would it not? Surely, he would never think me capable of any violence if I dedicated my life to healing?” It was sound reasoning, and she knew Tom would agree with her. Anything that would provide him the upper hand over the older wizard was often something of interest. After all, hadn't that been the only reason he had wanted her to begin with? Sure, she was talented, an experienced dueler at any age, let alone so young. They were merely bonuses, the thick and sweet icing atop an already decadent cake. What he really wanted her for was the namesake, the ability and knowledge to distort a Dumbledore, carve her into his own. He had already made her a Riddle, had already severed what few, tenuous connections existed between her and her supposed cousin.

She had been, at first, nothing more than a novelty. A victory. And Tom Riddle would take any other victory he could–he was nothing but greed and anger and hatred and jealousy.

He was silent as he grabbed a comb from the vanity, running it through his black tresses, taming the curls. She had to grasp hold of her own wrist to stop herself from reaching out and ruining his efforts, mussing his hair as if doing so would make him any less calculating. Any less of a Dark Lord.

When his hair was in it's usual coif, the wave of one particularly stubborn curl hanging over his forehead, he turned to face her, his head cocked to the side. “No matter what path you would decide to take, you would excel. I've no need for you in the Ministry- to be perfectly honest, I think it best to keep you as far away as possible in fact. Too much attention, too many eyes.” He considered her, his dark blue eyes unwavering, still as a painting, nothing more than brushstrokes and glossy oils. “Healer would be suitable, then. I suppose I'd rather have someone I trust attending to me and my
men, and who better than my lady?"

She shifted her weight against the door frame, inclining her chin to hold his gaze as he closed the distance between them, hands settling firmly on her shoulder. “You’d be trusting me with your life,” she said simply, a statement.

He smirked. “An honor I would only bestow upon you, of course. And not one to be taken lightly.”

“It is the greatest honor of all,” she breathed, a wide grin splitting her face in two. He trusted her. When he was at his most vulnerable, when his hair curled in a manner that he would otherwise deem unacceptable, when he was hurt or sick. He trusted her with his life.

A terrible mistake, really.

xXx

The summer had ended, the beginning of September sweeping upon them in heavy currents of rain, thick sheets of it flowing down the streets. Hermione was eager to leave, her belongings neatly packed and ready for departure a week in advance.

“Malfoy's been such a wonderful host,” Tom had teased when he saw her methodically placing items in her trunk so early, murmuring under her breath. She had thrown a blouse at him in turn.

When the time had come to leave, she had received nothing but a taciturn goodbye from Abraxas, a warm hug from Edie. When Tom had left briefly to procure the portkey that would send them to King's Cross station, Abraxas had leaned forward, his handsome and regal face marred by a deep scowl. “Pity that he has set his sights so low on you. He could be running the Ministry in a decade's time, you're aware. You should be grateful for his attention to you. I would hardly consider a witch such as yourself a prize if you were my wife.”

She had only grinned in response, eyes sparkling. “Dear Abraxas, not being your wife is the greatest prize I can imagine.” Her tone had been cutting despite her sweet smile, causing the scowl to become a snarl.

But Tom had arrived before anything further could occur, and after a firm handshake and a promise to keep in touch, they had left Malfoy Manor behind.

It was as if taking a gulp of fresh air after having been submerged underwater, the oppressive weight of the Manor lifter off her chest. It was crowded in King's Cross, and the floor was muddy and dingy from the people that passed through, bringing with them the poor weather. Umbrellas were shaken out, depositing even more grime. Everything echoed and boomed within the high ceilings, every sound louder than it should have been.

Despite all this, it was still much more of a relief to Hermione, the beginning of a wonderful trip that took her to exactly where she wanted to be more than anything. Home. Hogwarts's.

Even if it was the dungeons she would retire to, wearing a silver and green tie and sinking beneath emerald bedding. It was still home. And that alone made her grin widely as she entered the train, finding a compartment that was soon filled with the closest she had to familiar, friendly faces. Nott, Rosier, Dolohov and Mulciber entered with kind greetings, arranging themselves in the proper order wordlessly. Tom sat beside the window, Hermione nestled tightly into his side, an arm slung around her. Nott was to her right, the three of them opposite Mulciber, Rosier and Dolohov respectively.
Conversation quickly turned to Tom's exploits, each curious as to what path their feared leader had settled on. When Tom informed them of how Abraxas had suggested joining the Aurors, raucous laughter broke out among them.

“Talk about know thine enemy,” Nott had muttered, following it up with, “Probably more openings, though. From what I've heard, Grindelwald has practically laid flat that entire department. Killed almost fifty Aurors in total over the summer, most from the German and Bulgarian Ministry but still. The Minister has even allowed use of the Unforgivables in capturing his men. A bit too late, some might argue.”

Rosier chuckled. “Well, at least you've got that going Riddle. Free use of the Unforgivables. Sweetens the deal.”

Tom frowned. “I am not joining the Aurors. Nothing but boorish, brainless fools who would rather be told the definition of justice than to decipher a meaning for themselves. Magical Law seems most appealing, and I doubt I'd have difficulty finding an audience to rally behind me. Though I would loathe the campaigning itself. So tedious.”

“Not the sort to kiss babies?” Hermione teased, prodding her elbow into his side.

“I'd rather kiss a dementor,” he responded, his tone flat, quite genuine in his sentiment. Before the conversation could continue further, he said, “Hermione here has decided to take pity on you lot. She'll be setting her sights on becoming a mediwitch.”

“Thank Merlin,” Rosier said with a grin. “Nott did a right terrible job of fixing my ribs. I still can't inhale too sharply or it hurts like hell.”

“Then stop breathing,” Dolohov said simply, one brow raised and lips set into a scowl. “That should do the trick.”

Rosier looked to the other wizard, any sort of mirth absent from his eyes, his jaw clenched. “You first, mate.”

Nott chuckled, his gray eyes meeting Hermione's. “Looks like you'll get plenty of opportunities to practice with these two.” He turned his attention back to Tom, ignoring the two that seemed to be engaged in a heated staring match, as if the other might die through sheer will alone. “Other than your multitude of career opportunities, how else was your visit with Malfoy?”

Tom's face darkened suddenly, the edge of his lip twitching as though resisting the desire to sneer hideously. He raised a bottle of butterbeer purchased from the trolley to his lips, balancing it against his chin as he took a small sip, his movements slow and deliberate. It seemed he and Dumbledore shared quite the flair for the dramatics, Hermione thought.

After several long drawn out seconds, Tom said with a simple, casual shrug, “Malfoy will learn his place soon enough.”

xXx

Hermione had arranged to visit Dumbledore on her third day back to Hogwarts, indulging in the warm tea and the quiet of his private office. Her final year of school would prove to be trying, with a full schedule to meet all her healer requirements on top of her duties between both Tom and Dumbledore. It would be exhausting, though no doubt more so than the entirety of her future.

“I've already received several letters from healers offering to take me on as an apprentice, which was a pleasant surprise. Good to know I've got somewhere to go. Are they friends of yours?” she asked,
lifting her head up from where it was studying her timetable, laid upon her lap.

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, not to my knowledge. Though I’ve no doubt you have. At the beginning of each term a newsletter of sorts is set out with the details of promising students and their intended career paths with the hope of procuring them a mentor. You’ve managed to make your way rather high up on the list, considering your short time with us,” he answered, opening a drawer from his desk and retrieving from it a folded, large stack of parchments. He handed it over to her, and she unfurled it carefully, eyes scanning until she found her name.


A refugee of war, Miss Dumbledore found herself under the care of her estranged cousin and Hogwarts’s Professor after being orphaned by Grindelwald. She has displayed a wide breadth of knowledge, excelling in all of her classes. She has arranged to take a variety of NEWT level courses in Charms, Potions, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Her strengths lie in Defense and Potions, and an attached list of recommendations from her professors prove that she is an exemplary student with a skill set that will surely be of great use to any healer...

She skimmed through the recommendations, snorting derisively as she read through Slughorn’s. It read as if the man himself had taken her under his wing, guiding the poor and unfortunate orphan through a difficult school year following an immense tragedy. And receiving an Outstanding in his class all the while.

She supposed it was meant to be flattering, but she felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment. He had praised her, yes, but not without a good amount of praise to himself.

“That man is truly a wonder,” she muttered, abandoning the study of herself in favor of Tom’s. It was, of course, the first name on the list.

Tom Riddle. Slytherin. Undeclared.

While still uncertain of which career to take, it is no doubt that Mr. Riddle would be fully qualified for any he decides. He has been described as the ideal student, Prefect for his fifth and sixth year, earning Head Boy in his seventh. He received an Outstanding in all of his OWLs, a near unprecedented perfect score across the board...

The passage continued on for nearly a foot of the parchment, not including the many collections of recommendations that were no doubt far more indulgent than hers could ever be.

“He really has them eating out of the palm of his hand,” she said, settling the stack of parchment back onto Dumbledore’s desk.

The older wizard nodded. “Indeed. Even being undeclared, he’ll no doubt receive plenty of offers, with professionals of all wakes of life bidding for the opportunity to mentor him. I’ll admit I’m quite surprised he has stalled so long in his decision.”

Hermione shrugged, settling her saucer and teacup down. “I suppose there’s always the opportunity that he will decide on retail as he did previously. But I doubt it. Regardless, I’ll be there with him. I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you of my recent nuptials.”

Dumbledore's brows rose, sparkling blue eyes impossibly wide as his mouth formed a small 'o'. It was not often to see such an expression of shock on his face, the wizened man typically the one who knew of everything and spoke of it all in riddles. “Nuptials?” he repeated, leaning forward in interest.

“Indeed. You’re as surprised as I was when I learned of it,” she added, grabbing the tea kettle from
the tray and refilling her cup. “Tom didn’t think it worthwhile to fill me in on it.”

Any evidence of surprise had gone from his face now, instead he seemed to be considering something, a long finger scratching at his chin in thought. “Interesting development. I'm sure his reasons for doing so were more pragmatic than romantic. Still, it is reassuring to know that he trusts you so well.”

“Or that he wants to keep me close for more sinister reasons,” she muttered into her tea.

He chuckled lightly at that, raising his own tea cup high above in a gesture of congratulations. “Still, I believe you are deserving of some recognition, my dear. While the road ahead of us is quite long and winding, you are doing an excellent job,” he said. After a second, he added, fondly, “You've made me quite proud to call you my family.”

She smiled wide at that, her eyes burning as she blinked back tears. It would never be the same as her own family and friends, the one she had left behind in the wake of a violent war. But she was hobbling together her own family. A bit of a mismatched one, with shifty Slytherins and Death Eaters, Gryffindors and future Headmasters and Dark Lords. But it was a family nonetheless, and it was wonderful to be a part of one again.

She rose her cup as well, clinking it against Dumbledore's before bringing it back to her lips.

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Chapter End Notes

Up Next: Grindelwald makes his obligatory Tomione Appearance
Chapter Summary

Hermione begins to grow more comfortable in her role, making her question herself and who she is becoming. Meanwhile, a war that she has not paid much interest too comes close to home.

Chapter Notes

What up demons, it's me, ya boi.

This chapter was a long time coming so I hope it doesn't disappoint. Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read and comment, or left kudos. It means so much and even when writer's block and the real world become so overwhelming, it keeps me coming back to this story and excited to write it. I love you all so much for the motivation and kind words!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Eight: The Start of How it All Will End

'I'm a princess cut from marble, smoother than a storm
And the scars that mark my body, they’re silver and gold
My blood is a flood of rubies, precious stones
It keeps my veins hot, the fires find a home in me ‘
-Lorde, Yellow Flicker Beat

Hermione knelt down, the chill of the frozen forest floor sending shocks up through her kneecaps. She sighed, placing a hand flat on the neck of the unicorn, soothing it over the strong muscles as a golden eye flicked to her momentarily before closing. It was dying, too weak to fight her off, listless as it lay upon the ground, fallen leaves and dirt mottling it’s once perfectly white coat. There was a long slash that ran down the length of its neck, the blood- shimmering and silver in the moonlight- being magically drawn into a large vial.

The sight of it made her woozy, and she squeezed her eyes shut, biting her lip and bending her head further down so as to not appear in distress. She had, after many years of violent war, developed a strong stomach. But seeing the jar grow steadily more full as the unicorn- something so pure and wondrous it seemed a rarity even in the magical world- grew steadily more prone, his barrel chest quivering with uneven breaths.

It was monstrous.

She could feel its pulse weaken beneath her hands, slipping them upward and letting her fingers tangle into the white mane. She knew it felt no pain, having made certain to cast a silent numbing charm on it ensuring as much. But there was nothing she could do for the fear, the helplessness it must have felt in those final few moments. The moments between Hermione luring it out in the clearing with delightful treats and sugar laden fruits, jabbing the knife into its neck and dragging it
downward as it fell, bound by unseen ropes.

Death was an inevitability, she was not so naive as to think otherwise. But it was a cruelty, particularly when it was by evoked by the hand of someone other than Death himself and blood was spilled and soiling the earth. She was not so cold and bitter as to think otherwise.

The unicorn stilled before inhaling sharply, raggedly, letting the breath out in a wheezing noise.

She felt no more pulse- faint or otherwise.

She did not turn when she heard leaves rustle behind her, a twig snapping, the sound far louder than it might have been if it were in the middle of the day. She did not need to look to know that Tom was now standing directly over her, bent ever so slightly at the waist as he appraised her work.

“The stasis will do to hold it, but the efficacy of the potion will be compromised. Fresh blood is ideal and it could take months before we acquire all the other necessary ingredients.” He was scowling- she did not need to look to know that either.

She said nothing, biting down hard on the inside of her cheek. It would never cease to be jarring, she knew, the callousness he displayed. God's most pure creation lay dead at his feet, and all he could think about was how its death was not good enough.

Not fresh enough.

He moved, coming to kneel beside her. “Might as well make use of the rest of it,” he muttered, taking the knife from her hands and setting himself to work, tearing apart the carcass like a vulture. A scavenger. She stood on shaking legs, taking several steps back as she held the jar of blood to her chest. In minutes he had removed all of its hair, tossed within an emerald satchel, silver chords knotted together.

She sat on her bum on the ground, the chill of the October night numbing her within seconds. He placed a golden hoof beside the bag, silver staining his hand and the severed appendage. She said nothing as he worked, meticulously severing hoof from bone, careful not too damage it. She thought he said the word priceless, but his voice was drowned out, like the radio when it lingered between two stations, neither one coherent.

When he finished, he moved to the head, carving out the horn- a brilliant gold to match the hooves.

He wrapped his collection up, neatly and carefully, before tucking it into Hermione's beaded bag. He stood, brushing the dirt off of his slacks, frowning disapprovingly at the smears of silver that coated his shoe.

“Honestly, Hermione, this is terribly inconvenient. You can't expect us to make this excursion every time we need a new batch of potion?”

She startled at his words, drawn out of a reverie. Oh. That was why she had done this, this heinous crime that made her bones vibrate with unease, her own wand tremble in her hands as if knowing that one of its own- brother or sister- was dead from her hand. It was done because it was not a horcrux, and slaying an innocent was less stake than slaying an innocent and then proceeding to sever one's soul.

She skewed her lips in a grimace. “I don't expect us to. I am more than capable.”

He approached her, gazing at her with a curious expression, his brow furrowed, teeth kneading his lower lip in thought. She knew what he was thinking before he said it, interrupting him with finality,
a harshness to them that he had not expected.

“No.”

He blinked at her.

“I will not create a horcrux,” she said with a sigh, ignoring the hand he proffered to her and pulling herself up to stand beside him, brushing dirt and leaves away that clung to her wool cloak. The evening was cold, her warming charm waning and leaving her to shiver, yet she felt no pull to recast it, frozen fingers of her free hand winding into her pockets. Her words were tangible before her, puffs of clouds hanging in the air, suspended in place only to dissipate seconds later.

His expression darkened imperceptibly, brows knitting as he pressed his lips in a firm line. “You're being foolish.”

She raised her chin. “You're being extreme. I don't need to cut my soul into a dozen pieces when this will be more than adequate,” she stated, raising the jar a tad from where it was nestled in the crook of her elbow.

“I'm not suggesting a dozen pieces, merely two.”

She snorted. “Funny. I suppose though I should be thankful you consider my soul more valuable than your own.”

He quirked a brow. “Whatever gave you that impression, Darling?”

She shrugged, shifting her weight as she bounced from what foot to the other. It was getting dreadfully cold, the blanket of night beginning to turn into the early hours of the morning, that odd point in time where it was neither evening nor day. Something nebulous and undefined.

“You intend to experiment with your soul, not knowing how such an endeavor might end. I would suspect that someone who treats their soul with the same care of a first year handling a potion might not be too concerned about it,” she said, grabbing her bag from his outstretched hand and slipping it onto her shoulder. If it was any heavier from the added weight, she didn't feel it.

Tom frowned, eyes narrowing. “It's a soul, Hermione. Don't be so daft and romantic about it.”

“It isn't just a soul, Tom. It's...you. It's who you are. If it weren't so necessary why would a Dementor's Kiss be so devastating? Aren't you in the slightest bit worried about what might happen if you sever yours so much that it becomes unrecognizable?” she asked, her words rushing from her in urgency. It was perhaps the most challenging aspect of her task: convince Tom that he did not need seven pieces of his soul, divided among himself and various trinkets. But the boy wasn't simply stubborn, he was arrogant. He believed he knew best, that he was smarter and better than any wizard who came before him.

She did not give him time to respond before licking her dry, chapped lips and adding, “What about your magic? Many scholars theorize that your magic is tied to your soul. Would you truly be willing to risk the potency and power of your magic for a handful of horcruxes when a few would suffice?”

He continued to stare at her, a slight crease in his brow the only sign that he was effected by her words, that he was thoughtful. His eyes were small slits as if he struggled to see her in the dim light offered by the moon, the soft amber glow from the single lantern they brought with them. His nostrils flared, a muscle in his jaw clenched.

It might not have seemed much, but Hermione knew that it was much more than a slip in his well
trained mask. It was a crack in his armor, a fissure in his steadfast resolve. It was a pause, a consideration of something he had not thought of before or had dismissed.

Grasping hold of the opportunity, she took a step forward, clasping her hand that was not holding onto the still warm jar of blood and entwined her fingers with his. They were rigid with cold, his warming charm waning just as hers had. “Don't divide yourself at the cost of your power. Surely, a few horcruxes will be more than suitable. And besides-” she said, grinning widely, eyes flicking to his pinched lips- the color of wine from the chill. “I doubt they will even have to be utilized. No one will be a match for you, my Lord.”

She leaned up, balancing on her toes, as she bridged the distance between them and pressed her lips to his own. There was a second of hesitation before he returned the gesture, his lips stiff before becoming pliant once more. His hands moved from his side to wrap around her, pulling her tight against him and embracing her as he deepened the kiss, the jar between them warm and making the position awkward and clumsy.

He continued to hold her even as he broke away from the kiss, one side of his lips rising in a lazy smile. “Come on, it'll take a half hour to get back to the castle. We don't want anyone to miss us,” he said, and she frowned despite herself.

