Our Magic Knows No Bounds

by PinkGlitterMasturbation

Summary

Narcissa Malfoy is done with crazy, and she is determined to fix the mess her life has become. She has brains, a plan, and more than one dark spell to help her. But before she can put her plan into motion, she discovers a shocking secret about Hermione Granger, one that the girl doesn't even realize about herself. Before Hermione knows it, Narcissa has cursed them both, sending them back in time to deal with the Dark Lord in the form of the child Tom Riddle. Of course, Tom is no ordinary child, and time doesn't take kindly to being rewritten, so this will be a bumpy ride full of awesome, magical women, pragmatic decisions, and, rest assured, dear readers, plenty of sex eventually!

*Winner for Best Story in the Rare Pair Category in the Beyond the Book Fanfiction Nook Summer 2018 Award!*

Notes

Some disclaimers: 1) Like others who write Hermione/Tom fics, this is a guilty pleasure. I am self-aware enough to be able to see the pattern in my fic history (Sherlock/Molly, Sansa/Petyr, Loki/Jane, Sarah/Jareth, Alice/Luther). Yes, I like my ladies to be feisty and...
smart and my guys to be tall and dark in both the literal and moral sense. I don't think I can write a "good" Tom Riddle, so don't expect him to be warm and fuzzy. However, he will change under the influence of both Hermione and Narcissa. 2) I've read every Hermione/Tom fic a dozen times, so I would like to point out the fics I've read the most, in case I unconsciously borrow from them: Serpent in Red's "Somewhere in Time," as well as anything written by Nerys Dax, Provocative Envy, or Lady Miya - they have all fueled my lust for more Hermione/Tom fic. 3) I am a SLOW writer, and I write in fits and starts. My Sherlock fic took three years to finish, but what I start, I finish, rest assured. 4) I love the source material with all my heart, but since this is fan fiction, I take or leave cannon as it suits my plot needs. 5) My brain says soulmate marks are fucking ridiculous, but my heart LOVES them, and heart trumps head. I expect this fic will be a melting pot of every trope I've ever wanted to experiment with, lol.
Narcissa Malfoy just wants to save the world.

Narcissa Malfoy was more than passingly familiar with insanity. She’d literally spent her life acting as if the statements and actions of disturbed individuals made perfect sense, starting as a child with her numerous unstable Black relatives, and continuing into adulthood with her husband’s various shady connections, both in business and ideology.

If a half-rabid werewolf who preyed on children roamed the halls of her home, stinking of rotting flesh and muttering about dirt and blood, Narcissa only gripped her wand tighter and swept by without a glance. If her sister carved obscenities in the beautiful wooden panels of the Malfoy dining room and dug up garden gnomes to practice torture on, Narcissa got up at three in the morning to fix the damage, then went out to her rose beds to make sure there were no more gnomes to find.

Now, though, for the first time, Narcissa was truly terrified. She was terrified that the Dark Lord would win, that this madness would never end. Already, she could feel her desperation rising every time she looked at the cowering shell that had replaced her husband, and the raw panic that surrounded her son like the malevolent cloud she saw every time another Death Eater appeared in her home.

So much of her life had been spent keeping hidden in one way or another that no one knew the real Narcissa. She was probably the most powerful occlumens on the planet, but no one knew that—how could they? Narcissa had been consciously hiding her thoughts since she was four years old, and probably unconsciously since she first began to speak. Her father had used legilimency on his children routinely, pulling out any undesirable or traitorous thoughts, and punishing those thoughts soundly.

Anyone reading her mind now (and it was a routine, off-handed, violation performed by her sister and the Dark Lord) would only read the thoughts she deemed safe: concern for her own and her family’s safety, normal bothers associated with running a large estate, and an unfailing “belief” that the Dark Lord would make the world a better place for those of pure, deserving blood, even if the cost was high. For authenticity, she even let a low level of her disgust at the Death Eater’s lack of proper manners in as well.

Due to her birth into a pureblood family, and the assumption that she would graduate Hogwarts only to take up her position as the Lady of a manor, she was extremely well-versed in household and healing spells, as well as those dealing with clothing and cosmetics. She was also quite skilled at potions, though Severus did her the remarkable favor of neglecting to mention how much she actually assisted him in the work he did, both for himself and the Dark Lord.

The Malfoy library was one of the largest magical collections in the world, and Narcissa had been
researching all manner of possibilities for months. Something had to change, she knew. The Dark Lord could not win, but she didn’t want her husband and son in Azkaban either.

Meticulously, Narcissa had reviewed her past memories. She had made a habit of pulling out disturbing memories and carefully labeling and storing them. It was clear upon reviewing them that everything centered around the Dark Lord. She knew him better than he realized, and she knew that his insanity had worsened the less of a soul he had, and the longer he went with so little of a soul. His obsession with horcruxes was a closely guarded secret, but to Narcissa, it was obvious.

When the Dark Lord had risen to power the first time, he had been strong and charismatic – even occasionally charming. However, Narcissa had watched carefully, and by the time he was chasing prophecies and going after the Potters, he was already showing signs that his madness was beginning to rival his power. Since his 'rebirth' the night of the final task of the TriWizard Tournament, he had devolved exponentially, and Narcissa's life had devolved into a nightmare. What sort of ruler could he ever be? He was incredibly paranoid, and Narcissa knew without a doubt that he would rather rule over a kingdom of corpses than allow a rival to rise to power.

The Dark Lord was the problem, and he needed to be the solution. Narcissa had found an old dark magic spell that she had painstakingly translated from Nordic runes that could hurl enemies across space, transporting them far from oneself. She was working to combine that spell with an even older, darker Egyptian time travel spell, and as much as the thought frightened her, she planned on cursing herself, sending herself back in time to deal with the Dark Lord as a child.

This plan was not perfect. Time travel, even in the more common increments of a few hours, was dangerous and unpredictable. She accepted that she might never see her husband or son again, that changing the time line could write them out of existence, perhaps even herself. But Narcissa was a pragmatist, and she knew there was no future from this point. Either the Dark Lord won and everyone lost, or Potter somehow triumphed and she and her family spent the rest of their lives in prison, going slowly insane.

She had a target range of five years, as it was difficult to be precise with the spell, planning to arrive before young Tom Riddle started Hogwarts. Narcissa didn’t believe that time would look kindly on being rewritten, especially in a drastic fashion, so killing him outright wasn’t an option. Besides, who knew what worse horrors would rise in the power vacuum?

Though the Dark Lord did not share personal details of his life, she knew he had entered Hogwarts with no parents. If she could find a way to take him in, set herself up as a guardian, then she could influence him. She had no illusions that she could ‘save’ his soul, but she thought she might be able to keep it intact. Her plan was to find him and help him rise to power without horcruxes, to somehow keep his sanity. The wizarding world would still most likely fall to a Dark Lord, but not a madman. Who knew? Maybe she’d somehow steer him into politics and he could rule as Minister
of Magic, with little to no bloodshed at all. Deep inside, Narcissa’s mind smirked. The Dark Lord clearly had both mummy and daddy issues. If she could enter as a maternal figure, she might just save the world.

The sound of blasting spells and screams of pain and rage rose to the library, and Narcissa immediately went downstairs, wondering what fresh chaos would greet her. It was worse than she had imagined – Bellatrix screeching at snatchers and Draco, everyone in the room staring at three ragged teens. Three. One a gangly red-headed boy, one a waif of a girl whose hair was a tragedy beyond description, and one whose face was disfigured – features swollen to the point a mother wouldn’t recognize. Of course, Narcissa knew in her heart that this boy’s mother was long dead.

She watched silently as Bellatrix urged Draco to identify the boy, then lash out when he refused to do so in any definitive way. The boys were hauled away and the girl was tortured, Bellatrix taking great delight in practicing the work she’d started on the garden gnomes. Narcissa felt ill, though she knew her face was impassive. The girl said nothing, though she screamed loudly. Her tears streaked her dirty cheeks, and she bit her lips into a bloody mess. In the walled part of her mind, Narcissa allowed herself to note that the girl was incredibly strong and brave for one so young and outwardly frail.

“Bella, darling, leave some for the Dark Lord.” Narcissa spoke softly, as one did with mad people. “He’ll want the girl to be able to speak, to answer questions,”

Bellatrix looked up, her eyes wild. “You always try to spoil my fun, Cissy!”

“No,” Narcissa soothed, adopting the words from their childhood. “I always try to keep you safe. You are my sister. You are the Dark Lord’s favorite, but he will not be happy if you damage the mudblood beyond repair before he’s ready for that to happen.”

Bellatrix squeezed her thighs tightly against the girl’s ribs, which were most likely broken from the extended cursing. Smiling at the strangled sound of pain that emitted from her prey, she pushed back her sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark.

“Bella!” Narcissa couldn’t afford to speak softly now. “Please, wait.”

“Cissy,” Bellatrix growled, her angry magic crackling around her.

Narcissa put up her hands in what was half-plea, half-prayer to whatever deities might be listening.
“Just an hour, Cissy. Only an hour. I am certain the hex on the second boy’s face will be faded by then. Let us please be certain before we call on the Dark Lord.” Because she knew her sister felt most powerful when reminded of others’ weakness, Narcissa added, “For me, for Draco, please. We cannot afford to displease Him anymore. We are not favored as you are.”

After a moment’s silence, then a spiteful jab of her wand into the girl’s neck, Bellatrix rose from astride the girl, leaving her bleeding and convulsing into the four hundred year old carpet. Narcissa cast a minor healing spell nonverbally, and the girl’s whimpering lessened. Bellatrix was across the room, pacing. Draco and Lucius were standing still, as if pretending to be statues would somehow solve this disaster of a situation.

“One hour, Cissy! That is all!” Bellatrix swept away regally, as if she were a magnanimous queen extending mercy to unworthy subjects.

“I’m going to move her to the dungeons,” Narcissa announced to no one in particular, casting a levicorpus and floating the girl’s body in front of her as she walked out of the room. No one protested, nor did anyone follow her.

It was truly her plan to deposit the girl in the dungeons, after a few more healing spells. Narcissa needed to leave soon, and this girl’s nasty fate, along with that of her friends, would hopefully be rewritten or even written completely out of existence once Narcissa made it back to the past.

That idea was thrown to the winds as the bottom of the girl’s dirty and frayed shirt caught the edge of one of the many Malfoy ancestors’ portrait frames. The fabric rose up, revealing pale flesh, a sunken stomach, and ribs that were too prominent to be healthy. But what ruined all of Narcissa’s careful planning was the magical writing circling the girl’s navel. In a slanting, beautiful cursive, the words *What are you? What are we?* spiraled inward like the curve of seashell.

Narcissa stared, barely daring to breathe. This type of magical writing, embedded in the skin deeper than any Dark Mark, was a very rare, very special occurrence. There were enough instances in history that she knew exactly what it was, but not nearly so many that it didn’t shock her. These were the first words that her soulmate would say to Hermione Granger when they met. Everyone had a magical soulmate, someone whose magic melded perfectly, someone who made the other stronger, better. But only those with incredibly powerful magic were ever marked in such a way. The history books said that Merlin and Morgana La Fey had such marks, and even though they did not have a happy ending, there was no doubt their magic both separate and combined, had been formidable. It was also rumored that Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin had been marked for one another, though that had ended in tragedy as well. There were a handful of others, with happier outcomes. What Narcissa knew, though, was that soulmates found one another, time and space be damned. And what she also knew was that the words etched into the stomach of one of Harry Potter’s best friends were in the handwriting of Lord Voldemort.
The words themselves had to be spoken in the past, Narcissa decided, her mind working at
lightening speed. The only word likely to come out of the Dark Lord’s mouth towards the girl now
was *crucio*. There were time circles and paradoxes at play here, and she hadn’t even spoken the
damn curse yet! Her frustration mounted, but her determination strengthened.

This was the moment. Not the one she’d wanted, but the one she would seize. It would be nothing
to add this girl to her spell, and if even half of the reports she’d heard of this girl were true, then
she’d be a powerful ally, not even factoring in that she was apparently Lord Voldemort’s soulmate.
She’d *cast legilimens* on the girl while Bella had been torturing her and found an intelligent mind
with a strong moral code, but also pragmatic and flexible like her own – it was a mind Narcissa
was sure she could work with.

Turning the corner, she took the girl into a long, narrow linen closet only ever visited by the house
eelves. She cast several silencing spells, a few more healing spells, and then ended the *levicorpus,*
and instantly cast a *petrificus totalus.*

The girl’s eyes were wide, but she was frozen, as well as too shocked to panic.

“Hermione Granger,” Narcissa began, immediately deciding to leave off any talk of soul mates for
now. As a muggleborn, the girl might not have any idea what the marks were, and they didn’t
usually appear until the age of majority, so the girl probably wouldn’t have had them long – she
was not much older than Draco. “Listen to me carefully. The Dark Lord will be here any minute.
There is no way this war will end without unacceptable losses for everyone. I am going to change
everything. I am going back in time. You can stay here, oblivated, and hope that you and your
friends aren’t killed in the next few hours, or you can come with me. We will rewrite history and
shape the magic of England.” She arched a perfect brow. “Don’t you think it’s time witches were in
charge?”

There was no response as the girl was still petrified. Narcissa pointed her wand at the girl’s head.
“I am going to go into your mind, but only to listen for one word. You must tell me “yes” or “no”
to my offer, and you must tell me now, because I will be leaving with or without you.”
The ladies discuss plans and iron out some issues (you know, that giant herd of elephants in the corner of the room).

Egads! Writing time travel is a headache and a half! I tried to address the concerns that popped into my mind, but honestly, as soon as I dealt with one, another one would come up, so I just did my best. There may be discrepancies that will need to be fixed later, but it will suffice for now. Thanks to all the readers!

Hermione Granger was sure that she’d finally lost her mind. The stress of hunting horcruxes, of being hunted themselves, of camping with quickly dwindling supplies and even faster dwindling patience for two teenage boys, listening to the steady drone of dead or missing friends and allies on the wireless, combined with wearing that fucking horrible, soul-draining pendant – all of it had finally fried her brain, like pouring a can of soda over a computer’s circuit board. Because they couldn’t have been captured, couldn’t have been dragged to Malfoy Manor - this was all a horrible hallucination. It had to be.

And then? Then she’d been tortured by the person who’d haunted her dreams for the last two years. Of all the Death Eaters, Bellatrix Lestrange had been the one who scared her the most. Yes, Dolohov was frightening, as were the others, but Voldemort’s fiercest follower was positively feral, and Hermione would never forget her cackling taunts the night she’d murdered Sirius.

Lying under the madwoman who salivated over each of her cries like a rabid dog, Hermione’s mind had shut down. She would die before betraying their cause, so she allowed herself to focus on the pain, to enter it fully and respond only to it. The technique was not difficult; Bellatrix’s curses were the strongest she’d ever felt. Her thoughts briefly strayed to the Longbottoms, and she wondered if she somehow survived whether she’d be placed near them in St. Mungo’s. Bellatrix screamed questions, but Hermione’s brain processed nothing except the pain. She hadn’t even felt fear when the insane bint had pulled out a knife. After all, pain was pain, and the terrible burning in her arm was at least localized, not wracking through her entire body like the cruciatus.

It had taken several minutes for Hermione to recognize she was no longer being beaten, cursed, or cut. She slowly opened her eyes a crack and saw Narcissa swish her wand silently in her direction.
Instantly, Hermione’s pain lessened. Bellatrix was pacing and yelling. Narcissa was responding quietly, and before she could make sense of anything, Hermione’s skin began to tingle as her body rose into the air.

Narcissa was taking her out of the room. Why? Hermione wondered, but quickly decided that it didn’t matter. Draco’s mother was infinitely preferable to his aunt. For starters, she had discreetly healed Hermione though that action didn’t benefit her in any way. She was most likely taking her to where the boys were, which was exactly what Hermione wanted. They were always strongest together.

She felt cool air hit her stomach as her clothing caught on something. Suffering the after-effects of Bellatrix’s cursing, Hermione had not realized that Narcissa had stopped moving her until she heard the gasp. Even her eyelids ached, but she raised them to look at Narcissa, whose lovely face showed clear and deep shock.

What had caused Narcissa’s surprise? Hermione thought, but she answered her own question as she remembered the strange writing that had appeared only a few months earlier around her navel, around the time she and the boys had gone on the run. Because regularly bathing and even changing clothes had been a luxury, she wasn't exactly sure when the marks had formed. It was a mystery, but Hermione had determined to the best of her ability that the odd magical tattoo was not dark or dangerous, and as much as she loved to solve mysteries, she had horcruxes to hunt and Harry and Ron to keep alive. Her plate was full. She could research to her heart’s content when Hogwarts was liberated and Voldemort was defeated.

Then, it was Hermione’s turn to be shocked beyond speech when Narcissa had steered her into a linen closet, healed her, and asked her to accompany her, a Death Eater’s wife (and mother, for that matter) back in time to “fix” things.

Narcissa didn’t give a detailed explanation, but Hermione had no doubt that Narcissa was serious, and that she was capable. She saw Narcissa raise her wand, and let her mind race through her options. The horcrux hunt was crawling along. Yes, they had destroyed the locket, and thought they might know where the cup was, but there were still others, under who knew what magical protections – Dumbledore had been dying from the curse on ring before Snape had killed him. And Dumbledore had only guessed at the number seven - there could be more.

Hermione had spent the last year reading every dark magic book and treatise she could obtain, and it was obvious to her that Dumbledore would have died eventually from that magical damage. If Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard Hermione had ever known, could be permanently felled by the magic of Voldemort, what chance did three teenagers stand against it? She loved Harry as dearly as a brother, and she believed in him, but she wasn’t sure if belief was enough any longer. Dumbledore was gone, Snape had betrayed them, Hogwarts and the Ministry had fallen, and she and the boys were in the clutches of Bellatrix Lestrange, with Voldemort on his way. And if the
pureblooded wife and sister of Voldemort’s inner circle members was also saying that he needed to be stopped? He must be even less stable than Hermione had feared. As gut-wrenchingly terrifying as Bellatrix was, she was nothing compared to her lord and master.

There really was no question – no option. Hermione felt Narcissa’s entrance into her mind. The older witch’s intrusion was surprisingly gentle, a slight nudge for an answer. Hermione allowed her agreement to come to the forefront of her mind. *Yes.*

-oO0oOo-

Hermione was on a soft bed, covered with blankets. She stretched experimentally, and found that most of her body’s aches were faded. Sitting up cautiously, she looked around the room.

It was a small bedroom, and had the look of a hotel room. There were a few decorations – dried flowers in a vase on the dresser by the window, and a magical picture of a chubby blonde child playing with a rambunctious puppy – but nothing personal. A fire blazed in the grate, and Narcissa Malfoy sat in one of two over-stuffed chairs on either side of the fireplace.

She looked over at Hermione’s movement, and walked to the bed. Hermione noted that her clothing and hairstyle were different – about fifty years off.

“Aren’t we in the 1940s?” Hermione asked, her voice sounding like a public service announcement against smoking.

“Drink this,” Narcissa handed her a cup of what looked and smelled like chamomile tea. She arched an eyebrow when Hermione did not immediately drink. “Distrust now? You’ve already made an irreversible leap of faith, Miss Granger.”

Hermione noted the logic and took a sip. The temperature was just barely below scalding, but it was soothing on her throat, so strained from screaming.

“And, no, we are not quite in that decade,” Narcissa continued. “It is the end of June, 1938. And we need to get to the Dark Lord before Dumbledore does.”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “The Dark Lord? I’m pretty sure calling him that when we first meet will not set the right tone.”
Narcissa’s eyes flashed with brief anger, then settled. “Yes, well, years of terror do take their toll,” she sighed. “He starts Hogwarts this year. I had hoped to arrive a bit earlier, to shape him at a younger age.”

“What exactly do you know about Tom Riddle’s early years?” Hermione asked. She had the information Dumbledore had shared with Harry, and what little bits Harry had gleaned from his connection with Voldemort, but hoped Narcissa knew more.

Narcissa refilled Hermione’s cup, then poured a second cup for herself. “My sister’s father-in-law, Sebastian Lestrange, and my father-in-law, Abraxus Malfoy, both went to school with Tom Riddle, and were members of the original Knights of Walpurgis. And, of course, the oldest Death Eaters – the elder Avery, Mulciber, and Nott were also members, along with my grandfather Rosier and Dolohov.”

Hermione shuddered, running an unconscious hand down her breastbone, where she still bore the scar from the battle at the Department of Mysteries. “Yes, I know Dolohov, but I can’t imagine any of those men saying anything about Voldemort’s past, especially when he seems determined to obscure it.”

“They didn’t speak of it,” Narcissa conceded. “When they were sober. I am sad to say that my home became quite the Death Eater gambling hell and drinking den. Late at night, when those men were in their cups and the Dark Lord was away, well, they could gossip and bicker like teen girls.”

The two witches quickly shared what they knew, and Narcissa frowned when Hermione told her of Riddle’s parents, his birth, the orphanage, and the disturbing behaviors Dumbledore had been so suspicious of.

“Raised in a muggle orphanage during a depression and wartime? No wonder he had such hatred toward them.” Narcissa looked ill.

“You think that’s an excuse for his behavior?” Hermione felt her temper flare, and knew that they needed to get a few issues cleared between them before proceeding any further. “That it was reasonable for him to become a genocidal maniac simply because he was an unwanted child at a time of deep poverty? That it is fine because he mostly wanted to hurt muggles and mudbloods?”

“That is not what I said,” Narcissa said sharply. She set down her tea cup, took Hermione’s away, then pushed up the girl’s sleeve to reveal the thick magical bandages she’d carefully placed over
the carving Bellatrix had made. “I can’t pretend to be something I am not, and I will never fully understand muggles or the muggle world, but I am not my sister. I am not a Death Eater. I am a human, and I have my own opinions and prejudices, but I am willing to adapt,” she tapped gently on the bandage. “And you must be willing to as well.”

Before Hermione could respond, she continued. “I was merely commenting on how difficult it would be for a magical child to grow up in the muggle world, with no family, and burgeoning powers that probably ostracized him from others, and how that unpleasant experience most likely fueled his future behavior.”

Hermione nodded slowly, swallowing her anger. She reminded herself that Narcissa had given up just as much as she had to come here, and they had to make this work. “Yes, I agree. My parents were incredibly understanding once my Hogwarts letter arrived, but I know that my accidental magic as a child was frightening to them, and to other children. It set me apart, and not in a pleasant way.”

“Did you have many magical ‘outbursts’ as a child?” Narcissa pulled Hermione’s sleeve back down.

“A fair few – usually when I was upset or wanted something quite badly,” she admitted.

Narcissa cleared her throat delicately. “And I understand that you were teased at Hogwarts, by Draco and many others, for being a ‘know-it-all’ among other things?”

“Yes.” Her surprise at Narcissa admitting her son’s behavior must have shown on her face, because Narcissa gave a small, tight smile. “But you were probably also teased in your earlier, muggle school, were you not? For similar reasons?”

“Yes,” Hermione repeated, feeling sad at the memories, as well as confused.

“My point is that you are called the brightest witch of your age, even by your enemies, and the Dark Lord was certainly the brightest wizard of his own age. Children, whether muggle or magical, will always tease others, and they will especially target those who are different, so it is reasonable to assume that.” Narcissa paused and swallowed hard, clearly struggling to speak the word, “Tom had a similar experience in the orphanage to what you had before coming to Hogwarts, as well as the initial adjustment period.”
Hermione sat quietly, taking in Narcissa’s implication that she, the very type of person Voldemort hunted, tortured, and killed on a regular basis, could “relate” to his childhood. There were so many landmines there, Hermione was afraid to open her mouth.

Narcissa must have taken her silence for some level of agreement because she continued. “Clearly, Albus Dumbledore doesn’t know how to deal with Slytherin children,” she sighed. “Especially ones who have come from abusive backgrounds. How did he expect a talented, magical child with the blood of Salazar in his veins would behave when he was being mistreated?”

“Dumbledore didn’t know then that Riddle would be sorted into Slytherin; he just noticed that Riddle was a dangerous bully,” Hermione protested, though weakly. She had always privately thought Dumbledore, though brilliant, expected too much from children, and cared too little for their well-being. After all, he had left Harry in the custody of Dursleys, knowing Petunia’s distrust and disdain for her sister, and he hadn’t bothered to check on him for almost a decade! Years of physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect. With all Harry had gone through, and his mind’s connection to Voldemort, it was a miracle he’d turned out so well. And changing Voldemort’s past, giving him a place to call home besides Hogwarts, that would have to make a difference, wouldn’t it?

Narcissa was laying out the contents of a bag on the bed. There was some money, and a few official looking documents with seals, written in French.

“What are these?” Hermione asked, ready to change the topic.

“It’s easier to transfigure false documents on paper that has already been magically infused to be a legal document. Fakes on normal parchment are detected quickly, but some clever spells that are disguised as corrections, not forgeries, will produce us with new identities.” Narcissa sighed. “You do speak French?”

Hermione bristled a bit. “Yes, I do. Not fluently as a native of course, but I can get around Paris without trouble.”

“That will have to do,” the older witch sighed, pushing a lock of her pale blonde hair over her shoulder as she carefully pointed her wand at the paper. “I am now a distant cousin of Gaunts from France, Narcissa Bonneau, nee Rosier, and you are my daughter, Hermione Bonneau. My husband, your father, was killed in battle with Grindelwald. With the unrest in France and Germany, we decided to move to England, where I have cousins on my Rosier side. In going through our family papers in our preparation to move to England, we discovered the family connection to the Gaunts, and to Meriope, and subsequently, her son, and we have come to claim him.”
“Am I a pureblood?” Hermione didn’t think she could possibly pass as one, even if Narcissa drilled her privately day and night until September.

Narcissa shook her head. “No, that would be too difficult to prove, too much scrutiny. We will say that I came from a pureblood family, since I know enough about the older history of my French Rosier cousins, and my husband came from a wealthy half-blooded family. You can and will pass for half-blooded.”

Hermione examined the papers Narcissa had made. The work was excellent. “You know that muggle documents will be different,” she began.

“About that,” Narcissa smiled. It was a dangerous smile. “We are on a mission, Hermione. Too much is at stake to be morally squeamish.”

A cold shiver ran down Hermione’s spine. “What do you propose to do to the muggle orphanage director?”

Narcissa laughed at her. Laughed. “I’m not going to avada anyone! I was thinking a well-placed confundus.”

Hermione let out a breath, then decided total honesty was the only way to build trust. “That is good. I didn’t think you would kill anyone, but I thought you might use imperius.”

“Have you ever used an Unforgiveable, Hermione?” Narcissa’s voice was hardly a whisper.

“I’ve thought about it,” Hermione looked directly into Narcissa’s eyes. “I’ve wanted to. And if it came down to my life, I think I might. But I would like to avoid putting myself or others in that situation. Have you?”

Narcissa met her gaze calmly. “I’ve never killed or tortured anyone. I have used imperius, but only once, and it was an extreme circumstance.” She glanced away, as if looking into her past. “I would not use it again unless I had to.”

She rose and crossed to a set of drawers. Opening the top one, she took out several pieces of fabric. She came back and laid out underclothes, hosiery, and a dress on the bed. “You can shower through there,” she pointed toward the bathroom. “Then, we’ll get you dressed and head out.”
“Thank you, Narcissa,” Hermione began.

“Mother,” Narcissa corrected. “You’ll need to get used to calling me mother. And don’t thank me yet. You haven’t heard the part you’ll object to most - we’ll need to de-age you to be the same age as Tom.”

“What?” Hermione had no desire to be ten again, especially not a seventeen year old mind in an eleven year old’s body. But even as she protested, she knew it made sense to have someone at Hogwarts keeping an eye on Riddle, and Narcissa wouldn’t be able to do that as an adult.

Hermione didn’t elaborate on her complaints, but she did grab the clothing roughly off the bed and stomp toward the bathroom, closing the door with more force than necessary.

An hour later, Hermione didn’t recognize herself, or Narcissa, for that matter. Hermione was her younger self, but Narcissa had wordlessly fixed Hermione’s teeth and used about three different spells to force her hair into calm, lovely ringlets held back by a green leather headband which matched her navy dress with green piping at the rounded collar, sleeves, and hemline that fell mid-calf. She also wore gloves, and a light weight summer sweater. Narcissa had charmed her hair into a sleek bun, and turned the color all one shade – a slightly darker, less striking blonde. She wore black, as a recent widow would, but her dress fit in a way that screamed she had money.

That thought raised a question in Hermione’s mind. “I’m not trying to be gauche, but how will we afford to live? Some things can’t be created by magic.”

“I am more than aware of that,” Narcissa adjusted Hermione’s collar, even thought it was perfectly fine. It was something a mother would do, and Hermione suddenly ached for her own mother, the woman she’d obliviated and sent far away. “I had been planning this trip for a while, Hermione. I have plans in place. I researched investments, and I have enough to keep us until those investments pay off.”

“Why did you bring me?” Hermione blurted out. “And what do you know about the words on my stomach?”

“I will tell you all about it, but right now, we need to get our plan underway.” Narcissa transfigured her bag into more of a muggle purse shape and tucked her wand into her sleeve. “Once we have Tom Riddle, I’ll breathe more easily, and we’ll have time to discuss this. We need to be his first interaction with magical folk, not Dumbledore.”
“Fine,” Hermione agreed, pushing her annoyance aside for the moment. “Let’s go adopt Voldemort.”
Tom Riddle has NO desire to save the world.

Chapter Summary

Tom meets two strange ladies, and plots accordingly.

Chapter Notes

Hello again! I'm so inspired at the moment (thanks to everyone for the comments). I did some research, and some sources say Tom met Dumbledore in 1937, but I'm sticking with 1938. I have to say writing from Tom's perspective was fun (I'm not sure what that says about me, lol), though the next chapter will probably switch back to the ladies. I would like to reiterate my warning from chapter one that I CANNOT write a 'good' Tom. Based on personal beliefs and various readings, including the fascinating book The Sociopath Next Door, I don't think anyone is born evil, but I also don't think that sociopaths are completely made by circumstance. I think a small portion (1-4%) of the population has little to no conscience due to brain chemistry and structure, but whether or not that person will be driven to violence is dependent on many external factors. Tom will never be good, but he can be less violent, and more reasonable (though right now, he is a nasty little shit).

Tom Riddle was having a bad day. Though, if he really thought about it, this day wasn’t much different from any of the days before. Wool’s Orphanage was short on food, as usual, and Tom’s stomach was grumbling, even though his angry scowl over breakfast at the new boy two plates down had earned him an extra slice of bread. That boy, Shawn, had mocked Tom yesterday, had tried to take Tom’s book, but he’d learned what a mistake it was to cross Tom Marvolo Riddle. The memory of how his skin had tingled, like a gentler version of an electric shock, and how the skin on Shawn’s hands had turned red, like a bad sunburn, was a good one, but it was already fading.

Those fleeting moments, when Tom made his will manifest, were the only bright spots in his life. He was surrounded by inferior people; Tom knew he was better than them all. He didn’t hate the weak children who were smart enough to recognize their own weakness. Children like little Sarah who always flattened herself against the wall to let him pass, or the older, slower, Jonathan who didn’t hesitate to hand over anything he held that Tom showed interest in. He didn’t mind those type of children, and he had even stepped in with a menacing smile when Jane, a nasty redhead who liked to sneer at Tom with disdain, had tried to take Sarah’s sad excuse for a doll. Jane had dropped the doll instantly, clutching her head in pain. Let it not be sad that Tom wouldn’t protect those who did as he told them. No, the people who earned his ire were the ones who didn’t realize how stupid they were or those who openly defied him. Those idiots deserved to burn, and not only in their hands.
Tom knew, though, from past experience, that it would take a few days to feel that delicious tingle of his willpower again. Making things happen was tiring, especially the amount of fury he had directed at Shawn. Tom didn’t think he believed in love like some of the silly girls he heard tittering around the orphanage or at school, but if he did come close to love, it was for books, for knowledge, and for things he had claimed as his. That imbecile had dared touch something of Tom’s, and Tom wasn’t satisfied with the minor punishment he’d inflicted yesterday. Once his energy was restored, Shawn would be sorry on a more permanent basis, even if Tom were incapacitated for a week.

His hunger pangs diminished by his plans for revenge, Tom allowed himself a smile at his reflection in the spotted mirror over the bathroom sink. His clothes might be ill-fitting and shoddy, but everything was clean and pressed, and Tom knew he was a handsome boy. It was time for school, and even though Tom’s teachers were sadly lacking in the ability to challenge his intellect, he much preferred school with its books over the orphanage, where almost all time not spent sleeping or eating was devoted to various monotonous and meaningless chores. One day, Tom was confident, his superior intelligence and ability to charm others when needed would help him to rise above his circumstance, find his father, and claim his birthright, which he knew had to be magnificent. Being his, how could it be anything less?

“Tom?” a voice, thick with hesitation sounded from the door.

He glanced over and saw Jonathan hovering nervously. “Yes?” Tom knew his voice was cold, and he was pleased when Jonathan fidgeted more under his gaze. On days when he couldn’t exert his will forcefully, he had to rely on intimidation.

“Mrs. Cole asked for you,” Jonathan said, his hands behind his back. Tom smirked. He must have seen the red blisters on Shawn’s hands. “In her office.”

“Fine,” Tom replied, brushing past the older boy and heading downstairs to Mrs. Cole’s office. It was a drab, dingy room, like the rest of the orphanage, but it was small, and the fireplace made the room overly warm. Though the night had been cool and damp, it was late June, and the temperature was already rising.

Mrs. Cole’s face was flushed, and the grey hair around her temples damp. Tom put on his most charming smile, but he knew it faltered when he realized that there were two other occupants in the room. Tom recovered quickly, bowing his head slightly and giving a broad smile, making sure it reached his eyes.

There were two of them, both women. The older woman was beautiful, with pale blonde hair, aristocratic features, posture that had to be reinforced with steel, and impeccable, expensive clothing. She looked like the rich women he saw on the walk to school, when he passed by the
high street, with its department stores and boutique shops. This was the type of woman who should have been his mother – elegant and clearly intelligent, from the way she met his gaze. He also had the disquieting feeling that this woman knew more about him than Tom normally allowed, but he was intrigued, and that meant he would reserve judgment for now.

When he glanced over to the other woman, a girl, really, he felt his energy rise to the surface of his skin involuntarily. The tingle in his flesh, so strong and unexpected, was startling, and Tom fought to keep his face neutral. He could nearly *taste* the energy on his tongue, a coppery flavor more intensely than he ever had before, and he swore he heard it crackle gently around his body, as if trying to reach her.

And even more spectacularly disturbing? The girl seemed to be crackling as well. There was the barest hint of a shimmer around her, and a faint smell like air during a storm. Objectively, he noted that she was a lovely girl, though she didn’t favor the older woman. Where the older woman was coldly alluring, like a sharply cut, flawless diamond, there was something wild about the girl – something that belonged deep in a forest. She put him in the mind of a painting of the goddess Diana that he’d seen on a rare school trip to the National Gallery, but even as he admitted this to himself, he knew it didn’t make logical sense. The girl was dressed and coiffed in a most civilized manner. Her curls, a dark chestnut brown, full and glossy, were neatly held back by a headband, not a hair out of place. Her eyes, the color of the precious sprinkling of nutmeg put over the once-a-year eggnog, with their flecks of gold highlighting the irises, looked everywhere but in his eyes, like a properly brought up young lady who hadn’t been introduced. She clearly had hidden depths, and at that moment, Tom decided he would discover them, no matter the time or effort he had to expend.

He tore his eyes away from her at the annoying sound of Mrs. Cole’s “Hmm, hmm.”

“Mrs. Cole,” Tom began, keeping his anger at being distracted well-hidden. “You asked for me?”


To his amazement, Tom watched as the older woman moved her arm in a subtle manner, and whispered something under her breath. Then, she stood and held out a hand to Tom, ignoring Mrs. Cole, who sat back down in her chair with a dazed expression on her face.

“Forgive our hurry, Tom, but we must conduct our business and leave quickly,” the woman’s voice was as polished as her appearance. “This will be a great shock, but we are distant relatives of yours. I am Lady Narcissa Bonneau, and this is my daughter, Hermione. We only learned of our connection to your mother’s family in the last few months, when we were preparing
to leave France. We would like you to come and live with us, and we will have plenty of time to go into more of our family’s history, but we have very strict travel plans and we need to leave as soon as possible.”

Tom was shocked, especially when the woman mentioned his mother. He had always assumed for some reason that when he did find some remaining, distant family, it would be on his father’s side. He was also absolutely sure that the woman was lying, at least in part, but he didn’t care. An opportunity to leave the orphanage? He would never have passed that up, even if it hadn’t arrived in such an intriguing package as these two strange women.

“Of course, my Lady,” he bowed over her hand, kissing her cool skin, and his lips buzzed, in the same way his energy did. As he had read in the book *Alice in Wonderland*, things were getting “curiouser and curiouser.” Luckily, Tom knew he was more snake than rabbit, and he had no fear of dark places. He would tumble down into this mystery and rise victorious. “I am honored that you have sought me out and pleased to leave with you immediately.”

The Lady Bonneau met his eyes with her own, and he saw fear and determination, coupled with amusement and awe. *What a strange combination*, he thought. *Yet another puzzle to solve.*

“Do you have any belongings to collect?” she asked, looking over his clothing in a way that riled Tom’s temper. “We will, of course, provide you with a new wardrobe.”

Tom thought briefly of the treasures he had collected here, but dismissed that idea just as quickly. He wanted nothing to do with this place again, no shoddy scraps from annoying orphans to accompany him into a future with people of quality. “No, we may leave at once.”

From the corner of his gaze, he saw the younger girl touch Mrs. Cole’s arm and murmur something unintelligible. She was still avoiding his eye. Lady Bonneau took his arm, as if he had politely offered it to her, and marched out the door, the girl following silently. He was a bit put-off by her assumption of control, but she was the adult, and she was taking him from this wretched place, and there would be plenty of time to establish his dominance. The fact that both women seemed to want to hurry made him very alert, and he decided watching them closely was the best plan for now.

Outside the high gates of the orphanage sat a motor car, idling. Tom had never been in one, though he had wished to be, on mornings when he arrived at school soaked to the skin because the rain jackets provided to the orphans at Wool’s were second-hand at best. The driver was not in a livery, which meant it was a hired car, not one owned by the Bonneau family.
The girl, Hermione (what an odd name, like Narcissa...like Marvolo) was the one to open the door, and Lady Bonneau climbed in readily enough, but not before Tom saw a look of trepidation and mild disgust cross her face. Did it bother her to be in a public cab? Tom followed, and was happy to find the seating clean and smelling of some kind of lemon polish. He waited for the girl to follow, and was surprised to see that she was the one talking to the cab driver, giving him instructions.

She entered and pulled the door closed behind her, and nodded to her mother. “He’ll take us near to the entrance of Diagon Alley. It should be about a twenty minute drive or so.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” Lady Bonneau looked relieved, as if talking to the driver was a task she couldn’t possibly face. And that simply didn’t make sense. Lady Bonneau exuded wealth and power. What was a lowly driver to her?

There was a sudden jolt as the car hit a rut, and Tom’s hands came out involuntarily to steady himself. His fingers gripped the seat beside Hermione’s knee, and he felt a shock, stronger and almost painful, jump from her to his skin. The thought that had been forming in the back of his mind solidified and he knew without a doubt that this girl was like him. She could do what he did, or something like it.

For once, Tom couldn’t censure his tongue. The words spilled out before he even knew he was speaking. “What are you? What are we?”
Hermione Granger, oh wait, make that Hermione Bonneau (seriously, from Malfoy to Bonneau, wasn’t that a bit on the nose, Narcissa?) was no stranger to sacrifice. She had given up her education, the comforts of civilization, even her parents’ knowledge that she existed, for the greater good. She been tortured from a woman who was known for driving people insane rather than speak of her plans with Harry. In the last twelve hours, she’d even traveled through time, probably destroying any future, good or bad, she might have had, and allowed a woman who had been an enemy only yesterday to de-age her and claim her as a daughter – all to make a brighter future for everyone else. So, it was not hubris for Hermione to consider herself braver and tougher than most people her age.

And yet, at this moment, Hermione wasn’t feeling brave. As she sat with Narcissa and the orphanage matron in a stifling office, she thought the inside of Wool’s was as dreary as the outside, the walls papered with faded designs that couldn’t really be recognized, the baseboards and other woodwork battered, the floors scrubbed yet still stained dark and worn horribly. The two chairs had seen better days perhaps twenty years prior, and the boy the matron had sent to fetch Tom was dressed in clothes patched and altered too many times to retain much shape. Hermione felt pity for any child who lived here, even the future Lord Voldemort, then felt anger and disgust at herself for those feelings. Really, wasn’t it a bit like feeling sorry for Hitler because he didn’t get along with his father? Wasn’t empathy wasted on sociopaths? Then, she scolded herself for judging him. She needed to stick to the plan. Accept him. Like him, or at least do a fucking fantastic job of pretending to.

Narcissa had confounded Mrs. Cole as soon as the matron began asking too many questions about ‘legal proof’ of their relationship to Tom Riddle, though it was clear she was a bit relieved at the thought he might be leaving. Hermione saw the look in the woman’s eyes when she said Tom’s name, and, as Narcissa had predicted, it did remind her of how she had been looked at as child when she had inadvertently used magic.

During the trip by train from the wizarding village of Tutshill in the West Country to London, Narcissa had spoken more than Hermione had expected. She had still put off answering any questions about the magical words, but Narcissa had told Hermione about being raised magically, and pureblood customs, and the more she spoke, the more Hermione had begun to like
Narcissa Malfoy against her will.

Hermione had always despaired of the many old-fashioned and often vaguely sexist rules of what she saw of pureblood families, but the truth of Narcissa’s life was more like a Victorian novel than that of a modern woman. Narcissa had been passed from father to husband, and then once her husband joined Voldemort, yet another man had ruled her life. That Narcissa had been strong enough to hide her true self, and yet keep that true self intact for at least forty years was mind-boggling to Hermione. And then to have the bravery to risk the only way of life she had known? Perhaps the lady snake had a bit of the lioness in her, after all.

“You know that you’ll need to ask the hat to be sorted into Slytherin,” Narcissa spoke into the silence that had formed over the last few miles. “Hogwart Houses are very insular, and we want Tom to trust you, as much as we can manage.”

Hermione nodded grimly. She had come to that conclusion as well. Yet another part of her identity she would have to relinquish. She would need to become a snake. What would be left of her? She looked down to see Narcissa’s hand, pale, slim, and cool on her own slightly more olive-toned wrist.

“This is unbearably hard, I realize,” Narcissa said, and there was sadness in her eyes. “Our way forward has only the vaguest of plans, but I have faith in us, Hermione.”

“I’d like to have stronger faith, Nar- Mother,” Hermione corrected herself. “But I have to be honest, I am concerned about the future you think we will be able to create. I agree that killing Tom Riddle is too drastic,” she chewed on her lip thinking about the changes she’d made with Harry when she’d had the time turner. “Still, I wonder how much we can influence his beliefs.”

“Why, a great deal,” Narcissa insisted. “If Tom enters Hogwarts not as a poor orphan, but associated with a magical family, has a place to call home, and is exposed to more temperate ideas in the form of you, Hermione, I imagine we can work wonders.”

Hermione opened her mouth, but Narcissa raised her hand and continued, “Though I hope you use that ‘brightest witch’ brain to recognize the need to look at the bigger picture. Tom Riddle will never be content to simply work for the Ministry of Magic or run a profitable business. We aren’t here to save his soul,”

Hermione made a sound between a scoff and a choke. “As if he has one,” she muttered.
“His soul, and keeping it intact, is the precise reason we are here, I remind you.” Narcissa narrowed her eyes, just as a displeased mother whose child had dared to be insolent would.

Being a mother, it was probably easy for her to fall into that role, Hermione thought, and she needed to embrace being a daughter again, a role that she had feared she had given up for good. “I’m sorry, you are right,” Hermione was determined to keep the peace. “It’s just fear of the unknown that’s bothering me. I like to plan, to control outcomes as best I can, but everything here is chaos.”

“Oh, Hermione, life is chaos,” the older woman had that far away look again. “Control is mostly an illusion. The only control we have are the choices we make, and we must dedicate ourselves to making the best possible decisions.”

“But how can we know what those are?” Hermione protested. “What if our presence here, now, is already creating a bleaker future?”

“There could be no bleaker future,” Narcissa’s voice was low, but firm with conviction. “The Dark Lord would have won – he would have slaughtered the three of you as soon as he arrived, and his insanity would have progressed further, and the whole of Britain, if not the world, would have eventually died, if not in body, then surely in spirit.”

Hermione didn’t argue – it didn’t matter now, though as an inside witness to Voldemort’s behavior, Narcissa painted a compelling and terrible picture.

“So, we’re making it up as we go along, then?” Hermione tried to sound lighthearted, but failed.

“Mostly,” Narcissa admitted. She had been thinking of the soulmark, and she wanted to tell Hermione about it, but she needed to let them meet for the first time without any interference in their conversation, and she was afraid an outright rejection from Hermione would cause irreparable damage. Tom had to see them as allies from the beginning.

“Hermione, you have seen the aftermath of the Dark Lord’s work, but I have borne witness– I have seen more cruelty, torture, and death than you can imagine, and I have seen it unfold in my own home. I have been the one to levitate corpses, the one to hear pleas and screams day and night, with no escape. Do not think I don’t understand what I am about to ask, because I know fully.”
Hermione was getting nervous. *What the hell was Narcissa going to ask?*

“I need you to be nice to him, not simply tolerate him. We need to be his family, Hermione,” there was a plea in Narcissa’s voice, a vulnerability that Hermione hadn’t heard before. “If we don’t make him feel invested in us, in our ideas and beliefs, we can not sway him later. He will discover Dark Arts, and he will like them – from what you’ve said, he already has a taste for them, without even knowing his powers. We need to set up the conditions for him to come to us with questions, to know that we will not judge or reject him, or he will turn from us, and we will lose the advantage we have sacrificed everything for.”

Everything Narcissa said was true, and Hermione had already decided that she would need to put on an act with Riddle, to pretend to like him, but she realized now that wasn’t enough. Tom had already done several dodgy things at the orphanage, but he wasn’t Voldemort. He hadn’t killed anyone, but he was smart, probably at the genius level if his prodigious magical talent, along with the memories from Dumbledore were any indication. He wouldn’t be fooled if Hermione only pretended to like him. She had to give him a legitimate chance, somehow divorce the child he was now with the monster she had seen in the future.

There was no going back to the future. The only future now was the one she and Narcissa would shape, the one Tom would probably still rule in some way. If she couldn’t accept that, well, she had no place here.

“Yes, you are right,” Hermione finally said. “I will do my best.”

Narcissa gave her a rare, full, smile. *She’s so beautiful when she actually looks happy,* Hermione thought, then frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Narcissa watched Hermione’s face fall.

Hermione shook her head, then admitted slowly, “No one is going to believe I’m your daughter. You are very pretty, and I’m,” she paused. “Not.”

“We girls are so hard on ourselves, aren’t we?” Narcissa took out a small, round metal object and handed it to Hermione.

“What’s this?” she asked.
“It’s a mirror spelled to only give compliments, as well as helpful beauty suggestions,” Narcissa smiled. “I think you need to hear some. Honestly, dear, the only problems with your appearance were the teeth and hair, both of which I have corrected, though I will need to teach you the hair spells – I suspect they will need to be repeated daily. You are a lovely girl, with fine features and a nice complexion. Don’t internalize nasty comments you’ve heard over the years.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Hermione murmured, tracing her fingers over the gold filigree on the compact case. *Narcissa Malfoy giving her a pep talk? What had her life become?*

“Do you doubt you are a brilliant, powerful witch?” Narcissa prodded.

When Hermione shook her head, she added, “Then why can’t you see yourself objectively? The lines of your jaw, nose, lips? Are they not symmetrical? The distance between your eyes? Completely still, your features are pretty. Animated, you are beautiful. And you must be confident in this – in all things.”

Hermione was quiet, taking in the compliments uneasily, and Narcissa spoke again. “My sister had once been beautiful, though madness, hatred, and years in Azkaban ruined her. Still, she had no doubt that the Dark Lord would favor her, and he did.”

“I don’t think modeling my future interactions with Tom after Bellatrix is a good idea,” Hermione snapped, her anger rising. She took a deep breath to steady herself. Any and everything seemed to be setting her off. She needed to be calm, to be collected, or this plan would fail before it started.

“I wasn’t suggesting you should,” Narcissa said coolly. “The Dark Lord was attracted to power and confidence, so long as that power and confidence served him, rather than challenged him. Tom is still a child, but I am sure he will respond to power and confidence,”

Horror rose in Hermione as a thought crossed her mind. “You don’t imagine that I will be his *girlfriend*, do you?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration, Narcissa took a few moments to reply. She was absolutely sure that Hermione and Tom would experience intense attraction for one another eventually, but with the age differences and time travel, there was no way this would be an easy or even linear journey.
“No,” Narcissa lied easily, “but this type of response is exactly what I was talking about earlier – you cannot look at him with absolute horror and disgust. There are many types of attraction, Hermione. Remember, you may feel seventeen inside, but you are only a few months from being twelve on the outside. Tom is eleven as well, and I doubt he has an eye for girls. He will still seek out power, though, and if you are a source of it, he will come to you.”

“This is so fucking convoluted,” Hermione moaned.


The absurdity of the situation, along with the panic at the overwhelming odds rose in her, bubbling over in laughter that bordered on hysteria. Hermione laughed for the first time in what felt like weeks, and she couldn’t stop. Narcissa watched her silently for about ten seconds, then seemed to make a decision. She swiftly moved to the seat beside Hermione and wrapped her arms tightly around the younger girl. Hermione’s laughter quickly turned into sobs. How long had it been since anyone had hugged her? Narcissa smelled opulent, a mix of honey and almonds and ambergris; it was nothing like the light scent of lilacs and fresh soap that had always accompanied her mother’s touch. But Narcissa wasn’t holding back; she was completely enfolding Hermione, holding her like a mother would, and Hermione, though strong and brave, dissolved into tears.

“What have we done? What have we done?” she repeated.

Narcissa surprised even herself by kissing the top of the girl’s forehead. She had always wanted another child, a girl, and she laughed bitterly inside her mind at how fate had fulfilled her wishes. “We did what we had to, and we will continue to do so, Hermione.”

She pulled away slowly, allowing Hermione to collect herself. “We need to find a way to help you act younger. I expect you were always a mature child, but you must try to remember your younger self and act accordingly.”

“Okay,” Hermione agreed, though she wasn’t sure how exactly she would go about doing that.

The conductor’s voice carried from the hall outside their private compartment, announcing the stop in London in fifteen minutes time. Hermione straightened her shoulders. It was time to test the limits of her strength and bravery. Narcissa was smiling approvingly at her, as though she could read Hermione’s intentions. How strange that Narcissa Malfoy should look at her with pride, and even stranger still that Hermione should be glad of it.
The next two hours had been a flurry of planning and activity. They had traveled to Diagon Alley, rented rooms, visited Gringotts and Madame Malkins, and ascertained the exact location of Wool’s Orphanage. Narcissa had sent letters by owl to her great grandfather Rosier, informing him that she was a cousin on the French side of the family, and asking for advice and assistance in procuring a permanent home now that she was widowed and no longer wished to live in France. Hermione had grimaced, hoping she would never have to meet the rest of the family.

Then, Narcissa and Hermione had stepped out into muggle London, and Hermione had helped Narcissa hail a hansom cab. Even though she was clearly uncomfortable dealing with a muggle, Narcissa said nothing, and even squeezed Hermione’s gloved hand with her own as they stepped out in front of the orphanage gates.

“My mother asks that you wait for us,” Hermione smiled brightly at the cab driver. “We will only be a few moments, and we will be bringing another passenger with us, a boy my age,”

“I’ll wait,” the man nodded, looking grimly at the orphanage’s forbidding exterior. “It’s a kindness to be taking a child away from here, I reckon.”

Hermione only nodded in return, wondering how Tom Riddle would have reacted if he had seen the pity for his situation in this man’s eyes. She turned and followed Narcissa inside.

Now, she waited for the first sight of Tom Riddle. She felt him before she saw him – a rising energy in the air around her, something she’d only experienced a few times in her life, and only when spells had flown thickly around her – in the Department of Mysteries, in the Astronomy Tower, in the woods, running for her life from snatchers. She couldn’t help but feel some grudging awe at how much raw magic was concentrated in this boy. It seemed impossible, but Hermione swore that for an instant, she saw his magical energy in a blur around him.

And when she snuck a look at his face while he was staring at Narcissa, she understood how he had fooled everyone for so long. He was more than a handsome child – he was beautiful, with the kind of classical features that in the future would have had modeling agents stalking him with offers to be on posters for Gap or Abercrombie Kids. God help her in four or five years. Gilderoy Lockhart had nothing on Tom Riddle. His gaze moved toward her, but she quickly looked to the floor. She needed a minute before she could look at him. Maybe she needed several minutes. Why was her own magic rising inside her, unbidden. She felt strange and unsure and neither of those feelings set well with her.
Narcissa came to the rescue, rising to speak to Tom, and as soon as he agreed, she led him out the front door to the cab. Hermione kept her eyes focused on the driver as she asked him to take them back to the street where they’d been picked up, and promised him extra money if he could make the trip quickly. The shorter period of time that she was in a small, enclosed space with Tom Riddle, the better. *Had the de-aging process affected her magic? Her control over her involuntary magic? Did it recognize Tom as an enemy, even as a child? Would she somehow harm him?*

Narcissa had promised to talk to the Headmaster of Hogwarts within a few days, to make sure both Tom and Hermione were enrolled for the coming year, but they wouldn’t get their own wands until about a week before the beginning of school, and Hermione’s old wand was somewhere on the floor of Malfoy Manor, in a future that probably no longer existed.

With a bit of panic, Hermione entered the cab, and sat beside Narcissa, keeping her eyes fixed on the scuffed floor. She noticed that Tom’s shoes were more worn than the floor, and that the soles were beginning to separate. It reminded her of the clothing Harry was forced to wear on his summer holidays, and she felt so sad and angry at once that she wanted to scream.

Just then, the cab lurched as it hit a rut, and Hermione did give a little surprised scream, but not because of the movement under her. It was the sudden appearance of a pale white hand beside her on the seat, Tom Riddle’s fingers brushing her knee as he attempted to avoid colliding entirely with her, that made the sound escape.

As though her head was on a string, being pulled, she looked up into his eyes, which surprised her with their light shade of blue, *no hint of red*, and felt her magic jump to his hand, almost like an electric shock. Those eyes widened in something like recognition and delight, and he spoke directly to her for the first time, “What are you? What are *we*?”

Hermione’s heart thudded as though she’d run miles. He had said *those words* to her. Something of fate was at play here, something that transcended time. She felt her mouth move, and words spilled out, unbidden, “We are magic.”

Tom grasped at his arm, sitting back in his seat and pulling at the worn sleeve as though his skin was on fire. He pushed up the fabric, and there, before Hermione’s very eyes, her words appeared on his skin, in her own neat handwriting, down the inside of his forearm. He brushed his fingers over the letters, then glanced up at her.

“How did you do that?” he demanded, in a voice more astonished than angry, but still a bit cold. “*Why* did you do that?”
Narcissa spoke quickly, “She didn’t. It was involuntary.” She really didn’t want to have this conversation now – she was shocked his mark had shown up so quickly. Their connection was clearly a powerful one. “I will explain it, but perhaps it would be better if I start with the larger question of the existence of magic in this world?”

Hermione sat silently, still trying to calm her racing heart. What had happened? She was angry at Narcissa, who clearly knew what it was, but refused to tell her. However, it did make sense to give Riddle more of a general understanding of the magical world before going into something Hermione knew had to be complicated.

In the fifteen minutes left of the drive, Narcissa laid out the basics of the wizarding world, and Tom listened quietly, asking several intelligent questions that reminded Hermione of the ones she had asked of Professor McGonagall in her parents’ living room.

“So,” Tom asked, “my mother was a witch?” He shook his head. “That makes no sense – if she had magic why did she allow herself to die?”

There it was, Hermione thought, an obsession with death, thinking death could be conquered by magic.

“Having magic isn’t the same as having immortality. Witches and wizards get injured, sick, and old, just like muggles do,” Narcissa said. “And childbirth is hard for all women, magical or not.”

“And my father?” Tom inquired. “Was he a wizard?”

Narcissa shook her head. “Riddle is not a wizarding name, Tom. We haven’t found your father, but we are fairly certain he is not a wizard.”

“Why would a witch marry someone without magic?” Tom scoffed. “Why would my mother want to live outside the magical world, if it is as wonderful as you describe?”

“Love,” Hermione finally spoke. “Love is the most powerful magic, and everyone, wizard and muggle alike, has access to it.”

Tom gave her a condescending smile, as though she were a three year old. “Love? You are
no better than those silly girls at school.”

“Children,” Narcissa intoned. “I think we have arrived.” She took a bit of muggle money from her purse and handed it to Tom. “Will you pay the driver, please?”

Hermione was surprised for an instant, but then thought it was smart of Narcissa to have Tom continue to interact with someone non-magical, and to give him a job that made him more a part of their group, not an outsider.

Tom stared at the money for a moment, and Hermione wondered if he’d ever held so much at one time. In the midst of an economic depression, probably not. He opened the door and held out a hand to help both women down, paid the driver, then returned and offered his arm to Narcissa. For an eleven year old, this kid knew how to charm, and use polite mannerisms to his advantage, Hermione thought.

Narcissa smiled graciously and led them to the brick alley. When she pulled her wand out fully and tapped the bricks, Tom’s eyes filled with hunger. Hermione understood how he felt. She wanted a wand again as well.

Before they stepped through the open entrance, Narcissa turned to Tom. “Tom, it is important for you to know that there are some people in magical society who do not exactly welcome children of mixed magical and non-magical unions, nor children born into muggle families who are inherently magical. This is not necessarily just or fair, but it is the state of things, and it is my hope you will rise above such old-fashioned thinking. My husband, Lord Bonneau, was half-blooded, which makes Hermione half-blooded as well. I think the two of you will be turning tradition on its head at Hogwarts this year.”

Hermione listened to Narcissa, feeling like she had been turned on her own head. Narcissa Malfoy telling Tom Riddle not to believe half-bloods were inferior? Was it possible this whole crazy adventure was a dream? If she pinched herself hard enough, would she wake up in a cold tent, wearing a horcrux locket and eating increasingly watery root stew? She even went so far as to push hard into her palm with her fingernails, but she remained in Diagon Alley in 1938, following her new “mother” and Tom Riddle.
The ladies are going to need some more calming draught

Chapter Summary

Tom considers the changes in his life. Hermione does, too. Guess which one is happier?

Chapter Notes

Oh, dear readers, I am in a pickle. I'm enjoying writing this story soooo much! But I want them to be older! I've written myself into a sex-free zone, and I don't deal well with PG. I want sexy times, but I think it's important to lay a strong foundation for these two, to discuss their beginnings together at Hogwarts...what do you all think? Should I do a time skip? If so, how far forward? I'm interested in any and all theories. Let me know.

It wasn’t often the Tom Riddle found himself surprised. Like any unwanted child deemed a burden by society, he was an expert at reading people and situations. He was also highly intelligent, and no adults seemed to expect that of children, so that gave him yet another advantage. And Tom liked having the advantage.

Today, though, today was hardly real. Tom had always known he was destined for great things, that he was different – in a wonderful, special way. The appearance of long-lost, wealthy relatives was exactly the type of scenario Tom had imagined. That alone would have pleased him, but what had happened next was so much more.

We are magic. The girl had said it so simply, so easily, as if it were as natural as breathing. Her magic had jolted his hand, then her words had marked his arm. Marked him. He had been angry, had wanted to punish her, but at the same time, for the first time in his life, he was fascinated. She was powerful. He knew it in the same way he knew he was powerful. There might be a whole hidden world of wizards and witches, but Tom Riddle would stake his incredibly precious life on the belief that even among magical people, he and Hermione were somehow apart, were better.

Hermione’s mother was very competent as well, though her magic didn’t appear to him in the same way as the girl’s did. He was glad that he would be in the custody of an adult he could tolerate. The Lady Bonneau was not an embarrassment like the half-witted Mrs. Cole who could barely keep a small group of orphans under control. No, she was a woman to be reckoned with and respected.
He watched as shopkeepers, clerks, and other customers made space for her. She was beautiful and regal, and being associated with her raised his status. Tom thought he could grow to be fond of Lady Bonneau. He was pleased that she had informed him about the truth of the social structure, which allowed him to school his features and keep an impassive expression even as the most wonderful sights were unfolding around him. No one would know more about him than Tom allowed them to know. Some privileged group thought he and Hermione were inferior? Well, he would make it is business to correct their thinking when the situation eventually presented itself.

Tom was fitted for robes and other clothing, magically measured with floating tapes and chalk. His school clothes were immediately replaced, as were his shoes. Afterwards, dressed in clothes that fit him for the first time in his life, they went to a book store, larger than any library Tom had been in, and Hermione handed him a stack of books with a quiet murmur, “you will like these.” Perusing them briefly, he agreed with her assessment, and gave a polite “thank you,” because that was the charming thing to do, and Tom had made up his mind to thoroughly charm the two Bonneau women.

After Lady Bonneau bought him all the books, as well as a stack for Hermione nearly as tall as she was, they came to a writing supply store. The store’s wares were excellently displayed, with glass cases full of various quills and engraved seals, stacks of parchment in every shade, and shelves packed with inkpots and wax sticks. Tom stood as orphans always did when they entered a store – in the center, not touching a thing. For a moment, he wanted everything he saw so badly that he was unaware of himself.

He started when a warm, gloved hand slipped into his own, accompanied by a tingle of magic. Tom didn’t need to look to his side to know it was Hermione. Would it always feel like that when they touched? What would it feel like without the fabric of her gloves as a barrier? He hated it and craved it at once. He wanted to yank his hand free and yell at her for touching him without permission, but what he did instead was grip her hand firmly, and face her.

“Yes, Hermione?” he asked, surprised at how calm his voice sounded. He would say this girl was a witch, but that was obvious now.

“Which feather would you prefer?” she pointed to the glass display mounted on the wall, which was clearly filled with the most rare and expensive feather quills the store had to offer. Unlike at the orphanage and in the cab, where she had exuded a mixture of hesitation, fear, and a tinge of hostility, here, in this store, she looked relaxed and even happy, her solemn expression traded for a broad smile.

Tom had the strangest sensation at her question. He had taken things he wanted. Many things. But in his eleven years, no one had ever shown him a collection of beautiful items and told
him that he could have whatever he wanted. In that moment, looking at her while she stared so intently at the feathers, her magic pulsing with his own between their clasped hands, he decided that when he started his new collection, this time of magical things, Hermione would be the prize jewel. She was already his by blood, even if she was a very distant cousin, and she had dared to mark him. There was no escape for her. Her knowledge and magic would be an extension of his own, and it would be magnificent.

When he didn’t immediately respond, she pointed at a smoky grey feather with brilliant scarlet markings that ended in a tip so sharp, it looked as if it could slice off a finger. “That looks your style,” she smiled, her lips quirking to the side in amusement at some unspoken joke.

As with the books, he agreed with her taste, but he didn’t want to let her know that. Tom Riddle made his own choices. He dropped her hand, even though part of him didn’t ever want to let go, and gestured to a deep brown eagle feather that was fringed gold, making the edges of the feather indistinct and shimmery. “I prefer that one,” he said, pushing away the thought that the colors reminded him of Hermione’s hair and eyes.

She shrugged, and then showed him the parchment she liked, as well as shared her opinion on the different inks. He noticed she was back to being grave and factual, and as much as Tom understood both the need and the desire for a clever mask, he was not pleased she was wearing one around him.

When they came back to the strange inn with their purchases, Lady Bonneau showed him his room, which was his alone, and next door to hers and Hermione’s. She told him that they would have dinner downstairs at seven, and he was free to rest in the meantime. He thanked her and closed the door.

Of course, Tom was far too energized to rest. He went to the stack of books and began to read about his legacy. The top book, *Hogwarts: A History*, was the one Hermione had recommended reading first, and he didn’t plan on stepping foot into that school until he knew everything about it.

-oOoOoOo-

Hermione wasn’t sure what was happening to her, but she was sure that 1) she didn’t like it, and 2) it was related to the words on her and Tom Riddle’s flesh. From the moment she touched him, Hermione had felt a strange calm that seemed to disconnect her temporarily from her brain. Why in the world had she simply blurted out, “We are magic”? There were certainly better ways to ease Tom into the knowledge.
Thankfully, Narcissa had carried the rest of that conversation because Hermione hadn’t been able to concentrate. She had watched him carefully in Diagon Alley, looking for clues of sociopathic behavior, some excuse to hate him in the here and now, but instead she had seen his restraint and felt saddened. He had taken Narcissa’s warning about children from muggle and mixed backgrounds to heart, and closed away his reactions to all the wonderment around him. Despite this, Hermione knew he was thrilled to have things all his own – nice clothing and books.

Then, in the quill and parchment shop, her heart had broken a little. His guard had fallen, and he wasn’t anything except an unwanted orphan child who could barely fathom that he would be freely given something beautiful. Without thinking, she had done what she would have done for Harry; she had taken his hand, and as soon as she did, there was that feeling again, that palpable concentration of magic buzzing between them. She was thankful for the old-fashioned custom of wearing gloves, because she could feel his energy strongly as it was. He gave the slightest of tugs, but then tightened his grip. For some reason that she chose not to explore further, that relieved her. As awful and traitorous as she should feel, holding the hand of Tom Riddle simply felt right, which was so absurd her brain simply refused to process it.

When he dropped her hand a few moments later, the loss was there, but it was outweighed by relief. She hadn’t wanted to pull away from him. Heaven knows he didn’t handle rejection well, and she could already see the gleam of possessiveness in his eyes. Like Slughorn, Tom Riddle was a collector. He sensed her magic, and he wanted it. She had to make sure that he didn’t find out about his writing on her skin for as long as possible. There would be no escaping him then.

Hermione wondered how extended amounts of time with Riddle would change her. She was keenly aware of her reaction to him – her whole being, excepting her brain, wanted to like him, to comfort him, to help him. She felt this way immediately, and it had only grown stronger in the few hours they had spent together. What would an entire school year be like? And holidays together with Narcissa?

Back in her room, she excused herself to the bathroom and unbuttoned her dress. Her stomach was smaller, and the words were more tightly curled, but they were the same, and Hermione knew without seeing Tom use his quill that it was his handwriting, just as she had recognized her own on his arm. She traced the words, but they didn’t feel any different than her other skin. If Narcissa didn’t tell her the whole story soon, Hermione would find out using her own tried and true method: the Hogwarts library.

When she stepped back out, Narcissa was writing at the small desk in the corner. Hermione glanced down and saw a list of potion ingredients, a rather fanciful list – things like butterfly dust, baby’s breath, and laughing hibiscus.

“What is that for?” Hermione asked. “Sounds like the ingredients of a potion for cheering someone up?” She couldn’t imagine trying to cheer up any of the three of them artificially.
“I suppose it will have some mild mood enhancing effects,” Narcissa continued to write. “But it’s a potion to compliment your de-aging, to help you feel younger, more innocent – to act like a child, not an adult.”

Hermione shook her head furiously. “No, we can’t do that! I need to be on my guard with him! I need the advantage of my years, of what I know.”

“It isn’t a forgetting potion, Hermione,” Narcissa added unicorn hair to the parchment. “But you are wrong about being on your guard. That is precisely what we need to avoid. He won’t come to trust you if you are guarded.”

“I don’t think he’s actually capable of trust,” Hermione snapped. It was much easier to feel anger and loathing toward him when he wasn’t present, filling the air with some weird magical buzzing.

Narcissa rolled up the list and turned to Hermione. “You are doing exactly what you said you would not – judging him. I find that interesting, since when you are in the same room with him, the two of you seem to gravitate to one another. And don’t think I didn’t see you take his hand earlier, or the fact that he held it firmly for several minutes.”

“Yes, what is that about?” Hermione stabbed her finger at her stomach. “What are the words about? Neither of us will leave you alone until you tell us the truth!”

“I’ll tell you,” Narcissa rose and crossed to the heap of shopping bags. She pulled out a small vial of a familiar potion. “But you must take this first.”

“Calming draught?” Hermione groaned. How bad was this going to be if she needed to take the potion before she heard it? Still, the calming draught wouldn’t impair her senses, only help her not to freak out, so she took the vial and drank quickly. “Okay. Tell me.”

Narcissa looked like a small animal trapped in a corner by a predator. She obviously did not want to have this conversation. She sat on the edge of one of the twin beds and motioned for Hermione to sit beside her.

“Just tell me,” Hermione urged. “Rip it off quickly, like a band-aid.”

Hermione normally would have made a noise of frustration, but the potion was kicking in and she just calmly waited instead. “Never mind. I meant, tell me the main point first, then go into the details.”

“Fine,” Narcissa took a deep breath, then took the vial out of Hermione’s hand and drank the rest.