'Though, really, perhaps the Forbidden Forest in the wee hours of the morning was not the best time or place to discuss this,' she thought, following behind Tom as he led them away from the clearing after retrieving the lantern from where it had been laid down. She did not dare to look back at the white and silver carcass that remained behind them, a monochromatic and grim scene that would no doubt be scavenged by whatever beasts roamed in their wake.

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“Hermione, why don't you come up from that book long enough to hold a proper conversation, eh? Or eat your lunch, at least,” Rosier said, leaning on his elbows across from her at the table.

She glanced up, annoyed, before pointedly closing her book with a sigh. “Merlin forbid I actually try to do well in classes and prepare for my future,” she mumbled, pushing her book away from her so as to fill her plate with food. She had accepted an apprenticeship with a renowned Healer, Healer Anand, and the wizard had been adamant that she spend her free time pouring over his own various case studies and files which he sent to her weekly. Though, there wasn't much free time to be spared as it was, between her standard coursework and Tom Riddle.

Rosier- for what it was worth- looked apologetic as he leaned back in his seat, shrugging his shoulders. “Riddle would have our heads if he knew we let you go another day without lunch.”

“Again,” Mulciber added.

She might have rolled her eyes at that- of course Tom would assign her babysitters in his absence- but instead she frowned, looking about the Great Hall. “Where is Tom? I know he said he would be late to lunch but it's been almost half an hour?”

“Probably speaking with a teacher, or maybe he got caught up disciplining a student. He's got a lot more on his plate this year, being Head-Boy and all,” Mulciber suggested.

Hermione said nothing, eating her chicken thoughtfully. It was curious of Tom to disappear like this, not since her initiation into the Knights of Walpurgis at the very least. She glanced once more about the Great Hall, her eyes lingering on the large double doors before flicking in the opposite direction to the staff table, where Dumbledore was engaged in conversation with Dippet. She wondered
perhaps, if she should tell him of this during their weekly tea time. Surely, him disappearing without cause was enough to raise concern, though she doubted he would do anything to jeopardize himself.

A hand settled on her shoulder, and she snapped her head around until her own eyes met dark blue. “My apologies, Hermione, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Tom said, his gaze wandering to the staff table that she had so ardently been staring at only seconds earlier.

She flushed, waving a hand in the air dismissively. “I was just daydreaming,” she said, scooting along the bench until she was pressed into Mulciber's side, making room for Tom. He sat beside her, raising a hand as he gestured it opposite him at the table, where two Slytherin boys Hermione recognized though did not know sat beside Dolohov and Rosier.

“Hermione, I'm sure you know Cyprian Avery and Raleigh Lestrange. Sixth year students,” he introduced. “We ran into each other in the dormitories and I'm afraid I lost track of time. Avery here-” he paused, gesturing to the shorter of the two, with pale skin and neat strawberry blond hair trimmed at the sides and green eyes- “His father is a Potions master and researcher, who works very closely with several renowned herbologists and bestiary sanctuaries. Quite a convenient set up, of course, given the oft obscure and hard to come by ingredients needed in more advanced brews.”

Avery leaned forward, lips flicking as he attempted to compose himself, to keep the smug smile from tainting his handsome face. “He's created a phenomenal rapport with them. As such, they go to any length required to procure him what he needs.” There was something sinister beneath his words, lacing through them in a way that Hermione half expected him to wink twice before nudging her conspicuously. But instead, he sat back in his seat, folding his hands across his lap. “Riddle told me that you are experimenting with several healing potions for your studies, and asked for my assistance in getting what you need. I've already sent a letter to my father, and with any hope I will hear back from him by the breakfast tomorrow.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, doing her best to sound grateful even as she twisted to look expectantly at Tom, a brow raised. Her stomach felt heavy, roiling uncomfortably as she regretted what few bites of food she had.

“If we receive good news, then Avery will be invited to join our study group in the near future. He's very interested in the work we accomplish during our sessions,” he added, not looking up from his roll as he buttered it before topping it off with slices of red roast.

Hermione turned her gaze back to the boy in question, at the hunger in his eyes that she knew would not be satiated by food alone. Like a wolf lurking along the fence that separated it from the sheep, hackles raised and saliva dripping from sharp fangs. “That so?”

“I believe that my joining your study sessions will be a mutually beneficial arrangement,” he answered smugly. For a flicker of a second, she felt sorry for the boy. It would no doubt be too long before his hubris got the best of him and Tom was forced to humble him.

“And you, Raleigh? What have you done to earn a seat with us today?” she asked, genuinely curious as she busied herself with spearing a fork through potatoes.

For what it was worth, Lestrange was not as eager as his friend had been, donning a mask of indifference as he looked thoughtful for a moment. “My father is an ambassador for the Ministry, does some liaison work between other governments. He and my mother are off in Germany actually- they’re swamped over there, what with all the damage Grindelwald has done. They say the Bulgarian Ministry has practically crumpled. That their Minister is entirely nominal now, a figurehead at best while the few who remain under him are corrupt. Quite the mess.”
“And do you plan on pursuing politics, as well?”

He smirked now, the gesture not quite full as though he were fighting to maintain a sense of decorum. “Indeed. I've been practically groomed for it for as long as I can remember- when I was a child, Father would often bring me to work with him. I imagine he wasn't always necessarily allowed to, given all the sensitive information he came across, but who was going to tell him to stop?” he bragged, smugness warming his words.

Hermione said something placating to him, fanning the flames of his over inflated ego just a tad. She was no fool, and she knew exactly what he was worth to Tom. He wasn't simply a pawn, Lestrange was more elevated than that. A knight, perhaps.

The army was expanding, growing right before her eyes.

She knew that this would happen, that she would not see the fruits of her labors until decades down the line. Until the army amassed and rose to great numbers- numbers large enough to overthrow a government. She knew she was meant to sit passively, only rising to action at choice moments, and yet it still felt so painfully wrong. To be so complicit, to praise and honor men who would spit on her if they knew who she truly was. What she truly was.

She was disgusted with herself, and she reached for her goblet of pumpkin juice, downing it in one large gulp as if the spicy taste might wash out the bitterness on her tongue. But it lingered.

She imagined it always would.

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It had not taken long for either of the two Slytherins to earn their place beside Tom and his knights. Avery had made use of his father's connections, and within three weeks he knocked on the door to the seventh year boys' dormitories, a parcel in his hands and a smug smile on his face. Tom accepted it, opening it and glancing over the contents before handing it to Hermione, whose eyes turned into widened discs at the sight.

Vials held snugly in place to prevent from clashing into each other; vials filled with Phoenix ashes, a separate one with their tears. Another held about 11 elongated canines, a clump of jaw bone still attached from the vampire's they were ripped from.

Highly illegal, though necessary for her potion.

“We'll need more, of course. If all goes well we will be making a steady supply of the potion,” Tom said.

“I've already got more coming. It's easier to ship in smaller quantities. Less suspicious, y'know?”

Lestrange had secured his own spot by virtue of his father's position, a privilege of having an already well known and established Pure-Blood Family. Raleigh- the oldest of his siblings- was being groomed to take over for his father, acting as a liaison for the Ministry. A prize Tom greatly coveted, a unique piece to add to his collection.

And so it was on the second week of November that they were formally invited to join them in the Room of Requirements. They were to be inducted to the Knights of Walpurgis, a legacy Tom would leave behind to continue his reveling, keep the whispers of his power and what he would do for them brewing. They were to recruit for Tom even after he graduated, his numbers growing in his absence.

Avery was self-satisfied, barely able to contain his grin as Tom offered up his speech, his expectations of their loyalty. What he would give to them in exchange for them signing away their
lives. He would liberate them, and all they need do to be on the forefront of his rule was to serve him.

When his diatribe came to an end, he rose to standing, walking slowly along the circle, one hand sliding over the backs of their chair. “We'll start with you Avery. Now, if you will stand and we can properly begin,” he said, lips pulling into a small, knowing smile.

A chair scraped noisily across the floor as he stood, quick and clumsy in his eagerness, and he followed Tom to stand in the center of the room, between the fireplace and the table. His grin had only widened, and he stood tall, his chin rose. Pride.

Tom stood before him, an unreadable expression on his face as he stared at Avery for several drawn out seconds, making them seem infinite. Avery was beginning to grow restless under the scrutiny, shifting his weight from side to side when Tom finally spoke, turning his attention to Hermione. “Darling, how would you like to do the honors?”

She was caught off guard by his request, blinking as her mouth fell open. Had anyone other than Voldemort ever given the Dark Mark? Surely, it was something he and he alone had the privilege of doing- marking the new followers as if he were a saint anointing disciples, allowing them access to a kingdom where he had the only key. She could barely even fathom the implications of it all, a response faltering on her tongue, when Avery interrupted, his words a sneer.

“Her?” He was displeased that she would be the one to mark him, the contempt clear as his face crumpled. It was as if he had been insulted, Hermione clearly existing on a tier far below Tom. She tried not to seem hurt by the viciousness in that word, her cheeks flaming. Of course she knew that no one would hold her to the same reverence they did Tom, certainly not his newest fan boys, yearning for a spot within his circle and practically preening for his attention.

What was the purpose of promising your loyalty to Lord Voldemort when his lady would be the one to mark you, after all? It was indignant, and even she recognized that.

But Tom reacted with fire, his wand jutting out and flicking through the air before Hermione could even register what he had done, the sixth year boy on his knees and crumpled forward, his elbows digging into his thighs as his back bowed, hands burying in his hair. He was yelling, the sound guttural and mixed with groans of pain.

Hermione sighed, closing her eyes as she inhaled deeply. She began to count slowly, the interval of his torture. 1...2...3...4

The screaming came to an end just as she came to nine, and when she opened her eyes it was too see Tom kneeling before the boy- he seemed so small all of a sudden, panting heavily as he struggled to catch his breath. Tom's wand had moved from where it was trained, poking under Avery's chin as Tom used it to raise his head up.

“What do you have a problem with my Hermione? Is she not good enough to mark you?” he asked, his words leveled.

Avery whimpered in response, his fingers entwined in his hair and trembling. “N-no...my Lord. Sh-she's good enough,” he said, then quickly amended, his voice straining, “M-more than that! She's p-perfect!”

Tom leaned back on his heels, straightening his back while keeping his eyes lowered, trained on Avery's pale face. He seemed to consider him for a moment, his face unreadable as he thought of what to do with the disobedient young wizard.
The silence was thick, and Hermione shifted in her discomfort, the sound of her chair creaking beneath her impossibly loud. Like the crack of thunder on a quiet evening. It seemed to startle Tom out of his reverie, his dark eyes flicking to her for a second before turning back to Avery, the ends of his lips quirking.

“Well, perhaps if you're lucky, Hermione might still consider marking you,” he said, unable to resist the temptation any longer as he smirked and added, “if you beg.”

Avery swallowed harshly. “I...beg?”

Tom nodded eagerly. “Yes. On your hands and knees.” He stood then, folding his arms over his chest as he looked at Avery expectantly.

Slowly, the Slytherin pulled himself up on his hands, looking at Tom uncertainly who cleared his throat in a show of impatience, a brow raised. When the realization dawned on him that no, he would not be shown compassion and he had no other choice but to plead at the feet of a half-blood, of a Dumbledore in order to redeem himself, he turned to Hermione, crimson creeping upward from his collar. He seethed, the anger and humiliation barely hidden on his face, as he crawled to where she sat.

She was wholly uncomfortable now, clenching her jaw as if the tension in the room were invading her, stilling her bones and muscles. When he was finally sitting before her, she found herself fighting against the grimace at the sight. Some might have found it heady- the sight of a man bowed at the hip, low to the floor, a plead for forgiveness on his lips. It might have made someone else feel powerful; omnipotent.

But she was not that sort of someone, and it made her feel nauseous, though she wasn't entirely sure why. If not for the role she was playing, she would have rolled her eyes and hoisted him up. Instead, she straightened her back and rose a slim brow.

He chewed his lips, hollowed his cheeks as he dug his molars into the soft flesh there. “Please...my Lady,” he began, eyes flicking to the periphery before lowering to the ground, his ears turning crimson from in his embarrassment. What an initiation. “Will you...please...do me the honor...” He was struggling with his words, bitter and resenting the fact that he was expected to say them. He inhaled, exhaled shakily and began again. “It would be a privilege if you were to mark me, my lady.” The words were rushed, linked together in one long chain that required the entirety of a breath.

She leaned back in her chair, looking up from the form at her feet and meeting Tom's gaze. His face was cold, unimpressed. Turning her attention back to Avery, she sighed dramatically, exaggerated, and said, “Slower. And with a little more feeling.” She made her voice cold, a mimicry of the cruelty she had long since become familiar with.

Avery floundered, his mouth opening and closing several times with his barely contained rage, unused to being treated so small. Like he was nothing. He made to push himself up from the ground, perhaps to argue with more dignity. But she stopped him, extending a leg and using her foot to shove him back to the ground. She kept it there, the arch of her foot curving over his shoulder and placing a steady weight against him as she said, “That wasn't a suggestion.”

And so he began his begging anew, making certain to speak each word slowly and carefully, adding extra apologies and doling out even more praises to her. Perhaps to avoid further humiliation. Either way, she relented, a show of compassion even as she muttered “That will do.”

A flicker of malice darkened his face, if only for a moment, and she took it as an opportunity to shove he foot downward before pulling it back, sinking him further to the floor. She slid off her chair
then, taking hold of his offered arm in her left hand, producing her wand in her right. She told herself it was in kindness that she had accepted his apologies and moved forward in the evening, and not because a part of her, no matter how small, enjoyed the feeling of making a man like him grovel. She had not taken pleasure in the feeling of making someone so bigoted, so capable of evil cower beneath her.

The words were a meaningless mantra that she turned over and over again in her head, as if the repetition would make them more weighted. Would make them more truthful.

She reminded herself, for what felt like the umpteenth time since coming to this era, that she was playing pretend, that she was acting in a role that would never end and that would often make her shudder in its cruelty. It was simply a role, a part in a play where the curtains would take half a century to fall.

But the thought did little to assuage the tremble of fear that tossed around the contents of her stomach. How long might one act a monster before becoming one? How long might she pretend to enjoy the power and the rush of harming others she was better than (for there was no doubt in her mind she was better than them, though her standards were less in the quality of blood than in the quantity of morals) before the fallacy bled into truth?

How long before the charade became reality, and would she even be aware of the fall as it happened? She had not recognized the joy she had felt at subjugating a boy she knew would grow into a monster until the moment had passed and she was left to linger on the feeling of another body pressed beneath her heel. How could she possibly trust herself to catch it before it became too late, to stop herself before she became too lost in the act.

Somewhere, numbly, she thought how poetic it was. That each role seemed to accompany a new title, that Hermione Granger had been long since forgotten as Hermione Dumbledore took the reins and set on the path of war. Hermione Granger might have been a soldier, one of the many of the army that had been decimated, but Hermione Dumbledore was a general, a leader of the army who would herald it in.

She shuddered to think who Hermione Riddle might be.

-xXx-

The first snowfall of the season had come overnight, blanketing the world in white, thick mounds of snow which crawled up walls and the trunks of massive trees. Frost clung to branches, sheathing pine needles and firs in crystal cocoons. It carried on well into the morning, fat flakes fluttering through the gray sky.

Hermione sighed as she stared through the window of the Hog's Head, taking in the sight of the snow capped village, students wandering up and down the streets in knitted hats and scarves. Several Hufflepuffs had engaged in a snowball fight, using their wands and magic to propel the snowballs further and faster than otherwise possible.

She turned away as Tom came over, carrying two mugs of hot chocolate that he settled down on the table before taking the seat beside her. “Enjoying the inclement weather?” he asked, flicking his eyes just beyond her to the window.

“Hogwarts during the winter is my favorite,” she answered, shrugging her shoulders. “It's- for lack of a better word- magical.”

To her surprise, he agreed earnestly, dark eyes sparkling rarely as he brought his mug to his lips.
There was no sarcastic quip, no wry joke about her choice of phrasing, and it struck her as odd to see him in such a peculiar mood. In such a genuinely happy mood.

She narrowed her eyes at him, immediately dubious of his good spirits— it had of course, always been the harbinger of his callousness and torment, such as when he successfully drugged her in the beginning of their acquaintance. “What's gotten into you today? You're so…” her words faded into nothing as she made a flippant hand gesture, twirling her wrist through the air as if it could explain what she failed to.

He quirked a brow, playful smile tugging at his lips. “I'm so…what?”

He was toying with her, and she huffed out a breath of air in exasperation. “Happy. Jovial. Got a spring in your step. A twinkle in your eye.”

“Would you rather I be miserable and murderous?” he asked, humor warming his words,

“No, but at least it would be par for course,” she hummed, taking a sip of her hot chocolate. It was thick, piled high with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, and she held the mug in her hands even after swallowing, enjoying the feel of its warmth beneath her palms.

After a moment, he said in a low whisper, “If you must know, I suppose I'm in good spirits after last night.”

She frowned, her own mood souring at the reminder. “Oh. Well yes, I guess getting two new recruits will do that.”

He smiled fondly. “No, not about that. Recruits are a sickle a dozen and I'm bound to get plenty more in enough time. I'm referring to you and that wonderful show of yours.”

There was a second of panic, a fleeting moment where her heart thudded so loud she could hear it echoing in her head, where her rib cage felt too small. 'You've been found out. He knows' her mind screamed at her, and just as she was preparing an explanation, he continued, “I must admit, it was quite exhilarating to watch you put Avery in his place. I didn't know how it would work out—requesting that you mark and subsequently accept his apologies— but after that little display with Malfoy over the summer, I was intrigued and wanted to see more.”

She felt her body sag in relief, her muscles loosen as the threat of danger faded away. “Intrigued?” she asked, not wanting to let her own relief become suspicious.

Tom nodded. “Yes. I wanted to see if I could coax that side out of you, and evidently, I can.” His smirk was arrogant, and he seemed pleased with himself.

Her cheeks reddened at the thought of the night before, and she turned her gaze to her hands where she wrung out a napkin nervously between her fingers, the ply fraying from her handling. “I'm not entirely sure what came over me,” she said, hoping that her shyness might end the conversation and she could continue to tuck away all the guilt and shame she felt for perusal another time. Her stomach lurched painfully, and she felt all at once disgusted by herself and the way she delighted in her subjugation of another.

“There's no need to be embarrassed, darling,” Tom said softly, a hand settling over her own and pulling it away from the tatters of the napkin so that he could entwine their fingers. “I've always known you capable of employing such power and magnificence, it's what first drew me to you. A proper queen, after all, can't be disrespected by her people.” He brought her hand up, pressing a tender kiss to the knuckles.
She pinched her lips together, unsure of what to say. If she hadn't known any better, she might have thought him aroused by the memory of her stepping on one of his followers, by the coldness in her voice as she demanded he beg. “Tom, I-”

A loud, piercing wail screamed through the air, a siren that enveloped them and shattered the relative quiet of the dingy pub. She startled, pulling her hand from his grasp as her back snapped erect, looking about her. Her eyes widened, flicking around for the source of the noise, but all she saw were others responding to it, a patron dropping his pint glass so that shards fell to the floor and something amber pooled around his feet. The Hufflepuffs jumped in surprise, mouths falling open as two students clamped hands over their ears, scrunching their face in pain.

Hermione yearned to do the same, the noise so loud that it thrummed through her, made her eardrums pulse and ring in response. But instead she made to stand, shaking her wand out from her sleeve to slide in her palm.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder, pushing her back in her seat as Tom stood over her, keeping a protective hold on her. She turned, looking up at him with furrowed brows. “Tom?”

Gone was the levity in his expression, the glow that he seemed to exude in his uncharacteristically high spirits. In its place was something grim, lips pinched, eyes dark and calculating. His cheeks were hollowed out, and she realized that he was chewing on the inside of his mouth, a nervous habit that seemed foreign on someone so controlled.

“What is it?” she asked, dread warming her body, a fire lighting within her as the familiar feeling of adrenaline threaded through her veins, made her shake in anticipation of something that she could not identify.

Hermione suddenly realized that he had his wand out, was raising his arm in preparation for an unseen entity. He swallowed thickly, and she felt her stomach drop as his mask of cool indifference slipped away. He was anxious, perhaps even fearful though she dismissed the notion away just as soon as it had come. What did Lord Voldemort have to fear?

“I didn't think they would actually happen but during prefect meetings they always mention them. They're a warning siren,” he said, his tone clipped. Before she could even ask, he added, “Their war sirens. Hogsmeade's been breached.”

She shook her head. No. That was impossible. In all of her studies, the only battle and war that took place on the steps to Hogwarts had been Voldemort's war, not Grindelwald. What might she have changed that would make something so drastic, so dire happen?

“Perhaps it's a false alarm,” she supplied, trying to quell the electricity that sparked through her, the familiar and honed sense to fight.

If Tom said anything, it went unheard, the sound of a nearby explosion drowning out his words as wood creaked and splintered, glass cracked and shattered.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed! Follow me on tumblr at reneehartblog for sneak peeks and what not.
Chapter Summary

Hogsmeade is under attack, Tom has gone missing, and Grindelwald has become curious of the supposed Dumbledore girl.

Chapter Notes

Two updates in one week? On MY fanfiction? It's more likely than you think! It was really cruel of me to go like seven months without an update, and then when I do update, to leave it on such a cliffhanger. So I tried to get this one done super fast! I hate writing battle scenes, so apologies in advance, though I'm actually pleased with this a bit. Warning: this chapter and the one following it definitely earns its rating in terms of violence, gross depictions of injuries, and general body horror. It is a battle, folks.

Thanks to all those who left kudos and commented so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hermione groaned, bringing a hand up to press against her temple, grimacing in pain. Her entire body ached, muscles protesting with each movement, and the world seemed too quiet, too still. Like all sound was muffled, thick velvet was swathed over her ears. It felt, vaguely, like when she and Harry and Ron had partook in too much firewhiskey one night and felt nothing but confusion and agony the following day. But she had no memory of drinking the night before; in fact, her memory was a puzzling collection of nothingness. She could not recall, with any real distinction or coherence of time, what events had led to her lying down, cradling her head as the earth was silenced around her.

She remembered sitting in the Slytherin common room, a book in her hand and Tom pressed against her, Ishtar curled at her feet. She remembered reading a letter from Athena over her breakfast one morning- the witch was excitedly discussing plans to visit one weekend, as well as other more mundane going ons in her life that made Hermione smile somewhat fondly. She supposed she could consider her a friend. She remembered coming to kneel on the floor beside another, pulling their arm to her and turning it over to examine the soft, unblemished skin of their forearm, before pressing her wand against bronze skin-

She gasped, a whimper of pain at the sudden movement as she tried to pull herself up, sudden
recollection coming to her in quick succession.

Hogsmeade, with Tom, a cup in her hands. Sirens, wailing and loud that cut through the morning, filling her head with a cacophony of noise. An orchestra of splintered wood and shattered glass, shouting-

An explosion.

She jumped up, the pain in her body dimming away as adrenaline coursed through him, her capillaries and veins quivering. She swayed, unsteady on her legs as she opened her eyes and squinted them immediately, her head booming with the sudden intrusion of light.

She had fallen against a pile of wood and stone- where there had once been a wall- and a fine, powdery dust was coating her thick stockings and wool skirt, her black jumper and cloak. Chaos had flooded the streets of Hogsmeade, students running and tripping over the snow that hindered their progress. Their screams were muffled, the sirens low in the distance as the ringing in her ears encompassed her.

“Tom?” she called, her own words sounding far off and she could not tell whether she was whispering or crying out. Where was he? He had been right behind her, a hand on her shoulder...surely he could not have been too far separated.

She stumbled forward, grasping her wand so tightly in her hand that it shook violently, her knuckles white, and she flicked her head around- back and forth, back and forth- knowing how quickly an enemy could turn up behind her. But there were no enemies, only students and villagers, a frantic and frightened mess as they cluttered the alleyway, smoke pluming and billowing upward, flames of a fire spitting at the air.

A young Gryffindor fell at her feet, bare hands disappearing to catch himself in the snow, and Hermione reached forward through the haze of her mind, hoisting him up and nudging him towards the path of the school. If he muttered a thanks, she did not hear him, still deaf to the world.

“Tom?” She called out again, her panic mounting. What if he had not been as lucky as her? What if, instead of merely being tossed about like a puppet, wandering off with a concussion and damaged ear drums, he had been harmed more gravely?

What if he was not answering because he had been killed?

The thought filled her with an uncomfortable amount of dread, a plummeting feeling that dragged her down and made the rapid convulsion of her muscles even worse. No, no, no. He couldn't be dead. The idea seemed so foreign, so improbable, so ridiculous. He was Tom Riddle. He had evaded death so often, it seemed him immune. He would evade rebounded killing curses, battles against several wizards and witches. The idea of him succumbing to something so quick, something so sudden-

It seemed like a mockery, like Death himself had decided he had had enough of him and wanted to snuff him out before he could become a nuisance.

“Tom!” she called out, running back to the pile of rubble she had awoken in and digging through it with reckless abandon, using her wand to propel away that pieces of wood that were too hefty or awkward to manually move. Her hands seemed to work against her, shaking so much she struggled to grasp hold of it. There was too much of it, too much wood and concrete and stone, and her heart thudded harder and harder with each beat, with each layer of rubbish that did not reveal Tom.

Each layer meant greater injury. Each layer meant closer to death.
She did not choose to examine the fear, the anguish she felt at the chance that she might no longer see him again. She did not remind herself that his death was her ultimate goal, that a new plan could easily be arranged around him being dead and gone before Voldemort could even come into proper fruition. Instead, she pressed those thoughts aside and continued to forge through the rubble.

A hand grabbed her shoulder, tugged her back, and she whipped around, raising her wand and sending a silent hex in retaliation. She recognized the person who grabbed her as Mulciber, and she stood immediately, muttering apologies she could not hear as he groaned at the stinging hex. The counter curse was quickly applied, and the moment the stinging receded, he grabbed hold of her wrist and began pulling her up the path to the school, shouting at her.

“Grindelwald's army is here!” she could just barely make out through the fog covering her senses. “We’ve got to get to the castle!”

She pulled her wrist back, coming to a stop in the road, bodies rushing pass her as if she were a rock in a riverbed, waves forming around her. “No! I can't find Tom! He was right there and then there was an explosion and-”

Her words were silenced as the screaming increased in fervor, and she turned just in time to see several cloaked figures swoop down on brooms, wands raised. They were not as a grim a sight as the Death Eaters of her time were- there seemed to be no uniform, no masks to hide their identity. They were proud to be part of the movement, they had no need to hide or veil themselves from the world. While the Death Eaters knew what they were- a radical, terrorist militia; Grindelwald and his men saw themselves as merely a political faction, one that was not opposed to using force.

One of them- a woman, with broad shoulders and blonde hair that was tied in a plait tossed over her shoulder- looked at Hermione, lips curving into a grin. In an instant, she was rocketing through the air, falling in an arch that brought her to only inches over the snow as she moved towards her at great speeds.

Hermione felt a great tug at her shoulder, but she shrugged it off, raising her own wand and flourishing it up through the air and above her head. At her beckoning, the snow rose up, turning to a thick sheet of ice as it created a barrier, forcing the witch to turn haphazardly to avoid crashing against it. There was familiarity in this- the battle, the heat of the air as it sizzled with magic. The thrum of adrenaline in the course of a fight was more natural to her than the calm, and for, what was perhaps the first time since leaving her own world behind, she felt at home.

“You go! I'm not leaving until I find Tom!” she yelled, hoping Mulciber would hear and obey as she rose her wand again, stepping from beyond her wall of ice just in time to cast an impedimenta. It was powerful, the bolt of red light jettisoning through the sky and tossing one of them- a wizard- from his broom. She saw him land on the roof to a shop before dodging a curse tossed her way.

Wind whipped against her face, nipping and chilling her nose and the apples of her cheeks, but she was warmed from within, unconcerned with the cold as her skin was fevered. Her lungs expanded and contracted raggedly against her ribs. A curse came towards her- an incantation she couldn't hear nor did she recognize it- so she jumped out of the way, coming to a clumsy landing but remaining on her feet. She countered, firing off as many curses and hexes and charms as she could.

This was her style, the fighting technique she had honed and adapted through experience. She did not learn this in classrooms, but on battlefields, and it was messy and hectic and harsh. She hardly wasted time with blocking- either because she couldn't hear the spell to properly shield against, or because it was simply faster and easier to dodge. She was offensive, disastrously so, barely pausing to catch her breath or think ahead of the next few seconds, using every opportunity she could to fire off any spell in her arsenal.

But there were too many of them, the army- one more appearing with everyone she disarmed or sent plummeting to the ground. She was not the only one fighting either- several shopkeepers she recognized were holding their own, and she received a rather stern and concerned look from Professor Adalbert when he caught sight of her after knocking a wizard from the sky, but she had turned away from him before he could admonish her or tell her to return to the castle. She moved in a circle, not once keeping still- the risk of doing so meant becoming a target, and she fell into a routine. Wand raising to send an attack spell, side step, casting a hex, side step. But even as she moved in a circle, she was being pushed back, the battle moving forward and closer to the gates of Hogwarts, as if that had been their goal all along and the ruckus in Hogsmeade was merely for fun.

She was panting, heavily, hair whipping about her face and she cursed that she had not thought to pull it back that morning, the curls flipping over her eyes. But she could still see- from the corner of her eyes- when, from the hill that the school sat atop of, figures descended towards the village on brooms, each wearing matching navy robes, the Ministry seal glinting brilliantly as it sat adorned on their chests. Aurors. They must have been informed of the attack, had used the floos in the school. Some jumped from their brooms when they were close enough to the ground, running into the thick of the battle in a flurry of golden and red glinted spells, their brooms propelling themselves back through the air of their own command, waiting to be summoned. Others remained airborne, pioneering their brooms to enclose on Grindelwald’s followers.

The focus shifted then, from Hermione and the residents of the village to the trained Ministry officials, and she found herself forgotten in the battle, a moment of reprieve. A glorious one, as the rush of adrenaline was always short lived, and took only fifteen minutes of fighting for her to be winded, her already battered body to throb and protest at every movement. She rose her wand once more, summoning a shield of ice and snow to lean against in the interim. The world was still too silent, the only prominent sound she heard the high pitched ring in her ears, and so she settled against the makeshift barrier, breathing deep and steadily, trying to quell her frayed nerves. She was unable to hear the wind as it was sliced in half, as a curse made a quick course to where she stood, piercing through the snow and ice and impaling her sharply.

She felt the spell in her chest, where the curse seemed to finally settle, knocking the breath from her lungs, and she fell to her back, cold seeping through her clothing as she landed on the crumbled remains of her shield. Pain radiated from where she had been hit, and she pressed a hand uselessly between her breasts as if it might abate the pain. She felt something wet and warm, her blood hot against her blue tipped fingers. She looked down, her palm red, thin trails of blood sliding down the curve of her hand and saturating the hem of her sleeve.

She was bleeding- a lot, her sweater immediately becoming damp and clinging to her skin, and with mounting horror, she realized that her hip was also bleeding, that the curse had somehow reopened the wound from her shoulder to the opposite side of her waist. The wound she had received from Dolohov.

It was just a flesh wound, it did not contain the harmful curse that had nearly killed her, that had poisoned her internal organs, but the sting and the burn of the cut as her sweater grazed against it made her chest constrict, her heart thud wildly.

If she closed her eyes, she might imagine she was on the floor in the Department of Mysteries, writhing in pain and agony and-
Dying. She had been dying until someone had found her and saved her, whisking her away to the infirmary. If they had been even a minute, a second later-

She was not in the Department of Mysteries though, she was decades away from that moment. She pulled herself up, steadied her hand long enough to create another wall of ice, one that rose and curved around her to protect against all angles of attack. She was not in the Ministry, she was in Hogsmeade. Dolohov was not an older, far more dangerous and powerful wizard, but a boy, one whom she had bested on multiple occasions. She was not a young and inexperienced girl, she was a witch who had fought in and survived a war.

She inhaled slowly, steadily, trying to calm herself even as the adrenaline urged her to run, to fight, to panic. She pulled her beaded bag out from her pocket and into her lap, digging her arm in until her fingers brushed against her medical kit.

She threw her head back as she downed the potion, her ears popping a second after as noise- so much noise- flooded her senses. There was yelling, fire cracking, spells hissing. The siren still wailed, though it was merely a base for everything else, a steady beat that remained as everything else swelled in volume and intensity, a constant undulation. A battle cry. She winced at the riotous sound, but still sighed with relief, thankful to hear and have all of her wits about her.

The wound on her chest wasn't quite as easy to heal- not without fully undressing and several series of treatments- so she settled for a quick patch job. Her skin was taut, the seams from her hasty healing pulling at her flesh, but she was no longer growing light headed from the loss of blood, and with a quick swig of blood replenishing potion, the dots in her vision faded, her head did not seem to swivel freely about.

It had been a brief pause, but a much needed one, and she crawled out from the her shield of ice rejuvenated, like she was not tumbling down the face of a cliff with no landing in sight. Even more aurors had arrived now, the uniforms and Ministry emblems like a beacon of light, and the onslaught of Grindelwald's men was beginning to thin out, though they had moved, closer to the gates of Hogwarts than they had been before.

Students who had not been quick enough to escape were trapped in Hogsmeade, and she could see them huddling for shelter in the shops, watched as Adalbert- distracted from battle- grabbed a Ravenclaw and a Slytherin each by their cloaks and threw them into the Three Broomsticks.

She thought, for a moment, to search for Mulciber, but dismissed the notion almost as quickly as it came. He was at least accounted for, she had yet to find even a hint of Tom.

With the threat controlled by the Aurors, and Adalbert collecting the stray students he found, she let herself slip into an alley, the veil of smoke from the fires providing a veil. “Tom!” she called, rounding around the back of the pubs and shops, the smell of smoke becoming thicker, more acrid, the closer she got to where the Hog’s Head had once stood.

“Tom!” she shouted, her voice hoarse as it gave way to sputtering coughs. She had inhaled smoke, and it stung her throat, made her eyes water. She ducked her head, trying to crouch below it until she was at the rubble.

The last place she had seen him.

What had happened to him? She tried to remember what had occurred, those few seconds between when she had first heard the explosion and when she awoke underneath some stray pieces of wood. But there was nothing, just an absence of time where she was immobile, useless-
She saw it, a pale hand, prone and visible underneath crumbled bricks and dirt. A thin dusting of snow sat over top the pile, undisturbed. “Tom!” the name was spoken in a gasp, and she was running, jumping over debris and tripping over her cloak until she was skidding on her knees, tearing up her stockings. She used her wand and her opposite hand simultaneously, neither seeming to move fast enough as she unearthed him from the singed wood and charred remains and oh god they must have been so close to the source of the detonation.

She hissed when she finally saw his face- covered in soot and ash and dust, just barely hiding the tender and red flesh from where he had been burned. She inhaled a breath, wincing at the pain he must've experienced; from the protrusion of his cheekbone and down was all burnt. The bottom of his right ear was scalded, lobe melding to neck, and she did not see just how far down the injuries crept but he smelt of charred hair and cloth and thread from his tattered jumper wove into his skin down his shoulder and side-

It took four tries before her hand was steady enough to press against the pulse point in his neck, but she eventually found it, the small but present pulse of his heart. “Thank Merlin,” she breathed, slumping her head in relief. He was alive. He was injured and unconscious, but alive. The burns would be healed, broken bones could be mended.

When her breathing settled down, and she felt that she could move without falling to a bundle of nerves, she did so, shuffling back before using her wand and casting a silent levicorpus, her magic pulling his body from under the rubble with more grace than she ever would. She settled him down, pointing the edge of her wand to his cheek as she cast the first of what few diagnostic charms she knew. While she would not be able to heal him completely and undo the damage, she could at least ease it some, close the wounds so they would not become infected and make it a more challenging job. Stabilize his bones and mend fractures long enough for him to walk to a proper, trained mediwitch. She was decent enough with burns, having plenty of experience considering how often she and Harry and Ron had had to resort to fiendfyre while hunting horcruxes.

She would heal him enough, then ennervate him so the two could return to security of the castle. Surely, the Aurors would have the situation under the control soon enough, and she and Dumbledore would discuss what might have happened to make Grindelwald set an attack on the school, something he had never done in her own time.

She had a plan- a tenuous one, but a plan nonetheless- and she felt all the better for it, slowly roving the tip of her wand down from Tom's head to his side. A soft glow emitted from the end, turning an array of colors as she made her descent, causing her to inhale sharply. Black, red, blue. It was a palette of agony, each shade representing a different break, a different tear.

Why had she been so unscathed, when he bore the markings of broken ribs and burns so deep his skin bubbled and charred? It didn't make sense, yet she pushed the thoughts aside as she set to work healing what she could, wincing as she heard his bones pop as they fell into place with her unpracticed charms. Perhaps it was a blessing that he had been knocked unconscious, as he would not feel the pain that came with such little experience, skills that had been honed hastily in war instead of under tutelage.

The smoke continued to curl around her, and she paused in her ministrations to place a bubble charm over her head, the air crisp and cool and burning against her lungs which had grown so accustomed to the acerbic scent of fire. She did the same to Tom, knowing that the inhalation could make quick work of him, damaging him far more than she could heal. Knees sunk into the charred bed of ash she had settled onto, the sound of the distant battle becoming less prominent, screams diminishing. More aurors had no doubt arrived, trapping and containing the rogue witches and wizards, unable to escape with the nearest apparition point miles in the distance.
Finished with the broken ribs—his skin a hideous array of blues and purples beneath his clothing, she was sure—she swished her wand over him, cleaning as much of the dust and dirt as she could without a towel and water. Satisfied, she set her wand in her lap and reached into her beaded bag, finding the burn salve after some careful rummaging. The tub was near empty, a tad too dry. She had made the salve nearly two years ago now, and had traveled an impossible length through time with it—it was a wonder the stasis charm had held up at all. Still, she dipped her hand in, smearing it as softly as she could on the open wounds. It did not spread easily, even as she tried to warm it between the pads of her fingers.

“Sorry,” she muttered, uselessly, as she begun to work it around his damaged ear, telling herself that she would replenish her stock of potions and salves. She should have done it sooner, but she had hardly thought to find herself caught in a war so soon.