“You do realize you are scaring the shit out of me, even with the potion?” Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Ladies do not refer to ‘shit’,” Narcissa corrected.

“Stop trying to avoid the issue at hand,” Hermione ignored the previous comment. Whatever was coming would probably be worthy of a few f-bombs.

Narcissa met her eyes, and Hermione could see fear and sadness there, and maybe the tiniest bit of hope. “You and Tom Riddle share one another’s words because you are soul mates.”

“What?” Hermione’s mouth dropped open, and she thought somewhere in the back of her mind that she should be screaming, but the calming draught was doing its job admirably.

“I believe that muggles have a concept of soul mates; you must be familiar with it,” Narcissa waited for Hermione’s dumbfounded nod. “Well, in our world, it is similar, though of course with a magical component. Every magical person, every magical being, really – fairies, elves, I suppose even trolls, has a magical signature, which has unique properties. Magic is energy, and there are many types. For every magical signature, there is another that compliments, strengthens, and completes it. You may have many family members and friends with whom your magic cooperates and mixes well, but only one soul mate. The connection is different, much more intense, and”

“Not necessarily,” Narcissa hedged, then caught Hermiones’s disbelieving stare.

“Yes, the link usually blooms into a passionate relationship,” she admitted. “But not everyone ends up with or even finds a magical soul mate. With arranged pureblood marriages, and the widespread nature of magical settlements across the world, it simply isn’t that common. And, honestly, it doesn’t impede a fine, fulfilled life. I know Lucius wasn’t my soul mate, but I loved him, and we were happy in our marriage.”

Hermione unconsciously rubbed her stomach. “I get the magical compatibility aspect, but what about the writing? No one I know has ever mentioned anything like it.”

“It’s a mark of the power of the connection, and of those connected, and it is much more rare than finding a soul mate at all. When it does occur, those soul mates will meet. It happened with Merlin and Morgana, with Gryffindor and Slytherin,” Narcissa paused, a thought coming to mind. “It is a soul connection, so it’s logical that Tom’s mark didn’t show up until there was a version of him available after you were born who had his soul intact. When did your mark appear?”

“A few weeks after we destroyed the locket,” Hermione said quietly. “At New Year’s.”

“You were exposed to part of his soul, it may have even attached itself to you,” Narcissa mused.

“Are you saying you think I’m a horcrux?” Hermione felt sick. “How would that even be possible? His soul is complete right now.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Not a horcrux. But with a soul mate pull so strong, the magic in that soul piece would have been drawn to you, and I doubt once it was with you that it would have left.”

“I’m getting a headache. Am I his soul mate because of my inherent magical signature, or am I his soul mate because I was available, compatible magic that his soul piece happened to latch onto, and now, in the past, his soul recognizes his own magical signature?” Hermione’s mind was a mess of possibilities and how time travel and loops may have complicated them.

Narcissa placed a hand over Hermiones’s. “You are over-thinking this, probably because you don’t want to believe that you are naturally his match, but the Dark Lord was not the first to
make a horcrux, nor the first to have a piece of his soul go astray. Simply recognizing one’s own magic would not make a soul mate mark.”

“True,” Hermione admitted. “I don’t want to believe I am the soul mate to the most evil wizard the world has ever seen.”

“He isn’t evil yet, Hermione.” Narcissa looked desparate, and her voice trembled despite the draught. “You must embrace this, embrace him. You are the key to steering him from the dark.”

“He’s already dark!” Hermione wanted to cry, but the potion kept her eyes dry. “It is clear that he sees people as objects, that he cares only for himself and his possessions, and that he wouldn’t hesitate an instant to hurt others to get what he wants.”

Narcissa laughed, but it was a humorless sound. “Yes, that is all true. He might not have a conscience, but he does have a brilliant, logical mind, and a soul that is intact. And that soul will never stop wanting you – he will care for you.”

“No, he -” Hermione began.

“He will – he already does,” Narcissa insisted. “It may not look like the type of affection you recognize, but, like all aspects of Tom Riddle, it is unique to him. You keep trying to make this about him, Hermione, but it is more about us, about the differences we can make in his life. We can’t make those differences unless we are whole-heartedly devoted to this mission.”

Hermione fell back on the bed, stared at the ceiling. In the short time since they’d arrived, she felt like she and Narcissa kept having the same conversation with only slightly different phrasing. Narcissa wanted her to accept the situation; Hermione wanted to as well, but couldn’t. Narcissa impressed upon her the importance of acceptance; Hermione felt guilty and vowed to do better. Then, a few hours later, they had another round. But the soul mate mark? This was something completely different.

As a child, Hermione had attended the Church of England with her parents on Sundays. The Grangers were not devoutly religious, but they were spiritual, and had encouraged Hermione to ask questions about God and life and death and faith. When she discovered magic, she had needed to re-evaluate some of her beliefs, and the results were simple. She believed, and was backed up by what she knew of Harry’s mother’s sacrifice, of actions she had seen during the war, and of her own and Narcissa’s actions, that love was the most powerful force in the universe. She also believed that anger and hatred were motivated by fear. More than Voldemort had hated
Dumbledore or Harry, he had feared death.

Hermione thought teaching Tom Riddle how to love was a near to impossible task, but if their souls were meant to be together in some way, maybe she could help him not to be afraid. Fear was always driven by insecurity, by a lack of love, which Tom had in spades. Narcissa, as usual, was right. This mission was about her - if she couldn’t act out of love when they were faced with their best chance of creating a livable future for the wizarding world, then she had already given up.

She sat back up, and took Narcissa’s hand. “Mother, prepare the potion. I’ll take it. I’ll act my body’s age, and I’ll win Tom over.”

Narcissa smiled at Hermione’s use of ‘mother’. “Excellent. I am quite a dab hand at potions; I promise it will help.”

“What are we going to tell Tom?” Hermione asked. “He isn’t going to let the subject of the words go for long, and at school, he’s going to see my writing eventually. He’s too clever not to put it together, and we need to make sure he doesn’t equate this mark, me, as a weakness he needs to eradicate.”

“I’m not sure,” Narcissa said, tapping her perfectly manicured plum fingernails against her matching lips. “But I think it will go better than you believe. I saw the way he looked at you in the shop. He already thinks of you as his.”


“No, it’s a defense, Hermione,” Narcissa sighed. “Think of it. He has had no one – no family, no person to care about him in the slightest way. He’s only known indifference at best. Then we arrived, brought him here. We are his first connection to something wonderful, something beyond his wildest dreams. And the first words you said to him are now on his skin. As smart as he is, he is still a boy, and if he doesn’t cling to you, in his own way, what does he have left? The orphanage is gone – he’s adrift in a strange new world.”

“A fair point,” Hermione conceded, then added, “Can one develop an addiction to calming draught? Because I have a feeling I’m going to be needing more in the coming days.”

Narcissa laughed, and this time it was a true laugh. “Won’t we both?”
Hogwarts: it's love at first sight

Chapter Summary

Hermione takes the potion, Tom sees Hogwarts, and Narcissa saves a life.

Chapter Notes

So, the response is resounding. We need to stay with these crazy kids for a while. Thanks to everyone who wrote in - I will get back to everybody, though I have several papers to grade, so it may be a few days before another update. Love to you all.

Hermione soon discovered that it was very difficult for her not to like Tom Riddle when in his presence. When the three of them sat down for dinner that evening, Narcissa calmly explained to Tom that he and Hermione were magically linked. With a skill that left Hermione quite impressed, Narcissa carefully and subtly emphasized the point that would most resonate with Tom – that the mark was a rare and promising sign of great future power.

Tom’s look of wary acceptance transformed to a smug smirk. “And will Hermione have my mark someday?”

To Hermione’s great annoyance, Narcissa bit back a grin and said, “She already does. Your words have been on her for months. It was the appearance of your words that started our search for you.”

“Well,” Tom’s smug smile grew. “Then I think you were right to say that great things can be expected of us, Lady Bonneau.” He turned, flashing that beautiful smile at Hermione. She was grateful at that moment that she hadn’t taken any potion yet, that she could look at him as a child, not a contemporary. The amount of time she had left feeling that way was eroding rapidly.

“Please, Tom,” Narcissa caught his attention once more, and Hermione took a deep breath. “We are related. My paternal great-great-grandfather and your maternal great-grandfather were brothers. In the muggle world, this is a tenuous connection, but the magical world is much smaller. Let’s simplify and say cousins, with no numbers or ‘removed’. You may call me ‘Aunt Narcissa’ to account for the age difference.”

“Thank you, Aunt Narcissa,” Tom responded politely, but his eyes were on Hermione.
Narcissa was up at dawn the next morning, preparing the youth potion for Hermione. She was already feeling strongly for her, as if the girl were her real daughter. In this time, she was as good as, Narcissa reasoned. Though she was still suspicious of muggles, and frightened for their world to ever collide with her own, she had long since given up on thoughts of blood purity. She had performed enough tergeo spells on her floors and walls after Dark Revels to know there was no difference in how people bled. And pureblood families, with their centuries of intermarriage, high rates of insanity and low rates of birth? Over the last year, watching the Death Eaters roam Malfoy Manor, she had thought more and more that muggle borns and half-blooded children might actually be the solution to keeping wizarding alive in Great Britain. Though her parents and in-laws had spoken with venom about the lack of distinction between blood statuses in the United States, there was no doubt their wizarding community was more robust and thriving.

When Hermione rose and dressed, Narcissa handed her a potion the color of sunshine. It even smelled like sun – bright and clean. Hermione glanced at the potion, then back to Narcissa, who wore black from head to toe. She briefly wondered how Narcissa would look in a different shade, something softer, perhaps. Then, she raised the potion and drank.

It was a bit fizzy, and tickled her throat. By the time Narcissa performed the three hair spells on her, Hermione was feeling the effects. It seemed ridiculous, but her heart felt lighter, and she simply wasn’t as worried. The knowledge of Voldemort, of future events, was still in her brain, but it was further away, and she didn’t feel the desire to analyze it. What she really wanted to do was curl up in a comfy chair and read one of the books she had bought yesterday.

They had breakfast with Tom, where Narcissa announced she would be apparating them all to Hogsmeade. “Tom will be able to look around a wizarding village, and we will walk to Hogwarts, to make sure you are both enrolled for the school year.”

“We must walk because no one can apparate into Hogwarts, is that correct?” Tom asked. “That’s what I read in the book Hermione recommended.”

“Oh, you started,” Hermione was pleased, speaking more freely than she would have without the potion. “Did you get to the section on the floating staircases and vanishing doors?”

“I finished it,” Tom said proudly. “I read rather quickly.”

“Wonderful!” Hermione replied. “I’m so glad to have someone to discuss my readings with.” For a moment, she forgot she was speaking to Tom Riddle.

But if he was disinterested or annoyed, he didn’t show it. “I look forward to it.”
Tom had never been more pleased in his life. He had spent the night learning about Hogwarts and its founders, and when he had asked Hermione and Narcissa about speaking to snakes at breakfast, they had informed him that it was a rare gift, one shared by the founder Slytherin. He had no doubt which house he would be sorted into.

Every hour unveiled something new, something wonderful, and all of Tom’s suspicions that he was apart from and beyond others were being proven as each new fact came to light. He was a Parselmouth, able to do spontaneous, wandless magic, and his magic had marked Hermione first, before they had even met. Their marks were yet another sign that he was no ordinary wizard, and that Hermione was meant to be in his life, to help him rise to the glory that surely awaited him. All the talk about soul mates was a bit silly – he had no need for love. He preferred to think of the attraction in more scientific terms, like the bonding of atoms in the chemistry books he had read. Their magic formed something like a molecule, something that was stronger than the atom by itself. That he would allow.

The sensation of apparating alongside ‘Aunt’ Narcissa and Hermione was both unpleasant and unlike anything he’d experienced before. Once they arrived, Hermione took his hand again, and he felt instantly better, which annoyed him. He didn’t want to be dependent on anything, on anyone to feel better, but it was an indisputable fact that her touch, still through those gloves, did just that. And, he reasoned to himself, if she made him stronger, then it was only logical to keep her close.

He held her hand for a few moments, until the worst of the sick, dizzy feeling had passed, then dropped it, though he still walked close by her side. Tom found that standing in close proximity to her was about half as nice as touching her. She was particularly excited this morning, and happier, like she had been for those few moments in the quill shop. He didn’t normally care how other people felt, but he reasoned that she would be a better amplifier of his magic if she were in a good mood. Also, she appeared more receptive to his smiles and witty comments, which was as it should be.

Aunt Narcissa briefly described the different shops as they walked, but told them that they would go to Hogwarts’s first, then have lunch and shop on the return trip. Tom was glad of it – ever since reading the book last night (for which he had stayed up until the sky had begun to turn red), he had been filled with the desire to see the building in the flesh. Apparently, Hermione felt the same way, because he felt her magic fizz around her like bubbles from the gin and tonics the rich ladies drank at the outdoor cafes on the high street in the summers.

When they came around the corner, he was glad neither Bonneau lady was looking in his
direction. There was no possibility of keeping the shock and awe from showing on his face. It was the biggest, grandest building he had ever seen, and he had once walked past the gates of Buckingham Palace with the other orphans. The idea that he would be able to go to school here, to receive an education here, was almost too much to grasp.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” Hermione looked as if she would float into the air. Her curls were a bit wilder than normal, and Tom thought this must be what seeing a rare animal in its natural habitat was like. She simply belonged here, and she knew it. He wanted that certainty for himself.

Tom gave her a measured smile. “The building’s design is impressive.”

She laughed and lightly slapped his shoulder, “Tom, you know what I meant. It’s okay to love it at first sight.”

Before this moment, Tom was sure he would have badly hurt anyone who dared such an action, but his shoulder was abuzz from her touch, and she was smiling at him in a way no person ever had – with pure, unguarded joy. “I won’t say it’s love,” he finally said. “But I would like to see more.”

She laughed again, and Tom noted that while most people’s laughter grated on his nerves, hers had a sweet sound that he didn’t mind in the slightest. She was changing him, and he wasn’t sure if he liked that, but at the moment, he seemed to be powerless to stop it.

-oOo0oOo-

Hermione knew that the potion was affecting her, and she knew that Tom was responding positively to her, but she couldn’t believe she had hit him on the shoulder, as if he were Harry or Ron. Did this potion come with a death wish?

But then, after a blank expression that must have hid his shock, he gave her a smile, which though small, was still dazzling. Luckily, before she could make another assault on his person, they were distracted by their arrival at the gates, where they were let in by a dour man who muttered and groused just like Filch had.

*Did caretakers come in any flavor except grumpy,* she wondered, but was honestly a bit comforted that something at this older version of Hogwarts already felt like home. He lead them on the familiar path to the Headmaster’s office, which Hermione could have found both sleeping and
blindfolded, but she, along with Narcissa, she noticed, took care to not appear to know the way.

Hermione knew that Headmaster Armando Dippet was over 300 years old, but his picture on the Chocolate Frog cards in the future was a younger image, and she had to stop herself from staring at his mostly bald head and heavily lined face as they entered. Tom stiffened beside her, and she knew he must be thinking similar thoughts. It didn't seem possible someone so ancient could still be alive.

“Lady Bonneau,” Dippet rose a bit unsteadily, and Hermione was relieved when he sat back down. “I am pleased to meet you, though this time of year is very busy. What can I do for you?”

“I have two matters of business, Headmaster,” Narcissa began, and her voice was more heavily accented than previously. “I am a Rosier by birth, though I have lived most of my life in France. My husband, Lord Bonneau, was killed fighting against Grindelwald’s forces near the prison he is building in Nurmengard. I felt it no longer safe to remain in France with Grindelwald’s power growing by the day. My daughter, Hermione, would have started Beauxbatons this year, but I ask that she be accepted here.”

Narcissa handed him a few of the papers from her bag, but he barely glanced at them before nodding and returning them to her. “I am sorry for your loss, Lady Bonneau. Grindelwald is a danger to us all. Most magical folk cannot remember life before the Statute of Secrecy, but I lived it my early years. It was a violent time, and I have no wish to spend my remaining years in the same type of chaos. Of course we will take Hermione in.”

He paused, as if collecting thoughts from the air around him. “You had a second matter to discuss?”

“Yes,” Narcissa said, “I needed to inform you that Tom -”

But Narcissa was cut off by the door slamming open and the caretaker running into the room, yelling.

“He’s done it again, sir!” The caretaker’s face was red and his words barely discernable between his gasps.

Despite this, Dippet seemed to understand completely, and he rose with a speed that surprised Hermione. “Pringle, this will be his 43rd probation, if the bloody fool lives. He only arrived back for the term yesterday. What has he done this time?”
“He’s brought a bleedin’ dragon with him, sir!”

“Is it loose?” Dippet’s eyebrows, which seemed to have all the hair that was missing from his head, rose comically.

“No,” Pringle gasped, holding his side. “But Silvanus’s burned pretty bad, and I can’t find Madam Selwyn!”

Narcissa was already standing, her wand out. “Sir, I am quite skilled at healing magic. Please allow me to assist.”

Dippet nodded quickly, and everyone ushered out, following Pringle across the lawn to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A charred lump that could have been most of a man was sprawled on the grass.

As Narcissa knelt beside him and began to murmur spells, Headmaster Dippet headed into the forest path, with Pringle behind him, towards sounds of loud snorts and roars that Hermione recognized from Harry’s first task during the Triwizard Tournament.

Tom turned back and forth, clearly unsure which direction merited the most attention. Another roar, louder than any elephant, erupted from the tree line and Tom grabbed Hermione’s arm without thinking. “Are there really such things as dragons? That breathe fire?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, and they are as fierce and deadly as in muggle legend.” She threaded her arm through his, and pulled him back. “Let them handle it. We should see if Mother needs help.”

Though Tom didn’t care one way or the other about the coal heap on the ground, it was fascinating to watch the witch perform a spell of substance, not simply levitating goods or magically performing every day tasks. He watched her closely, and this time, as she moved her wand in intricate patterns and spoke in words he couldn’t quite understand, he could see her magic, feel it.

Unlike Hermione’s energetic, barely contained magic, Narcissa’s was tightly controlled, like a well-trained pet, and it didn’t cast nearly as wide of a circle around her. He wondered how much of this was due to the use of a wand channeling the magic, as opposed to the spontaneous, full-body magic he and Hermione were capable of wandlessly.
“Mother, do you need me to get any supplies?” Hermione spoke lowly, but firmly, loud enough to be heard, but not enough to break Narcissa’s concentration.

“Fairy aloe balm,” Narcissa replied quickly. “There should be some in the hospital wing cabinets. Break into them if you must. Go!”

Hermione took off at a run, and Tom paused only for a second before he ran after her. She was light and fast, and Tom didn’t catch up with her until they had reached the doors to the school.

“Which way to the hospital wing?” he panted slightly, as she pulled open the door.

She froze. She couldn’t immediately go to the right place. The timeline information had to be preserved, but she couldn’t waste time. “I don’t know,” she bit her lip, took Tom’s hand in hers and cried, “Accio ghost!”

Tom felt magic pour through their joined hands. The feeling was incredible, a rising power that traveled out of him, out of her, and shot down the corridor. To his amazement, almost instantly a ghost floated at them, holding his very displeased head in place on his neck.

“See here, children!” The mostly see-through man began, “I am not at your beck and-”

“Please, sir, no disrespect, but we need to find the hospital wing. A professor is gravely injured and we must get medicine.” Hermione spoke in a rush.

“Follow me,” the ghost nodded, more with his hand than his head, and Hermione ran after him, dragging Tom behind her, their hands still clasped tightly.

The hospital wing was on the first floor, not terribly far from the entrance, but no one was there. “Do you know where to find the Matron?” Hermione asked the ghost, already opening cabinets.

The ghost sniffed. "It is not my job to keep track of the living."

Tom could not abide boredom, so he began to look as well, reading the spidery script on the boxes, jars, and bottles. There was nothing he recognized as a normal medicine, only strange words like bezoar, calming draught, dreamless sleep, and so on.
“I found it!” Hermione yelled, and she was off down the hall.

He chased after her more out of a distaste at being left behind than anything else, and arrived on the lawn to find a larger group assembled around Narcissa. There was a tall, slender man with long brown hair and an even longer beard, as well as another man with thick spectacles and blond hair that stood straight.

He chased after her more out of a distaste at being left behind than anything else, and arrived on the lawn to find a larger group assembled around Narcissa. There was a tall, slender man with long brown hair and an even longer beard, as well as another man with thick spectacles and blond hair that stood straight up from his scalp like the growths from an onion bulb. Both men were wearing long robes like the Headmaster.

The onion haired man looked at the jar in Hermione’s extended hand and took it immediately. “Clever girl!” He kneeled beside Narcissa and began to scoop out the slimy green gelatin and spread it on the man’s exposed, reddened skin.

Tom noted dispassionately that the man’s skin hardly had any charring left, having turned an angry red on the right side and a waxy pink on the left. Of course, the man was missing his right leg up to the knee, his right hand was gone and the remaining skin was covered in a multitude of scars.

There was silence for about ten minutes, and then Narcissa stood. “I believe we can move him to the hospital wing now. He will need to be on bed rest for at least a week.”

The tall, bearded man pointed his wand at a fallen tree branch and it lengthened and spread into the shape of a stretcher. He floated the unconscious man onto it. “I believe, Headmaster, that Madam Selwyn was visiting St. Mungo’s this morning to see about recruiting an assistant healer for the year.”

“Yes, Albus, I remember now,” he glanced at Narcissa, and gave a respectful bob of his bald head. “It is fortunate that Lady Bonneau was here to assist us, and so capably, too.”

Everyone began to walk, slowly making their way back to the castle beside the floating stretcher.

The bearded man looked at Lady Bonneau with an intelligent and close, though friendly, gaze. “Indeed, Headmaster, I am certain Silvanus will be grateful for her presence, as soon as he is conscious again.”

He looked across to Narcissa and bowed his head. “Professor Albus Dumbledore,” he gestured the hand not holding the wand toward Hermione and Tom. “Are these your children, Lady Bonneau?”

Narcissa smiled, but Tom thought it wasn’t as kind of a smile that she gave to others. “Hermione is my daughter. Tom is a cousin, but his parents have passed, so he is my ward. I believe Tom is already on your book for this year, and I have just arranged with Headmaster
Dippet for Hermione to come here rather than Beauxbatons.”

“Yes, a bad situation on the continent, this business with Grindelwald,” Dippet murmured.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore’s face definitely tightened at the mention of the name Grindelwald, and Tom wondered what that was about. He liked collecting information about what made others uncomfortable, so he filed that observation away for later use.

The onion haired man smiled at Hermione and Tom. “I am Professor Beery. I’ll be your Herbology teacher. After your quick thinking this morning, I’ve no doubt you’ll both be star students.”

They had reached the entrance, and a dark haired woman dressed like a drawing of Florence Nightengale Tom had seen in a history book greeted them, annoyance twisting her mouth into a frown.

“Of course Silvanus would choose the morning I was gone to pick a fight with a dragon! That man won’t have any limbs left by the time he retires!” She brandished her wand, pointing it like a sword at the unconscious man. “I can take it from here Albus.”

She glanced down, taking in the man’s condition, and her head snapped back up. “Who healed him? This is excellent work.”

Headmaster Dippet nodded at Narcissa. “It was the lovely Lady Bonneau. Perhaps she could go with you to the hospital wing to discuss the spells she performed, to make sure all is well?”

“I would be happy to let Madam Selwyn check my work,” Narcissa said graciously. She turned to Hermione and Tom. “Children, can you wait here for a few moments?”

“They can come with me,” Professor Beery offered. “I will show them the greenhouses they will be working in come a few months from now.”

They split up, and Professor Dumbledore followed them to the greenhouses. Hermione knew she had attracted his attention, and she did her best to stay calm. Tom might be a child in this time, but Dumbledore was an adult, already at great power, only a few years from winning the elder wand from Grindelwald.

Tom saw Hermione tense when the taller professor with the odd name – what self-respecting man would allow the word ‘dumb’ to be part of his name – entered the greenhouses behind them. That, combined with the effortless nature of the man’s earlier magic was enough to earn Tom’s attention.

“Miss Bonneau, and Mr.?” He paused.

“Riddle,” Tom supplied with an easy, charming smile. Oh, he was definitely going to be watching this man. “Tom Riddle.”

“Muggle-born?” Dumbledore asked. Professor Beery coughed behind them.
“No,” Tom answered, a tad more coolly. “Half-blooded, like my cousin.” He nodded to Hermione, who was now standing so close to him that their shoulders were almost touching. That pleased him for some reason.

“It is no matter either way,” Dumbledore answered kindly and looked over at his colleague, who was fussing with terracotta pots. “We care only about magical merit here. Isn’t that so, Professor Beery?”

Professor Beery glanced up, his eyes giant behind his glasses, blinking like an owl. “Oh, of course, we welcome everyone, especially in Hufflepuff house.”

Dumbledore winked at Hermione. “I do believe he’s trying to sway your vote toward his house before the sorting ceremony.”

“Oh, that won’t matter,” Tom quickly added. “Hermione and I will both be sorted into Slytherin.”

Her former Headmaster raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? Well, then I imagine my house in a tight race for the house cup.”

“Are you Ravenclaw, sir?” Hermione was not above a bit of misdirection. Maybe she would be fine in Slytherin.

“No, I’m the head of Gryffindor House. Professor Merrythought leads Ravenclaw, and Professor Slughorn is the head of Slytherin.” Dumbledore answered. He paused, then asked, “How did you two find the hospital wing so quickly?”

A shiver of Hermione’s magic washed over Tom, like water sloshed from a glass too full. She was nervous, and he wondered if they would be in trouble for using magic. There had been some mention of a restriction of underage magic in his readings.

“We summoned a ghost and asked for directions,” she said, truthfully enough.

“I see,” Dumbledore began.
“How did you summon a ghost?” Beery had moved closer, apparently forgetting he was holding a handful of potting soil. “You’re first years, and you don’t have wands.”

“How did you summon a ghost?” Beery had moved closer, apparently forgetting he was holding a handful of potting soil. “You’re first years, and you don’t have wands.”

“Hermione and I channeled our joined magic through our hands and she said the spell,” Tom jumped in.

“Accio?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

Tom nodded, “Yes, that was the spell, and then almost instantly, a ghost who was nearly missing his head came to us and we followed him to the hospital wing.” He refused to be ashamed of the fact that they had done magic. He and Hermione were magic.

Dumbledore stroked his beard for a moment. “That is quite impressive; it is certainly beyond the ability of most first years,”

“Come now, Albus,” Beery laughed. “Let’s be honest. That sounds beyond the ability of most fifth years! Wandless magic at, what, 11? If these two are any indication of what this crop of students will be like, I’ll be thrilled. I’m tired of students who pass out when re-potting mandrakes simply because they forget to pull down the earmuffs.”

“I had read about wandless magic in Durante’s Practically Everything About Practical Magic,” Hermione added, wanting to remove herself and Tom from Dumbledore’s radar. “I knew in theory that we could channel one another, and it was emergency – poor Professor?” she paused. No one had said his surname.

Dumbledore smiled at her, and this time, his eyes twinkled. “Kettleburn. He is our rather brash and often reckless Care of Magical Creatures instructor. It is fascinating that your abilities are so well-developed, and in tune with one another, though that can happen in families. It was underage magic, but there was no wand involved, and it took place at Hogwarts, where you are both admitted, even though the school year has not quite begun.”

“And I think, Miss Bonneau, if you have been reading Durante,” Dumbledore shook his head, “that you may be headed for Ravenclaw, not Slytherin.”

Hermione blushed at the compliment. “I do love to read, sir,”
“And I will inform Professor Kettleburn of that when he awakes, and let him know that his gratitude may be expressed in the form of obscure 19th century magical texts.”

Hermione and Dumbledore both laughed. Tom’s face pulled toward a scowl, but he stopped it. When Dumbledore left only a few moments later, Tom was relieved. He heard Dumbledore murmuring, “Durante!” under his breath. Tom turned back to see the wide smile on Hermione's face, and he thought they needed to have a chat about where and to whom she belonged.
Blood Status Means Nothing to Tom Riddle?

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Tom talk about blood and Narcissa gets a job.

Chapter Notes

So glad to be back! Spring Break is over, so updates will probably only be about once a week or so from now, but I’ve got lots of ideas and happy to be putting them to the page. Love to you all.

“How about we put those clever minds to good use?” Professor Beery came upon them before Tom could share his displeasure with Hermione. “I’ll need to collect some more fairy aloe since we used most of it on Professor Kettleburn. Again.”

Tom swallowed his anger for the moment and listened carefully to the professor. He didn’t like making mistakes, so he always paid attention to instructions. The process was simple enough – cut the smaller inner leaves that glowed like a firefly from the plants, then cut the leaves apart and scrape the bright gelatin inside into a jar to be processed with other ingredients later. Professor Beery handed them both knives and jars, and then moved away to another task.

It was satisfying to be given trust and responsibility when they hadn’t even started classes, so Tom followed the instructions carefully, and he noticed Hermione took great care in her work as well, scraping gently but thoroughly on each leaf segment. He liked that she was smart and skillful, but he was still angry with her.

“Are you going to be in Ravenclaw?” He asked quietly. “Or in Dumbledore’s house? He seems to want you there.”

“Any of the houses would be thrilled to have either of us, Tom,” Hermione responded absently, still engrossed in her work.

Tom scraped a bit more roughly at the leaf in his hand. “That isn’t an answer.”
She could practically see his anger, and thought carefully before replying. “I don’t know where I’ll end up. The hat does the sorting – it magically determines the best House match for each student. I have many of the qualities associated with Ravenclaw, as do you.”

“You are very smart,” Tom allowed. “But we are magically linked - our magic is a match for one another, and there is no doubt I belong in Slytherin, so that is where you belong as well.”

“Tom, our connection is at the soul level – it will never break. I don’t need to be beside you every moment for it to ‘work’. It simply is.” Hermione was getting upset.

Yes, she was here to make Tom’s life different, to give him a human connection, but she was not going to exist only as an adjunct to him, as only his and not as her own person. “Also, our magical match is a complimentary one – each of us supplying something the other does not have – that is what makes it so strong. It stands to reason, then, that exploring and developing the differences in our magic will only strengthen our bond, not weaken it.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. Her argument made sense, and more power was definitely a good thing. Her magic was crackling in her curls, creating an angry halo. She was angry with him, and something else…was she afraid? Oddly, the thought of her fear didn’t please him. Perhaps he needed to try a different tactic.

With a charming smile fully in place, Tom turned to her, setting down his knife. “Is there some reason why you don’t want to be in Slytherin with me? You know more about the houses than I do. Your mother said she was in Slytherin. What is the matter?”

Hermione nearly dropped the leaf she was holding. Was Tom showing concern? Though she didn’t doubt for an instant that he had an ulterior motive, his tone of voice and facial expressions were shockingly convincing. She decided to be as honest as she could.

“Everyone you have met so far, Tom, has either been tolerant or ignorant of our blood status, but I have grown up with blood-based prejudice, and thinking like that is what led to my father’s death,” Hermione was not exactly lying, and she and Narcissa had come up with a detailed backstory that would need to be told at some point.

“Even though Grindelwald is more about magical ability than blood status, the bottom line is that he believes magical people should rule over muggles, that they are inherently better. And, here in England, many pureblooded families believe they are better than half-blooded or muggleborns, and should have more rights. Some believe muggleborns shouldn’t be allowed any rights in the wizarding world at all.”
Tom was silent, so Hermione continued. “My mother is pureblooded, and she was raised to believe that way, but she broke from it to marry my father, who was half-blooded. My grandmother was a muggle, and I have no desire to see her, or any of the rest of my muggle relatives, subjugated simply because they cannot perform magic. There are many brilliant muggles, many amazing muggle inventions, and it is a part of my heritage that I won’t be ashamed of.”

She was on a roll now, gathering steam. Despite what Narcissa said, Hermione did not want to be in that nest of vipers. “And, on the opposite side, I don’t believe that muggleborn witches and wizards are any different magically than purebloods. Look at us, Tom, we are both half-blooded, and I can literally feel how strong our magic is, especially when we are together. How can anyone say we are weaker or less than purebloods? Slytherin House is full of this kind of pureblood prejudice. They will not welcome me or my ideas, Tom. Why would I want to subject myself to that kind of environment, day and night, for seven years of schooling?”

Watching Hermione for the past few minutes had been thrilling, Tom admitted to himself. This was the longest speech she’d ever made to him. Her personality, which like her magic, fluctuated so wildly between lighthearted cheer, determined resourcefulness, somber consideration, and passionate defense, was almost overwhelming. She wore her heart on her sleeve, which was simply baffling to Tom’s cautious nature. Though he wanted her to do as he said, he did not care for the idea of anyone else telling her what to do, let alone insulting her.

“I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you, Hermione.” He responded without thinking, and was shocked at the words that came out.

Hermione’s eyes were wide as saucers. “I know that,” she replied instantly, looking just as surprised.

They were quiet for several long seconds. Then he asked, a ferocity in his voice that chilled her, “Do you imagine I would allow anyone to disrespect either of us?”

It was a tricky question to answer, Hermione thought. The part that was linked to his magic was pleased he would stand up for her. But she didn’t want to encourage his bullying. “Tom, you can’t change people’s beliefs by intimidation – all that does is drive the belief into hiding. Wouldn’t you rather prove them wrong simply through your intelligence, your power?”

Tom gave a small laugh. “I don’t think that will quite do the trick, Hermione.”
The magical world was still very new to him, but people were people, Tom thought. Motivated by greed and fear and power. It was obvious that the purebloods had been in power for quite a while and were determined to keep that power. Tom had no problem with disrupting that system, and he knew for a fact that intimidation worked just fine as a way to subdue enemies.

He belonged in this world. The longer he was here, the stronger the feeling became. And if anyone – pureblood or muggle, adult or child, saw him as less, they were absolutely his enemies. However, Tom was smart enough to know he needed to destroy it from within, and that, to keep Hermione happily ignorant, he would also need to be discrete.

Knowing that contact would comfort and distract her, Tom closed his hand over hers. She had taken off the gloves to collect the fairy aloe, and the pleasant buzz was indeed much stronger through their bare skin. He allowed himself a moment to enjoy it as well, then focused on his words. “I would very much like to have your company in Slytherin House, Hermione. If half-bloods are so rare there, then the two of us, in one year, will make much faster progress together than in separate houses.”

“And,” his smile widened and he ran his thumb over the top of her hand, copying the reassuring squeezing motion he had seen girls who were considered friends share in school and at the orphanage. “I promise you will not be threatened or bullied or treated any differently. I’m surprised you are so concerned. Your mother is a pureblood. Your father was a wizard, even if his mother was a muggle. I’m the one who is truly half-blooded, by their definition, which I find highly suspect.” He paused, a thoughtful look on his face, as though he were solving a puzzle.

“Mathematically, it doesn’t work. In the magic books I’ve read so far, it is claimed that wizards have been here since approximately the same time as the rest of humanity, with very little influx of other wizarding communities or new blood. Even if the families were very large, it seems there would be too many close blood connections to sustain a healthy population. These supposed ‘sacred’ pureblood families must be lying – they have to be hiding half-blood connections or possibly even muggleborns in their pasts.”

Hermione couldn’t believe Tom Riddle at any age was saying these things out loud. She caught his thumb, holding his hand fast. “You are brilliant, and you will be an amazingly powerful wizard. Anyone who thinks differently is both prejudiced and a fool.”

Tom didn’t need her reassurance, but he liked it. He was finding that he liked many, many things about Hermione Bonneau. But it simply wouldn’t do to let her know this. He disengaged his hand and started back on the next fairy aloe leaf. “Agreed. Slytherin House is facing a year of transformation.”

There was no point in arguing, Hermione realized, her hand still tingling from his recent
touch. It did make more sense for her to be in Slytherin, as much as she was dreading it.

After a few minutes, Tom spoke again. “Why did Dumbledore make you so nervous? Did you think we were going to get in trouble?”

She shrugged, trying to act casually. “I wasn’t sure. The underage magic rule is very strict, but it doesn’t usually go into full effect until after one has a wand. Magic before then is a grey area, but we were helping to save a man’s life, so I was mostly certain it would be okay. I just didn’t want to start my school career by upsetting the Deputy Headmaster.”

“That is understandable,” Tom cut the next leaf, watching her from the side. “Is what we did so rare?”

“Well,” Hermione admitted, “most children do exhibit wandless magic now and then, but to perform an actual spell, and not simply make a toy move or vegetables disappear from their plates, and to consciously use our magic together – that is rather unusual.”

Tom nodded, pleased, “I would like to read the text you mentioned – the Durante?”

“Of course,” Hermione smiled, then adding a teasing tone, “Are you sure you might not be a Ravenclaw?”

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Electra Selwyn was full of emotions. She was angry at Silvanus for doing something stupid, again. She was worried because, despite his careless ways, she actually liked the man. She was guilty she hadn’t been there to help. And she was frustrated because not a single person who she’d interviewed at St. Mungo’s was half as talented as the witch in front of her, and she desperately needed competent help for this school year, especially considering Silvanus had a dragon somewhere in the Forbidden Forest.

“Lady Bonneau,” she finished her diagnostic over Silvanus, “you saved Professor Kettleburn’s life. I only wish I could have assistance like yours for the coming year.”
A thought formed in Narcissa’s mind, and she decided to go with it. “Why couldn’t you?”

“Couldn’t I what?” the matron asked, confused.

“Have my help,” Narcissa replied. “I have no permanent home at the moment, and I must admit that the loss of my husband so recently makes me anxious to be separated from my daughter for so long. If you need an assistant healer, I would be happy to take the position. I don’t have formal training, but,”

Electra cut in. “It doesn’t matter! You’ve more than proven yourself, as far as I’m concerned. And I think Headmaster Dippet likes you. He’s a fairly crusty, grumpy old man, but he called you ‘the lovely Lady Bonneau,’ which is practically singing your praises. I suspect I won’t have to work too hard to convince him.” She smiled, heading toward the door. “Come, let’s speak to him now. I’ve placed an alert spell on Silvanus.”

An hour later, Narcissa had, for the first time in her life, a job that wasn’t being a wife or mother. She genuinely enjoyed healing magic, and she would be able to stay at Hogwarts, close to Hermione. It was hard to be alone in the past, and she knew they needed one another.

She collected Hermione and Tom, and they walked back to Hogsmeade. There was an owl waiting for them from the Rosiers at the little village inn. She held her breath as she broke the seal. From conversations in childhood with her grandfather, she knew the French side of the family was not disliked, per se, but they were not close either. Before she had left the future, when she was still planning on going alone, Narcissa had researched the family members and found that nearly all direct connections to the Rosier and Bonneau families had either been killed or imprisoned in Nuremguard during this time, so there was no one to contradict her story.

Dear Lady Bonneau,

My husband and I were pleased to receive your owl. It has been far too long since we’ve connected with our French cousins. We are sorry for the loss of your husband and the need for you to leave France with your daughter. We are also intrigued by the boy you mentioned. Though we were aware of our family’s connection with the House of Gaunt, we did not realize there were any Gaunts living other than the old man Marvolo and his son Morfin, who are both currently in Azkaban for assaulting muggles near their home. We would be happy to assist you with finding an estate, and invite you, your daughter, and the Gaunt boy to come to Rosier Manor for the rest of the summer. Our son, Thaddeus, will be entering his second year at Hogwarts in the fall, and our daughter, Marguerite, will be in her first year. I am sure the children would enjoy the opportunity to become acquainted before the school year begins.

As you mentioned staying in Hogsmeade, I will open our floo connection to the one
in Madam Pudifoot’s – she is a former school friend of mine – and you may come this evening at six pm.

Yours Cordially,

Orpha Rosier, nee Prewett
The Rosier Children Annoy Tom Riddle

Chapter Summary

Tom and Hermione get to know their Rosier "cousins." Hopefully, no one will die.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bridge...exciting things will be happening soon, I promise.

Tom was fighting the urge to stab Thaddeus Rosier in the neck with the silver butter knife resting with the tea service on the table in front of him. He imagined the feel of the sharp tip sinking into flesh, the gush of red when he pulled the knife back out. It seemed impossible that he could be related, no matter how distantly, to someone was so stupid that he didn’t know he was stupid.

“And then there’s Professor Slughorn, the head of Slytherin House, and of course he knows how important the Rosier family is, so I expect when I get to fifth year, I’ll be invited to his get togethers – the Slugclub it’s called–” Thaddeus smiled condescendingly at the three younger children. “Perhaps, because of the Rosier connection, you might get in as well when the time comes. Of course, I’m sure I’ll be a beater for our Quidditch team this year, and Slughorn loves good players –”

“My brother is obsessed with that silly game,” Marguerite gave an unladylike snort. “But he isn’t as good as he thinks, and Mother won’t let him play unless until he brings up his charms scores – he almost got a “T” last year!”

“Shut your mouth, Marguerite!” Thaddeus scowled. “You don’t know anything. You don’t even have a wand yet! And Charms is a completely useless class!”

Hermione watched the siblings fight, wondering if the adults would ever come back. Like most upperclass families at this time, the Rosiers didn’t seem to want to see or speak to their children unless it was mealtime. They had arrived early, and Narcissa was immediately taken on a tour by Orpha, while she and Tom were encouraged to get to know the Rosier children over tea.

It was abundantly clear that the younger Rosiers did not like one another, and it was also clear that they were opposites. Thaddeus probably would have the build for a beater, in another year or so. He was tall and burly, with broad shoulders even at a few months shy of thirteen. In contrast, Marguerite was small, looking more like eight than eleven. Marguerite seemed intelligent, but she clearly loved taunting her less bright brother.

Hermione could also see that Tom was annoyed by Thaddeus’s boasts. He was probably imagining some kind of gruesome physical punishment for the boy’s sheer stupidity. Even though he’d somehow managed to keep his underage magic discreet enough at Wool’s to avoid notice, Hermione knew that if he attacked Thaddeus, even inadvertently, that the consequences would be disastrous. Luckily, she had years of practice being the level-headed peacekeeper.
“Do you both have brooms?” she asked.

“I have a broom,” Thaddeus smirked. “Marguerite’s is practically a toy.”

Marguerite huffed. “I can still go faster than you do! I’d have a better chance getting on a team as seeker than you as a beater. You cry like a baby whenever you fall off.”

“Perhaps you could show us? Neither of us has ever had a broom,” Hermione said. She glanced at Tom, who still looked dangerously annoyed.

“That’s not surprising, given your backgrounds,” Marguerite murmured.

“Marguerite!” Thaddeus looked shocked. Hermione was more shocked that the boy had better manners than his sister, and she felt a rush of anger that reminded her of the surge of emotion she’d experienced right before she’d punched Draco Malfoy in the nose. God, had that been satisfying. She briefly wondered what Marguerite Rosier would do if she smacked that pureblood smirk off her face.

“Our backgrounds?” Tom inquired, an eyebrow raised, which honestly, a boy of eleven should not be able to do, Hermione thought.

Before Marguerite could answer, Hermione cut in. “We are all cousins here. Let’s be civil. Yes, Marguerite, we are both half-bloods. It’s simply a fact; there is nothing to be done to change it. Are you going to throw away the chance to have company besides your brother this summer by insulting and avoiding us, or shall we all have fun?”

Thaddeus smiled, and this time, it was genuine, not an attempt to impress or cow her. “I vote for fun.”

“So do I,” Hermione smiled back, and turned to Tom. He gave an irritated shrug. Hermione decided that was as close as she would get to a yes – Tom Riddle didn’t strike her as someone who enjoyed many of the ‘normal’ pursuits of childhood.

Marguerite nodded slowly, and Hermione knew she was weighing options, responses, and outcomes. This girl definitely belonged in Slytherin House. “Fine. I do get bored with Thaddeus so quickly.”

“Hey!” Thaddeus began, but Hermione and Tom were already following Marguerite outside to the extensive gardens.

For the next hour, they took turns on the brooms, and Hermione was indeed grateful that Marguerite’s broom didn’t rise more than six feet off the ground, though it zipped along rather too quickly for Hermione’s taste. Tom, on the other hand, took to Thaddeus’s broom with ease, and Hermione caught more than one begrudging grin from the corner of her eye as he flew by.

Marguerite seemed to warm up to both of them, and she even offered to get out her wizarding chess set after dinner and explain the rules to Tom. Privately, Hermione thought that Marguerite was impressed with Tom’s ability to fly so quickly and easily, and was realizing she had underestimated his magic. Slytherins did love their displays of power. For his part, Tom acted politely, with no more icy stares. Whether that meant he was mollified, or if he was silently plotting revenge, Hermione was unsure.

“Do you play exploding snap?” Thaddeus asked her while the other two were flying. “I’m not really one for chess,” his voice was a bit hesitant, as if admitting that was shameful.
Hermione felt a little sorry for him, sure that if he had been actually been in danger of earning a “T” that he probably had some kind of learning disability or simply a low intellectual ability overall. Pureblood inbreeding did produce some problems like that. His initial arrogance was most likely a defense mechanism, a smokescreen of bravado. “Well, I’m not very good at it,” Hermione admitted. “But I don’t care for wizarding chess either – it’s so violent.”

Thaddeus laughed. “Yeah, that’s why Margie loves it. She likes beating things up, but she’s so small, she can’t do much yet,” his face darkened. “Once she learns a few things at school, she’ll probably hex me every chance she gets.”

Hermione shivered. Even though Thaddeus was the boy who would grow up to be Narcissa’s grandfather, she wondered if perhaps some of Bellatrix’s lovely personality traits hadn’t come from her great aunt Marguerite. She certainly looked like a younger version of Bellatrix. Instinctively, Hermione touched her arm, which was still securely bandaged with enchanted healing wraps. She and Narcissa hadn’t yet come up with a way to heal the words Bellatrix had carved into her flesh.

“How cold?” Thaddeus asked, confused. “It’s quite warm, but if you are chilled, we can go back to the library. There’s a fireplace, and always blankets on the chairs.”

Such chivalry from a Slytherin, and one who knew she was not a pureblood, was a welcome surprise. “No, I’m fine. I just had a brief cold chill,” she paused. “I’m honestly a little afraid of being on flying brooms.”

Thaddeus’s expression went solemn. “If you end up in Slytherin House, don’t tell people things like that. They will use your fears against you.”

“Who uses yours against you?” Hermione asked softly, wondering if he’d actually answer her.

“Antonin Dolohov, mostly,” Thaddeus said. “He’s a year ahead of me. Sometimes the fourth years Hubert Avery and Jack Mulciber. They’re on the Quidditch team, and they like to harass me about how I’ll never be good enough to play.”

“I’m sure they aren’t the experts on Quidditch,” Hermione reassured him. The House head is the person who picks the teams – Slughorn, right?”

“Yes,” Thaddeus glanced down at his shoes, suddenly interested in the laces. “But I still have to get better grades, like Marguerite said.”

Hermione smiled. This was familiar territory. “I’m very good at school work. I was homeschooled until this year, and I would be happy to help you, if I can.”

Thaddeus shook his head, “I don’t think that will happen. You don’t seem like a girl who will end up in Slytherin House. You’re too nice.”

“Hermione will be in Slytherin, I have no doubt,” a cold voice said from behind her. Hermione bit back a sigh. Not this insecurity again.

It was at this moment that a small house elf popped in front of them. It was the first time Tom had seen one, and he couldn’t stop himself from starting just a bit. He had heard the dragon, but this was different – the first magical creature he’d seen. The fact that it could travel instantly between two points meant it must have magic that was at least similar to humans. Though, with its bald head, floppy ears, and Grecian-style toga, it was impossible to know from sight alone whether it was male or female.
“Mistress Rosier is asking Yeza to be bringing the young Masters and Misses into the house now. Dinner is being ready.” The little creature looked nervous, though with eyes so large, Tom wondered if that was how it always appeared.

“Thank you, Yeza,” Hermione smiled at the creature, and Tom had to shake his head. Even though Thaddeus was clearly as dumb as a box of rocks, his earlier statement about Hermione being too nice was true. The girl was polite and kind, even when people didn’t deserve it. Tom firmly believed in giving people what they deserved. Hopefully, Hermione would learn this too.

-oOo0oOo-Seven Weeks Later-oOo0oOo-

“Pass the biscuits, please,” Tom spoke absently, two books, one for reading, the other for reference, open in front of him.

Hermione, who had three books open, one for reading, one for runic translations, and one for reference, handed him one of the jam-filled biscuits he liked best without comment, though they both paused and shared a glance as their fingers met and magic flowed between them.

She smiled at him in such a casually affectionate, matter-of-fact way that Tom returned her smile before he realized what he had done. For others, he felt mostly annoyance, occasionally tolerance, and, very rarely, respect, but Hermione’s presence, and especially her touch, made him feel calm and focused. She had a way of eliciting emotion from him that no one else could, and he wasn’t comfortable putting that on display. In his experience, any shown emotion was a weakness except anger. Anger was power, so long as he was able to make those who angered him suffer. If that was beyond his abilities at the time, then he hid that feeling as well, waiting until the moment to strike presented itself.

He decided then and there to be more careful with his expressions. However, when they were alone like this, the two of them surrounded by books, with too much tea and far too many cakes and biscuits (if Hermione politely asked for a small tea tray, the elves squeaked with teary eyes about the fact she said please and then brought more of a selection than Tom had ever seen, even in the display windows of bakeries), Tom thought it was alright to allow a small smile or two. He needed to keep Hermione happy, after all, and at these times, reading silently, occasionally stopping to discuss something they had found, Tom felt at home. The orphanage was already fading into more of an unpleasant dream than a memory, and after the arrival of their Hogwarts’s letters two weeks ago, he had been determined to prepare himself for the coming school year. Tom Riddle would not be caught off guard or put to a disadvantage.

They had spent every afternoon for the past seven weeks in the Rosier library, during the time when Marguerite had her elf flute lessons, and Thaddeus took his private Quidditch mentoring from a retired professional player. Apparently, Maxwell’s desire to have a son follow in his beater footsteps outweighed Orpha’s concern over grades. Tom was glad for this quiet time – he didn’t like many of the games the Rosiers wanted to play because they were a waste of time. Why in the world would he want to play chess when he could be reading a book about magic? When he could be discussing theory with Hermione?

The more they studied together and talked, the more Tom realized just how brilliant Hermione was. Of course, there was never a doubt that someone whom fate determined was a match for him would be intelligent, but Tom was so used to being disappointed by people’s abilities, Hermione was a revelation. She could read as fast as he could, and he thought she might even have a better memory than he did – she could repeat or quote huge chunks of text or page numbers without looking. When they paused to discuss their readings, she spoke thoughtfully and with insight.
Honestly, other than the fact that she was so nice, she was a perfect compliment to him.

The door opened to the study, but instead of Thaddeus bounding in, followed by a sauntering Marguerite, Narcissa entered. She was dressed in a traveling cloak, a charcoal grey with green trim. When she looked at them, surrounded by tea and books, she laughed.

“You two are the most studious children I have ever met. Go and change, please. Today, we are taking our trip to Diagon Alley for school supplies.”

Tom’s heart beat fast in his chest, but he kept his face neutral. Luckily, Hermione asked the very question he wanted to. “And our wands?”

Narcissa’s smile widened knowingly. “Yes, we will be making a stop at Ollivander’s.”

Hermione made a noise that Tom was not sure he was able to classify – it was somewhere between a laugh and a squeak. Her excitement was so strong, he could feel her magic pouring off her; it hit him like a wave and he felt his facial muscles twitch. This girl was getting more dangerous by the second.

“I’ll go change,” he said shortly, and left quickly.

Narcissa looked at Hermione. “He left in a hurry.”

“I think he feels something when I have a strong emotion, and he doesn’t know what to do, how to react.” Hermione closed the books on the table and neatly stacked them.

“So many changes, even positive ones, so fast – he does need some adjustment time.” Narcissa flicked her wand and returned the books to the shelves.

Hermione added quickly, “He’s excited, though, to get his wand. I can feel it.”

“I’m sure you can,” Narcissa patted her hand.

“How does this work? I’ve looked through this whole library,” Hermione gestured to the room. “There are only vague references to soul mates, and nothing about those with magical word marks.”

Narcissa gave her a rueful smile. “There wouldn’t be. This is a pureblood library. As I told you, very few pureblooded families have access to soul mate magic due to family alliances and matches made when children are very young. Soul mates are meant to find one another, but that doesn’t happen when daughters are shut away and kept from contact with anyone besides family and the intended. In our seventh year, a friend of mine, Janice Mulciber, confessed to me that she was sure a muggleborn Hufflepuff was her soul mate. They didn’t have the marks, but she could feel their connection. Of course, she was already engaged to one of those ghastly Goyle boys, and so she married him, and never saw her Hufflepuff again after she graduated.”

“That’s horrible,” Hermione remembered Gregory Goyle and bile rose in her throat at the thought of being engaged to any of his relatives.

“Yes, though I doubt she would have ever chased after the muggleborn boy – it would have been too much of a leap of faith for her to take,” Narcissa shook her head, remembering the leap she had made, and the uncertainty she now faced. “My point was that you’ll have better luck in Diagon Alley or the Hogwarts library, because pureblood families tend to ignore books on subjects they consider beneath them.”
Hermione chewed on her lip. “I’m afraid there probably won’t be much anywhere.”

“You are likely right. From what I’ve been told, for most people who are lucky enough to find their mates, the bond mostly ensures a happy union, stronger wards on their homes and properties, and, if there are children, extra protections for them.” She paused, adding quietly, “I suspect from the sheer force and power of her final act of magic, that Lily and James Potter were soul mates.”

A memory flashed through her mind, the photo of his parents that Harry had shown her, and she knew Narcissa was right. There was something about them, about the way they had smiled at one another, that was special, and Harry, well, Harry’s life was a miracle. It made sense that soul mate magic had protected the extension of itself in the form of Lily’s child. She made a silent prayer to the universe that Harry was alive and well in the future, and that she would be able to help create a future where he knew his parents, and witnessed their love every day.

She felt Narcissa’s arm go around her shoulder, gently leading her to the door. “We’re doing so well, dear.” Narcissa squeezed her. “Better than I expected, honestly. When you go upstairs, will you tell Tom that he needs to pack his trunk? After Diagon Alley, we’ll be heading directly to Hogwarts. I need to be there a week early to help Madam Selwyn prepare the Hospital Wing, and you two will stay with me in the staff lodgings until school starts next Monday.”

Hermione let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. “That sounds wonderful. Thaddeus is fine, but I’m worried that if Tom spends much more time with Marguerite that she’ll end up having a nasty accident.”

Narcissa sniffed. “Well, the girl is perfectly horrid.”

She’s no worse than Draco in our first year, Hermione thought, but held her tongue. It was somehow sweet that Narcissa was defending Tom. And that thought made Hermione laugh silently. Wanting to defend Tom? How far she’d come in a few months.
Kittens and Snakes and Ribbons, Oh My!

Chapter Summary

The first part of the adventure of a day in Diagon Alley. Everybody is feeling closer, but no one wants to admit it.

Chapter Notes

I just loved writing this chapter - it came so quickly I had to share. Enjoy! Love to all my readers!

Diagon Alley was much busier than usual, with many families shopping for school supplies alongside the normal business traffic. Narcissa was glad that Orpha planned on taking her children the following day, and that she would only be going with Hermione and Tom. Orpha, being born into the Prewett family, was a bit more tolerant than what Narcissa remembered of her own grandmother, Thaddeus’s future wife, who had been born a Crouch. Still, Orpha’s constant tuttings over the problems “poor Hermione and Tom will most likely face being half-blooded,” along with the implication that Narcissa should have married a pureblooded husband, were insufferable.

A master of compartmentalization, Narcissa smiled and nodded, accepting Orpha’s sympathy while contemplating how best to sabotage the woman’s prized unicorn-shaped topiaries. She reminded herself hourly that she would be escaping to Hogwarts soon, with the two children she had claimed. And she truly had claimed them, Hermione more so than Tom, but the charmingly devious future Dark Lord was growing on her despite her knowledge of his potential future. Some times, late at night, alone in bed, Narcissa allowed herself to think of Lucius, and, very rarely, Draco. Those indulgences didn’t last long because they ended in bitter tears, and tears were a weakness she couldn’t allow herself.

When Narcissa thought of Lucius or Draco, she was quick to push those thoughts away, as she knew Hermione pushed away any hint of her friends or family. Hermione was her family now, and the girl made her proud everyday. Without fail, she came to Narcissa’s room every morning and drank the potion for making her behavior better match her physical age, even though Narcissa was fully aware that Hermione worried about how unguarded the potion left her. Early in the morning, and in the evening before bed, when the potion’s effects had faded, Hermione would share her fears about how close she felt to Tom, how easy it was to like him.

“What if my feelings for him, as they grow, make me overlook my morals? My belief in
what is right?” Hermione had asked just last night.

It had become a nightly habit for Narcissa to comb Hermione’s hair after her evening bath, gently whispering spells to help tame the wild curls and prevent them from turning to a frizzy mess while she slept.

Working the comb gently through Hermione’s wet golden brown curls, Narcissa had answered honestly, “People change, as do their morals and beliefs. I am a different person than I was twenty years ago, and it is only reasonable to expect that you will be influenced and changed by such a significant connection as a soul mate.”

“I only hope I can influence him more than he influences me,” Hermione twisted her hands in her lap. “He’s so charismatic, even at such a young age.”

Narcissa carefully braided a thin strand of hair, then unbraided it. “Maybe we just need to make you equally as charismatic.”

“Ha! My default temperament is, as I’ve been repeatedly told, ‘a bossy know-it-all’ – not the sort of girl who draws a crowd. My first year at Hogwarts, it was a few months before I made any friends, and even then, I only ever had a small social circle.”

“Well, this is a new first year, and you have me,” Narcissa held her shoulders in a comforting grip. “And you really don’t need to do much. Tom already finds you fascinating, and that won’t change.”

“I don’t simply want to be pulled along by the tsunami that is Tom Riddle,” Hermione leaned against the woman she was considering a true mother more and more every day.

Narcissa shook her head. “You won’t, Hermione, you are too strong for that. Trust yourself. You were holding your own against a fully-grown Dark Lord who was actively hunting you. You can do this.”

-oOo0oOo-
Now, having taking the potion, Hermione seemed more relaxed and spontaneous, less worried about identifying every possible consequence of every word or action. It had been years since Narcissa had seen a purely joyful child. Draco had been sweet when he was young, but never so unconsciously happy as Hermione was capable of being. Hermione’s happiness was almost a palpable energy, especially when they entered any place with books.

Narcissa allowed herself to embrace her new reality. She was for all intents and purposes, a widow in this time. She was Hermione’s mother, and Tom’s guardian, and she was going to enjoy the yearly tradition of school shopping, as well as do her best to make sure the children enjoyed it as well. A quick trip to Gringott’s last week had confirmed that her first two investments had paid off, and the forged paperwork she had provided to lay claim to what remained of the Bonneau estate had gone through as well. No Bonneaus in line for inheritance would survive the next few months in Grindelwald’s embattled territory, so she didn’t feel bad for taking it in her quest to prevent the rise of another, much more powerful Dark Lord. There was money aplenty, and she intended on showering both children with the best of everything.

From the brief histories of themselves she and Hermione had shared when they had first come back in time, Narcissa knew the girl had been raised in comfort, with two parents who had earned above average incomes. Her family had provided nice things for her, and frequent opportunities for travel and entertainment that many others would not have been able to afford. Still, Hermione had never lived in luxury, and Tom knew nothing of it.

She apparated the children side-along to the main street of Diagon Alley, and took them first to double-check their previous orders at Madame Malkin’s. Since the shop already had everyone’s measurements, it was simple to add a few more things to the list.

Tom eyed a tuxedo-cut dress robe, and Narcissa discreetly murmured, “You’ll get something like that in a few years, for the formal occasions at Hogwarts, and I’m sure you will cut a dashing figure.”

“That will be nice,” he smiled at her in reply, and Narcissa thought that his grin was more genuine than normal. The boy had no trouble smiling at most everyone if it got him what he wanted or projected the proper image, but Narcissa, through the very discreet use of light legilimency, had been happy to determine that he respected her and enjoyed her company, which was practically a rave review as far as Tom Riddle was concerned.

He turned and motioned toward Hermione, who was looking at a large, colorful display of hair bands and ribbons. “I think you might need to buy the whole lot to keep Hermione’s hair in check, Aunt Narcissa.”

In a quieter voice that only Narcissa could hear, he added, “Her curls look like a friendly
version of Medusa’s snakes, don’t they?”

Despite the daily morning and evening spells that Narcissa placed on her daughter’s hair, it was only ever barely contained. And in moments like this one, when the girl was excited and happy, her curls rioted. How telling that Tom would see them as snakes.

“Well, as you are the parslemouth, Tom,” Narcissa replied, failing to keep the laughter out of her voice, “you might have to be the one to pick out the proper ribbons.”

Hermione heard their laughter, and gave them both a playful scowl as they joined her. To Narcissa’s surprise, Tom actually reached out and tugged gently on a stray curl and spoke to it in a hissing whisper.

“What did you say?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide. She had only ever heard Harry use parseltongue in times of danger or distress, and those had been harsh, rasping sounds. The light, playful hiss Tom had made was something completely different.

Tom smirked. “I told your hair to behave.” He hadn’t yet released the curl, and he tugged it again, slightly harder, but still not enough to hurt. He sighed and let go, watching the curl spring back. “Clearly, your hair listens as well as you do.”

“Hey!” Hermione batted at his hand, but Tom side-stepped and pointed at the case.

“She needs the thicker bands for everyday – in the silver, green, black, and amber leathers, as well as some thinner ribbons for braids in those same colors,” his tone was so commanding, he could have been stating preparations for a battle.

Hermione made a face as the shop clerk immediately began pulling out the selections Tom had requested. “I can pick out my own hair accessories, thank you!”

“Darling, Tom has good taste,” Narcissa soothed. “Those are actually very nice colors against your coloring. I would have recommended the same.”

“Fine, but I want the sapphire and the ruby as well, in the hair bands,” Hermione insisted, feeling a bit childish, but wanting to make the point that she would not allow Tom to make all her decisions. “And the white ribbons with the blue diamonds,” she added, feeling like Tom knew
exactly what she was doing, and was amused.

That smirk stayed on his face as they walked to the bookstore. Narcissa was aware of how many stares they attracted. The wizarding world in Britain was small enough that most families knew one another at least by sight, if not by proper introduction, and gossip spread quicker than a doxy infestation. A young, attractive, wealthy widow with two children was enough to cause a stir, but add to that the amazing fact that said widow and the children had helped to save the life of a Hogwarts professor before the school year even began? Everyone in Diagon Alley wanted to meet them.

When Narcissa gave the names of the children in the bookshop, people around her stared. She noticed that this made Hermione uncomfortable, but seemed to feed Tom. With every place they visited, he became more assured, and Narcissa was glad he would be starting the school year with a sense of belonging.

After arranging to have the books sent to her assigned quarters at Hogwarts, she took the children to the magical pet store. Tom’s initial (and very brief) facial expression was distaste, though it smoothed out when he saw the owls. Hermione went over to the cats, and began playing with the kittens.

“Would you like to help me pick the family owl?” Narcissa asked Tom, who hadn’t moved from just inside the entrance.

“The family owl?” Tom echoed, looking slightly perplexed.

Narcissa nodded. “You are a part of our family, Tom.” When he didn’t answer, she added, “Permanently. We are only very distantly related by blood, though that would be enough, but you and Hermione are also bound by magic. If I haven’t made this explicitly clear, let me do so now: You will always have a home with us, Tom. You will never go back to Wool’s. I have arranged my will, in case of any accidents, and you and Hermione would live with the Rosiers until reaching majority. You are provided for, Tom, and more than that, you are wanted.”

He was silent for several seconds, staring at the cages of owls. Finally, he met her gaze with a solemn expression, and said, in a very grave tone, “Thank you, Aunt Narcissa.”

Narcissa was no fool, and Tom was a master manipulator, but she felt that he was sincere, and as a child raised in an often violent home, she could read emotion, or the lack of it, very well. Tom, as much as he was able, was grateful, and he was certainly relieved that he would never go back to that orphanage.
They didn’t elaborate, instead turning the conversation to the qualities of the owls for sale. Narcissa told him what she knew about the various breeds, as far as distance and strength, and as she suspected, Tom was drawn to the larger, more impressive birds.

“I think this one,” Tom pointed at the largest owl in the store, a grey bird with white marks like a bow tie on its neck, a wickedly curved beak, nearly unblinking amber eyes, and talons that looked like they would cut through the thickest bird-handling gloves.

One of the store employees rushed forward, a small woman with eyes almost as wide as the owls she sold. “Ah, strix nebulosa, the great grey owl,” she opened the cage, and the bird flew out, stretching its wings to a span wider than Narcissa had ever seen. The bird came directly to Tom, who had put out his arm. Though the bird’s weight pressed down his forearm, Tom didn’t flinch as the talons gripped him.

“Oh, he likes you,” the woman cooed. “That’s nice. Some of the larger breeds aren’t as friendly.”

Narcissa was impressed, too. Many magical children were a bit frightened their first time handling owls on their own, let alone a child raised in the muggle world. Tom looked impossibly regal, holding the owl like a born prince. She sighed inwardly. He was a prince, the heir of Slytherin, so much more than he currently knew. It would be quite the life’s work to keep him from falling headfirst into the seductive embrace of dark magic.

“So, is he fit to bear the Bonneau and Riddle family post?” Narcissa asked lightly.

Tom nodded, and the owl, clearly well-trained, went back into the cage at the shopkeeper’s motion. “He won’t have to stay caged long, will he?”

The woman shook her head. “No, of course not. As soon as we get him registered to your family, we can send him directly to the Hogwarts owlery if you like.”

“That would be perfect,” Narcissa replied. She gestured to the rest of the store. “Tom, you may pick out your familiar, if you like.”

“Most students choose a cat, toad, or owl, all of which are approved Hogwarts pets,” the woman offered. “Though I understand there is some flexibility for true familiars, as opposed to
“How is the difference defined?” Tom questioned.

The woman’s large eyes blinked a few times as she pondered her answer. “True familiars form a magical bond with their owners, and will protect owners with their lives. It is a difference that is more felt than seen, but it is usually obvious from how well the animal responds to the witch or wizard. The great grey will be an excellent family bird, but I wouldn’t call him a familiar.”

Tom nodded and walked toward the other cages. Narcissa gave the woman her account information and filled out a few forms for registering the bird as a mail carrier. From the corner of her eye, she watched Tom pass the owls, then the toads, heading instinctively toward the rather small selection of reptiles. He stopped in front of a bright green snake with white markings, hanging in curls from a thick branch that crossed the cage.

Her pulse quickened as he leaned his forehead against the glass and the snake immediately unwound itself and raised up along the inside of the glass, as if responding to a snake charmer’s flute. She reminded herself that without the connotation of Voldemort himself as a parseltongue, Tom’s ability, though rare and often connected to darker wizards, wouldn’t be alarming to most people. Dumbledore was a great fool, she thought for not the first time, to judge the child Tom so harshly. Parseltongue could clearly convey amusement and affection because she had seen and heard it this morning in Tom’s teasing of Hermione. All magical talents had the potential for light or dark, and all variations inbetween. Encouraging Tom instead of shaming him was important, Narcissa felt.

“Does your son speak parseltongue?” The shopkeeper had followed Narcissa’s gaze and her eyes were now so large, she resembled a house elf. “How fascinating! It’s such an uncommon talent. He was so good with the owl, too! Why, I’d bet he’d be a natural at gamekeeping!”

Narcissa laughed at the image of Tom in such a career. “I’d highly doubt that,” she murmured. “But, yes, my ward is a parseltongue, and I imagine you can go ahead and add that snake to our account.”

“Anything else, Lady Bonneau?” the shopkeeper asked.

“My daughter still needs to choose something,” Narcissa replied. “I’ll let you know.” She headed over to the section with the cats.
Hermione was petting the kittens, though she was watching Tom. When Narcissa came to stand beside her, Hermione lifted a tiny cat that looked like a cheetah with too-large ears. “It’s a serval,” she smiled. “A wild cat from Africa that’s commonly domesticated.”

“Trust the two of you to pick the most wild animals in the store,” Narcissa responded dryly.

“Is it really alright for Tom to have a snake?” Hermione bit her lip.

Narcissa shrugged gracefully. “It will be fine. If there were more parselmouths, there would be snakes instead of toads. If anyone complains, they can take it up with me.”

One look into Narcissa’s hard brown stare made Hermione glad that she and Narcissa were no longer enemies. She watched as the storekeeper opened the case and lifted the snake out into Tom’s waiting hands. The snake slithered up and around his arm, extending over his shoulders and resting its diamond-shaped head against his chest, the almost neon green contrasting sharply with Tom’s grey and black sweater.

Hermione walked to Tom, holding her kitten. As she approached, his snake perked up its head, tongue darting out at the kitten’s scent. Tom hissed something softly, the sounds much sharper than he had used with her in the morning.

She watched the snake watch the kitten, then looked at Tom. He appeared both relaxed and amused, and she couldn’t help but smile. “I hope you told your snake that my kitten is not dinner.”