A sound—different from the crack of the nearby fire, from the shouting of commanding aurors and the clash of spells—made her pause, her back straightening, gooseflesh prickling her skin. Her hand, still slick with burn salve, gripped around her wand. It came again, and she recognized it immediately: feet crunching over snow.

She stood, extending her arm out and ready as her bag and the open jar fell from her lap and at her feet. But she paid it no mind, her focus entirely drawn to the man who stood behind her, emerging from the line of trees that was the Forbidden Forest. He was tall, the hem of his cloak dragging in the snow, pooling around his shoes, caked in mud from his trudge in the woods. He had fine blonde hair, trimmed low to his scalp, and sharp, clear blue eyes. He was handsome, with an angled face and strong jaw which was clenched against the cold. He had a wild, almost playful demeanor about him, lips splitting into a grin that she had seen Fred and George don when they were particularly mischievous.

It took only a second for her to recognize him—she had seen his face before, in countless history texts, projected against the walls in class when covering the unit. He had always seemed so solemn, eyes set in a stern glare, lips thin and pinched beneath the thin blond mustache. But it was undeniable; this was Gellert Grindelwald.

He rose his hands, palms flat and pressing towards her in a show of meaning no harm, chuckling softly. “I’d do away with that, if I were you. Don’t start something you can’t finish,” he said, and she hesitated, disarmed by his tone. It was almost joking, as if in jest, but the warning lurked clearly below the words, the intent to harm if need be evident in the curl of his voice.

“I think you would do well to practice what you preach then,” she said, only steadying her hold of her wand, raising her arm slightly as he took another step towards her.

He seemed amused, as if he might otherwise laugh at her audaciousness, but his face quickly gave way to something darker, sobering into a grim expression. He took another step forward. “Imagine my surprise, Miss Dumbledore,” he began, placing an odd emphasis on the name, edge of his lips curling into a knowing grin, “When an article run by the Prophet tells the harrowing tale of a young girl finding solace in her estranged, well-known cousin after surviving an attack by the big bad wolf. When the article blames me for murdering her family and attempting to murder her.”

He came to a stop, cocking his head to the side as he narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at her, as if searching for familiarity. Just when she was beginning to grow hot underneath his scrutinizing gaze, he said, “Not entirely out of the ordinary. I’ve murdered plenty. It’s not even the first time I’ve been accused of murdering a Dumbledore.”

She felt her jaw clench, imperceptibly. She knew Dumbledore and Grindelwald had clashed often throughout the war, culminating in Grindelwald's defeat. But she had never heard of any other
Dumbledore, murdered by the mad wizard or otherwise.

“It is, however, the first time I've been accused of murdering a Dumbledore who I know for a fact did not exist. There was never a cousin in Bulgaria, nor a daughter who escaped. And I'm fairly sure you're not Albus's illegitimate child,” he paused, chuckling briefly as if he had something funny. “So if you're not a Dumbledore, than who are you, and why is he covering for you?”

She did not answer; instead she snapped her wand forward and shouted, “EXPELLIARMUS!”

-xXx-

Mulciber crouched low in the alley, chest rising and falling in quick succession as panic bloomed within him. His hands shook, and he wound them in his cloak as he shrunk back against the shadows, trying against all the adrenaline in him to stand still. Shaking, even involuntarily, would give him away, the disillusionment charm only able to conceal him so much.

The battle raged on beside him, taken to the gates of Hogwarts as if trying to swarm and march on into the school. Perhaps that was their goal, though he couldn't fathom why. What would Grindelwald gain from attacking schoolchildren and teachers?

His arm twitched, the black ink of the tattoo itching painfully against his flesh, and he grasped his wrist to hold it straight. Someone was trying to find him, a member of the Knights. He had lost sight of Hermione in the scuffle; brought to his knees by a powerful spell and then kicked in the face by an escaping student was all it took for the witch to slip too far from his line of sight, hidden within the chaos. She had said something about finding Riddle- had he disappeared as well? It didn't make sense- he would hardly let Hermione out of his sight, how could he become so separated from her? Especially in the heat of war?

The itch of the tattoo was becoming unbearable by now, he gritted his teeth as he fought to ignore it. Was it Hermione calling out to him? Or one of the others? Nott had chosen to stay behind and study, and Avery hadn't even left the dormitories, still smarting from the night prior. Rosier had left Mulciber in Zonko's to harass some Ravenclaw who owed him money- a quidditch related bet, no doubt- when the sirens had begun, followed in short order by the explosion. Mulciber had searched for him among the crowd, but he was nowhere in sight, and he abandoned his search the moment he saw Hermione wander out from the alley, confused and battered.

“Come on,” he hissed, his arm convulsing involuntarily now, and just when he thought he might tear his skin from his bones, a hand settled on his shoulder, another clamping over his mouth.

“It's just me,” came the gruff, yet familiar voice of Dolohov, and he sagged against the warm body pressed into him.

“Merlin, don't sneak on me like that,” he hissed, though he knew the call between their marks had been enough of a warning.

“Have you found anyone else?”

Mulciber shook his head, feeling at ease with another by his side even as his concealment charm flickered. “Hermione, but she went to find Riddle and I lost her.”

Dolohov blinked, frowning. “Riddle's lost?”

He shrugged. “I guess. It's practically a riot out there.”

“No, you imbecile! Riddle and Hermione went to the Hog's Head- that was where the explosion
was!” Dolohov spat, growing irate.

Understanding dawned on him, and his camouflaged eyes flashed in horror. “You don't think anything happened to him, do you? I mean, Hermione seemed alright and they were together.” The prospect that Riddle might be harmed seemed outrageous, ludicrous even. The wizard was unflinching, more stone and statue and power than man. He seemed so infallible, like Death himself would shrivel in his presence. No, he was certain that Riddle was fine.

Dolohov stilled a moment in thought, shifting to look at the main road that ran through the village, the dim glows of spells casting lights off the snow. “Do you think you were the first one I tried to reach out to?” he grumbled.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean,” the boy growled, sliding his hand down from Mulciber's shoulder and to his arm, hooking his fingers into the crook of his elbow. “I tried reaching out to Riddle, but got no response.” He tugged, sharply, pulling Mulciber from his post and down deeper into the alley. “Let's go.”

Go where, Mulciber wanted to ask, but the words never left his lips. He knew where they were going, to the rubble that had once been the Hog's Head.

-xXx-

Grindelwald was quick to block against the disarming spell, flicking his wand effortlessly through the air and sending back a disarming spell of his own. The bolt of red light was larger than what typically accompanied the spell, encompassing the lot between the wreckage of the building and the lining of the trees, casting an eerie glow over the snow. It was powerful, and even as she jumped out of the way of it, she felt her arm wretched, tugging at the socket as he wand slipped from her gasp, aided by the slick of her palms from the salve.

“No!” she yelled, wide eyed as her wand flew in an arc threw the air and into Grindelwald's waiting palm. She was struck with a sudden vulnerability, stripped of her most prized possession before she could even blink.

Grindelwald smirked, pocketing the wand. “Don't take it to personally, love. Mine is pretty remarkable.” He winked then, and she growled in anger, knowing that she never stood a chance because it was the Elder wand. The unbeatable wand forged in blood and death was twirled between long fingers, having not yet found its way into Dumbledore's hands.

“I just want to talk- I might even give it back to you if you cooperate.”

“Go to Hell,” she shouted before diving behind her, scrambling to Tom's unconscious form and scrambling for his wand. He would be furious with her to know she took it off his persons, but his anger would be abated to know it was in defense, and even if it fought against her, seeing her for the enemy he had overlooked, it would be better than nothing.

Her finger caught on some broken wood, slivers sliding into the soft skin, but she ignored it in her fumbling, pawing through his robes and chipped stone-

A force tugged at her ankle, ripping her back and away from the rubble. She scrambled for purchase, digging her nails into nothing, and sinking them through ash and snow and into the frozen earth. But there was nothing she could hold onto, nothing that could withstand the pull of the Elder wand, and she let out a strangled cry when a finger broke when it curled around a rock just as she was wretched backward.
She kicked, her left leg flailing and hitting nothing as an invisible force held tight on her right ankle and kept it taut. Her body jumped over a rock hidden beneath the snow, the bubble charm popping with the force as the smell of fire once more invaded her senses. Her jumper and robes became heavy and wet as she was dragged through the ground and brought right to Grindelwald's feet.

A kick finally landed, her heel colliding sharply against his knee.

He let out a gasp, hissed, before flicking his wand and pulling her into the air, carrying her by the one leg until she was upside down, her wool skirt slouching against her waist, the thick fabric fighting the pull of gravity. Her curls cascaded down, fluttering with each movement, and her arms-heavy in the position- reached out, trying to claw his face, tug at the clipped strands of hair. He evaded her attempts, rolling his head from shoulder to shoulder, and with a growl she went for his neck instead, digging her nails- jagged from scraping against the wood and brick- from his clavicle and to the curve of his jaw. A trail of blood, ruby red against the pearl of his pale skin, appeared in her path.

Fire burned in his eyes, rage seeping through his veins as she defied him, and his left hand wound in her hair, grasping painfully at the tendrils and giving a sharp tug away from him. It forced her head back, exposing her throat as she swallowed thickly, fingers pulling at her hair, her scalp burning with the pressure. Her arms fell to her side, weighed down by the pull of the Earth.

His right hand rose, tapping the tip of the Elder wand between her eyes in a taunting gesture. “Cooperate!” he hissed, emphasizing each syllable with a tap. “Is that so hard? I just want to know who you are. What's so special about you, a lying orphan, that Albus might let you adopt his name?”

“It's not a lie!” she retorted, not knowing how he knew so much about Dumbledore's intimate life to see the cracks in her identity, but unwilling to compromise on it. It was all she had, the small, slight grasp to this world and time. She wasn’t going to sacrifice it.

He considered her for a moment. Then, simply, “Show me.”

And he was in her mind, effortlessly, without even a warning, no spoken word as he entered her thoughts. It startled her, how easily he had done so, and instead of trying to force him out, revealing that she was an accomplished occlumens, she instead offered him memories, carefully tailored, altered and prepared for moments like this. The same ones she had fed Tom in a drug addled haze, the ones that she and Snape had spent hours on perfecting. Every detail exact and perfect in their imperfectness, straddling the line between too incorrect to be truth, too accurate and concise to be anything but a crafted lie.

And he perused them all, taking his time examining them before she felt the pressure leave her head, like when one was being crushed only to be freed and finally breathe deeply, fully.

She made a show of panting heavily, as if exhausted and worn from having her life so easily ripped from her and sorted through. Hoping that the information would be enough to assuage him, enough to convince him that he didn't know the Dumbledores as well as he thought, that two cousins had managed to evade his knowledge.

“I cooperated...now let me go,” she said through breaths, feeling the effects now of having been hung upside down, her head feeling too heavy and too light all at once.

He skewed his lips. “They're clever. And very well done. But false memories are still false memories,” he said with finality, and she felt her heart quicken its pace. How did he know?

He tightened his hold on her scalp, digging his nails between her hair follicles for good measure.
“Show me the real ones, now.” It was a command, the tone suggesting that it was in her best interests to obey it.

Like hell.

Moving as quickly as she could manage, she made a tight fist and swung forward with all the might she could summon, feeling his nose crack beneath her knuckles just as her other hand reached for the wand held between them. His grip had gone slack with her assault, and she was able to pry it from his hand, causing the levicorpus charm to come to an abrupt end. She folded her elbows in, curled her knees as she fell to the ground, stopping herself from crashing down on her head and neck. She rolled away and up, shirking her robe off despite the chill to keep from tripping over the hem, the wand screaming, pulsing in her hand as if protesting against being ripped from its rightful owner.

“It won’t work for you, witch!” he shouted at her, the words turning into a cackle as if he knew it was just a delay tactic. That she was only postponing the inevitable. It quivered in her grasp, squirmed as if trying to escape, wishing to return to its master. She thought of snapping it in half out of desperation and spite, but knew it would do no good. The wand had to find its way to Dumbledore, had to be coveted by Lord Voldemort. She strengthened her hold on it, cradling it to her chest.

A stinging hex- weak and pathetic- cracked like a whip against her shoulder, and she turned around to see that Grindelwald had resorted to wielding her stolen wand, a mad glint in his eyes. She had made off with his wand, with the Elder wand, and he looked like he was teetering on the edge of insanity at the idea.

“How ’bout a trade then, huh? Yours for mine?” he insisted, twirling hers in the air to show it off. “The wand chooses the wizard, and they don’t respond well to being taken. We’ll return them, and be on equal footing again.”

Before she could respond, her wrist twinged, an itch crawling up along her forearm. She frowned, pressing it against her side as it only intensified, like the spasm of a muscle-

“That wasn’t a suggestion!” Grindelwald yelled, the meager semblance of calm he had managed moments ago gone now as he feasted her with a spiteful gaze, cold and steely with untethered rage. And he had raised her wand- sloppily, angrily- as he yelled out, “Crucio!”

It was a weak curse, dampened by the effects of her wand fighting against harming her, but it was a cruciatus curse all the same. She fell to the ground, the twitch in her arm forgotten as all of her muscles convulsed and contracted, her nerve endings exploding and blooming. Her cells were electrified, like scalding needles were being pressed over every part of her, shoved into her skin, her muscles, her tendons, hitting bone.

She was well-acquainted with the pain, having writhed on the floor of Malfoy Manor beneath Bellatrix’s wand, had fallen to her knees in the Great Hall during the Battle at Hogwarts. Had been brought to tears by Voldemort himself before she had made her escape, had been whisked away by Snape. Each time had been exponentially worse than this, the agony more incremental, and she still managed to keep a tight hold on the Elder wand despite it, had counted to 72 seconds before she finally gave in to the pain and screamed.

She lost count when the screaming began, but soon after, it ended. The screams, the cruciatus. She exhaled shakily, her muscles sore and aching but it was reassuring. Normally they became weightless, numb in the wake of the terrible curse.

She pulled herself up, turning to see Grindelwald doing the same, brushing snow of his slacks. She
furrowed her brows and looked around in confusion before her eyes settled on the form, rising from the rubble and snow, coated in dust.

Tom had come to, was holding his own wand out in a shaking, white knuckled grip. His skin—which had only moments before been charred and covered in pustules running down half of his face—had healed a great deal from the salve, wrinkled and red and pink. He had been forced into a limp, favoring one side greatly as he steadied his weight.

And yet, despite how beaten and damaged he still looked, despite the fact that he had literally risen from a crumbled wall and pile of ash after having been unconscious, he looked positively terrifying. His jaw was clenched so tightly she worried it might shatter, his teeth turning to fragments. His hair was shaking from the tremors of rage which shook his body, and his eyes—

His eyes were blood red, the whites tinted pink.

Grindelwald looked at Tom as if seeing him for the first time, unaware of the fact that he had been there during the whole affair, his body healing slowly from the few spells and charms and potions Hermione had managed to offer him. “And who are you?” Grindelwald drawled, as if bored or feigning it well.

“Don’t you dare touch her,” Tom hissed in reply, and then he was leaping forward, unheeded by the leg that had been fractured, a cacophony of lights spitting out of his wand as he seemingly fired off every spell and curse in his arsenal. It was less a technique than it was the result of unbridled anger and poor impulse control, but nevertheless, it succeeded in keeping Grindelwald in the defense, forcing him to summon shield after shield as he stepped back and away from the stream of magic.

The shields were weak in his hand, Hermione’s wand fighting against the pull of his magic, and she could see the shields crack. Fissures running through them with each brush of a curse. As if they might give way at any moment.

She did not hesitated as she wielded the stolen wand to assist him, starting first with a disarming spell, wishing—needing— to have her own wand back. To not feel the magic and core of a wand fight against her and sputter pathetically at the simplest of spells. After a moment, the Elder wand refusing to perform for her, it finally offered a bolt of red light, jetting through the air and at Grindelwald—

The wizard dove from it, too distracted with warding off Tom’s besiege of curses to block.

“Expelli—” she was cut off by a sudden and overwhelming constricting around her middle, like a thick, invisible chord had been wrapped below her ribs and tightened. She gasped, the air forced from her lungs and she reached down as if she might loosen the source of it only to clutch at air and cloth.

What the—?

A witch appeared before her, hovering over head from atop her broom, her blonde hair loosened from the braid she had been wearing at the start of the battle. The same woman who had first attacked Hermione. “There you are,” she said coyly, almost saccharine. Her wand was raised, aimed at Hermione’s middle, and with a twist of her wrist the band tightened, digging into her skin.

Ignoring the throbbing pain at her midsection, she pushed forward, turning the wand from Grindelwald to the woman. She sent a stunning hex, sparks emitting from the tip before the spell broke through and cut into the air.

She blocked it deftly, sending one of her own that Hermione leaped away from, not trusting the Elder wand to throw up an adequate shield for her. The band around her was constricting, cinching
at her waist so that white dots appeared in her vision, her legs tingling and feeling weak as she trudged through the snow.

Her energy was waning, the constant and unrelenting thrum of adrenaline beginning to wear on her. She needed to become more aggressive, needed to end the battle sooner rather than later less she collapse in a heap.

Leveling her wand at the witch, she shouted, “Sectumsempra!”

A moment of hesitation, and then the wand warmed in her hand, sputtering to life.

The woman screamed in surprise and anguish as lashes cut into her, a long one running from her temple and down to the opposite side of her jaw, cutting down her neck. Another appeared under her ribs, running vertically down to the top of her thigh. Another slashed into her hand, the one holding her wand that within seconds fell to the ground, along with a thumb and index finger.

Hermione grimaced at the sight, cursing her brashness. What had she been thinking, using a spell that wasn’t even invented yet?

The yells were becoming louder, shriller, as the wounds cut deeper and deeper, pale skin turning crimson. And then she was tumbling through the air, the witch’s wails coming to an abrupt silence as she slipped from consciousness, plummeting to the ground in her broom from above Hermione. She tried to jump out of the way, but the hefty weight of the prone body was on her too quickly, knocking the breath from her just as the chord around her waist dissipated.

“Noooo!” Grindelwald bellowed in rage, his contorted face appearing to her as she shoved the body to the side. He had become livid, eyes wide in his madness, any spark of humor or mischief gone. Deep veins were visible beneath his skin, protruding in the state of wrath, and with barely a glance in Tom’s direction, he flicked the wand, sending a pulse of air that knocked Tom to the ground, several feet from where he had been standing.

“This game has gone on far enough!” he sputtered, and Hermione tossed the body- the lifeless body, it occurred to her, the blood loss too great to mean anything else- and made it to her feet just as he extended his palm out, calling the Elder wand to him.

His magic had grown powerful in his grief, and her fingers were snapped as the wand- unable to disobey him- broke through them to settle into the outstretched hand.

Panic rocketed through her as her hand- already swelling, her finger that was broken earlier a sickly shade of violet- tried to call out to her own wand, magic pulling and tugging feebly for purchase. When none came, Grindelwald now holding both wands in his hands, she settled for the spare wand by her side, the one that lay beside the severed thumb and finger. It, too, had been cut in the curse, an angle running through the hilt and revealing the frayed dragon heartstring core. The magic inside of it was dead, just like its master, and it offered only a spark of golden lights in protest before falling still, quiet.