He smirked and titled his head down to the snake, hissing. The snake nodded at him, hissing back in what seemed a friendly fashion, as far as one could tell of a snake. “I just told him not to eat the kitty. He agrees, though insists that I offer him something of similar size for his actual dinner this evening.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Then what did you say before?”

“Only that a friend is approaching, and not to be frightened,” Tom said easily, though Hermione had the feeling he was lying.

“Why would he be frightened?” she queried.
Tom raised his eyebrows at her obvious suspicion. “Snakes have a strong startle reflex. It is only courteous to warn whether approaching animals or individuals are friend or foe.”

Now, Herimone’s expression turned to fascination. She couldn’t resist new knowledge. “So, when you talk to them, how does it translate in your head? Surely, with an animal, it can’t be word for word?”

“No, there really aren’t words in the same way that we think of them – I can communicate simple thoughts, but mostly, it’s more of a speaking of feeling,” Tom said, a bit hesitantly, as though he couldn’t believe he were talking about this to another human.

“If you had to translate directly, what would the words be?” Hermione pressed, eager for understanding.

Tom’s brow furrowed in concentration. “It doesn’t really translate. I suppose the closest would be, ‘Not food, protected.’”

“You would protect my kitty?” Hermione’s smile was so wide, her bright white, perfectly straight teeth were on display.

“I didn’t say that,” Tom grumbled, “it would be a wise practice to keep the little fluff ball away from him when we are not present. Instinct is instinct, after all.”

Hermione had a sudden memory of the similar argument she had had with Ron over Scabbers the rat and her half-kneazle. She wished now that Scabbers had been eaten, honestly. It wouldn’t do to be a hypocrite. “I’ll keep her safe at night, if you promise not to let your snake go wandering.”

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Looking at how possessively Hermione clutched the baby cat, Tom knew that letting his snake eat it would be a problem. “My snake will behave, I assure you.”
She seemed satisfied with his answer, at least for the moment. The snake was curled under his chin, and Tom felt content for the first time. Was this a common sort of happiness? Not feeling the need to do anything, simply enjoying being?

He had lied to Hermione about what he had said, because the truth was too dangerous, too revealing. When she had approached with the kitten, his snake had actually been more interested in Hermione than the feline.

“Your magic mate?” the snake had asked.

Tom knew enough of snake ‘words’ to understand that the word ‘mate’ wasn’t the equivalent of ‘wife’ or ‘girlfriend’ in human terms. It implied a deeper connection of absolute trust, a willingness to sacrifice for the other, and anything created by the pair. Tom had no doubt he and Hermione would create great things, even if he had no interest in the messy physical side of human relationships.

“Yes, my magic mate,” Tom had answered, knowing that would protect Hermione forever, and extend any protection the snake would offer him to Hermione as well.

When Hermione asked what he said, he came up with a plausible response. It was one thing to admit to himself how important Hermione was. It was something altogether different to admit that to her. Giving another person that level of power over him was unthinkable. He was glad when she got distracted by the idea of parseltongue as a language, and the mechanics of translating it.

He racked his brain to give her some kind of approximation, and was again pleased by how intelligent she was. They spent the next fifteen minutes discussing parseltongue, while his snake patiently put up with the kitten’s attempt to alternately bat at, lick, and nurse from him.

Narcissa interrupted them long enough to provide small cages for transporting the two animals, and though Tom would have preferred to keep the snake draped over his shoulders, he whispered soothingly that he would be out soon, as well as provided an excellent meal the approximate size of a kitten (though explicitly not Hermione’s kitten).

They walked down the cobbled streets toward yet another shop, and Tom thought about what was left on their lists. Could it be time for the wands? Narcissa stopped, and he read the sign above the mullioned window with satisfaction: Ollivander’s. At last.
It Isn't Easy Getting Chosen By a Wand

Chapter Summary

Part two of Diagon Alley day - it's about time our two kids got some wands. But nothing is simple when Hermione carries the weight of future knowledge.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I couldn't wait to get this up. I've taken liberties with what types of wood and cores Ollivander uses, but it suits my nefarious designs, so.... I hope everyone enjoys reading it as much as I enjoy writing it. Next chapter will finally put our beloved pair at Hogwarts! Love to all the readers. You are awesome.

Stepping into the airy store lined from floor to ceiling with many shelves stacked with thousands of slender boxes, Tom was struck by two things. One, magic was practically alive in this store, and, two, Hermione was suddenly either very upset or nervous or both. Beside him, her magic had dampened and wilted, as though doused with cold water.

He looked around for an obvious cause. An affront to Hermione was an affront to himself at this point, but there was nothing he could detect. There were other customers, trying out wands at the long counter that ran the width of the store, with a man of about forty or so whose brown hair, already liberally streaked with grey, puffed out around his head in a rather wild fashion. He had muttonchops to match, and though his clothing was well-tailored and clean, he gave the overall impression of the sort of mad scientist drawn on movie house posters.

The man came from behind the counter as they entered. As he came closer, Tom felt the man’s magic. Like Hermione, this man exuded magical excitement, though his magic was sharper, and a touch darker. Tom knew instantly this man was very personable, very clever, and very secretive. He recognized those qualities easily in others.

He bowed to Narcissa. “Lady Bonneau, I am so pleased to have you in Ollivander’s,” his hand gestured to the wide room. “I’ve recently replaced Professor Kettleburn’s wand for the third time, and he told me of the great service you and your children did him. I’m honored to help your children find their wands.”

Narcissa nodded graciously, her posture and movements aristocratic without effort. Tom liked her more every day. After her recent statements in the pet shop, he was ready to let down his guard.
somewhat with her. He trusted she meant what she had said, and the thought that she had gone to
the trouble to provide for him in her will was satisfying. She valued him as an addition to her
family, accepted him without reservation as the match for her daughter.

Tom, like all orphans, had imagined what having a family would be like, but those thoughts had
mostly been of curiosity, not a true desire to have a group of people coddle and fuss over him. That
idea was actually repugnant. What Tom truly desired was to have the best of things, and he knew
Narcissa was the best of mother figures he could have. She was his now, too – a beautiful,
intelligent, and powerful woman to be the head of his family until he was old enough to claim that
spot for himself. His family – it was an odd thought, but it had taken root in his mind, and he
simply couldn’t stop himself from accepting it as the new state of things. After all, didn’t he
deserve a family that was worthy of him?

“Mr. Ollivander, this is my daughter, Hermione, and my ward, Tom Riddle, who is our cousin
through his late mother, Meriope Gaunt.” Narcissa replied politely. “They are both starting
Hogwarts in the next week, and long to choose their wands.”

“Ah, Lady Bonneau, but it is the wand that chooses the wizard or witch,” Mr. Ollivander corrected
gently.

Tom had not missed how the man’s eyes had widened when Narcissa identified him as a Gaunt. He
had learned more about his mother’s relatives while staying with the Rosiers, and knew he was
only one of three Gaunts remaining. The Rosiers had many books of pureblood family genealogies,
and he had been gratified to learn just how old and prestigious the House of Gaunt had been,
though it had suffered in the last few centuries from the exact attitudes Hermione had told him of –
too much intermarriage with close relatives, children born with little or no magical abilities, as well
as outright madness. Hermione had helped him find old copies of the wizarding newspaper the
Rosiers had stored in their library. Even though her face had been tense, as though she were afraid
of his reaction, she had handed him the stories of his uncle and grandfather’s imprisonment for
attacking a muggle and assaulting a Ministry of Magic official, respectively.

His relatives’ appearance was repulsive – they were ragged and filthy, unkempt, as well as simply
ugly, with twisted features, matted hair, and sallow complexions. Even had they been clean, well-
dressed, and smiling, Tom doubted the men would be a welcome sight to anyone. The family’s
obviously limited means, combined with their stupidly aggressive nature, made Tom glad he had
never met them. They weren’t worthy of being his family, of being connected with him. It was
probably a blessing his mother had married a muggle, or Tom might have been more like his Uncle
Morfin or Grandfather Marvolo, which was a horrific thought.

When he had said as much to Hermione, her eyes had sparkled so brightly he thought she might
have been holding back tears, which would have been ridiculous. She had touched his arm,
removed the newspaper from his grip, and said, “You are the only person who can define who you
are, Tom.”

Her hand, small and white on his arm, and her voice, full of emotion on his behalf, pleased him though he needed no reassurance. “I know that,” he had answered, “I am not ashamed of anything, nor will anyone make me feel that way, especially not inbred, insane pureblooded fanatics who are stupid enough to land themselves in prison.”

Hermione had shaken her head. “Not all purebloods are like that,” she’d argued. “My mother is not, and there are other families who are more tolerant and open. The Gaunts are simply a very extreme example.”

“Those who wish to judge us will find themselves corrected,” Tom had answered, finishing the conversation as he had thrown the page with the pictures of his relatives in the fireplace.

They had not spoken of the Gaunts again, nor had he asked any questions about his muggle father. Given what he had seen, he suspected his charm and attractive features came from that side, but he had no need of a father now, especially not when he was beginning a new life, in a magical world. A muggle father (if the man were even alive) might protest, or expect him to live in the mundane world. Leaving behind all the wonders he had seen was unthinkable, so he crushed any random thoughts of the Riddle side of his heritage. The name was agreeable enough, and he would keep it, but he had no desire to seek out any additional information. That chapter of his life was done forever.

“Now,” Mr. Ollivander’s voice brought Tom out of his thoughts. The man had extended his hand toward the children. “Who shall go first?

Once again, Tom felt a disturbing fluctuation in Hermione’s magic. When she was standing so close to him, their shoulders almost touching, her magic was always at edge of his awareness. Mostly, the sensation was calm and peaceful, though occasionally, as it had been most of the day, excited and playful. Since coming into the shop, it had contracted, drawn in on itself. Tom did not like the loss – the retreat of her magic left him feeling empty, like on the mornings when the oatmeal at Wool’s had been thinner than usual, barely lining his stomach. He felt his anger flare. He wanted to know why this was happening, and he wanted it fixed. Now.

Before he could turn to Hermione to question her, she had answered Mr. Ollivander. “I will,” she said, her voice calm, even though Tom knew she was far from calm inside.
He followed her closely. Was she frightened? If so, of what? It didn’t seem to be the man, even despite his eccentric appearance. Glancing discreetly at Narcissa, Tom noted that she was tense as well. He could sense her subtle magic at a low level, and it was vibrating nervously. Had Hermione had a previous bad experience with handling a wand? She had seemed happy earlier in the day, even asking about the wand store.

Mr. Ollivander had gone back to his position behind the tall counter, and Hermione stepped up on a small platform that put her at a better height. It was wide enough for two, and Tom didn’t think twice about stepping up beside her, keeping the distance between their bodies narrow. He was going to figure out what was going on. Hermione should not be keeping anything from him. If she was worried, she should tell him. And if she was scared, she should definitely tell him. He could barely stand the withdrawal of her magic.

Narcissa had come to stand on her other side, as if offering support, and Tom was further puzzled and angered. Hadn’t she said he was a part of this family? Why weren’t they telling him everything? Even the salesman could see something was amiss, because he raised his eyebrows at Tom and Narcissa.

“Lady Bonneau, Mr. Riddle,” he began, taking a long, narrow black box off the shelf behind him. “You may want to give Miss Bonneau a bit of room. Searching for the right wand can be a delicate process – mismatch of witch with wand can let off quite impressive accidental magic. Only a few days ago, a young Weasley set fire to my curtains,” he added dryly, gesturing to faint singe marks on the wall around the curtain-less window frame.

Something in that statement made Hermione giggle and relax a bit, but Tom was not sure what. Narcissa went a few steps back, and Tom grudgingly moved a few inches. He wasn’t leaving that platform, though.

Reading his clients like any good salesman, Ollivander shrugged and opened the box. Inside, nesting in black velvet, was a light, faintly reddish brown colored wand, a bit stubby, with a thick handle. Tom found it rather ugly, and from the slight frown on Hermione’s face, he gathered she did, too.

“Just a starting place,” Ollivander murmured reassuringly. “This wand is pine, with a kelpie hair core, an older wand, made by my father. It is a good wand for giving me an idea of your magical strength.”

Hermione’s magic was pulsing wildly as she reached out and closed her hand around the wand. She gave it a very gentle wave, and the box Ollivander had been holding flew out of his hand and hit the high ceiling, almost hitting the man in the head as it fell back down.
Ollivander smiled knowingly. “Yes, I thought you would be too powerful for that by far,” he said, using his own wand to bring the box back up to the counter. “You need a wood that is very strong – your magic channels forcefully.”

He walked up and down the shelves for a few moments, pulling boxes until he had a pile of about six. Laying them on the counter neatly, he opened the top one. This time, the wood was dark, almost black, on a red velvet lining. The wand was much thinner, but still looked more substantial than the first.

Hermione’s magic flared out instantly, the box with the wand shooting away like a bullet, so far that it was lost in the darkness of the shelves behind the wandmaker. Tom had to keep from gasping for breath. He could feel Hermione’s magic again, with ferocity. She was both angry and in pain. What was happening? His magic rushed out, wrapping around her. He couldn’t control or stop it – the magic itself wanted to comfort her.

“How about not walnut,” Hermione barely managed to speak, her voice low and strained. Her head leaned against his shoulder and Tom let it rest there, unconscious that he was making a loud hissing sound until it had already escaped his lips.

“No one will hurt you,” he repeated in English. Hermione’s head remained on his shoulder, her magic shivering.

Ollivander stared openly. Hermione had performed magic without touching the wand at all, powerful magic at that, Tom was speaking Parseltongue, and their combined magic was filling the air with a smell like a thunderstorm.

Narcissa’s calm voice sounded from behind them, getting softer as she came to stand near Hermione again. “Mr. Ollivander, I am sure you are aware that I was recently widowed. Lord Bonneau was murdered by one of Grindelwald’s followers, and that man had a black walnut wand. I believe my daughter would appreciate it if you didn’t show her any wands of that type.”

“Of course, Lady Bonneau,” Ollivander’s face brightened in understanding. “My apologies, Miss Bonneau.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Hermione replied, her voice sounding more like its normal tone. She straightened her head, but stayed pressed against Tom’s side. “That was a rather overwrought reaction.”
“It was instinctual, my dear,” Narcissa rubbed Hermione’s back lightly. “Getting one’s own wand is a momentous occasion. I know your father would have wanted to be here. All is well. Simply be yourself, and the right wand will come to you.”

“Excellent advice,” the wandmaker smiled, and opened a third box. “This is an apple wood, nine and one-half inches, with a core of unicorn hair.”

Hermione lifted it cautiously, giving it a small twirl in her fingers. The box it came in levitated evenly, and Tom was delighted as Hermione’s magic seemed to stabilize, flooding back to mingle at its edges with his own magic. He was a bit annoyed she hadn’t shared her concern over choosing a wand without her father or the fear of a particular type of wand – did she think he wouldn’t understand her fear or pain because he didn’t remember his parents? However, Tom’s anger had mostly evaporated, soothed by the return of their magical equilibrium and replaced by the pleasure of watching magic, as well as the prospect of trying his own wand soon. He would simply need to have a talk with her later about keeping secrets.

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Hermione had been terrified as soon as she had entered Ollivander’s, and she knew that both Tom and Narcissa were aware of this as well. As much as she wanted a wand again, she was afraid of what choosing a wand might reveal. Wands sat in Ollivander’s store for decades sometimes after being made. They waited for the right owner patiently. Having fought in many skirmishes, Hermione had ‘mastered’ several wands, and her own wand had been taken from her before they left. Even if her wand existed in 1938, which was doubtful, would it still want her? Would its magic somehow know she had failed to keep it? And what of Harry’s wand? If it was here, having been made with the twin core of Voldemort’s wand, which was certainly here, would the holly wand, choose her because of the piece of Voldemort from the locket that was most likely attached to her now? And if she failed to change future events as far as Harry was concerned, would the lack of that wand kill him? All these possibilities were giving her a headache and making her dread what should have been a wonderful moment.

She could feel Tom’s growing annoyance, the angry tingle of his magic reaching out for hers, and she tried to get her emotions under control. An upset Tom Riddle would do nothing to help the situation. She took the first wand, which was ridiculously weak, and was relieved when Ollivander seemed to understand she needed something more substantial.

But then, to her absolute horror, he had brought her the very wand that had tortured her. It had only taken a split-second for her to recognize the future wand of Bellatrix Lestrange nestled, fittingly, in blood red velvet. Did the wand recognize the lingering touch of Bellatrix’s magic in the wounds on her arm? Pain and anger had flooded her. With no consciousness of what she was doing,
Hermione’s magic had swiftly and aggressively thrown the wand as far away as possible.

Incredibly, Tom’s magic had surged toward her, enfolding her in a buzzing cocoon, as if protecting her from harm. She doubted he was aware of what he was doing, but it was a lovely gesture, and she put her head on his shoulder, grateful for the support. She felt a bit sick and dizzy. Hermione was further shocked when Tom spoke to her in Parseltongue, a soothing hiss which he translated quickly. No one will hurt you, he’d said. She wanted to cry at the irony that the woman who had so damaged her had been Tom’s future mistress and most avid follower. That the future version of Tom had most certainly wanted to hurt her – to kill her. She forced herself to take deep breaths, to focus on the present, not the past that was actually the future.

While she was still attempting to recover, Narcissa, who also recognized her sister’s wand, stepped in with an utterly believable lie, and, in that moment, with Narcissa’s strong, cool hand rubbing gentle circles on her back, Hermione knew she loved her. Narcissa loved her. Narcissa would protect her, and the feeling was absolutely mutual.

Her calm had returned, she had performed adequate magic with the next wand, and Tom had relaxed as well. Hermione sighed inwardly in relief. No matter what happened, she and Narcissa would deal with it, and they would do just about anything to keep Tom from becoming the monster he had been in future.

“I don’t think this is the one,” Hermione said politely, handing the apple wand back.

“No,” Ollivander agreed. He shuffled the boxes and frowned. “I have a few wands that I’ve only made very recently, from a shipment of rare cores I received. I’ve just started using phoenix feathers as cores, as well as a few exotic specimens from around the world. I made some test case wands with these different cores. They are a bit temperamental, but they are powerful.”

His cool, intelligent gaze focused on Hermione, then Tom. “Forgive me for asking, but are you children magically linked? Soul mates, perhaps?”

Narcissa cleared her throat in what sounded like reproof. “Mr. Ollivander, that is a rather personal question, and I’m not sure,”

“Forgive me,” the man repeated, even though he continued. “It is simply that my work requires me to be very sensitive to magical signatures and attachments, and these two,” he pointed to Tom and Hermione, “are more magically in-tune than twins.”
At Narcissa’s annoyed look, he hastily continued. “If they are magically linked soul mates, they would be best served by complimentary wands – yin and yang, if you will. Perhaps they should test the wands at the same time.”

“Yes,” Tom replied firmly. He clearly wanted to take charge, Hermione thought. He’d been thrown off by her emotions and needed to be in control of something. She felt Narcissa nudging gently in her mind, planting words there with careful legilmency. *Be calm, darling. Tom’s wand will most likely be the yew wand. You mustn’t react badly.*

She nodded slightly to let Narcissa know she’d heard. “That’s fine,” Hermione added out loud to Ollivander.

“Lady Bonneau?” Ollivander questioned, seeking her approval.

Narcissa caught the wandmaker in a firm gaze. “I am trusting your discretion, Mr. Ollivander, to protect my family’s privacy. We both know how rare soul mate pairings are, let alone ones this early in life and so strong, and my daughter and ward do not need to be the subject of gossip or unwanted attention and questions concerning their magical connection. That is a private matter.”

Ollivander nodded solemnly. “Of course, Lady Bonneau. I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Allright,” she waved a hand toward him in acquiescence. The man disappeared into the shelves again.

Narcissa looked at the two children. They were standing so closely together, she doubted she could have slipped a piece of parchment between them. When they were in the same room, they gravitated toward one another like magnets. She didn’t think they even realized how close they were. As Ollivander had mentioned, they reminded one of twins, though two more different children it would be impossible to find.

Hermione was almost certain Ollivander was fetching the yew wand. A phoenix core was a newer type, and still uncommon in her time. But what were the other cores? She longed for her vine wand, its reassuring weight in her hand. Would she be able to perform magic as well without it?

“Here we are,” Ollivander was holding only two boxes. Both were rather long. He placed one in front of each of the children. “Try these.”
Tom opened his box with no hesitation. Hermione closed her eyes briefly at the sight of the long, pale wand, with the handle carved to jut out over the thumb like a sharp thorn or bird beak. When she looked again, he was holding it, and his face was so satisfied, so aglow, that Hermione felt bad. She was doing it again, judging him for things he hadn’t done. Right now, he was where she had been at the age of ten, thrilled at belonging to such a wonderful world, delighted to be experiencing magic, to be making magic happen.

He deftly swished the wand and with no verbal command, Hermione’s box rose, the lid lifted, and the wand inside floated to her hand. The wand wood was also quite pale, though a few shades darker than Tom’s wand, with a hint of gold to it. It was carved in a spiral fashion, gradually narrowing to a fine tip. It was not particularly flexible, but Hermione could feel the strength of its magic coursing up her arm, racing to join her own. It was her wand, she knew without a doubt as soon as it touched her fingers.

She turned to Tom, and with a subtle wave of her new wand, vanished the wand box altogether. Tom smiled at her more broadly than he ever had, twirling the yew wand between the fingers of his other hand thoughtfully before making a semi-circular motion that caused all the lights to flicker at a rapid pace, moving across their faces as if they were under a mirror ball.

Hermione had never faced Voldemort directly. She had second-hand reports aplenty, and she knew he was brilliant. Now, though, standing toe to toe with Tom as he held a wand for the first time, feeling their magic, now amplified and intensified by the use of wands, Hermione was speechless. She was also euphoric. Their magic was buzzing and flowing and swirling, and she thought they just might float away. It took her a second to realize that Tom was happy – truly, properly, happy – maybe for the first time ever. She returned his smile and added to it with laughter.

“My goodness,” Ollivander stared at them, close to speechlessness himself as the lights finally stopped flashing.

“What are the particulars of the wands?” Hermione asked, forcing the wandmaker to concentrate on something other than the amazingly precocious performance he’d just witnessed.

“Oh, yes,” he smiled, though he still looked a bit dazzled. “Mr. Riddle’s is yew wood – a powerful wand wood associated with both mystery and leadership, victory and longevity. The core is a phoenix feather, which is a strong, fiery magic that also has healing and regenerative properties.”

He saw Tom watching him, and added, “These are magical properties of the wood and cores by themselves – these can intensify or change when made into a wand, and the magic of the wand’s master influences the wand as well. Both wand and master learn from and adapt to one another.”
“And Hermione’s wand?” Tom asked, his voice pleased and relaxed.

“Ah, Miss Bonneau’s wand is made of rowan wood, which also has properties of power and mystery, as well as vision, balance, protection, and transformation. The core is a hair from the tail of a sphinx, recently collected by a friend of mine who traveled to Egypt,” Ollivander said. “It was very tricky to work with. The sphinx magic should have an affinity for logical, ordered magic, but also enormous potential for sheer power.”

He looked first at Tom, “Your wand is fire and action,” then to Hermione, “Yours is air and logic. They will suit you both individually, but also compliment you when you do magic together.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ollivander,” Narcissa took Hermione’s arm and motioned to Tom. “Come, children, it has been a long day of shopping and we need to get ourselves and your pets settled in at Hogwarts before it’s too late.”

“A pleasure to help you, Lady Bonneau,” the salesman responded. “Remember, Mr. Riddle and Miss Bonneau, that you mustn’t use the wands outside of Hogwarts grounds until you are of age.”

Hermione saw Tom’s mouth twist in displeasure, though it didn’t stay that way long. She had a feeling that now Tom had experienced the power of magic channeled through a wand that few restrictions would keep him from practicing it.
Both Tom and Narcissa Get a Little Weak in the Knees

Chapter Summary

Tom and Hermione explore Hogwarts the week before school starts. Hermione makes a confession. Narcissa has her mind blown.

Chapter Notes

In additional research, I realized that I started the kids too young. The first year should start at age 11, turning 12 during the school year (or over the next summer). Hermione's bday is in September, which would make her 12 almost as soon as school starts, and Tom's is on New Year's Eve, which would make him a couple of months 'younger' than Hermione. I've changed the ages in this chapter to make them both currently 11, and I will go back and fix previous chapters when I have a spare moment.

We meet Narcissa's lady love in this chapter, but nothing that earns that 'E' rating yet. This chapter is longer than usual, and I still haven't quite gotten to the beginning of the school year proper...but I'm sooo close, I swear. Love to all the readers!

**A reader pointed out that blast-ended skrewts are actually a hybrid breed created by Hagrid, so they wouldn't have actually existed in 1938** (I clearly have messed with that timeline, and I apologize....but not enough to change it :)

That evening, Tom sat with Hermione in the small parlor of Narcissa’s staff rooms, practicing spells listed in their first year textbooks. They floated small objects, produced lights at the ends of their wands, and repaired torn pieces of parchment. Their familiars were out, the snake wrapped comfortably around Tom, its tail touching Hermione’s side, where the kitten in her lap gently batted at it.

After unpacking their things, Narcissa had told them to explore, and they had headed immediately to the library. The current Hogwarts librarian, Miss Brannan, was about five hundred times more personable than Ms. Pince, and she had allowed the two early students to browse in the stacks for a few hours before shooing them to dinner. After a bit of research, Tom and Hermione had both chosen names for their animals. Since the cat’s natural habitat was from central Africa, Hermione had settled on Khethiwe, which was Zulu for ‘the one who is chosen.’ Tom unsurprisingly picked a name he thought was fearsome for his emerald green boa – Damballa, the name of a Voodoo snake god who was considered a primordial creator of all life.

The next few days passed quickly, even without much of a schedule. Narcissa spent most of her time in the Hospital Wing, helping Madam Selwyn with restocking the potions and preparing common antidotes and medicines for student ailments. Sometimes, Tom and Hermione would
assist Professor Beery in small tasks in the greenhouses. Hermione was pleasantly surprised that Tom didn’t mind the work. She wouldn’t have thought he would have a green thumb, but Tom seemed to want to try everything, and go everywhere.

Hermione remembered the work it had been to keep Harry and Ron from roaming in restricted areas, but Tom was actually worse. He was so confident, and seemingly fearless, determined to be master of this new domain. In the mornings, they explored, traipsing up and down floating staircases, finding all the ghosts and poltergeists, even looking down the third floor corridor, which had been strictly off-limits in her time, and which appeared to be a humid hibernation area for some kind of pulsating seedpods that Hermione later discovered after a study session in the library’s herbology section would eventually erupt into extremely large carnivorous plants with flesh-eating secretions.

In the afternoons, they would walk the grounds, skirting the edges of the Forbidden Forest, wading up to their knees in the lake, and going over the lawns. One day, they sat in the empty stands overlooking the Quidditch pitch, and Hermione gave a brief, incredibly bad description of the game. The first day, it had taken every bit of Hermione’s considerable mental ability to remember to act surprised at every ‘new’ sight. However, by the second day, Tom’s enthusiasm had her experiencing the familiarity of Hogwarts with fresh eyes. Honestly, he was so like her in some ways. He wanted to go to the library, wanted to know the reasons for things. Tom would never call her a bookworm or a know-it-all. She began to dare to hope that this school year would be different than her first one in 1991, that she might indeed have more friends and less ridicule.

Two days before the school year, they sat in a patch of daisies near the south lawn, trying to turn the petals on the white flowers another color. When Hermione had suggested the exercise, she had expected Tom to scoff. Once again, he had proved her wrong to judge. Tom seemed very interested, especially when she informed him that the spell was advanced for a first year, but a type of foundation for more complicated transfiguration. They worked side-by-side among the flowers, first only managing to send the flowers flying across the field, but then, gradually producing pale shades, and finally progressing to brilliant jewel tones.

With her excellent memory, it was not hard to recall how she had originally learned performed this spell, the fits and starts she had experienced. She duplicated those actions, though holding her magic back was not as simple as remembering her previous actions. It was not in Hermione’s nature to deliberately do something incorrectly or at less than her capabilities. When she had first held her new wand, Hermione had felt better, like a real witch again, but that evening, when she and Narcissa had discussed the need for her to restrain and disguise the limits of her magical abilities, her frustration had returned. It required more focus than normal to under-perform.

Tom floated a daisy that had been turned crimson to the growing pile in front of them, and Hermione placed a canary yellow one on top of it. Suddenly, something slimy, enormous, and on fire came charging directly at them, and she threw up her wand, yelling, “Protego!”
What she could now see was a fully-grown blast-ended skrewt bounced off her magical barrier, dazed, and began crawl-running in the opposite direction. A man with wild rust colored hair, the very pink skin of a recovering burn victim, as well as a prosthetic hand and lower leg, rushed to them.

“Miss Bonneau and Mr. Riddle, I presume?” He spoke rapidly, not waiting for an answer. “Excellent shield charm, Miss Bonneau, first-rate. I’d love to stay and tell you kids how grateful I am, but that skrewt won’t catch itself! I need it for Monday’s third-year class.”

He began to run, rather quickly for a man with a fake leg, but stopped after only a few paces. He turned back to Hermione and Tom. “No need to mention this to the Headmaster – he can’t put me on double probation, after all.” He winked, his bloodshot black eye missing its lashes, and took off again.

“That man is a hazard to himself and everyone else,” Tom said absently after a few seconds of watching Professor Kettleburn attempt to herd the skrewt toward the lake.

“What was that spell? Something about protection?” He was focused on her again, intently. “It was very powerful.”

Hermione flushed unhappily, searching for a plausible excuse for her knowledge. “My mother and father taught me a few things, to be used in emergencies only, since things were getting so bad in France.”

Tom nodded. “I know that must have been,” he searched for the right word, “frightening.”

She thought of the battle at the Ministry, the Astronomy Tower, and Bill and Fleur's wedding, of racing through the woods being chased by snatchers, of lying on the floor of Malfoy Manor, screaming and bleeding. It was no act to reply, “I spent most of my time terrified.”

“In London, there was constant talk of Hitler,” Tom said quietly. “Many people think England will go to war soon with Germany and Italy. I thought the magical world was outside of that, but it seems you have a similar figure terrorizing Europe.”

“Grindelwald has some similarities to Hitler, I suppose,” she admitted. “But no matter what war, muggle or magical, wages outside, we are safe at Hogwarts.”
“Do you truly think so?” Tom gave her a critical look. “That seems incredibly optimistic, especially given your family’s circumstances, Hermione.”

“Mother and I came here precisely because it is so safe. And though Grindelwald has many followers, they are still greatly outnumbered.”

Tom picked another daisy, pointed his wand at it, and it instantly turned a deep green. “Will you teach me the protection spell?”

There was no emotion in his voice, no obvious concern, nor greed for knowledge, but Hermione could feel a shift in his magic, a tension that she hadn’t felt before, even when the skrewt was rushing toward them. Tom would never admit to fear, and she wasn’t about to press the issue, but Hermione was positive that was why he wanted to know, and she didn’t see how she could refuse him. It wasn’t remotely dark magic, and not terribly advanced, especially for someone like Tom.

“Yes, I’ll show you, though you’ll need to have something to block to know whether or not your shield is effective, so I’ll have to throw a mild jinx your way.” Hermione hid a grin. She was about to jinx Tom Riddle, and she couldn’t lie – she was a bit thrilled.

Tom raised an eyebrow. “A mild jinx? I don’t suppose your parents taught you that. Have you spent every waking hour since you could read learning spells for future use?”

Hermione did smile at that. “Stand and face me,” she instructed. “I’m going to use a jelly-legs jinx – if it hits you, it will make your legs go limp and you’ll fall down. I haven’t tried it out before, so if it works, it will be fairly weak and fade quickly. When I cast, you will try to perform the shield spell in time to stop my spell from connecting with you. This is actually like a duel, but we aren’t being formal.”

“A duel? We haven’t used those since the 1800s,” Tom shook his head. “For having magic, wizards can be rather old-fashioned.”

“True,” Hermione said. “It’s even customary to bow to your opponent.”

Tom immediately gave her an exaggerated bow, and she laughed. She showed him the wand motion and repeated the proper pronunciation. Then, they both cleared their expressions, staring silently at one another for a few seconds before Hermione quickly struck, raising her wand and yelling the spell simultaneously. He raised his wand and performed the spell perfectly, but a
fraction too late. His legs wobbled under him. Annoyed, he copied her spell, sending the jinx back her way, but her shield was up instantly.

“Give it a minute, and we’ll try again,” Hermione offered, knowing he wouldn’t be satisfied until he could block her spells. She was moving at less than half her average casting speed, and only a quarter of her force, but she was still impressed. Tom had owned a wand for less than a week, and he was performing spells accurately and forcefully and far beyond the normal capabilities for his age.

Tom was hit three more times before he successfully blocked her. It was a good thing he got faster, she thought, because he was looking rather angry by the final attempt. His *protego* was solid and strong, and she was happy to put an end to the dueling. Tom would be formidable very soon, she knew. He wouldn’t stop until he could perform at a level he found acceptable.

Hermione gathered the flowers, and watched Tom throw a jelly-legs jinx at a daisy stalk, which immediately fell sideways. “Feeling better?” she asked.

He didn’t quite scowl at her, but it was close. “I don’t like feeling at a disadvantage,” he finally said, his voice low.

She knew exactly how it important it was that Tom was admitting this to her, and she thought carefully about her response. “You aren’t at a disadvantage, Tom. How could you be? You are incredibly intelligent. The magic you have is the strongest I’ve ever felt – and I don’t believe that’s because we’re soul mates. In the past few weeks, you’ve mostly seen magic performed by adults, and you can’t compare yourself to them. There’s a reason why school lasts seven years – magic, for all the people seem to be born with it, is not easy to focus or control.”

“You know more than I do,” Tom accused. “How is that not a disadvantage?”

“Because knowledge alone won’t help you. Someone can know the words and wand movements of a spell and still struggle with casting it,” Hermione answered. “And I will share my knowledge with you, Tom.”

He looked up at her, his blue eyes staring at her intently. “Will you?”

“Of course,” Hermione nodded, standing with the handful of colorful flowers.
Tom came closer, put his hand over hers, crushing a few of the daisies. “You promise? Do you swear that you will never lie to me or keep things from me?”

Sensing abandonment issues several miles wide, as well as many potential danger zones, Hermione nodded again. “Tom, we are soul mates. Our magic is bound. What good would it serve me to try to be separate from you?”

“You didn’t tell me you were scared about choosing a wand,” he insisted, his hand warm on hers. “And I know there is more to the story about the walnut wand.”

Hermione’s heart raced, and she wondered if he could feel her pulse through her fingers. Why did he have to be so clever? His brilliance forced her to lie to him even more.

“Was your father murdered in front of you? Your mother said he died in a battle near Nurmengard. What is the truth? What are you keeping secret?” Tom looked into her eyes, ready to catch any mis-step.

She was being tested, Hermione knew, and much sooner than she had accounted for. Her careful story with Narcissa had been thrown off by the unexpected offer of Bellatrix’s wand and Hermione’s loaded reaction to it. If Tom was this observant and suspicious at eleven, things would only become more complicated. The real eleven year old version of Hermione might have panicked at this moment, because, back then she truly had relied upon book knowledge, but she wasn’t that girl anymore. She wasn’t afraid to think on her feet and adapt her plans to fit the situation. The future of the magical world, maybe the whole world, depended on her, and she wouldn’t let it down.

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Tom’s anger was growing by the second. He was annoyed about the jinx, frustrated it had taken him a while to match her speed, but that wasn’t the true problem. Hermione had a head start in magical studies, but he had not a single doubt he would catch up quickly. What truly bothered him was what she wasn’t saying. As her soul mate, Tom deserved to know her fears and weaknesses; they might affect him, too. And, it was only fair. Hermione had seen him in Wool’s, wearing disgusting hand-me-downs, alone and unwanted. She should share what she was hiding.

With his hand around her wrist, he could feel her magic and her quick pulse. She was scared, nervous, but she looked directly into his eyes. “Well?” he asked, impatient.
“I’ll need my hand,” she replied, no tremor in her voice. He released her and she set down the flowers and gave him her wand.

He took it silently, feeling its magic, which was very different from his own. Hermione unbuttoned the cuff of her shirt. What was she doing?

“T’m going to show you something,” she said. “Something I have not shown anyone except my mother.”

From the placement, he wondered briefly if he would see her magical words – *his words*, but then discarded the thought. She wouldn’t be upset over his words, and she was very upset.

“At after my father died, but before we left France, there was an attack on the village near our home. Mother and I were in town that day, making preparations to leave, and when Grindelwald’s followers arrived, it was chaos,” she was slowly rolling up her sleeve, revealing a wide bandage wrapped around her forearm.

“I was separated from my mother as people dueled in the streets, and I went down an alley to try to find a place to hide. One of Grindelwald’s followers saw me, and came after me. He had seen me with my mother right before the attack, and he knew my father had been a half-blood, and had fought against Grindelwald. The man said I didn’t deserve magic, that I had dirty blood, because of my father, and he did this.”

She had unwound the bandage, and Tom looked down. The pale, soft skin of her inner arm was almost completely covered by raised, angry cuts that spelled out ‘mudblood’ in jagged, uneven letters.

Tom had probably been angry at least three times a day for as long as he could recall. His anger came easily, and it was warming feeling, a comforting prelude to his plans for revenge on whomever had dared to cross him. Seeing the word on Hermione’s arm was a different feeling entirely. He gripped their wands tightly, both in one hand, to keep from roaring in anger. His magic was rising in him, and he couldn’t stop it.

There was a loud sound, like a cannon, and suddenly, they were surrounded by a cloud of white. It took Tom a few seconds to realize that he’d somehow blasted magic at the daisies, and the petals were falling around them in a silent storm.
“I’m not ashamed,” Hermione said defiantly, tears in her eyes. “But the attack was very painful and frightening, and the memory of a wand like that man’s made everything fresh for a few seconds in Ollivander’s.”

“Who was he? Do you know his name? Is he still alive?” Tom asked, his fingers reaching out and tracing the air above her wounds. Someone had marked his soul mate. It didn’t matter how long it took; if that man were still alive, Tom would find him. And if that man were dead, Tom would find a way to bring him back to life so that he could kill him.

Hermione shook her head, her hair wild around her face, white petals caught in the curls. “No, we don’t know who he was, but none of Grindelwald’s men died during the attack, so he probably is out there, somewhere.”

“Why hasn’t your mother healed it properly?” Tom’s gaze was drawn to the cuts again, wanting to memorize every injury so that someone could account for it later. “It looks so red; is it infected?”

“No, it’s not infected in the muggle way, but the knife he used was cursed. The wounds are full of dark magic, and they’ve resisted all the attempts to heal them so far. Mother is working on a new salve.” She began to fumble with the loose bandage.

“Stop,” Tom ordered. He handed her the wands, and slowly pulled her arm out straight. Carefully, he rewrapped the bandage. “Is that too tight?”

Hermione shook her head, looking like she would cry.

Tom rolled down her sleeve and buttoned the cuff. “Does it hurt?”

“Always,” Hermione said simply, one tear finally escaping down her cheek. She took a deep breath and straightened, wiping her face. “But I won’t give any of those prejudiced bastards the satisfaction of knowing that.”

He regarded her, unsure of what to say. He was so very angry still, but also proud – proud of her strength.
She held out his wand, and he took it. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like you weren’t a worthy confidant,” she said. “It is just painful and it makes me feel very vulnerable.”

“You don’t need to feel that way,” Tom brushed a petal from her hair. “I’ve told you twice already that I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She smiled at him, and he was relieved. Her magic was relaxing, going back to a happier state. “It’s a two-way street, Tom. I won’t let anyone hurt you, either, and I will always keep you from having any disadvantage.”

“How will you do that?” He raised an eyebrow.

Her expression was playful now. “Haven’t I already been teaching you? I bet no one else begins first year knowing what we do.”

Tom grabbed her free hand and squeezed it. “Let’s go to the library and continue to make sure they will never catch up.”

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Narcissa was thoroughly enjoying herself. Other eyes might glaze over at the prospect of making the same potions and ointments in batches of one hundred or folding and magically sterilizing dozens of bandages and linens, but Narcissa found the repetitive actions peaceful. Madam Selwyn apparently felt the same way, because though they occasionally shared a story or discussed a work-related topic, they mostly worked in a peaceful quiet.

When Narcissa commented on the peaceful atmosphere, Electra laughed. “Oh, it won’t be this way much longer. Mark my words, on our first night, we’ll have at least five crying first years, a few second or third year girls having their first menstruation, six or seven assorted headaches, ten to fifteen stomach aches from eating too much at the welcoming feast, and a small group of fifth through seventh years who want to ask about contraceptive potions but who are too shy to say the actual words.”

Laughing, Narcissa began to ladle the aforementioned calming draught into several
individual dose sized flasks. “That’s quite a list for a first day.”

“The first two weeks are the worst, then things quiet down until Quidditch practices begin. Then, in December, Professor Merrythought begins the dueling club, and things get horrible all over again.” Electra griped, a sour expression on her face.

“Did I hear my name?” A voice called from the door, and Narcissa glanced up to see a woman walking into the small lab that was exclusively devoted to the Hospital Wing.

Professor Galatea Merrythought was dressed in muggle men’s clothing from head to toe, and it suited her immensely. She was a tall woman, with a boyish figure, wide shoulders, narrow hips, and no bust to speak of. Her top half was covered in a tailored tweed suit jacket with matching waistcoat, crisp white shirt, and a burgundy ascot at her throat, while her bottom half was clad in form-fitting trousers that disappeared into brown leather boots polished to a shiny gleam. She was tapping her wand against her side as if it were a riding crop. Narcissa wondered idly if that were safe, but surely the DADA professor would know.

Electra’s facial expression did not improve at the sight of her colleague. “Ah, Professor Merrythought, how good to see you.”

The Head of Ravenclaw House simply grinned at her, despite the implication that Electra was not at all pleased. “And you, Madam Selwyn, as always.”

“Can I assist you?” Electra pursed her lips. “Lady Bonneau and I are very busy with preparations for Monday, so…” she trailed off.

“Actually, I came to introduce myself to Lady Bonneau,” Galatea stepped across the room and came to stand directly in front of Narcissa. She held out her hand across the cooling cauldron of calming draught.

Up close, Narcissa could see that Galatea Merrythought was about ten or fifteen years older than she was, strong-featured, with large, wide-set hazel eyes, a long nose, and a wide mouth that was a bit crooked when she smiled. Her auburn hair was cropped closely at the nape of her neck, leaving only short curls to cluster around her face. Her eyes and mouth had the beginnings of laugh lines. She was not beautiful, but she was very alive, and her vitality was attractive. Narcissa wanted to know this woman.
She put down the ladle and flask and wiped her hands on her apron, then extended her arm to shake the professor’s hand. Narcissa noticed a shift in her magic, like a log falling in a fire and sending up a shower of sparks. Then, their hands were touching, and Narcissa nearly cried out. This woman’s magic was flowing up her arm, caressing her own magic and that could only mean...

Galatea recovered first. “I simply had to meet the woman our old codger of a Headmaster refers to as a ‘lovely lady’. I didn’t realize you were actually an aristocrat.”

“Only by marriage,” Narcissa replied automatically, her pulse pounding.

The professor’s smile wilted. “Oh? You are married?”

“Widowed,” she corrected.

Galatea’s smile was there again, though more subtle this time. “That’s g….I mean, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Electra was watching the two with a confused expression on her face. “Well, Professor, you’ve met her now, and we still have work to do,” she gave a hard smile. “I’m sure you do, too.”

Shrugging off her jacket, Galatea shook her head. “No, I haven’t a thing to do. I suppose in the spirit of camaraderie, I’ll have to stay and help you bottle medicines.”

“Fine,” Electra managed to bite out, her annoyance clear as day. “You can sterilize the flasks in the cabinet for Lady Bonneau. I need to go speak to Professor Beery about the weeping cherry bark he promised me for the headache tonic.” The matron was gone with a swish of her long, full skirts, her heels clicking sharply against the stone floor.

“Electra doesn’t like me,” Galatea sighed, opening the cabinet to the left of Narcissa and using her wand to float the bottles out onto an open counter space.

“That much is obvious,” Narcissa replied, still trying to calm herself. Perhaps she should take a sip from the ladle? “Why doesn’t she like you?”
“Oh, a dozen reasons,” Galatea replied cheerfully, as if discussing a thoroughly pleasant topic. “She thinks I’m too rough with the students, she thinks I’m too blunt, she thinks I encourage Silvanus to do stupid things, she thinks I’m too wild, and, even though she won’t ever admit it out loud, she thinks muggleborns shouldn’t be professors.”

“Really?” Narcissa had wondered how soon discussions of blood status would find her at Hogwarts. “Electra doesn’t seem-”

“You’re pureblood, aren’t you?” Galatea interrupted, her brows knitting.

“Yes, though I don’t see,” Narcissa had never had to defend her blood status, and Galatea’s tone had turned a bit less friendly.

Galatea interrupted her again. “Oh, it has a lot to do with the situation. You know what just happened as well as I do. I’m muggleborn, and I know, so I’ve no doubt you’re aware.”

Narcissa didn’t trust herself to speak, so she simply nodded.

“So, we are soul mates, and I don’t know if we could be more different,” Galatea sighed and waved her wand over the flasks. “I mean, you are beautiful. Very, very, very beautiful, but how would this even work?”

Narcissa flushed as she spooned out the potion. She wanted to turn around and hold the other woman’s hand again, but Narcissa Black Malfoy was nothing if not disciplined. “I’ve no idea. I never thought I would meet my soul mate.”

Galatea gave a harsh laugh. “No, the purebloods don’t give their daughters much choice when it comes to marriage. How old were you when you were married off?”

“I was eighteen,” she replied, “but I went willingly, I had a loving marriage, and I wouldn’t trade my daughter for anything.” Draco’s face flashed through her mind, but she pushed it away.

Turning, she faced the older woman with her chin lifted proudly. “I do not apologize for my blood status, nor do I expect you to.”
“You are such a surprise,” Galatea murmured, stepping so close that Narcissa could smell a hint of cedarwood and clove on the professor’s clothing.

“So are you,” Narcissa answered honestly, barely breathing. Everything was too close, too intense. She had too much to do to deal with a soul mate. Hermione and Tom were her priorities. She would not be swept away by some strange combination of magic and lust. Because there was definitely attraction. Narcissa had never touched another woman romantically, but she wanted to run her hands all over Galatea.

Galatea chose that moment to prove her blunt and wild nature by leaning down the four-inch difference in their heights and pressing her lips to Narcissa’s. Galatea’s lips were warm and smooth and dry, and Narcissa sighed into her mouth, her own lips opening slightly, their breath mingling. They stayed that way for a long moment, sharing a rather chaste kiss, until Galatea finally ran her tongue over Narcissa’s lower lip, and then they were kissing in earnest, their arms wrapped around one another’s waist, their tongues, teeth, and lips out of control.

Narcissa couldn’t think. She hadn’t kissed anyone in her life except Lucius. He had been a very good kisser, and a passionate lover. She wouldn’t have imagined she could experience a better kiss, but Galatea was. The kiss wasn’t simply passionate, it was engulfing, and that made it dangerous.

With a deep breath and a gathering of will, Narcissa pushed away and straightened her hair. She turned back to her task, pouring the potion with a trembling hand.

“Well,” Galatea’s mouth touching Narcissa’s ear as she spoke softly, “Wasn’t that something? I think we’ll get along just fine after all.”

Narcissa’s knees felt weak, but she locked them and didn’t respond.

Galatea ran a finger down the back of Narcissa’s dress, tracing the line of her spine. It felt like fire, like Galatea was touching her naked body in a much more intimate place than her spine. “Can we have dinner in my quarters? I would very much like to talk to you in a more private setting about all of this.”

Narcissa waved her wand and levitated the flasks, stepping toward the cabinet on the other side of the room. She needed space. “Yes, we can have dinner, but not tonight. My daughter and my ward are staying with me until the school year officially begins, and I need to be with them.”
“Fine,” Galatea’s tone was exaggeratedly gracious. “What about Monday night?”

“Electra said that the first night of the term is very busy here,” Narcissa didn’t look at the other woman while she finished putting the bottles away and returned to clean out the cauldron with a few strong spells to avoid cross-contamination with any other medicines. “She’ll probably need me.”

Galatea was close again, and with a swift, non-verbal spell, she had cleaned the cauldron to a spotless state. Narcissa stared down at it, but Galatea gently tipped up her chin. “I’m pretty sure we need each other – that’s what the whole soul mate bond is about – strengthening and complimenting one another. How about Tuesday?”

“Tuesday will be fine, though if I have to work, you must understand,” Narcissa finally answered, her jaw tingling from where Galatea’s fingers had caressed the skin there.

“Excellent! It’s a date,” she grinned, a wide, infectious, lopsided smile that had Narcissa’s mouth twitching at the corners. Galatea leaned down and dropped a brief kiss on the corner of Narcissa’s tiny smile. “That’s my girl. I’d better head over to my office before we scandalize Electra by making mad, passionate love in the Hospital Wing potion lab.”

Narcissa had no reply to that, but she couldn’t stop herself from sighing softly as Galatea grabbed her jacket, threw a wink at her over her shoulder and left whistling a jaunty tune, her slim hips swaying slightly. Once she was out of sight, Narcissa groaned and gently beat her head against the closest medicine cabinet. How in the world was she going to deal with this? Galatea Merrythought was a complication that she didn’t need, but that she couldn’t deny she wanted
The Sorting Hat, aka Troublemaker

Chapter Summary

A beautiful night, a boat ride, a candle-filled hall...what could go wrong? Ask the hat.

Chapter Notes

I changed the ages in the previous chapters - if someone sees a stray one, let me know. I also found out that my creature of choice wasn't around in 1938, but I'm keeping that for now until I can come up with a better replacement.

This chapter introduces some relatives of familiar characters, and though I believe that most ancestors are their own people with distinct personalities, I love Luna sooooo much that I had to make an ancestor with her qualities. She's just so fun to write!

Our poor possessive Tom is in for a rude awakening...

love to you all!

Hogwarts by night was stunning, and even Tom Riddle could see its beauty. Narcissa had brought them to the Hogwarts train station just as the children were disembarking so that he and Hermione could take the traditional first year boat ride across the lake. Though Tom didn’t care about tradition, Hermione had seemed excited, and now that he saw the outline of the castle, with its thousands of glowing lights, silhouetted against the starry sky, Tom appreciated the grandeur, and was pleased to be part of it.

Thankfully, the incessant chattering at the train station had died away on the lake, and when they disembarked and walked up to the school, the other children were mostly silent, staring with wide eyes at the building looming over them. Tom and Hermione had been standing side by side, but then the prefects were greeted by Professor Dumbledore, and they began arranging the students in alphabetical order by last name. She was now far ahead of him, only three students back from the beginning of the line, while he was only five away from the end.

Marguerite Rosier was directly behind him, her mood better than Tom had ever seen over the summer. “Hello, Tom,” she even gave an attempt at a smile. “Are you ready to be sorted into the glorious House of Slytherin?”
Though Tom did not like Marguerite, he was on his best behavior at the moment. He had learned at muggle school that being charming to classmates and teachers was a good policy, and as long as no one crossed him, that was how he would proceed.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

“I’m sure I’ll be Slytherin as well,” a small but firm voice said from behind Marguerite. A boy of roughly Tom’s size and build, stepped into sight, and held out his hand. “I’m Jacob Selwyn.”

Tom shook his hand, because that was the polite thing to do. “Tom Riddle.”

“Oh!” the boy smiled. “You’re the boy who helped my aunt over the summer.”

Tom nodded. It was no stretch to see the family resemblance between Jacob and the matron of the hospital wing, even without the same last names. They both had pale skin, dark hair and dark eyes, and pointed chins. Aware that he didn’t want to get a reputation as a braggart (because Tom earned all his praise), he added, “It really was my guardian, Lady Bonneau, who did most of the helping. Hermione and I simply got some medicine and brought it back.”

Jacob shook his head. “My aunt wrote to my father that the two of you performed magic in the school, without wands.”

Marguerite was interested now. “What kind of magic did you do?”

“We used accio to summon a ghost for directions,” Tom replied in a bored tone. After several weeks of reading about magic, and this last week of practicing magic with Hermione, their small use of a simple spell back in June didn’t seem terribly impressive to him.

“Without a wand? Really?” Marguerite’s head tilted and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “That sounds…”

But Tom was saved from having to show Marguerite just how much he could do without a wand by movement in the line. He turned and followed the students in front of him. They took the most direct route to the Great Hall, and though Tom had seen it several times over the last week when he and the Bonneau ladies ate informal meals with whichever staff members showed up, the room looked much different now.
The enchanted ceiling was free of any clouds, and studded with twinkling stars. Giant candelabras floated over the tables, providing soft yet adequate light. The four tables, so empty over the summer, were filled with students and the air was filled with the hum of multiple conversations. The students quieted as the first-years filed in to the center of the room, in the space between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Looking to the end of the room, Tom saw the staff table, where Narcissa was seated beside another woman who put him in the mind of the photographs in the papers of that American aviatrix who had vanished at sea trying to fly across the world.

Narcissa smiled at him, and he returned her smile. The other woman whispered something to her and Narcissa looked down. Who was that woman? She seemed awfully familiar with his guardian. He refused to fidget, because that was something children did, and he was above that, but he was starting to get annoyed. He wanted to get the sorting sorted, have dinner with Hermione, and see the Slytherin dormitories, which had been impossible to explore without a password.

Headmaster Dippet stood, wobbled slightly, then raised his wand to his throat. His voice rang throughout the room. “Good evening Hogwarts students and staff, and welcome to another year of study. We will begin the sorting shortly, but first a few announcements. As an addition to our staff, Madam Selwyn has taken a new assistant in the Hospital Wing, the Lady Bonneau, and will be better equipped to handle the various and sundry student maladies. Regarding safety concerns, due to last year’s end-of-term herbology prank by the graduating Hufflepuff students, the third floor corridor is now off-limits, and Professor Beery will be enlisting sixth and seventh year herbology honor students to help come up with a solution for moving the seedpods. Mr. Pringle has asked me to remind all students that fleeing from Professor Kettleburn’s class, while understandable, is not an excuse to enter the Forbidden Forest, and if students are found there for any reason, they will receive detention. We have a rather large in-coming group of first years, so that will do for now. Individual House Heads and prefects will provide any house-specific information after dinner.”

He nodded at Professor Dumbledore and collapsed into his chair. The Transfiguration professor stood, brandishing his wand and neatly summoning a wooden stool to the center of the room, followed by a ragged, black conical hat. Tom stared. It was the opposite of what he had expected – it was shoddy and patched, and looked like a parody of magic, not a powerful, enchanted object.

The hat moved on its own, something like a stretch, and began to speak, telling the tale of Hogwarts and its founders. Tom stifled a yawn. He had read all of this, with far less annoying drama and cutesy rhyme, in *Hogwarts: A History*. Finally, there was a pause, applause by the students, and Professor Dumbledore called out, “Abbott, Tabitha.”

The first student approached, a nervous girl who seemed to disappear in her robes when she sat down. Dumbledore placed the hat on her head, though it barely touched her before shouting,
“Hufflepuff!”

The table furthest to the left clapped and shouted their approval, and the girl almost ran to their table, clearly not comfortable being the center of attention, even for so short an amount of time.

“Barnes, Richard,” Dumbledore consulted the list which floated beside him, trailing down the floor and to the edge of the platform.

A short boy stepped forward with a grim face. Tom rolled his eyes. What were they all so scared of? The hat wasn’t going to eat them, though that would perhaps be more amusing.

The hat took a bit longer with Barnes, but still, the total time was under ten seconds. “Gryffindor!”

Dumbledore didn’t look at his list this time. He smiled at the next student directly. “Bonneau, Hermione.”

Tom straightened, watching Hermione. She was at least thirty feet away, but she was nervous, he knew. He reminded himself that Hermione was different than he was, that she felt things, and given the reactions of the rest of the students in line, being nervous seemed rather common.

The hat fell almost down to her nose, obscuring the top part of her face. It sat there, and was silent. Several seconds passed. Then, the seconds became a full minute. Then another minute, and another.

A nearby older student sitting at the Ravenclaw table pulled a watch from her pocket, and quietly said, “I think she’s going to be a hatstall. I wonder which houses are being deliberated.”

The student beside her glanced at the watch face. “It has to be at least five minutes to be a true hatstall.”

“Well, she’s at four minutes now – I’ve never seen that.”
Tom fumed, turning his gaze back to Hermione, who was biting her lower lip quite aggressively, her teeth turning the skin around her mouth white. He hoped that hat had enough sense to put Hermione where she belonged, or he’d set the bloody thing on fire.

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*Have we met before?* The hat asked as soon as it slid onto Hermione’s head.

She groaned and whispered, “Put me in Slytherin, please, and let’s get this over with.”

*Oh, you are cunning, no doubt,* the hat replied. *And willing to lie and manipulate to serve your purpose. Slytherin House will embrace those qualities.*

Hermione wanted to protest, but it was the truth.

*But you are also clever, very clever. A lover of books and learning for simply the joy of expanding your mind. You would live in the library if you could, and write term papers for fun. That is Ravenclaw through and through.*

Well, at least it hadn’t suggested Gryffindor, she thought.

*Speaking of Gryffindor,* the hat echoed cheerfully in her head, *I can’t see what you’ve done exactly, but I know it was brave. Brave beyond compare – brave like Godric was.*

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Hermione hissed. “I asked for Slytherin!”

The hat ignored her, making a humming sound. *There is magic in you that is yours, but not yours. It is soul mate magic, and it is stronger than I have felt in centuries. Do you bear words?*

Hermione nodded, the hat slipping a little further past her nose. She wanted to yank it off; it was hot and stuffy, but the hat was a powerful object, and if it knew something about her bond with Tom, she wanted to hear it.
A few seconds passed, and the hat spoke slowly, as if putting together the pieces of a puzzle with its mind. *You are such a case! You’ve made a habit of meddling with time, and journeyed to the past to meet your soul mate.*

“It wasn’t to meet him!” she whispered angrily. “That just happened!”

_Fate doesn’t allow anything to ‘just happen’, _the hat sounded like it was smirking. _Your actions will be critical to the future of the wizarding world._

Hermione huffed. “I know that.”

_You know so much, yet so little, _the hat said in its usual cryptic fashion. _You want to hate and love your soul mate at the same time. You want to save him and destroy him all in one breath. You are too strong to have your personality subsumed to another’s. Best to give you some space to breathe, to grow, to become the woman he won’t be able to live without._

“Please,” Hermione begged, her voice a low prayer. “I need to be in Slytherin.”

_Your nest doesn’t need two snakes, and a magical pairing like yours must have balance. It would be a shame to come all this way to save the world, then throw it all away to be a slave to a tyrant’s whims. You can’t save him by becoming like him. Don’t be afraid to challenge him; your bond will hold, and not only hold, but grow stronger._

“Ravenclaw!” The hat yelled, triumph in its voice, and the Ravenclaw table cheered loudly.

Hermione brushed curls out of her face as the hat was lifted off. Professor Dumbledore was smiling broadly at her, the familiar twinkle in his eyes.

“I did predict just this, Miss Bonneau,” he laughed, but caught sight of her miserable expression and sobered. “It is for the best. Even soul mates need some distance, especially when they’ve found one another so young.”

She cast a glance back at the staff table, trying to send an apologetic look to her mother, but Narcissa didn’t look angry, only thoughtful. When she turned back and began to walk toward the Ravenclaw table, she tried to avoid meeting Tom’s gaze, but the impulse was magnetic.
His expression was blank, which she knew meant he was hiding extreme anger. She thought about the hat’s words, and how she and Narcissa had been treating Tom so carefully, trying to keep him pleased and non-lethal. The hat was right. Saving him, keeping him from becoming a vicious, Pureblood supremacist – that wouldn’t happen by letting him have everything he wanted. She had told him a few days ago that their bond would never break, and now she had to believe in her own words. Tom Riddle was furious with her, but she wasn’t going to allow herself to care.

She gave him a broad smile, which merited a look of surprise, then of barely contained fury. Hermione turned, breaking the contact, and sat at the place made for her at the Ravenclaw table.

When she looked across the table, she almost gasped. A girl around her age sat absently twirling her long, straight, white-blonde hair and staring at Hermione with wide blue eyes that seemed to look right through her. She was most definitely a grandmother or great-grandmother of Luna Lovegood.

“Does that boy want to harm you?” she asked, her voice just as dreamy and slow as Luna’s had been.

In Hermione’s time, she had found Luna illogical and often annoying, wondering frequently how the girl was sorted into Ravenclaw. Now, though, Hermione found the mannerisms comforting and endearing, a little piece of her time that she could embrace.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s contemplating it,” Hermione answered evenly. “But he won’t. What’s your name?”

“Patience Foster,” she replied. “Bonneau is a French name. Did you flee France? There’s terrible fighting there at present.”

“Patience!” The girl of around fourteen who sat beside Hermione admonished sharply. She had light brown hair pulled back in braids so severe they raised the skin at her temples. Her glasses, which were curved like cat’s eyes, were thick and sturdy, fastened with a beaded chain around her neck. Honestly, she looked like a younger version of Madam Pince. “You are being quite rude!”

Patience looked blankly at the other girl. “Irma, I’m only asking the questions everyone
wants to know. That is a service. If Hermione doesn’t wish to answer, she will say so.”

She was Madam Pince! Hermione smoothed her robe, and tried to keep her face from showing her shock. She wondered if the girl was as nasty now as she would be as a librarian.

“I don’t mind,” Hermione said quickly. “These are facts, and people will learn them eventually. I have nothing to hide, but I would like to watch the rest of the sorting.”

“Yes, we need to see what your cousin is going to do to the sorting hat,” Patience nodded sagely. “I predict violence.”

Irma made a sound that was somewhere between a scoff and a cluck.

“You have no idea,” Hermione sighed at Patience, turning to watch the students behind her.
Chapter Summary

OMG! Guys, idk! I drank two shots of gin and this came out! Shit hits the fan in the most spectacular way....I have no other way to summarize this chapter.

(Oh, btw, I think in the last chapter that I described by Luna stand-in, Patience, as being older than Hermione, but I'm going to fix that because I want her to be the same age).

Love to you all!

***Maybe WARNINGS for some violence to underage characters, though not explicitly described***

Chapter Notes

I think the summary was the notes....sorry...two shots of gin is clearly my limit.

Tom watched Hermione smile at him, then turn and sit at the table full of cheering Ravenclaws. Her back was to him now, and her hair made a wide halo around her head and shoulders, the curls crackling with magical energy. The students around her were talking to her, congratulating her.

As the line move forward, Tom felt her excitement and nervousness. He was certain she could feel his anger, even though he knew his face was perfectly calm. Before this soul mate magic, he had never had to worry about anyone knowing something about him that he didn’t want them to know. Tom liked to keep his things close, especially the things he valued most. Hermione was the most valuable, and now she was going to be out of his reach for most of the time for the next seven years.

He had read several books on the school system to make sure he knew how the school worked – the organization, the customs, the course of study. In those books, there had been many references to the house system, and how deep house loyalties ran in students, often for the rest of their lives. Tom knew that he would have some classes with her, and free time to study in the library together, as well as the weekends, but he had grown accustomed to the last two months of having her constantly at his side from the time he went down to breakfast to the time he went to
bed. That arrangement had pleased him, and he was very upset that it had come to an end.

When the line had moved enough that Tom was beside where Hermione was sitting, he subtly shifted and leaned toward her. Before he could say or do anything, she spun in her seat and faced him.

“I did ask for Slytherin, Tom,” she whispered. “But the hat said I belong here, and I won’t lie – I’m happy. I told you how I felt about the pureblood prejudice there.”

Tom stared at her with cold, angry eyes. Having possessions that thought for themselves and talked back was a headache, he decided. The line started to move forward, and Tom spoke, not realizing he had hissed in parseltongue until he saw the confusion on Hermione’s face.

He straightened and moved forward without translating, ignoring her hurt expression, though he could feel disappointment tinged with sadness at the edges of where her magic met his. They had been within a few feet of one another for most of the summer, and he wondered how well he would be able to feel her magic when he was in the dungeon dormitories and she was in an airy tower.

“Tom!” Marguerite was speaking to him, her voice low but excited. “Tom!”

Annoyed, Tom turned a bit sideways in the line, but not enough to draw attention to himself. “Yes?”

Marguerite moved closer, and Tom’s angry magic flared, sending out a small shock that hit Marguerite’s shoulder. Her hand flew up, rubbing at the spot, but she made no sound. Pureblooded children did not often cry out when reprimanded, and Marguerite knew a reprimand when she received one. Tom’s obvious skill, combined with what she had just heard, was forcing her to re-evaluate her opinions on Tom Riddle.

She kept the space clear between them now, but asked quietly, “Are you a Parselmouth?”

Tom gave her a disdainful stare. “Obviously.”

Jacob Selwyn nudged closer to Marguerite, staring openly at Tom over her shoulder. “That’s a very rare talent!” he whispered. “You’ll be in Slytherin for sure – Salazar himself was a
“I know,” Tom replied, turning to keep pace with the line’s movement. Though he would have preferred Hermione’s company and praise, the way Marguerite had cowed before him, and the amazement in Jacob’s eyes was improving his mood. The sorting was proceeding at a very fast rate now, the hat shouting pronouncements, the tables cheering. Having seen several other students sorted, the children were approaching the stool more confidently, and it was almost Tom’s turn.

He watched the hat, and as it moved and spoke amid rips and patches, his anger rose again. What right did a piece of talking fabric have to separate him from his soul mate? He needed her. Tom stopped, frozen for a second. Had he just thought that he needed her? That was impossible and unacceptable. He didn’t need anyone. Maybe distance was not a bad idea, after all, if he was growing weak and attached.

“Riddle, Tom.” Dumbledore called, and Tom strode forward with no hesitation. Dumbledore set the hat down, and though it stayed on the crown of his head, Tom could hear the hat speak, inside his mind.

Well, well, the other half of the pair! There’s no doubt where you belong, is there?

“Slytherin,” Tom said with satisfaction, then added accusingly, “Why did you take her away from me?”

Your little sphinx is part lion, part bird, and all independence. If you want to possess the heart of a wild creature, you must set it free occasionally. You don’t keep your snake in a cage, and you can’t cage her, either. Heed my words, Tom Riddle, your soul mate will require a careful touch if you don’t want to end up like Merlin and Morgana and Salazar and Godric.

Before Tom could ask about those last words, the hat shouted “Slytherin!” and a loud clapping and a few whistles came from the far right of the room. Tom walked over, enjoying the applause (the first he’d had in his life) and pondering the hat’s words. It was true he would never cage Damballa, other than short times of transportation. Damballa needed freedom to wander and hunt. The same went for Jeeves, the name he had bestowed on the family bird. Last year he had read a battered Wodehouse novel he’d found in the school library, and he rather liked the extremely competent, almost omniscient butler. Jeeves was free to fly in the rookery, and placing such a grand bird in a cage was not something Tom would do.

He remembered his first impression of Hermione, of the hint of the wild, deep woods about
her magical core. Then, he thought of the times her magic had flared: when they had needed to find
the medicine; when she had been faced with the walnut wand; and when they had been charged by
Kettleburn’s creature. Her defensive, protective magic was very strong, like an animal who was
afraid of being wounded. Tom felt a flash of rage as he thought of the wounds she already had. He
swallowed his anger for the moment. Let it not be said that Tom Riddle couldn’t adapt to new
knowledge. Hermione needed to be approached like a wild creature? Fine. Tom was excellent
with taming and controlling animals. He would slip a silken leash over her neck and keep it long
enough that she wouldn’t even notice before it was too late.

The Slytherin table was full, but the students toward the closest end had moved to make a
place for all the first years to sit. There were several students Tom recognized from the boat ride
and the line, and Thaddeus was also there. Tom sat beside him.

“Excellent, Tom!” Thaddeus smiled. “I knew you’d end up here!”

“Slytherin!” The hat called again, and Tom clapped with the rest of his new house as
Marguerite came over. There was barely ten seconds pause before the hat shouted, “Slytherin!” for
the third time in a row and Jacob bounded toward them, looking extremely pleased with himself.

Marguerite came to stand beside Tom and asked quietly, “May I sit?”

Tom found he rather enjoyed her appropriate deference. He shrugged as if he didn’t care
and turned back to the table, where he caught the eye of a larger boy who was looking at him.

The boy, maybe a third or fourth year, with a solid build nodded at him with an arrogant
expression. “So, you’re Thad’s cousin? A half-blooded Gaunt? I thought they were all in prison.”

His wand was burning in his pocket, heating along his thigh, but Tom knew pulling it out
and hexing this Neanderthal would be a bad idea. At the moment. “I don’t have anything to do with
my Gaunt relatives,” Tom replied coolly. “And my blood status has nothing to do with my
abilities.”

Immediately, silence fell around him. All the students within earshot of Tom’s statement
stared at him. He felt his magic rising, anger causing it to crackle. Marguerite moved a few inches
away, as did Thaddeus.

The boy laughed at him. “See? Even your Rosier cousins know that’s not true; they don’t
“Thad and I moved because his magic is going to strike, you idiot,” Marguerite hissed like an angry snake. Tom was honestly surprised the girl wasn’t a Parselmouth.

Jacob nodded in wary agreement. “He’s a Parselmouth, and he can do wandless magic.”

With any angry glare at Jacob and Marguerite, the boy continued. “Listen, I don’t need a lecture from snot-nosed first-years, and I’m not afraid of anyone, especially a little half-blood whose Pureblood relatives are insane old bastards rotting in Azkaban for getting caught giving muggles what they deserve.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed, and the boy began to quietly choke. The rest of the table watched, silent, and Tom smiled broadly. He rather liked the way Slytherin House seemed to deal with its problems without alerting any adults. These were not the tattle-tales of Wool’s. The choking continued, and the boy’s face turned an angry red.

“Tom,” Marguerite said, her voice low, not a warning, but something close to a polite suggestion.

He released his magic, pulling it back to himself, and it embraced him in a euphoric cloud. Few things pleased him more than punishing idiots who had earned his wrath. The boy staggered to his feet and took a seat at the other end of the table without a word.

“What is his name?” Tom asked.

Another older boy, with dark Slavic features, turned his black eyes toward Tom. “That was Jack Mulciber, and, as you saw, he isn’t smart enough to recognize when strong magic is present. I’m Antonin Dolohov.”

“And you are smart enough to recognize strong magic?” Tom stared directly back at Antonin.

“I am,” Dolohov nodded. “I’m also powerful enough to defend myself, and I think I should warn you that most Slytherins believe that blood status means something. If you want to attack everyone in your own house, you’ll find yourself in a bad position. You might be strong, but you’re
still only a first-year, and you don’t know even a quarter of the spells the rest of us do.” His tone was matter-of-fact, not accusatory.

Tom’s blue eyes could have been carved from ice. “I don’t need formal spells to do whatever level of damage needs to be done. My magic is instinctual and it obeys me completely. I may be a first year, but imagine what I’ll be doing one month from now. It would be very, very foolish for anyone, no matter his year, to cross me,” he paused and spoke at length in Parseltongue, his low hissing just loud enough to carry down the table. Nearly the entire table stopped what they were doing and watched.

A tall, handsome boy with pale blonde hair, light grey eyes, and very white skin whom Tom had seen on the boat ride, was the first to have the courage to ask, “What did you say?”

Tom smiled at the level of caution and submission in the boy’s voice. “I said that I am descended from Salazar Slytherin himself, in an unbroken line, and it doesn’t matter if my father was a muggle, I will be the most powerful wizard this house has seen since our founder. Anyone who cares to test me will learn this first-hand. Ask Mulciber if my magic felt weak or lesser when it was crushing his throat. Power will trump blood every time.”

No one laughed this time, nor did anyone speak at all. The silence stretched until there was sudden, loud applause from the rest of the room, and food appeared in front of their faces, loading the table. The sorting had ended, and the feast was begun. Subdued, the Slytherins began to fill their plates, gradually relaxing and turning back to regular conversations.

“Abraxas Malfoy,” the blond boy said as he took a roll from a plate.

Tom gave him a nod, inwardly wincing at the strange names these wizarding families insisted on burdening their children with. “Tom Riddle.”

The boy grinned easily, his face almost as handsome as Tom’s own. “Yes, I’m sure all of Slytherin House knows you now.”

Marguerite smirked beside him. “Jack Mulciber certainly knows it.”

Thaddeus added cautiously, “Don’t hurt him too much, Tom. He’s a really good beater. We need him for Quidditch season.”
Deciding that his intimidation had gone well, Tom changed tactics. His experiences at Wool’s had taught him that nothing kept enemies and subordinates more off balance than the ability to switch moods instantaneously. So, Tom laughed, treating Thaddeus’s statement like a joke.

“Don’t worry, Thaddeus, Jack will fine so long as he watches his mouth.”

As expected, the other students looked at each other nervously, unsure how to take Tom’s good mood. Finally, a girl with dark glossy hair, intelligent brown eyes and honey colored skin said, “Vidhi Khatri. I am also half-blood. I am glad to know that at least one person here won’t spit on me for that.” Her words were crisp, spoken with a slight accent.

Tom regarded her solemnly. She had a very serious demeanor, and he could tell she had the potential for magical strength. “To me, magical power is the true test of a witch or wizard, and I’d rather be surrounded with strength than an out-dated belief system.”

Abraxas, Marguerite, and Jacob fidgeted. Dolohov’s mouth was shut firmly, as though he were struggling to keep from saying something he’d regret. Tom decided to throw them a bone. He wanted to rule this house eventually, after all, and he didn’t want to alienate everyone.

“The Pureblood customs have done their work of protecting and maintaining magical society thus far, for which I am grateful,” he said smoothly, his most winning smile firmly in place. “We simply need to be flexible enough to add to our power by allowing those with great potential to have a place in this glorious house.”

“Well, that sounds fine to me,” Thaddeus spoke between mouthfuls of potato. “Slytherin needs more smart people so we can win this year’s House cup. You can earn a lot of points in the classes.”

“Not that you’d know,” Marguerite chided. “You probably only lose points for forgetting your homework or opening your mouth.”

Abraxas winced in sympathy for Thaddeus. “I’m glad my younger sister isn’t here yet. She’d be saying the same things to me.”

Dolohov finally spoke. “It is true that very little can be accomplished without power,” he admitted, his face less tense.
“Just so,” Tom agreed, and turned his attention to the delicious banquet in front of him. It probably was good Hermione wasn’t here. She would have been outraged. He smiled to himself. What Hermione didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

-oOoOoOo-

Hermione was thrilled with the conversation at the Ravenclaw table. Everyone was discussing classes, professors, and books they had read over the summer. When she mentioned Durante, two other Ravenclaws had immediately started a discussion with her about the contents.

Of course, everyone had listened to her answers to Patience while trying to pretend they weren’t, but after she had given a brief explanation of how she’d come to leave France, they seemed satisfied, and turned back to talk of studies. Except Patience.

“Tell me about the boy, your cousin,” she said, dipping a finger in her potatoes instead of her fork. “He is very intense.”

Hermione looked over to the Slytherin table where Tom was sitting. She didn’t have a direct line of sight, but she could feel that Tom was angry. This anger wasn’t the same as earlier, though. He was…using magic? Now? She craned her neck. Patience moved to the side, creating a gap.

“Someone’s angry over there,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“What are you talking about?” Irma snapped. “Really, Patience, sometimes I think your brain is stuffed with feathers.”

Turning out Irma’s sharp tone, she tried to hear anything from the Slytherin table, but it was quiet. Oddly quiet. Could he not be away from her for twenty minutes without causing mayhem? His magic heightened, flushed with pleasure, and then dissipated slowly. Whatever he had been doing, he was pleased by it, but he had also stopped.

She forced herself to pay attention to the dinner, but it was hard to concentrate on food and small talk when she was concerned about Tom’s behavior. She chatted lightly with a few other
Ravenclaw first years, Josephine Longbottom, and Felicity Fraiser, as well as answered on-going odd questions from Patience about the Chinese zodiac, magical creatures who might or might not live in the South Pole, and the possibility of whether, with a particularly strong Bubble head charm, one might be able to find Atlantis. However, the meal was over before she had eaten much of anything, and her stomach was in knots.

Students were rising and forming lines to head to their dormitories, and Hermione knew the potion was wearing off, because she didn’t feel remotely like an eleven year old. She felt eighty, burdened with responsibility that seemed close to breaking her back.

“Darling?” Narcissa’s calming voice called to her, and she turned to see her mother standing with Madam Selwyn and another tall woman with short red hair and an easy, clearly genuine smile who had to be the head of Hermione’s new house, Professor Merrythought. “Could you come here for a moment?”

Hermione left the line and approached the women. They made an interesting visual composition – short to tall, with contrasting coloring and clothing styles. Madam Selwyn was short, with a rounded figure, rosy cheeks, shiny black hair, and dark eyes. Her clothes were almost an exact copy of what Madam Pomfrey had worn – a floor-length, long-sleeved, high-necked slate blue dress covered mostly by a heavily starched and brilliantly white apron. She could have stepped into any muggle hospital in the 1800s, looking right in place. Narcissa was also wearing a long dress, but hers was a darker, charcoal grey, with only half-sleeves, a closer, more stylish cut and rounded neckline that showed her collarbones. Her apron only started at the waist, and seemed more part of the dress than a protective piece. A few inches taller than Madame Selwyn, with her much paler complexion and hair, Narcissa looked like a fashion designer’s vision of how a nurse should dress.

Professor Merrythought was altogether different, and Hermione liked her on sight. She was tall and rangy, dressed in the long, black professorial robes, but they were open, falling like a coat around her rather than being her actual outfit. The clothes she wore underneath reminded her of Professor Lupin’s style, except well-cut and brand new. She made Hermione think of the old movies she had used to love to watch with her father – this woman was fiercely intelligent and independent, and not afraid to confront gender roles, like a Katherine Hepburn or Marlene Dietrich.

Merrythought immediately put out her hand. “Miss Bonneau! So glad to have you in my house! Your mother sings your praises.”

Hermione flushed. “I am happy to be a Ravenclaw, Professor Merrythought.”

“Yes, well, we weren’t sure for a bit,” Merrythought laughed. “Once you hit six minutes, I was concerned Dippet was going to have a heart attack. I believe that’s a new record. Did the old hat want to put you in the snakes’ nest like your mother?”
Though her tone was playful, Hermione could tell Merrythought was fishing for answers, wanting to know about any hint of potential deviousness in her house. “The hat considered every house except Hufflepuff,” Hermione admitted. “The hardest choice was actually between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.”

Narcissa shook her head at Hermione’s easy confession. “I should have known you’d never be a Slytherin, dear. You’re too willing to share your secrets.”

Madam Selwyn gave Professor Merrythought a decidedly unfriendly look. “The staff, even Heads of Houses, should guard against judging students by their house affiliation.”

Merrythought’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “I don’t judge anyone by house affiliation, Electra. I judge them by their words and actions.”

“Darling,” Narcissa spoke, redirecting the conversation. “I called you over to make both Madam Selwyn and Professor Merrythought aware of your special need for a daily potion, and the potential side effects of the cursed wound you are suffering from.”

Hermione and Narcissa had become as close as true mother and daughter this summer, sharing long talks at night, and by virtue of their unique situation as time travelers who were interfering with the past, both were acutely aware that there would be instances when one of them realized the need for a change in plans, and the other would need to play along. “Of course, Mother,” she replied evenly.

The hall was silent now. All the other students and staff had gone, and Narcissa carefully rolled up Hermione’s sleeve and unwrapped her bandage. Both Madam Selwyn and Professor Merrythought gasped.

Gently, Professor Merrythought touched the skin around the cuts, taking out her wand and whispering several rapid spells that Hermione barely caught. The air above her arm glowed red, with dark splotches of black.

“‘The curse in this wounds is exceedingly dark,’” the professor murmured. She glanced up at Hermione with an expression both sympathetic and outraged. “This must pain you greatly.”

Hermione nodded. Madam Selwyn had also drawn her wand, and she gripped Hermione’s
arm with a cool soothing touch while performing her own medical diagnostic spells. “What have you tried so far, Narcissa? This probably won’t respond to much in the way of healing, but I’m sure we can figure out some kind of pain relief.”

Narcissa listed the common healing spells she had attempted, as well as the lesser known ones. “The enchanted bandages are helping at the moment, and they lessen the pain, as well as offer a protective barrier against any contact, which intensifies the pain. I wanted both of you to be aware, because the constant, low-level fight Hermione’s magic has with this dark curse can cause her to be withdrawn and affect her mood, especially in the evenings and mornings when she is tired. I have designed a potion that helps to elevate her spirits throughout the day, so that she may have a more normal childhood experience, but, of course, we would welcome any ideas you ladies might have for a more long-term solution.”

Madam Selwyn waved her wand, “Coeo.” The basic healing spell took away a bit of the sting, and then she expertly rewrapped Hermione’s arm with magic, the enchanted bandages strengthened by several additional spells. When she had stepped back, Professor Merrythought circled her wand around Hermione’s arm and tapped the bandages lightly, saying “sempers tueum et servans.”

“Always seeing and protecting?” Hermione asked, her Latin as good as ever.

Merrythought smiled at her quick translation. “Just a spell to strengthen the protection offered by the bandages – you should be able to bump your arm in your sleep or be jostled in the hall crowds without pain now.”

“Thank you,” she said to both women. She glanced at the empty hall. “Though, if that’s all, I should probably get to my dormitory.”

Narcissa leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Good night, darling.” Hermione hugged her in return, comforted by the now familiar smell of expensive marzipan that surrounded Narcissa’s clothing and skin, wishing they could discuss the sorting debacle, but knowing it would have to wait.

“I’ll escort you, Miss Bonneau,” Professor Merrythought offered. “Ravenclaw Tower is quite a ways from here, and the path is not a direct one.”

Hermione nodded gratefully, though she was sure she could have found her way. She didn’t mind company – it would keep her mind from wondering what Tom was doing out of sight in the dungeons.
Professor Merrythought pocketed her wand, gave a civil nod to Madam Selwyn, and openly grinned at Narcissa. “Good night, ladies.”

Watching Narcissa flush like a third year, Hermione wondered what was happening. There was definitely a flirtatious vibe coming from the DADA professor, and it looked like Narcissa was responding. Just when she thought she had things figured out, the past threw another mystery her way.

“Your mother is quite the lady,” Professor Merrythought said as they walked, then laughed. “Literally.”

“She is very special,” Hermione answered, then decided on bluntness. “Are you interested in her romantically?”

Professor Merrythought stopped walking and faced Hermione. Her sharp hazel eyes regarded Hermione for several long seconds. “You sound like a Gryffindor, but observe like a Ravenclaw. And if that hat debated Slytherin at all, then you are triply dangerous. I doubt you miss a thing. I can’t wait to have you in class.”

“That isn’t an answer,” Hermione responded.

“No, it isn’t,” Professor Merrythought resumed walking, at a more brisk pace. “I don’t normally discuss anything remotely personal with students. Since you are Narcissa’s daughter, and since you have had a very trying last six months, I will say that I value your mother’s company, and leave it at that.”

Hermione shook her head. “I can’t leave it at that,” she spoke as her seventeen year old self, ready and willing to defend Narcissa from any possible hurt. “I don’t care the slightest that you are a woman, but my mother has lost nearly everything in the last few months and I won’t allow anyone to hurt her, even unintentionally.”

“Good Lord!” Professor Merrythought stopped again. “I would deposit you with those brash loudmouths of Dumbledore’s for sass if I weren’t so entertained! So many of my Ravenclaws are quiet and introverted – you are going to shake up the nest something fierce.”

She was smiling a broad, crooked smile that was mirrored in her bright eyes. Hermione
desperately wanted to trust her – she was so likable. Her face sobered for a moment. “I am muggleborn, Miss Bonneau, and a woman who loves other women. I wouldn’t trade my life here for anything, but this magical existence of mine has come at a cost – the same cost you bear on your arm. If anyone would be hurt out of a relationship between Narcissa and myself, I think we both know who it would be.”

There was something in the professor’s eyes, a softness around her mouth, whenever she said Narcissa’s name, and Hermione thought of Narcissa’s flush. Narcissa didn’t flush. “Are you soul mates?” Hermione blurted out.

Professor Merrythought threw her arms up in the air in exasperation. “I have no words for you right now, Miss Bonneau.” She continued to walk. “I foresee a year of headaches in store for Ravenclaw House.”

Hermione hurried after her, a grin on her face. “But that’s wonderful! Why aren’t you happier?”

“I’m not discussing this with you, especially in the hallway,” Professor Merrythought continued to practically run down the hall, her long legs taking great strides Hermione had to rush to catch up with.

“My mother needs a soul mate. She loved,” Hermione forced the words out, ignoring a shudder at the thought of Lucius, “my father, but with your help, I think she can heal and be truly happy.”

“Not talking about this,” Professor Merrythought repeated. “And I expect your silence on the matter.”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to stop. “Of course!” she said, mildly offended. “I would never discuss such a matter with others.”

They were going up stairs now, and Professor Merrythought waited on a landing for another staircase to float into place. “You are as much a mystery as your mother. What are they putting in the water over there in France?”

“We only drink wine in France,” Hermione teased.

The professor laughed, a deep, full laugh. “Ah, well if that is the case, I’ll need to be
checking your room for contraband every weekend.”

The staircase aligned, and they continued on, the tension between them evaporated. “You really will be a shock to the Ravenclaw system, I expect,” Professor Merrythought said. “Intelligence combined with action is sometimes too much for this house to handle. I know I was a bit misunderstood as a student. Everyone wanted to throw me to the lions.”

Hermione nodded. “Gryffindors are wonderful, but their study skills are atrocious!”

“Now that sounded like a true Ravenclaw!” Professor Merrythought grinned, stopping in front of the entrance to the tower. “And just in time.” She lifted the brass ring of the knocker that was shaped like an eagle.

“There are two sisters,” the eagle spoke, “One gives birth to the other, and she, in turn, gives birth to the first. Who are the two sisters?”

“Day and Night,” Hermione answered promptly, then added, “Or Life and Death, if one considers the life cycle, how decaying plants and animals feed other plants and animals. Really, any endless cycle that is commonly divided into two halves could be reasoned to answer the question.”

Professor Merrythought smiled. “Excellent! I’m glad to know there’s at least one first-year who won’t be crying outside the tower all day.”

They entered the common room, where the six prefects were leading a discussion of the rules. Hermione was immediately struck with how quiet and orderly the Ravenclaws were, and understood what Professor Merrythought had said. She hadn’t realized how much being a Gryffindor had shaped her personality until she was in a setting without those qualities.

Everyone stopped talking as they entered. “Good evening, my fellow Ravenclaws!” Professor Merrythought’s voice carried through the airy tower. “Welcome to our new additions. This is Hermione Bonneau, and she needed to discuss some Latin with me. Apologies for our lateness.”

At the mention of Latin, most of the students nodded, as if consulting the House Head on a matter of Latin was a perfectly understandable reason for being late. Hermione went over and sat on a long blue velvet sofa beside Patience and Josephine. Professor Merrythought spoke for a few minutes, encouraging students to come to her with any problems, and mentioning weekly Friday evening house meetings that took place right before dinner. Hermione was surprised again.
Professor McGonagall had rarely come to the Gryffindor common room, but it seemed that Merrythought was here frequently.

“I’ll be retiring now, but I’m never far, and Zephora, Tamesine, Nicholas, John, and Alysander are all patient and understanding prefects, and Rachel is our prefect and the Head Girl, so Ravenclaw tower has many sources of wisdom for any questions or concerns. First years, I’ll be seeing you bright and early tomorrow after breakfast for our first Defense Against the Dark Arts class.” She smiled and left the tower.

The Head Girl stood. Rachel was a short girl with the compact build of a gymnast and skin the color of coffee with only the barest hint of milk. Her dark hair was braided in several rows flat against her scalp, but the multiple strands joined at the nape of her neck and made a single braid that trailed to her waist. “First year girls, follow me. I’ll show you to your rooms.”

She led them to an arched doorway near the large statue of Rowena Ravenclaw, then up a spiral stone staircase to a circular landing that branched out into several large rooms. Rachel pulled a list out of her pocket. “Bonneau, Foster, Fraiser, and Longbottom, this is your room. There is a bathroom for the four of you to share adjoining your room.”

The four girls entered, and Hermione saw their trunks were at the ends of the large, four-poster beds that were made of a dark wood and hung with thick sapphire bed curtains, and covered with white and blue comforters. Thick white rugs lay on the floor beside each bed, to give a warm place to step onto in the morning. Each girl’s pajamas had been put across the bed, and matching slippers and robes in dark blue had been placed there as well.

Hermione was exhausted, her arm throbbed, and she just wanted to sleep. She gathered her things and went to the bathroom, quickly changing into the nightdress, wiping her face and neck, and brushing her teeth. She would get up early and take a long, hot shower, but for now, her new bed was calling.

When she came back, all three of her roommates were standing in the middle of the room, staring at her bed. Josephine and Felicity looked about to scream, but Patience was smiling that dreamy, vacant grin.

“I think your cousin sent you a message,” she said, pointing to Hermione’s bed.

Hermione turned, and saw Damballa curled on her pillow. Khethiwe was also there, sprawled over Damballa’s coils. She sighed. “I see.” She went to the bed and gently ran a finger over the snake’s bright green scales.
“That snake is terrifying,” Felicity shuddered.

“It’s a constrictor, not poisonous,” Hermione said, thinking logic was the best tactic for a Ravenclaw crowd. “And it is my cousin’s familiar. He wouldn’t hurt a human unless that human tried to hurt him or Tom.”

“Or you,” Patience added. “Damballa would protect you, too.”

“Probably,” Hermione nodded.

Josephine stepped a bit closer. “It is a very beautiful color,” she was clearly trying to be nice. Hermione thought of Neville’s sweetness with a pang of regret.

Damballa had stretched out, and now she could see that just below his mouth, a small rolled piece of paper had been attached with a thin string. Hermione thought the fact that Tom had sent his familiar to scare the crap out of her roommates was a message in and of itself, but he certainly went for the grand gestures.

She unrolled the parchment. Patience was reading over her shoulder, which Hermione should have found intrusive, but somehow found adorable instead. The other two girls were obviously curious, but not willing to get so close to Damballa.

In the neat, aggressive script that matched the handwriting on her stomach, was written, I said ‘you are still mine,’ but what I meant was that nothing can separate us. I’ll see you at breakfast. Damballa will make sure no one bothers you. Ever.

Patience read the words out loud and petted Damballa without a care, who allowed it graciously. “He’s a funny boy.”

Josephine shook her head slowly. “I don’t know if I’d call a possessive Parselmouth ‘funny.’”

“It’s a little romantic,” Felicity argued, then glanced at Damballa. “Is he staying the night, or are you sending him back?”
“No romance!” Hermione frowned, getting out a quill and ripping a small piece of parchment. Tom was clearly attempting to switch tactics and be charming again. However, she was wise to him. She penned a quick reply, *I agree that different houses will not separate us, but I have my wits and a nearly wild cat to protect me in a tower with three lovely roommates and absolutely no threats. I will be fine, and will see you at breakfast. Good night.*

She rolled the parchment, attached it to Damballa’s string and whispered softly to him. “Go back to Tom.” Even though it wasn’t Parseltongue, the snake seemed to understand, because he slithered away at a faster speed than Hermione would have thought possible.

-oOo0oOo-

Tom had settled into the surprisingly warm and rather luxurious bedroom in the Slytherin dormitory with ease. The bed was soft and magically warmed, as were the stone floors around the beds hung with emerald green curtains. His room housed three other boys: Abraxas, Jacob, and Corvus Black. All the other boys were purebloods, but they said or did nothing to indicate they had any problem with his status as a half-blood.

He had heard vague whispers in the common room from older students about him, but he didn’t respond. The display at dinner had been enough for now.

He sent Damballa to Hermione, and wasn’t sure to laugh or scowl when the snake returned before too long. Her note did make him laugh, because he could hear the tone of her voice in her writing, and because the writing itself, which matched the words on his arm, reminded him of their connection.

A prefect, William Bulstrode, came by a few moments later and gruffly ordered the lights out, and Tom lay in his bed, clutching his wand, thinking he would never fall asleep due to all the thoughts racing through his mind.

-oOo0oOo-

Tom woke to the sound of muffled laughter and his flesh on fire. He sat up in the bed, only just managing to keep from screaming, and saw the shadows of three figures in the doorway.

“Learn your place, Riddle! You aren’t as powerful as you think!” A voice which could have
been any of the older boys whispered menacingly.

There was more laughter, then another voice hissed, “You might have bullied muggles, but now you’re up against real wizards now, you stupid little git!”

Tom said nothing. He couldn’t. His whole body was burning, and he could hardly open his eyes to see if he was actually physically on fire, or if this was simply a painful sensation. The voices retreated, though the pain remained, Tom managed to recognize there were no real flames. If he tried to speak, he knew he would scream, and the whole house would hear him, hear his failure. Instead, he yelled in his mind, and he yelled for Hermione.

-oOo0oOo-

Hermione Bonneau might rule the day, but Hermione Granger ruled the night. Nearly three years of constant, outright danger, and many months of being an outlaw on the run had made her ready at a moment’s notice. When she woke to the sound of Tom’s screams reverberating in her skull, Hermione was out of her bed, wand in hand, and running down the stairs, out of Ravenclaw Tower before any conscious thought had passed. Her soul mate was in danger, and she would rescue him.

Muscle memory carried her to the dungeons, and she screamed outside of the entrance until a disheveled and sleepy perfect opened the stone wall. She burst past him, ignoring his yells, and those Slytherins who had come to stand in the common room. She glanced around wildly until she caught sight of the glint of Damballa’s green scales down a dark hallway.

A few small-time jinxes were thrown at her, but Hermione mindlessly threw up a rebounding spell, and didn’t stop to see who got hit with what. She flew down the corridor into Tom’s room, yelling for the lights, which illuminated brightly, to the dismay of its occupants, and found Tom on his bed, convulsing in pain.

“Oh, Tom,” she whispered, all thoughts of Voldemort forgotten at the sight of the eleven year old being tortured in front of her. He had espoused her thoughts, no doubt, said something in defense of half-bloods, and this was the price.

She cast a strong protective boundary around his bed, sent a patronus to Narcissa, then began to use every healing spell and counter-curse she could remember. His teeth had bitten bloody marks into his lower lip, and she would have thought cruciatus, but it was continuing without the caster present, so that couldn’t be it.
Knowing he was too proud to scream, she cast a *muffliato*, and leaned over him. “Tom, Tom,” she stroked his face. “No one can hear you, I promise. Tell me how it hurts. I want to help you. Please.”

At her assurance, he finally let out a scream, terrible and long, and Hermione began to cry tears of rage. “It burns! Help me!”

“I will,” she cried, as frantic as if she were in the pain herself, casting any spell, healing spell, counter-spell, or charm that had to do with cold or cooling. She even jinxed him with a freezing spell, and that seemed to do more good than anything else. As it faded, she jinxed him again, holding his hand and telling him that it would be all right, that Narcissa was on her way.

Narcissa did arrive shortly thereafter, with Madam Selwyn, Professor Slughorn, and Professor Merrythought in tow. Hermione didn’t realize they had arrived until she saw frantic waving at the edge of the bed. No one could speak through her *muffliato* or pass her boundary spell unless she lowered them. She ended the spells, noticing the looks of shock in the staff members’ eyes, but not caring at the moment.

“*We have him, darling,*” Narcissa murmured, as she and Madam Selwyn approached the bed.

“They cast some kind of burning curse on him,” Hermione cried, her tears falling faster, as Tom had stopped crying out again. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction, she knew, and she also knew what that cost him.

Professor Slughorn stood looking uncomfortable and useless, though Professor Merrythought called out a few suggestions of counter-curses as she tried to take Hermione by the shoulder to lead her out of the room. Hermione shrugged out of her touch, and ran back to the common room.

“Whoever did this, I will find you. Tom will find you,” she magnified her voice with her wand, until the walls nearly shook. “And nothing will keep you safe. The Pureblood Reign of Terror has ended. If you stand against us, you will be sorry!”

Professor Merrythought had come to her side, and was staring, her face a war between shock, approval, and the need to do her job. “Miss Bonneau,” she began softly, but Hermione had spent six years in the company of Ginny Weasley, and she cast a perfect and explosive *reducto*
curse at the Slytherin fireplace, watching with satisfaction as bricks and mortar and embers went flying and the Slytherins ran for cover.

A strong hand covered hers, lowering Hermione’s wand hand, and gently taking the wand from her grip. “Go to back to bed!” Professor Merrythought’s voice was so firm that not even Slytherins objected. Most of them had already scurried away.

Professor Merrythought tipped up Hermione’s chin. “Well, you’ve made a pretty mess coming to your soul mate’s defense. I hope I never have to do something like that for your mother.”

Hermione continued to cry, wanting to stop, but unable.

“Can you help me clean this up?” Professor Merrythought asked softly.

Surprised, Hermione hiccupped. “Yes,” she admitted.

“Then you will,” her professor answered. She handed Hermione back the rowan wand and began to cast spells to repair the fireplace. Hermione joined her, and it was only a few minutes before there was no evidence that the fireplace had been reduced to rubble.

“Would you like to check on him?” Professor Merrythought turned to her.

Hermione nodded dumbly.

“Will you behave? This is going to be disaster as it is.” The DADA professor pinched the bridge of her nose. “I hope you realize that you’ve as good as declared war in this school? As a first year? On your first day?”

“I don’t care!” Hermione insisted, holding up her arm. It didn’t matter whether the wounds had occurred almost forty years in the future. The ideas that feed the actions were the same, and they needed to be rooted out. “I’m tired of the prejudice. I will fight it to my dying breath! No one will tell me I’m less!”
Professor Merrythought drew in a shaky breath. “On a personal level, if things work out with your mother, and even if they don’t, I will say right here and now, that I would be honored to call you my daughter.”

Hermione gave a surprised laugh. It was not the response she had expected, but then, Professor Merrythought was a muggleborn, and she understood – understood in a way Narcissa never quite could.

“However,” she continued, “as your professor and Head of House,” she sighed. “I must tell you that this behavior is unacceptable,” when Hermione tried to interrupt, Merrythought gave her a sharp look that stilled her words. “Coming to another student’s aid is admirable, but you should have contacted your mother and Madam Selwyn, and myself instead of taking off on your own.”

She paused, regarding Hermione critically. “You have performed magic tonight that is beyond my wildest expectations for any student, let alone a first year. Hell,” she admitted, “I would have had a hard time getting through that barrier if you hadn’t lowered it. You are clearly a prodigy, and I refuse to allow you to act so much like a rash Gryffindor that you get yourself expelled in your first twenty-four hours of school.”

Hermione was silent, knowing Merrythought was speaking the truth. There was little argument against it, now that her anger had faded somewhat.

“Good,” Merrythought smiled weakly. “You’ll have to talk to Dumbledore and Dippet, but I’ll be there, and you were acting protectively,” she eyed the now-pristine fireplace, “except for that last bit, but we fixed that. I’ll give you a week’s detention, and we’ll call it even.”

“A week’s detention?” Hermione asked, aghast. Somehow, the idea of being in trouble still managed to shock her.

Merrythought’s smile widened. “You did destroy school property in a rather spectacular fashion. I’d say that was pretty lenient.”

“Did I at least hit any of the Slytherins?” Hermione grumbled.

Merrythought tried to force her face into a stern expression, but failed. “Oh, a few I expect. Let’s go check on Tom and then get you to bed.”
They walked to doorway, where they were stopped by a younger, slightly slimmer version of the Potions professor Hermione remembered from her sixth year. “Miss Bonneau,” his eyes were gleaming at her, “that was some rather amazing magic for a first year.”

“Horace,” Merrythought sighed. “She nearly blew up the common room. She needs no encouragement.”

“Indeed?” Slughorn looked excitedly at Hermione. “Was it a *reducto*?”

“Tend to your students, Horace,” Merrythought snapped, and Slughorn immediately shuffled away.

Inside the dorm room, three young boys sat up in bed, wide-eyed. Hermione easily recognized the closest boy as a Malfoy, while the second heavily favored Madam Selwyn. The final boy was unknown, but she noted with satisfaction that all of them looked terrified of her. Best to have made a strong impression.

“Hermione,” Narcissa looked up at her. “He’s better. We’ll move him to the Hospital Wing in a few moments.”

Madam Selwyn murmured a few more words over Tom then also straightened. “He’s asleep for now. He’ll rest through the worst of the effects.”

“What was it?” Merrythought asked. “It reminded me of some kind of *flagrante* curse.”

The matron nodded. “I believe it was a weak version of that, and Tom was lucky it was cast by someone without too much power or ability, probably a third or fourth year at most.”

Narcissa came around the bed and hugged Hermione tightly. “He’ll be fine as soon as the curse fades. You saved him much pain, and maybe even some permanent damage.”

“Who did this?” Hermione had turned to the room, her anger rising with her magic again.

“Whoa!” Professor Merrythought grabbed her arm again, and now Hermione was trapped
on both sides, Narcissa clutching her on the other. “We aren’t going down that road again. Dumbledore and I will do a thorough investigation. We’ll find out who was the culprit, and, even if we can’t, I will personally make sure Tom’s bed is warded appropriately.”

Hermione twisted free, and in her anger, she barely thought as she turned to Tom’s four-poster bed and covered it with every protective spell she knew.

“Oh, darling,” Narcissa was pulling her back, whispering in her ear. “I’m so sorry. So little is known about the strength of a soul mate bond like yours and Tom’s – I didn’t know you’d have so visceral a reaction, but you must think. You must breathe. You must come back to yourself. You can’t continue to do this level of magic.”

Slowly, Hermione’s arm stilled, and she stopped casting, letting Narcissa hold her. Over her mother’s shoulder, she glanced at the three boys who watched her, their mouths agape. She narrowed her eyes and they all instantly looked away.

She allowed herself to be handed from her mother back to Professor Merrythought, who led her out of the dungeons and back to Ravenclaw Tower. At the door, Merrythought silenced the knocker and opened the door quickly.

“Get the rest you can. We’ll deal with the fallout in the morning,” she sighed, running a hand through her short red curls. “Be aware, though, that I am always on your side, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded, and walked slowly up to the silent tower room. There was quiet breathing from the other occupants, and she cast a muffliato on her own bed so that she could alternately cry and scream in peace.

What had she done? Had she ruined everything? And why in the world had she reacted so strongly? Now that she had some distance, she could see that she how rashly she had acted, how much she had exposed and risked. The magic done in front of the Slytherins had been mostly silent, and they probably didn’t truly recognize the significance of her power, though they would be certainly be shocked that she could perform non-verbal spells. But Selwyn, Merrythought, and Slughorn surely did, those Slytherins would likely tell the whole school the tale of the reducto explosion she’d caused.

Thinking of damage-control, Hermione thought that if she carefully coordinated with Narcissa, they could probably chalk up what she’d done to a combination of an extremely strong soul mate connection, precocious magical ability, and being a child who had lived in an active warzone.
But what she couldn’t defend to herself was how rage-filled she had become. If she had been faced with the Slytherins who had cursed Tom, if she had known for sure it was the culprits, she could barely imagine what she wouldn’t have done to them in retaliation for Tom’s pain. She would have blasted her way through all of the dungeons, dragged bodies from the rubble and destroyed them. How was she affected in this way? Was it Voldemort’s soul piece, somehow clinging to her and tainting her? Or was it an instinctive need to protect the other half of her soul, no matter the cost? Hermione wasn’t sure there was an answer that would satisfy, but since she knew that if Tom were in danger, she would know, she allowed herself to fall into a fitful sleep.
Hermione Tells Tom What She Thinks

Chapter Summary

Narcissa gets some comfort, Hermione tells Tom how she feels about his behavior, Tom continues to gain support, and Hermione gets called to the Headmaster's Office.

Chapter Notes

Hope this explains things well...I wanted to make it clear that the adults are concerned, but not blaming Tom at the moment.

Narcissa was feeling numb. Months of careful planning, such strong initial success, and now… now, it seemed all was falling apart around her. How foolish she had been to think that she could rewrite history so easily, that bringing a girl of seventeen, even one who had a strong moral center, to meet a soul mate who had no morals would end in anything but disaster.

She looked down at Tom, wiping a few beads of sweat from his small brow. He was still a child, and now he was going to be caught in the middle of war with himself and Hermione at the center. It might only be a school-aged war, but it was already vicious, and after witnessing Hermione’s reaction last night?

Narcissa had heard tales from Draco, and minor snippets from Death Eater talk about the skills of the Golden Trio. They had all written the Weasley boy completely off, chalked Potter’s successes up to extremely good luck, but the girl, they had agreed, was an actual threat. Narcissa had taken that to mean that Hermione was a bright and clever witch for a seventeen year old. What she had seen displayed in the Slytherin dormitory last night was not the magic of seventeen year old. She was beginning to realize that Hermione not only matched the Dark Lord in intelligence, but that she was on her way to matching him in magical power.

So far, the pair had only been exposed to one another with significant age discrepancies. The Dark Lord had been in his seventies, which was barely middle-aged for a magical person, while Hermione had been a child, though still a match for his wits. Now, Tom was eleven, and Hermione, though only six years older in magical terms, was worlds older in experience, having nearly finished school, and learned much more in practical, real-world magical experience. When Tom gained a few years, and was closer to Hermione’s level, Narcissa wondered if there would be any force on the planet that could withstand their combined wills.
In the meantime, even though his ability was raw and unfocused, Tom would wreck havoc. And Hermione, whether she agreed with him or not, would protect him, that much was clear after this evening, and that was a terrifying thought because there was not a single student at Hogwarts who could best her, and more than one professor who would struggle to do so.

“Narcissa?” Electra had come to Tom’s bedside with a fresh bowl of mint and aloe water. “I’ll take over for a bit. Tending to someone you care for is especially draining. Get some rest, I will see to him and call you if anything changes. I truly believe he will be fine now.”

“Thanks to Hermione’s quick thinking,” Narcissa stared down at the boy, not moving.

Electra put down the bowl and took the rag from Narcissa’s hand. “Yes, your daughter was… stunning, honestly. She is brilliant, though she doesn’t quite have your talent for healing. Now, go to your quarters and sleep, or you won’t be much help to anyone tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Narcissa repeated. “Tomorrow is going to be,”

“Awful,” Electra supplied bluntly. “The Slytherins will be in chaos, the other houses will hear about it, and all of that added to the normal beginning of the year headache will make for an absolute kerfuffle beyond all comprehension.” She raised Narcissa by her shoulders and pointed her to the door. “I know Professor Merrythought thinks I hate muggleborns, but I don’t. I just don’t like her. I think Slytherin House needs more half-blooded students, and even muggleborns, eventually. But being the first outspoken half-blood in that house is not going to be an easy road for Mr. Riddle. This probably won’t be the only time he ends up in the hospital wing. It’s good he has your daughter to give him friends outside of Slytherin.”

Narcissa nodded, but she was thinking more along the lines that they would be seeing a lot more of Tom’s victims in the hospital wing than the boy himself. The Dark Lord would not be caught unaware twice, no matter his age. She walked down the hall to her quarters in a daze, having lost focus for the first time since going back in time. Before, she had not known what would happen, but she had deluded herself enough to feel like she was in control. That control was gone, and she had no idea of what to do next.

“I thought you’d show up eventually,” Galatea was leaning casually against her door, still in her robe and men’s pajamas. “How’s the boy?”

“He’ll be fine physically by morning,” Narcissa replied automatically. “How’s my daughter?”

Galatea laughed. “After what I saw tonight, I could drop that girl into a nest of Hungarian Horntails
and feel sorry for the dragons.”

Narcissa made an annoyed huffing sound.

“She’s fine, physically, same as the boy.” Galatea soothed, moving from the door to take both of Narcissa’s hands in her own. “You know, when we first met and you said that you had been married, even though you were widowed, I was jealous. I was jealous that someone else had been married to my soul mate, and had given her a child. But now, after having spent time with Hermione, I’m glad. That girl is a genius, a prodigy, and she believes in equality and humanity, and I can’t imagine a better future than a Hogwarts with her in it. She’s going to take this place by storm.”

At the mention of ‘future,’ Narcissa groaned. “I need to get some sleep, Galatea. This has been a trying evening.”

“Let me come in, Narcissa,” the other woman whispered in her ear. “Just let me hold you. You know you’ll sleep better that way, whether or not you admit it.”

Too tired to argue, and not wanting to be alone with her thoughts, Narcissa opened the door with a quick spell and allowed Galatea to follow her. She didn’t pause, but headed straight to her bed, and Galatea was as good as her word. The taller woman slid into bed behind her, pulled her close, and breathed softly into her hair until Narcissa finally slept.

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Tom woke slowly to unfamiliar surroundings. He had a vague memory of pain, then of Hermione over him, her hair and face wild, like the etching of an avenging angel he’d seen in an old family Bible his third grade teacher had always had on her desk, and allowed him to read.

Once he’d fully come to, his memories returned, he identified the room as the Hospital Wing, and he was on his feet, jumping out of the bed before Madam Selwyn could protest. As he ran down the hallway, he looked out the windows. The sky was still mostly dark, though light was breaking on the horizon. Nothing would stop him from attending his first day of classes, just as nothing would stop him from punishing whoever had been behind the events of last night.
“Crystallized Pineapple,” he spoke to the dungeon wall, which promptly slid open. No one was in the common room, and Tom went quickly to his room, quietly got clean clothes from his trunk, grabbed his school bag with writing supplies and textbooks, and ran back out.

He went down the hall until he found a regular bathroom and washed his face and hair in the sink. He had not seen his wand, but he was not worried. Tom was sure, with no room for doubt, that Hermione had picked it up to keep it safe, just as he was sure Damballa had gone back to her.

As much as he had been angry with her yesterday, that was how much she had redeemed herself, and more. Though he wouldn’t like to say so out loud, Hermione had been right in everything she had said about Slytherin House, and when he had needed her, when he had failed himself, she hadn’t failed. She had rescued him. Due to the pain he’d felt, which was still lingering as a vague, uncomfortable warmth, he didn’t know exactly what she’d done, but there had been a flurry of spells, cast faster than he could follow. She had protected their space, he knew, and cast some kind of noise cancelling spell, allowing him to let out the scream that he’d been holding. She had somehow lessened the pain, and then made his skin blessedly cool. Tom had read all of the first year textbooks, front to back, and none of what she’d done was there.

Narcissa and Madam Selwyn had taken over then, and Hermione was gone, but then, only seconds later, he had heard her voice, emanating from everywhere in that dungeon. His heart almost stopped when she swore vengeance. Even though he knew he was magic, this world was still half a dream to him, and despite accepting the idea of soul mates intellectually, it wasn’t until that moment, when Hermione was screaming her rage on his behalf, that he knew in his heart that she was truly his match.

After checking to make sure he was perfectly presentable, not a hair out of place, the marks on his lips thankfully healed, he entered the Great Hall and sat silently at the end of the Slytherin table. He watched the sun rise, and listened as the castle began to wake. He needed to come up with a plan, but in the meantime, he needed to show the school that he was strong, that last night was nothing to him.

The first person to come in was Hermione, as he had hoped. She was in her uniform, her clothing neat and pressed. Her hair was pushed back from her face by the wide black leather band he’d picked out in Diagon Alley, though her curls were not what he’d call restrained.

“Tom,” she said, her voice full of affection, relief, and exasperation. “I’ve just come from the Hospital Wing, where I had hoped to find you. Of course, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see you on your feet well before you should be.”

He stood, walking to meet her in the middle of the hall, his arms spread as if he owned the room. “I won’t be off them again.”
“It might not be that easy,” she took his wand out of her pocket and handed it to him. “We’ve stepped into a nest of vipers itching to bite us.”

“Easy is boring, and it’s my birthright to control snakes” he replied, taking the wand and sighing in pleasure as he felt his magic reconnect with it. He tucked it into his sleeve and took her hand.

She looked at him in surprise. He didn’t usually initiate contact. He returned her gaze, and smiled broadly. “Hermione, I want to thank you for last night.”

“I,” she stuttered, perhaps more shocked than she ever been in her life. When he turned on the charm, she felt nearly defenseless. “I… of course, Tom. I told you I would protect you, too. I meant it. What actually happened?”

Tom squeezed her hand, enjoying the fact that her touch was lessening the lingering discomfort of the burning curse. He knew she wouldn’t like some of what he was going to tell her, but he was certain she wouldn’t reject him either. Last night had shown him just how strong their bond was.

“A fourth year insulted me at the welcoming feast,” Tom was sure to lead with the evidence that he hadn’t been the one to start the problem. “Jack Mulciber. He called my Gaunt relatives insane and stupid, but I didn’t really care.”

Hermione knew something big was coming. Tom’s jaw muscle was twitching. “What else did he say, that you did care about?”

“He said I was weak, that I had dirty blood,” Tom replied, the words coming out in a furious hiss.

She knew exactly how those words stung, especially the first time one actually understood the hatred and prejudice behind them. “Tom, you know that’s not true,” she soothed, then asked. “What did you do to him?”

“What makes you think I did something to him?” Tom’s face was all innocence.

Hands on her hips, Hermione gave him the same expression she had used countless times
on Ron and Harry. Though Tom did not duck his head to hide a sheepish expression, he did answer her.

“I choked him with my mind,” he admitted, then added in a defensive tone, “He was an idiot, spitting prejudiced poison, and I wasn’t going to listen to it. He needed to be taught a lesson!”

A thousand different alarms were going off in Hermione’s mind. This was the heart of the problem of Tom Riddle. She and Narcissa might have swayed him to the other end of the blood-status belief spectrum, to the side that believed in equality and personal merit, but that didn’t mean his motives had suddenly become pure. He still acted out of anger as well as a need to amass power and control others, and had no problem using violence and intimidation to get his way. He wasn’t concerned for the plight of half-bloods and muggleborns so much as he was determined to be recognized as the best at everything as the half-blood he was, with followers in tow to praise him.

How could she combat his core personality? She was no psychiatrist, but Voldemort’s actions in the future had been symptoms of many psychological problems – megalomania, sociopathy, and narcissism, to name a few. Some of this was created or worsened by how he had whittled away at the piece of his soul left in his body, and Narcissa had told her that there had been a marked increase in both cruelty and irrational behavior when he had refashioned his body after the final task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

She had difficult material to work with, and he was too smart to manipulate. The hat had told her not to be afraid to test their bond, to challenge him, and that seemed like her only option at the moment.

“I know you have always been alone, but part of that is because you choose to hold yourself apart from others, to see yourself above them,” Hermione began. “Simply because we have great magical potential doesn’t mean we are better, or that our opinions or lives mean more than others, and if you believe that, then you are embracing the same tenants of Pureblood prejudice, only with groups moved into different roles.”

“We are better, Hermione,” Tom looked more amused than angry, as if he were trying to explain a simple concept to a small child. “How can you claim that your life isn’t a million times more valuable than an inbred pig like Jack Mulciber’s?”

“I don’t have to like everyone to believe that all life is sacred,” Hermione countered. “I won’t pretend that I won’t fight to protect you, myself, and others, but I would never even consider choking someone just because he insulted me!”
Tom drew himself up. He was a few inches taller than she was, and with the extension of his angry magic, he seemed even larger. “Mulciber didn’t simply insult me! He tried to invalidate my existence in Slytherin House, in the magical world altogether. I know all about the pecking order of humanity, magical or not. People like Mulciber see us as their subordinates at best, and their slaves at worst, Hermione.”

Though his magic was swirling around them in anger, he ran his hand up her arm with an extraordinarily gentle touch, barely touching the sleeve over her bandage.

“People like Mulciber will cut and curse us to pieces if we don’t take decisive control,” he made a repetitive motion with his index finger on her shirt as he spoke, and Hermione realized with surprise that he was tracing a rune of healing and protection over her wound. It was one of the runes she had shown him several weeks ago, and her heart thudded at the thought he wanted to protect her.

His hand stilled and he looked into her eyes. “If anyone else dares to spill a drop of your blood, or harm you in any way, I will kill them.”

“Tom,” her eyes were wet, tears of frustration welling up. “You can’t kill people. It is wrong. We can reform this society, bring equality for every blood status. We can be free without resorting to violence.”

“We can be more than simply free, Hermione,” a broad smile both charming and arrogant covered his face. “Together, we could rule this world, and bend it to our will.”

She closed her eyes. He’d said it. Rule the world. At eleven. “Tom, I don’t want to rule the world,”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you want the magical world to accept and follow your beliefs?”

“Changing public opinion and enacting fair laws and protections for all blood statuses and all magical creatures isn’t the same as ruling over the magical world.” Hermione snapped. “I don’t want to sit on a bloody throne!”

“I sat in the galley at a Parliament session once,” Tom said. “My teacher brought the brightest students there, to ‘see our government at work,’ but I saw nothing except meaningless arguments. There was no action, no work done at all. From what I’ve read about the Ministry of Magic, it seems no better. Do you want to wait until we’re old and grey before changes are made? Or do you want to make our lives, and those of others you value, better now?”
Hermione recognized his point, but refused to concede. “Social change takes time precisely because it isn’t a war; it isn’t violence! And if you paid any attention in your history classes, you will know that war doesn’t solve anything! It may deal with immediate problems, but look what is happening in Europe right now! How do you think Hitler has won the hearts of the German people? Because they were crushed in the first World War, and they were impoverished and angry, and now they want revenge! How is creating a situation like that here with the Purebloods going to give us a better society?”

“I find it amazing that you want to pretend power doesn’t matter when I know you used a massive display of power last night to protect me. Why is power used defensively fine, but power used offensively in order to pre-empt the need for defense bad?”

“Because good people don’t go around attacking others!” Hermione yelled.

Tom smirked, “I never claimed to be good, Hermione, and as my soul mate, you must have more than a little bad inside yourself.” He pulled at one of her curls, his eyes unfocused for a moment, lost in memory. “You looked like the Angel of Death over my bed last night.”

She thought of her rage last night, and suspected that was an accurate description. “But,” she insisted stubbornly, “I didn’t hurt anyone.”

“No,” Tom laughed. “You declared war, and war has violence. If you think for one instant that the Slytherins who attacked me and their allies won’t seek to answer the challenge you issued last night, then you are more naïve than I thought.”

Hermione groaned. He was right about that. He was right about a lot of things. “That’s true. They will be coming for us. The Headmaster will be asking questions, but the halls will likely be a gauntlet.”

She thought of the coming interviews with the staff and knew she needed to warn him. “I know you are used to doing whatever you want without many consequences, Tom, but you can’t be expelled from Hogwarts. I need you here with me, and if you openly attack other students, you will be sent away. And if you try to fight all your battles alone in the dungeons, you will get hurt. If the professors find out that you choked Mulciber, you will be in serious trouble. If it comes up, you need to say you didn’t intend it. Since you didn’t use a wand, that is believable enough; anger can trigger involuntary magic, especially in untrained wizards and witches. Lie as little as possible. Professor Dumbledore will recognize any lies, trust me.”
“And what do you plan to say about your actions?” Tom asked seriously. “I was not fully aware of what was happening last night, but I could feel your magic, and it was out of control. It was everywhere, like its own living force, and I am positive you did things that you should not be able to do at our age and skill level.”

Hermione had spent the morning pondering this, and she had briefly talked with Narcissa in the Hospital Wing about a plan of action. “I’m not sure, completely,” she said slowly. “Our bond is very special, and very rare, so that was certainly a factor in my magic out-doing itself to protect you. I also have extremely strong and specific memory abilities. I can watch an adult perform a spell and repeat pronunciations and wand movements perfectly, often on the first try. Much of what I did last night was unconscious, and I can’t claim to understand how I did it all.”

She looked up at him, remembering his beautiful features contorted in pain. “But I’m glad I did, and I’d do it again.”

Tom seemed mostly pleased with this response. “We will triumph, Hermione, and then you won’t have to worry about me ever again.”

“Tom,” Hermione answered honestly, “I’ll always worry about you because you are your own greatest enemy. Until you can understand that other people have inherent value, not simply as tools or possessions, then you will always be angry and at odds with others, no matter how many ‘problems’ we solve.”

He frowned at her. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on that point. For now, we need to decide what we are doing in the immediate future. Students will be arriving for breakfast any minute.”

She sighed, knowing she wasn’t going to change a lifetime of behavior in one conversation. “Fine. Only two or three Slytherins were involved in the attack, right?”

Tom nodded. “I believe it was Mulciber and two others, probably in his same year. The shapes were mostly the same size.”

“And some of the other first years were interested in what you said?” Hermione’s nose crinkled as if she smelled something bad. “Marguerite seemed to hang on your every word.”

“Are you jealous of Marguerite, Hermione?” he laughed.
“No!” she snapped, and continued speaking while he kept laughing. “Your roommates seemed concerned for you.”

Tom shrugged. “They were polite enough. I think they were impressed by my magic, and they were terrified of you, so power will win them over more than words.”

“Slytherins,” Hermione muttered. “The good news is that many of the students in the other houses are half-bloods, and only a generation or two away from muggle relatives, if that far. Add the muggleborns and the sympathetic pureblood families like the Longbottoms, Shacklebolts, Weasleys, and Abbotts to that, and there are plenty of students who will support and defend the stand we’ve made in classes and hallways.”

He looked pleasantly surprised. “That is good news.”

“Tom, that isn’t carte blanche to do what you want,” she warned. “Many of those students will support you as far as defense, but will not agree with attacking Purebloods or taking revenge.”

His expression soured. “So, they all have morals, like you.”

“That isn’t a bad thing, Tom!” She could hear noise above them, in the halls. “Do you remember the protego?”

Tom nodded, and she quickly listed three other defensive charms, grabbing his wand hand and leading him through the motions, her palm over his knuckles, her magic pleasantly mingling with his. It was difficult to pull away from how ‘right’ it felt to touch his hand, to move his wand with hers, as if they were one magical source, with one conduit. “You can use any of those to block spells cast at you, and you won’t get in trouble for them.”

“So, I should allow them to attack me with no consequence?” Tom’s mouth made a grim line. “That isn’t the Slytherin way, and they will never respect me if I simply defend with no attack.”

Students were in the hallway now, and Hermione gave in a bit, realism setting in. “Fine!” She whispered. “Just don’t do anything that will cause lasting or visible damage, and do not use your wand. Spells from your wand can be traced. IF a small amount of revenge will keep you safe, then use it wisely.”
He smiled now, a beautiful smile that would have charmed any other girl to her toes. With a flourish, he lifted her hand and bowed over it. “Of course, my Lady.”

She gave him a disapproving glare, but inside, she was thinking she was never going to be free of Tom Riddle if he continued to look at her like that.

“Riddle!” Abraxas Malfoy was striding toward them. He stopped several feet short, glancing warily at Hermione.

“Hermione, this is Abraxas Malfoy,” Tom’s voice was all polite civility. “Abraxas, this is my cousin, Miss Hermione Bonneau.”

“A pleasure, Miss Bonneau,” Abraxas bowed his head, though he seemed afraid to get too close to either of them. “You are quite the marvel at spells.”

Hermione shook her head modestly. “I am simply extremely fond of my cousin, and will do anything to keep him safe.” She let the edge of a threat enter her voice, which caused Tom to grin and Abraxas to go whiter than he already was.

“Yes, that was clear,” Malfoy assured her. “I was actually coming to find Tom, to see if he was alright after…” his voice trailed off, unsure if reminding Tom of the curse was wise. “Jacob and Corvus on their way too, and I saw Vidhi and Marguerite in the common room. We all support you, Tom,” he glanced at Hermione. “And your cousin, too, of course.”

Her ego was thrilled to have a Malfoy shaking in front of her, and even though she knew it was petty, Hermione gave him a hard stare, and responded, “Good.”

Tom looked positively enchanted with Hermione’s not-so-veiled-threats. “Yes, I hope that everyone understands that Hermione and I have a bond that transcends house affiliation, and any insult to her is an insult to me.”

“And vice versa,” Hermione said, even though she had already proven that beyond the need for words.

Abraxas nodded, and Hermione caught sight of the Rosier children entering with three other Slytherins, Tom’s two other roommates, and a girl barely larger than Marguerite with dark hair and
a grim look on her face. In contrast to everyone else’s serious expressions, Thad gave her a small smile and wave, and, for once, Marguerite didn’t sneer or make any snide comments.

“We know Mulciber was one,” she said quietly to Tom once the entire group had come to stand in a semi-circle around him, leaving a wide space between them. “And Thaddeus and Sebastian told me this morning Calvin Nott was out of their room last night. Calvin’s only a second year, and more stupid than my brother. If you scare him, I’m sure he’ll tell us who the third boy was.”

A tall, thin boy who was clearly having an awkward transition to his teen years came up to them and nodded silently. Marguerite performed the role of social secretary, to Hermione’s annoyance.

“Tom, this is Sebastian Lestrange, he’s a second year who rooms with my brother and Calvin Nott,” she stated.

Hermione’s magic flared up briefly, the air took on a metallic charge, and Sebastian, who had come to stand beside her, moved away quickly. Apparently, tales of her performance in the dungeon last night had carried to all of the Slytherins. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that this boy had no connection to Bellatrix, who had only been a Lestrange by marriage, and that she couldn’t hate him solely due to his last name.

Tom glanced at her sharply, but said nothing when she quickly shook her head and calmed her magic. He turned to Sebastian. “We didn’t get a chance to meet last night,” he extended his hand.

Everyone watched, wary, but Sebastian took Tom’s hand without hesitation. “I’m proud to be a pureblood, and I will marry to keep my line pure and carry on my family tradition, but Mulciber and Nott don’t have a single brain cell between them. I would rather ally myself with power.”

With a gracious and diplomatic smile that everyone except Hermione probably believed was sincere, Tom answered, “I don’t want to destroy any traditions – I simply want to expand them. Some of these traditions were started in the middle ages, and they need to be updated for the modern world in order to keep the magical world strong.”

All of the Slytherins were nodding, as if hypnotized by Tom’s words and Hermione was amazed. Maybe he did have a birthright to control snakes, both literally and figuratively.

“Hermione?” Patience had come over to the group, her pale eyes, fly-away platinum blonde hair, and vacant expression giving her an ethereal air. She looked directly at Tom and smiled broadly, as
if they were old friends. “Damballa is very happily resting in my bottom drawer. I left it open so he can slither out.”

“Thank you, Patience, Tom and I appreciate that you looked after him this morning, don’t we, Tom?” Hermione prompted.

Tom nodded, giving Patience a critical stare that would have had any one of the Slytherins running for cover. “Of course.”

Patience looped an arm through Hermione’s. “Come, they want to plot. Snakes need dark spaces to relax sometimes. We should get breakfast. I’m sure they’ll be full of surprises in our DADA class.”

Knowing she couldn’t control Tom, and hoping he would heed her warning, Hermione said a polite goodbye and turned to leave with Patience. Tom caught her other elbow, his magic buzzing on her skin. Her own magic rose to greet his, and the mix hung in the air, thick with power. All seven Slytherins took another step back. Patience remained on Hermione’s other arm, smiling at them approvingly.

“Be careful,” he said, and because it was Tom, the words came out like an order, but she could feel the affection behind it in his touch.

“I will,” she promised, and left with Patience, praying that he would use that brilliant mind of his to avoid getting caught doing whatever he was about to plan.

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Things were quiet at the Ravenclaw table. Hermione answered all the questions she was asked calmly and as logically as she could, and her housemates were quickly satisfied with the fact that she had a strong bond with her cousin, she was exceptionally clever and a quick learner, and she had been exposed to more practical battle magic than an average student because she had lived in area heavily attacked by Grindelwald’s forces. Being very intelligent themselves, they knew it was possible for young witches and wizards to be very talented, and not being Slytherins, they were much more inclined to take her at her word, because she hadn’t given them any reason not to trust her.
After breakfast, when they received their schedules, she and Patience headed to Professor Merrythought’s classroom, waiting briefly at the entrance of the great hall for Tom and the other first-year Slytherins to join them. Hermione wanted to keep Tom in her line of sight, to prevent any trouble she could. They made an odd group, she thought. Patience had linked arms with her again, and they walked beside Tom, with the rest of the Slytherins around them like a security detail. Fate had a funny sense of humor, she thought bitterly.

As expected, news of last night had spread through the whole student body, but the details were, as usual, embellished or completely wrong. Hermione heard a group of second-year Gryffindors arguing over whether or not she had apparated into the dungeons, and two first-year Hufflepuffs asked her if she had really used fiendfyre to destroy the Slytherin common room.

“Your legend proceeds you,” Tom said dryly as the Hufflepuffs scurried away, disappointed that Hermione had denied the use of fiendfyre.

“We should compose a ballad,” Patience hummed a sample heroic-sounding tune. “We could call it, ‘The Tale of the Lady of Light and Her Dark Prince.’”

Hermione nearly choked on the laughter she held back at the thunderous expression on Tom’s face. “That’s ok, Patience, I doubt music could do me justice,” she teased.

Patience nodded gravely. “True, perhaps I should make a painting? Or an enchanted tapestry? I’d need quite a lot of thread.”

“A sense of self-preservation would serve you better,” Abraxas muttered off to Hermione’s side.

They all fell silent as they turned the corner and joined the larger group of Ravenclaw and Slytherin students filing into Professor Merrythought’s classroom.

“Hermione?” Tom held out a chair at one of the long tables that sat four students.

It was usual for students of different houses to sit with one another in classes unless professors specifically mixed the students for projects. However, no one said a word as Patience and Hermione sat down with Tom and Abraxas.

Professor Merrythought was already in the room, at the front of the class, and Hermione relaxed a
bit. She loved learning, and it didn’t matter if she’d taken this class long ago. Her DADA teachers had been disastrous for the most part, so she thought she could learn quite a lot from a competent professor.

She took out her books and note-taking supplies, and smiled as Tom did, too. He had the brown eagle feather quill, its golden edges shimmering in the light. As the class began, Hermione was once again reminded of Professor Lupin. Professor Merrythought had a split schedule for classes; for every two class periods of traditional instruction, there would be one class period of practical spell work, and all exams would have a spell casting component. She also sponsored a dueling club that began in December, and though first-years weren’t eligible to duel, they were welcome to come and watch the older students practice.

After DADA class, they headed to Charms with Hufflepuff House and then Herbology with Slytherin again. Hermione wrote copious notes in all her classes, as usual, and managed to hold herself back to answering only every other question, which worked out well, since Tom answered most of the others in DADA and Herbology. Between the two of them, they might have earned enough points for their respective houses to slightly offset the points that would be deducted once they were called in to speak to the Headmaster.

As the day wore on, Hermione came to dread the inevitable meeting more and more. Why hadn’t they been called first thing? She was in the library, working on the first homework assignment for Charms with Josephine, Felicity, and Patience, feeling like she must be in the calm eye of the storm when a Hufflepuff prefect came to the table.

“Hermione Bonneau? Headmaster Dippet would like you to come to his office.”

She nodded and gathered her things, actually relieved to be finally taking care of this problem. Whatever the punishment, she would face it, and she and Narcissa would help Tom figure out a better way to handle the older Slytherins.

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When Hermione entered the Headmaster’s office, she thought she had an inkling of how Harry had felt facing the Wizengamot in his fifth year. The Headmaster was seated behind his large desk, and Professors Dumbledore, Merrythought, and Slughorn were in chairs to either side, creating a sort of high court, with a single, hard wooden chair in front.
“Miss Bonneau,” Headmaster Dippet called, and gestured to the chair. “Please sit.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replied, perching on the edge of the seat. She pulled her magic into herself as tightly as she could, to keep everything about herself in control. She also raised her mental shields, but tried to make them appear as natural barriers rather than consciously constructed ones.

“Last night was an eventful first day for several students,” Dippet murmured. “And not the type of beginning that bodes well for the rest of the school year. There are always minor scuffles between houses, but such an attack within a house, and then a response from outside, well, it is more than a little concerning.”

The ancient headmaster seemed out of breath from that pronouncement, and looked to Dumbledore, who continued for him.

“There are many altercations in Hogwarts throughout the year, intended and otherwise. As staff, we know that these arguments and even some of the minor damage inflicted are necessary for the growth and development of maturity in young magical persons. It is only by testing limits that students can learn how serious magic is, how great an honor and responsibility it is to have magical abilities.” Dumbledore’s voice was kind, as was his expression. Hermione relaxed just a bit.

Dumbledore went on, “However, when students cross the line into seriously harming others, the school administration has a duty to investigate, correct, and, if necessary, punish those who are mis-using magic in dark or malicious ways.”

Dippet nodded, his bushy eyebrows raised high on his bald head. “Absolutely correct, Albus!”

No one had asked her a question yet, so Hermione remained silent. Dumbledore smiled at her, and she wasn’t sure if it was quite genuine. She wanted to believe in him, but he had concealed so much from Harry, and allowed so much harm to come to him in service of the greater good, that it seemed foolish to trust him completely.

“Miss Bonneau,” Dumbledore began. “We have interviewed everyone in Slytherin House who was awake before or during the incidents of last night. I have consulted with Madam Selwyn and your mother, as well as Professors Merrythought and Slughorn. Other than damage from a reducto curse fired in the Slytherin common room, which hurt no one, and which you subsequently repaired under the instruction of your Head of House, you did nothing wrong last night. Indeed, you came to the aid of a fellow student, and alerted staff members while you attempted to counteract a very dark and painful curse.”
Professor Merrythought added, “I’ve already explained to our Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster that I told you the appropriate response to learning of Tom’s suffering would have been to inform the staff immediately instead of trying to attend to him yourself.”

Hermione nodded, still unsure of where this interview was headed.

“Miss Bonneau, I suspected from the first day that I met you and your cousin that the two of you were magically linked in an extraordinarily powerful and unique way. Your mother has informed us, privately, that you and Mr. Riddle are soul mates, and not only that, but soul mates who are magically marked with each other’s words,” Dumbledore shook his head in amazement. “A bond like that will shape your life and magic profoundly, but we know very little of how the particulars will play out. Clearly, you can sense when he is in danger, and I am sure the reverse is true.”

“It will a fascinating seven years,” Professor Slughorn noted, his eyes alight with anticipation. “I simply can’t wait.”

The other professors all turned to the Potions professor, who quickly looked away. “Of course, we want to avoid problems in the future,” he muttered.

“Hermione will be serving detention with me for the next week for the damage in Slytherin house,” Professor Merrythought said, giving Hermione an encouraging crooked smile.

Dippet nodded approvingly, “That will do for the infraction, since she did help repair the damage,” he glanced at Hermione, his ancient eyes seeing her more clearly than she had given him credit for. “Which brings us to the other concern, your level of magical ability.”

Slughorn sat forward, all but rubbing his hands together.

Professor Merrythought rolled her eyes, and said sharply, “I think we can all agree that Miss Bonneau is a magical prodigy, at defensive abilities, if nothing else. It is not a crime for a student to be a genius.”

“Of course not,” Dippet humphed, then turned to Hermione. “Your mother assures us that you have always had strong magic, exhibiting unconscious magic even as an infant, changing the color and shape of your toys, moving items into your reach with levitation. It is also true that the restrictions on underage magic are more lenient in France, and your mother freely admits that she
and your late father taught you spells of healing and protection to be used in life or death circumstances due to the fighting near your home.”

Dumbledore stood and approached her. “There are many instances throughout history of witches and wizards performing extraordinary magic while they or their loved ones were in danger. The pull to defend a soul mate would be irresistible, I am sure.”

He stroked his beard with a thoughtful look. “We would like to perform a few basic tests of your magical skills, simply so we can be aware of whether last night’s events were mostly unconscious, or if we need to consider moving you up a few years of study. What do you say?”

Because Hermione didn’t put legilimency past Dumbledore, she looked at Dippet instead as she replied. “I am happy to take any test.”

“See?” Professor Merrythought grinned. “Definitely belongs in Ravenclaw.”

For the next half-hour, the three professors and the Headmaster took turns asking her questions and having her attempt to perform various spells. Not wanting to be separated from Tom further, but also not wanting to draw suspicion, she allowed herself to perform several protective spells at almost her full capabilities, but kept everything else to the level she had displayed in 1991 in her first year of Hogwarts. The professors seemed impressed with her defensive skills and general knowledge, but relieved that she wasn’t doing beyond NEWT level magic in other areas.

Dumbledore turned to Dippet after they had asked her to produce a Patronus. Hermione knew that Narcissa had revealed this skill, as the way she had learned about Tom’s condition, so she reluctantly cast the spell, her otter not nearly as bright or active as it normally was.

“Armando, I believe we could easily move her to third or fourth year classes, but she would suffer socially, and certainly be distressed due to further distance from her soul mate,” he declared.

Professor Merrythought nodded in agreement. “She is very talented, but she is still a child, and one who recently lost her father. Moving her out of her age group would be a disruption, and likely isolate her.”

“And it would deprive us of the opportunity to have her in our classrooms for the full seven years of schooling,” Slughorn added, as if this were the primary concern.
With an indulgent smile, Dumbledore replied, “That is also true.”

Dippet cleared his throat for a full ten seconds, and Hermione was about to ask if he was choking, when he finally spoke. “Miss Bonneau, I believe we are all satisfied. You will report to Professor Merrythought to discuss detention next week. Do you have any questions?”

Hermione desperately wanted to know if Tom had already been seen, and if they had found the Slytherins who had hurt him. She wasn’t sure if asking was wise, but her inner Gryffindor came out. “Did you find the students who cast the burning curse on Tom?”

“We did,” Headmaster Dippet’s eyes were dark, and Hermione thought he must have been very formidable at the height of his powers. “Due to the severity of the curse, and the cowardly nature of attacking a fellow student in his sleep, all three boys have been expelled from the school until after the Christmas break. Their parents have been notified, and they will need to arrange for private tutors to keep the boys current in their studies. The boys will have an opportunity to return in the new year, but will be on a strict probation.”