With no wand, she clawed frantically at the well of magic within her, desperation igniting a flame within her, and rose her palms through the air, knowing that she had never been particularly adept at wandless magic and hoping for a miracle. The snow before her trembled, rose a foot in the air as if preparing to form a shield, only to be trampled by Grindelwald as he rounded upon her.

His nostrils were flared, lips white in the grit of his lips. And he rose his wand- the Elder wand, the one she had used seconds prior. “Let’s see how you like it then. Prior incantem!”
She jumped to the side, hoping to evade the sectumsempra curse that had been sent hurtling towards her, knowing all too well the damage it could do, the efficiency with which it could maim and kill.

She slipped, the snow forming a thick, crisp layer of ice and she fell to the ground, hands sinking to catch herself, one knee caught under torso from falling mid-sprint, the other extended behind her.

She felt the heat before the pain, the burning sear of the curse as it cut into her calf amplified by the cold that had seeped so deeply into her skin she was numb. And then came the agony, the hitch of her heart at the sudden increase of panic, of dread. Blood rushed in her head, a great swooshing sound that made her all at once dizzy, and her stomach twitched and tossed. For the second time that day, she could hear nothing, the surge of blood and adrenaline creating such a cacophony all else had been drowned out.

She was dimly aware that she was being lifted, pulled in the air by her collar, and she heard the words just as she felt a swift and sudden prodding in her mind- ‘perhaps now you’ll cooperate’- and Grindelwald was in her head once more.

His perusal was kinder than Tom had been. While Voldemort was careless and cruel, preferring to dig through the thoughts and memories with the ferocity of a rabid beast, Grindelwald seemed to coax them from her. A beckoning that she was unable to fight against- her vision had turned white, like static, and her heart beat felt more prominent than ever, the only sensation she could perceive. The only one she could separate from all the others.

She did not know how much Grindelwald had seen- she had trouble keeping everything straight, and the assault of her memories as they were pulled to the forefront of her mind only jumbled it up further. She could forget, wholly, where she was and what she was doing, too lost in the memory of Harry flying in the air on his Firebolt, narrowly avoiding the snapping maw of the dragon. Lost in the memory of Snape and Dumbledore as she sat in the abandoned home, left behind in the mass exodus.

There was a delay in her thoughts, a sluggishness that bogged her down- why was she feeling so tired all of a sudden?- and it wasn’t until she was thrown back to the ground that she realized Grindelwald had been tossed some distance away and she could see one, two, three Tom’s as he hovered over her, his face slipping into several refracted images.

Yes! That’s right! She was with Tom. That was correct. And she had been in the middle of battle- why was she so tired and ready to fall asleep if she were in the throes of a fight?

“-I do?” she heard, the words faint and distant, ebbing just on the edge of her consciousness, and she blinked up at Tom.

“Hmm?” she asked, somehow managing to slur the simple sound. She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus on the sight of him as he knelt beside her. The burns were glossy and tight as he skewed his lips, contorting his face into a look of horror.

But why-?

Her head lulled to the side, too heavy to keep lifted, she could see the pool of blood that seeped around her, the contrast stark. Scarlet against white- it made her head ache, the spots return in her vision. Like a gossamer veil was tossed over her face, obstructing her vision. But she could see it through the haze, squinting her eyes to see that the black of her stocking came to a too abrupt stop. That her leg- just below the knee- was missing.
Thanks to Fantastic Beasts, I now picture young Dumbledore as Jude Law (A+ casting, really wonderful, yas queen). I do not, however, feel similar in regards to Grindelwald. Sorry, I just can't get behind that one for a list of reasons. Personally, I picture Paul Bettany when writing him, so if that helps the imagery for you, have at it.

Also this still ended on a cliffhanger, whoops! My bad! Comment if you're ever so inclined, and follow me on tumblr for sneak peeks, answers to questions, tomione posts, and a smattering of every other fandom because what it organization? Tumblr: reneehartblog.

Next up: The battle continues, with some of the Knights, Dumbledore and familiar aurors of past joining the fray. And Hermione comes to the horrifying conclusion that Grindelwald got a full, front seat view to her unaltered memories.
Hey remember last chapter when I said things would be gross? I’m honestly expecting a visit any minute now from the authorities regarding my search history.

Also, a special shout-out to reviewer malfoycollins: Don’t worry, you will get your wish. #JusticeforCrane.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty: We Will Live Forever Part 2

‘When angels fall with broken wings
I can't give up, I can't give in
When all is lost and daylight ends
I'll carry you and we will live forever, for ever’

-Breaking Benjamin, Angels Fall

Dumbledore had been grading papers when the siren sounded its cry. He startled, looking from his desk to the large windows on his right side, the small village just visible in the top corner. His chair screeched along the stone floor as he shoved it back, standing. His quill sat, abandoned, red ink dripping from the nib and onto the parchment piled below, but he paid it no mind, coming to stand before the window and looking down at the village. Blue eyes flicked from behind the half moon glasses, searching for anything that might have triggered the alarm.

All seemed quiet, nothing terribly remarkable about the magical town. He sighed, rubbing a hand over his temple and stepping back. Even if it was a false alarm- a fact he was near certain of, as Hermione had never mentioned Grindelwald launching an attack on the school- the students would all need to be returned to the safety of their dormitories, and Dippet would need his assistance.

The loud, booming sound was what made him snap his attention back to the windows, and his mouth fell, slinging open. Fire crackled over the once peaceful village, barely visible from behind the cloud of smoke- thick and black- that plumed and engulfed the rooftops, rolling over and into the snow-capped trees of the forest. Figures were running, darting out from the shops and restaurants and into the streets, a staggering crowd of frightened students.

Eyes widened, and he was storming through his empty classroom, summoning his cloak to him wordlessly as he cast another spell on his fireplace, switching the floo to allow access from the Ministry, protocol should an attack ever fall on the school. It was, to his knowledge, the first time it had ever been utilized.

He shrugged on his cloak as he darted down the halls, footsteps echoing wildly off the stone walls- not all his, several other professors who were not chaperoning that weekend following suit. The stairs were eerily still, the whimsical and random movement coming to an end for the threat. The castle, he realized with a touch of mortification, was somewhat sentient, and seemed to be taking the danger seriously.

He tucked the thought away; now was not the time to study what sort of ancient charms had been used- and forgotten- in the school’s creation. He was in the Great Hall in short order, thanking
Merlin that the founders thought to include several shortcuts, and the doors were already open, Dippet standing at the center, wand raised. He spared Dumbledore only a glance as he brushed against his side.

“I’ve sent word to the Ministry that it’s not a drill. Merrythought, Binns and Bellamie are assisting me in the wards,” he said, his words curt and clipped as his jaw clenched. More than half the school was at the village, and it would take time to raise the wards that would allow the students and professors in, while keeping the enemy out. “Go and help the others with the students. I can’t fathom to think how many are out there, and every single one of them must be returned safely.”

There was a pause, lips parting before closing again. Finally, he said, sorrow weighing down his voice, “I won’t lose another one. Not again.”

“We won’t,” Dumbledore said, clapping a reassuring hand on the Headmaster’s shoulder before running down the stone steps that led to the castle. Something twisted painfully in his chest, his stomach coiling into itself. There was no way of knowing that, for certain. And it was in fact a very real possibility that not all the students would be returned, that the foot of the school had just become a battleground. That casualties were the price of war and each new front presented a new price.

He hurried his steps.

Aurors swept above him, brooms flying overheard and leaving a trail of smoke and magic in their path, only for two to lower, brooms flanking either side of him. He did not need to look to see who sat astride them.

“You think he’s here for the girl? Your cousin?” came the gruff voice of Gregor Moody.

He didn’t hesitate in his response. “Yes, I do. The article in the Prophet must have gotten his attention,” he answered, having to yell as they came to the gates separated Hogsmeade from Hogwarts, weaving to the side to avoid the swell of students bursting through and up the path.

“I hate journalists,” was all Moody said before pulling his broom upward and disappearing into the sky, navy cloak fluttering behind him.

“Should I look for her, then?” Crane asked, the concern evident in his widened eyes, a hand raising to brush the hair back from his face.

Dumbledore considered him, chewing his lip before sighing. “Yes, but be careful. She’s no doubt to be with Riddle, and the last thing we need is his personal rivalries get the best of him.”

“Right,” he said with a nod, before he too took off into the air, darting around the cluster of aurors.

He knew it could be potentially disastrous, sending Crane out to keep an eye for her. As far as Tom had known, Crane had been expelled and expunged from the Wizarding world, and he was content with that. But to have him know that he was not only wandering about it freely, but that he had been taken under the wing of one of the most respected aurors? An auror whom Albus was quite friendly with?

It would be suspicious, and might throw off the ruse of caring cousin, but it hardly seemed to matter in the grand scheme of it all, and he doubted Tom truly believed that Dumbledore thought Crane responsible as it were.

No, it hardly mattered when Grindelwald had descended upon them, when the dark wizard who Hermione had never seemed too concerned for had suddenly taken a great interest in her.
He seethed through his teeth, wishing to curse and place the blame on someone, something, but knew that the blame could only be leveled on him. What happened here, on this morning, would lie squarely on Albus’s shoulders.

He should have known better than to let the publication slip by, he should have had the forethought to request her name not be included in it to begin with. He should have known that her name and story would immediately intrigue Gellert.

He cursed the older version of himself, the one that had sent Hermione back in time to begin with, for not thinking of this possibility. Or perhaps he had thought of it, and had not cared, or had simply thought that she was resourceful enough to deal with the repercussions.

Or maybe he thought that he, the younger iteration, would have the good sense to curb the situation before it became out of hand.

No matter how he tried to twist it, he couldn’t deny that he was wholly culpable. Even blaming himself in the distant future had been some pathetic, roundabout way of thinking to shirk away the blame and responsibility. Because he should have looked out for her, should have known how dangerous it would be to be connected to him.

Should have, at the very least, told her about his history with Gellert so she could have the option to protect herself.

But he didn’t, because it was uncomfortable.

Because she looked at him with such reverence, such idolization that he couldn’t bring himself to shatter it. He had seen her own memories and felt the power of her emotions and her love and the way she adored and respected him, as if he was infallible, as if he held all that mattered in the world in his hands. She gave away her future, her life, the entirety of her own universe to travel in time and do the unthinkable because he had told her to. She trusted him to guide her in her task, through decades in which she would offer her servitude to the man who had destroyed everything she loved, because he had never failed her before.

It was a weight of responsibility he had never known, and he didn’t respect it. Not enough, not as much as he should have.

And now she was lost in the battle, being hunted by a dangerous man, because he didn’t want her to look at him with anything other than trust and affection.

He was disgusted with himself, with his greed and selfishness.

He prayed that she was alright.

He didn’t think he could handle any more blood on his hands from someone who only ever loved him.

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When Tom had awoken to the sound of Hermione’s tortured screams, he had been filled with unmitigated fury. He thought his blood might truly boil, thought he might be capable of tearing someone limb from limb, flesh from muscle, with his bare hands. He thought he had known all the bounds and depths of rage, only to slip further down the precipice, discovering even greater wells of it.

And without even thinking, acting purely on emotions and instincts and that overwhelming desire to
hurt, he launched a slew of spells and curses at Grindelwald, wanting to make the wizard scream louder than Hermione had. But they were all rebounded, Tom unable to move as fast as he wanted, his entire body screaming in protest with every movement, skin stretching and pulling uncomfortably from the haphazardly healed burns. He was covered in a sheen of sweat despite the cold, his skin fevered, and he could barely breathe, each inhalation needing to be deeper, each exhalation more ragged.

He hardly knew what had happened when Grindelwald had screamed- a bellowing ‘Noooo!’ echoing off the trees and the sides of the remaining buildings. And then he had been tossed aside, a barricade of air pulsing at him and lifting his worn body easily. He might as well have been thrown at a bed of rocks, the ice cracking beneath his weight as he was deposited in the snow, coming to rest at the base of a tree in the Forbidden Forest.

His body made a sickening sound as it slammed against the trunk, and he gasped out a breath, the overwhelming desire to vomit flipping his stomach. He reached out a hand, digging it into the bark and using it as leverage to hoist himself up, hissing as the rough texture scraped along the sensitive skin, stinging the burnt flesh. But he ignored it, ignored the tremble of his stomach, the bile rising in his throat, until he was standing, pausing for only a second as he rested his head against the tree.

It took a great deal of effort, pushing through the dizziness, shaking his head as if it might abate it, but he managed to turn, to stumble back towards the small field. His awkward gait turned into an ambling jog when he saw red at Grindelwald’s feet, Hermione in the air, and a hand around her neck. The disturbed snow around them had been tinted pink, like a graph of their struggle.

He flinched when a bolt of red light shot through the air, coming from his side, colliding against the wizard and hurling him up and away from Hermione. He didn’t even care to look and see who had cast it, his eyes focusing on her form as it fell to the ground, crumpling easily. He jumped over the body of the woman- the one whose death had stoked the flames within Grindelwald, had twisted him with rage. And he came skidding to his knees, reaching out to grab Hermione and pull her into him before he came to an abrupt, horrified stop.

His eyes widened, and he felt his breath get trapped in his lungs; felt something lodge in his throat. Her leg had been severed, and there was so much blood surrounding her and so much more coming out, a steady gush from the clean amputation.

She was pale, a ghastly shade of white, her lips tinted violet and the rise and fall of her chest was small, barely perceptible.

The anger that he had felt, the murderous desire that had coursed through his veins and kept him moving despite the aches and groans of his body had left him. Turning to fear, helplessness. She was bleeding out right before his eyes, and he had no idea of what to do, of where to even begin in healing such a disastrous wound. He placed a tentative hand to her cheek, pulling it away after his finger tips brushed against the cold skin. “Hermione, what do I do?” he asked, hoping that she was awake enough to help him, conscious enough to give him some sort of direction. If only to stop the bleeding.

The knees of his slacks were wet and warm, the pool of blood inching out further and further, warming and melting the snow even as it saturated it.

“She tried to pull herself up, but the attempt was weak and feeble, and she fell back after only rising a
few inches off the ground. “Stop it,” she muttered, the words sluggish and weighed down, slurred. He knew she meant the bleeding, but he didn’t know how.

She rose a hand, fingers pinching at the edge of his school tie which had come pulled out from where it was tucked in the collar of his oxford. Understanding filled him. It wasn’t good enough, and he doubted it would even make too much of a difference, but anything was better than watching her bleed to death. He undid the tie with shaking fingers, gingerly raising her thigh (if he felt a tad sick at the sudden weightlessness of her leg, no one need know) and made a makeshift tourniquet, tugging the ends as tight as he could.

Snow crunched beneath hurried steps, but he paid it no mind- Grindelwald hardly seemed to matter, not when Hermione was coming in and out of consciousness, when his skin was warm and slick with her blood.

A figure settled on her opposite side, raising a wand and aiming it at the amputation site. Sparks flared out, a blue light coiling around and dimming-

Nothing. The spell did nothing. It was still unhealed, and the flow of blood, dimmed by the tourniquet though not stopped entirely- continued.

He finally looked up, meeting the familiar face of Joshua Crane. There was a flurry of emotions, and he was struck by the fact that he could feel so many things at once. That he could want to punch the older wizard square in the face, while also hoping that he might keep trying to heal the wound. That one spell might finally work.

He glanced over his shoulder, where Grindelwald was thoroughly distracted, Mulciber and Dolohov arriving swift on the scene, fanning around the man on either side of him and offering an unrelenting stream of spells. Something like pride swelled within him, but he stopped it away, turning his focus back to Crane, who was muttering curses under his breath, chewing his lip in frustration as yet another healing spell fizzled out, unable to counter whatever the curse had been.

“They’re not working. The curse-” he began as he tried another healing spell, and yet nothing.

“No!” Tom did not realize he had said it until he heard it, the sound harsh and cold. “No, something will work. Something has to work.” It had to, it simply had to. He wouldn’t accept it. Hermione would be healed and she would be fine. He was not going to just sit here and watch her die-

“He knows, he doesn’t know.” Crane said, the soft, placating timber of someone approaching a delicate situation, and the desire to reach out and punch him had grown thrice as strong. Why was he wasting time on pity and calming tones when Hermione was still alive?

A small, blue tipped hand reached out, coming between them, and it settled on the back of Crane’s neck, pulling him down and lowering him so that his forehead was pressed to Hermione’s. Her eyes were open, just barely, half-lidded, and her wine-colored lips were parted, her breath a faint wisp that formed in the chill of the air.

Tom stilled, feeling strange at the sight before him, like an outsider watching something unbearably intimate. There was a twinge of jealousy, and if he had been a kinder man, he might have felt ashamed that such an emotion had taken priority. That it overwhelmed the panic and fear and anger and grief (no, no, he was not feeling grief, because grief meant mourning, and mourning only happened when someone had died. And Hermione was not going to die.) But he was a cruel, selfish man, and he felt irate at the sight of Crane bowed to his Hermione, close enough that her lashes brushed against his cheek.
Hermione’s hand grew slack, slipping away from Crane’s head just as he pulled back. His face was unreadable, drawn in thought, and he pinched his lips before turning away and back to the severed leg, raising his wand once more.

“She used legilimency to show me the counter curse,” he offered in explanation, his tone suddenly cold as he regarded Tom. Gone was the warmth, the kindness he had shown when he attempted to calm him only seconds before. He ignored Tom entirely as he bent over the bleeding wound and began reciting the counter curse, a long and wordy Latin verse.

It was as if watching time in reverse, watching the petals of a flower curl back into itself from bloom. The blood began to move in the opposite direction, seeping back into her body, and Tom hastily reached down, undoing the knot of his tie and tossing it aside so that it could return unimpeded. Color returned slowly to her flesh, her lips becoming soft and pink. And the wound was beginning to heal, tissues forming anew, skin bundling together to act as a seal.

He didn’t stop himself now, reaching forward and wrapping his arms around her, relief washing over him. His hands turned into fists as fingers entwined in her jumper, curled in her hair. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough contact, it wasn’t enough of her. He had her pressed so tightly that he could feel her heart beat, even as it grew stronger and more pronounced as she stepped further away from the cliff she had just been teetering on. He could smell her hair, it smelt like smoke and dust, and was dampened from the snow. He could feel her body as she breathed more steadily, as she seemed to exhale sharply in relief, a slight tremor shaking her limbs.

Her head twisted, suddenly, as if having her wits returned to her made her all at once remember she had been in the middle of a battle. And then she shoved Tom aside, scrambling back just as a spell- a bolt of lightning but black instead of brilliant white crashed on the ground where they had sat, scorching the earth below and melting the snow and ice upon impact.

It created a divide between them, Tom thrown to one side, Hermione tossed against Crane and scrambling to stand only to realize she couldn’t because she was still missing her leg. Crane, regaining his balance, reached down and tugged her up, looping an arm around her waist so she could lean against him.

Standing, Tom saw that Grindelwald had turned his attention to them, that Dolohov was nowhere in sight, that Mulciber lay in the snow, unmoving.

Grindelwald paused, turning to look at Hermione, blue eyes flicking from her face- flushed with color, now, no longer that frightening pallor of death- to her legs. Leg, nodding somewhat as he took in the absence of one, the wound healed and sutured together with magic. “Good, you kept her alive,” he muttered.