Hermione blinked in shock. Dippet was impressing her. In her own time, she had honestly thought students at Hogwarts got away with far too much, even when those students happened to be Harry or Ron or herself. Dippet clearly ruled Hogwarts with a much firmer hand, something she would keep in the forefront of her mind, especially when she was trying to make sure Tom behaved in the halls.

“It is more generous than I would allow,” Professor Merrythought said quietly. “I saw Mr. Riddle’s condition, and if those boys had been more competent, they could have killed him.”

Dumbledore answered Hermione’s other question with his next statement. “Yes, but Mr. Riddle also needs to learn to control his temper. His inadvertent magic at the dinner table could have killed Mr. Mulciber just as easily.”

“Yes, but it was inadvertent,” Slughorn cut in. “The boy is a raw source of power, like his soul mate, and we must foster such prodigious talent!”

Hermione kept her expression still, but she was greatly relieved to know that Tom had taken her advice, and that he had managed to convince the professors that his choking of Mulciber had been beyond his control. Even Dumbledore seemed to believe it, which was important. Dumbledore’s suspicion of and animosity toward Tom in the original timeline was not something she wanted to recreate.
“Did Tom get in trouble for the accidental magic?” she kept her voice concerned, but not accusatory.

Professor Dumbledore shook his head. “No, but we did have a long discussion with him about the importance of keeping his emotions in check, and the warning signs of when his magic may be on the verge of acting out of his control. Many first-years have trouble with accidental magic, but those students who are often angry have the most difficulty. Mr. Riddle would do well to find a few hobbies that help him to decompress.”

“Does he fly well?” Professor Slughorn asked excitedly. “I’m always on the watch for a new member for our Quidditch team.”

Hermione couldn’t hold back a smile at the thought of Tom playing Quidditch. The first time he got hit with a bludger, he’d level the whole pitch. “I don’t think Tom is the Quidditch type.”

“Pity,” Slughorn said in a dejected tone.

Headmaster Dippet cleared his throat again, for even longer this time. “That concludes our discuss, I believe. Miss Bonneau, you are free to go. We will see you in a half-hour at dinner.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hermione replied, nodding at all the adults and leaving the room in a much happier mood than she had entered it.
Happy Birthday, Hermione!

Chapter Summary

Hermione has a birthday, Tom gets her a present, Narcissa gives some advice and receives some in return.

Chapter Notes

Narcissa struggles a bit with her attraction to another woman. I wouldn't call it internalized homophobia exactly, but perhaps hesitation born out of a lifetime of personal repression. There really aren't any gay characters or even side mentions of anything other than heterosexual lifestyles in HP, though I love that J.K. Rowling made Dumbledore gay ex post facto. Given how small the wizarding community is, and the pureblooded (and even half-blooded) desire to procreate and continue the magical community, and since it is 1938, I thought the world would be only partially or grudgingly accepting, so that's how I portrayed it.

Tom was a man on a mission, striding down the hall with purposeful steps. He was alone, for the first time in nearly three weeks. After the admittedly rough start to the school year, Tom had found equilibrium between caution, planning, and action. The two fourth years, Jack Mulciber and Hubert Avery, as well as the second year, Calvin Nott, were gone, sent away in shame, and Professor Merrythought had spent a good hour placing protective spells over his room and his bed, though he had heard her mutter that it was mostly redundant after Hermione’s previous warding. Still, he slept lightly, and always rose earlier and went to bed later than the other students. He wouldn’t be caught off-guard twice.

Before the three boys had left, Tom had managed to place some terribly itching nettle powder stolen from the greenhouses all through their packed trunks. It was juvenile, but his options were limited at the moment, and the thought of their skin stinging with no hope of relief for at least a few hours took the edge off his anger for a short while.

No one else had said anything to Tom about his blood status, and Tom hadn’t spoken of it, either. Classwork had become his new focus, and he applied himself with a ferocity he usually reserved for punishing those who had insulted him. From Herbology to Transfiguration to even Care of Magical Creatures, Tom outperformed every student except Hermione. Every professor was pleased with his magical and intellectual abilities, and he was cementing his place as the rising star of Slytherin, of the whole school, with Hermione at his side. He was biding his time, focusing on growing his skills, along with the list of spells he could perform. When he wasn’t in class or doing homework, he was in the library, reading every book that seemed remotely useful.
He knew that many Slytherins weren’t happy with him, especially the older siblings of some of the first years, and the boys who were sent away. However, they were keeping their distance and their tempers for now. Sagitta Black, the sixth year sister of Corvus, eyed him maliciously in the halls and warned her brother loudly in the common room about being careful choosing his ‘associations’. She was already engaged to the seventh year prefect, William Bulstrode, and he seemed to share her opinions, even if he wasn’t as vocal about them. Morgan Nott, another sixth year, and the older sister of Calvin, was often in the pair’s company, along with Ulfred Avery and Blake Goyle, who were both seventh years, and she looked like she was barely restraining herself from scratching his eyes out every time she passed him.

Abraxas, Jacob, and Corvus, along with Marguerite and Sebastian, seemed willing to ignore the older Slytherins if aligning themselves with Tom would gain them power. As the youngest students, they grasped at anything that would raise their status. Thaddeus simply followed them out of habit, while Vidhi, as the other half-blood, was attracted to Tom’s ideas out of principle. Dolohov remained neutral, taking no side. His position was the most popular one, and most of the second through fifth years seemed content to act like nothing had happened at all.

Tom played along, not hiding his beliefs, but not shouting them out, either – there would be plenty of time for that later. In the halls, he found that Hermione was right about the support he had. Many students of other houses, especially first and second years who were half-blooded or muggleborn, greeted or nodded at him every time he passed them. It was a bit odd, honestly. Tom was quite used to praise from adults, but kind regard and respect (not born of fear) from his own age group was foreign to him. He found it not altogether unpleasant.

A routine was growing, along with a lull in the apparent animosity of the pureblooded students, but Tom didn’t believe for an instant that this was a ceasefire. It was strategic withdrawal on both sides, waiting and watching for the perfect opportunity to strike again. Right now, though, he had his mind on another matter.

Yesterday, in the library, as Hermione and her Ravenclaw girlfriends were leaving for dinner, he’d heard Patience say something about Hermione’s birthday this weekend. He had not had any idea when her birthday was, but if it was soon, he needed to talk to Narcissa immediately. Keeping Hermione happy was important, and a strong leader made gestures of generosity.

He entered the Hospital Wing and found Narcissa wrapping the hand of a third year who was sniffling. “When Professor Kettleburn offers to let you pet any of his creatures, decline in the future,” she murmured.

The student nodded in furious agreement and shuffled away. Narcissa smiled softly, then sight caught of Tom. “Tom! Are you alright?”
“I’m fine, Aunt Narcissa,” he reassured. “I came to ask you about Hermione’s birthday.”

“She turns twelve on Saturday,” Narcissa hid her surprise that Tom was interested. As a muggle orphan, birthdays probably hadn’t been different than any other day for him.

Tom nodded. “And may I order her a present?”

Narcissa just managed to keep the shock off of her face. “Of course you may.”

Tom looked away, his face blank. “I have no money.”

It was a fine line to keep from hurting his pride, Narcissa knew. “You are a minor. Hermione has no money of her own, either. But you both are my family and legal heirs, so my money is your money. You may order whatever gift you please from any magical shop catalogue and charge it to the Bonneau family account. And when I am next in Gringotts, I will arrange a small allowance for both you and Hermione.”

“Thank you, Aunt Narcissa,” he turned his face back to hers, and rewarded her with a charming smile.

Taking advantage of his good mood, Narcissa broached a more sensitive subject. “How are things in Slytherin House?”

Tom replied non-committedly, “No one is bothering me, if that’s what you are asking.”

“Don’t forget that I was a Slytherin, Tom, with many Slytherin relatives. I know all about their tactics, and I also know that this fight is far from over,” Narcissa sighed. “You’ve been alone for most of your life, but you have me now, too, not just Hermione. Remember, I do have years of hard-won knowledge that might just help you.”

He considered her anew, his cool blue eyes shrewd. “What would you do? If you were me? A half-blood speaking out in the midst of a House clinging to outdated traditions that will eventually drag it down into madness and loss of magic?”
It almost took Narcissa’s breath away to hear how astutely he’d diagnosed the problem, and how completely he’d rejected the pureblood belief system in this brave new timeline she and Hermione had created. Maybe things would work out, after all. They simply needed to guide Tom where he already wanted to go, with minor adjustments. “I would proceed slowly, with great caution, and make every statement deliberate. They must see you are not backing down, and that alone will eventually anger them into making a mistake.”

Tom’s eyes darkened with surprise and admiration at her blunt speech. “And then?”

“Then, you put them in their place,” she gave an elegant shrug. Hermione would be annoyed, but Narcissa was a Slytherin, had been raised in a house of Slytherins, had married and given birth to Slytherins, and she understood Tom’s motivations better than Hermione’s Gryffindor heart and Ravenclaw brain ever could.

“They won’t stop attacking you until you prove to them that you have the power to keep them in that place. But you must be smart about this – you cannot simply punish them. You must win them over, or you will always be fighting. This is a war, not a skirmish.”

The child who might not become the Dark Lord looked at her with something close to affection in his eyes. “What do you think I will need to do to win the war?”

“Have patience, foremost, Tom,” Narcissa answered honestly. “This will be the work of several years, not weeks or months. Gather friends outside of Slytherin, and treat them well, not as lackeys. Loyalty born of fear only lasts so long before it turns to hatred. As the other Slytherins see you growing in power and well-supported, their willingness to stand against you will falter.”

“You could be our youngest Minister of Magic ever. You are a brilliant young man with amazing talent. But if you allow your anger to get the better of you and hurt others for speaking their minds, then you won’t gather the wide base of support you will need to rise to the top of our society.”

“How much power does the Minister of Magic actually have?” Tom’s expression was thoughtful. He’d told Hermione didn’t want to go into politics, but he was willing to reconsider.

“That depends on the Minister,” Narcissa said. “Someone who is intelligent and cunning might have nearly unlimited power to make change.”
Tom Riddle was a beautiful child, and he could smile in a way that made Narcissa’s heart ache for her own son. “I see. Thank you for your time and advice, Aunt Narcissa.”

“I am happy to advise you on any matter, Tom. I will always be here for you.” On an insane impulse, she leaned over and kissed his forehead, as if he had been Draco. Tears began to well in her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to keep them at bay.

Tom raised his head sharply, though he looked more confused than angry. Had he ever been kissed, Narcissa wondered. Had Meriope Gaunt been able to place her lips to his cheek before she died? Had any muggle woman lifted him in her arms as an infant or toddler? After a few seconds consideration, he gently took her hand, bowed over it, then left without another word.

-oOoOoOo-

Hermione woke to excited chattering. As she sat up and opened her eyes, she saw Khethiwe tangling herself into ribbons dangling from a small stack of presents at the end of her bed.

“Finally!” Felicity came over and sat near the presents. “We’ve been dying for you to wake up so we could watch you open your gifts!”

Josephine and Patience had come over, too, and all three girls were crowded onto her bed now.

“Can’t I get a shower first?” Hermione asked, thinking that she was actually somewhere between eighteen and nineteen this morning due to the extra months from the Time Turner, and that all she really wanted was a strong cup of coffee.

All three roommates shook their heads. Josephine lifted a small wooden box and handed it to Hermione.

“I know we’ve only been friends a short time, but I hope you like it,” the girl smiled, her sweet expression guileless. Hermione appreciated the no-strings-attached affection from her roommates greatly. They wanted nothing from her; they simply enjoyed her company. It was like being in Gryffindor Tower again, except with more intellectual discussions and less exploding Weasley brother products.

“I’m sure I will,” Hermione opened the box and saw a large, round pewter pin, with a raven engraved into the metal. “It’s beautiful, Josephine!”

Josephine’s smiled widened. “It’s a pin for securing your winter cloak. I know it will be a little while before you need to use it, but the winds blow so strongly here, I’m sure our cloaks will be flying in our faces during Care of Magical Creatures.”

“I agree,” Hermione was touched by the lovely and thoughtful gift. “Thank you,” she leaned over and hugged her.

“Now mine,” Felicity was practically bouncing on the bed. She pointed to an oddly-shaped
The bag was heavy as Hermione lifted it, with an uneven weight distribution. A few quick tugs to the string revealed two smaller paper bags, each one white with blue stripes, and another, tall and thin paper wrapped object. The first bag was filled with the light brown, Scottish fudge she knew was called ‘tablet.’ The second had several pieces of ‘Edinburgh Rock’ a roughly circular soft candy that came in various pastel shades. The third gift was a bottle of a bright orange drink labeled ‘Iron Brew.’ Though the gifts were small, Hermione was well aware that sugary treats were expensive in a country rapidly heading to war, and the sugar itself was hard to come by.

“Felicity,” Hermione hugged her as well. “Thank you, so much. I love Scottish sweets.”

“Really?” Felicity asked. “I wasn’t sure, since you spent so much time in France. Isn’t everything chocolate and cream there?”

“I’m only half-French,” Hermione laughed. “And I can’t wait to try this drink – does it really have iron in it?”

Felicity grinned. “They say so, but it tastes more like ginger beer and orange cream to me. Course, everyone in my family says it tastes different to them, so it’s a bit of mystery, really.”

“Well, let’s try it now!” She opened the bottle with her wand, and the four of them passed it around, commenting on the taste, and sharing the tablet and rock candy.

“The aftertaste does remind me of the time I had to carry my house key in my mouth while I was gathering flowers last summer,” Patience said, putting a large gift wrapped in bright blue, shiny paper in Hermione’s lap.

As much as she had come to adore Patience, Hermione was half-afraid to open the present. There was absolutely no way to know what it would be. Best to get it done, she thought, and pulled off the paper and opened the box. She immediately laughed so hard she almost fell off the bed.

In the box was a large leather book that looked at least one hundred years old. The red cover of the book was embossed in gold letters that read, *Weaving Tradition: Creating One’s Own Magical Tapestries.* Beside the book were several skeins of yarn in the traditional reds, blues, greens, and creams of tapestries.

“Oh, Patience!” she said when she caught her breath. “Where did you get this book?”

“It was my grandmother’s. She said I could have it,” Patience answered. “She heartily approves of young women engaging in traditional hobbies.”

Hermione laughed again at the thought of Patience being traditional in any way. “You do realize that if we make this, Tom will probably set it on fire?”

Josephine and Felicity had both heard the story of ‘The Lady of Light and Her Dark Prince,’ from Patience, who half-sang, half-chanted the ballad she was continuously composing, laughed even harder.

“It’s a good thing you’re an ace at protection spells, then,” Felicity said.

Josephine added, her eyes crinkled with good humor, “I’d be happy to have my mother send us a book on protecting magical artwork from damage.”

“We haven’t even made it yet,” Hermione thought of her attempts at magical knitting in her
fourth year. “It probably won’t even be recognizable as a picture.”

The girls entered the Great Hall an hour later still in an excellent mood. Breakfast on the weekends was leisurely, and many students were still asleep, so the hall was only about a quarter full. When they entered and sat at the Ravenclaw table, Narcissa rose from the staff table and came over.

Reaching a hand to smooth the curls that were much more unruly without her daily intervention, Narcissa kissed the crown of Hermione’s head. “Happy Birthday, darling.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Hermione replied, turning to face her.

“Since it’s the weekend, I was thinking you could come to my quarters for a birthday tea later this afternoon.”

Hermione nodded, eager to have a private conversation with Narcissa. “That sounds lovely.”

“Excellent,” Narcissa rose again and nodded at the other girls. “Have a good morning free with your friends.”

“Your mother is so elegant,” Felicity sighed once Narcissa was gone.

Josephine nodded as she spooned oatmeal into a bowl. “She looks like she stepped out of a fashion magazine. I’ve never seen a healer dress so well.”

“You must take after your father,” Patience said, reaching across Hermione to take a piece of bacon off a platter.

Hermione had long since giving up taking anything Patience said as insulting – the girl’s brainwaves clearly operated at a different wavelength than most. “I do,” she answered simply.

A large, dark owl flew into the room and landed on the table between Patience and Hermione. Felicity and Josephine both pulled back in surprise.

“This is Jeeves,” Hermione explained, giving him a bit of bacon and taking the package he held. “Our family owl.”

“He’s the biggest owl I’ve ever seen!” Felicity hesitantly reached out to pet his tail feathers.

“What did he bring?” Josephine asked.

Hermione wondered that as well. She thought Narcissa would give her any gift at the tea, and she didn’t think Tom even knew it was her birthday, not that she supposed birthdays were very important to him, at least other people’s.

The package was light and rectangular, wrapped in iridescent silver paper with thick, curly green ribbons. There was a card tucked firmly under the ribbons, and Hermione opened it first.

_In memory of our first magic together. I know we can do more, and I thought you’d be interested in these. Happy Birthday, Hermione._

_Tom_

Inside were two slender leather bound books, even older than the weaving book Patience had given her. They had no markings on the outside, but the title pages told her they were original
copies of Durante’s treatises on wandless magic from 1723 and 1730. That Tom had known about her birthday, and had gone to the trouble to find a gift that was not only suited to her, but also had emotional meaning left Hermione speechless.

He had been remarkably restrained in the past few weeks, and a model student when in any public space. From what she heard when the Slytherins talked in the library, the situation in the dormitory was a bit more tense, but not outright hostile.

She looked over to the Slytherin table, and saw him watching her, so she rose and went over to him. Most of the older Slytherins were absent, but Tom’s usual group surrounded him, Marguerite glued to one side and Abraxas on the other. The Malfoy boy quickly made a space for her and she sat sideways, facing Tom, who looked very pleased with himself.

“Thank you for the books, Tom,” Hermione held the books, stroking the covers.

“They seemed the perfect gift for a girl who already knows so much,” his smile was crafty, and Hermione wondered what he was up to. “I believe wandless magic is untraceable?”

Of course he wanted to learn about and practice magic with her that would enable him to attack others without a trace. “Yes, but it is a very difficult type of magic, and not something that can usually be done without a firm foundation of wand magic.”

He leaned close and whispered softly, “I have faith in our ability to do that which is not commonly done.”

She had that faith too; more than that, she had the knowledge that he was absolutely capable of extraordinary magic. “We can, I know, but we must also pace ourselves – great power without knowledge is almost worthless.”

Tom frowned as he considered her words. “Perhaps, but we can gain the knowledge concurrently. What the school will not teach us, Hermione, we must teach ourselves.”

Hermione recognized her own thoughts, especially from her fifth year, and nodded, hoping that she could guide him slowly. “Thank you again.” She squeezed his hand, noticing how surprised the rest of the table was that she touched him freely, or even at all.

“Tomorrow in the library, then?” he grinned, not attempting to disguise his pleasure at her agreement. He loved it when she did what he wanted, she knew.

“Yes,” she replied, giving him his ‘win’ for the moment. If he wanted to meet in the library, he wouldn’t be expecting to actually practice much magic, only to discuss theory.

She excused herself, and went back to her Ravenclaw friends. After they finished breakfast, they went back to the Tower and spent a relaxing morning of listening to music, painting each other’s nails, playing gin rummy with the muggle cards Felicity had brought, and attempting to make sense of the magical tapestry book, which was rather vague in its directions. Patience insisted on trying some of the basic weaving spells using a few of Hermione’s thin hair ribbons, and though Hermione was initially afraid her hair would be damaged beyond repair, the result was truly lovely, leaving Hermione’s brown locks in two thick braids, the hair interwoven with the white ribbons with the blue diamonds.

By the afternoon, she was in an excellent mood, even though she had skipped her potion this morning because of the weekend and the late breakfast, and she honestly thought it was a very nice birthday, despite the occasional pangs of longing for her friends and family from her own
She went down and through several halls to get to Narcissa’s quarters, whistling softly as she walked. The library was on the way, and as she passed it, she ran into Tom, who was coming out, alone.

“Do you want to take a walk around the lake?” he asked. “I need some light and air, I think.”

“No wonder. I really don’t understand putting dormitories in a dungeon,” Hermione frowned. “But I can’t, I promised Mother I’d meet her for tea.”

Tom was disappointed, but he didn’t scowl, which Hermione took as progress. As she turned, he reached out and touched her braided hair. “Who did this?”

“Patience,” she replied. “Do you like it?”

“It looks almost exactly how I had imagined it would,” he nodded approvingly. “This will be good for dueling club and all the classes where you’ll need your hair back for practical lessons, though the green ribbons would look better against the color of your hair.”

She laughed. “I’m not a Slytherin, Tom. Wearing green in Hogwarts is different than wearing it out and about. House colors are taken very seriously. Why do you think Patience chose the white and blue ribbons out of the rainbow of colors I had?”

Tom’s tone was almost petulant when he spoke his reply. “Green isn’t just a Slytherin color. It’s always been my favorite color, and I like to see it on—” he stopped himself.

On his things, Hermione finished in her mind. “Well, my favorite color is red, but I don’t need everything I own to be red.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said. “You had better get to your tea.”

She shook her head, surprised that he had given up so easily, and when she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror in the entry of Narcissa’s quarters, she knew why. That little sneak had used the transfiguration spell she’d taught him, and he’d done it with his wand out of sight, and nonverbally. She was slightly mollified that not all the ribbons were green; there were also some of deep crimson woven in, the two dark complimentary colors standing out in what she had to admit was a better contrast to her honey colored hair than the blue and white.

Narcissa appeared behind her and lightly touched the ribbons. “From your expression, I take it Tom had something to do with these?”

“He changed the colors,” Hermione sighed, and followed her mother into the sitting area, where there was a tea service and several delicate and delicious looking sandwiches, cakes, and biscuits. “His power at this age is simply astounding.”

“But he’s coming along,” Narcissa murmured. “He approached me about a gift for your birthday, and he was very agreeable. It’s becoming easier for him to talk to others in a more normal, less autocratic way.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed, thinking of interactions she’d seen between Tom and other students. “He still thinks he’s better than everyone else, though.”

Narcissa lifted the teapot and began to pour. The smell of Lady Grey tea rose in the air. She
handed a gold-rimmed china cup and saucer to Hermione. “Darling, he is special, and by many common definitions, better than most. He’s too smart not to realize he is unique, different, even in this magical world.”

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek in exasperation. “Yes! He’s a bloody genius! He has intuitive magical abilities that are insanely advanced for his age, but being better at magic, or having stronger magic doesn’t make him a more worthy person. People are equal. Everyone’s life matters.”

Calmly, Narcissa sipped her tea. “I agree. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here. However, it is naïve to think that Tom will not rise above others, that he will not seek out a position of power, and it is important to carefully encourage his leadership abilities.”

“Encourage him how?” Hermione narrowed her eyes. She knew Narcissa was much more willing to cross the line into darker magic if it suited her purposes.

“Tom will eventually have to prove his power to the older Slytherins, and to the younger ones who have put their faith in him,” Narcissa answered. “If you can help him do so with a minimum of violence and without getting into trouble with the Headmaster or any teacher, he will learn that outright deadly attacks are not necessary to achieve his goals.”

Hermione picked up a cucumber sandwich and took a vicious bite. She chewed for a moment, then asked, “Does he even have a goal besides a vague, insane desire to rule the world?”

“When we spoke the other day, he seemed to warm to the idea of one day being Minister of Magic,” Narcissa leaned forward and patted Hermione’s knee reassuringly. “As much as we would like to plan the next seven years, we have only a fraction of control in how they will turn out. Life is unexpected, and Tom is a force not easily manipulated. The best we can do is offer him support and guidance.”

“He wants to study wandless magic,” Hermione looked down into her almost empty cup, thinking how nice it would be if divination and reading tea leaves actually worked. Then she might know what the right thing to do was.

“Already?” Narcissa raised her eyebrow. “He is one surprise after another. I expected him to be very talented, but his level is beyond my wildest expectations.”

“Should I do it? If he can do wandless magic, then his magic can’t be traced, and he’s less likely to get into trouble, but it opens up the potential for a great abuse of power.”

“If he wants to learn, he’ll learn with or without you, and isn’t it wiser to keep apprised of how he’s progressing?” Narcissa asked.

Hermione absently ran a hand down the back of her braids, feeling the silky fabric of the ribbons. “I suppose. He told me that he isn’t good. He actually said that to me. I’m concerned about how dark he will eventually become, the lines he will cross, and whether or not I’ll be dragged across those same lines.”

“You won’t be dragged anywhere,” Narcissa smiled. “You are much stronger than you give yourself credit for, and you wouldn’t hesitate to speak your mind on an issue that was important to you. As for Tom, well dear, we knew that we’d never make him good, as you put it. You need to come to terms with that. He is your soul mate, and you are meant to be together, so I have no doubt that you can find a compromise in yourself. You simply must decide what that compromise entails.”
Hermione needed to change the subject. Too much thought of Tom’s future gave her headaches. “Speaking of soul mates,” she grinned. “What of Professor Merrythought?”

Narcissa flushed, darker than Hermione had ever seen. “I do not know. It is very confusing. To also find my soul mate in the past, to have that soul mate be a woman, it is…all a bit much.”

Hermione was glad she had skipped her potion this morning, and that she was in her adult brain for this conversation. “My father’s sister is a lesbian, and I was raised to see her relationship with her partner as no different than the one my parents had, but I’ve noticed the magical world doesn’t seem to have much to say about differences in sexuality or gender assignments. I never saw any couples in Diagon Alley who weren’t heterosexual – how is that even handled in the magical world?”

“It isn’t, really,” Narcissa admitted. “Because having magical children is so important to the pureblooded families, sexuality simply doesn’t matter. Duty to one’s family comes first. Many pureblood spouses separate in everything except name after they’ve produced children. And I know several half-blooded matches who have similar arrangements.”

“So, there is a lot of pressure to be in heterosexual relationships, not because homosexuality is seen as bad, but mostly for the purposes of having children?” Hermione frowned.

“Yes,” Narcissa nodded.

“It seems ridiculous that witches and wizards don’t just use some type of magical artificial insemination or a gestational surrogate. Muggles have sorted this out quite well,” she said.

Narcissa smiled. “There are gay witches and wizards who marry and live together, they just aren’t a very large population. The number of married witches and wizards who engage in homosexual liaisons are much higher.”

“But that’s so sad!” Hermione argued. “Why do they put duty before their own happiness?”

“We did,” Narcissa shrugged. “We came back in time and left our lives forever out of a sense of duty to make a better future.”

“Point taken,” Hermione said, her voice grim. “But to the world, you’re a widow, with a child. Surely you are free to do as you please.”

Another rosy flush covered Narcissa’s cheeks. “Yes, I am free in that sense, but Galatea is a complication. A very serious one. I know I feel our bond strongly, and I’m concerned it would grow to the point that she might figure out our secret.”

“That’s jumping far ahead,” Hermione cautioned. “I think you deserve happiness, Narcissa, and I think you can have it with her if you let yourself.”

Narcissa, her cheeks still flushed, said nothing, only sipped her tea in silence, but Hermione had the feeling would be seeing Professor Merrythought very soon.
Chapter Summary

We learn a bit about Galatea's background, and how she feels about the very reserved Narcissa. Poor Narcissa has trouble processing all her feelings.

Chapter Notes

So, there's no Hermione or Tom in this chapter - I got sidetracked by Galatea and Narcissa - I'm falling in love with those two. I based Merrythought's age on the knowledge that she would need to have a certain level of schooling and apprenticeship to become a professor, and for the years she is supposed to have taught at Hogwarts. If Narcissa is around 42 or so at this time, I'm making Merrythought about ten years older, though she's probably closer to twenty years older if I were being strict with cannon. Also, I took some liberties with Galatea's specialities because it sounded good to me.

Also, I know it's been a while, but it's almost the end of the semester, so I've had a bunch of grading to deal with. Hope this was worth the wait, and don't worry, I'll get back to our main pair soon. Love to all.

Galatea Merrythought was a joyful person, but that didn't mean she'd had an easy life. She had been born the seventh child to a poverty-stricken family in Manchester in 1886, and when she had received her Hogwarts letter, accompanied by a tall, florid faced-man dressed in seventeenth-century garb in the late summer of 1897, she had already been working for ten months as spinner in one of the many local cotton mills. Upon opening the door to a man in clothing more suited to an Elizabethan gentleman than to those worn in a tenement slum house, her father had promptly boxed Professor Johnston’s ears, yelling that he’d find a place “in Bedlam for the damned nutter” if he didn’t stay away from his daughter. Galatea, whose born name was Jane Galatea Barker, after her mother’s one and only romantic remembrance of Greek mythology, had gone after the strange man who was now sporting a bloody nose, splashing mud over her only clean dress as she had screamed for him to stop.

Thankfully, Professor Fesiah Johnston had encountered much worse in his thirty years of contacting muggleborn children and their families. He had given the young Jane a wide smile, clear and specific directions to Diagon Alley and the Hogwarts station, and having witnessed her family’s poverty, he had also given her a small purse of muggle money for her journey. In a very compassionate manner, especially for a man who was sinking nearly knee-deep into the muck of a factory town street, the professor had warned her that she had a hard choice to make, and that her choice would likely cause deep divisions in her family. Professor Johnston had stayed with her in a shadowy corner, whispering spells that had kept them miraculously cool and dry until her father had departed for his own factory shift, then had gone back with Jane to speak to her mother, who was a bit more reasonable.
The division of her family had not been an exaggeration. Understanding that explaining magic simply wasn’t an option, Professor Johnston had instead informed Ingrid Barker that her youngest daughter had been noticed as exceptionally clever at the mill, and that wealthy benefactors wished to pay for her education. Though Mrs. Barker was inherently suspicious of a grown man in strange clothes who clearly had money, showing interest in her youngest daughter, she had noticed that Jane was different than the other children, that she was sharper, hungrier for knowledge, and definitely less likely to be satisfied with the narrow world around her. After getting assurances in writing (which she could barely read) that they wouldn’t have to pay anything, Mrs. Baker gave the odd man her promise that they would put Jane on a train bound for London at the end of August.

Due to the constraints of their first meeting, Jane hadn’t completely understood all of what her Hogwarts letter meant until she had stood outside of the entrance to Diagon Alley, happy to see Professor Johnston waiting for her. By the end of the day, Jane had finally understood the reason why so many of her wishes came true, like the time she’d prayed for the fire not to go out in the dead of winter, and it had blazed so strongly, it had nearly burnt down the apartment. She’d also heard enough of chatter around her to know that Jane would not do as a name in the magical world. Professor Johnston had laughed at this proclamation, but had agreed to call her by her middle name.

It was twenty years later before she had changed her last name as well, though it was not to separate herself from her muggle parents, who were long dead, their lives shortened by years of factory work and the squalid conditions of crowded tenement housing. She had been offered the name by her mentor, an ancient woman with whom she had completed her advanced degree and double certification as a Master of Defense Against the Dark Arts and Counter-Enchantments. Tabitha Merrythought had no children, was the last of her line, and after ten years of an apprenticeship that had been more like a mother-daughter relationship than anything else, Galatea had taken the surname Merrythought as a tribute to their connection, and Tabitha had officially named Galatea as her heir, leaving her a small estate in Surrey and a tidy sum in Gringotts.

Given how much she had drifted away from her remaining muggle family (one sister and a handful of nieces and nephews), Galatea had mostly given up on maintaining those connections beyond sending birthday and holiday cards and setting up money for the children’s schooling. Her sister was sixty now, an old woman with grandchildren who had aged in the normal muggle way, while at 52, Galatea wasn’t even middle-aged by magical aging standards. Beside the obvious barrier of dramatically different life experiences, and the aging issue, Galatea also knew without being told that her romantic attachments to other women were not something her muggle family approved of, adding another layer to her estrangement.

Galatea loved teaching, she liked most all of her coworkers, and she adored the bustling halls of Hogwarts. When Armando had offered her the position of Head of Ravenclaw House after Professor Johnston had retired, she had been more than thrilled, more than honored. She had felt vindicated. Her hard work and natural talent had been the only considerations – not her sexuality, not her status as a muggleborn. Over the years, though, she had longed for companionship, and had formed crush after crush on married witches who had occasionally returned her affection, but never wanted to be seen with her in public.

Those affairs had left her heart and ego bruised, and she had given up on romance, had made her peace with being alone. It gave her more time to work on her constant and various projects, she reasoned. Galatea was a born inventor, and often shopped in muggle stores for things to charm and enchant, trying to create magical objects out of the mundane. Sometimes these experiments went well, and she had even patented a few: a tea kettle that whistled the tune, “I’m a little teapot,” instead of shrieking, and a hall bench that sprouted arms and removed users hats,
boots, and coats when they said, “Service, please.” Other times, they were unqualified disasters, and she still bore the faint scars from when a china cabinet she had been trying to enchant to set the table had exploded and cut her face and hands to ribbons.

She also had a keen interest in disenchanting dark objects. Her run-in with a cursed Slytherin scarf that had tried to strangle her in her second year had set her on the path of specializing in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and in Counter or Disenchantments. She had worked closely with Dumbledore for the past five years, going from room to room in Hogwarts, attempting to locate and neutralize the dark magical objects and curses that both students and staff had left behind over the centuries.

The castle was a living thing with not all areas available at all times, secret passages and stairways that never quite lined up, and even after half a decade, they hadn’t come close to eliminating one-tenth of what was likely in the place. This task, though it was impractical and probably actually impossible, gave Galatea something to focus on when she wasn’t teaching, especially on the school holidays. Dealing with unknown curses and dark magical objects required concentration, and Galatea didn’t think about her lack of a love life when she was hard at work.

Then, she’d returned to Hogwarts after a trip to South America over the summer, studying with a witch descended from the Mayans, and learning about the magical properties of several jungle plants. She’d even brought samples for both Professor Beery and Slughorn, to their delight. Madame Selwyn had never liked her, but she had brought the nurse a jar of ointment for soothing dragon pox scars as a gesture of goodwill. However, as soon as she had walked into the Hospital Wing, she’d forgotten all about the reason she had come.

The new healer was the most beautiful woman Galatea had ever seen. She had expected the woman to be pretty – the fact that crusty old Dippet had called her lovely meant something – but Lady Narcissa Bonneau was practically a goddess. Standing over a cauldron, which was usually a recipe for frizzy, greasy hair and oily skin, the woman was perfectly composed, her light blonde hair twisted intricately on both sides of her face, and gathered in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her skin was pale but luminous, her eyes large and dark, her features finely shaped and perfectly symmetrical. She was slender, but still womanly in her curves, and when she looked up and smiled, Galatea’s hibernating heart had awoken, ravenous.

And that had been before they’d touched. When their skin had met, a euphoric feeling had flooded Galatea’s entire being. She had always been an optimistic, cheerful person, easy to laugh and be pleased. It was not unusual for Galatea to feel good, to be happy. But Narcissa’s presence made her baseline happiness seem like nothing; she felt ecstatic and filled with possibilities.

She’d wasted no time with coyness, and though her brain cautioned her that this must be a mistake, that this beautiful, polished, pureblooded aristocrat couldn’t possibly be the soul mate of a muggleborn who had been come from nothing, her heart leapt. It had been insane to kiss the Narcissa only a few minutes after meeting her, but the pull was strong, and the kiss itself had been the best of Galatea’s life.

Narcissa had been very reserved since then, smiling and flushing, but never giving anything away. Galatea had never been good at hiding anything, actively attempting to solve any mystery she came across, and never backing down from a challenge. Narcissa was both. How much of her behavior was upbringing and how much was having recently lost her husband in a war zone, Galatea hadn’t deduced yet. She wanted to be respectful, to offer Narcissa companionship without any type of romantic pressure, but it was hard to be patient with the constant tugging of the soul mate bond. Having found her magical match, she wanted to be with her, to touch and hold her.
Since the night at the beginning of term, though, Narcissa had made herself scarce. She often missed meals, staying in the Hospital Wing with any patients and eating from a tray, and had not yet had the promised dinner in Galatea’s quarters. Narcissa seemed to avoid being caught alone, especially after the morning when she’d woken in Galatea’s arms after the horrible business in Slytherin House.

The light streaming in through the high windows had been hazy, and Galatea had opened her eyes slowly, taking in the feeling of a soft body pressed against her own, the faint smell of sweet, expensive flowers, and the tickle of a warm exhalation on her exposed collar bone. Narcissa had turned in the night, and her head rested on Galatea’s shoulder, her sleepy breathing and nuzzling movements unintentionally erotic. Not wanting to break the calm, but knowing that she needed to return discreetly to her own room before long, Galatea had shifted as slowly and subtly as she could, but Narcissa had instantly sat up and apologized.

“I’m sorry,” her eyes had been downcast, her body already turning away to stand. “I – we – I need to get back to the Hospital Wing to check on Tom.”

Galatea had also stood, and grabbed her robe from the end of the bed. As a lesbian in a society that saw same-sex relationships as itches to be scratched or quaint curiosities, Galatea had found herself politely but firmly dismissed the morning after more than once. Though they hadn’t done anything sexual, Narcissa’s reaction hinted strongly at shame, and Galatea simply didn’t have it in her to fight a whole lifetime of pureblood conditioning this early in the morning.

“I understand,” she’d said, and left without another word.

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Now, a month later, Galatea was ready to fight. This avoidance was ridiculous. Some people spent their whole lives looking for soul mates, so how could she throw away such a gift? How could Narcissa? She checked the staff schedules, and waited patiently for Narcissa to get finished in the Hospital Wing, and caught her as she walked out.

Seeing her, Narcissa’s face took on an expression that was at once happy and exasperated. “Galatea,” she said, a slight reproof in her voice.

“I know you didn’t eat dinner,” Galatea answered. “I asked the elves – no one brought you a tray, but two very sweet house elves are bringing a near feast to my quarters, and if you don’t come with me and help eat it, they’ll be heart-broken.”

Narcissa sighed in resignation. “I am hungry,” she admitted, rubbing a hand on the back of her neck. “But I’d like to have a bath.”

Galatea grinned, her smile wickedly tilted. “I have a quite lovely bathtub. I charmed it to sink into the floor. It’s practically a small lake.”

Flushing, Narcissa pursed her lips together. “The bath can wait, I’m sure.”

They walked quietly to Galatea’s rooms, which as the Head of Ravenclaw House, were much larger, grander, and airier than Narcissa’s quarters. As promised, the main sitting room, which was lined with books from floor to ceiling, except for the break for the white marble fireplace, had a small table with places set for two and a wide variety of foods piled on it.

Galatea pulled out Narcissa’s chair, then poured her a glass of wine. Narcissa raised an eyebrow. “Feeling lucky?” she murmured
Laughing, Galatea poured her own glass and sat down. “Always. My life has been an exceptionally lucky one. Finding you is proof of that.”

Narcissa’s face was still. “My life has been the opposite. Nothing in it has been charmed except for my hair and clothing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Galatea said. “But we can make a new life, together, if you will allow this to happen.” She looked at the other woman, who was so clearly struggling with her feelings. “What is holding you back?”

“I’m not sure,” Narcissa grabbed her glass and took a very unladylike gulp of her wine. “My life has been very…planned. And in the last year, everything changed. I suppose I am just trying to adjust to the newness of being in a different country, of being a widow, a single mother, of having a job, of finding a soul mate I hadn’t been looking for.”

Galatea nodded. “That is a lot. And I don’t want to hurry you or make you feel pressured – I only want to spend time with you, to get to know you. Fate apparently thinks we’re insanely compatible, so I think we’d enjoy the process.”

“I know I would,” Narcissa spoke into her glass, and took another sip. “That’s part of the problem,”

“Because I’m a woman?” Galatea asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

“Well, that part is certainly new,” Narcissa admitted, then hastily added, “but not unwelcome. I don’t mind that you are a woman, I just…I had a husband, one whom I had been married to since I was eighteen, only a few months ago. He might not have been my soul mate, but I loved him, just as I am sure you have been in love before.”

“Of course,” Galatea picked at the mashed potatoes with her fork, not looking at Narcissa. “I suppose I’ve been overly eager. It is one of my many faults.”

Narcissa reached across the table and placed her hand over Galatea’s. “I find you utterly charming, Galatea, but I’m not an easy woman to love. I was not raised with love, nor even affection. Talking about how I feel is difficult for me. And, if I am honest, I am terrified of being with you, of embracing the joy of having a soul mate, because with the luck I’ve had, I’ll have you only long enough to be heartbroken when I lose you.”

Galatea stood, pulling Narcissa up to face her. “I have enough luck for both of us, Narcissa. Just be here, with me, now, and let the rest go. I’m not going anywhere.”

Giving into the desire to be closer to her soul mate, Narcissa went into the taller woman’s arms, resting her ear against Galatea’s nearly flat chest, hearing the reassuring beat of her heart, feeling the gentle flow of their magic mixing together. She tried not to think at all, only breathe and feel, and found it easier than she would have guessed.

How long they stood, swaying in front of the fireplace, Narcissa didn’t know. She had been so scared. What would it mean to have a soul mate? Narcissa’s whole life, for as long as her memories could stretch, had been built around two things: duty to her family and hiding her thoughts and feelings. She might have replaced duty to her family with the loftier goal of duty to the entire magical world, but she hadn’t given up on hiding herself away. Would Galatea be able to know the true Narcissa? Was there even a true Narcissa to know? She was just starting to learn who she was, with her healing work, and adult friendships not based on being Pureblooded or married to a Death Eater. It was so much at once.
There was no denying, though, that being in Galatea’s company was soothing and invigorating at the same time. And being in her arms? Heaven. It was like an instant calming draught, a peaceful sensation that everything was fine, and would continue to be fine. Was this what safety felt like? Narcissa didn’t think she’d ever felt safe in her life until this moment.

Galatea pulled away slowly after a while, and walked through an adjoining doorway. Narcissa heard the sound of water and debated running.

“You need to relax, and I think a soak in my lake is just the thing,” Galatea came back in, and lead Narcissa into the bathroom. The tub did sink into the floor, and was filled with steamy water scented with the clean smell of lavender. It looked wonderfully inviting, and Narcissa’s muscles were sore. Galatea waved her wand and thick white bubbles covered the surface. “I’ll let you undress in private.”

Narcissa waited until the door was closed and shrugged out of her clothing, folding it neatly on the cabinet that held the towels. The water was bliss, just hot enough to start to unwind her tension, and it was a few minutes before there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Narcissa called, feeling absurdly light-hearted, almost as bubbly as the water surrounding her.

Galatea entered, carrying their two glasses and the bottle of wine. She sat cross-legged on the tile that made the rim of the bathing area and handed Narcissa her glass. Her grin tilted again, and she spoke reverently, “You are the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.”

Narcissa had been raised knowing that she was attractive. Both Andromeda and Bellatrix had also been lovely, and the three sisters were considered to be the perfect Pureblood matches, with more than one family offering for each sister. Of course, Andromeda had run away to marry a muggle and been blasted off the family tapestries, but before that, the girls had been taught to value, enhance, and protect their looks as their most important asset (after their chastity, of course). Lucius had often told her that she was beautiful when they were courting and newly married, but the words had little meaning. Saying she was beautiful meant she was acceptable, that she looked the way a wife should look.

When Galatea said those same words, though, with wonder in her eyes, as if Narcissa were a gorgeous sunset or the view from a mountain overlooking miles of forest and valleys of flowers, Narcissa felt beautiful.

“Thank you,” she managed to finally say, feeling overwhelmed. Part of her wanted to pull Galatea into the water with her, to feel her hands again, and to feel them in new places.

“Can I take down your hair?” Galatea asked quietly, and Narcissa nodded, a little thrill of anticipation running down her spine.

Galatea moved to sit directly behind her, and spoke soft spells of undoing, slowly uncoiling the bun and twists, then carding her fingers gently through the mass of Narcissa’s thick blonde hair.

“Where did you learn those spells?” Narcissa groaned in pleasure as Galatea began to massage her scalp with strong fingers. “Your hair is too short for them.”

With a laugh, Galatea leaned down and whispered in Narcissa’s ear, “I make it my business to know all the spells it takes to reduce a woman to a state of déshabillé.”
Narcissa shivered, and Galatea lifted her hair to one side, draping it over her shoulder and placing slow, barely there kisses to the line of her bared neck.

“How many women have been in this bath?” she teased, trying to distract herself from the warmth spreading through her body that had nothing to do with the water.

“Just us,” Galatea answered between kisses, her lips now on the curve of Narcissa’s shoulder.

Narcissa meant to keep quiet, but instead, she said, her voice tinged with lust even to her own ears, “You aren’t in the bath.”

Galatea’s long, broad hands tightened briefly on Narcissa’s skin. “I could remedy that situation rather easily, and I would love to do just that, but I promised to give you time to process all the changes in your life. I’d be a poor soul mate if I pressed my advantage when you are drowsy, tipsy, and naked.”

With a gentle touch and a few swishes of her wand, Galatea had Narcissa out of the tub, wrapped in thick, soft towels. She led the younger woman to a chair in front of the fire, which was quickly blazing, then left, coming back holding a long white cotton nightgown with tiny emerald flowers embroidered along the square neckline.

“I transfigured a pair of my night clothes,” she smiled, her hazel eyes shining as they reflected the firelight, a very faint line of freckles visible across the bridge of her nose.

Narcissa stood, and managed to get the nightgown over her head before she dropped the towels. She was amazed that she felt so at ease and unguarded around this woman, whom she still barely knew, yet trusted effortlessly. “Thank you.”

“Let’s go to sleep,” Galatea put an arm around her shoulders. “You look exhausted.”

The bed was wide, but Narcissa made no pretense of staying on the far side. As soon as Galatea slipped between the sheets, Narcissa rolled over to her, laying her head against the other woman’s chest and falling into a quick and deep sleep.
Hermione and Tom Don't See Eye To Eye, But They Still Fight Back to Back

Chapter Summary

Hermione tries to prep the group for a defensive-only showdown with the older Slytherins. Tom is not amused. They have words, fight, then have words again.

Chapter Notes

An extra long chapter for you all, because I love you. And it's chock full of Tom and Hermione!

Hermione had a headache. Honestly, every part of her ached. For the past three months, Tom had been pushing the limits of her mind, her emotions, and her magic. His homework, like Hermione’s own, was always done well and well in advance, leaving him with large chunks of free time, which he insisted on spending either in the library for study or an abandoned classroom on the fifth floor for practice. His cadre of Slytherins were usually present, and over the weeks, he’d managed to attract a few others from outside his own house, a couple first-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs who were muggleborns. Hermione was always accompanied by Patience and often by Josephine and Felicity, too.

On the surface, they functioned as a large study group. After a long discussion with Tom about how it was important to surround oneself with intelligent and talented people, and that doing schoolwork would help prevent them from looking like some sort of gang, Hermione had convinced him to help her make sure that all the people in group had their homework completed before spending time on other projects. For the most part, this was easy. Thad had the most difficulty, and Hermione spent a good deal of time checking his work and explaining concepts to him. He was still earning more “Poors” than “Acceptables,” but at least he wasn’t getting “Dreadfuls.”

Once all homework was done, they would head to the fifth floor and practice all the current spells and charms from their classes, then work on spells from the first year textbooks. Everyone in their group, even Thad (who hadn’t really remembered much from his first year), was now doing end of the year spells before the Christmas break had even arrived. Sebastian Lestrange, as a second year, was helpful in tutoring the first years, and despite her initial reaction to him, and his outspoken belief that blood purity did matter, just not as much as power, Hermione got along with him. He was perfectly polite, without a single sneer or snide comment, and he treated the few muggleborns in the group the same as everyone else.

The study group lasted a few hours in the evenings after dinner, and on the afternoons on the weekends. By then, most of them were ready to do something that normal children did, and left to relax in their common rooms with their friends.
The core group that remained, usually just Patience and Tom’s fellow first-year Slytherins, ended up watching Tom and Hermione argue over the interpretation of obscure magical texts, as well as attempt nonverbal and wandless magic. Most of their disagreements were on fundamental theoretics: what was magic? What made magic? Was it energy? What allowed a ‘magical’ person to tap into this hidden power? If some people were inherently magical, why did an overwhelming percentage of those people need help via wands and words to make their natural magic manifest in the world? How much did motivation and intention affect one’s magic? Could magic actually be light or dark, or only the people wielding it?

These were questions Hermione had often wrestled with in her own mind, and though they were certainly difficult and abstract, she had always thought that the wizarding world seemed very content to accept the benefits and dangers of magic without much investigation into where it came from and what sustained its existence in the world. Tom was very hungry for knowledge, and he devoured books almost as quickly as Hermione did. They read theory, created their own theories, and experimented.

Despite their intelligence and strong connection, and the times she and Tom had instinctively used magic to connect to and protect one another, they soon found that purposely trying to use nonverbal spells was tricky for most of the group, and unpredictable in its results. Wandless magic was so difficult, it was almost impossible unless the casters were very angry or frightened. The amount of concentration required was physically draining, and Hermione went to bed exhausted every night.

However, Tom was nothing if not stubborn, and Hermione was not going to allow him to outpace her. She might be the only thing that eventually kept him in check, and she had committed herself to being able to do anything he could. It was an insane experience, to have a group of friends who really wanted to learn and explore magic. It was like being in Dumbledore’s Army again, only at a younger age. The others in their circle didn’t put forth as much practical effort as she and Tom, but they watched and listened, as if attending a series of lectures, and there was no doubt that they were gaining confidence and ability at a much faster rate than the average first-year students.

Through their daily time together, distinct personalities emerged. Tom, of course, was the charismatic leader. Jacob and Vidhi were both quiet and studious, but also the two most likely to ask questions about theory. Abraxas was all charm, opening doors for the girls with broad smiles. He was the largest first year boy, and he always stood behind Tom, and a bit to the side, the very definition of a right-hand man. Though his eyes tended to glaze over when deeper theory was discussed, he was quick with defensive spells and never needed help with his homework. Corvus was the funny one, always joking and when he laughed, something about the curve of his smile and the tilt of his head reminded Hermione of Sirius in his light-hearted moments. Patience usually sat near Corvus, and was the most likely to laugh at his jokes, though often at the wrong places. She didn’t seem to pay attention to anything that was happening around her, but then she would offer a comment that was deeply insightful, and Patience was the only person beside Tom and Hermione who could consistently perform nonverbal magic. Marguerite was stealthy and mostly silent, and though the girls were not exactly friendly, there was no doubt Marguerite noticed everything that happened in her house, and that she managed to keep tabs on budding plots. Hermione thought more than once that the tiny brunette would’ve made an excellent spy/assassin in the future. Marguerite also seemed to understand that Tom had little impulse control when it came to disrespect, and that he only listened to Hermione, which meant that Marguerite went to Hermione with any news about what the older Slytherins were or were not doing.

The halls were quiet and peaceful, and no one in Slytherin had said a single thing about Tom’s half-blood status in weeks, according to Marguerite’s nightly reports at their study group.
And tonight, Marguerite had said the same thing she’d been saying – that no one was saying anything, and that was a terrible sign. Hermione had made sure everyone practiced protective and rebounding spells, as well as temporarily incapacitating but not truly harmful jinxes. As the group broke up to head back to their dormitories, Tom helped Hermione pack all their books away.

“You’re worried something is going to happen soon,” Tom said, his tone matter of fact.

“Yes, I am,” Hermione admitted, whispering a protective spell over the delicate Durante texts before placing them in her bag.

Tom shook his head. “And you still think shields and jelly-legs jinxes are going to solve the problem?”

Hermione frowned. “I think those actions will prevent you and the others from being expelled, Tom. We can’t go around cursing and choking people.”

“We’re getting better with wandless magic everyday, Hermione,” he put down the book he was holding and took her bag from her hands. “Soon, we’ll be able to do whatever we want.”

They were facing each other now, only about a foot apart, and neither of them was holding a wand. Tom looked at the rest of the books on the table and levitated them into her bag. She sighed and closed the bag’s flap and sent the bag across the room, to rest by the door.

“Look at us!” Tom smiled. “We can do more nonverbal and wandless magic than most adults!”

“I want to go further with magic than anyone else ever has,” Tom grabbed both of her hands, and she could feel their magic – both her own magic and their combined magic was always so much stronger when they were touching. “We can’t do that if we don’t firmly establish our dominance in this school.”

“Yes, we can,” she tried to pull her hands free, but he tightened his grip. “If we’re so superior, like you believe, then why isn’t defense enough? They won’t be able to hurt us – isn’t that what matters?”

Tom laughed. “No, what matters is respect.”

“There’s a big difference between respect and fear, Tom,” she gave another jerk and he let go. The loss of their combined magic left her feeling a bit lightheaded. She looked away from him and voiced a question she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer to. “Do you like the way it feels when you make other people afraid? When you hurt them? Does it make you feel good?”

He had her hands again, and the flood of their magic back through her body made her close her eyes. His head lowered to hers, their foreheads touching. It was incredibly intimate, though not at all romantic. It was deeper, and Hermione wondered briefly if this level of connection was something that only soul mates could feel, no matter their ages. Vidhi had lent Hermione a few magical texts from her Indian grandmother about chakra magic, and as their third-eye points aligned, the force of his life energy almost knocked her over. His will, and his determination to see his will done, was immutable. Thoughts flew through her mind. Was he the irresistible force? Was she strong enough to be the immovable object? How could this possibly end well?

“Yes, it feels wonderful when others fear me,” he whispered, his breath cool against her face and smelling of peppermint. “I crave it. It makes me believe anything is possible, that the whole world will kneel at my feet.”
Her eyes flew open and she wrenched backwards. “I will never kneel, Tom.”

His expression looked as close to hurt as Hermione had ever seen it. “I wouldn’t ask you to! You’re -”

“Special?” she spat, her anger rising. “No, no I’m not. I’m just a girl, a person trying to live a happy life and make positive changes in society without hurting others. You don’t have to subjugate the world to be happy!”

“Maybe not,” he snapped, heading toward the door. “But I want to. I want to control others, and I will have the power to do so, eventually. Since our happiness is so clearly linked, I think it would be best for your happiness to help me obtain what I want with the minimum amount of pain for all the stupid, unimportant people you seem to hold in such esteem.”

He slammed the door with magic, and she gathered her books and made it back to Ravenclaw Tower just before the curfew began.

Rachel Shacklebolt, the Head Girl, was sitting in a chair near the entrance, books and parchment spread out over a small table in front of her. She looked up as Hermione entered.

“You just made it,” Rachel said, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Your shadow Patience was back twenty-five minutes ago.”

Hermione sighed. “I had to-”

Rachel held up her hand. “I’m not yelling at you. You are here, and in time. You don’t owe me an explanation. From all the accounts I’ve heard, you are certainly intelligent enough to properly manage your time.”

Hermione nodded and walked toward the staircase leading to her room. Rachel’s voice stopped her.

“Hermione?” Rachel stood and crossed to where Hermione was, lowering her voice. “It’s very admirable, how you are fostering inter-House connections with your Slytherin cousins. Ravenclaws and Slytherins and even a few Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs studying together and practicing magic together as first-years is almost unheard of, but I think it’s great.”

“I think so, too,” Hermione said, relieved to know the Head Girl was on her side.

Rachel gently caught her arm and pulled her still closer. “I want you to know, though, that you should not underestimate the older Slytherins. Just because they haven’t done anything doesn’t mean they aren’t planning something. Those boys who got suspended have older siblings, and those boys themselves will be back after the holiday break. I’m all for studying and practicing spellwork, but being out in the halls late is a recipe for disaster. If they catch you alone, they will hurt you. It won’t be bad enough to get them suspended, but it will be enough to make you miserable. Trust me, I’ve been on the wrong side of Slytherin hex more than once in my seven years here.

Hermione thought of all the hexes she’d suffered as well, and unconsciously rubbed her lips, reminded of the time Draco had made her teeth grow.

“That friend of Tom’s, Corvus?” Rachel continued. “His older sister Sagitta is probably the most vicious person in this school. Last year she thought I was flirting with her stupid fiancée just because I had to do evening patrols with him as a prefect, and she cast a spell on my braids that made them twist like screws into my scalp. Even though it only took Madame Selwyn and
Professor Merrythought an hour to loosen them, the pain in my muscles stayed for several days. I could barely think for the splitting headache I had. Sagitta hates Tom and *you* – she thinks you are contaminating her brother’s mind. She talks about it during our Herbology classes all the time. I want you to be aware and be careful.”

“Thank you, Rachel,” Hermione said with all sincerity, and she began planning in the back of her mind. She would be prepared to handle Sirius and Narcissa’s great aunt. No other member of the Black family was going to get a chance to harm her.

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The faux peace lasted a few more weeks, not erupting until the day before the holiday break was scheduled to begin. To discourage students from skiving and general laziness, several of the professors had scheduled tests for the day, and Professor Beery was one of them. There was a practical exam on the proper harvesting techniques for several plants, and Hermione and her roommates had been joined in the hall by Tom and his first year Slytherins on their way to the greenhouses. They easily fell into step with one another, and even though she had been annoyed with Tom, she still felt better when they traveled the halls in a group.

They rounded a corner and were suddenly faced with a group of much older Slytherins, all sixth and seventh years. There were five of them, and the two in front held hands. The couple appeared well-matched in temperaments, looking at everything around them with disdain. The boy was the prefect who’d opened the dungeons their first night, William Bulstrode, and the girl on his arm was Sagitta Black. The others were Calvin’s older sister, Morgan Nott, Hubert Avery’s older brother, Ulfred, and Blake Goyle. All of them had smug expressions on their faces.

Sagitta had very pale skin, a pinched face, and dull brown hair. She glared at them all, then spoke to her brother. “Corvus,” her voice was incredibly shrill, unpleasantly reminding Hermione of the portrait of Sirius’s mother in Grimmauld Place. “Mother and Father wanted me to remind you that we don’t allow mongrels in our home, so you’d better not be planning on having any of your dirty-blooded pets over during the break.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Corvus replied quickly, then glanced behind her. “I would think Morgan and Ulfred would be the ones concerned about their younger brothers, not you. How long has it been since a student was suspended from Hogwarts? Your families must be so proud.”

Morgan leaned forward, her red face nearly matching her hair color. “My brother will be back next month, and if any of you bother him, you’ll regret it. Our father works for the ministry in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and he could have you thrown into Azkaban before you could blink.”
“I don’t think that’s possible, even if one were directly apparated to the prison,” Patience noted dreamily, though Hermione noted that her wand was gripped tightly in her hand.

“Are you brain-damaged?” Morgan sneered at her. “How did you end up in Ravenclaw?”

“Well,” Sagitta smirked, “the Sorting Hat is clearly losing its powers. Sorting half-bloods into Slytherin? That was clearly a mistake.”

Hermione glanced around. None of the first years could do much of anything yet as far as attack, so she really only needed to worry about Tom. And the five older Slytherins.

“The only real mistake would be failing to recognize the need for change,” Tom responded icily. “Luckily, I’ve learned to distinguish between pureblooded students with talent and loyalty,” he gestured magnanimously at the young Slytherins who had come to stand in a cluster around him, “And those who exhibit the unfortunate signs of centuries of incestuous inbreeding.”

Several things happened at once then. Sagitta shrieked and swished her wand hand, her mouth open, but Hermione nonverbally cast *expelliarmus*, neatly catching Sagitta’s wand, pausing only briefly before throwing it over the side of the nearby stairwell. William was yelling something at Tom, who advanced toward him, not taking out his wand or speaking. William, in contrast, fell to his knees, making a pained face and clutching his stomach.

Ulfred Avery sent several hexes in quick succession toward Hermione and Patience, but Patience had already conjured a shield that extended to both Hermione and herself, and Hermione cast a silencing spell on him. Marguerite followed that with some kind of hair-growth hex and Avery’s eyelashes were soon completely obscuring his vision.

Morgan was behind Avery, using him as a shield, and she hit Abraxas with a stinging hex, his white skin instantly breaking out into red welts. Abraxas didn’t cry out, though. He bit his lip and sent a jelly-legs jinx at Avery, who went down, leaving Morgan exposed. Vidhi threw a spell at her from the side, and Morgan hunched forward, as if she were going to vomit, but then began making a growling sound, followed by an outright barking noise.

With a satisfied smirk, Vidhi announced loudly, “I think I’ve found the real mongrel. Morgan thinks she’s a dog!”

Tom turned away from whatever he was still doing to William, delight on his face at
Vidhi’s obvious talent for humiliating the enemy. “Well spotted, Vidhi!”

The Goyle boy seemed about as clever as his future relatives, and the spells he threw, though dark, were not particularly powerful. Jacob and Felicity were both hit, but still continued to fire back, and Josephine yelled, “sominus” and Blake fell over sideways and promptly began to snore.

Sagitta, now angry but disarmed, ran at her brother, yelling, “You stupid little blood traitor! Our parents will disown you for this, I’ll make sure of it!” and began to rain blows on his head, landing punches to his face and neck.

Corvus was a bit small for his age, and scrawny, and though he had his wand, he seemed too shocked and desperate to avoid his sister’s fists to remember to do magic.

The other pureblooded children stood silent as well. Apparently, siblings coming to blows was not very common in magical households. Hermione ran over and kicked Sagitta hard in the shins, not wanting to use magic on someone she’d disarmed.

Turning, Sagitta shrieked, “Stay out of this, you little bitch! You’re no better than a mudblood, and if you dare touch me again, I’ll-”

But what Sagitta would have said was lost, because in that moment, Hermione only saw Bellatrix, and she wordlessly and wandlessly sent the older girl flying across the corridor, her head smacking against the stone wall with a dull thud, then falling to the floor.

Everyone had been watching, even Tom, and whatever spell he had cast on William had ended. William rose slowly, on shaky legs, walking toward his fiancée. Hermione turned back to face the others.

The scene was a disaster. Morgan was still barking, tears of rage streaming down her face at her inability to stop. Avery was trying to walk away, but was tripping over the facial hair that was down to the floor and completely obscuring his vision. Goyle was on the floor snoring. William was pale and drawn, and Sagitta was unconscious. On their side, Abraxas was covered in welts, Jacob’s nose was three times its normal size, Felicity had a horn sprouting from the side of her head, and Corvus had a bloody nose and a black eye.

Hermione couldn’t believe what she had done, and she was terrified that she’d really hurt Sagitta, even as she felt a thrill of satisfaction that her friends had done well against the group of much older students.
Tom stepped over to where William knelt beside Sagitta.

“What?” William snapped at him.

“If you attempt to hurt me or any of my friends again, no amount of family connections or money will keep you safe from me,” Tom spoke quietly. “You may have thought yourself better than others, but your magic is weak and pathetic. I am strong, as are those who align themselves with me, and we will not tolerate your disrespect.”

William made a horrible jeering laugh. “You and your little girlfriend are going to end up in Azkaban for assaulting my fiancée.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “Really? I don’t think so. Hermione used wandless magic, and there’s no trace of it.”

“But there are witnesses!” William snarled.

“No, there aren’t,” Tom gave him a nasty smile. “Morgan, Goyle, and Avery saw nothing, and you – well, Obliviate.”

Hermione watched, stunned. Tom had clearly been working on his own, looking up things he knew she wouldn’t approve of.

“Let’s get the sequence of events clear,” Tom was speaking to the group now. “We were attacked. We defended ourselves, exactly as it happened, except that when Sagitta was hitting Corvus, he ducked and she was thrown off balance, falling and hitting her head.”

Every one of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws present nodded solemnly. Tom looked at Josephine, who was unharmed, and a generally cheerful and well-liked student. “Josephine, will you fetch Lady Bonneau?”

“Yes, of course,” Josephine went back down the hall at a run.
William was now staring blankly at Sagitta, and Hermione knelt beside the girl, feeling the back of her head and murmuring healing spells. There was no blood or swelling, and Hermione had been received enough vicious knocks during magical fights that she knew her spells for healing head injuries were effective if applied immediately after injury. Sure enough, Sagitta was moaning and opening her eyes before Narcissa had arrived.

With her sharp gaze, Narcissa took in the situation, assessing it quickly. She checked over Sagitta and announced she would probably be fine, but would need a headache potion before going back to class. She stopped the hair growth on Avery and ceased Morgan’s barking. After looking at Goyle, she left him on the floor. “He’ll wake up in about ten minutes, no worse for the wear.”

She healed Corvus’s bloody nose, and relieved the pain of his bruised eye, but told him the mark would stay for a few days. With a soft expression that Hermione knew was because she was reminded of Draco, Narcissa smiled warmly at Abraxas and cast a few cooling charms on his skin and told him to ask Professor Beery for a little aloe to rub on his welts. “They’ll fade in a few hours. Just don’t itch them.”

Abraxas nodded, and stood aside for Jacob. “My, your nose is quite spectacular today,” Narcissa murmured. She looked at Felicity’s horn and sighed. “You two will need to come with me, along with Mr. Avery and Miss Black.”

Narcissa took Avery’s arm because he still couldn’t see well. She glanced at Tom and Hermione. “I’ll see both of you this evening, after dinner, to discuss our holiday plans.”

“Oh course, Aunt Narcissa,” Tom smiled widely. Narcissa looked somewhere between pleased and exasperated. “The rest of us will just get to class.”

“Yes, do that. I’ll send Felicity and Jacob with an excuse once they’re set to rights.” Narcissa left, shepherding the injured students down the hall.

The remaining students hurried to the greenhouses, where they were ten minutes late. They relayed the story of the hall altercation to Professor Beery, mostly to explain the absence of Jacob and Felicity, and he shook his head. “All this blood status business is pure nonsense! Get to work now, or you won’t finish your exams in time.”

Hermione worked with Patience, Tom, and Abraxas, as usual, and of course they had no difficulty finishing their work with time to spare. Once their answers and sample cuttings were submitted, Tom moved his stool over and leaned close to Hermione.

“I’ve been thinking of a word to adequately describe you, my dear soul mate,” his voice was barely a whisper, no chance that even Patience or Abraxas would hear it. “And I believe the correct term is hypocrite.”

When she didn’t respond, he continued, his breath tickling her ear. “Don’t think we won’t talk about this.”

Luckily, Jacob and Felicity returned, and Professor Beery allowed Hermione to help them catch up with their work. She had no doubt she was in for an uncomfortable discussion with Tom, but right now, she just didn’t want to think about anything. The hall fight had brought with it so
many memories of her previous Hogwarts experience. After so long of being in constant danger, Hermione knew she had over-reacted, that none of the older Slytherins had been using spells that were permanently damaging. Her response to Sagitta had been a release of pent-up anger at all the pureblooded prejudice she’d been subjected to for the last seven years of her life, and to the torture she’d suffered at the hands of Sagitta’s future relative.

Through the rest of the day, Hermione kept her distance from Tom and concentrated on her work, though she couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said. When she returned to Ravenclaw Tower before dinner, she took a long shower, and tried to gather her thoughts. She wanted to face Tom and Narcissa with a clear mind.

Was she a hypocrite? She railed at Tom for wanting to use violence, then she was the one out of all of them who had used the most force, force that could have been deadly. Yes, she had acted out of instinct, but wasn’t Tom driven by instinct as well? Was he evil because he wanted control? To be honest, she was a bit of a control freak herself. She planned and researched every option of every possibility, and had a tendency toward melt-down when her plans went awry. Narcissa had warned her again and again that Tom did not share her morality. She cried, her tears running down her face with the shower streams. How could he be her soul mate? If she was supposed to somehow temper his homicidal tendencies, she was doing a piss-poor job. She’d made him stronger at a younger age, and was failing at being a role model for morality.

She dressed for the holiday feast in a mechanical fashion, still lost in her thoughts. Tomorrow morning, most of the students would leave for home, and Sagitta’s words to Corvus kept running through her mind. What would the Blacks do to Corvus when they found out he was aligning himself with a half-blood who denied and defied the importance of blood status? What about the Rosiers and Abraxas, when their parents caught wind of what was happening? Pureblooded families were closely tied, and they all seemed to know one another’s business. Vidhi and Jacob would be fine, but their families were the exception in Slytherin House students.

“A penny for your thoughts?” Hermione was pulled out of her worst-case scenario spiral by Felicity’s soft Scottish accent.

“Oh, they’re worth a few pounds, at least by weight alone,” she laughed weakly.

Felicity nodded and rubbed the side of her head that had sported a horn only a few hours earlier. “It was a very strange afternoon.”

Josephine walked over, clipping her hair back from her face with barrettes. “That is an understatement. I’ve never been in a fight! It was scary, but…”

“Thrilling?” Patience had drifted out of the bathroom, her hair still wet.

Nodding excitedly, Josephine sat on Hermione’s bed, which was the closest to the bathroom door. Felicity came over as well, and they absently helped one another as they talked, combing and braiding hair, straightening buttons and ties and sharing jars of hand lotion and tiny pots of scented lip balm.

“I was so surprised we did so well!” Felicity exclaimed. “I mean, we’re first years, and they were in sixth and seventh! We held our own.”

Hermione worried her lip, looking down at the sapphire blue bedspread. “I was a bit out of control. I could have,”

“You weren’t,” Josephine said flatly. Her tone was not at all like her normal bubbly self
and Hermione glanced up to see that the sweet girl’s eyes were hard with justified anger. “She’s horrible. That whole family is horrible. The Blacks are third or fourth cousins of mine, and our family sees them at weddings and big parties, and they are just awful. Sagitta has an older brother, who was married last spring. The poor bride cried through the whole wedding and she was dead two months later. The Blacks said she got dragon pox, but she probably killed herself to get away from him. They use dark magic on their children to punish them, and it twists them forever. I honestly don’t know how Corvus has remained so normal and nice.”