It struck Tom as a curious thing to say, that someone who had seemed so desperately to want her injured, who wanted her to suffer, should now suddenly care. But before he could give it more thought, Grindelwald raised a wand, flourished it through the air as he said, “She’ll be coming with me now, and I’ll make my leave.”

The air itself seemed to rush with the force of the spell, tendrils of magic and wind and power wrapping around Hermione, prying her from Crane’s grasp. He fought against the pull, his fingers digging into her side before they released. But he was quick, hands moving to grasp onto her wrist, his feet dragging through the snow as he was pulled with her.

Tom produced his wand from his sleeve, aiming it at Grindelwald and throwing a powerful stunning spell his way. But it was deflected, Grindelwald raising his left hand carelessly and summoning a shield for it to bounce against, shimmering in the light of the day. His eyes widened, and he cast
another one, only for it to ricochet once more. In any other instance, he might have grown envious, would covet the ease with which Grindelwald had done that. How he had summoned a wordless, wandless barrier with his non dominant hand, all while maintaining hold on the spell that encircled around Hermione’s waist, pulling her and Crane closer. It was the sort of power that made his throat dry, made his fingers twitch like it was a corporeal thing he could reach out and swipe for himself when no one was looking. He wanted it, wished with such avarice that he could do those things, that he could wield such magnificent power and magic.

But beyond the flicker, the spark of greed he felt at it, he could only feel panic rising in him once more. Panic as Crane was shoved back by the snap of an unseen spell, as his hold on Hermione faltered and his feet buried and skidded on the snow. Panic as Grindelwald curled his arm around Hermione, his cloak shielding her body from the cold. Panic as she was nearly taken from him again.

“No!” he roared, and he was wildly flicking his wand, broad, swooping motions as he used every spell he could think of, dredging through the memory of every class he sat in, of every dueling club, every obscure spell and charm he found through his late night studies. Every book he had ever pulled from the shelves of the restricted section. But they were all deflected, Grindelwald barely even needing to swish his own wand through the air to counter and block them all.

Some had rebounded, forcing Tom to duck out of the way as his own spells were projected back at him, one even skimming over Crane’s shoulder as he too sent a flurry of curses.

None seemed to even so much as tire Grindelwald, a bored, slightly amused expression pulling on his face. The air hissed and crackled, vibrated with the magic that lingered, like a static energy that charged the wind, made your hair stand on edge. It smelt pungent, like burning charcoal and smoke and everything was alive, humming and singing. Tom thought he had never, in all of his life, been so immersed in magic, so saturated in it that gooseflesh prickled his flesh and all the hair on his arm stood on end. It made his stomach twist and turn uncomfortably as if it was somehow too much. As if something that he was, something that existed in his veins and his mind and heart could be too much.

Desperation curled in him, as Grindelwald- perhaps finally having enough with the wizards- turned his back on them and began to march into the forest, dragging a struggling Hermione with ease. It made him irate, that twinge of envy at the confidence that came with his power, that Grindelwald thought himself so strong that he could turn his back on them in the middle of a duel. Thought them so weak that he needn’t even worry about the threat they posed.

“Avada Kedavra!” Tom seethed, moving his wand in a sharp stabbing motion. Green light- brilliant green, like the reflection of light as it bounced off an emerald- jettisoned from the tip of his wand, casting an eerie glow over the snow and the stones of the buildings that encompassed them. He felt Crane’s look of disbelief rather than saw it, the implications of the curse all but forgotten as he cared only for stopping the wizard from reaching the apparition point, taking Hermione with him.

His wand pulsed in his hand, the thrumming almost painful as- instead of ducking away from the killing curse- Grindelwald merely turned on his heel and cast another shield, the green shimmer of refracted light as it collided right in the center.

It was impossible. There was no known shield or countercurse that could withstand the sheer brutality of the killing curse. And yet, Grindelwald’s did just that, even if he was pushed back deeper into the forest, obscured by the shadow of the trees. The beam of the spell, like a heated rope of fire and electricity, threaded through the air, clashed against the unyielding shield. Tom’s hand was convulsing now with the force of the curse, the handle of his wand growing unbearably hot as it trembled in his grasp.
He felt it crack, the wood splintered like a seam down the length of it. He heard the sickening split of his wand, as the struggle to hit its target became too much. The green light flickered twice, then diminished entirely, seconds before the wand in his hand turned to fractured splinters.

He opened his palm- the burns fresh, newly scorched from the magic as it quaked dangerously in his hold- and the three pieces that had once been his wand fell to the ground, sinking into the snow.

“I’ve done my very best to make sure Albus would not have to mourn any of his students,” Grindelwald growled, snapping Tom’s attention back to him. “Do not make me put him through that.” He then turned to Hermione, who slumped in his hold, eyes widened as she continued to stare at where Tom’s wand had fallen at his feet. “Come on now, Miss Dumbledore. You and I have much to discuss.”

She startled, pulling from her trance as she leaned back, inclined her head up to look at Grindelwald. She pinched her lips, jaw clenched. She said, in a voice that was calm, restrained, “It’s Mrs. Riddle, actually.” And then she reached up, digging her middle and ring finger into the corner of one clear blue eye.

He startled, trying to shirk her out of his grasp, but she had wound her other arm around his neck, broken fingers ensnaring into his shirt collar, one leg raised and hooked around his waist. Her fingers sank deeper in- quick and efficient as she was with most things- up into the first knuckle, and she curled and twisted her wrist as she tightened her hold on his lean body, resisting his attempts to toss her.

A sickening squelch, followed by a popping sound seemed to reverberate around them, and Hermione pulled back, crying out as she straightened out the bruised and swollen hand, unlatched from his person. Her other hand was coated in blood, tinting the snow pink as she fell to the ground, catching herself with it.

Grindelwald howled in agony, raising a hand that curled uselessly over the eye dangling from the bloodied socket, attached only by a string of pink nerves. Blood and clear mucus trailed down his cheeks, fingers shaking, obscuring the eye from view.

Color drained from his face, and his lips trembled in rage as Hermione attempted to pull herself up against a tree, only to be trapped there, unable to move beyond it. He moved towards her, one hand still clamped over his empty socket, blood seeping between his fingers, the other raising the wand above his head.

“You and your friends have tested my patience enough,” Grindelwald hissed, his voice a low and measured gravel as if barely restrained, and he swished his wand, the roots of the tree coming to life and bursting through the ground.

Hermione’s eyes widened, and she tried to scramble away, but she was hindered greatly, limited to a weak crawl, and within seconds she was confined to the base of the tree, the branches like a prison around her body. Satisfied that she would not be a problem, Grindelwald turned his attention to Tom and Crane, pointing his wand straight so that it was level with Tom’s eyes.

“I’m giving you an opportunity here, boy, to leave unharmed. You two can turn around, collect those brats who came to help you,” he used his wand to gesture to where Mulciber lay, unconscious, just behind him. “And you can go back to the castle and have that nice mediwitch there tend to your face. You’ll be interviewed by some aurors, and then they’ll send you on your way to get a new wand in a few days.” He paused, lips twisting into a smile. He looked positively deranged, then, the eyeball Hermione had managed to gauge from his head hanging loose from his skull, the cavern of the socket dark and rimmed in maroon. His grin was wry, creating folds in his skin around his eyes and
He paused, licked his lips. The grin slipped away, revealing a stern, solemn expression. “Or you can be very stupid and try to fight me, the greatest Dark Wizard to live, without a wand. Sure, he’s still got his,” he cocked his head to the side, gesturing to Crane, “but no worries there, not for me. Better wizards than you have tried to defeat me.”

He hummed then, his breath forming crystals, the rise and fall of his chest steady, as if he was otherwise composed. As if he hadn’t been fighting in a battle for a near hour; as if he wasn’t cradling his eye in the palm of his hand.

Tom scowled, jaw clenching tightly as his hands tightened into fist, nails digging into his palm so tight it stung, eyes watering as he further irritated the burns. But he ignored the pain, ignored all the sensations that fluttered through him; the heavy palpitation of his heart, pulsing against his shattered ribs, each breath an effort and strained. His skin felt as if it was tearing fresh and anew with each movement, and he was having difficulty seeing clearly, a smattering of white starbursts flooding his vision, and for a moment he might have thought it was snowing again, a massive blizzard descending upon them.

But it was not snowing anymore, and his head swooned with vertigo, his injuries beginning to wear him down, grind him into nothing. His body was growing weaker with each second that dragged by, and Grindelwald was right. He had no wand, the pieces laying strewn at his feet. That same avarice from before stirred within him, angry and bitter that he was not as powerful as the man who stood before him, who was threatening to take his Hermione away from him. Angry that no matter how much he had studied, what he had sacrificed- his soul, he had given away half of his soul- and yet, it was still not enough.

It wasn’t enough.

He knew that he should swallow his pride, return to the castle. It wasn’t as if it would be met with indignity, after all. He had fought against Grindelwald, had held his own quite masterfully. If anything, he would be lauded a hero, having done everything he could to help the school and save Hermione. It would only help to build himself up, turn him into the legend he yearned to be. It might even open paths otherwise closed to a penniless orphan such as himself.

But none of that mattered, because he wouldn’t have Hermione.

He was running through the snow before he had even realized he had made the decision, feet crunching noisily, his steps made slow and lumbering even as his heart thudded louder, his blood swooshing in his head the only noise he could hear.

He was propelled back after only a few steps, the ground rising up, like a large snake was burrowing under the snow and had snapped its head up at him, sending him flying through the air. His stomach flipped as he was tossed, and for a mortifying second he thought he might actually be sick. He was dropped unceremoniously on his back, pain radiating around him. A gasp escaped him as he tried to sit up, his hip searing at the action.

There was a hiss, a crackle of magic as Crane had sent a bolt of light at Grindelwald, only for it to reflected by a hastily erected shield, the spell shooting back at Crane who ducked out of its path, skidding to the side. The spell collided against a tree, bursting through the center. The tree groaned, creaked as it toppled over, branches and pine needles spitting outward.

“Wrong choice!” Grindelwald bellowed, and then he fired off a series of spells, a cacophony of crackling magic. Tom rose from the ground, raising his hand, summoning all the magic he could,
anger and rage and need heating his veins. Snowflakes rose from the ground before him, clinging to each other, forming little frozen blades. Like fragments of glass, they shimmered in the afternoon sun as it rose in the sky, and he flicked his wrist, the sharp icicles slicing through the air. They threaded through Grindelwald’s shield, cut along his shoulder and his face and neck.

He gasped at the sudden pain, hissed as long trails of red appeared across his skin, tore randomly into his robes: across his breast, over a shoulder, down the seam of a lapel. The once too pale color of his face had all but disappeared now, blood smeared across his visage, trickling down the slope of his brow, the curve of his cheek. It was ghastly, and even as it continued to slide down his chin, to the heavily stained collar bound around his neck, he seemed more surprised than pained. More impressed that Tom had successfully wielded wandless magic than he was bothered by the shallow yet plentiful slivers carved into his skin.

He chuckled then, an appreciative glint in his eye. “Is that all you’ve got then, Lord Voldemort?”

‘How does he know that name?’ Tom thought, but he had little time to ponder it, Grindelwald raising his arms and twirling his wand, as if he were the conductor to an orchestra, the crescendo of the piece beginning. On his command, the snow rose, a mountain of startled snow, some parts muddied, others pink and red, a map of the brutality of the battle. It continued to grow, rising overhead, towering over him and rising as high as the trees of the Forbidden forest.

He could see Crane from the corner of his eye, the wizard taking several steps back as he rose his wand, firing spells at the massive wall of ice and snow. But it did nothing, each scorch of his spell was simply replaced in moments, the snow tumbling as it rose higher and higher.

There was nothing to do but run, to try to evade the snow before it made its descent, cresting in a downward arc. Crane had come to the same conclusion, clenching his jaw and turning on his heel as he ran, his gait slow and awkward as he trudged through the snow on the ground.

It aggravated him, that- like a trapped and frightened animal- he had no choice but to run. But he did, his fractured leg stinging in agony with each step, the snow might as well have been concrete beneath his injured body. His face was pinched into a grimace, the pain evident on his face, and his breath was ragged, chest constricted from the cold and the constant ache of his body in protest.

He saw the snow falling, arching over him. It was a wave, curling around him and trapping him within a spiral. He watched as it crashed into Crane, only a few feet ahead of him, the boy falling to his knees and raising his wand to form a shield before disappearing under the wall of snow.

He turned to the side, trying to run through the tunnel before it swallowed him whole, keeping his head low as the arch became smaller and smaller. The sound was riotous, causing a screech to echo in his head as the roar of it grew louder and louder, as if a dragon stood just before him, its massive jaw stretched in an eternal scream.

The tunnel was growing smaller, the walls confining him, until what felt like a brick knocked against the side of his head. Stars exploded in his vision, his head throbbing from the contact. And as the arch finally fell atop him, he crumpled under the weight, his world turning dark once more.

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Hermione was screaming as she watched the snow settle from within her prison of tree roots and swooping limbs, pressed so tightly against the branches- thick as her thigh- that the sound was strangled and breathy, her chest constricted. The massive wave of snow- so high that she could see nothing above it, only Grindelwald’s figure before it- was now coating the ground, smooth and unblemished, neither Joshua or Tom in sight.
“No!” she called out, her cheeks cold and stinging from where the tears streamed across her face. Grindelwald turned to her, a wicked smile splitting his face in two, the eye dangling grotesquely from where she had plucked it. His skin was marred with slivers, smeared in blood so that not even a trace of the handsome man she had seen only an hour earlier remained. There was no disguise in place to conceal the monster within.

“I gave them their chance to run,” he said, his tone calm and placating. “They wrote their own fate.”

She pressed her face forward, so that she could level a heated glare at him, her eyes burning with fire, with anger. “I ought to rip the other eye from your face.”

He chuckled, nodding his head indulgently. “Not before we have a little chat, hmm, Miss. Dumble-Ah, my apologies, you said Mrs. Riddle, correct? Or would you rather go back to being Miss. Granger now that you’ve become a widow?”

Her jaw tensed, the crowns of her teeth grinding so hard onto each other she thought she might shave them down. She had forgotten his foray into her mind as she was bleeding to death, the amputation fresh and dizzying and leaving her unable to defend against any attempt to break through her carefully guarded mind. Her anger gave way to panic- he knew. How much he had seen, she did not know entirely. But he had seen enough, and she needed desperately to salvage what she could.

“I don’t know who you mean,” she lied, knowing it was a pathetic attempt even as she said it.

He seemed amused. “Come now, you've had a bit of an identity crisis but I’m sure you still remember who you were before this silly little plan of yours. Or, it was Albus’s plan, wasn’t it? Not to worry, I seem to have eliminated your problem. Lord Voldemort won’t be an issue. I even made sure to bury him for you.”

She remembered then, with horror, what Dumbledore had told her the day she sat within the abandoned muggle home. ‘Time has a way of maintaining itself.’ She couldn’t go back and simply kill Tom Riddle, because someone else would rise to take his place.

What if Grindelwald was to be that person, if Tom had truly died? What if she made him unstoppable with her mere presence in this time?

She thought she might cry with the feeling of utter helplessness. She hated this more than anything, the feeling of being trapped and caged like an animal, the knowledge that others were going to fight until death. The knowledge that there was nothing she could do but watch and pry pathetically at ancient tree roots that wound around her.

She had traveled through decades- through generational wars- had given up the life she had, only to sit trapped in a prison, missing a leg as the entire plan unfurled before her. As everything she had carefully arranged was being dismantled.

The shadows came to her, like the reel of a film strip, grainy and out of focus in her mind. Visions of the war- her war- of watching Fred and Remus die, of just barely escaping capture. The feeling of victory, triumph as each horcrux was destroyed, hope building upon itself only so that the fall was mightier, greater, when Voldemort just created more. The sinking feeling of standing just before snatchers, so close she could count the pores on his face, and knowing that the only thing between them was a thin ward.

She had felt helpless more times in her life than she cared for. She had felt helpless when Hagrid came to the courtyard, carrying the believed corpse of Harry. When Voldemort simply apparated in the wake of the battle, the air still thick and electric, escaping his eminent death and prolonging the
war. When Ron lay dead at his feet, Harry dying in his grasp and she could do nothing but run.

Run and cry.

She couldn’t do it again, not anymore. There was nowhere to run to, the world different and not her own. And she couldn’t bring herself to cry anymore. She had wasted enough tears on dark wizards and their wars and fight for power. She had given enough of herself away for cruelty and evil, and she would not kowtow to yet another maniac, a self declared king who sought to rule over her and the ones she loved.

She would not start over again, she would not begin from nothing once more because of this, an unexpected blip in her radar. She would not tear herself and her world asunder once more- she needed to have something left for her, a piece of her no one could take, least of all a prejudiced mad man. She would not let Grindelwald undo all of her work, all of her sacrifice.

Her hand broke through a space in the roots, jutting out as she called out for her wand. “Accio wand!”

It was ripped from where Grindelwald had stashed it in an inner pocket of his robes, flying the short distance between the two to settle in her palm, the weight familiar, reassuring. Her fingers curled tightly around it, before Grindelwald could think to take it from her, though he made no move.

He sighed, exhausted. “Haven’t you fought enough? I’ll take you to my quarters- even let you wash up and eat something before we talk some more. It will be easier if you just stop fighting.”

“Never,” she promised, just before pressing herself further against the prison, twirling her wand forward. “Expecto Patronum!”

She had never been very good at the spell, had struggled for weeks in the DA to produce the little otter. She remembered then, that she had thought of the moment after the troll incident in their first year, when she had sat and talked to Ron and Harry and was never once dismissed. When they seemed intrigued by her words and not bothered by them. The moment she knew she had finally made friends. It had worked then, and she tried to recall the moment now.

But the memory simply darkened, tainted by the sorrow that swelled as she remembered they were dead. A silver mist emerged from her wand, only to dissipate seconds after.

She swallowed, fingers trembling as Grindelwald tutted.

“It’s getting quite sad to watch this, now,” he said.

“Expecto Patronum!” she called again, undeterred by his words. She thought of ever happy memory she could conjure up, days at the zoo with her parents, dinners spent cluttered together in the small kitchen of the Weasley home. Afternoons propped against her favorite corner in the library at Hogwarts. But they would twist, skew in her mind as faded reminders of the life she once had, never to be again.

Silver mist, once again dissipated.

She called it out again, before Grindelwald could even speak. And again, when the memories didn’t suffice. None were good enough, none were purely happy on their own, and the helpless feeling from before threatened to claw its way back, to overcome her.

No! She was not helpless- she refused to be. She had fought greater wizards than him and come out of it unscathed, she had stared down Death itself only for it to back down. She was powerful enough
that Lord Voldemort saw her fit to be his queen— not simply a follower, not one face in a legion to serve him. He had trusted her enough to mark his men, and she had pressed Death Eaters beneath her feet.

She had tricked Lord Voldemort so that he held her at his side. She had reduced Grindelwald to nothing by killing his follower, and then plucked an eye from his head. She was not weak, she was a witch who would not be undone because she couldn’t think of happy enough memories.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Light exploded, the dense cluster of trees disappearing in its brilliance. The air pulsed and warmed, and the tree that had been lodged around her was thrown back, tossed deeper into the forest. The sound of it falling, of branches snapping, was lost among the crackle, the shout as Grindelwald was tossed back by the large and stately beast.

She fell forward, her hand of broken fingers coming to catch herself in the mound of dirt left behind from where the tree was uplifted. She blinked, blinded by the brightness, only for her eyes to adjust on the silvery form before her. It was large, far larger than her otter had been, and made entirely out of bones and taut skin, as if someone had cobbled together a creature out of the corpses of others and strapped a leathery hide over top it. It had massive wings, the silvery veins visible through the skin as they flapped soundlessly above her.

She had not seen thestrals often in her life, only fleeting instances during the Battle of Hogwarts and had seen drawing of them in her textbooks. They had always filled her with a sense of dread, of unease at the sight of the creatures so often associated with death. Now, however, it filled her with relief, a guardian of her own to command.

“Get Dumbledore!” she called to it, the long and thin head nodding at her before turning its gaze forward. The wings flapped, more harshly and erratic than before, and took off at a charge, bowing its head and pummeling into Grindelwald just as he rose from where he fell, the collision knocking the breath from his chest.

She grinned when silvery hooves kicked at his face as he tumbled to the ground, as his nose crunched loudly from the impact. And the thestral was in the air, a shimmering cloud of smoke trailing behind it as it became smaller and smaller.

She didn’t watch it disappear, instead pulling herself up from the hole, using the uprooted tree for leverage. She wouldn’t make it far, unable to stand and run, but she just needed to distract Grindelwald enough for Dumbledore to arrive. The apparition point was still a long ways off, buried deep in the Forbidden Forest, but she had no way of knowing how close Dumbledore was and how long it might take him to get there.

He had defeated Grindelwald in her time, surely he could do it now.

She was crawling forward, pulling herself to where she had seen Tom before the snow collapsed on top of him. The snow was thinner, disturbed from the powerful gust of the thestral’s wings, and she could see something black in the distance— his school cloak, perhaps.

‘He’s not dead,’ she thought, wincing as broken fingers pulled her forward. ‘He survived an explosion, surely some snow fall will be nothing to him.’

Fingers gripped her hair, tugging her sharply so that she was jerked upwards and backwards, being dragged back to the forest. She growled in pain, feeling hair snap from her head. But the pain was alleviated as Grindelwald pulled her up, tossing her over his shoulder. She gasped out a breath,
watching Tom disappear as he carried her back.

“You’re too late. Dumbledore’s on his way- he’ll beat you, you know. I’m sure you saw that when you digging around in my head,” she seethed, her voice warmed in her confidence. Grindelwald might have had the Elder Wand, but Dumbledore had found a way to beat him once before.

He said nothing in response to her taunts, snow crunching beneath his feet as he made his way back to the apparition point.

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“Over here!” Dumbledore shouted as he ran faster than before, the shimmery creature leading him to an expanse just beyond the village, an alley way separating it from the Forbidden Forest. Moody soared ahead of him, appearing from the viscous cloud of smoke and dropping from his broom at the side of a prone figure, barely visible beneath the snow.

His heartbeat became erratic at the sight of the alley- the battlefield- his pulse becoming an uneven staccato in his veins. He was shaking, not from the cold or the adrenaline of the fight but from the anxiety that was cresting within him, at the sight of several unconscious- Merlin, he prayed they were merely unconscious- bodies strewn about. None of them Hermione.

“It’s Crane!” Moody called, brushing the snow off the figures chest as his other hand roved his wand over his body, a dim light emitting from the tip and turning each and every shade imaginable. “He’s alive, but we’ve got to get him to St. Mungo’s,” he snapped, barking orders at an auror as she too dropped from her broom by his side.

There was blood running down Crane’s chin, coating his lips. Eyelids fluttered over restless eyes, and with a groan, he coughed, sputtering out more blood, flecks appearing on Moody’s face. He seemed unbothered by it however, smiling softly as he told his protege he would be alright.

“There’s another one here!” an auror- Liber- shouted, and Dumbledore ran to where he knelt, unearthing a student from the snow.

“You recognize him?” Liber asked, gingerly turning over the boy’s face for Dumbledore to examine.

He swallowed thickly, nodding his head even as he winced at the partially healed burns that marred the skin, the blood that saturated his thick curls and made them stick to his head. “Tom Riddle. Is he-?” The question died on his lips, his mouth turning dry. He couldn’t say it, couldn’t say the word that sat like poison on his tongue.

“Alive?” Liber asked. “There’s a pulse, but it’s weak. I can’t even perform any diagnostic charms on him, my magic can’t pick it up.”

He pinched his lips, unable to feel the relief at the words. He was alive, for now and just barely. And Hermione was still nowhere to be seen. “Place a stasis on him to keep him from worsening, and get him to St. Mungo’s immediately. He is to be top priority,” he said to the auror, the young wizard nodding dutifully as he worked quickly, taking care to not move Riddle too quickly, too sharply.

He didn’t deserve the kindness, Dumbledore knew, but he would never say it. No one was to know the sort of monster that lurked behind his burned and bloodied face. Even if it seemed like a waste of energy- there were other injured students who could be healed, ones who did not dream of enslaving others, ones who did not fantasize at length about torture and murder and delight in the pain they caused in others. Tom Riddle was a waste of kindness and consideration, and- not for the first time since Hermione had come to his life- he thought that all of their problems might be best solved with a
swift snap of the neck.

The thought made him pause, sigh heavily as he pressed a hand to his forehead. It felt that way sometimes, as if there were a stranger in his head. The ghost of a past he had tried so hard to leave behind that said such awful things to him; made him think something so cruel.

It wasn’t a ghost or stranger, though; simply another attempt for him to shirk responsibility.

He was once again reminded that no, he was not the hero Hermione thought him to be. And that all of this was because of him trying to play that part, to not act like he was a man built of mistakes and regret and foolishness.

He put a stop to the thoughts before they could become too much and consume him- for now, he needed to find her. The self-doubt and mental flagellation could come later.

He looked around him, watching as Mulciber was pulled to his feet and brought towards the castle, as an auror checked over the slumped form of one of Grindelwald’s follower, shaking his head to a friend in the distance. Mediwitches and healers began weaving around the buildings, looking for stragglers and students who hid from the battle. Aurors marched purposefully through, ready to catch any witch or wizard who was neither a student nor ministry official. And then his eyes fell on the sight of the silvery thestral, standing just at the edge of the forest, hooves digging into the hole created by an uprooted tree.

He whinnied soundlessly, shaking his head so that stars followed its movement, the billowing ethereal smoke like a startled halo. He was moving towards it, ignored by the others as they tended to the task at hand, to healing the injured and capturing the guilty. The beast was even more imposing this close, and in any other situation, he might have thought how remarkable it was that her patronus was a thestral.

But instead his thoughts were filled with what he might find should he follow it. He had spent years trying his best to evade this, telling himself that it was not his job to take care of Grindelwald. He was not an auror, he was not the Minister of Magic. He was a school teacher, he was perfectly content with that. And even when Hermione told him that he had defeated Grindelwald in battle in her own time, he had locked that thought away. Ignored it, as if doing so might erase it from reality, as if fate and destiny could be rewritten out of ignorance and stubbornness alone.

It was always meant to come to this, wasn’t it? He should have known better than to think he could move beyond his past. It was sort of poetic, in a way. This world began, long ago, in the minds of two young boys who believed themselves to be infallible. It began with him and Gellert, it was only fair that it should end that way.

“Can you take me to her?” he asked of the thestral, running a hand down its spine. The skin was neither cold nor warm, though it was slick, the skin smooth over the uneven skeletal form.

White eyes blinked at him, and the wings flapped once, twice, three times before settling low at its side, clearing the way for Dumbledore to sit astride him.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: (singing) This is the battle that never ends, it goes on and on my friends!
It was fun to write Dumbledore in such an intimate manner. I imagine that in this point in his life, he’s still very much struggling to be the person he wants to be, and he has a lot of turmoil about it. It’s not quite second nature to him, and he has to consciously set himself on the right track. Either way, I enjoyed writing the cracks in his psyche. Likewise, Tom was fun to write for this same reason, his thoughts and emotions the exact opposite of Hermione’s and feeling things he’s never experienced before. As for the battle, I apologize if its length is getting quite tedious, but I feel like the showdown between Dumbledore and Grindelwald deserves a chapter of its own.
Chapter Summary

The battle continues as Dumbledore arrives, though Hermione is distracted from Grindelwald by a more imminent threat.

Chapter Notes

*Skates in on heely’s while drinking a smoothie* I’m back, babes.

A huge thanks to Kyoki for betaing and reigning in all my fuck-ups.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty One: We Will Live Forever Part 3

‘Grey skies will chase the light away, no longer
I fought the fight, now only dark remains forever

Divided I will stand
And I will let this end’

-Breaking Benjamin, Angels Fall

Dolohov groaned as he pulled himself up from the forest floor, a hand clutching at his head as if he could hold it together even as it was threatening to be torn apart by the dreadful ache. His vision was a blur, and each attempt to open his eyes resulted in a sharp pain; the light too bright, the world too much.

His body curved around a tree, and his back ached with each movement. He tried to sit up, but gave up after two tries, his head and back each singing in agony. He lay there for what felt like an eternity. Time seemed to move differently when one was in pain. Slowing as each sensation became amplified, allowing you to be saturated with and appreciate the feel of torn skin, strained muscles, and shattered bones.

He had read once that some muggle religions believed that suffering was a sacrament from a god himself and was to be honored and experienced without assistance. That all beings were sinful creatures and should live in misery and pain, holding God in their hearts, their prayers to him on their lips. The details were a bit foggy- he had laughed and tossed the book aside, giving it no more attention- but he thought that there was nothing more unfair than being made to suffer for your existence. How could someone be sinful without sin? And why was pain necessary for divinity?

What sort of God was so weak he needed to break you down to nothing before he could help?
Time dragged forward, the snow wetting and weighing down his school robes and the cold turning his fingers blue. In all that time he was no more a God fearing man than he had been before. Perhaps it was a lie the hopeless told themselves to make their bleak lives seem more meaningful.

His headache had eased some, and when the pressure behind his eyes faded to a hardly noticeable hum, he slowly opened them, blinking as he stared at the branches that extended over him. He was in the Forbidden Forest- propelled there by a powerful spell sent by Grindelwald- and if he slowed his breath so that the whistling of his lungs was silenced, he could hear shouting in the distance.

He tried to roll over and grimaced all the while as he managed to pull himself onto his side. It was even more painful than before- his spine felt as if it was being twisted and pinched and with a yelp he allowed himself to lay on his stomach. The pain became discomfort, and he lay there, settling his face to the snow. It was cold, but it hardly bothered him, his flesh taut and numb.

He wondered how the battle was going, telling himself that he should bite down through the pain and amble back. That Riddle would surely be disappointed in him for not trying harder- might even punish him for his easy defeat.

But he could hardly bring himself to care. It wasn’t another student he had lost to, but Grindelwald, and surely that had to count for something.

He snorted, even as the pain reverberated through him at the small action. Of course, it didn’t count; Riddle did not need justification for his cruelty. Their loyalty was payment for a place within his world, and any failure in said loyalty was subject to whatever punishment he saw fit.

He thought, once more, of the God who allowed men and women to suffer for the atonement of imaginary sins.

More time passed, counted in the breaths he took, the cold seeping into his stomach until it, too, was numb. And for a moment, he thought he might sleep. It was not comfortable by any means, but he was tired and his body ached and time might move faster if he did. Someone would come for him, teachers or aurors. He was not so far into the forest that he had to worry about the beasts that lurked through the grounds.

His heart thuddled, and he was jerked awake by the sound of snow crunching, twigs and branches snapping.

He startled, palms bracing himself as he pulled his head up and looked at where the sound had come from. He swallowed thickly when he saw Grindelwald- tall and large from his position on the ground- shuffle through the trees. There was blood running down his face, staining his collar, and a hand was raised and cupping his face as if cradling an injury, the other curled around something he had hoisted over his shoulder.

‘Someone,’ he corrected, biting down the gasp as Grindelwald passed him, Hermione’s wild curls unmistakable as she lay tossed over his shoulder. She was tugging uselessly at him with one hand, and he could see her mouth moving but was too far away to make out her words.

Without thinking, he pulled himself into a kneeling position, wincing as pain flared within him and the snow noisily cramped beneath him. He inhaled sharply, holding his breath as if it might make him invisible, hoping that Hermione’s incessant chattering was all that the wizard could hear.
Neither seemed to notice him, and Grindelwald walked deeper into the forest, unimpeded.

He exhaled at the sight of his retreating back.

He knitted his brow at the sight, wondering what Grindelwald could want with Hermione before shrugging the question away. He had never liked the witch- his opinions on the matter were well known- and if he were being honest, it was a very convenient and clean way to be rid of her. He resented her presence, her skill and how quickly she had swayed Riddle and climbed the ranks when he had been steadfast and loyal since the day he met the charming and powerful wizard. He certainly resented being forced to bow his head to her and call her his Lady.

If Grindelwald wanted her, he could have her.

But the question came to him again. Why **did** he want her? He knew that her family had been killed by Grindelwald, but did her escape really create an obsession so great he needed to hunt her down? To drag her away from Hogwarts, one of the most heavily guarded places in the magical world? Why take her at all? If he wanted to finish his business, why not simply kill her and make his leave?

Furthermore, what had happened to Riddle that Grindelwald managed to pry her away from him?

A pit settled in his stomach, at the thought that Riddle might have succumbed to the battle. Though a part of him- a *traitorous* part, he knew- hoped that he was dead.

The punishment for letting Hermione be taken off would be severe, and Dolohov trembled at the very thought of it. If Riddle was dead, there would be no one to condemn him for watching her go, no one to torture him for it.

But if he wasn’t...

Perhaps it was that thought that spurred him to move, the fear of what Riddle would do to him if he knew Dolohov had the chance to help Hermione and had instead watched them pass. Fearful of the rage and of ending up on the wrong end of Tom’s wand, he pulled himself up on resisting, trembling legs, and followed Grindelwald as he went deeper in the forest.

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Hermione struggled in Grindelwald’s tight hold, her breath ragged and uneven. She was wearing down, the exhaustion weighing so heavily on her that her limbs felt like they were made of lead, pulling her down. The adrenaline which made her heart and pulse thump erratically had barreled through her and depleted, leaving her worn out and drained. And her need for a healer was growing more evident, her one hand useless as bolts of electricity ran up her arm, the amputation site of her leg a pain that was becoming harder to ignore without the veil of adrenaline numbing it.

“Why are you doing this? I won’t be of any use to you,” she said, her words hitching as she was jostled with his steps. “It’s not like I can tell you what to do differently. You’re *not* the wizard I came here for.”

“No, but that hardly seems to be an issue anymore, hmm?” he retorted, his voice soft- as if he too was losing the will to fight.

The implication left behind in his silence unnerved her. “He’s *not* dead. And even if he is, I can bring him back. He’s got a horcr-”

She shouted as he came to an abrupt stop, tossed her away from him so that she sat at his feet, scrambling back as she raised her gaze to meet his. He was baring his wand, pointing it at her as he
seethed with something indeterminable. Not quite rage, not even cruelty. But something raw and muted and uncontrollable.

“Bring him back? You would bring him back after everything you’ve seen him do? What you know he’s capable of?”

Her mouth fell, unable to conceal her surprise at his words, the sentiment behind them. It was coarse and harsh and rich with disbelief as if he thought her mad for wanting to bring back Tom. As if he was any better; as if he wasn’t just as much a monster as the man he was condemning.

She stuttered over her words, so cut off by the judgment in his tone. “I-I’ve got to. The timeline, it has to be p-preserved-”

“Consider it divine intervention,” he cut her off, waving his wand for emphasis. “You did the best you could, no fault of yours.”

“Someone else will take his place!” she yelled, gripping her own wand tight. She was in no condition to battle with him again, but its weight in her grasp was comforting all the same. “The timeline will rectify itself and put someone else in his place. At least I know how to stop him when the time comes!”

Grindelwald laughed at that, throwing his head back as the sound echoed in the forest, wrapping around her in the space so small and intimate by the clustered trees. “Is that what you call stopping him? Traveling back through time with a dangerous and untested spell? Joining his merry band of delinquents? Torturing them with Unforgivables? Slipping into his bed at night? Am I just supposed to believe that someone plotting his death would turn around and devote themselves to him, offer their love?!?” His words grew louder and louder until they were surrounding her, piercing through her and ricocheting off the curve of her skull. There was spit slicking his lips, a desperation curling in his voice that made her shrink back like she were a child being admonished by their parent.

She wished to argue with him, defend herself, even though the same thoughts had sat in her own mind and she hadn’t even been able to defend herself then. But any thought of rebuttal died the second she saw movement behind Grindelwald, her eyes widening at the sight of Dolohov.

His mouth was agape, eyes wide and flicking back and forth between the back of Grindelwald’s head and Hermione, his wand lowering to the ground. For a brief moment, time stood still, and she had a million thoughts all at once compressed into the silence that followed. She wondered how much the boy had heard before realizing that it had, in fact, been everything. She wondered if there was any way to salvage it- a way she could twist the words or convince him that Grindelwald was delusional.

But the idea was dismissed before it could even settle in her brain. Dolohov had been suspicious of her from the very beginning; there was simply no way he would see this as anything other than a confirmation to all his concerns. The proof that he had, in fact, been right all along.

She was shaking her head, swallowing thickly as she tried to plead with him, tried to delay the moment and hope that Dumbledore would arrive shortly. “Anto-”

He cut her off, lips curling into a sneer as he gestured wildly with his wand. “I always knew. I always knew there was something off about you! The others- the others thought I was suspicious and jealous. But I was right!” There was a manic glint in his eyes, his words trembling with excitement. “But this? From a different time? How is that even possible?”

Grindelwald had turned to look at Dolohov now, sighing and muttering something about tenacious
students who never learned to quit. But Dolohov couldn’t take his eyes off her, shifting sideways in the snow to better meet her gaze, his wand raising to steady on her. A threat for answers, curiosity overcoming the delight that made his eyes glow so earnestly.

“What time are you from?” he asked, making a jabbing motion at her, eyes narrowed. “Ten years from now? Twenty?”

“Closer to sixty, give or take,” Grindelwald answered, his one good eye focusing on Hermione, face unreadable.

She heard a sharp inhale, her gaze flickering back and forth between the Slytherin and Grindelwald, unable to determine who posed the greater threat. Which one of them was more likely to harm her?

She focused her sight on Dolohov, pulled her own wand out before her. His eyes were wide, bulging from his head as he gaped openly. “Sixty years?!” he shouted. “You came sixty years into the past...to stop us?” He scoffed, chewing his lip in thought. “Because we won, didn’t we?”

“No,” she said, her voice low. “Not *we*. He won. He’s the only one that wins. That will ever win. There’s no *we*, no matter what he’s told you. All he’s ever cared about is himself and he will preach and promise whatever he needs to in order to convince others to do his dirty work!”