Patience caught Hermione’s hand and squeezed it. “It was a very good thing that you disarmed Sagitta before anyone else, and that you knocked her out.

Felicity shook her head. “I don’t know why you feel guilty! You healed her, almost immediately. You clearly didn’t mean to knock her back as hard as you did, but you were protecting yourself, and Corvus. His sister was beating the snot out of him.”

“So,” Hermione began slowly. “You don’t think it’s, well, wrong, that Tom obliviated William?”

All three of her roommates looked at her in disbelief. They shook their heads, nearly in unison.

“No, it wasn’t wrong,” Josephine said. “It was smart. Even if it was accident, you would have been the one in trouble, and Tom knew that. He kept you safe. I think it was very nice how we all protected one another. I feel like I have a school family.”

“Exactly,” Felicity joined in. “I was very scared to come here, being muggleborn, and though everyone in our house has been nice, there are older students and even some teachers who don’t seem to accept me. To know that we have friends who are willing to fight people who would bully us is important.”

Hermione remembered her own difficulties as a muggleborn and gave Felicity a reassuring hug. “Of course we will always fight for you.”

As she spoke, she realized the truth of her words. She was motivated to fight against pureblood prejudice, and she would protect herself, her friends, and Tom. Tom’s beliefs were extreme, but maybe she had placed herself too far on the opposite end of the spectrum. She couldn’t always fight dark spells with simple shields, and things would only get more intense. Her Ravenclaw sisters, who were all good people, didn’t see any problem with their actions today, so maybe she needed to just relax a little. Tom wasn’t going to turn into the Dark Lord over night, and if she tried to keep a stranglehold on his magic, maybe she would do more harm than good.

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After the feast, Hermione and Tom walked together to Narcissa’s quarters. They walked in silence for a bit, then Hermione finally spoke.

“You were right, somewhat, about my actions,” Hermione said. “I do say one thing and do another, but it isn’t intentional. I have high ideals, and I want to be a good person, but sometimes, I fall short.”

Tom sighed. “You do not fall short, Hermione. Your magic knows what it wants, and it is
glorious. I know you want to believe that everyone is equal, but that just isn’t true, Hermione. All of the world, nature, is variance.”

“Outwardly, yes, but inside, in the heart and soul,” Hermione argued, “we are the same. We are equal.”

“You think Sagitta Black has a heart? She beat her brother for no reason other than he dared to disagree with her beliefs. If you hadn’t disarmed her, she would have tried to hurt all of us.”

Hermione frowned. “I think she had a hard childhood, that she was treated very cruelly at a very young age, and that makes her an angry, unstable person.”

“And because of her sad childhood, which by the way, Corvus shared, we should allow her to attack us and feel bad for defending ourselves? For attacking her back adequately enough that she’ll think twice about bothering us again?”

“No,” Hermione threw her hands up in exasperation. “I didn’t say that, I just-”

“You just don’t want anyone to get hurt,” Tom laughed, a jagged, cynical sound, especially coming from an eleven year old. “But that’s impossible. We won’t change centuries of prejudice with sweet talk.”

Thinking of various human rights movements, Hermione recalled the pictures of beatings and brutality that those seeking to change the status quo had faced. And how remaining non-violent, even though it was difficult and at times heart-breaking, had been the best policy in the long run for all of those movements.

“Well, you won’t win them over with fear, either, Tom. Making people kneel before you will only drive fear and anger deeper, and make supposed ‘followers’ more likely to stab you in the back. Why do you think most monarchies are only figureheads these days? We have to find a middle ground. I’ll give a little if you will.”

Tom looked amused now. “Give a little? What do you suggest?”

Hermione thought for a moment. “If you give up on the idea of people kneeling before you, and if you will promise only to attack those who are trying to harm us, I will promise to continue helping you with wandless magic, and to help you achieve your goals, so long as they fall short of world domination.”

He raised an eyebrow, interested. “What about financial domination?”

“As long as any workers in businesses you may own are treated fairly, fine,” Hermione replied.

“And what if I want to go into politics and change laws that benefit only Purebloods and restrict the rights of others?” Tom queried.

Hermione nodded. “As long as your political policies do not go so far that they start to leave Purebloods without rights, then I agree to help.”

Tom snorted. “So, you agree to help me as long as you agree to help me? Hermione, for someone who wants to meet me half-way, you aren’t giving much ground.”

She groaned in frustration. “You have no idea what you are talking about! I am more than
meeting you! Just because I don’t want to go on a sadistic reign of terror and leave all of the people who disagree with me crying in pain at my feet.”

“No,” Tom broke in, grinning. “You want them unconscious at your feet, their wands tossed far away, with no hope of mercy unless you yourself choose to give it. I watched you this afternoon. You were the Angel of Death again, holding Sagitta Black’s life in your hands.”

“What?” she asked horrified. Was that how he had interpreted her actions?

“If I offered to only fight with defensive spells, to do everything you asked any time we were attacked for the rest of the year, how long do you think it would be before you broke your own rules, Hermione?” Tom laughed, his handsome face even more handsome in the expression of genuine amusement. “Your brain might have high, civilized ideals, but your magic is untamed, and it fights like a wild creature.”

Hermione didn’t answer that statement, because they had arrived at Narcissa’s quarters, and she was glad. Tom was insightful, and she needed to process what he’d said before she answered.

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Tom was still grinning as he opened the door, though his face fell a bit when he saw Professor Merrythought sitting beside Narcissa on the couch by the fire. Their hands were not quite touching, but he could see the flow of their magic around them, swirling together. He had suspected something was going on between the two women, which honestly, was a little surprising – two women? Was that something that happened in the magical world? But the entwined magic he could see at their edges told him they must be soul mates, too.

He didn’t really care other than to be sure that Professor Merrythought did not disrupt the family balance he had come to enjoy and expect with the Bonneau ladies. Professor Merrythought was the Head of Ravenclaw, and a powerful witch, so he was content for the moment to withhold judgment.

Hermione was quiet, and Tom knew she was thinking about what he had said. She thought too much, at times. His soul mate’s overactive conscience was further proof to him that having one was a burden. If she would just allow her magic to flow instinctively, she would be unstoppable. One day, he would convince her of that. She wanted the world to be fair, which was an insane, childish idea. He wondered how she reconciled that desire with her brilliant mind. It would be easy to lie to her, to simply keep his dabblings into topics and behaviors she didn’t approve of hidden, but he didn’t want to lie to her. That was a new experience for him, the urge to share his thoughts.

He’d shared them with her a week ago, when she’d asked if he liked making others fear him. To anyone else, he would have denied it, come up with a charming lie. But to her, to his soul mate, he’d spoken the truth. She’d reacted with indignant defiance, and he had been confused. He didn’t want her to kneel. They were a pair, a matched set, and she was the only person on his plane. She didn’t believe that yet, but she would. She might not understand herself completely, or want to accept her darker side, but there was no doubt she had one.

Narcissa greeted them and they politely said hello to Professor Merrythought as well.

“Professor Merrythought has invited us to spend the holidays at her estate in Surrey. It will be quieter than the Rosier house, and I thought you two might like the chance to have a peaceful break, given the tension we’ve had here, and the events of this afternoon,” Narcissa said.

Hermione questioningly looked at Professor Merrythought who replied, “Yes, all the staff
knows about the little hallway skirmish, though the details are thin because no one is saying anything. Since everyone is fine and no truly dark spells were used, I believe a blind eye will be turned, but I would not expect that to continue into the new year. Headmaster Dippet may be ancient, but he is savvy, and he will not allow the halls to turn into battle zones.”

“I’m worried about Corvus,” Hermione blurted out. “Sagitta said she was going to have their parents disown him, and that is something the Blacks are known for doing.”

Tom had been thinking about that threat as well, and wondering about how the time at home might affect several members of his group.

“We can’t do anything about that in advance,” Narcissa said evenly. “But if he comes to us, we can certainly help him.”

Hermione seemed pleased with that response, but Tom continued to think about the problem of the holiday break all through the rest of the conversation, and even when he walked back to the dormitory.

The Slytherin common room was full, students lounging and talking and making plans to visit one another during the break. When Tom entered, silence fell. He noticed Marguerite and Abraxas and the others sitting in a corner, talking intently. He ignored the stares and walked over to them.

“Hello, everyone,” he smiled, his charm fully in place.

“Hello, Tom,” Thad said, before Marguerite nudged him in the ribs. “What? He said ‘hello.’”

The rest of the first years were silent, waiting for Tom to speak. He decided praise was the best opening. “All of you did an excellent job this afternoon. I have heard from Professor Merrythought that no further questions will be asked about the incident, and, of course, I trust your personal discretion.”

They nodded and Tom quickly cast the *muffliato* spell Hermione had taught him once they had started the group work. “That said, things are not over, and many of you have to spend time at home for the next few weeks where you may be raked over the coals about your connection with me and the things I’ve said about blood status.”

Abraxas and Marguerite both looked pained and Corvus looked terrified, but defiant. “Let me ease your minds,” Tom turned up the charm, working to make them feel invested in what he was saying.

“I will never ask you to be anything except the Slytherins you are. If you need to recant, lie, or beat siblings into submission to get through the holiday break, then do so. We will pick up where we left off in the new year, but do not feel the need to defend me to your parents. I suspect many of them will believe there is no defense for me. And that is fine. The time will come when the whole wizarding world will see how powerful we’ve become. But we have to get through the next six years first.”

He could see from the relief on the others’ faces that he had said the right thing. Despite the disconcerting fact that Hermione was able to see through his motives, no one else could. They saw what he wanted them to see.

“Are you coming to Rosier Manor?” Marguerite asked, her eyes worried though her voice
betrayed nothing.

“No, Hermione and Lady Bonneau and I have other plans for the holidays, though we may see you at some point over the break,” he answered non-committedly.

After that, the conversation lapsed into everyone’s plans and what they hoped to get for Christmas, and Tom listened because he believed it was important to keep track of what his followers desired, but he was wondering what in the world a Christmas outside of Wool’s Orphanage would be like.
Tom's First Christmas

Chapter Summary

Holidays with the ladies and Tom. There are philosophical discussions, hunts for gifts, and some horcrux cameos. I have no excuse for the sappy sentiment. Tom and Hermione just want to give each other the best! I love these crazy kids.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the long delay. I've been dealing with final exams and I have a stack of papers to grade as I speak, but I just enjoy writing this story so much that I can't keep away too long. So...a reader pointed out that it really wasn't possible for Narcissa to self-identify as a Slytherin, and I laughed out loud because it's such a glaring mistake and I totally dropped the ball on that bit of continuity. I will fix it at some point, but for now, let's just pretend all mentions of being Slytherin were only in Narcissa's head or to Hermione.

After this chapter, expect a fast-forward to year five (1942-1943 school year).

love to you all

The Merrythought estate was definitely on a more humble scale than the Rosier residence – more the home of a country squire as opposed to a lord, but it was well-made and well-cared for, with four constantly smiling house elves who wore sparkling white togas with blue trim and fawned over the guests to the point that Tom began to contemplate violence.

Hermione, of course, sensed this, and as he came down the stairs on the second morning of the break, he watched from around the corner as she spoke to all four elves in a kind, firm voice.

“Tom,” she began.

“Oh, the young master!” The oldest one squeaked. Tom thought it was the oldest, at least, and probably a male, from the amount of hair that sprouted from its ears, but he couldn’t be sure. “Such a handsome one! So charming!”

Well, Tom, thought, at least the elf had good taste.

“Yes, he is very handsome,” Hermione agreed, and Tom smiled in the shadowed stairwell, strangely happy to have her compliment, though that was ridiculous, because he knew he was handsome. It was simply a fact.

“He is telling Olive not to be picking up his clothes!” A less-wrinkled, more feminine-
looking one nearly wailed. “I needs to! I needs to make the guest room nice!”

“I know,” Hermione soothed softly. When she wasn’t yelling at him, she had a very lovely, calming voice, he thought. “But Tom was not raised in the magical world.”

“Like our Mistress!” The third one, who was completely androgynous, as far as Tom could tell, said. “We serve our new Mistress just as well! Our new Mistress Merrythought is so kind! She was trying to sets us free at first, but when we was so upsets, she is letting us stay!”

Hermione’s expression was pained. Tom bit back a laugh. From what he knew of Hermione, and the little he’d experienced of house elves at the Rosiers, Hogwarts, and now here, he knew it must be killing her to have servants who were basically willing slaves. There was no way she’d be able to wrap her mind around that.

“Professor Merrythought is an excellent person, I know. And I’m sure she only wants you to all be very happy,” Hermione bit out grudgingly. “But back to the subject of Tom, well, I think it would be best if you only came to him if he specifically calls for you. He simply isn’t used to the level of attention you so kindly provide.”

“But what abouts the clothes?” the one named Olive wrung her hands.

Hermione patted her stick-thin arm with a delicate touch. “Well, just pick up his clothes when he isn’t in his room, and make sure not to bother his books or paperwork. I suspect he’d be more touchy about those things than his clothes.”

She suspected right, Tom thought darkly. He didn’t like anyone to touch his books. The elves agreed and popped away, and Tom waited a moment, then walked down the rest of the stairs.

“Oh, Tom,” Hermione smiled broadly, and he noticed how much more relaxed she was when they weren’t at school, when it was just the two of them. “I was thinking of going sledding down the large hill at the back of the property. What do you say?”

“I’ve never been sledding,” he responded slowly, not sure if he wanted to or not.

“Well, it’s great fun,” she replied, taking his hand, and as he knew that she knew, it was difficult to refuse her when they were touching. “Come with me. The sun is shining, the snow is perfect, and you’ll love it.”

He acquiesced, and soon found himself bundled in a scarf, hat, and gloves, trudging up a steep hill dragging a battered sled. Professor Merrythought’s home had many plain, muggle objects, and that strangely made Tom feel more comfortable there. Not every thing was a mystery, though he quickly learned that many of the muggle objects had been enchanted and did unexpected things, like the towel rack in his bathroom which had tried to dry him off when he got out of the shower. There was regular pen and paper in the library though, and Tom reveled in the convenience of being able to write notes without unfurling parchment or dripping ink.

When he reached the top of the hill, he was a bit out of breath, and he saw Hermione was as well, though she was smiling nonetheless. “Ready?” she grinned, and threw herself belly down on the sled and took off.

He quickly followed, though seated properly, and used the guide ropes to try to catch up with her. It was close, but she came out ahead, and then it was a true competition, and neither of them could be pulled away. They went up and down the hill countless times, getting thoroughly soaked from crashing and landing in the snow, and standing covered in said snow while disputing
loudly who had won each and every race.

Tom had no idea how much time passed, but the sun was almost gone from the sky when Professor Merrythought came out, waving her wand and vanishing the sleds.

“I think that solves that argument,” she said with her crooked grin. “We’ll call it a draw.” Then, she swished her wand again and dried both of their soaked hats, scarves and coats. “I can see your competitive nature extends beyond the classroom. Popsy made hot chocolate. Come inside and warm up.”

Hermione laughed and took his hand, and Tom went quietly, mostly because he was still mentally tallying his racing wins. It was nice to be inside the warm house, and the hot chocolate was excellent, as was the dinner that followed.

After dinner, they all sat in the library and Tom watched from under his eyelashes at the women around him. Professor Merrythought was sitting at a desk in the back of the room, studying the pieces of a dismantled clock in front of her. Narcissa was on the sofa, reading a muggle book on healing herbs that Professor Merrythought had handed her as they had entered the room, looking up every so often to ask a question or make a comment. Hermione was stretched out on her stomach in front of the fire, as she had been on the sled, looking at a catalogue for a magical bookstore, occasionally circling a title. Tom was in a chair by the fire, his feet near Hermione’s head. Damballa was draped across his shoulders, and, to his annoyance, Khethiwe was in his lap, purring and kneading her claws into his legs while he tried to read a book on magical laws.

He wasn’t really paying much attention to the book, though not because of the stupid cat. The scene before him was so normal, so peaceful, and even though Tom didn’t need a family, this was certainly pleasant. He liked being around intelligent people in comfortable settings, and this definitely qualified.

“Tom, Hermione,” Professor Merrythought called. “I think you’ll find this interesting.”

They both stood and came over to desk. As they got closer, Tom felt something tug at his magic, like a magnet.

“Is this clock cursed?” Hermione breathed, keeping her hands firmly at her sides, not touching the desk. At her words, Tom copied her posture.

Professor Merrythought nodded. “Yes, it was a clock I found in Hogwarts, and as far as Professor Dumbledore and I can tell, it’s a few hundred years old, and when it strikes the hour, anyone who hears the chimes will fall asleep then and there.”

“Why?” Tom asked.

“Why does anyone curse any object?” she shrugged. “Probably to keep a rival from getting somewhere on time, one Quidditch team sending it to another House to make them miss practice or a game, though it could have simply been to cause general mayhem. A lot of low-level curses like these are simply pranks that could be a bit too powerful.”

Tom leaned forward carefully, looking at the springs, cogs, and hands on the desk. The magic emanating from them felt different from that which came from the enchanted objects he had become accustomed to. It had a slower, lower energy, more like a coiled snake waiting to strike than the happy bustle of floating cups or teapots, and Tom found its vibration familiar, akin to his own natural magic.
“Are you a curse breaker, too?” Hermione had moved a bit closer to him, and he could
feel her magic extending outward in a protective fashion across both of them. He held back a grin
at her instinctive defense. She thought she was so in control, his soul mate, but under her civilized
exterior, her magic was wild and ferocious, and prepared to retaliate against any perceived threat
before she was even fully aware of it.

Professor Merrythought lifted the clock face, which was detached from the rest. “I
can break many curses, but I don’t specialize in them. I studied more general disenchantments and
counter-spell work. Most cursed objects were magical to begin with, so identifying the underlying
magic can sometimes undo the curse without the need for further work.”

Tom was fascinated now. “How do you undo a curse?”

“Very carefully,” Professor Merrythought laughed, then walked them through the
preventative steps she had already performed. “Now, this bit is very theoretical, but you two are
brilliant, so I’m confident you’ll follow. Do you think magic is a living energy?”

“Yes,” Tom and Hermione answered at the same time.

“I agree,” the professor said. “And so do many theorists, though it hasn’t been proven,”

“Well, magic is never proven like a scientific theory,” Hermione said, her tone
annoyed. “I don’t see why not – it makes sense to have a rigorous method for testing theories.”

Tom nodded, thinking that many of the advanced texts on magic he’d read didn’t really
discuss why or how magic worked.

“So true, Hermione,” Professor Merrythought seemed to share their frustration, and he
thought once again that muggleborns, or half-bloods stood the best chance of making exciting
magical discoveries, simply because they didn’t take magical knowledge for granted. “Now, if we
accept that magic is a living energy, then can we go a step further and say that magic is
intelligent?”

Hermione pondered the question, her lips pursed. Tom thought of the way his magic
flowed through him when he was angry or upset, often knowing what he wanted or needed to do
before he did.

Tom spoke slowly, reasoning as he did. “I believe so, but to know for sure, don’t we
need to know where magic comes from?”

“Right,” Hermione picked up on his thought, “if it comes from somewhere inside the
witch or wizard, then it is only as intelligent as the person fueling or wielding it. But if it comes
from some outside source, then, yes…I think it does have some type of intelligence, though not
necessarily a human definition of intelligence – something greater?”

Her last statement was more of a question, and Tom scoffed lightly. “Greater? Like
magic is from God?”

Hermione shook her head, clearly knowing Tom well enough not to take offense. “No,
not God, exactly. Maybe love and hate? Life and death? All the energy that dissipates when matter
is transformed? Is magic what happens in the space of transformation, since matter and energy can
neither be created nor destroyed?”

“I think you are on the right track,” Professor Merrythought mused, lightly moving her
wand, and floating the clock face and hands into the air. “Let’s say that magic is intelligent, that it
comes from some source outside of us, whatever we want to call it. If it is intelligent, how can we use it?"

“It must submit to us,” Tom readily supplied. “We have to control it.”

Professor Merrythought raised an eyebrow. “A telling choice of words, Tom. You can control magic to a certain point, but brute force of will isn’t always the solution.”

“What about tricking it?” Hermione was staring at the clock hands, hanging like tiny daggers in the air. “Simply because it is intelligent doesn’t mean it has infinite intelligence – we could be smarter and fool it.”

Tom smirked at Hermione’s rather Slytherin response.

“Both right,” the professor said, and spoke a few words that caused the various parts of the clock to glow different colors. Most of the pieces were a pale yellow, like weak sunlight, but the face plate, the hands, and a chiming mechanism were a blood red color.

“These pieces,” she pointed to the red ones, “are infused with a curse. Under the curse is the original enchantment, which is now lying dormant. We must make the curse believe it has done its job. Once a curse has ‘sprung’ if you will, it has used up most of its energy and is weakened. It must be renewed before striking again. In this instance, the clock strikes on the hour. After it thinks it has chimed, that is when I can most easily destroy the curse by transforming it into a different kind of magic.”

She manipulated the chiming device with magic, and whispered a silencio over the parts. “Just in case,” she grinned, then as the mechanical pieces began to vibrate, she cast several quick spells over it.

Tom watched, fascinated, as the red pieces glowed more brightly for a few seconds, then faded and become the same pale yellow as the other parts of the clock.

“How?” Hermione breathed, her gaze focused on clock as well. Tom could almost see her brain furiously working through theories.

“Well, just as you said, one can’t really create or destroy magic. It is, I firmly believe, subject to the laws of energy and matter as laid out by muggle scientists and philosophers. However, there must be ways to transform magic between the various distinct classifications of how it is expressed.” Merrythought offered the clock face to Tom, and he held it in his hand, feeling only a gentle quiet magic emanating from it now.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. “So, all magic, is at its core, an act of transfiguration.”

“At an even more basic level, it is an act of communication,” Narcissa had come to stand behind Tom. She smelled like expensive flowers, the type that only bloomed in carefully tended greenhouses. “The magic that is a part of you, that you channel naturally, works with the free-floating magic that is everywhere.”

After a long discussion on the nature of magic, which was more interesting than any of his classes so far, they all retired to bed. Tom lay awake on the soft mattress, thinking of how marvelous it would be if he could pull in the free-floating magic, make it part of his permanent magical signature. He longed to try his hand at cursing something, then try to undo the curse, just to see how it worked. Of course, there was the stupid rule about not doing magic outside of
Hogwarts, which made Tom’s skin physically itch with the need to release magic. How could he have magic, know it, and not use it?

Over the next few days, no matter what she said about following the rules, it was obvious Hermione felt the same way. She was constantly trying to distract him with activities, probably because she was well aware that he was dying to do magic. Narcissa seemed to know this, too, because she arranged for several day trips, taking them to Diagon Alley for shopping two days in a row, then sending them with Professor Merrythought to muggle London so that she could shop alone.

He enjoyed the day in London, marveling at what a difference it made to have money. Professor Merrythought had no trouble navigating downtown London, and she took him and Hermione to the National Gallery, Harrod’s, and several bookstores, stopping for a lavish afternoon tea that probably cost more than what was allotted for an individual orphan’s keep for several months.

Narcissa had given Tom and Hermione wizarding and muggle money during the trip to Diagon Alley and Tom spent quite a while carefully selecting gifts in both locations. Having money of any kind was highly addictive, and Tom vowed to himself that he would never go without it again. With the help of the house elves, who were much more tolerable when they weren’t hovering over him, he got a list of Professor Merrythought’s books, and managed to find a few titles he thought would interest her. For Narcissa, he ordered a magical herb collection set, which came with several pairs of scissors made of bronze, silver, and bone, and were enchanted to glow in different colors when it was time to harvest particular plants. Because she had been very keen on the muggle book Merrythought had given her, Tom also bought Narcissa a botany text from one of the bookstores in London.

Hermione’s gift plagued him. Of course books were always an appropriate item, but she went through them so quickly. She would love a book, but she’d be on to another one within a week or two. And, he had gotten her books for her birthday. He bought her a few volumes on magical theory and one on muggle chemistry, but he needed to get her something else as well, something different. The stores he visited were full of possibilities, but none of them were quite right.

It wasn’t until he’d wandered off from the others in Diagon Alley that he’d found that something. A twisted, dark lane had veered off into the shadows, giving a markedly different atmosphere than the well-lit and cheery stores on the main road. A smudgy sign that was barely legible seemed to read “Knockturn” something. Tom strode down the road, and stopped in front of a mullioned window display. Borgin and Burkes was the name above the door, and Tom entered without a second thought. He could feel old magic here, magic that wasn’t particularly nice, and it called to him.

Not everything in the store was infused with dark magic, but Tom was sure that a hefty majority of the items would be banned from Hogwarts. Despite this, Tom was intrigued. What happened to the magic stored in these items before it was triggered? It was lying in wait, and he pondered whether or not he could steal it, transfer that magic to himself without activating curses or other unpleasant side effects. A place like this was practically a repository of magic, there for the taking, if one were clever enough to do so.

“Can I help you?” A cadaver thin man had appeared at Tom’s elbow, seemingly out of nowhere. He appraised Tom’s expensive outer robes, shoes, and Tom’s handsome features. Tom saw the exact moment when the man decided it wouldn’t do to simply hurry him out of the store like the average unaccompanied minor.
“I’m looking for a unique gift,” Tom said evenly, the weight of his intelligence and the heavy purse in his pocket behind his words.

The man’s smile was more of a gash in his face than anything one would wish to see. It didn’t phase Tom at all. “For a friend or….”

**Enemy** was the unspoken word that hung in the air. Of course this was a place where one would shop for an enemy. Tom smiled, and it was charming, even to the cadaver man. “A very, very close friend. My cousin. She is my age, but very mature.”

“Women of all ages do love jewelry,” the man suggested offhandedly, pointing to a few glass cabinets that were softly lit on the inside with light reflected off of various stones and gems.

Tom wasn’t sure that was true, but he glanced at the case. Jewelry was a traditional gift, and it bespoke of power and money. Most of the pieces were boring – pretty enough, but not unique enough for his soul mate. There was one item, though, a delicate necklace made of tiny links of silver and green and blue stones carved into the shape of scarabs, that caught his attention.

The man followed his gaze and frowned. “That piece doesn’t really belong there – it’s Egyptian, designed a thousand years ago to put on someone considered property – someone the owner didn’t want to be touched. The scarabs represent eternity and life’s mystery, but the hex on it is rather strong. If a person not the giver touches the wearer, that person’s hands burn and swell.”

Tom rather liked the idea of anyone who touched Hermione getting burned, but then he thought of Patience, of how she nearly always had an arm linked through Hermione’s. He often thought of Patience like another Khethiwe, an annoying pet of Hermione’s that he had to tolerate. It wouldn’t do to hurt her. Still, the necklace exuded power, and he wanted it, to experiment on when he returned to Hogwarts.

“I’ll take it, but I still need something else,” Tom said. Moving away from the glass case, he went up and down the crowded rows of shelving. As he walked, he heard a faint whispering. It was in parseltongue, and it was saying “**yours, Heir of Slytherin.**” The cadaver man was following him, and Tom schooled his face to be neutral, though his magic was buzzing. Toward the back of a dead-end aisle, he encountered another glass case. This case was only sparsely filled, but on the middle shelf, nestled in a bed of wrinkled black velvet, was an octagonal golden locket, with glittering emeralds creating a shape that was both the sinuous curve of the letter “s” and a snake across its front.

He knew the locket was his by right, but he also knew the cadaver man was crafty, though he did not appear to be able to hear the locket's hissing. Tom did not allow his eyes to fall on the locket for long. Instead, he looked at the item beside it, a cloisonné pin shaped like a fleur de lis.

Tom pointed at the pin. “My cousin was born in France. She might fancy that pin.”

The cadaver man’s jaw muscle twitched in what was probably amusement. “You seem to have a talent for selecting cursed objects, young man. That pin will make the wearer forget any events that have happened in the last year.”

With a sigh that Tom injected just the right amount of annoyance into, he pointed at the locket beside it. “What about the locket – is it cursed, too?”

“No,” the man bit out the words, clearly insulted. “It is simply an old locket, probably owned by a member of Slytherin house. Is your cousin in Slytherin?”
“Yes,” Tom lied. He gave another glance at the locket, but kept his tone and expression casual. “I’ll take it, too.”

Reaching past Tom, the man plucked out the locket. “Is that all, then?”

Tom looked around the store for a full minute more, then nodded. “For now,” he replied easily. He followed the man to the front counter and had just completed the transaction, paying what he was sure was too much, but feeling generous enough not to argue, when the door opened and Narcissa walked in.

“Tom,” she said, her face a mirror of his own perfectly even expression. Her cheeks were a bit reddened from the cold weather, but she still looked regal. “We were not sure where you had gone.”

It was simply a statement of fact, no reproach, but Tom felt vaguely uncomfortable at the idea that Hermione and Narcissa may have been worried. “I’m sorry,” he said easily, having learned long ago that the important thing about apologies was their statement aloud, not whether one actually meant them. “I was getting a few last minute gifts for Hermione.”

Narcissa raised one delicate eyebrow that said, here? “Well, if your shopping is completed, we should be getting back to the others.”

“Madam,” the cadaver man injected quietly, all subservience. “I do feel I should inform you that nothing purchased here is returnable, and we are not liable for an improperly handled merchandise.”

Tom smiled broadly at the withering, haughty glare that transformed Narcissa’s beautiful face to that of an angry Queen.

“My ward is perfectly capable of handling magical objects, and our family could purchase this entire store without blinking, so there is no need to worry your likely faulty objects will be brought back. You would do well to remember your place, sir.”

“My apologies, Madam,” he murmured, his skull-like head bowed.

Tom offered Narcissa his arm, and they left, Narcissa’s skirts swishing and Tom’s boots clicking. They had only walked a few yards before his guardian spoke to him in her normal, soft tone.

“Knockturn Alley is not a place where underage wizards or witches generally go unaccompanied, though Borgin and Burkes is probably the least objectionable of its stores. What did you purchase?”

Ever since their discussion in the Hospital Wing, Tom had not felt the need to lie to Narcissa. She supported him, recognized his talent, and didn’t seem phased by anything he did. Perhaps it was because she was the mother of a very complicated, talented child herself, and because Tom was that child’s soul mate. Regardless, he answered her without hesitation.

“A cursed Egyptian necklace for practice at undoing the curse,” Tom said, then added, “When I get back to Hogwarts.”

“Breaking curses is a difficult, tricky business,” Narcissa replied. “You will need to proceed slowly and cautiously, and never alone. Make sure Hermione is there with you, in case you need to get help, if something goes wrong.”
“The curse isn’t that powerful – it causes burning and pain in the hands if a person not the owner touches it, but it isn’t deadly,” Tom used his reassuring voice.

“Don’t trust everything a salesman says,” Narcissa warned. “Is the item wrapped?”

“Yes,” Tom nodded.

“Then promise me not to touch it with your bare hands until I’ve run a few diagnostics on it, please,” Narcissa tightened her hold on his arm as they went over a patch of slick cobblestones.

Narcissa’s request was perfectly reasonable, Tom thought, and she hadn’t forbade him from working with the necklace, only asked that she look it over as a precaution. “Fine,” Tom allowed, even though he didn’t like to be hindered in any way.

“What was the other item, the gift for Hermione?” Narcissa asked curiously.

Tom smiled widely, his face handsome even when smug. “It is a surprise, but I promise it is safe.”

“How do you know that it is safe?” Narcissa continued, and Tom was annoyed, though he knew she was only motivated by concern for Hermione.

“It spoke to me, in parseltongue,” Tom said with finality in his tone. “And I can feel its energy. It’s meant to be mine.”

As soon as he said the words, he realized his error – that he had identified the item as his, but had also told Narcissa that he was giving to Hermione, which was as good as saying out loud that he considered Hermione his as well. However, Narcissa made no comment on this, and Tom once again appreciated the older woman’s excellent sense of discretion.

-oOo0oOo-

On Christmas morning, Hermione woke early, went downstairs and found Narcissa at the breakfast table. She was sipping tea and had the small vial of sunshine yellow potion already prepared for Hermione to take.

“You’re up early,” Hermione smiled as she drank the potion.

“I thought it would be nice to have a few moments alone,” Narcissa poured Hermione a cup of tea as well.

Hermione nodded eagerly. Professor Merrythought’s estate was a peaceful, happy place to visit, but they hadn’t had much time to converse alone. “What happened with Tom yesterday? Was he down Knockturn Alley?”

“Yes, and he bought a cursed Egyptian necklace from Borgin and Burkes,” Narcissa sighed. “He wants to try to break the curse on it, he says.”

Hermione shook her head. “He might consider that an interesting project, but he wants more than that. I’m sure he’s going to try to figure out a way to absorb the unused power from the curse.”
Narcissa smiled. “Well, I wish him luck. He certainly isn’t the first to think of that, to have these types of theories, but no one has done such a thing. Tom is one of the most brilliant wizards I’ve met, but there are limits to everyone.”

“I hope so,” Hermione slowly sipped at her tea, trying to avoid burning her tongue. The tea here was always a bit too hot. She reached for the cream to cool it down some. “But I have the feeling that what Tom puts his mind to, he’ll accomplish eventually.”

“I simply can’t imagine how it would work – trying to amass more magical power in one’s body…people aren’t hollow – they can’t simply be ‘filled’ up with additional magic. The magic that goes into enchanting objects is different,” Narcissa absently traced her finger on the flower design on the tablecloth as she thought aloud.

Hermione took another drink of tea, relieved that the cream had made it a drinkable temperature. “But Tom is aiming to transform the magical energy, to make it compatible with the magic inside himself.”

“Still, it would require his body to host more magic than it was accustomed to,” Narcissa pointed out. “He would most likely burn himself out – overload his physical self.”

“Since when has Tom cared about his physical body?” Hermione snapped, then caught the reproving look from Narcissa and bit her lip.

This Tom hadn’t done anything to his body, had sliced away pieces of his soul, she reminded herself. It was her job to help make sure that he didn’t.

Narcissa tucked a lock of her hair, which was loose for once, behind her ear. “Let us speak of more pleasant things. It is Tom’s first Christmas. What did you get him?”

Hermione couldn’t help the grin that formed on her face. Despite her gripping a few moments ago, she had been enjoying her time with Tom on break. He had been amazingly tolerant and good-natured, though Hermione suspected much of that was because he wanted to be distracted from his inability to do any magic. They’d had a lovely trip to London, and his continued, easy acceptance of muggle travel, art, food, and the great crush of holiday crowds while at the museum and shopping had warmed her heart. He simply hadn’t blinked. He had enjoyed going to the muggle bookstores, and had even dragged Hermione to see his favorite painting in the National Gallery, one of the Goddess Diana walking through a green wood, her bow in her hand, quiver slung across her back, all manner of woodland creatures following her. It seemed an odd choice for his favorite, but she’d loved it immediately, too.

He had been very tolerant of the house elves, once they had given him a bit of space, and he didn’t treat them rudely or with disdain. She didn’t think he thought of them as equals, but she had time to work on him.

The four of them had gone shopping in Diagon Alley a few separate times, and Hermione had also looked at numerous wizard store catalogues, trying to find the perfect gift for Tom. He was not easy to shop for. Of course he was interested in all kinds of books on magic, but Narcissa had given him the best of everything as far as clothing and school supplies, and had also given him permission to order additional things he needed or wanted, so he had his small but growing library of books, and plenty of nice parchment, inks, and quills. She had a suspicion that Narcissa had gotten him a broom for Christmas, so that was out, too. The problem was though Tom wanted the whole world, he didn’t want many actual things in it. He longed for gifts Hermione couldn’t give: knowledge and power.

Even though she put no stock in divination, she knew from Harry and the future Dumbledore that Voldemort had been interested in it, so she ordered a set of texts with the most
sensible explanations of the various branches of divination for Tom, even though they wouldn’t start those classes until third year, or in Hermione’s case, not at all. In Harrod’s, she purchased him a lovely set of jade cufflinks and a tie tack made from an excavated Trojan coin, remembering what her father used to say about all men needing a good set of cufflinks and at least one tie pin.

The final gift, she’d found in a crowded shop in Diagon Alley, more of a flea market than a proper store. It sold a bit of everything, from small housewares to knick knacks to a tiny selection of premade potions for minor problems like headaches or acne. Shoved on one of the many sagging shelves was a glassy black rock the size of her fist, with a hole through the middle about four to five centimeters in diameter. Hermione knew it was an adder stone, and she could feel the magic coming off of it. Without access to her magic at the moment, it was impossible to know how old the stone was, but there was definitely magic infused in it, and she knew that the Druids who had lived in the British isles had prized adder stones and used them for many spells of protection and persuasion. The magic had a lovely feel to it – strong and protective, and Hermione thought it was just the type of old, magical object Tom would appreciate, and it was also just the type of positive, light magic that Tom needed more of around his person. Luckily for her, the shopkeeper didn’t seem to notice those same things, looking at Hermione in surprise when she said she wanted to buy it. She thought that Tom could put the object on his bedside table for an extra level of protection, which was never a bad thing in that snakes’ nest of a dungeon at Hogwarts.

She listed her gifts to Narcissa who nodded approvingly. The stairs creaked and both women went silent. Tom entered, looking perfectly put together despite the early morning hour and the fact he was wearing striped pajamas. Hermione tried not to stare, but Tom Riddle in pajamas was not a sight she’d ever thought to see.

“The elves keep popping outside my room, whispering to one another about whether or not I am awake yet,” Tom’s mouth was twisted into a sour expression. “I decided it was time to get up.”

He sat beside Hermione and she poured him some tea. “They’re just excited for Christmas.”

“Yes, it’s been ages since they’ve had children in the house at the holidays,” Professor Merrythought came in, her smile crooked and her men’s pajamas paisley.

After everyone had managed to drink a cup of tea, Narcissa stood, and Hermione was surprised by how excited she looked to usher everyone into the library, where the stockings and gifts were. Her adoptive mother was grinning ear to ear, making piles of the presents and handing the stockings to Hermione and Tom.

When Narcissa handed Tom the oversized sock, he was silent for a few minutes before looking inside. This was his first Christmas, in so many ways, she thought. For a few seconds, Hermione thought of what it must have been like to be an orphan at Christmas, and her heart swelled with empathy for him. As always when she was in the same room with him, she wanted to be close to him. She had sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire, so she gently pulled on his pant leg, and he sat down beside her. She scooted close, their bodies touching from shoulders to bent knees, and she felt him slowly relax as he looked in the stocking.

Narcissa had outdone herself, and there were sweets of every kind, enough to give her dentist parents a massive coronary. Tom unwrapped a chocolate frog right away, but it escaped, sending both Khethiwe and Damballa hunting after it. Hermione unwrapped one of her own and handed it to him, and he ate it with a wide smile. She cautioned him against the every flavor beans, but he was stubborn, and she was pretty sure he ate a boogey flavored one, even if he wouldn’t
admit it.

There were boxes of clothing and additional lovely school supplies of the highest qualities. Tom did get a sleek broom, which he examined with great interest, but not the unabashed love Harry or Ron would have shown. Hermione’s breath caught when she saw that Professor Merrythought had given them both beautifully handcrafted leather diaries with thick, creamy blank pages, black leather for Tom and sapphire blue for Hermione. She also gave them both golden and silver fountain pens enchanted to never leak or run out of ink. *He hasn’t made a horcrux, Hermione* chanted in her mind. *This diary will not become a horcrux.*

Her thoughts must have been loud, though, because Narcissa gave her a tight smile and very subtly handed her cup of tea that smelled suspiciously of calming draught. A few minutes later, she was relaxed again, and thrilled at how much Tom had loved his presents. They had exchanged gifts of books, and of course those were wonderful, but she was able to feel Tom’s excitement over the adder stone, and his pride at the cufflinks and tie pin.

“This is for you, too, Hermione,” he handed her a small square box.

It was very light, and Hermione thought it must be a hairpin or a piece of jewelry to be in such a small box. As she unwrapped the box, Tom’s magic surrounded her. He was very tense, and she realized that whatever was in this box, it was very, very important to Tom that she like it. What could mean so much to him? Besides his wand, she couldn’t think of any object that he cared that much about.

She pulled off the lid and managed just in time to keep herself from hurling the box into the fire. In the green fabric lining of the box was Salazar Slytherin’s locket. Hermione had so many horrible memories of that damned thing, the whispers it made, the cold dread she felt when placing it around her neck, the way it filled her with anger, how it turned her and her two best friends against one another. It was evil.

“I think it was in my family at some point,” Tom was saying, lifting the locket from the box and undoing the clasp. “I think it may have belonged to Salazar Slytherin himself; it spoke parseltongue to me in the store; it told me that it belonged to me.”

Hermione kept very still as Tom leaned forward and put his hands with the ends of the locket chain around her neck, fastening the clasp at the back of her neck and letting the locket fall to the middle of her chest on its long chain. *It’s not a horcrux. Tom has obtained this without killing anyone. Tom is proud of it. He finally has something that is a piece of his family’s history. I can’t reject this. Besides, if I have the locket, he can’t make a horcrux out of it, can he?*

“Tom,” she wetted her lips and tried again. “Tom, I…this is probably a family heirloom…you don’t have to give this to me.”

“Hermione, you are my family, and I want you to have it,” he leaned back, looking at her thoughtfully, then nodding his head in a pleased way. “The golden amber color matches the flecks in your eyes.”

She swallowed. There was no way out of this. Narcissa was in the corner, pouring another cup of tea. Hermione was pretty sure she was going to need it. “Thank you, Tom, I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

He gave her a beautiful smile, looking so much like a normal boy that Hermione was almost fooled for an instant. “Say you’ll wear it all the time.”
“I’ll wear it,” she promised, thinking gloomily of how often she had already worn the necklace. “But you know at Hogwarts, it will have to be under my sweater. I can’t wear a Slytherin locket in Ravenclaw Tower.”

“That’s true,” Professor Merrythought laughed. “Can I see it?”

Hermione went over and allowed Professor Merrythought to examine the locket. The professor was fascinated, and Narcissa and Tom came over as well as she ran diagnostics for age and spells and finally, after questioning Tom about the parseltongue, agreed with him that the locket was very, very old. They pulled out a few history textbooks and found illustrations of Slytherin, and he was often depicted wearing a locket quite similar in appearance to the one now around Hermione’s neck.

“There’s certainly power coming off of it,” Merrythought gazed at it.

Hermione could feel the magic as well, but, to her unparalleled relief, it was nothing like the horcrux. Instead, it reminded her of the ancient, deeply layered magic of the sword of Gryffindor when she had held it in the Forest of Dean. Even though it was Slytherin’s, the energy did not come across as inherently dark, simply complex and powerful. She forced her thoughts about future memories of the locket as a horcrux aside and looked at Tom who stood beside her, the pure pleasure in his smile, which was uncalculated, unguarded.

He had given her something he treasured, something he wanted, a powerful magical object that was intimately tied to the family he’d never known, tied to the prestige of his House. It was the only gift he could truly give, the only thing he had to give. Hermione focused on that, because that was good – that was as close to love and kindness as Tom was capable of. Filled with emotion, she turned and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly, the locket pressed into their diaphragms between their bodies.

At the contact, their shared magic swirled and swelled around them. It felt like home, and Hermione couldn’t fight it with her logical mind, she could only close her eyes and rest her head against Tom’s shoulder. His arms had come to close around her waist, and it was, against all odds, against all she knew, comforting. She was hugging Tom, and she didn’t want to stop.

“We need to get some real food in our stomachs after all that chocolate,” Narcissa’s voice sounded nearby, and Hermione finally opened her eyes and pulled away.

Tom said nothing, but his eyes watched her like she was another gift.

-oOoOoOo-

Six days later, Hermione had grown used to the locket and even enjoyed the low hum of magic she could feel radiating like a second heart beat in her chest area. Today was Tom’s birthday, and she’d gotten up early to make him a cake. The house elves helped her and between the five of them, what had started as plans for a simple chocolate cake with buttercream frosting had turned into a three-layered confection decorated with tiny green marzipan snakes and twelve silver candles.

Narcissa had quietly issued invitations to a birthday get together at Fortiscue’s in Diagon Alley. After ensuring that several students could be there, she and Hermione had told Tom that
they wanted to take him to Diagon Alley for a birthday lunch, and they apparated together with Professor Merrythought. When they walked toward the ice cream parlor, Tom laughed.

“Ice cream? It’s snowing,” Tom shivered for effect, an easy grin turning up the corner of his mouth.

Hermione returned his smile. “They put hot fudge on top of the sundaes – that’s warm.”

He stared at the locket, the bright winter sun catching the emeralds, making them sparkle. “I’m glad you didn’t put the locket under your robe.”

Of course Tom wanted the locket on her, visible in all its Slytherin magnificence to anyone who gazed at her. It marked her as his, an extension of him, and there was a part of her that knew in her modern, muggle existence, that would have been unhealthy. But they were magical soul mates who had transcended time and space and Tom had never had anything or anyone to call his own, but now he had her. And whether he admitted or not, the gift was not so much about claiming her as it was offering everything he had to her, which was the opposite of possessive and selfish.

When they entered the shop, Tom stopped just inside the door, and though his smile widened no further, Hermione could feel from his magic that he was happily surprised. Abraxas, Marguerite, Thad, Vidhi, and Jacob were all there, as well as Patience, Felicity, and Josephine, and the table they had claimed was filled with gifts.

It was a normal birthday party for a twelve-year-old boy. They laughed and joked and everyone noticed the locket, though only Patience mentioned it.

“Even though you aren’t the Heir of Slytherin, you look good in his jewelry,” Patience twirled a toothpick with cherries impaled on it and bit one on the end.

Marguerite choked on her milkshake. “You think that’s Slytherin’s locket?”

The others stared at Hermione’s chest, and she was intensely glad of the fact that they were all currently eleven or twelve.

“It is,” Tom said simply. “It spoke to me in parseltongue.”

At those words, everyone stared harder. Tom leaned close to Hermione and spoke in parseltongue. The low hissing curled around them all, and they watched as a group as the locket made a soft clicking sound and opened. For a terrible instant, Hermione imagined a black cloud of evil billowing out of the locket, but it was empty, though the inside was covered with tiny runes, dozens of them intricately carved into the glassy golden surface.

The runes were beautiful, but the locket did nothing more until Tom spoke again and it closed. They all looked duly impressed, mostly because of the use of parseltongue, rather than a locket that opened and closed magically.

Hermione had been afraid that without magic to tie them together that their group wouldn’t function as well, but the afternoon was like a study session with no studying. Narcissa brought out the cake that the house elves had delivered and the Ravenclaws teased the Slytherins over eating snake cake. It was a scene she could have had with Harry, Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville, with only minor modifications, and that was a surreal realization. Part of her ached for her future-past friends, but she knew she was doing the right thing, the only thing she could do, to make their lives better, even if she wouldn’t be able to be in those lives.

She had wanted to get Tom a meaningful gift, but had already used up all her ideas at
Christmas. His birthday on New Year’s Eve allowed her no time to think up something new. She’d bought a few additional books, and an excellent potions ingredient set that included several rare elements, but wanted something more personal.

When the party was over, Tom and Hermione sat in Professor Merrythought’s library, looking over the gifts. They were mostly books, though Patience had given him a hat covered in snake scales. Hermione laughingly put the hat on, two strands of scaly yarn trailing down on either side of her face to create ‘tails’.

“Tom,” she sat beside him on the couch. She put her hand on his and he laid down the book Marguerite had gotten him on the history of hexes.

“Hermione,” he smirked, looking at her in the silly hat. He tugged on one of the tails and the hat easily slid off, falling to the cushioned seat.

“I don’t have a wonderful gift to give you, nothing that matches the locket,” Hermione said softly.

Tom’s eyes widened slightly. “You give me your company every day,” he replied smoothly.

“I would give you that any way,” she waved a hand dismissively. “My additional gift is my promise to help you with the necklace, to help you learn how to undo curses,”

“You’d do that anyway too,” Tom teased. “A puzzle left unsolved would drive you mad.”

She found it hard to concentrate when he teased her, because he was so adept at playing the role of charming boy that sometimes she wasn’t sure what was real. An angry Tom was easier to accept in many ways. But Tom wasn’t angry now, he was happy, his magic moving playfully at the edges of her own. In these brief moments, she believed anything was possible, that she could save the world from the monster he had the potential to become. Instinctively, she knew that the best chance would come from fostering and strengthening their connection, of being the conscience he didn’t have.

Hermione twisted so that she was sideways on the couch, fully facing him. She stared directly into his eyes, grasped both of his hands, and said, “Tom Marvolo Riddle, I pledge to help you explore the limits of magical abilities. I will help you to become the best wizard and person you can be.”

Tom raised an eyebrow, “If you will be attempting to turn me into what you deem a good person, then you have only disappointment ahead.”

“No,” she replied immediately. “I’ll settle for as good as you can be, and I’ll make up the difference.”

Even white teeth, just a bit sharp, appeared as he laughed. “Well, that seems like a deal completely in my favor. I’ll take it.”

Hermione smiled, wondering if she’d just saved the world or bargained it away to the devil himself.
The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth...

Chapter Summary

It's four years later. Hermione and Tom have a relationship that isn't a relationship. Maybe that isn't what they actually want. Jealousy is all over the place, and tempers flare.

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow. Not sure where to begin. Almost 18,000 words in two days...a lot of shit happens.

Warning #1: SEX! This chapter earns the "E" in a big, big way.
Warning #2: Underage Sex! (because if you don't think improperly supervised kids at Hogwarts weren't banging....well they sure are here.)
Warning #3: Teenagers being horny and having little impulse control - there is making out/sex between more than one pairing, and maybe not the pairing you'd like to see.
Warning #4: Tom IS a sociopath, and they are promiscuous pleasure seekers by nature. I did say at the beginning that this wouldn't be a romantic, good Tom. Hermione has to make some tough choices, but she's going in with her eyes open.
Warning #5: The sex will definitely be toward the power exchange, D/s spectrum, which I think is fitting for Tom's character. You are warned, and I love you all!

Chapter 19

-oOo0oOo- four year later, fall of 1942-oOo0oOo-

“Isn’t Tom Riddle the most gorgeous boy you’ve ever seen?”

“His eyes are so blue, and his smile!”

Hermione did not look up from her OWL study materials at these comments. Over the past two years of school, she had become immune to the near constant refrain of Tom Riddle worship that filled the halls, classrooms, and dormitories, and had even penetrated the sacred walls of the library. Somewhere between their third and fourth years, Tom had grown five inches and this past summer, leading into their fifth year, he’d added another two inches to be nearly six feet tall while still three months shy of turning sixteen. He’d also become even more good looking, though that should have been impossible.

Everyone at Hogwarts who found men attractive noticed. The third and fourth year girls were the worst offenders, like the tittering Hufflepuffs who were currently waxing poetic on Tom’s physical features. As a prefect, Hermione could have issued a detention for their loudness in the quiet area of the library, but if she started giving detentions or deducting points for every time someone went ga-ga over Tom, she’d reduce all the houses to negative numbers and empty the halls of students.

“Oh, here he comes! He’s coming this way!” The voices were shrill whispers now, the girls
working themselves into a frenzy.

She had felt his magic a full minute earlier, but had continued with her notes. Even though she’d already successfully defeated the OWL exams in the future, she was nervous all over again, her mind inventing a million reasons why she might fail despite her talent. Also, obsessing on the test kept her mind occupied. And occupied was a good thing, because her mind was full of bitter musings and dangerous secrets.

“Hermione,” his voice had fully deepened over the summer, and it was melodious. Still, she didn’t look up.

“Fine,” he said, and her notes vanished. Her head snapped up instantly.

“Tom!” she yelled in a whisper. “Bring those back!”

“You know how bad I am at retrieval,” his voice was all lazy insolence as he dropped into the chair beside her, long, graceful limbs sprawling artfully. Hermione heard the girls in the library make a collective sigh.

Hermione gave him an angry glare. “You’re only bad when you want to be.”

He smiled, and another sigh sounded from the room. “I’m only bad when you ignore me. I’d have thought a clever girl like you would have figured that out by now.”

“I’m trying to study,” she snapped. “I don’t have time for your games.”

“Hermione,” Tom’s cajoling tone walked like fingers up her spine, and she used every bit of self-control to keep from shivering. She hated how her body responded to his presence, to that new, deeper voice of his. “Those tests aren’t for months, and you know don’t need to study for them. School started three weeks ago, and I’ve barely seen you.”

His voice dropped even lower, and there was a hint of anger in it now. “Why are you avoiding me?”

She stood, because he was too close. Her whole being was on fire, and she wasn’t ready to deal with this. “I’m not avoiding you, Tom.”

A lovely, perfectly shaped dark eyebrow arched. “You’ve put off the study group, and you are sitting on the other side of the room in our shared classes,” those blue eyes matched the color of a stormy sea as he stood, too, his body in her space, his height towering over her. “Are you wearing the locket?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He whispered a modification of accio, and the locket gently floated out of the neck of her sweater. The stormy look passed, replaced with a smug smirk. “Of course you are.”

“Tom, I told you I would wear it,” she stuffed the locket back down her shirt. She had kept her promise, and hadn’t gone a single day without it since he’d given it to her nearly four years ago.

“Promise me you’ll be at the study group tonight after dinner,” he reached out and tugged at one of her curls, which were standing wildly around her head from her anger, she knew.

She nodded; she couldn’t keep up the pattern of the last three weeks. “Of course,” she kept her voice neutral. “This is a challenging year academically. I’ve simply been trying to settle in.”
Tom eyed her suspiciously. “Well, we’ll have plenty of time to discuss this later. I’ll see you after dinner.”

As soon as Tom left, after another pull at her curls, she gathered her things, realizing with relief that her notebook had reappeared amid her papers. She practically ran to Ravenclaw tower, and locked herself in the shared bathroom. Tugging off her clothes, she stepped into the hottest shower her skin could stand.

Three weeks ago, on the train ride to Hogwarts, several things had happened and she didn’t want to think about any of them. She and Tom had come to King’s Cross from Galatea’s, Professor Merrythought now that school has started again, she reminded herself, where they had spent their summer break. Narcissa had purchased a lovely cottage in Hogsmeade at the end of their first year, but the Bonneau Riddle clan was not often there. Hermione knew Narcissa wanted a symbol of her independence, a place to call her own, and that was important. She also knew that Narcissa was very much in love with her soul mate, and that Galatea lobbied hard for the whole family to move in with her at the Merrythought estate. The compromise was a few token days staying in Hogsmeade during every vacation, but most time not in school was spent in Surrey. Hermione and Tom had their own permanent rooms, though Narcissa had long since given up the pretense of a separate bedroom there.

Narcissa had apparated them to the King’s Cross station so they could reconnect with their school friends before the term officially started, though their luggage was already at the school, and they’d been running through the halls of Hogwarts for two weeks prior when Narcissa and Professor Merrythought had moved back into their Hogwarts quarters to prepare for the new school year.

Tom had gone looking for Abraxas, and Hermione had quickly been found by Patience, who had grown rather willowy over the summer. Though no one in this time would understand the reference, Patience looked like a 1960s flower child with her loose white blonde hair crowned with a daisy chain, her dazed expression, and her colorful yellow sundress made from enough material for a small tent. Golden fabric was everywhere and when Patience sat down beside Hermione, the extra material settled over her lap like a blanket. They had chosen a small compartment, really only space for their roommates, and once Josephine and Felicity were there, the girls closed the door and shared stories of their summer.

Set to turn sixteen in only a few weeks, Hermione was the oldest of the group, but all of them had fall birthdays, and would be sixteen before Christmas. Josephine’s family was already discussing her marriage options in a serious way, and that topic dominated the conversation. As a pureblood, Josephine was expected to marry soon after completing Hogwarts, and pureblood engagements were lengthy. Even though the Longbottoms were a kind family, they still believed in duty, and continuing their magical bloodline.

“They want me to be married by eighteen!” Josephine cried, her pretty dark eyes filled with tears. “I want a family, I do, but I’m not even sixteen until November! My grandma came over with a list of ten names last week and told me to whittle it down to three likely candidates who could ‘court me’.”

Felicity patted Josephine’s back and sighed. “I can’t even imagine that. My parents don’t want me to even think about boys until I’m twenty. Those were their exact words. I think they still hope I’m going to quit this ‘weird’ magical life, train to be a nurse, and come home to Edinburgh, that I’ll marry a nice boy from our neighborhood eventually.”

“Is Jacob on the list?” Patience asked, her eyes gazing out the window, unfocused on
Hermione watched as Josephine’s cheeks rapidly blushed. “I’d say that’s a yes,” she grinned. “Jacob is getting to be very handsome.”

The shortest boy among the group for the first three years of school, Jacob Selwyn had finally grown toward the end of last year, and his cute, boyish face had matured greatly. He had very long lashes, was incredibly studious for a Slytherin, quiet and a little shy, but always polite. Hermione didn’t know about the other names on the list, but as far as picking a pureblooded husband who wouldn’t be insane or cruel, Jacob had to be at the top of the list.

“No one is as handsome as Tom, though,” Patience turned her eyes back toward the other girls.

Her words were said in a very matter-of-fact tone, like the sky is blue. Josephine stopped crying and laughed. “And no one knows that better than Tom does.”

“Do you think he gets tired of seeing that face in the mirror?” Felicity mused. “Is he even human? Sometimes, last year, when he did magic, especially in dueling club, I swore he was glowing.”

Hermione was decidedly uncomfortable with discussing Tom’s appearance. “It’s the way he’s always looked, there’s nothing different,” she shrugged in what she hoped was a casual way.

“Hermione, how can you be so blind?” Felicity laughed. “You have a Greek god for your cousin – you spend all the holidays and summers with him. How are you not in love with him like the rest of the school?”

“I’m pretty sure love is not what the attraction is,” Hermione responded tartly.

Patience nodded solemnly. “Hermione’s right. You wouldn’t believe what I heard a group of seventh year Gryffindor girls say they wanted to do to him last year.”

“Well,” Josephine tugged on Patience’s sleeve. “Now you have to tell us. And don’t spare the dirty details!”

If Hermione had thought for the first two years of school in the past that the students seemed more innocent when it came to romance and attraction, that notion had been sent to fiery grave of exploded hormones in the last two years. Third year had been full of secret crushes and tears in pillows for both Josephine and Felicity, as well as others around the school, Hermione knew. She and Patience seemed the only ones not affected, thank heavens.

Last year, there had been much more active demonstration of affection – invitations to the tea shop in Hogsmeade, hands held in the hallways, even a few kisses for the more adventurous. And of course, there were the illicit meetings with unsuitable partners in empty classrooms or dark hallways that were spoken of in hushed tones. No, the students of the 1940s might be more discrete, but they were no less ruled by their sex drives. There were some differences, she noted. The boys were almost always the instigators of an actual relationship in this time, though girls hinted and flirted with their intended targets. The relationships between fifth years and older were taken much more seriously in this time as well – when a pair was labeled a true ‘couple,’ and not just a brief flirtation or a single date to a particular event, a future commitment of engagement was heavily implied. This was especially true for the pureblooded students, but many half-blooded students in sixth and seventh years had already been discussing marriage.
The Hermione who had grown up in the 1990s found this ridiculous. What about college? What about apprenticeships to gain the title of mastery over a particular field of magic? Some of the girls, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors in particular, were planning on further studies, and had mostly removed themselves from the dating arena by publicly stating as much. It seemed, sadly, that there were only two categories available at the moment: a girl who was looking for her future husband at Hogwarts and who would be settling down and having a family shortly after graduating, or a girl who only wanted a career, and had pushed boys to the side completely. Hermione seemed to all outside eyes to be in the second group, as she made it clear to anyone who asked that she would be going on to advanced studies after her NEWTs, and Tom Riddle always smiled approvingly when he heard her say this.

Despite the beginning of romance swirling around them at Hogwarts, Tom and Hermione’s relationship had remained the same as it had since their first year. They were incredibly close, but they were not a couple. Even though sixteen and seventeen year old girls who were practically women had been throwing themselves at Tom since he had turned fourteen, he simply didn’t seem interested. He was his normal, charming self, opening doors, giving empty compliments, and smiling at each girl like she was the only one in the world, but those actions had no impact on him, only the lovesick females of Hogwarts. He was perfectly aware of his affect on others, and used it to his advantage, but remained untouched by any such feelings himself.

Over the holiday and summer breaks, they spent long hours reading in Galatea’s library, walking the property while discussing magical theories, and following the news from both the muggle and wizarding wars currently on-going. With Tom, the pursuit of magic, of honing his abilities, was everything. He could go all night without sleeping or pass up meals to keep on a particular train of thought.

When thinking, and especially when doing magic, Tom preferred Hermione to be physically close to him, in the same room, and often seated directly beside him. Their connection had grown from all their time together, and now, Hermione could feel in her magic when he left the house or when he was coming down the hall toward the room she was in. This was when he was feeling neutral, of course. When he was feeling strongly – either happy or angry, it didn’t matter how far away he was, she felt it, too. That reminded her of Harry’s connection with Voldemort, which made her uncomfortable, but also reminded her of her duty to the world.

In many ways, their relationship had solidified into more of a brother-sister connection than anything else. During their first two years at school, they had touched frequently – holding hands to make spells stronger, sitting so closely their body warmth mingled through their clothing. But somewhere over the summer before their third year, shortly before her fourteenth birthday, Hermione had stopped reaching for him, and he also drew back. Their magical connection was strong enough that they didn’t need to physically touch to draw energy from one another, and that buffer of magic took the place of physical touching.

It was over the fourth year Christmas break that Hermione had gone to Narcissa and asked for additional training in occlumency. Tom had been starting to work on legilimency, and it was only a matter of time before he tried it on her, she knew. She made it clear that she didn’t want him to use it on her, but speaking her boundaries meant very little when Tom viewed her like an extra limb filled with magic he could use to strengthen and sharpen himself. Her mind would be a playground for him to practice, and he’d do it so quietly and carefully, she wouldn’t know until it was too late. Narcissa had agreed and the two of them had begun evening ‘teas’ that were less about mother-daughter bonding than about protection. Hermione was confident that she had proper shields up for now, though she doubted they would last unless she continued her training. To resist a person who would eventually become one of the strongest legilimens ever known, she would need to become a master occlumens.
It didn’t help that Tom often knew how she felt, even if he didn’t know her exact thoughts. She had been hard at work since last spring at burying her emotions as well. If she didn’t let her emotions boil over, she could keep them hidden. This summer had been difficult. She was fifteen all over again, and she was a mess. The reason she’d stopped reaching for Tom was becoming harder and harder to hide. All the little tiffs of anger and frustration and longing she had felt over Ron were nothing compared to how Tom made her feel. When Tom sat close by, her heart thudded. When he smiled at her, it practically stopped. He was her soul mate, and her body knew that. It also knew that he was the most beautiful creature she’d ever seen. Her mind ignored her body. Hermione had already compromised so much. She was terrified if she touched him, or he touched her, with romantic intention, that she’d be lost, just another one of the silly girls mindless to everything except pleasing him.

Tom was the golden boy of the school. The study group he and Hermione had created was hailed as a shining example of inter-house cooperation and their members were producing astonishing magic. When the three boys who had cursed Tom during their first year had returned after Christmas break, they had stayed clear. There had been a few additional scuffles with Sagitta Black and her cronies, but the hexes had all been more petty than harmful. In their third year, after Sagitta had graduated, there was really no one to stand in his way of being the defacto leader of Slytherin House. Even Dolohov, who had remained neutral, had come around, and now, as he was entering his seventh year, he was already talking about making connections in the political world that would benefit Tom in a few years.

Abraxas Malfoy was working on that front, too, through his father. Even with the family motto of “Always Pure,” Gawain Malfoy seemed to agree with Abraxas’s decision to align himself with Tom. He was descended from the House of Gaunt, after all, and the ward to a pureblooded woman with excellent connections, even if he did have some radical ideas about muggleborns. During part of the summer each year since their third year, Tom had been invited to Malfoy Manor. The two boys were a wonderfully complimentary pair – Tom’s dark good looks and Abraxas’s pale handsome, Tom’s slender grace and Abraxas’s more muscular build, carved from his place as Keeper on the Slytherin Quidditch team. When they walked the halls of Hogwarts together, they left three-quarters of the school enthralled. Tom was the more reserved, circumspect one, while Abraxas was often ‘do first, think later.’ The elder Malfoy appreciated the rise in Abraxas’s grades and magical skill that had resulted from his friendship with Tom, and from the few times Hermione had been around Gawain, she had the impression that he wanted to turn the duo into his own political machine. It was amusing to her that Gawain thought he could manipulate Tom, but Hermione had no doubt Tom had skillfully led him to that conclusion.

On the surface, Tom was near to perfect, and most of Hogwarts saw him that way. Hermione knew this version of Tom had to be a world of improvement over the Tom he would have been otherwise, but though he treated people better and inspired loyalty due to his charm and how much he helped others to be better at their own magic, he was still a master manipulator, and ravenous for power. He adored the dueling club, and Hermione could feel the flare of satisfaction whenever he saw fear in the eyes of others, and even if it was only a fleeting, oh, bloody hell, I’m about to get hit with a powerful jinx, it was still a sadistic form of happiness that worried her.

She had managed to keep Tom away from practicing seriously dark magic, though they had read about everything, and had even frankly discussed the pros and cons of horcruxes at the end of last year, though, thankfully, Tom had seemed to approach the topic as a simple discussion of the limitations of being truly immortal, not an actual plan of achieving said immortality. She had jokingly suggested they become vampires if all they wanted to do was to live forever, and he honestly seemed to give more thought to that idea than horcruxes.

Frighteningly, he had been more interested in the imperius curse than anything else last
year. Of course it appealed to his dominating nature to have people do his bidding, but she thought she had impressed upon him how serious the consequences of such an action would be, and he’d dropped the topic, or had least pretended to. When she was in Ravenclaw tower for the night, she often wondered what Tom was doing in the dungeons, and how far he was going in a dark direction when she wasn’t there to rein him in.

Tom could make convincing arguments for power and darker spells, and Hermione always felt her arguments about rightness and morality fell short, going in one ear and out the other with Tom. He humored her and slightly teased her by taking dark spells and modifying them to be weaker or even light, opposite versions. Once, at the end of last year, he’d turned a stinging hex into a tickling jinx and made her fall to the floor laughing in front of the whole study group. She’d been so angry, she’d sent the original stinging jinx back, and he’d laughed triumphantly through the pain of red welts covering his skin, pleased at her angry response. He knew just how to push her to make her act out of a dark place, and she hated that. It was like he could reach inside her and pull out malice, and that was terrifying.

She rose from the seat, dis-entangling herself from Patience’s dress. “I’m going to find the trolley. Does anyone want anything?”

They all shook their heads, and Hermione went into the corridor. The train had pulled out over an hour ago, so most students had settled into compartments with friends, and the hall area was empty. There was no sign of the trolley. She walked toward the next car, and her magic shifted subtly.

Tom was probably near, in one of the other compartments that lined this car. She peered into the closest one, though she was at an oblique angle and couldn’t be seen herself.

There were only two people in the compartment, Tom and Marguerite. As usual, Marguerite had put herself as close to Tom as she could, nearly plastered to his side. In their first few years, Marguerite had given Tom distance, but she’d inched closer as time passed and she wasn’t reprimanded. It was no secret that Marguerite was in love with him, nor that Tom knew this.

“Slughorn will put us all in his club this year, don’t you think?” Marguerite was saying, her hands threading through her long, dark curls as if combing them with her fingers. Her fingers casually brushed Tom’s arm as she did so.

Tom was focused, looking down at a book, but he made no move to pull away from Marguerite. “Most likely,” he replied in a bored tone.

Marguerite sighed, obviously a manufactured sound. “Well, definitely you and your girlfriend, at least.”

Now he looked up. His head turned to Marguerite, and Hermione couldn’t see his expression, though she clearly heard his words, “Hermione is not my girlfriend.”

Hermione walked away quickly, keeping her magic pulled in as tightly as possible, her blood chilled in a similar fashion to another train ride, one that had featured dementors roaming the halls. She kept going until she found a loo, then ducked inside, warded the tiny space against sound and cried for ten minutes straight. Her tears were angry ones. She was furious, and tears were the only outlet she had right now because she couldn’t blast Tom and Marguerite into nothingness like she wanted to.

Why had fate screwed her so royally? Why did she end up longing for a soul mate who
would never return normal human affection? Tom loved the power she had, the magical boost her presence gave him, the prestige she connected him to through her assumed identity, but he didn’t love her. He used her like another part of his brain, his magic, but he didn’t look at her like a person, like an independent being who needed real love and affection. She knew he didn’t look at Marguerite that way, either, but he enjoyed her slavish attention, the way the ancestress of his future favorite henchwoman fawned over him and obeyed him without question.

Hermione’s rather fertile imagination began to spin all kinds of possibilities. They probably did dark spells together in that bloody dungeon, laughing at how naïve she was to think Tom wouldn’t do whatever the hell he wanted behind her back. With a sinking feeling, she realized that Tom would probably sleep with Marguerite if it afforded him any advantage. If he hadn’t already.

She took a deep breath, ending the spiral of her thoughts. Even if her body was fifteen, her mind was older and she was better than this. Hermione did a few simple charms to erase the signs of her crying from her face, and went back out into the hall.

As she stepped out, she saw Abraxas coming her way. He bounded up to her, all muscles and smooth smile and knowing eyes and pale blonde hair, and the fifteen-year-old hormones inside Hermione had to appreciate his appeal. He had been a terrible flirt since their third year, though he never directed those type of attentions toward Hermione. No one did. Even if no students knew about Tom and Hermione’s status as soul mates, they all either believed she was Tom’s girlfriend (which she clearly wasn’t, per his own words) or his beloved cousin (as if he could love anyone), which put her off-limits to everyone. Not a single student had expressed anything except friendly interest in her.

“Hermione!” he said easily, familiarity born of years of close study and magic performed together. “Jacob and I have been scouring the train at opposite ends for the treat trolley. Marguerite asked for a bloody pumpkin juice, and we were trying to be nice, but I’m getting tired of looking. Have you seen it?”

It was slightly comforting that Abraxas and Jacob had also been in the compartment at some point, but wildly annoying that Marguerite had sent them away to practice her wiles on Tom. There was also the crushing statement that Tom had definitively labeled Hermione as “not his girlfriend,” repeating itself in a loop in her head.

“No,” Hermione shook her head, still struggling to be calm. She felt immature and stupid to care about whether or not Tom thought of her in that way. Maybe they were an example of rare platonic soul mates. Maybe Hermione just wasn’t his type. Voldemort was so twisted, he and Bellatrix had probably crucioed each other in the place of a real human connection. And if Bellatrix had been his type, well, Marguerite was a much saner, if no less cruel, version. If Tom was her only option for a relationship in this time, and he didn’t want her that way, then she was doomed to be without a romantic interest, probably for the rest of her life. And that was a horrible feeling.

“Are you alright?” Abraxas was closer now, peering critically at her face. “You look sad.”

Abraxas was generally a loud and boisterous presence, bragging loudly, flirting outrageously, but that was part of his sneaky Slytherin nature, Hermione thought. The noise of his demeanor kept most people from realizing how perceptive and intelligent he was beneath that exterior.

He had come even closer, and Hermione could smell chocolate and the polish that the Quidditch players rubbed on their brooms that reminded her of an evergreen forest. She felt fragile, like her skin was a web of cracks barely held together. If he pushed, she would break apart into all
the insecurities that had eaten her to a near hollow state of being.

She didn’t understand that she was silently crying until his warm, slightly rough hand was cupping her cheek and wiping away a stream of tears. His face was very near, but tilted to her ear.

“I’d kiss you now, but he’d kill me. Or you would,” he whispered with a grin, his breath smelling of dark chocolate and oranges.

A laugh came out automatically, but it wasn’t a very pleasant sound. “He would only kill you for show, not because he cared.”

Abraxas hadn’t moved back, and when he spoke again, his lips brushed the outer curve of her ear. “But you wouldn’t?”

A shudder ran through her and she didn’t try to disguise it. She was mad, and that made her especially susceptible to bad decisions. When she was angry, her logical mind had a tendency to shut down, and emotion ruled in its place, a wild thing driven by baser instincts. This was too serious, though. She had to keep herself together.

The movement of her shiver had twisted her head to the side, and Abraxas’s lips trailed down the line of her neck, not so much kissing as breathing softly, barely touching, but making her whole body come alive in a flood of feel-good chemicals. Her back went against the door to the loo, and she fumbled at the knob, opening it and pulling him inside.

Abraxas had a husky laugh, and it wrapped around her pelvic region in a wonderfully pleasant way. He whispered spells of locking and sound protection, then he bent his head and kissed her mouth.

It had been six years since Hermione Granger, now Bonneau, had been kissed. The last one had felt like a horrible impression of an octopus trying to eat her face – an octopus named Cormac McLaggen. In her bed at night, when the potion wore off, she wished she had better memories of kisses to draw upon for her fantasies, especially two years ago, when those fantasies had started to feature a tall, dark-haired boy with a devastating smile that rarely reached his blue eyes.

She knew she was falling in love with Tom, and she was fighting it. Her loyalty, her devoted friendship, her intellectual abilities, her magical power – those were things she could and did give him. But her heart? That felt like the last remaining piece of Hermione Granger, the secret spot that she could still call her own. And she was glad she had held on to it for dear life, because it was clear Tom didn’t want her heart. Well, he probably did want it, because he liked to own things and people completely, but he had no plans on giving her his heart in return, so Hermione would keep it hidden, safe.

And Abraxas Malfoy, of all people, was going to help distract her, it seemed. He was an excellent kisser, his lips wide and smooth and soft, exerting just the right amount of pressure and tongue, one hand wound into her hair at the base of her neck, the other gently splayed at the base of her spine. She returned the kiss, mirroring his movements to make up for her lack of experience, letting the pleasurable sensations distract her. He was a gorgeous boy, and on nights when she had been angry with Tom, he had been the replacement fantasy material, though she had no idea before now that he wanted her.

After several minutes, he pulled back, looking down at her with grey eyes stripped of his earlier, light-hearted flirtation. “Hermione,” he began, his breath coming in pants, his hand still tangled in her hair. “I can’t believe we just did that. I mean, I’ve wanted to do that for ages, but…”
“He will kill you,” she sighed sadly. “I like you too much to want you to die.”

Abraxas’s expression was suddenly violent, an emotion she hadn’t seen on him before, though he wore it well. “I would follow Tom to the ends of the earth. He is going to change everything one day, and I want to be beside him when he does. Just being near his magic, his brain, is addictive. He is the Heir of Slytherin, and I’m happy to be his loyal knight in most every way, but he takes you for granted, flaunts Marguerite in your face,”

She closed her eyes. “Tell me the truth, Abraxas, please. Is he sleeping with her?”

He rested his head on her shoulder, still holding her close, the strands of his pale, straight hair tickling her cheek. “Yes.”

And just like that, Hermione knew she hadn’t kept her heart safe, because it was breaking right now, and it was more painful than Bellatrix’s torture. “How long?”

“The end of last year,” his voice was hardly audible, as if volume could affect the amount of injury she felt. “I don’t think it was very many times,” he hastily added.

“Does he even like her?” Hermione’s voice cracked.

Abraxas kissed her cheek, catching her tears in his mouth. The gesture was oddly kind and comforting, and Hermione allowed herself to cry harder, allowed him to hold her in this intensely private and vulnerable moment.

“I don’t know,” Abraxas said finally. “He’s… Tom. The only person he actually cares about is you, Hermione. But sex feels good, and it gives him power over Marguerite, and all her connections.”

“Yes, he’s a fucking chess master, isn’t he?” Hermione wanted to hurt him, and that thought scared her.

Abraxas nodded seriously. “He absolutely is, and we can’t forget that. Marguerite is a pawn, a rook at best. You’re the Queen. You’re the one he won’t let anything or anyone touch.”

She grinned sadly, looking down at the arms holding her. “You’re touching me.”

His smile matched hers. “I clearly have no regard for my future existence,” a tiny part of his normal, easy to laugh self had returned. “Look, I’m his roommate. I see more than I should, and I keep my mouth shut, except now, with you. Marguerite threw herself at him, waited half-naked in his bed. She wants him, and what Marguerite wants, she gets.”

“She can’t marry him,” Hermione knew her voice was petulant, but she didn’t care. “He’s not pureblooded.”

Abraxas laughed. “Oh, she won’t marry him, but she’ll marry a stupid pureblood with lots of money and no talent, and she’ll put all those resources behind Tom. She’ll do what pureblooded wives do best – give their husbands a few children, then do whatever she wants. Tom is only sleeping with her to control her.”

“And that makes it better?” Hermione’s hair was curling, her angry magic rising and she pulled at it, tried to keep it in check.

“No,” Abraxas shrugged, “but it makes it something Tom would do. Hermione, I don’t understand why you are so upset. You know how he is.”
“I’m upset because,” she searched for words.

“Because he isn’t using you?” Abraxas’s grey eyes were sharp, pinning her down. “Would it make you feel good if he had kissed you, had sex with you, without feeling anything? Whatever he does feel, it is for you, and it is as good and pure a feeling as Tom is capable of. Marguerite is acting like a fucking whore, and that’s how Tom treats her. She knows she will never have one-millionth of the affection he gives to you, and she hates you for it.”

Everything Abraxas said was true. She knew Tom had no conscience – or at least, so little that it couldn’t effectively function. Sociopaths used people as they saw fit, and they tended to be promiscuous, and pleasure-seekers. Of course a fifteen year old with little to no morals would have sex with a half-naked girl in his bed. But some part of Tom had to have known it would hurt her, upset her, because he hadn’t let anyone tell her.

“Well, fuck him,” Hermione said, her anger rising to a near-volcanic state. “I’m a person, not an ideal, untouchable statue of a girl on a shelf. I can’t live the rest of my life without affection.”

Abraxas looked both terrified and amused at her outburst. “What are you going to do, Hermione?”

“You’re sixteen now, aren’t you?” she thought his birthday was right before school started, about a month before her own.

He nodded, looking wary.

“Do you have a fiancée yet?” her fierce gaze dared him to lie.

“Not yet, I swear,” he put up his hands. “My parents are talking to other families, but they don’t have a list yet. I think they thought I’d pick someone at school and save them the trouble.” He gently rubbed her hand. “Unfortunately, I’ve been preoccupied with thoughts of a beautiful, brilliant half-blooded girl who isn’t an option for several reasons.”

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. “Not so preoccupied that you haven’t gained a thorough reputation as the best kisser at Hogwarts.”

“Have I now?” he grinned, taking her hands and putting them around his waist, then doing the same with his at her waist. “Care to weigh in on the matter?”

They kissed for a long time, gentle, slow kisses that were arousing in a non-threatening way. She could have fallen asleep against him; he felt safe and solid. How long had it been since she’d felt safe around Tom? As soon as she started to be attracted to him, she had run for cover.

“This can’t end in anything except tragedy, Abraxas,” she sighed against his mouth.

“I’m well aware of that,” he kissed her as he spoke. “But I’ve been half in love with you the night you stormed into our room and saved Tom, and I fell the rest of the way last year in potions when you squeezed my hand after I helped Felicity save that disaster of a sleeping draught she was trying to make.”

“What?” she was shocked. Until those last words, it had been a silly action, a flirtation they could walk away from, keep as a guilty secret.

He pulled her more tightly against his entire body, his actions more rough than anything previous, and she felt how hard he was – how hard all of him was. “I want you, but I don’t want to
use you, Hermione. I love you.”

She cried, much harder than before. This was the first time a boy had told her he loved her. It wasn’t Ron, the boy she had dreamed of in her previous, future life, and it wasn’t Tom, her fucking soul mate. It was Draco Malfoy’s grandfather, and she thought her head might just explode.

“It’s okay,” he continued, his voice the only part of him that was soft. “I know you love him.”

“Abraxas,” she wiped at her tears, and kissed him. “You are so much more than I had realized. I can’t use you, either.”

He was smiling again, the sexy smile that was legend at Hogwarts, second only to Tom’s. “Oh, but you can. I hereby give you permission to use me any way you want, Hermione.”

And, again, anger shorted out Hermione’s higher brain. Tom had fucked Marguerite – more than once, and he would do it again, now that school had started. If he could use sex as a weapon, then she damn well could use it for comfort. She wasn’t going to save herself for the hope that Tom would wake up one day and care for her in the way she wanted him to. What a fucking fool she’d been, practically drawing hearts with their names in them, thinking, as soul mates, that she and Tom would go off into the sunset together. This second adolescence with its flood of hormones had betrayed her, and the euphoria of the soul mate connection had struck the killing blow. Hermione Granger had fallen in love with Tom Riddle and he couldn’t care less. Well, she was taking it back; her love was her own, her body was her own, soul mate bond be damned.

She leaned in to kiss him and there was a quiet knock on the door. They both jumped, panicked. The spells Abraxas had put up cancelled noise going out, not coming in. Hermione’s heart raced and she hurried to check her hair and face in the mirror. Would Tom be there? No, she didn’t feel his magic. There was something familiar, though, something soft and comforting, like a favorite blanket. Patience.

“Hermione? I think you have five minutes to be gone from there,” Patience’s voice was more focused than usual, and definitely more insistent.

Abraxas looked like he might vomit. Hermione rubbed his arm. “We’re safe. It’s Patience. I trust her with my life. I’m going with her, now. Wait five minutes, then go back to the others.”

Despite his obvious fear, he grabbed her and kissed her, hard and deep. “I don’t regret it. I never will. I love you.”

She kissed him back, part of her glad they’d been stopped before doing something that would have probably gotten them both killed. “You love power, Abraxas. I’m just the wrapping.”

“That’s not true. What do we do now?” he asked, pulling her close again and lifting her to be able to lean his head against her.

“I have no idea,” she said honestly. “It’s more than a bit terrifying. Don’t you remember what happened to Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot?”

His head was against her chest, a warm weight against her heart. “Arthur didn’t love Guinevere, not more than Britain, not more than power, not the way Lancelot loved her,” he protested.
Hermione took a deep breath, tried to swim through a sea of hormones, hurt feelings, and arousal back to her logical mind. “Abraxas, you are going to be married in a few years, and it won’t be to me. I could easily fall in love with you, but I won’t. I can’t do that to either of us.”

“Tell me this won’t be the last time, please,” his grey eyes pleaded even more than the tone of his voice, and his arms held her tight.

It felt so good. So good to be loved, to be wanted, to be given unconditional affection – affection given even at the risk of so much danger. “I can’t promise that, Abraxas, but I can tell you that I still want you.”

She was out the door before he could answer, sliding the door open just enough to get out and closing it behind her. Patience was there, alone, bright yellow as a sunrise.

“You smell like mortal danger,” she grumbled, and Hermione started, because Patience never grumbled.

Patience took her hand, Hermione followed meekly, whispered every cleansing spell she knew on herself as she walked, just in case. They were in the compartment, seated with Josephine and Felicity for only a few minutes before the compartment door opened and Tom slipped inside.

“Ladies,” He addressed the whole group, but his sharp blue eyes raked over her, and she erected the walls Narcissa had shown her, protecting her mind and keeping her emotions chained down. The truly good part of her thought she should feel guilty. The part of her that sought justice said she’d only done what Tom had done to her months ago, though a few kisses could hardly be compared to full-out sex. The part of her that sought vengeance itched to curse his lying ass off the train, quickly followed by Marguerite.

“Tom,” Hermione was shocked at how normal her voice sounded, like she hadn’t just been kissed for several minutes by Abraxas Malfoy, and told that he loved her. She looked at his lovely mouth and wondered if Tom went down on Marguerite. She didn’t think he’d be that selfless of a lover. Marguerite probably had to do all the work. Well, she could fucking have him, Hermione told herself fiercely.

“Hermione, we have to go to the prefect’s meeting in a few minutes. Will you walk with me?”

“Sure,” she nodded and rose, not daring to check that she was completely put together. Patience handed her the prefect badge and her school robes. “Thanks, Patience.”

Patience’s expression was back to its normal, dazed self. “That’s what friends are for, Hermione, to help us when we forget ourselves.”

Tom ignored Patience, as usual, but Hermione wondered, not for the first time, if Patience had a bit of the second sight. She leaned over and dropped a kiss on Patience’s forehead.

“Can we go?” Tom scowled. Hermione allowed herself to laugh on the inside. If he was annoyed at a friendly kiss on the temple, then he’d probably spontaneously combust over the earlier events of the day.

They walked back to the last train car quietly.

“What made you so happy a little while ago?” he asked, his voice light, but forced.

Shit, Hermione thought. Please tell me he didn’t feel my arousal. “Patience invited me to
stay with her family this summer. I’m excited to see her grandma’s place. It’s in the Orkney Islands.”

Tom held the door to the next compartment open for her. “You won’t be at home this summer?” he sounded angry, but not because he thought she’d lied.

“You go to Abraxas’s every summer,” she shrugged, her heart racing just a bit at the mention of the boy who was now her partner in the crime of high treason against Tom Riddle.

He didn’t answer, and they spent the rest of the walk in silence.

In fact, she thought as she showered, that was pretty much how the first few weeks of school had gone. She was avoiding him. She was avoiding Marguerite, and the other Slytherins because she knew they all knew, except Thad, because he didn’t know anything not directly related to Quidditch. A whole group of people she had considered her friends had kept a secret from her, and even though most of them had probably thought not telling her was a kindness, and she was mad at the whole sneaky lot of them. Well, not Abraxas.

She scrubbed harder at her skin as she thought of that pale Malfoy hair, those grey Malfoy eyes, his rough hands, and soft lips. She was beginning to think Abraxas had put a tracking spell on her, because he had found her several times in these last three weeks, and always when she was alone, walking back from the library or heading to the greenhouse to check on a set of plants she was growing for extra credit that she didn’t need but wanted anyway.

He would pull her into empty classrooms, and they would kiss each other senseless, though he never pushed her for more. It was clear that the soul mate bond did not in any way preclude attraction to others. Abraxas was beautiful, and his arms were strong and his lips soft, and he always tasted like chocolate. Sometimes, she ended up crying, and he just held her and stroked her hair. He was incredibly sweet, and she wondered each time how much longer she could do this without hurting him one way or another.

And, now? Tom was calling her out on her odd behavior, insisting on her presence at the study group, and this was going to be simply horrible. She got out of the shower and metaphorically dressed for battle. Her hair was pulled back into a tight braid, her mental shields were up, her emotions were tamped down, and her wand was in her hand. On a whim, she pulled the locket out of her sweater, letting it rest on its long chain on her diaphragm, a connection to Tom that Marguerite would never have. It was petty, but she didn’t give a fuck.

The study group had long since claimed a large, unused classroom on the fifth floor as their base. Over the years, they had cleared out old desks and brought in more comfortable furniture, and even a few thick rugs to fall back on when practicing dueling. When Hermione walked in, everyone else was already there. The small groups of students, some looking over homework, others practicing transfiguration and charms, still others dueling, reminded her of the best part of school – the camaraderie. Too bad that was gone for her in a large way.

Several people glanced up when she walked in, and as she crossed over to where Tom was sitting on a couch, the low table in front of it covered by books and the ever-present Marguerite at his side, she saw Marguerite narrow her eyes at the locket.

Hermione made no attempt to hide her grin. She wasn’t going to fight Marguerite for Tom. Why would she fight for someone who didn’t want her, not in that way? But she wasn’t above pissing Marguerite off.
“Hermione,” Tom’s voice was pleased, as it always was when she did as he told her to, when she was near to him. He wanted his magical battery, with its shiny trophy locket, right next to him so everyone could admire it, but not dare to touch it. “Sit down. Abraxas, move over and make a spot for Hermione.”

Abraxas, who had not looked up when she came in, now obligingly made room for Hermione, and she sat, without a word, between Tom and Abraxas. She could feel heat coming from Abraxas, magic coming from Tom, and hatred coming from Marguerite, who sat on Tom’s other side.

“We’ve almost found the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, I think,” Tom said, pride in his voice. “I’ve narrowed it down to three likely locations.”

Hermione froze, swallowed, and answered evenly, “I didn’t know we were looking for it. I thought that was a myth.”

“Well,” Tom said breezily, “the part about it being a home to a beast who will cleanse the school of muggleborns has to be pureblood propaganda, but it is the chamber of secrets – plural – so, I think it is there, that it was Salazar Slytherin’s private potions lab and maybe library, and it is something that, as the Heir of Slytherin, I am entitled to find.”

“I’m not sure I’d dismiss the claim about the beast so easily,” Hermione held back a shiver at the horrific memory of being petrified. She thought of Myrtle, the whiny, annoying girl who wasn’t improved by being alive, but whom she had promised herself she would keep alive this year. And Hagrid, sweet, bumbling, and gigantic even in his third year, whom she could not let be framed and expelled.

“Really, Hermione,” Marguerite snapped, her eyes on the locket once more. “What type of ‘monster’ do you think could live undetected, unfed, in the school for about one thousand years?”

“I don’t know, Marguerite,” Hermione snapped back, though Abraxas had discreetly poked her in the side in warning as she leaned forward. “What about a basilisk that could move through the pipes and eat all manner of rodents and also go into the lake as it pleased? What better magical monster for Slytherin House than an enormous, fucking, slimy snake?”

She hadn’t counted on feeling so angry when she was face to face with Marguerite, with Tom beside Marguerite, so angry she would say things she never, ever should have. Both girls had leaned forward, on either side of Tom, and he watched them with knitted brows.

“A basilisk? That would be…quite genius, really.” Tom turned toward Hermione, smiling in wonder. “Well, we’ll just need to kill it when we open the chamber and our problems will be solved. See, Hermione? Everything’s better when you come to the study group. No one else thought of that.” He turned to Marguerite. “Make a note to study ways to kill basilisks.”

Marguerite nearly stabbed through her parchment with her quill as she wrote. Hermione cast a nonverbal slipping spell, and the quill dug sharply into Marguerite’s leg. Blood welled up through her stocking. The cut was long and deep enough to require treatment, and the horrible part of Hermione’s brain wished she could cut the girl all over.

“You’d better go get that healed,” Hermione said tonelessly.

Tom gave Hermione a pointed look as Marguerite left in a huff, holding her hand to her leg to stop the bleeding. “You could have healed that instantly.”
“I didn’t want to,” Hermione replied, and she leaned back into the couch and opened the book she’d brought with her.

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As Hermione smiled at him, a bit of evil in that grin as Marguerite fled, bleeding, Tom knew that she knew. And she was angry. He reached out with his magic, and felt what he had for the last several months – hardly anything. Her emotions, her magic, were walled up, barely touchable, and that made him angry, too.

Since shortly before their third year, Hermione had been pulling away from him, subtly at first, then, since the end of last year, about the time he’d come into his room to find Marguerite in his bed wearing nothing except one of his button down shirts, rather dramatically. He should have realized before now what had happened, but he’d been researching the Chamber of Secrets, and was so close to finding it, that he’d been distracted.

When he’d first seen Marguerite on his green sheets, her dark, almost black curls, and pale white skin spread out in invitation, he’d been inclined to throw her out. Though his roommates and the other boys seemed to have sex on the mind more than magical studies, Tom hadn’t been particularly tempted. He’d masturbated in the shower; it felt good, but it was more of a biological urge that could be controlled, like putting off a meal, than some great desire that he would allow to consume his time and energy. He was happy that Hermione seemed to be of the same mind, not giggling and tittering like all the other girls in their classes. She gave no hint of being interested in anything romantic or sexual. She didn’t flirt or give significant glances, and she certainly didn’t throw herself at anyone the way Marguerite (and several other, older girls) had done with him.

It wasn’t until that night that he’d made the connection between sex and power, and, well, then he’d been a goner. Sex with Marguerite had been like what he imagined using the imperius curse would be like. She did what he asked, when he asked it, and it felt fantastic. He hadn’t come inside her, ever, because there was no way he would let her have his child. Instead, he’d pulled out and spilled over the sheets, then instantly vanished the mess. He hadn’t let her stay afterwards, even though she wheedled for it, and he’d only had sex with her a few other times since then. Marguerite mainly got him off with her hand or her mouth, and he didn’t care in the slightest if she had an orgasm herself. She was the one who kept coming back, so it wasn’t as if she could complain.

The sexual knowledge itself was another benefit, because knowledge was always power, and now he could slide subtle innuendoes into his charm, into the smiles he bestowed, and he got what he wanted even more often because of it. Except with Hermione. She was something else entirely, not a girl or a potential conquest; she was his soul mate, elevated above the physical. This summer, he’d looked at her differently, had caught himself wondering how sex would feel with their connection, how their magic might flow around them if he took her in the field of wildflowers outside the Merrythought estate. Of the wonderful, powerful sexual magic they would be able to perform together.

But he hadn’t. She was beautiful and wild, but she also seemed innocent, and Tom had never had anything that was pure in the way she was. He didn’t want to touch her that way. She was already his. He didn’t need to prove it. He would never say out loud that he was scared, that he was worried that if he joined with her in that way that she’d be able to rule him, control him, and that simply wasn’t acceptable.

He didn’t think she knew. Truly. He was a very perceptive person, but she’d been her
normal self, except for the gradual retreat of her magic. More than one girl in Hogwarts had changed her entire behavior overnight, and he had chalked it up to a woman’s hormonal issue, thinking it would sort itself out eventually, and he’d have his Hermione back, her usual cheery, brilliant self. He didn’t think she also had fallen victim to those nasty hormones that every one else seemed to be struck senseless by.

But she’d just deliberately cut Marguerite, then sent her away. She knew he’d had sex with Marguerite, and Hermione had punished her. Now, the only thing that remained was for her to try to punish him. He could feel that she wanted to. Part of him longed for it, to have her fly at him, her magic wild, so he could subdue her and show her once and for all that he was the one who was dominant. Then, they could cease their tiresome arguments about what was the right and moral thing to do, and just do what he wanted, with her in her proper place at his side, her mouth shut and her magic at his disposal.

The room emptied quickly. The magic crackling in the air was not something most students could handle. It was heavy and charged, and Hermione’s hair was escaping from her braid at an alarming rate. Tom stood from the couch and discovered he was aroused. Hermione was beautiful, and her magic was thrilling, and he realized he did want her in that way. And now, for the first time, it was clear she wanted him in that way, or she wouldn’t be jealous of Marguerite, who any moron could see was nothing to him.

Abraxas was still on the couch, and Tom narrowed his eyes as he saw how close together they sat, how comfortable they looked beside one another. It was an off-handed, unconscious comfort, the way Hermione’s wand hand was twitching on the cushion, and how Abraxas was leaning toward her, his own hand, also curled around its wand, brushing her knuckles. Any one else, except maybe Patience, who was potentially brain-damaged, would have moved away from Hermione when she was that angry, when her aggressive magic was coming off of her in waves.

Oh. Oh, Tom realized, and then his anger was beyond words. Hermione was his, but Abraxas was his, too. Abraxas was the closest thing he had to a friend, the person he turned to nearly as much as Hermione. In the summers, when they raced brooms and plotted political futures and took day trips to exotic locales with Abraxas’s father, Tom thought that might be what having a brother would be like. Abraxas was much, much smarter than most people realized, and he was an important ally, a loyal and obedient knight to Tom’s cause. Or he had been. The two people he had trusted had been betraying him behind his back, lying to his face. He imagined their bodies, one all white blonde hair and muscles and grey eyes and that fucking bastard smile, and the other all golden brown curls and slender grace and amber eyes and his. No one touched what was his.

Something shifted, and it took him a few seconds to understand that Hermione had let her magic loose, had finally stopped holding it in. It came to greet his, though the greeting was more of a slap in the face. Now, as clear as anything, he felt her desire, her anger, her sense of…betrayal?

He had cast something, but he didn’t even know what it was, only that he’d hurled it at Abraxas, but it didn’t connect, because Hermione had put up a protective barrier. Before they could leave, or someone else could come in, he magically barred the door and muffled the room.

“Did you fuck him, Hermione?” His voice carried, echoing in the empty room. “My best friend?”

“Tom,” her voice was low, but carried just as well. “People who live glass houses shouldn’t cast stones.”

He cast several stone projectiles her way, and she vanished them in mid-air. “I take it that’s a yes.”
“Did you think I wouldn’t find out about Marguerite, that I wouldn’t care?” She threw a flurry of jinxes his way, each one successively darker.

Tom was impressed despite himself. She’d been holding back. Well, so had he. Instead of aiming at her, he threw curses at Abraxas, who had been silent, but now did a remarkable job of defending himself, though he didn’t cast a single attack spell.

“Tell me, Abraxas, did you know that Hermione isn’t just mine because I want her?” Tom moved closer, his handsome face wearing a deceptively benevolent expression. “She is mine because fate gave her to me. She is my soul mate.”

“What?” Abraxas looked shocked, and glanced at Hermione, who said nothing. All her energy was focused on Tom, on anticipating his actions and deflecting them.

Suddenly, Tom was struck with the idea that Abraxas might have seen Hermione’s words, his words that were on a place on her body he hadn’t seen, and he now desperately longed to view.

“No,” Hermione shook her head fervently, cutting him off. “But I’ll bet Marguerite saw mine. You’re so righteous, so bloody chauvinistic, you fucking bastard! You let her touch what was mine!” Her magic came out and it knocked him onto his back, his body hitting against the thick, dusty carpet.

“Go, Abraxas! I’ll deal with this.”

“No, Hermione, I,”

But Tom didn’t know what happened after that, except that Hermione had somehow gotten Abraxas out of the room, and re-barred the doors, and now it was just the two of them. The fall backwards had only mildly stunned him; he was more impacted by Hermione’s anger, the rage that seemed to match his own over Marguerite. Did she think of him the way he thought of her? That didn’t work. He was no one’s. She was his, but he was no one’s.

He stood, and looked at her, his eyes full of incomprehension. “Do you think I am yours?”

She was absolutely still, her magic pulled back in again, a contained, beautiful statue carved of ice. “No. And I am not yours.”

Tom’s magic flared around them, and he walked quickly toward her. “You are mine. You have always been mine.”

A sharp blast threw him across the room. He used his wand to halt the speed, and stood several feet away, panting in anger.

“It’s one or the other, Tom. Either we are each others or no one’s,” Hermione frowned.

“You don’t get to decide that!” He roared.

“Yes, I do! I am a human being! I am not your magical totem or slave! And if you were capable of basic human emotion, you would understand that!” She dodged the freezing curse he sent her way as she yelled.

He considered her words, then sneered. “I’m clearly more evolved, Hermione, since I understand that emotions are useless. Where have yours gotten you? Here, where I am forced to teach you a lesson in how to behave.”
“Good luck!” She laughed bitterly. “If you’re interested in a woman who acts like a dog on a leash, go find that little bitch Marguerite!”

Red jets of light flew toward him, and though he moved quickly, the edge of the hex caught his arm, slicing through his sleeve into his skin. His expression stilled, his face frozen in a deadly, charming smile. “You’ve drawn first blood, my dear soul mate. Or was that Abraxas? How much of yourself did you give him?”

“Tom, at this point, it doesn’t matter, because you’ll never be touching me, ever again.”

In an instant, he was beside her, grabbing her arm. The touch was electric. They were both so angry – enraged, really, but it didn’t matter. They deflated somewhat, and Tom could feel, feel how hurt she was. How she ached over what he had done. “You will always be mine, Hermione.” She shivered, and he sighed in something like relief.

Inspired, he ran his hand up her arm, and he felt her response again, the one she didn’t want to give, but came anyway. He pulled her close and she didn’t protest. “You will, won’t you?” he whispered. “Be mine?”

She shook her head, her eyes willfully closed. He smiled, and put his newly acquired skills to use. His hands went around her waist, and he knew his suspicions from the summer had only been the palest of hints at the truth. Touching Hermione in this ways was not pleasurable. It was a revelation, heaven spread across his flesh.

Her eyes were still closed when he lowered his lips to her mouth, and even though she bit his lip hard enough to draw blood, he kept kissing her and she kissed him back, angry and sexy and what the hell had he been doing with Marguerite? Hermione’s lips were silk and her teeth were like daggers, and the combination was intoxicating. He put his hands on either side of her face, holding her cheeks and deepening the kiss.

“Just because you’re sexy and a good kisser doesn’t mean you win,” she pulled away, but only to speak against his lips, her chest heaving against his own.

“No,” Tom agreed, and he kissed her, much more softly this time. “I’ll win because you want me to, because Abraxas can’t make your skin sing like I can.”

“Marguerite can’t.” Hermione began.

He put a finger to her lips. “Hush. Marguerite can’t anything. Marguerite is nothing.”

She looked down, tears in her eyes. “If she’s nothing, how could you give her what was mine?”

Touching her body, with their magic loose around them, her feelings were absolutely clear. She was furious, she was aroused, but further down, she was devastated. She was in pain, and he had done that. He knew instantly that continuing to try to convince her of the truth that Marguerite meant absolutely nothing to him was not the route to take. Hermione didn’t want to hear that. She wanted to be comforted, to be…loved? He held back his own anger at the memory of the look on Abraxas’s face when he’d revealed their soul mate status. Abraxas was in love with Hermione, and that was why she’d done whatever she’d done with him.

Tom filed that information away, pushed his anger to the side. He’d make Abraxas pay later. Hermione was the priority now. She needed to be re-tied to him, their connection cemented, her wounded feelings soothed.
“I didn’t give her anything,” he said gently, all calm reassurance.

She reared back, but he held her. “You fucked her! How is that not -”

“Yes, I had sex with her,” Tom admitted, keeping a tight grip on Hermione’s arms, not letting her go. If she really wanted to, she could use magic. But she wasn’t, which he took as a good sign. It was time to sacrifice a chess piece. “But I won’t, not again, not if you ask me not to.”

“I shouldn’t have to!” Hermione began.

“Should I have had to tell you not to let Abraxas touch you, to let anyone touch you?” He struggled and failed to keep the anger out of his voice.

“We’re soul mates!” she protested. “You know what that means!”

Tom arched an eyebrow. “What I know is that you haven’t touched me in years, haven’t shared your full magic with me, have given me no indication that you wanted any kind of relationship like that!”

“Wow! So, I’d need to be naked in your bed for you to understand my feelings? Some soul mate connection!” Hermione scoffed, though he could see that those words had hit their mark.

“I think our connection, now that it is flowing again, is rather amazing,” Tom’s voice was back to deeply seductive. “Don’t you?”

She was wavering, he felt it. He let go of her and went for the action he knew would win her over. He unbuttoned his cuffs, carefully taking out the jade cufflinks she’d gotten him that he always wore, and pushed up his sleeves, revealing pale skin and her words on his forearm. “I barely removed anything, Hermione. Marguerite never touched your words.”

Hermione hadn’t seen those marks in four years, he knew. Tom was always dressed smartly, wearing long-sleeved dress shirts even in the summer months. At night, the few times she’d seen him in pajamas, he wore long sleep shirt and pants sets. He never pulled up his sleeves, never looked anything but an elegant young man, perfectly put together.

As he’d hoped, her small, thin fingers reached out and hovered over his exposed words. Her magic was concentrated, electric, and when she finally lowered her fingers to his flesh and traced the words that had ushered him into the magical world, into his destiny, he couldn’t stop a low, shuddering sigh from escaping his throat. Hermione’s fingers were magic, just like her words said, We are Magic.

At his admission, she’d relaxed, though only a bit. He clearly had more work to do. “Hermione, I’ve never wanted anyone except you.”

Her beautiful brown eyes, with those fanciful amber flecks, stared at him accusingly. “I heard you on the train. In the compartment with Marguerite, heard you tell her that I was not your girlfriend.”

He laughed, loudly, unconcerned. “You aren’t my girlfriend, Hermione! You are my soul mate – you are above all that. Your place doesn’t have a label, or a question.”

She looked oddly pleased, but continued in an angry voice. “Did you ever think that I might want what everyone else does? That I need attention, affection, touch?”

“And I suppose Abraxas was happy to supply those things?” Tom’s anger had returned, full-
force, before he could stop it. “He’ll be lucky to live through the night!”

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Hermione yelled, her hair crackling with building magic.

“He touched you! And you let him!” He yelled back.

“Marguerite touched you first! And you let her!” She screamed, and several windows burst, glass flying out onto the lawn in a great whoosh.

He took a deep breath, forced himself to calm down. He turned away and repaired the windows. The release of that magic was somewhat calming, but when he turned back around, Hermione was crying.

The only other time he’d seen her cry was when he’d rewound the bandage around her scars. Guilt and regret were not feelings Tom Riddle had any experience with, but he was feeling something. Something that was extremely unpleasant.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, and, for the first time, he truly meant those words.

“Please don’t hurt Abraxas,” she responded, then at his angry glare, “He is a loyal friend – to both of us. He didn’t do anything except comfort me.”

“How, exactly?” Tom needed the details, even though he didn’t want to hear them, to imagine them.

She pulled herself up straight, and he could see that she wasn’t ashamed. His soul mate felt justified in what she had done, which made him even angrier. “We kissed. That was all.”

“How many times?” Tom wasn’t done with this interrogation.

“I didn’t count,” she huffed. “Probably…ten times, I guess.” Her own anger began to build again. “How many times did you have sex with Marguerite?”

“We had sex three times, she gave me oral sex seven times, and used her hand another dozen or so times,” he answered honestly, no emotion at all.

“Oh, my god!” Hermione shrieked. “And you’re trying to make me feel like shit over a few kisses? That were mostly in tears over how upset I was about you and Marguerite? You are a fucking asshole, Tom Riddle!”

“Wait!” he lifted his hands in a stopping gesture. “We’ve already established that neither of us had given the other an indication of interest, so how can you blame me?”

“I had hoped you loved me,” the words were so low, he almost didn’t hear them. His chest contracted painfully.

Almost as soon as she had spoken, she was running for the door, as if her words scared her so much she had to flee before they could catch up with her. He lifted his wand and sent the closest tables hurtling in front of the exit, blocking it in a neat, if somewhat precarious-looking, stack.

“Let me out,” she hissed, her head turned away. He could hear tears in her voice.

“No,” he replied, coming up behind her. Her narrow shoulders were shaking. Tom pulled her wand out of her hand, then bent, putting both of their wands on the floor.

Hermione’s laugh was such a cold, hollow version of the one he knew, of the one he craved
hearing, that a shiver went through him. “I don’t need a wand to make you regret keeping me here, Tom.”

At that, he quickly spun her around, putting his arms around her waist again. “If you stay, you won’t regret a thing, Hermione.”

She didn’t answer because he was kissing her again, and it was even better than the first time. He lifted his hands and tangled his fingers in that glorious mane of hers, feeling the silky curls and the magic in them flowing up his arm. They were locked together for several minutes, and his hands found other places as well, explored the length of her spine, the curve of her hips, the subtle rise of her perfectly rounded ass. She was made for him, and he even though he had told himself he didn’t want this from her, he knew now that he’d been lying to himself – that this was nothing without her.

She pulled back from him, panting. “I can’t just be your new toy Tom. I can’t be another Marguerite.”

“What? You are nothing like Marguerite! I don’t ever want her again, not after touching you,” his arms, much longer than hers, pulled her back against his chest, though she managed to look up at him in righteous anger.

“Until it serves your purposes. I’m not blind, Tom. I may have been lost in hormones, but I still have a brain. You use her. You want to have her connections, the power and money she might supply in the future, and sex is the easiest way to guarantee your access to it!” Hermione’s cheeks were flushed, her mouth was swollen, and Tom could hardly focus on her words.

Tom smiled, and it was beautiful and horrible all at once. “You have it exactly. I use her. Why does that bother you so much? I think I have much more cause for anger. You care about Abraxas, and he’s probably in love with you, so that is much worse.”

Hermione was gone again, slipped from his arms and crossing the room to their wands. “You are insane, Tom! No, wait. I’m the insane one, for thinking that I could be in a relationship with a person who has no sense of morality, of fidelity, of kindness. You won’t ever see why I’m hurt, why what you are doing to Marguerite is wrong. And that means that I can’t ever be with you in that way. You’ll just break my heart, Tom. And you won’t feel a goddamned thing.”

“You think I feel nothing; you always say that, but it isn’t true,” Tom protested. “I might not feel the way you do, but I’m upset. I’m upset that you didn’t trust me enough to tell me you wanted to be with me that way. I’m upset that you let Abraxas touch you! I’m upset that you are telling me now, once again, how I think and how I feel. And judging me! Always judging me! You preach about accepting people as they are, but you won’t accept me as I am.”

“So, being your lover would mean allowing you to run off whenever it was convenient to have sex with a political connection, but I would have to be pure, to save myself only for you? How like a man to think that is an acceptable arrangement!” Hermione snapped back.

“How many people do you want to fuck, Hermione?” Tom asked, his voice dangerous.

“I don’t want to fuck anyone. I’d like to make love, to be held,” she answered. “I doubt you could understand that.”

Quickly, without a word, he lifted her. He was much taller, and stronger than most people realized. His build was elongated muscle, slender, but he kept himself fit. Hermione was not difficult to pick up. He carried her to the couch, depositing her on the cushion, and kneeling on the
floor in front of her.

Her eye color looked much darker now, thanks to her widened pupils. Tom smiled in a way he knew would curl her toes. “I might not understand other people’s feelings, or even feelings in general, but you are my soul mate. I know exactly how you feel when you let me. And I know that under your anger, you want me.”

“Of course I want you, Tom. That’s why I’m so angry,” Hermione’s expression softened.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you pull away?” Tom pressed, his hands tracing circles over her knees, his touch burning through her thin stockings.

Magic vibrated in a high, nervous way around them, through her into his fingers. “Why are you afraid of me, Hermione?”

Her eyes were closed again, her head back against the couch, her hands fisted. “When our connection is open…it just kept getting stronger, and then I wanted….and it’s just too much.”

Clever as always, he read between the lines. “You think if we have a romantic, sexual relationship that we’ll be even more connected. And that scares you.” He didn’t admit, wouldn’t admit that he had worried over the same thing.

His hands tightened on her knees, and he leaned forward until his lips were against hers. He kissed her lightly, pulled at her lower lip with his teeth, keeping the pressure just below a bite. “It’s good, then, we’re both very talented and brave people,” he laughed.

“Yes,” she whispered, emboldened by their shared magic, by how right it felt, but also scared. There was no going back from this moment.

“I know you’re still a virgin,” he whispered back, a smug smile on his handsome face as he lowered his head to kiss her knee through her thin stocking. His lips were hot, and she shuddered. “Abraxas isn’t that stupid, though I was apparently foolish to not properly mark what is mine.”

With a quick motion that shocked him, she came forward, made her face level with his own. “Make a wand vow that you won’t hurt Abraxas,” she held up her wand.

“Hermione,” he began, annoyed again, then stopped. The magic seeping into his fingers from her knees was intoxicating. He wanted to feel her magic all over, wanted that intense pleasure he’d gotten when she’d touched the soul mate mark, and wanted to find his words on hers. “Why is it that you seem to attract pale blondes with no concern for their lives?”

“I don’t know. Why is it that you seem to attract tiny, vicious, lying brunettes that would as soon kill me as look at me?” She scowled.

Now it was Tom’s turn to scowl. “Marguerite would never hurt you. She knows I would kill her.”

Those lovely brown eyes filled with tears again, and Hermione bit her lip, hard, before replying, “Oh, Tom, don’t you see that Marguerite has already hurt me? And I can’t ever return the blow.”

There it was again, a jagged sensation in his chest, sharp and tight. “You cut her leg open,” he argued. “Then you cut my arm open. So far, you’re the only one who has hurt anyone.”
Hermione had the grace to flush, embarrassed. “I won’t do anything else, just promise not to hurt Abraxas.”

“Define hurt,” Tom smirked, thinking of several possibilities.

“The fact that I am in love with you already hurts Abraxas every minute,” she snapped.

The tightness was replaced by a glowing feeling, a rising euphoria. “You love me?”

She sighed heavily. “I don’t want to, but I do.”

He was quiet for a few moments, the only sound their breathing, and the slight catch of her stockings under his fingers as he continued to stroke her knees. “I’m not sure about love, Hermione, but I value you, value you more than anything else. And I don’t care if Abraxas loves you, because that means he’ll protect you, serve you, as my soul mate.”

“If it’s a pride thing, Tom,” her voice was hesitant, obviously trying to keep the tenuous peace they’d reached. “No one knows. No one but the three of us. And Patience.”

Tom huffed, rolling his eyes. “Of course Patience bloody knows.”

“She’s my best friend, my roommate,” Hermione answered.

“And Abraxas was mine,” Tom’s tone was scathing. “You are both mine, not each other’s.”

She looked at him sharply, and he wondered what she was thinking. He felt her confusion, though that was clearing, and her residual anger, though that was fading as well. Her arousal was there, too, but her brain had taken control, because he could practically feel her thinking, though her actual thoughts were out of his reach. He’d tried some low level legilimency over the past year, but with no success, unlike the easy entrance he’d made into several other minds. He wondered if she were a natural occlumens.

“Are you attracted to Abraxas, too?” she asked after a moment’s contemplation, a sly smirk playing around her lips, as if she knew something he didn’t.

He didn’t pull away, didn’t protest. Instead, he considered the question, thought about the possibilities. Tom didn’t keep secrets from himself – there was nothing he was ashamed to think about. He knew he liked collecting things, and since coming to Hogwarts, he had added people to his collection, and they were some of his most prized possessions. Hermione, of course, was the jewel in his crown, the most precious, but Abraxas had been in the second place. He was intelligent, he was powerful, he was handsome, he had excellent political connections, his family had more money than probably any other in the country, and he had, until tonight’s events, seemed unquestionably loyal. All of these things enhanced Tom’s status.

Marguerite had these things, too, though not as much as Abraxas, and she was a distant third in his mind’s rankings. This idea of being able to completely own all of his favorite things, to own their bodies as well as their magic and actions, well, that was an intriguing thought. Hermione seemed much less upset about the thought of Abraxas than Marguerite…and Marguerite was expendable, he’d already decided that. If Tom allowed some kind of connection between Hermione and Abraxas, and also with himself, would that satisfy Hermione’s need for ‘a more human connection’ as she’d put it?

“Why?” Tom arched an eyebrow. “Do you think he wants me that way?” Tom thought being able to control both Abraxas and Hermione with sex might simplify matters greatly.
She bit her lip, chewing the way she did when she was trying to figure out an Arithmancy problem. He found it adorable, and noticed that he was relaxing as well, that both of their magics had calmed, and there was more pleasure of just being together, of a simple touch, the way it had been when they were first years. He hadn’t realized how much he had missed it until now. He suddenly wanted to keep this, even if it came at a great cost, to keep Hermione happy, to keep her open to him.

“I think he might be,” she finally answered. “We compared ourselves to Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, and that legend certainly has homoerotism aplenty. And,” she ran her fingers down his jaw, tracing the line of bone, “who, male or female, could resist this face?”

“You’ve been resisting it,” he said sourly. “If you’d kissed me last year, we could have avoided all of this.”

“Don’t lie to me, Tom,” her voice was firm, her fingers found the back of his head and pulled his face closer. She bit his lip again, and it was hard. “I know you. You would have fucked her regardless, because it suited you to do so.”

He didn’t pull back. He found the harsh sting pleasant, and he wanted to dig into her in return, to hurt her just enough to make her scream in the same kind of pleasure. “So, if I let you have Abraxas, if I let Abraxas have you, if I eventually take him myself, will that appease your feelings, will you stop trying to control me?”

“Control you?” her hair moved of its own accord, her eyes darkened with anger.

“Hush,” he said again, bringing his finger up between their lips. “Think, think with that brilliant mind of yours, my dear soul mate, instead of those messy emotions. You can’t change me. You do influence me, whether I like it or not, and you remind me of consequences. You love me, and I…can’t be without you. I won’t be without you. We are meant to be together, and I want you to be mine, but I also want you to be happy. Do you understand how significant that is? I don’t care what other people think or feel, but I care about you. And, if we are being brutally honest, I can’t make you happy, Hermione, not if you try to fit me into some romantic ideal. I’m not Lancelot, that’s your precious Abrades. I’m Arthur, the once and future King of all Britain, and his wizard, Merlin, all in one. You are not only Guinevere, you are Morgan Le Fay. The dark part of you knows this, even though you try to silence it.”

“Morgan and Merlin nearly killed each other,” her voice was sad again, and he didn’t like that.

“We won’t,” he said, kissing her fiercely for a minute, then stopping to speak. “We will surpass their legends with ease. You are my lady, my Queen, and my dark enchantress, but you have to let me be who I am.”

“Let you sleep and torture your way though the school, through the larger wizarding world, securing power by any means?” her tone was light, though they both felt the weight of her words.

“Not exactly,” he laughed softly. “I can see now how I might have been hasty with Marguerite, and after kissing you, well, she’s not even a shadow of you, Hermione.”

She blushed, this time in pleasure, though her critical glance told him she was well aware he hadn’t answered her question.

“And Abraxas?” he pushed her shoulders back against the couch. “How did he kiss?”
Hermione’s golden brown eyebrow raised and her mouth tilted. “Very, very well,” she replied, her voice barely on the safe side of a taunt.

His hands were on her knees, then sliding down her legs to her ankles. Slowly, he unbuckled her shoes and set them aside. She swallowed, her legs seeming to be the center of the world as his hands slid up her thighs, under her skirt, finding the tops of her stockings, whispering an unsticking charm, and rolling them down an inch at a time, his mouth starting kisses at her knees and continuing to her ankles.

“And where, exactly, did he kiss you?” Tom’s voice was somewhere between deadly and amused. He was unhurried, revealing pale flesh in small increments, then kissing that flesh. Once both of her stockings were crumpled on the floor and she was panting, he looked up at her from his place between her legs, a place no boy had ever been.

“Only my face and neck,” she breathed, distracted by his fingers and mouth, but not enough to stop this dangerous game they were playing.

“Only?” Tom made a tsking sound. “I know Abraxas could have done better than that. He’s told me about other girls, you know, told me what it felt like to fuck them. Pureblooded boys start early, you know. He must truly be in love to respect you so much,” his hands inched further up as he spoke, found the lace of her knickers, made hooks in the waistband, and with a wicked grin, he gave a harsh tug, and the scrap of red silk joined the grey stockings on the floor.

He smiled, a coy, amused grin as he glanced at the red lace and silk. “I would have guessed white cotton.”

“Shows what you know,” she said, trying to be haughty, but laughing herself.

“I am going to show you what I know,” his smile widened and his eyes darkened. “You’ve always been so far ahead in so much, and now, I’m going to be the one giving the lesson.”

“Yes, Sir,” she breathed, half-mocking, half-seriously aroused.

“Oh, my, you like that, don’t you?” Tom shook his head, and lust and power poured off of him in waves. “Abraxas is probably the perfect gentleman, and that…well, that’s a bit boring, isn’t it?”

“I find it lovely,” Hermione lifted her chin defiantly, and he grabbed it, put his finger in her corner of her mouth. She made to bite it, and he pulled away, laughing.

“A powerful thing like you, longs to be reined in, held tightly. Watch and learn, my dear,” he murmured, lifting her skirt and handing her the hem. She took it, looked down at herself, bare to his eyes. Her pubic hair was neatly trimmed, not nearly as wild as the hair on her head, and it was glistening. He leaned forward, pushed gently at her thighs. She spread them wider and he, in turn, spread her most intimate folds, his long, strong fingers making her shudder.

“I’m doing this because I want to,” Hermione panted as his fingers slid inside her, first one, then two, stretching and pulling. “You can’t control me, either. Sexual submission isn’t the same as magical submission.”

“Mmmm,” Tom murmured, using his free hand to trace around the skin of her thighs and pelvic area. “Where are my words, Hermione?” the question was an order.

She raised the hem of her skirt higher, revealing the curve of her stomach. He sucked in his breath. There was his hand writing, coiled like a spiral, like a snake, around her navel What are
you? What are we? As if the skin there were magnetic, his fingers went to them, unerringly, immediately. Her whole body trembled under him as he traced the path of his words.

It was too much, Tom felt their magic rising, connecting in new, stronger ways, and he had to see it through, had to seal it, to never let her escape him. He pulled on her hips, sliding her closer and lowered his mouth to her stomach, tracing his words with his tongue, then trailing down to her hip bones, sucking and licking until she was writhing against, all breathy moans that had to be the most beautiful sounds he’d ever heard. It didn’t matter how well Abraxas kissed, how much he said he loved her, he was nothing next to Tom.

Her shudders and moans morphed into a loud gasp as his talented lips and tongue followed the path of his hands, licking and sucking at her labia and clitoris with the same energy he normal reserved for punishment and revenge. Because this was a bit of punishment, a reminder to her that she couldn’t resist him, that she wouldn’t be complete or happy without his touch, without being in his good graces. She didn’t care about herself, but he had plenty of leverage, especially those two pale blondes Hermione loved, and he knew she loved Abraxas, even if she wasn’t in love with anyone except Tom himself. His soul mate had a billion pressure points, and he would experiment with all of them.

“Did you do this for Marguerite?” Hermione managed to say between her more vocal reactions.

“What do you think?” Tom gave her a nasty, sarcastic smile as he raised his head. He replaced his lips with three fingers, inserted harshly and fast, making her wince and lean into him at the same time. “I didn’t even kiss her, Hermione. She is pathetic. She is not worth your thoughts.”

“Oh, God!” Hermione was distracted by his pumping fingers, by the way his thumb was toying with her clit, in a lazy, careless way.

Tom’s smile sharpened, his teeth bared. “I think I prefer the term, my Lord. It has such a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? I think I’d like to hear it screamed in your voice, Hermione. What do you say, my little bird?” He dragged a finger over the Ravenclaw shield on her chest, over the swell of her breast.

Her body went taut as a bowstring for an instant, and he felt fear, but he worked her through it, lowering his mouth to her cunt again. He would never lower himself to do such a thing with someone else. But Hermione was a world unto herself. She was the exception to everything, his one weakness, and as such, she needed to be completely under his control. He had to be clever, though, because she understood him, guessed his motives and actions frighteningly well. Handling her properly was the greatest challenge of his life, but he knew that she was also the key to his greatest reward.

-oOoOoOo-

Hermione hated herself as her body responded to Tom’s touch like his was its master – as if the arrogant bastard needed any more fuel for his superiority complex. But she couldn’t stop herself. Too much had happened, and she could feel what Tom couldn’t – that he was giving himself to her as well. He might be all power plays on the outside, but she’d found a crack, a way in. He’d admitted she was everything, had even tacitly agreed not to hurt Abraxas, to give up Marguerite, at least for now, and if she handled her supposed submission in just the right fashion, and she would be more in control than she’d been in years, and he wouldn’t even know.
She also hated that much of what he said was correct, even if it wasn’t right. Her fear of him, of loving him, of giving him power over her, had complicated matters. And, she did judge him. She held him to the standards of regular people, and he wasn’t a normal person – he didn’t have a conscience. As much as she tried not to, the shadow of his future self loomed in her mind, and his current self was more than capable of wrecking havoc. She and Narcissa were constantly debating how far Tom could go into darkness before he reached the point of no return. Would it be the imperius? The cruciatus? Would he kill someone? Hermione honestly couldn’t imagine Tom going his life without killing, multiple times, and that realization was horrible, because she loved him. How could she let a killer, a sociopath who wanted to control her, to control everyone touch her? How could she like it?

Hermione pushed those thoughts away, because there was no answer. It simply was. Tom might not have a conscience, but he had desires, and right now, his burning desire was her. If she kept it that way, she might keep him from sliding into the abyss.

He was laughing above her, drawing all kinds of sounds from her throat, sounds she would never have thought she could make – sexy, husky moans and gasps. He said he wanted to hear her call him my Lord, and part of her wanted to, to see his satisfaction as she screamed out. Would giving him that, that sense of power, soothe his ego enough to relax him into a less angry space?

These thoughts swirled in her mind, but they were barely coherent, as they were punctuated with waves of pleasure from Tom’s ministrations below her waist. She could feel an orgasm building, even though she tried to keep it back, not ready to give him that yet.

“Stop it, Hermione,” Tom’s tone was amused and annoyed at the same time. “I know you are holding back, trying to punish me. That isn’t how this works. You crave order and rules, and I’m the one who can supply those things for your physically. Give in, be a good girl and let go, let me feel you,” his voice dropped, and it was so sexy, Hermione shivered from the sound.

“Not until you do,” she bit her lips, trying to tense her muscles against the rising euphoria.

He grinned, and rose, pulling her to her feet in front of him. He was so tall, her head only came to his collarbones. In one swift motion, he had her sweater over her head, her tie on the floor, and was unbuttoning her shirt. He arched an eyebrow at her, daring her to argue.

She responded by tugging at his clothes, and shortly, they were naked. Hermione stopped breathing for a moment. He was so beautiful, so terrible, so powerful, so…hers. No one else would see him so vulnerable, whether he realized that or not. She lifted his arm to her mouth, kissing her words again.

His eyes closed, his mouth tightened, and she knew he was holding back, that he was just as concerned about this irreversible step in their connection as he was. She wouldn’t call him out on that, though. His fingers were in her hair, and he was tugging. She found she liked that.

They were in sync, lowering themselves to the floor, on one of the thick rugs, which Tom transfigured into a soft mattress and Hermione swiftly covered with slick, cool sheets that felt amazing against their bare skin. Rolling, she found herself on top, and she clenched at his hips with her thigh muscles, running her hands down the elongated muscles of his chest, the plane of his abdomen, the jut of his hip bones, the hard length of his very aroused cock. She curled her hand around him, fascinated by the silky skin that moved easily over the hard muscle underneath.

“Hermione,” he half-panted, half-warned. He clearly wasn’t a fan of being teased. He
flipped her over and she sighed at the feel of his entire body covering hers, of his magic covering her, bringing every cell to heightened awareness.

“You are mine,” he spread her legs, stroked her, then lined his cock up with her entrance. He kept his hips still, bringing his hands up to grab hers, and pin them to the mattress on either side of her head, her curls caught tightly under them, a warning. They were both motionless, just staring into each other’s eyes. “You are mine, no one can touch you without my permission, little bird. Do you understand, Hermione?”

She nodded, because she needed to give him this, because she wanted to give him this, despite all logical thought.

“Do you really?” He pushed forward just slightly, his cock brushing all the nerves in her labia, at the very outer part of her vagina. “I want to be perfectly clear,” he moved forward again, barely at all, only enough to set off another round of fireworks between her legs. “I will kill any one who touches you without my permission, and there will never be a body found, and all your tears and anger won’t change a thing, because your body, your magic, knows its mine.”

Hermione responded before thinking, “And you’re mine?”

His pupils were wide, the blue around them just a hint, but it was an icy blue. She held back a shiver. His response was to push inside of her, hard, all the way. She shrieked. Even though she was very aroused, it was an intrusion, an instant stretching that pulled at her muscles, burning. Once he had filled her, he was still again, kissing her face in a much gentler way than she expected, though his wrists continued to pin her own down.

“You feel like bliss, Hermione,” he breathed, his mouth close to her ear. “And I’m going to make you feel the same way. Relax.” The last word was said in his command voice, that particular tone that managed to bypass her brain entirely and go directly to her animal instinct. She took a deep breath and focused on how the pain was turning into pleasure.

“Does it hurt and feel good all at once?” he asked when he started to move, pushing down against her wrists, making long, deep strokes in and out of her.

“Yes,” she breathed. It did hurt, but she liked it. His movements skirted the line between pleasure and pain, pulling first to one side, then into the other, leaving her panting and wanting more of both.

“Good,” he laughed and kissed her. It was no longer gentle. They were teeth and tongues, and she would have bruises on her wrists, bruises inside, but it was so good. She reopened the bite on his lower lip and tasted coppery blood.

“You are positively feral, dear,” he leaned down and bit her breast in retaliation. It was a hard bite and she yelled, though he followed the bite with a long, soft laving with his tongue, twirling his tongue over her nipple, licking at the swell of her breast, then repeating his actions on the other side.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer. “I’m not the only one who’s feral,” she hissed.

“Just marking my territory, darling,” he made a very sharp, deep thrust and closed his eyes at the half-cry, half-moan she made. He spoke a series of spells, ones for contraception, and then he moved even faster.
Hermione held on with her legs, because her hands were still pressed into the mattress, she could feel something growing, not just an orgasm on the horizon. No, their magic was preparing, and something was going to happen, something beyond their control.

Tom clearly noticed as well, because even though he didn’t break his pace, he let go of her wrists, twining his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck instead, pulling tightly so that her head was bowed back, so that she was looking directly into his eyes.

Her whole body was shivering, in a way that wasn’t entirely physical. This was a spell. This was some ancient magic, and they were already past the point of stopping.

“Say it, Hermione,” Tom demanded, his voice low and harsh, but also somehow pleading. “Say you’re mine.”

“You first!” tears formed in the corners of her eyes as he tugged on her hair, but she felt powerful, the magic rising through her made her feel invincible.

He was shuddering, too, looking at her in anger and wonder, biting his own lips, as if he could hold back the magic that was about to hit them like a tsunami.

“Tom! My Lord!” she screamed against the pleasure, and those words did the trick, just as she knew they would.

Tom pulled her hair even tighter, determined to hurt her even as he gave her what she wanted. There was a price for this, and she would be paying it forever. “I’m yours, Hermione,” he gasped, ecstasy overtaking the feeling of defeat.

“And I’m yours!” she exhaled, her hands wrapped around his chest, leaving no room between them.

It happened then, whatever it was. Magic filled them, pushed them both past the pleasure point of human bodies, lifted them into something outside of flesh, outside of time. Was this heaven? Hermione wondered, as they slowly came back into themselves. Tom looked bewildered, and slightly distraught, not at all his normal, carefully controlled self.

He looked down at her, rolled them to their sides. “What did you do to me?” His voice was too stunned to be completely angry.

“It wasn’t me, Tom,” she shook her head. “It was us.”

“This,” he gestured to the two of them, “was not normal. It was,”

Hermione hid her smile. It was scary, how powerful that had been, and he had to be terrified over what he’d admitted. “Amazing?”

Tom said nothing. He moved away from her, and she felt the instant he pulled away magically as well. She didn’t push, didn’t need to. She could still feel him, behind his walls. She wondered if he could feel her as well.

“Your words,” he scowled, looking at her stomach, then his arm. Hermione followed his gaze. Their words, which had been inked in their skin in a bold, black color, were now a glowing gold, shimmering in the light like the words would come off and float away, ethereal and beautiful.

Before she could say anything, he was putting on his clothing. He was scared, and angry, unsure of how this would affect him. She felt gently along their bond, along the edges of their
magic, searching for a soft spot, some place where she could help.

She used magic to get her clothes back on quickly, then crossed to him. He looked livid and dangerous. “What do you want?” she asked softly.

“The world, Hermione,” his smile was not a happy one. “You know that.”

“What do you want of me?” she clarified.

He had grabbed her waist and pulled her close before she’d finished her question, his face pressed into the wild cloud of her curls, breathing slowly and deeply. When he drew back, he tapped the locket and spoke in a low, trembling voice. “Take care of the part of me I seem to have given you.”

Then he was gone, angry again, blasting furniture away from the door, and down the hall at a sprint.
Roommate Conversations and Interrogations

Chapter Summary

Tom has a talk with Abraxas. Hermione’s roommates have a talk with her. The Room of Requirement makes an appearance, and the Chamber of Secrets is discussed as well.

Chapter Notes

I’m so happy that most people are pleased with the age shift and the change in our favorite couple’s relationship status. Trust me, Hermione isn’t giving up her power just because she digs a power exchange during sexy times. Also, Abraxas just became a character I like more and more, so I’m giving him some additional space. Narcissa and Galatea will be back in the next chapter.

Tom didn’t actively recall walking back to the dungeons. When he entered the Slytherin dormitory, he paused, blinking at his surroundings, orienting himself. The common room was full, as usual at this time of night. It was barely past eight o’clock. Time seemed to have stood still on the fifth floor.

Marguerite came toward him as he crossed the room. He put up a hand in warning, and she stopped, a sullen expression clouding her face.

The thought that her presence hurt Hermione tempted him to find a way to get rid of her, permanently, but that would piss her off, too. Honestly, his soul mate was difficult to please. He continued down the hall to his room, and was happy to find Abraxas the only occupant.

He closed and warded the door against opening and sound. Abraxas immediately got off his bed, homework sliding onto the floor unheeded.

“Abraxas,” Tom said calmly, a polite smile on his face. He watched the other, older boy closely. Abraxas was a strange mixture of defiance and resignation.

“Tom,” he replied softly, his grey eyes wide.

He knew Abraxas was handsome, knew that his pale good looks were a foil for Tom’s own dark ones. But, now, gazing at him in the diffuse, low light in the dungeon, he saw that Abraxas was beautiful, and he saw how Hermione had been attracted to him. Plans were forming in Tom’s mind, and he had several things he needed to test. Abraxas’s loyalty was first and foremost, along with the hint Hermione had made.
Tom came to stand in front of him, much closer than was normal for them. He lifted his hand, put on the back of Abraxas’s neck, and though he started, Abraxas didn’t pull away. Tom could feel his pulse, pounding nervously under his fingers. He tugged gently on Abraxas, bringing him even closer.

“What do I smell like, Abraxas?” Tom whispered, a venomous sound that was more hiss than speech.

Abraxas’s grey eyes went even wider, his long lashes curling back to his pale eyebrows. He didn’t answer, only sucked in his breath.

“What do I smell like, Abraxas?” Tom continued in a low voice, the same one he had just used on Hermione to great effect.

The other boy nodded, only the barest movement of his head.

“Hermione made those marks,” Tom grinned, the bloody marks red against his white teeth. “Whom do I smell like, Abraxas?” this time, he inched his fingers up a bit and wound them in the silky pale hair that brushed the other boy’s neck.

“Hermione,” Abraxas exhaled shakily, his words mostly inaudible, though Tom knew exactly what he’d said.

Tom gave a sharp tug on his hair. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that. Whom do I smell like?”

Abraxas’s face was so close, Tom could smell chocolate on his breath as he answered, louder this time, but still softly, “Hermione.”

“Yes,” Tom lowered his head to Abraxas’s ear. “Hermione. I smell like Hermione because I just had her under me, screaming my name. I smell like Hermione because she is mine. Now, that makes sense because she is my soul mate. What I don’t quite understand is why you know what she smells like.”

With a quick jerk, Abraxas tried to pull away, but Tom was too fast, and his grip was too strong. “Now, now. If you want to be alive tomorrow, you will behave in a civil fashion, my dear friend.”

Abraxas was still again, though his eyes darted to his wand. Tom waved his hand and it vanished from the bed. Abraxas closed his eyes, a deep sigh torn from his chest, then squared his shoulders, clearly gathering his courage. Tom appreciated how he didn’t grovel. He really was a clever boy, Tom thought. He decided to turn a knife, just to see the reaction.

“Do you know that Hermione asked me to make a wand vow to not hurt you?”

“What?” Abraxas flushed, his pupils dilated. “She asked that?”

Tom nodded, still holding Abraxas’s hair. “Hermione thinks you are worth saving, that you are loyal despite your recent actions.”

“I am loyal,” Abraxas said firmly.

“We’ll see,” Tom’s tone was breezy. “First, you need to recount your sins, Abraxas, before I can decide whether or not to forgive you.”

Abraxas wet his lips, and Tom noted how wide they were, how they curved pleasantly even
when motionless. “I…I kissed Hermione.”

Tom laughed. “Yes, you did! She told me that you kissed her several times, and that you kissed her…how did she put it? ‘Very, very well.’ But that isn’t all, is it Abraxas?”

His eyes were wide again, a bit of panic there. Tom thought it was unbearably lovely, that tiny amount of terror threading through the slate grey of his irises. He shook his head. “No, no, I haven’t done-”

“Oh?” Tom arched a brow. “You don’t love her? You didn’t fall in love with my soul mate, offer her not only physical attention, but romantic love? You didn’t try to creep into her heart, yet another place reserved only for me?”

Abraxas’s gaze flew to the floor, his pretty mouth turned down. “I,”

“Yes?” Tom prompted, another hard tug at his hair. “Honesty is the best policy, Abraxas. Or don’t they teach purebloods that?”

Grey eyes looked up at him incredulously. Tom laughed, in actual amusement this time. “True, we are Slytherins. Honesty isn’t one of our common virtues. But, do you know, Abraxas, I think will demand honesty from you, and trust me when I tell you that I will know if you are lying.”

Abraxas nodded heavily, hampered by Tom’s hold. “I do love her. She is,”

There was another pull, much more vicious than any others so far. “I know exactly what she is, Abraxas. She is mine.”

“I just wanted to make her smile,” Abraxas finally said, “She was crying and it hurt to see. She was so sad!”

Tom was close again. “And you’d risk your life for her?”

Abraxas nodded without hesitation but said nothing.

“What about for me?” Tom mused. “What would you do for me?”

“Anything that didn’t hurt Hermione,” came the swift response. Abraxas barely winced at the way Tom’s hand wound tighter and tighter in his hair.

“Anything? Well, that is something,” Tom replied. “That is…excellent to hear.”

He closed the remaining distance between their bodies. They were so similar in height, there was no noticeable discrepancy, their hips, shoulders, chins, mouths, and eyes in alignment. Tom had power over Abraxas, and Abraxas was a very attractive person. He made no attempt to hide his arousal over these facts. Abraxas’s grey eyes were blown black, wide and wary, but aroused as well. Tom could feel the evidence of that, too.

“Hermione is my soul mate,” Tom used his low, seductive voice again, and watched as Abraxas tried and failed to hold back a shudder. “I want her to be happy, and I am not the cuddly, romantic type. If she needs those things, I will need to find a way to supply them for her, even if they don’t come from me,” he smiled, his blood red lips close to Abraxas’s pink ones. “But, I’d need to trust that source. That other source would also have to be mine. My things can play with one another if I allow it. Do you understand what I’m offering you, Abraxas?”
The pale boy wet his lips again. “Yes,” his breath came out in a low exhalation that was almost a plea.

Tom spoke a finger’s width from Abraxas’s mouth. “And how will you repay me for such a generous offer?”

Abraxas swallowed. “However you want.”

Tom smiled so broadly, the bites on his lips reopened. “Oh, I hoped you would say that, my clever friend.” Then, he kissed Abraxas, pushing his face forward with the fist at the back of his neck.