The smirk slipped from his face at her words, his jaw clenching. But she couldn’t stop herself from speaking, unable to contain the truth much longer. “You think he cares about what happens to you? Do you think he cares if you’ve got power? Do you think he cares if you’re willing to lay down your life for his cause? He doesn’t care if you die; he will mourn you as a soldier, not a friend, and even then he will move on in short order.”

He shook his head, his face becoming hard and sharp in his anger. “No! You’re lying! You’ve been lying this whole time. But you’re just some last chance, aren’t you? What was the plan, exactly? To send you back and purposefully lead Riddle astray? Your cause was so far gone that some plain bint of a half-blood was the best they had?” He chuckled as he spoke, the sound only fanning her ire.

“Mudblood,” she corrected, drawing her shoulders back and raising her chin. “If you’re going to insult my status as if it means anything, at least get it right. I want the knowledge that you lost several duels to me to sting as much as possible.” He opened his mouth to retort, but she cut him off, brow raised. “What is your plan, exactly? To kill me? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a bit occupied at the moment, and I’m sure Grindelwald is growing impatient, so you better get on with that then. And when you do kill me and go on to tell everyone why, do you think Tom will just believe you? That he’ll be alright with my death once you assure him that I somehow came from a different time to defeat him? Despite time travel being impossible now, with no known spell or device to take one back in time outside of the Ministry patent office? Do you think he won’t doubt you? That he’ll want evidence? Evidence that you can *never* provide?”

She may have been digging a deeper hole for herself, just another problem for her to resolve in the near future with some memory charms. But the longer she could talk, the longer she could delay Grindelwald fleeing, with or without her in tow. The longer chance she gave for Dumbledore to find them. *Where was he?*

Dolohov said nothing, his mouth gaping as he struggled with her words. There was no plan, and she knew that in her small time there she earned more of Tom’s loyalty than Dolohov had- perhaps more than he ever would. It was enough to stall him, to defuse the situation long enough to buy her more time.

She licked her lips. “I can obliviate you. Absolve you of this burden. Tom won’t hurt you for lying
about me again, and you won’t have to feel like a traitor.”

He sneered, his face contorting into one of utter repulsion. “Don’t you dare go in my head you filthy mudblood!”

He raised his wand, the beginning of a curse dying on his lips just as it began as he was pulled to the side by an unseen force. He fell against the base of a tree, wand slipping from his grasp and getting lost in the snow.

But Hermione paid him no mind, her attention focusing instead on the trees as they split apart, uprooting in the arrival of Albus Dumbledore.

She grinned wide, relief sweeping through her as Dumbledore, riding astride her Patronus, jumped down and took several wide steps until he stood just before Grindelwald, wand raised and pressing just below his chin.

“Let. Her. Go,” he seethed, teeth gritted. His voice was cold, alarmingly so, and Hermione felt herself pulling away, wanting nothing more than to distance herself from the two wizards.

Grindelwald seemed unimpressed by the grating voice and bared teeth, chuckling even as he looked down at Dumbledore, head tipped back. “Oh, of course, wouldn’t want anything to happen to your cousin now would we?” he taunted, his grin slipping when Dumbledore lurched forward, sinking his wand deeper into his throat.

“How much do you know?” Dumbledore asked.

“Enough to want her alive,” Grindelwald answered after only a moment of thought. “Enough to hope that boy is dead.”

“Tom,” Hermione heard herself whisper.

“Is alive,” Dumbledore added, and she once more felt herself sag with relief. “He is at St. Mungo’s being treated as we speak.”

Grindelwald roared suddenly, making a broad, swooping gesture with both his arms. The wind whipped around, forming a vortex that picked Hermione up, dragging her through the snow even as she reached out and tried to find purchase on something-anything. But there was nothing, and she tumbled, unable to see through the sudden whirlwind of snow.

Just as she was beginning to get too dizzy and her stomach churned too heavily for her comfort, she finally came to a slow stop, the world moving around her. She was the axis that it spun around, a fixed point for the earth to twirl about.

She wasn’t the only one who had been thrown around, Dolohov trying to pick himself up only to slip and fall a few feet before her, Dumbledore using a tree for leverage.

“You were always a hypocrite, Albus!” Grindelwald sneered, the words veiled behind a crooked and wry grin. There was something unsettling about the expression- like he had too many teeth to fit in his mouth.

Grindelwald approached Dumbledore now, circling him slowly. He was a house cat prowling on mice, playfully batting them back and forth before the kill. “Why do you protect him when I became so disposable? How will you live with yourself when the atrocities begin to mount and you’re unable to wash the blood from your hands? Knowing you aided and abetted him?”
Dumbledore grunted in response, bracing himself against a tree trunk as he came to his feet. “You’re seeing something that isn’t there. And making this about you, a laughable assumption when I haven’t given you a thought.”

Grindelwald growled, and there was a flash of light that brightened the clearing, a veil of purple falling to the world.

Hermione twisted, her back wet and cold from where she lay in the snow, her flesh numb to the pain that might have otherwise radiated. She felt useless, struggling to pull herself up with only one leg to ground herself, the other absent and the ache from the uneven slash growing impossible to ignore. The snow was harder than it had been in the village, a layer of crisp ice settled over the top that crunched with movement. Shards of ice that scratched and pulled against her frozen skin, the pain greater with the chill.

She forced herself to move, gritting her teeth as fingers- some plump and swollen and broken- pulled feebly at the low hanging branch of a tree. Dumbledore was here now, the discordant sound of his battle with Grindelwald a din that fell to the recesses of her mind. He could more than handle the dark wizard.

She needed to get to Dolohov.

He wasn’t far from her, not really, but the distance seemed insurmountable. Her body sagged into the earth, reluctant to move and screamed in protest.

What would happen if she gave in to the want? If she fell back into the hollowed shell of snow her body created and closed her eyes?

Would she die?

No, she wouldn’t. She knew that with confidence. Dumbledore was here and he would protect her. It was the one constant she had, in this life or her previous one.

Would Dolohov run from the battle while she slept? Would he find the others and tell them what he knew? Spread the knowledge like a fiendfyre she would be helpless to stop? Dolohov was cruel and opportunistic- that, too, was a constant in both lives.

Which task seemed more impossible? Pulling her battered body from the snow and erasing his memory, or trying to contain the truth, undo the damage a hateful Slytherin could do? Would it be easy convincing the others that Dolohov was delusional, or would he plant the seed of doubt that would grow into an immovable force? Would all of her work be so easily undone by loose lips?

She shouted as she sat up, her hip and knee aching when she pressed too much weight on the only leg she could. She bit her lips to silence the sound, wincing as the ice cracked like shattered bones as she moved over it.

She managed to pull herself up on one knee, panting in exertion. But the triumph was short-lived when she saw Dolohov glance at her from over his shoulder, lips pulled into a hideous snarl. Her heart fell when the sneer twisted, morphed into a smile.

And he ran back through the path they had come, heading back to Hogwarts. His steps were slow and trudging, weighed down by the snow, but he was still quicker than she could ever be.

She leveled her wand before she realized it, her wrist shivering as it rolled in the shape of a clockwise circle. “Obligare ad!” she hissed.
Golden chords sprouted forward from the tip of her wand, snapping through the distance between her and Dolohov. It didn’t attack him though— he didn’t even realize she had spelled him until the cord pulled around him, snaked around his waist and cinched together.

He glanced down, raising his elbows out to avoid touching it. But the chord and the soft golden glow faded, disappeared entirely.

He whipped around to look at her. “What did you do?” he hissed.

“I can’t let you tell them.”

He scoffed, his eyes looking past her, at the battle that clashed on the opposite side of them. His lips were the color of wine, and they trembled in the cold; his nose and cheeks pinched from the chill so that color blossomed against the otherwise pale skin. But his eyes burned with a ferocity she herself was well acquainted with, a fire that burned within him and urged him forward.

His chest heaved with worn and ragged breaths and with a look that might have made someone weaker recoil, he turned away from her and took a step forward.

She yelped as she was tugged through the snow.

He shot her a quick, furtive look before taking two more experimental steps.

She dragged behind him, remaining at the same distance she had been when the spell was placed. He shouted, though the sound was drowned out by something cracking behind her. Before she could even look over her shoulder to make certain Dumbledore was alright, he took off in a backward run, squaring his body to face her as he pulled his own wand from his robes.

“I’ll drag your broken body back, then. Let Tom decide what to do with you. You’ll be properly afraid of him then. He doesn’t much care for traitors,” Dolohov hissed, a promised, as he grinned manically. “And he’ll certainly forgive me for this! Crucio!”

She screamed instantly, too hurt and exhausted to even fight against it. Her nerve endings were split open, sending bolts of electricity through her veins and boiling her blood beneath her flesh. The heat was strumming through her, splitting her in two, slicing the frozen and numb skin from her so that the pain was fresh.

Her throat was raw, and she wondered how long she had been under the curse— time seemed indiscernible; both infinite and finite. She was jostled and pulled as Dolohov continued to pull her along, and she could faintly hear laughter beneath the rising swells of her cries.

All of it came to an abrupt end simultaneously. The laughter was the first thing to halt, happening only half a second before all the other actions that followed. The pain stopped, her screaming tapered, and she was no longer being pulled but plummeting, wand slipping from the feeble grasp she had managed to maintain.

Soon, even the plummeting came to an end, and she landed on something…

Well, something odd. Not quite firm, but not entirely soft. There was some give, like she was bounced back up but that wasn’t quite right either.

It didn’t matter, however. Her natural curiosity had all but vanished, her consciousness wavering in and out, like a dying pulse. She felt herself sink in— into the ground, into nothingness.

A scream pierced her nothingness, nudged her.
“What’s that!” Dolohov shouted, his voice pitched and panicked.

Why was he panicked?

She was jostled again, the ground trembling.

Why was the ground moving?

“What the fuck is that?”

Her eyelids felt weighed down as if they were made of lead, but she finally managed the task, vision swimming. She was met with a veil of white. Static white, like the telly when a storm was strong. For a brief second, she thought she might have fainted, fallen into the nothingness she had been leaning towards for too long now. How much could someone endure?

How much abuse could a body be submitted to before shutting down?

But then her senses came to her, slowly and dulled and overwhelmed by the frightened screams from somewhere beside her. She was laying on a series of ropes- a net?- that sloped and curled around her body, bouncing with the slightest change in weight. But they were sticky, and her muscles twitched and ached as she tried to pull her hand away from them.

Her realization was faster than her return to consciousness, and she startled suddenly, trying and failing to sit up.

The spider web held her down.

‘It’s an egg sack,’ she thought, eyes widening at the wall of white only an arm’s distance from her. Silken strands pulled taut together, forming a cocoon that was nearly the same size as her.

She turned her head to the other side, wincing as hair snapped from her scalp. She could barely see Dolohov, hidden behind the large legs of Aragog as the acromantula stood over him. She hadn’t seen him in her own time, though she had heard the stories from Ron and Harry- recalled the way Ron shuddered each time the sheer size of the beast was mentioned.

She shuddered now, looking at it.

Its eyes were the size of bowling balls, black caverns that mirrored Dolohov’s terrified visage, the image warped in the curved shape. The small appendages that were settled at the base of its mouth twitched and curled inward and outward as if it were sniffing Dolohov. Inhaling him before consumption.

“Do something, Hermione!” he hissed, lips flinching. He did not look to her- refused to look away from the hungry beast above him. “I dropped my wand.”

She did too, she remembered, panic unfurling within her. This was it then, wasn’t it? All of it- all of her work, all of the struggles she faced- all for nothing. Her secret would be preserved, but only because she and Dolohov would die.

She nearly laughed then, a cold and bitter and joyless laugh. She had fought so hard- had fought through the loss of a limb, one that was only haphazardly healed- only to die to a creature that would someday offer Harry and Ron the breadcrumbs that would lead to them stopping Voldemort, if only for a moment. If only a shadow of the man.

The shadow that she had spent over a year charming and plotting against.
Because he was still Tom Riddle when he made the diary. The very same Tom Riddle that had been hers.

“Aragog!”

She tried to yell, but the words were more of a croak, scratching along the base of her throat as she said them. But the creature heard her regardless, the small appendages stilling as he turned those large, oversized eyes to her.

Dolohov still refused to look at her.

“I’m Hagrid’s friend,” she said, trying to smile but finding the motion impossible. She was so exhausted.

“Aragog?” Aragog repeated, the voice strange and rumbling and sharp.

She forced herself to smile, despite the fatigue. “Yes, Hagrid. He raised you, right? Took good care of you. I know he misses you.”

“Aragog?” Dolohov was the one to repeat the name now, though it was wry and twisted with disgust and confusion.

Aragog turned his attention back to him. “The winter has been long. So few creatures fall to my web and my children will hatch soon. They will need food.” Before the words- the short, chopped up sentences- could register, the spider lurched forward, sinking fangs into Dolohov’s neck.

What started as a strangled scream bubbled and burst, turning into a wet gurgling sound as the paralytic venom sank in and slackened his muscles. There was a twitch, a spasm, before he finally stilled, only Dolohov’s widened eyes flicking back and forth.

Aragog pulled away, all eight of his long, bent legs moving to the side of the wizard. Blood was smeared over his neck and collarbone, saturating the once white collar of his oxford. It was a gruesome scene, and she felt her lips tug into a grimace, the gesture only deepening when Dolohov looked at her from the corner of his eyes, a silent plea stolen from paralyzed lips.

“They will eat the boy first, you have time to run.”

There was a sound- like fabric ripping, tearing apart at the seams- and then something was crawling on her. Light as a feather presses across her torso, over her hips. If she closed her eyes, she might imagine that they were cats, a barely noticeable weight passing over her- the soft feeling of hair brushing across her cheek.

But they weren’t cats, they were baby acromantulas, a hundred of them. Twice as large as each of her fists.

If Dolohov could still scream, she imagined the sound would shake the earth, summon the swarms of aurors still investigating the grounds of Hogwarts. The spiders descended upon him, and he was lost in a sea of hairy, spindly legs. She flinched at the sickening sounds that followed, thick squelches as skin was pulled from muscle, muscle from bone.

She pulled herself away from the sounds encompassing her, the wet gurgling that made her stomach churn uncomfortably. She couldn’t afford to lay and gape in horror at what was happening beside her, she needed to find a way to escape the web.

She pulled and struggled, gritting her teeth as the sticky residue clung to her skin, clung to each
follicle of hair, clung to the fabrics of her robes. She was jostled by the shifting tension of the web, jostled by the weight caving as the baby spiders swarmed to Dolohov.

She cursed herself, angry for having lost her wand in a thrashing fit when Dolohov held her under the cruciatus curse. But if she had learned nothing else, it was that a wand was simply a witch’s tool, not the witch herself. It was not the source of her magic or her power- she was. Spells and incantations and charmed words may have coaxed the magic from her center, chiseled it into meaning- but it did not chisel it into existence. Her magic would subsist with or without a wand or foreign words.

She skewed her eyes tightly shut and strained to focus- the gruesome sounds beside her a difficult thing to ignore. Her fingers curled around the web that clung to her palms, her frozen skin aching, as she recalled the sensation of summoning her magic. It was coming easier to her now, desperation honing her skills more than any book or lesson ever could. The well within her felt less buried, like it had been pulled from a pit beneath her feet and settled in her ribs, warming her, magic quaking with each breath.

She imagined that her hands were fire, that heat rose from the lines etched in her palm like lava bursting through the splitting maw of the earth. That she held lightning in her hands, a thousand degrees worth of heat that would incinerate the string of web clutched within her grasp.

It was an odd way to use her magic, more abstract and less defined than she had been taught. There was no wand to control it, no incantation to direct it. Simply here trying to forge and mold her magic the way she needed to, at that moment. Turning her magic into fire and heat that began in her palms but spread through her, coursing through her veins and capillaries until her entire body was the center of a flame.

She fell quickly through the web, crashing against the thin layer of ice covering the snow. Steam billowed around her as she sunk into the earth, and she hissed as her frozen skin blistered and reddened. Groaning as she sat up, she blinked up at the web above her, tattered from where she fell through- though the spiders did not seem to notice, Dolohov barely visible beneath the swarm aside from his face pressed to the side.

Flesh the color of stone, blood smeared along his lips, the exposed cheek that had been chewed through and revealed the stretch of muscle below. Tears mingled with blood, and she grimaced when his iris twitched, his eyelashes trembled in an aborted blink.

He was still alive.

Her gaze fell to the forest floor, where she saw Dolohov’s wand, the dark- almost black- wood a starking contrast to the snow, saturated with blood that rained down from above.

She barely thought of her actions as she lurched towards, her movements playing over a grotesque symphony of garbled chokes and wet tearing. She grasped hold of it, and aimed it above her, her vision immediately blurred now that she was directly below Dolohov and blood fell upon her face.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light flashed brilliantly before her, too bright against the snow that reflected the spell.

And then it faded, the light pulling back to reveal Dolohov, his body slumped against the web instead of rigid, paralyzed. His gaze fell to her, but it did not focus on her.
It didn’t focus on anything.

Dead eyes sunk into a half consumed face, bits of chewed up skin framing the hole across his cheek. The spiders were unbothered by his death, feasting away, hairy and spindly legs climbing across the web, across other spiders as they fought for a place to settle and eat.

She fell to her side and vomited, her stomach lurching violently. Her face was wet and warm with blood and tears, and she trembled.

The word murder sat in the back of her mind, but she shoved it away- there were more important things at hand. It had been a mercy kill- his flesh fell in chunks to the ground and the chords of his throat were exposed and bloodied to the world. His death would have been long and agonizing and even if she had found the strength and power to fight off and rescue him from the swarming acromantulas, she would not have the needed skills to heal him. He would still die, slow and agonizing, then.

She merely hastened the inevitable.

His wand was dull in her hand, lifeless and unresponsive.

She tossed it aside, dragging herself across the sheet of ice and snow, hands curling around a tree. Bark dug into her blistered skin, and her broken fingers flared in pain. But she ignored it, her breath becoming sharp as she persevered. She was near blind with the pain and the blood that felt like lead on her eyelids. But she saw with her hands, fumbling root from root as she pulled herself slowly up the slight hill, her one leg doing what it could to leverage her battered body up.

It felt as if hours had transpired, like she had spent an eternity climbing up what would have otherwise been an easy task. The noisy sounds of the flesh being torn from bone were forgotten, drowned out by the ringing in her ears that bounced around her skull. Her world was slipping from her, her vision a swath of nothingness and her hearing a dull pitch that burrowed into the fuzzy parts of her brain. Her world was becoming smaller, nothing but the earth she wrapped desperate fingers around, the pain that radiated through her body. A body that was slowly dissipating from her as well, joining the nothingness that was creeping towards her.

She collapsed in relief when she felt the ground plateau, finding herself once more on the path she and Dolohov had plummeted from. Her body was numb- not even the chill of the snow pierced through her senses.

Dimly, she was aware of the battle she had left behind. Aware of the acromantulas that were still so perilously close. Aware of the dangers that roamed the forest, looking for easy prey like her.

The awareness was not enough to sustain her, and the world finally turned to black.

Chapter End Notes
The next chapter will be the FINAL (finally, fucking right?) showdown between Grindelwald and Dumbledore.

Also, a huge thanks to everyone who supports this story and bears with me on my nonexistent update schedule; whether it's by leaving such lovely comments, kudos, or even just by reading it. Ya'll are the best!

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