Even though Tom applied force, Abraxas went willingly, parting his lips and kissing Tom with a passion that surprised him. So, Hermione had been absolutely right. Abraxas wanted them both. It was silly for him to doubt her, Tom thought. She was almost always right, annoyingly so. There was copper in his kiss as well, and Tom was oddly pleased at the idea of both Hermione and Abraxas swallowing his blood, even in minute amounts.

The kiss, which had been angry on Tom’s part to begin with, grew languorous, and he once more agreed with his soul mate. Abraxas Malfoy was a very, very good kisser.

Tom pulled away, released Abraxas’s hair, watched in satisfaction as the other boy tried to restore his composure. His lips were red now, too, and his pale cheeks flushed and Tom was very, very pleased. Yes, he could forgive Abraxas his indiscretion. After all, Hermione was irresistible, and she would need another outlet, a place to focus her messy emotions. And Tom would allow that, with Abraxas only, because now they were a closed circuit, the three of them, and both Hermione and Abraxas were his.

He waved his hand and he was holding Abraxas’s wand. He held it out, a show of good faith, and Abraxas took it, and immediately put it on his bed again and shrugged, as if to say he didn’t need it all, not in Tom’s presence. Once again, Tom was impressed. Abraxas was so much smarter than most knew, and he could read people well. He really was an excellent choice for a right-hand man.

Abraxas came back to him, stood closely. “May I kiss you again?”

Tom laughed. “You are a greedy one, aren’t you?” He wrapped his arms around the other boy’s waist, so much more substantial than Hermione’s slender form, and kissed him for several more minutes, then stopped abruptly. “We’ll continue this later, but you have homework to do,” he motioned at the parchment and books on the floor around Abraxas’s bed.

“Homework? Really?” Abraxas asked in disbelief, his erection evident against his trousers.

“Have you ever been fucked by a man, Abraxas?” Tom titled his head, curious.

The pale boy shook his head furiously, his cheeks flushed and eyes down.

“Excellent,” Tom said, then added. “If you’re going to be mine, you will be mine only, and Hermione’s, of course. I’m sure she’ll want to play with you, too.”

Abraxas’s mouth was open, but no sound came out, and Tom had cancelled the spells on the door and left before he could think in words instead of sheer lust and panic.
Hermione put the room to rights and headed slowly back to Ravenclaw Tower. She had a lot to think over, and she wanted to be alone. She changed directions and found herself in a long, empty hallway, pacing in front of an empty stretch of wall.

The Room of Requirement responded gracefully to the request, *I need a place to think.* The room was part library, part bedroom, and a fire crackled in an enormous marble fireplace. She crossed to one of the seats in front of the fire.

It was oversized and plush and swallowed her in a comfortable way. She drew up her knees and stared into the fire, watching the magical flames dance. The flicker movement was hypnotic, and she enjoyed letting her mind rest after so much turmoil, finding a peaceful, meditative space.

Strangely, it wasn’t difficult to get to that peaceful place, nor was it a problem to come back to herself, and lay out her thoughts in her mind afterwards. Normally, Hermione was prone to over-thinking and second-guessing, her clever brain seeing too many possibilities, branching out into an overwhelming sea of potential actions and consequences. This was one of the main reasons why she loved reading and research so much. By accumulating knowledge, she was better able to wade through and discard actions that hadn’t worked for others in the past or that might lead to future problems.

The situation with Tom was even more complex because she had two sets of knowledge to try to work with and integrate: the current set of circumstances and their probable outcomes based on the factors she knew, and the future outcomes that had been created by a timeline she was interfering with, but still had the potential to occur in some similar or even wildly mutated fashion.

It was evening, getting late, and her potion, though weakened greatly because she was only a few years away from the age she’d been when she and Narcissa had first arrived, was worn off. She could always tell when the potion was gone from her system because she would feel a bit wistful and introspective, thinking of her parents or her friends. She didn’t allow herself to dwell on them long though, because she couldn’t imagine what they would say to her about the day’s events.

Instead, she focused on the present, and the immediate future. Tom was angry and sacred, but that was good in a way. Whatever had happened with their soul mate bond had forced him to recognize he was capable of feeling, even if it didn’t follow the same patterns as most others. This gave Hermione hope. He could be reasoned with, he could be molded. For all that he said she couldn’t change him, she knew very well that she already had, and even though the sex would surely lead to some future drama, she was glad she’d done it, for multiple reasons.

Her new points of research were to find out everything she could about the Chamber of Secrets and killing basilisks – *hadn’t there been some sort of ridiculously easy solution, something involving a chicken...no...a crowing rooster?* She’d figure that out and make sure that no one who was muggleborn was anywhere near the third floor bathrooms until that thing was killed. That includes *you,* she reminded herself. Sometimes, after years of being Hermione Bonneau, she forgot her own story. The other item was to discover more about the soul mate marks, especially the change in color in their marks. It had to be some kind of sex magic tied to the soul mate bond, because it hadn’t taken place until after they’d both climaxed, simultaneously.

Having been on the run with a limited library, and then having been put back into the body and, at least during the day, the mind of a twelve year old, Hermione hadn’t done much research into sex magic, but she was definitely going to be correcting that deficit in the next few days.

The calm she’d felt all evening kept steady, and she thought maybe her magic was just so
happy to be free, and her soul mate bond was thrilled to be re-established, stronger than ever. If she concentrated, she could feel Tom’s magic humming somewhere far away. She focused a bit more and felt…happiness? She shook her mind. No, it was more like satisfaction and thrill. A thrill at doing something, proving something. Whatever it was, though, it wasn’t violent or angry, and she was relieved. Despite the threats he’d made, she didn’t think he would hurt Abraxas, not after the intrigued look he’d had on his face when she’d asked him about the two being attracted to one another.

It made sense, given Abraxas’s unerring devotion to Tom from their first year, even when Abraxas had been coming from a background that was decidedly not in favor of half-bloods proclaiming their equality, and especially not of half-bloods championing muggle borns as well. She sighed, understanding exactly how Abraxas felt, the magnetic pull of Tom Riddle. She supposed she even understood Marguerite’s attraction to Tom, to the power he represented, though that didn’t stop her from hating the girl. If it had been any one else, Hermione was sure she would have been at least fifty percent less angry, but Marguerite reminded her so much of Bellatrix that even on a good day, she itched to hex her.

She rose and went to the shelves by the fireplace and perused the books. The Room, always helpful, provided a book on dangerous magical creatures, and Hermione noted she was right. All they needed was a crowing rooster, which couldn’t be too difficult. She would have asked Professor Kettleburn for one, because she was sure he kept several kinds of birds, but his roosters where probably crossbred with dragons and breathed fire. One of the families in Hogsmeade must have a rooster. She put the book back on the shelf and went onto the one beside it, a crimson leather bound volume with no label. Gingerly, she lifted it, cautiously opening the cover, though she didn’t think the Room would provide her with anything that would hurt her.

Inside, in calligraphy that was overly loopy and a tad difficult to decipher, Hermione read a faded title: *The Moste Astounding Magick of Linked Heartes*. Could linked hearts be another term for soul mates and their bond? She turned the thin parchment pages, her speed slowed by the handwriting that took effort to read. There was no date on the book, but from the spelling and some archaic word usage, she estimated it was about least six hundred years old, not quite as hard to read as Chaucer, but more challenging than Shakespeare. The content was badly organized, more of a collection of musings rather than a book with a central, recognizable thesis and clear evidence provided to support said thesis. However, Hermione was nothing if not persistent, and she bit her lip in frustration and curled her hair around her finger and forced herself to read the entire thing.

From what she could garner, the author (also unnamed) was the husband of a woman who had soul mate markings, and who later left him to be with the soul mate, or as the man termed it, ‘her other heart’. Though the writer didn’t seem bitter, he was clearly heart-broken himself, and began collecting all the information he could on how the ‘heart link’ worked. He had traveled all over Europe, looking for people who had found their soul mates and gathering their stories, which he related in bits and pieces. Most of the text was personal anecdotes that were interesting but not really helpful. However, he did mention that those linked with writing had the most powerful bond and were most likely to find one another. These pairs, he wrote, ‘are the glowing sun and the pallid moon, the fragrant summer and the frozen winter, extremes of behavior and magic – often one very light and one most dark.’ Hermione knew this was true, from the small amount of research she’d been able to do. Marked pairs tended to be strong personalities with great magical abilities, and not a lot else in common.

The book offered no explanation for the marks or soul mates in general beyond references to fate. However, toward the end, the author made a list of stages of the marked bond, based on the information he’d collected. First was the initial appearance of the words, usually upon the two first meeting one another, but, he noted, occasionally one would be marked before meeting the other, if
exposed to a great deal of the other’s magical energy in the form of a wand, enchanted objects, etc. When the words appeared, especially if the pair was with one another, their magic would create a link, enabling them to feel the presence of the other, and emotions as well.

After that, the more time the pair spent together, and the more physical touch, the more the bond strengthened. Crucial to this was the viewing of the bond, seeing one another’s writing, and touching the writing, which were stages two and three. Hermione frowned in thought at this. Because they were so young at their first meeting, and because her marks were on a more private place, they hadn’t fully complete stages two and three until tonight, as well as stage four, which was alluded to as a ‘physical and spiritual congress.’ That had to be the sex, and no wonder their bond had made such a powerful connection, practically taking them out of their bodies – they’d solidified several significant steps in the bonding process in a very short span of time.

She squinted at the last stage, which was not clearly worded. It was labeled, ‘The Unified Hearte, Body, and Spirit.’ Did that mean the bond was capable of linking their bodies and souls completely, tethering their lives together? Would they eventually be able to read one another’s minds without legilimency? *That* would be a serious problem, for multiple reasons. Under no circumstances could Tom Riddle ever know the contents of her mind. Though she read the entire book, there was no further information on what *caused* this final state of bonding, whether it occurred naturally from continued exposure to one another, or if they had to *do* something additional to make it happen.

Hermione rubbed at her temples, thinking that she now had a headache, and the book had only given her vague worries, not any truly useful information. The thought lead to an inventory of her other physical aches, and they were many. She wished for a bath, and the Room provided one. Hermione sank into the tub, letting the hot water soothe her muscles. In the long mirror on the opposite wall, she saw the signs of her earlier adventure. There were matching finger shaped bruises on her wrists, and perfectly symmetrical bite marks on her breasts. Everything from her navel to her knees was sore, and she carefully healed herself, removing the outward evidence, though she left one thumb bruise on her left wrist, a single spot she could gaze upon, a small gateway to all the memories of wild range of sensations she’d felt.

She had given her virginity to Tom Riddle, to her soul mate who didn’t actually seem to have a working soul. Clearly it was there, intact, but he didn’t use it the way other people did. And the sex itself? She bit her lip at the memory, felt the tender spot where he’d bitten her, though much less hard than she’d bitten him. There was no surprise that Tom would want to dominate her physically, and she was honest enough with herself to admit she found it arousing, though she was blind-sided by her reaction. She hadn’t imagined that rough, angry sex, a battle with their bodies, could be so amazing, or that it would transform into something much more profound by the end.

Submitting to Tom sexually also served the purpose of giving Tom an area of their lives where he called all the shots, where he could feel in control, which was important to keeping him stable. When Tom Riddle felt out of control, bad things happened. In Tom’s original timeline, this year was a pivotal one. He had opened the Chamber of Secrets, killed Myrtle, made his first horcrux, framed Hagrid, and solidified Dumbledore as an enemy. Then, there was the search for the Gaunts, and the murder of his father and grandparents, along with more horcruxes.

He had mentioned offhandedly that they would kill the basilisk, but Hermione wondered how willing he would be to kill such a powerful weapon, a snake that he could talk to and control. Would he want to keep it? Train it? Adjust its magic to become some kind of attack dog? That seemed a cunning and likely choice for Tom, who valued power so highly. She was positive that he wouldn’t turn the snake loose in the school to hunt muggleborns, but she was much less positive that he wouldn’t use it to kill *someone* who’d annoyed him at some point in the future.
And his father and grandparents? There was no reason to think they would react any
differently to Tom finding them now than they had in the original timeline, and that would mean
murder. Tom did not take kindly to rejection. His uncle was probably out of Azakaban by now, and
if Tom decided to visit him, he would be very upset to learn that his mother had used a love potion
on his father, not because he believed in the sanctity of free will, but because he would learn his
father reviled his mother, never wanted her, never wanted to have a child with her, and no matter
how beautiful and brilliant Tom was, he would never be welcome at the Riddles’. And, because he
was half-blooded, he would never be welcome at the hovel of the last of the Gaunts.

She gathered her clothes along with her thoughts, taking the two books as well, and went
back to Ravenclaw Tower. It was close to curfew, and there were only a few students out in the
common room. She took the stairs up to her room, and found that her three roommates were sitting
on the central rug, talking quietly.

“Hermione!” Josephine was up and hugging her as Hermione put the books on her
nightstand. “We were worried about you!”

“Why?” Hermione was confused. None of the three Ravenclaws had been at the study
group because they had been on the Astronomy Tower, working on a shared star charting project.

Felicity put her hands on her hips and made an exasperated sigh. “What do you think
everyone is talking about? There were twenty students in there, and they all went back and told
their common rooms that you and Tom were probably going to kill each other before the night was
over, that the doors were warded and silenced, and you did something to Marguerite?”

Hermione looked down, not answering. She was a bit annoyed she’d let her emotions get
the better of her over Marguerite. It seemed so petty now, to say that she’d cut Marguerite’s leg out
of jealousy.

Patience was at the side of Hermione not taken up by Josephine, in the extremely close way
that Patience always stood by her, and her button nose scrunched as she sniffed Hermione’s hair.

“You’ve had a bath,” Patience stated. “You smell like vanilla soap, with a hint of mint,
too.”

All three girls stared at Hermione. Felicity and Josephine both had dropped jaws, while
Patience simply smiled in her vaguely absent fashion.

“Why would you need a bath, Hermione? And why would you take one somewhere else?”
Felicity’s tone was teasing, fishing for the story.

Josephine had pulled back, was looking Hermione over with a close eye. “Yes, Hermione,
why would you do that?”

Hermione flushed. She was not ashamed of the sex, but it was extremely…intense, and not
the sort of sexual interaction most girls a few days from their sixteenth birthdays engaged it,
especially not in 1942.

Felicity was smirking now. “Tom just looks the same as always, huh?”

Josephine laughed. “What does he kiss like, Hermione?”

“Probably like a very strong snake,” Patience supplied helpfully. “I imagine he has a long,
flickering tongue.”
No one commented on that, though they all snickered for a few minutes. Hermione collected herself. “He was very…passionate.”

“I’ll bet,” Josephine had collapsed backward onto Hermione’s bed. “I’d be afraid to touch someone so…”

“Pulsating with power?” Patience asked, laying beside Josephine.

Felicity shook her head and looked at Hermione in mock despair. “Did she just say ‘pulsating with power’?”

Hermione could barely answer for the laughter spilling out of her throat. Once she could breathe again, she took Felicity’s arm, and they both sat on the bed with their other roommates. Hermione leaned over Patience’s perfectly calm face.

“Don’t ever use that phrase around Tom, Patience,” she laughed a bit more.

“It isn’t true?” Patience drew her eyebrows together.

Josephine was half-laughing, half-choking. “Yes, Hermione,” she gasped. “Tell us all about Tom’s pulsating -”

She was cut off by the launching of a pillow at her head, which in turn became a full out battle. Fifteen minutes later, feathers surrounded them and they were breathless. They cleaned up the mess with magic, then all laid cross ways on Hermione’s bed, the four of them staring up at the sapphire bed hangings.

“Seriously, though, do you think you’ll marry him?” Josephine asked, breaking the quiet that had fallen.

“I can’t imagine you with anyone else,” Felicity remarked, before Hermione had answered.

“Maybe Abraxas,” Patience mused.

“Malfoy?” Josephine’s voice held amusement and disbelief. “Hermione, he’s worse than Tom. Between the two of them, they have the whole school in love with them, but Abraxas actually kisses all the girls who fancy him! He’s a Romeo! Plus, he’ll have to marry a pureblood.”

“It would be hard to be in love with someone everyone else wanted,” Felicity sighed. “I’d get very jealous.”

Hermione bit her lip, then answered, “I did get jealous, of Marguerite,”

Josephine made a scoffing sound. “Tom couldn’t care less about Marguerite. You’re the only girl he ever really looks at.”

Felicity added, “When he watches you when you do magic, in classes and during the dueling club, his eyes get dark and he gets this smile, and…” she fanned herself.

Now, Hermione laughed. “How much do you watch him?”

She shrugged. “He’s pretty. I like pretty boys.”

Patience turned, laying her head on Hermione’s shoulder, which wouldn’t have been possible when they were standing, because Patience was quite a bit taller now, the tallest girl in their year, in fact. “Some of the prettiest things are the most poisonous.”
They all fell silent again. There was no arguing that point. No matter how lovely Tom’s words, his manners, and his smile, the power barely contained within him was dangerous. Three sets of arms suddenly surrounded Hermione, holding her close.

“Be careful,” Josephine whispered.

“It’s too late for that,” Felicity murmured. “If you weren’t his before, you certainly are now.”

Patience sighed, her breath warm on Hermione’s clavicle. “Don’t worry. Hermione is more than a match for him.”

Hermione hoped that was true.

-oOoOoOo-

The next morning, Hermione woke early, dressed quickly, and hurried to breakfast. Patience accompanied her, a quiet, calming presence always at her side. Over the years, Patience had become a part of Hermione’s life that was automatic. Rise, dress, walk arm and arm with Patience to breakfast, to class, to study, to dueling club. During the summers, when Patience was traveling with her parents, Hermione felt the loss keenly. Her odd, but very perceptive, friend was like a security blanket, a support to her emotions, and often, the voice of thoughts Hermione herself did not speak. She had not had close female friends in her previous school experience, but her bond with her roommates, and Patience especially, was something that made losing her future friendships bearable.

Tom found Patience annoying, she knew, mostly because Hermione gave her love and attention without thought and unreservedly. And also because Patience seemed to know more of Tom’s true nature and secrets than he liked others to be aware of.

At the base of the stairs that lead to Ravenclaw Tower, Hermione and Patience found Tom and Abraxas standing, apparently waiting.

Tom’s eyes flicked to Patience and narrowed.

“Good morning, Tom,” Patience smiled as if he weren’t practically scowling at her.

“Patience,” Tom replied tersely.

“Are you boys going to escort us to breakfast?” Patience asked, then added, “How nice.”

“We were hoping to have a few minutes to speak with Hermione alone,” Tom answered.

Hermione gave him a smirk. “You can say anything you’d like in front of Patience.”

Tom frowned. “Really? So you want me to talk about how I *fucked* you last night in front of Patience?”

The only person who looked embarrassed was Abraxas, who immediately ducked his head.

Patience gazed directly at Tom. “I know. Under the vanilla and mint, she smelled like blood and lightening – like you.”

Hermione made a coughing sound to cover her shocked laughter.
Tom’s expression would have scared anyone else, but as usual, didn't phase Patience. “Do you have an exceptionally excellent sense of smell, Patience, or were you exceptionally close to her?”

Abraxas made a sound of distressed warning, his eyes trying to catch Patience’s, but she was still meeting Tom’s eyes completely.

“My head was on her shoulder, while we were lying in bed together,” Patience gave him a broad smile, as if she just taught him a new spell. Hermione briefly wondered if Patience were deliberately baiting Tom.

“Tom,” Hermione interjected. “This is nothing new. Patience is my best friend. She hugs me all the time.”

“In bed?” Tom asked, though he seemed more resigned than angry now. “How many pets do you need?”

Hermione didn’t respond, but, to her surprise, Patience let go of Hermione and took Tom’s arm, looping her own arm through his. Tom glanced at her in shock, which only increased when Patience hugged him tightly, then rested her white blonde head on his shoulder for a moment before she kissed his cheek, rather close to his mouth.

Tom, Abraxas, and Hermione were all frozen as Patience gave another bright, distracted smile and said, “There, now I’ve given you all the same affection I give Hermione. I think you needed it. Affection always improves one’s mood.”

She let go of Tom and repeated her actions on Abraxas, who actually smiled in return and gave her a shaky, “Thanks, Patience,” after the kiss on his cheek.

“What planet are you from?” Tom mused aloud as he continued to stare at Patience for several minutes. Hermione noted that he made no move to rebuke Patience, which she took as a promising sign that he would accept her as a part of Hermione’s life she wouldn’t set aside. Finally, he shook his head and turned to Hermione.

“I think the Chamber entrance is in the girls’ third floor bathroom. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I think we should explore it. What better way to spend your birthday, Hermione, then uncovering magical secrets buried for centuries?” he said, then sighed. “You can come, too, Patience.”

Patience graced him with another smile, to which Tom rolled his eyes.

Hermione fought against panic. “I think there is a basilisk there, and I think it is incredibly dangerous. We’ll need to take several precautions.”

Abraxas was close to her free elbow, closer than she would have thought Tom would allow, but Tom said nothing, nor did he say anything when Abraxas actually touched her, putting a calming hand on her arm. Her eyes darted to Tom, and he smirked at her, a sexy, knowing smirk. What had he said to Abraxas last night, she wondered.

“The basilisk shouldn’t be dangerous, right? I mean, it only targets muggleborns. We’ll just keep them away until we deal with it.” Abraxas squeezed her arm, and Hermione felt an odd thrill, not only from his touch, but from the fact that Tom was watching with that expression on his face.

She shook her head, focusing. “No, the basilisk won’t be dangerous to Tom, because he is
the Heir of Slytherin, and he is a parslemouth. But it’s venom and stare could kill any of us, no matter our blood status.”

Tom’s smirk dropped as he seriously considered her words. Patience began to hum her ever-lengthening ballad. He glared at her, but she continued as if she didn’t notice.

“A rooster’s crow will kill it,” Hermione began. “I looked it up last night.”

“Maybe we should see if I can control it before we try to kill it,” Tom said, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I was sure you were going to say that,” Hermione’s brow furrowed. “If you do want to keep it alive, you will need to make sure that it can’t go beyond the chamber. This creature is deadly, and if you are controlling it, and it hurts someone, there will be serious consequences.”

“Tom doesn’t want to kill anyone right now,” Patience’s words were half-sung. “Isn’t that right?”

“Listen to your pet, Hermione,” Tom laughed. “I’m not feeling murderous at the moment, so everything will be fine.”

Abraxas laughed, too, and stroked Hermione’s arm gently, lightly, as if it truly were a silly fear on Hermione’s part to be concerned about potentially letting loose a creature that only Tom could control.

“You’ll need to go down first,” Hermione insisted. “You’ll need to talk to it, get it slither away, or stand down, or whatever, before the rest of us can enter. And you need to promise me that you will command it not to kill anyone.”

“If there is actually a basilisk down there,” Tom replied, “and if it responds to my orders, I will command it not to kill anyone, unless I say so.”

Abraxas gave Tom a questioning look. “What if it is down there, but it doesn’t respond to you? If it doesn’t want to obey you?”

“Snakes tend to obey me,” Tom arched an eyebrow. “But in that unlikely scenario, well, you and Hermione and her pet will be waiting in the girls’ bathroom with a rooster, just in case.”

“Stop calling Patience my pet,” Hermione glared at Tom’s self-satisfied grin.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Patience said airily, patting Hermione’s other arm. “It makes him feel better. Snakes can be so tetchy.”

Tom opened his mouth to say something venomous, Hermione was sure, but other Ravenclaws were coming down the stairs.

“We need to be getting to breakfast,” Tom said instead, giving Patience a look of warning that she blithely ignored.

“Abraxas, take Patience’s arm,” he ordered, and took Hermione’s arm in his own.

It was the first time Tom had touched her this morning, the first time he’d touched her since last night, and there was surge of magic as their arms linked, threading up their shoulders, spreading through the rest of them. They were still a moment, absorbing the impact. Tom glanced intently at her wrist. Her sleeve had ridden up a bit, and the thumb shaped bruise was visible.
He lowered his head to her ear and whispered, “I’m glad you kept that.”

She turned and kissed his cheek, right there in the hallway, even closer to his mouth than Patience had. He shivered. “So am I,” she replied.

“Kissing in the hall, Miss Bonneau?” he asked as they began to walk behind Patience and Abraxas. “Trying to stake a visible claim?”

“As if I need to,” Hermione scoffed. “You told me the truth last night, I could feel it. I’m the one you want.”

Tom nodded. “That’s right, little bird. You don’t need to prove anything. Remember that, and try your best not to peck out Marguerite’s eyes with your sharp little beak.”

“I’m not going to touch her,” Hermione replied loftily.

The sexy smirk was back, full-force. “Are you sure? You seem to require an awful lot of touching, from an awful lot of people: me, Abraxas, your little pet.”

“You make friendly hugs sound salacious,” Hermione protested. “And most people do like to be touched, as Patience said.” She switched topics and lowered her voice. “What happened with Abraxas?”

“Why, I only touched him in a friendly manner,” Tom’s tone was teasing, and he laughed at Hermione’s wide-eyed response. “You put the idea in my head, dear, and you were right. I think Abraxas will be even better friend to us in the future, his loyalty to us thoroughly secured.”

She sighed. “It isn’t just about controlling him,” she began.

“I know,” Tom cut her off, and she watched his face as he looked ahead at Abraxas, saw the glint of appraisal and felt the affection in his magic. “I do like him, you know.”

Hermione felt the truth of this through their connection and she smiled. “That’s wonderful, Tom.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to start liking your pet, though,” he warned, his eyes moving to the loose, straight waterfall of pale hair that fell to Patience’s waist. “She’s an impossibly annoying thing, and if it weren’t for you, I would have stuffed her in a vanishing closet in our first year.”

Hermione laughed, because she felt no real malice from him, only exasperation. “I think she’s growing on you, Tom.”

“Never,” he vowed, but there was a hint of smile at the edge of his mouth.
Narcissa Makes Threats...And Also Makes Time in the Forbidden Forest

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Narcissa discuss the potential problems with Tom's plans. Narcissa and Galatea weigh in on how they feel about the evolution of Tom and Hermione's relationship, and think of their own as well. Moaning Myrtle makes a cameo, though she's not dead. yet...

Chapter Notes

So, I was lazy and didn't check my books for the right bathroom...in one source online, it said first floor, and another said second, and then I remembered the difference between US and UK designations of first versus ground floors, so I apologize for any earlier mistakes. I'll correct them eventually, when I finish the whole story and go back to do final, clean-up edits.

For those who love Narcissa/Galatea, they have some fun action in this chapter, and we'll get back to our others soon. I'm already working on the next chapter, where Tom talks to a giant snake.

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“The Chamber?” Narcissa frowned, pacing in her small parlor. “So soon?”

“He’s actually close to the original time line,” Hermione replied absently, sitting in the chair by Narcissa’s window, looking out over the moonlight reflecting on the lake. It was far past curfew, but Narcissa had informed Galatea that she wanted Hermione to spend the night in her quarters, as an early birthday evening spent together, since Hermione would be spending most of Saturday, her actual birthday, with her friends. “He did open it in his fifth year.”

Narcissa nodded. “True, but we’ve changed so much. I’d hoped that maybe that whole issue would be sidestepped.”

“Ha!” Hermione laughed, a touch bitterly. “If Tom knows there is a chance something down there will increase his power and status, nothing could keep him from exploring it.”

Suddenly, Narcissa had crossed to her, was on the floor, holding Hermione’s hands tightly. “You can’t be anywhere near this! You are muggle born and I will not have any harm come to you!” Her voice was fierce, a mother’s love suffusing it.

Hermione uncurled from the seat and hugged Narcissa. “Give me some credit, mother.” She’d grown used to calling Narcissa mother, and it was natural now, an easy habit. She had two mothers in her mind, her mother from the future-past, and Narcissa, the woman who’d changed her
life and was helping her to save the world. “I’ll have mirrors set up over the bathroom, a spell for
clouding its eyes, and a rooster ready if Tom can’t control it, though we already know he can.”

“So, he’ll have a basilisk at his beck and call,” Narcissa sounded worried.

“He did before, but he didn’t risk using it much – it’s too large, too difficult to explain
away,” Hermione soothed, but then thought about Hagrid, who had Aragog growing somewhere in
the castle and shuddered. “I honestly think he’s more interested in what else might be down there.”

“Do you know?” Narcissa asked.

Hermione shook her head. “Harry didn’t really explore it beyond what he described as a
kind of enormous antechamber-underground cavern that was carved from rock, with stone and tile
and serpentine sculptures. That can’t be all, though, I agree with Tom on that point. Slytherin
would have some kind of lab or library or both down there, too, I would think.”

“Yes,” Narcissa agreed, “It doesn’t seem likely that he would design something so
elaborate only to hold the basilisk, but Hermione, darling, you must be careful. Many, many old
pureblood families guarded their possessions with curses designed to keep those objects and books
within the family. They will likely recognize Tom as being a descendant of Slytherin, and perhaps
even Abraxas because the Malfoys have familial connections to Slytherin, but you should not touch
anything.”

Hermione squeezed her hand. “It will be fine, mother. After five years of watching Galatea,
I understand the protocol for approaching potentially cursed objects, and so does Tom.”

Narcissa looked at her wrist, at the bruise there that had faded to a yellow brown color, like
a smudge of dried turmeric. Her expression was thunderous. Hermione had never seen such
emotion on Narcissa’s face. “Did he hurt you?”

Several thoughts flashed through Hermione’s mind in rapid succession. Narcissa had seen
Tom’s future self torture and kill many, many people. Even if Hermione was his soul mate, she
didn’t have this knowledge, this deep-seated fear that Narcissa concealed so well, the vivid
memories of just what Tom was capable of.

“No,” Hermione answered firmly. “No, he didn’t. It was consensual.”

Narcissa managed to both relax and raise a suspicious eyebrow at the same time. It was
quite a feat. “Consensual what, exactly?”

Hermione squirmed. Narcissa was her confidant, but she was also her mother figure, and
this was slightly embarrassing. She took a deep breath, remembering a comment her other mother
had once made in her fourth year, ‘If you’re too embarrassed to talk about it, you’re too young to
be doing it.’

“We had sex, Tom and I,” she looked at Narcissa with a bit of difficulty.


“What?” Hermione asked, then understood. “Oh, yes, of course.”

“Hermione,” Narcissa began, then stopped. She rose, poured a drink of fire whiskey from a
decanter she rarely touched, then turned back and continued. “I am well aware of how the Dark
Lord treated the people he slept with. It was often a form of humiliation, a punishment. Even those
who enjoyed such activities found him cruel. My sister,” she looked away and gulped the drink in
“My sister bore many marks that came from him, and though she also would have labeled them consensual, I want you to know that you can come to me if he hurts you, and we will figure something out. I would keep him under imperio for the rest of his life rather than let him hurt you.”

Hermione’s eyes welled with tears, and she went to Narcissa and hugged her again, more tightly this time. “Thank you, thank you, for your love and care, mother, but I am fine. I wouldn’t lie to you. Tom is…a dominant presence, but I can handle him. I am his soul mate, I…” she thought of the new development.

She untucked her shirt and unbuttoned the bottom few buttons, revealing the words that had remained their new shade of shimmering gold. Narcissa gently traced the words. “Does it feel different now?”

“Only when he touches it,” she admitted. “Otherwise, it feels like normal skin.” She re-buttoned her shirt and went to her school bag, taking out the book she’d been given by the Room of Requirement.

She pointed out the relevant passages and they discussed possibilities for over an hour. Narcissa agreed with Hermione that there was most likely some kind of magical event or spell that created the final unified state, and that they needed to make sure Hermione and Tom never reached it, which was difficult without knowing what it was in the first place.

Then, Hermione took a bath and changed into her night clothes and Narcissa brushed and spelled her hair in front of the hair, as she had when they had first travelled back in time. They were almost ready to fall asleep in front of the fire when there was a knock on the door.

Narcissa stood, a smile on her face. “It’s Galatea,” she said simply and went to the door.

Hermione wondered if non-marked soul mates went through the same stages. Galatea and Narcissa had become as close as any couple she’d ever seen. It didn’t seem a stretch at all to imagine them sharing thoughts, and, unlike Tom, Galatea would probably understand, respect, and support the changes Narcissa had made to create a better future. The weight of future knowledge was a heavy one, she knew.

Galatea came in wearing her usual crooked smile, looking very pleased. “I’m sorry about the late visit, and I know tomorrow is your birthday, but I would like to give you your present tonight.”

“You finished it?” Narcissa asked her, happiness shining in her eyes.

“I wouldn’t be able to wait now,” Hermione smiled. “Not after seeing how you two are grinning.

Galatea laughed. “Well, I can’t help but be excited. I’ve been working on this gift for five years, with your mother and Madame Selwyn’s help.”

Hermione chewed her lip, trying to figure out what in the world the three women would have collaborated on, but then Galatea gently took her arm, and she knew. With a light touch, Galatea slid up her nightgown sleeve and carefully unwound the ever-present bandage to reveal the jagged wounds that had never even so much as scabbed over in five years.

Narcissa took a jar off the mantle and rubbing a cooling lotion over Hermione’s angry cuts. In her mind, Narcissa’s voice there, a tender use of legilimency that said, “I’m so sorry I didn’t
There were tears in Hermione’s eyes again. Galatea said, “I have to warn you, this is going to hurt. I have to trigger the curse in your wound to get to be able to transmute it. It might not disappear completely, either, but I’ll do my best.”

Hermione nodded and steeled herself. Galatea waved her wand, and there was a burning fire in her arm, a bone-deep pain that she’d never forgotten, but had been able to push to the furthest corners of her mind. The pain wrapped around her, dragged her into the past, which was the future, and she screamed, not sure where she was, not sure when she was, only that the pain was there, and she couldn’t escape it.

Suddenly, Tom was in her mind, yelling for her, and she tried to shut him out, to keep him from feeling her pain, but she was stretched too thin. “Tom!” she gasped, and blacked out.

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When she came to, she was in the second bedroom of Narcissa’s quarters, the one Tom slept in when they arrived at Hogwarts before the dormitories were opened. Tom was beside her, his face angry. When he saw her open eyes, his anger faded.

“Hermione,” he breathed, as if it were the first breath he’d taken in years.

“I told you that she would be fine, Tom,” Narcissa was on her other side, Galatea at the foot of the bed. “We knew what we were doing. The curse was extremely dark. There was no way to get rid of it without some pain.”

“Some pain?” Tom snapped, angry again. “I felt it. It was…torture,” he finished, his jaw muscle twitching as though he were holding back worse words.

Galatea nodded solemnly. “Yes, it was. The curse was made for torturing, and Hermione has been living daily with its lingering effects, which though not as intense as the initial occurrence, are decidedly unpleasant.”

Hermione tried to sit up and two hands, Narcissa on right and Tom on the left, pushed her back. “I’m fine now,” she protested, though weakly.

“It was a strong curse, and an even stronger countercurse, and both of those spells flooded your system. You need rest,” Narcissa’s tone brooked no argument. It was her ‘I’m your mother and a healer’ voice.

“Can I at least see it?” Hermione made to lift her arm, but it wouldn’t obey. Her whole body was weighted with exhaustion.

Tom was the one who rolled up her sleeve with the delicate touch she’d only previously
seen in the way he cut magical ingredients in Potions or harvested plants in Herbology. She stared, and he did, too. On her forearm was a pale pink scar, raised and knotted in the way that burn scars usually were. It covered most of the space from her inner elbow to her wrist, as the words had, but there was no visible writing, and no pain, either, other than a certain tightness from the pull of the raised skin.

“One day, I’ll fix it completely, make it as flawless as the rest of you,” he said, his words low in her ear, more sweet than he probably intended.

“I have many flaws, as you well know,” she smiled, her head tilted toward his, their foreheads close together. She saw Galatea and Narcissa watching them – the professor in amusement, her mother in resignation.

Hermione met Galatea’s eyes. “Thank you, so much. To look at my arm and not see that hateful word, it’s…it is the best gift.”

Galatea came over and kissed her forehead. “I’m only sorry that it took me so long, and that it was still such a painful process.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Hermione reassured her, tears in her eyes. “It was worth it. I’m going to be thanking you for a lot longer than the five years you worked on it. This is priceless, Galatea.”

Narcissa waved her wand, checking over her daughter’s vital signs. “You need rest, dear. It’s late and you should sleep.”

“May I stay? I want to be sure she sleeps peacefully.” Tom was the picture of innocent concern, no hint of impropriety.

Narcissa looked at him, her intelligent gaze piercing directly through Tom’s act, and making Tom aware of this as well. “Hermione needs rest, not an anxious soul mate. You can only stay if you promise to let her sleep.”

“Of course,” Tom smiled, his expression angelic. “I want Hermione to be full of energy for her birthday tomorrow. We are going to go exploring in the castle.”

Galatea waved her wand and transfigured a chair into a cot for Tom. “This castle is the best
place in the world for exploring, but if you find something that is exuding dark magic, or even hints at it, please come fetch me or Professor Dumbledore. We don’t want to have to be spending Hermione’s birthday in the Hospital Wing with more counter-curses.”

Tom nodded, “Don’t worry. We won’t try to deal with any magic we aren’t prepared to handle.”

Hermione managed to hold in a snort, and when Narcissa leaned in to kiss her cheek again, she whispered, “Be careful. Send me a patronus at once if anything goes wrong.”

The two ladies left shortly after, and Tom immediately got off the cot and slid under the covers beside Hermione, putting his arm under her upper body and pulling her against his chest. She rested her head, listening to the physical evidence that he did have a heart.

Tom didn’t say anything, though Hermione had expected he would launch into plans for tomorrow. He simply held her, stroked her hair, and said, very softly, “I was afraid you were going to die. That pain was much, much worse than the burning curse from our first year. I will get my hands on that man, eventually, and he will be paid back in kind, with interest.”

“I’m not giving him another thought, Tom,” Hermione answered sleepily, knowing the fictitious man would never be found, and not wanting to wish a vengeful Tom on any of Grindelwald’s followers, no matter their beliefs. “You shouldn’t, either. He might be dead by now, anyway. It was years ago, and fighting has been going on in Europe all this time.”

“Death is too good for him,” Tom muttered, but surprisingly let the matter drop. He occupied himself instead by playing with her hair, twisting the curls around his finger. “But sleep now. We have an eventful day ahead of us tomorrow.” He kissed her temple, and she fell asleep in his arms, dreaming of terrifying glimpse she’d had of the basilisk in her mirror, and of the instant, complete paralysis that had frozen her for days.

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Narcissa’s back was to the door when Galatea entered the bedroom. She could feel the waves of confusion and upset pouring off of her soul mate, but Galatea wasn’t sure of the exact cause.

She came up behind her, looped her arms around Narcissa’s slender waist, resting her chin
on the shorter woman’s shoulder. “What’s wrong, love? Are you upset about those two? They are soul mates, and they are both so mature. Tom will be sixteen in a few months as well; I’m surprised they waited this long to get involved romantically.”

Narcissa didn’t answer, but her shoulders shook ever so slightly. Galatea’s heart jumped, and she turned Narcissa around, holding her close. “Is it that your daughter is growing up? I think it’s natural to feel some loss over their movement towards adulthood, and Tom, he’s been like a son in a way, too. Do you want to talk about it?”

“I can’t,” Narcissa spoke through her tears, rubbing her face against Galatea’s shirt. “Not right now.”

“That’s alright, too,” Galatea soothed, and kissed the top of her head. “Let’s go to bed.”

They lay down on the bed, and Narcissa put her arm and leg across Galatea, as she always did, her entire body molded to the side of Galatea’s form. Her long, blonde hair was down, and it hinted at the smell of orchids and other hothouse flowers. There was something exotic about Narcissa, something secret and intriguing, something Galatea felt she would never quite grasp or touch, even after four years of being together as soul mates. As Narcissa’s breath deepened and she fell asleep, Galatea thought of how they’d become lovers.

It had been in March, on an usually warm day. They had gone out to the Forbidden Forest to gather unicorn hair from the bushes for Professor Slughorn, and make cuttings from some of the healing plants and herbs for Madame Selwyn. Though they had shared a bed most weekends since returning from the Christmas break, they had not progressed beyond kisses and touching over clothing. Narcissa held back, and as much as it hurt, Galatea did not press the issue. She told herself that it would be all the sweeter when Narcissa finally was comfortable, and she took many long showers.

They came to a circle of trees, an area strong with peaceful, protective magic. There was quite a bit of silky strands of unicorn hair in the surrounding low brush, and the thick grass in the center was like a soft carpet, inviting bare feet. Galatea was an impulsive person, and her boots and socks were gone in an instant. Only a few seconds later, she was lying in the grass, staring up at the leaves that blocked most of the blue sky, but allowed enough soft light in that it felt more like dusk than noon.

Narcissa laughed at her as she gathered the hair, carefully winding it around large spool. “You’re such a child sometimes.”
“Just because I enjoy nature doesn’t mean I’m a child. You’re just afraid to have fun, Narcissa,” Galatea had teased, though there was an element of truth there as well. Narcissa was carefully controlled, very tightly wound, and any humor she displayed was more sarcastic or dark than joyous.

With an indignant expression, Narcissa had set down her things and taken off her own shoes and socks, lying down beside Galatea in one fluid motion. “I can be spontaneous, too,” she protested.

“Just how spontaneous?” Galatea raised herself up on one arm, leaning over Narcissa, her voice dropped low.

Narcissa raised one perfectly arched eyebrow. “Why don’t you find out?” She lifted up high enough to brush her lips against Galatea’s in a teasing manner.

“There is nothing I’d like more,” Galatea whispered as she gently pushed Narcissa back down onto the ground. The grass was tall enough that it framed Narcissa’s pale blonde hair and dark eyes with a vibrant green aura, making her edges seem almost aglow. “I wish I were an artist,” Galatea sighed, her thumb rubbing across Narcissa’s high cheekbone. “I would paint you, just like this.”

“You don’t need a portrait,” Narcissa twisted into Galatea’s touch, following the movement to stay connected. “You have me.”

Galatea sobered for a minute. “Do I? I don’t know that anyone can have you, Narcissa. You are the most guarded person I’ve ever met.”

“And you are one of the most open I’ve met,” Narcissa responded. “Soul mates tend to be complimentary. We give each other what we lack most. Through you, with you, I can be more open, more spontaneous.”

“And I can learn discretion?” Galatea laughed. “I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Narcissa smiled, a quirk of her lips both sweet and sad. “I wouldn’t want you to learn any of the lessons I’ve had.”
“What are you keeping back, Narcissa?” Galatea frowned. “I am here for you. I will help you carry any and every burden you have.”

“I don’t want you to carry them, Tea,” Narcissa softly argued, using the diminutive that she only spoke when they were alone. “I want you to kiss them away, make me forget them completely.”

Galatea knew there was more than one deep hurt Narcissa was avoiding, but this was the most frank she’d been about it so far, and they had the rest of their lives. Galatea was a patient woman, and when her soul mate looked at her with that inviting gaze, she couldn’t do anything except the woman’s bidding. “Far be it from me to disappoint a lady,” Galatea murmured.

She slowly undid the line of buttons down the front of Narcissa’s dress, watching with growing anticipation as more and more pale, perfect flesh was revealed. At the waist line, she stopped, and pushed the sides of the dress back, exposing Narcissa’s brassiere, a concoction of black lace that hardly shielded her now pebbled nipples.

“Oh,” Galatea breathed, her fingers coming up to trace the line where lace met flesh, dipping below the fabric, feeling the rise of Narcissa’s chest with each deep, shuddering breath. She lowered her head, and kissed along Narcissa’s clavicle, paying attention to both sides before she focused her attention on the hollow of her throat, then traveled the path of her breast bone. “You are unbearably lovely.”

A pink flush suffused Narcissa’s skin, which only added to her charm, Galatea thought. She had reached the inner swell of Narcissa’s breast, and she whispered, “Divesto.” Her hands came up, cupping the rather generous curves, her mouth finding and teasing the nipple, just as Narcissa’s hands wound into her curls, pulling her closer.

Galatea chuckled lowly, “Don’t try to rush this. We’ve waited so long, we need to do this right.” She used her tongue to make circles around the nipple, then gave small nips and kisses across the rest of the breast tissue.

Narcissa groaned in frustration, tugging on Galatea’s hair, trying to get her to refocus her attention on the nipples, which were hardened and flushed a deep rose color. “Don’t tease,” she moaned.

“I haven’t even started teasing you, sweet thing,” Galatea answered softly. She shifted Narcissa to her side and worked her dress the rest of the way off without magic, slowly pulling her clothes off, stroking and kissing down the line of her spine, the curve of her hip, the back of her
knees, the small dip just below her ankle bone. Narcissa gave a shiver, and Galatea cast a warming charm.

She lay, still clothed, behind Narcissa, one hand lightly touching her breasts, darting back and forth in a way that was delightful and unsatisfactory at the same time, her other hand spreading through the darker blonde curls between Narcissa’s legs, finding the slick crevice there, tracing first the outer lips, then the inner ones, hovering over the small button at the top, but barely making contact.

Suddenly, Narcissa’s hand closed over hers, forcing fingers to go where she wanted them most, index and middle digits pinching lightly, on either side of her clitoris, rubbing in tight, frantic circles. She pushed back against Galatea’s shoulders and hips, then spoke the same spell, leaving Galatea naked behind her, their skin touching from shoulders to toes.

Galatea gasped, but it was from Narcissa’s rising magic, not the boldness of her action. Their increased skin contact made their magic hum delightfully, creating a depth of intensity to their touches that left Galatea fearing she was going to spin out of control.

She scrambled to gather her thoughts and coordinate her movements, to use the techniques she knew would pleasure Narcissa, leave her shuddering for minutes at a time, drawing out the sensation. Even though they were soul mates, that wasn’t a guarantee that they would end up together, and she wanted to give Narcissa everything, to show her that she didn’t need to go anywhere else. Part of her was terrified Narcissa would end up married again, probably to a Pureblood, with Galatea as the dirty little secret she was so used to being.

Try as she might though, there was too much desire and magic mixed together to be premeditated, to artfully seduce Narcissa, and her body was so soft, so beautiful, so perfect, Galatea was in a state of awe, hardly believing she was allowed to touch this woman, that this woman had been designed by fate to be with her.

Narcissa’s grip loosened a bit, and she turned in Galatea’s arms, out of breath, but with a concerned look on her face. “What’s wrong? Are you ok? Do you want to stop?”

Galatea laughed. “Those are my lines, not yours,” she kissed the bridge of Narcissa’s nose, then the indentation above her lips. “I was simply overwhelmed for a moment. You are…perfect.”

“I’m over forty and I’ve given birth,” Narcissa’s smile had a self-deprecating twist. “I’m far from perfect.”
She looked at the fine lines, hardly noticeable around Narcissa’s eyes, and the bit of frown line between her brows. Galatea felt a pang of sadness at how often her soul mate had to have frowned. She kissed the lines individually, then went down and kissed the faint, almost silvery marks on the curves of her hips and the gentle rise of her stomach from where the skin had stretched during pregnancy. She lifted her head after touching the last one to her lips. “I love every mark on your body because they have been your life, and they have led you here, to me, to us, now, in this place.”

There was a distinct glistening in Narcissa’s chocolate colored eyes, “That is the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Galatea’s easy, crooked grin came out. She felt a bit more at ease, some of the nervousness faded away, and she was in a prime spot, between Narcissa’s spread legs. “Let’s see if I can’t shift your mood from romantic to lustful.”

Narcissa laughed. “I have no doubt you can,” she said, but she sat up, scooting away.

“What are you doing?” Galatea asked, unclear on what was happening. If she didn’t get to make Narcissa come, she would likely die, she feared, though more from the sting of rejection than un-culminated sexual desire.

Narcissa pushed Galatea back to the grass, then straddled her. Galatea was sure her brain had stopped working completely at this point. She kissed her for several minutes, rocking her hips against Galatea’s until they were both panting. “I just didn’t think it was fair for you to do all the work. I’m not like your other women, Galatea. I’m not going to use you for sex and then pretend we are nothing to one another. And I’m not going to make you do all the work, lay back and be pleasured, without returning the favor.”

Galatea raised an eyebrow. “Have you ever touched a woman? Have you ever tasted a woman? It’s a learning curve. Don’t worry about me, Narcissa. I’m happy to please you and then take care of myself.”

“No!” Narcissa’s voice was sharp. “I desire you. I want to touch you, so take your own advice and be patient and let me do this without rushing.”

Galatea put up her hands in surrender. “I am at your mercy.”
Now, Narcissa’s smile held a hint of danger. “Well, that was silly of you.”

She shimmied down Galatea’s lower half, rubbing as she went, then settled on her stomach between Galatea’s legs. Her touches were soft and a bit hesitant at first, and she began her kisses on Galatea’s smooth, hard inner thighs, thin and toned from years of nervous energy, running up and down stairs and corridors in the castle, hiking and horseback riding in her spare time. The warmth of her mouth, the softness of her lips, the tiny flicks of her tongue, had Galatea a moaning mess before Narcissa even made it to her cunt, spreading her lips, licking and kissing from the bottom of the folds to the hard nub at the top, sucking at her clit while sliding her hands under Galatea’s buttocks to lift her up closer into Narcissa’s mouth, pushing her tongue deeply inside of Galatea, then pulling back to replace her tongue with fingers and kiss and lick higher. Galatea’s hips were bucking and each touch was imbued with magic, but she held back.

Galatea wanted them to come together, to feel their magic combine, along with the physical pleasure. She managed to twist herself away, and realign their bodies so that they could each be pleasing one another. Narcissa was above her, and she pulled her hips and cunt down to her mouth, using every bit of skill, every trick she knew to bring her soul mate to the edge with her. The combination of a finger curved up high on the soft, spongy spot of her inner wall along with a circular motion of her tongue on Narcissa’s nub seemed to be effective, if the increased pace of her rocking hips was any indication.

Galatea felt her own body start to tense, to prepare to break apart, and she moved her tongue faster and pressed her finger harder, and suddenly, they weren’t bodies writhing in an enchanted forest, they were energy whose only experience was bliss, their magic wrapping around one another and caressing inside one more deeply than any tongue or fingers could. For an instant, Galatea touched something, dark and raw, inside of Narcissa, but then it swirled away, hidden again.

Narcissa had collapsed on top of her, and Galatea could feel the pulse in her cunt, the throb of her pounding blood as it flooded the lower half of her body. Narcissa’s long white legs were sprawled over her chest, and Narcissa’s blonde head was resting on her thighs, her heavy breathing sending aftershocks of pleasure through Galatea as the warm puffs of air hit the delicate skin of her lower lips. The idea of ever moving from this spot seemed impossible.

“I believe you may have inadvertently used a bone-dissolving spell on me,” she murmured, turning her head to kiss the side of Narcissa’s knee. “I can’t wait to see Electra’s face when I tell her what you did, and I have to spend a night screaming while I re-grow bones in the infirmary.”

Narcissa’s body gently shook with laughter, the vibration against her skin making Galatea sigh in pleasure. “Well, you’ve done the same to me, so I don’t know how we are going to make it out of this clearing.”
“Oh, we aren’t,” Galatea looked up at the tree canopy above. “I think we’re going to have to live here now.” She lightly traced the curve at the bottom of Narcissa’s buttocks, watching with a smile as the other woman shivered.

Though they had been exaggerating, it had taken them quite a while to recover. They had cuddled in the soft grass for over an hour, half-dazed, before their magic and their bodies settled to the point where standing and dressing were viable options. After they had gathered the rest of the items they had set out for, they’d made their way back to the forest entrance, and on to the open school grounds, where many students were enjoying the lovely day, sitting on blankets by the lake, practicing flying on the Quidditch pitch, and walking the outdoor gardens.

As soon as they reached the first students, a pair of second year Gryffindor boys who were trading chocolate frog cards, Galatea had moved further away Narcissa, so used to keeping her relationships private. But Narcissa had shocked her by sliding her arm into Galatea’s, and walking arm in arm with her for the rest of the way back to the castle.

“I told you, I’m not ashamed of you, Galatea,” Narcissa whispered, and Galatea had to look away, because if she had meet Narcissa’s gaze, she had known she would have cried.

And Narcissa had been true to her word. They didn’t stand in front of the school and make an announcement, but staff and students alike seemed to slowly realize they were a couple, and when people started asking, Narcissa told them that Galatea was her soul mate, and Galatea did the same.

They kept their separate quarters at Hogwarts, but spent the evenings in each other’s rooms when Narcissa wasn’t covering the overnight watch in the Hospital Wing. On vacations, they mostly went to the Merrythought estate, but spent occasional weekends at the Hogsmeade cottage Narcissa had purchased.

Galatea looked down at Narcissa, sleeping with a frown. It was hard to see Hermione and Tom grow up, to know that they would come of age in just over a year, and leave Hogwarts in two years. Narcissa was exceptionally close to her daughter, Galatea knew, and she cared for Tom deeply as well. Galatea adored Hermione, and considered her an adopted daughter, and she found Tom fascinating, though there was a darkness about him that gave her pause. Sometimes, standing near him, she felt a power exuding that nearly matched some of the darkest cursed objects she’d dealt with. She knew that Dumbledore felt it too, though most of the other staff sang the boy’s praises. Hermione and Tom were going to change the world, she had no doubt, and Galatea only hoped that Hermione’s leveling influence would win out over the anger that Tom tried to bury deep inside himself.
Hermione’s second attempt at a sixteenth birthday began in a much more dramatic fashion than the first time. She woke from a restless, not-quite-nightmare about the basilisk to Tom’s low hissing against her skin, a vibration more than a sound, his lips trailing over her neck.

“What were you saying?” she asked as she slowly opened her eyes, focused more on the feel of his lips.

Tom smirked, and damn her if he didn’t look even more gorgeous with tousled hair and sleepy eyes. Her heart thumped as his hand found the hem of her nightgown and began inching up her thigh. “I said, ‘Happy Birthday.’”

She wiggled closer, putting her mouth near his ear and her hand in his dark hair, caressing the spot where his scalp dipped in right at the base of his skull with her thumb. “I didn’t think snakes celebrated birthdays,” she teased.

“Oh, they don’t, but I’m making special words, just for you,” he laughed, leaning his head back into her touch, then quickly forward to kiss her lips.

“Well, Narcissa owes me a tidy sum,” Professor Merrythought observed from where she leaned lazily against the door jamb. “I told her you two would be in the same bed.”

Tom and Hermione had pulled apart at the sound of her voice, which was definitely more amused than angry, but she gave Tom a pointed look until he got out of the bed.

“I’m sure you’ll want to get cleaned up for Hermione’s birthday explorations,” she said, looking pleased that Tom was still completely clothed.

“Yes, indeed,” Tom answered smoothly, no embarrassment on his face. He glanced at Hermione. “I’ll see you in just a bit.”
Hermione nodded and he left. Galatea sat on the side of the bed Tom had vacated. “I’m sure you’ve already had a thoroughly awkward conversation with your mother about this, and I don’t want to add to that, but I do want you to know that you can always come to me with any questions and concerns. I’ve been Head of House for long enough to know that some of the most brilliant students can also be the most stunningly stupid when it comes to romance and sex. Tom being your soul mate both eases and complicates matters. I’m sure the attraction is strong, to the point of being overwhelming, once normal hormones are factored in.”

“It is…intense,” Hermione admitted, looking down at bedspread.

“I won’t natter on,” Galatea stood up again. “Happy Birthday, dear, and remember that I am here for you.”

Hermione stood up as well, and hugged Galatea tightly. “Thank you for the thoughts, and for last night.”

Galatea flushed happily. “You are the closest thing to a daughter I have, and I couldn’t let you suffer if I had the ability to stop it.” Then she left, before Hermione could thank her again.

It was early, especially for a weekend, and the Great Hall had very few students in it. Patience was at the Ravenclaw table sitting beside Irma Pince, who was a seventh year now, and who was lecturing Patience on something she was clearly ignoring. When she saw Hermione enter, she stood up, and they walked arm in arm to the Slytherin table, where Tom and Abraxas were sitting at the far end, across from one another.

They both stood as the girls came over, and met them half-way. Tom immediately put his arm around Hermione’s waist and kissed her cheek. “Happy Birthday, Hermione. Are you ready for an adventure?”

“Once I get down to Hogsmeade and back,” Hermione noted. She still needed a rooster.

“The spells we went over last night for the clouding of the eyes, the mirrors we will set up, and my parseltongue really should be enough, dearest,” Tom narrowed his eyes. Even though the use of the word ‘dearest’ was more emotion than Tom usually displayed, he managed to make it sound more like an admonishment than an endearment.

He clearly did not want to kill the basilisk, and didn’t want any crowing bird to do so by
accident, either. Hermione chewed her lip in thought. Since Tom hadn’t yet opened the Chamber, it was possible that the basilisk was not even active. It could be in a magical hibernation, waiting for instructions from the Heir of Slytherin. Salazar Slytherin was too clever a wizard to leave a beast at large that could potentially kill his precious purebloods as well.

“Fine, but no one except you goes down into the Chamber until you’ve found the thing, temporarily clouded its eyes, and ordered it to go into the pipes or someplace out of the way until further notice,” Hermione offered her compromise.

Tom squeezed her arm again. “You are worrying over nothing. There probably isn’t even a ‘monster’ down there.”

“We’ll see,” Hermione answered grimly. She leaned over and took a muffin off the platter on the Slytherin table. “Let’s get this over with.”

As luck or fate or whatever gods wanted to fuck with Hermione would have it, the first floor bathroom was occupied at only eight in the morning on a Saturday. By one whiny third year doing her damnedest to get killed, Hermione thought bitterly.

As they entered, it was not immediately apparent that anyone was in the room, but as Hermione and Tom began to put repelling wards on the door, a face that was not much paler in life than it had been in death peered out from an open stall, large eyes blinking owlishly behind even larger circular frames.

“Ooooh! What are you doing bringing boys into the girls bathroom?” Myrtle sounded both appalled and thrilled simultaneously.

Tom froze, as did Abraxas. Hermione could practically see the potential lies spinning in their minds, but there really was no time for convincing Myrtle. Hermione would not have her blood on any of their hands.

She quickly raised her wand and oblivated Myrtle, then pushed her out into the hall and closed the bathroom door. Tom raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Hermione said defensively. “She’s muggleborn. I don’t want her anywhere near this place.”

Patience gave Hermione’s shoulder a reassuring pat. “It was for the best. She talks too
much, and Tom would end up very upset.”

Tom eyed Patience with annoyance. “Don’t pretend to know my mind, Patience.”

She turned those light blue eyes that seemed to see through everything to Tom. “Oh,” she said offhandedly, “I’m not pretending.”

Abraxas fidgeted as Tom continued to stare at Patience. “Can we please get on with this?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, let’s.” She gestured at the bathroom at large. “Where do we start?”

Tom strode over to the sinks, looking at them carefully. “There was a book left in the private Slytherin library, written in something that no has been able to understand in generations. It’s a curiosity now, a game or trick that Slytherins play on incoming students – trying to make them decipher something that isn’t decipherable. But I’ve figured out what it was – notes left by a parselmouth, notes written in phonetic parseltongue, since it isn’t a written language. It was a rough translation, since so much is tone of voice and inflection, but I believe one of my Gaunt ancestors knew there was an entrance in this place, and made an effort to keep it hidden even when more modern plumbing was installed.”

Hermione was peeved. Tom hadn’t told her he’d found such a book. Of course, in all previous conversations about the Chamber of Secrets, she’d tried to play it down or say it likely was a musty dungeon or cave not worth the trouble.

He was speaking parseltongue now, softly, and the sink came apart, just as Harry had described. The exposed pipe was large enough around to slide down, but it was a blind slide, with no way to see what was at the bottom. Tom spun around, grinning widely at his success. Abraxas started forward as well, but Hermione caught his arm.

“Wait!” she said sharply. “Let Tom go first. That’s what we decided.”

Tom was too happy to be annoyed at her fear. He came over and kissed her on the mouth, quickly, and winked. “I’ll be back in a few moments to tell you that there is no basilisk and you’ll feel silly.”
Before she could reply, he climbed into the pipe and slid into the darkness. Hermione felt a bit sick to her stomach. She noticed that Patience was already moving mirrors, arranging them around the room, and she breathed a bit more easily, going to assist her friend, then standing close to the door, at an angle that only allowed for seeing the entrance to the Chamber through the mirrors.

“Hey,” Abraxas came and stood beside her. “This really has you shaken up. I can’t believe you obliterated Myrtle. I thought you thought oblivation was borderline dark magic because it is a form of mind control, no matter what the Ministry thinks about using it on muggles. In fact, I’m pretty sure you used that line on Tom during one of your famous arguments.”

Hermione changed the subject. “I’m surprised you are still walking and talking after mine and Tom’s last argument. I’m so sorry you got dragged into that,” she told him truthfully.

He was blushing now, and it was adorable on his pale skin and against his chin-length white-blonde hair. “I would have stayed,” he said quietly, “but Tom has forgiven me, and even said…” he trailed off, his pink cheeks turning red.

“I can just imagine what Tom said,” Hermione responded tartly. “Tom knows we care about one another, and that we care about him, and he will use that to his advantage.”

Abraxas met her eyes. “I don’t mind being used as long as I’m allowed to touch you,” He was so earnest, his feelings so plain, Hermione wondered how on earth he’d been made a Slytherin.

“It isn’t just Hermione you want to touch,” Patience sang, having finished work on her last mirror and come to stand beside them, so quietly they’d barely noticed.

Poor Abraxas was rapidly approaching the shade of a tomato. “It’s ok, we aren’t judging!” Hermione said quickly, taking his hand. “But I think we should continue this discussion with Tom present, just so there are no misunderstandings.”

“Right,” Abraxas looked relieved, and Patience merely smiled serenely. Hermione tried to relax as well, feeling through her bond with Tom that he was fine. In fact, he was happy. She wasn’t sure whether that was a good sign or not.
The Chamber of (SEX) Secrets

Chapter Summary

Our favorite foursome explores the Chamber of Secrets. Then, there's a magical goblet that gives them an endless supply of meade. And Tom casts a sneak spell. Then, well...I'm sure your filthy minds can take it from there. Features plenty of sex, of every variety.

You probably don't need it, but Warning for Underage Drinking (though not so much that it causes consent issues) and Warning for a spanking and general D/s sexual behavior (though it's all consensual).

Chapter Notes

I'm of the mind that the basilisk, as a magical creature, has decent communication skills, and also that Slytherin wouldn't have made it his pet if he didn't have magical control over it, that he could pass down through his blood line. There isn't a lot of source material on what would be in the Chamber, or even all that much about Slytherin, really, so I used my imagination.

I was also thinking about types of magic, and elemental aspects, and since Tom and Hermione are fire and air, respectively, I thought they might need some earth and water to ground them. Also, I'm just kinky and wanted an excuse to write group sex, lol.

Love to everyone!

-oOo0oOo-

Tom was more than a little shocked to find an enormous basilisk curled in the mouth of a giant statue of Salazar Slytherin in the main antechamber. It wasn’t that he doubted Hermione’s intelligence, but he had truly believed her to be wrong on this matter. Even though he had lived in the magical world almost exclusively for the past five years, with only occasional trips to muggle London or other large cities, and had seen all manner of wondrous things, it still seemed a bit far-fetched that a giant basilisk had been living in the bowels of the school for centuries.

When he approached the statue, he saw the glint of scales, and quickly cast the eye clouding spell he and Hermione had devised, and as he came closer, it lifted its enormous emerald green head, in a questioning motion he’d often seen from Damballa, its eyes now a milky white.
"One of The Blood?" It spoke quickly, flicking its tongue, testing the smell of Tom on the air.

"Yes, One of The Blood; the blinding is only temporary," Tom replied without hesitation, and he could have sworn the snake smiled.

It uncoiled, and Tom, who had also researched basilisks to be on the safe side, noted that it lacked the red plume which would indicate it was a male. She was gigantic on a scale that was beyond impressive, and Tom smiled back, flicking his own tongue against his teeth as he spoke.

_I claim this space, as One of The Blood. Are you claimed, too?_ It was hard to ask questions that were based on more human concepts, but the snake was a magical creature, not an average serpent, and she seemed to understand and speak more clearly than other snakes Tom had encountered, other than Damballa, who always understood Tom, even when he didn’t speak.

She bobbed her head. _Yes, I am Snake Queen, but I am bound to this place, bound to serve Ones who are of The Blood._

Tom was impressed with her speech. She was indeed more advanced in her ability to talk in human concepts. _Was Salazar Slytherin the first of The Blood? Did he place limits or rules on you?_

_Salazar brought me here. I cannot leave without One of The Blood’s order._ Her hiss was sharper now. _I am very hungry for a good meal. Tiny creatures do not satisfy._

_We will get you something better soon,_ Tom promised, pondering how difficult it would be to get a cow down here. Or maybe that talking cow, Marguerite.

_We?_ She moved her head from side to side, scenting the chamber.

_I have friends who will be coming down. My magic mate and two others. They are not directly of Slytherin’s blood, but they are not to be attacked._

The snake reared back, rising high, her head towering above Tom. She was clearly affronted. _I do not attack invited guests of One of The Blood._
Excellent, Tom replied, then added, I won’t be ordering you to kill muggle borns, either. Centuries have passed, and I have no interest in wiping out what might be the only way to revitalize inbred magical bloodlines. We’ll have to find a way to supply you with larger mammals. If I give you freedom to leave the castle at night and hunt in the forest and nearby mountains, can you be discrete, killing only animals, and return to the chamber during the days? Or do you have an insatiable taste for people? You might have to wait a while before I have someone who annoys me enough to feed him or her to you.

One of her thin nostril slits twitched in what might have been a sneer. She was apparently a very moody snake, Tom thought. Deer and other large mammals will be sufficient. And I need only hunt once every few weeks if my prey is large enough. People aren’t very satisfying, either – they taste like large, fatty rats.

Do you have a name, other than Snake Queen? Tom asked, amused.

Salazar called me Astarte, she answered, and leaned in very close to Tom, flicking her tongue along his skin. Tom stood very still and did not flinch. You are very magical. Salazar would be pleased you have come.

Tom tried not to preen at the praise. I am pleased as well. Return to your nest for now, and stay there until this evening, when you may go out and hunt.

The snake acknowledged his order with a quick head bob, and then turned and disappeared into the recesses of the mouth of the statue. Tom was indeed pleased that the snake had obeyed him without question, that she could be reasoned with, and wasn’t simply a vicious attack dog that would kill anyone who entered the chamber or even came across her path.

Once the snake had retreated, Tom explored the Chamber, looking for some kind of hall or door that led into a different area. The walls were rough-hewn stone, more of a natural cave than a man-made room. As he moved around, he drank in the magic of the place. It was alive with energy, with power. The walls were warded heavily and there was old, thick magic not just in the walls and emanating from the presence of the basilisk, but in the air itself. He hovered his palms over the rock, and found a place that wasn’t as solid as it appeared. There were still wards, but it was an entrance of some kind. He spoke in parseltongue again, “Open for the Heir of Slytherin,” and after a shimmering flash of light, there was a doorway.

He followed the short hallway that opened into a large, circular room with a vaulted ceiling and shelving around the entire circumference. The walls were an emerald green tile that shone dully in the light from enchanted, never diminishing candles ablaze in a massive silver chandelier. The shelves were English oak, stained so dark they were nearly ebony. Many of the shelves were filled with books and journals, but there were also magical objects and instruments,
jars, boxes, and vials of potions and potion ingredients. There were two large white marble fireplaces on opposite sides of the room, with a cluster of green leather chairs in front of each. The center of the room had four long tables arranged in a diamond shape, with potion making supplies littered on the tops.

Tom examined the tables closely. Not a hint of dust or cobwebs were present, so the chamber had to have some kind of perpetual cleaning enchantment. The cauldrons on the four tables were all empty, but there were ingredients and instructions laid out – and they were mostly rare and very advanced, tricky potions that Tom had read about but not yet attempted. One was a mind-altering potion that produced effects similar to the *imperius* without a wand trace, and the other three were all attacking potions that led to various nasty deaths.

Knowing Hermione would be annoyed by all four, Tom carefully put the parchment with the instructions in one of the drawers built into the wall below the potion shelves and floated the ingredients back to their places. He breathed deeply. It was lovely – the feeling of power that surrounded him. This was his inheritance, his birthright. Maybe the Gaunts had gone weak and insane from inbreeding over the centuries, but his original ancestor had left so much magic behind that it was almost unfathomable how powerful he must have been in life. Tom was elated, so ready to absorb all the knowledge and magic and strength this space was offering. It was his for the taking, and he would use it to rise, but he was smarter than Slytherin. He wouldn’t preach exclusion and isolate himself from others who didn’t agree with him. No, he would take over the world, with the world none the wiser, with the world *thanking* him for it.

He explored the rest of the area, finding another hall that led to a suite of personal rooms – bedroom, bathroom, and sitting area with another, smaller library, this one with row after row of green leather bound journals. Tom picked one off the shelf, felt a tingle as the magical wards in the journal reached out to him, tested him. The writing inside was small and neat, but it was in late Old English, right near the boundary when Old English was transitioning into Middle English, and though Tom had some familiarity, he would need to get dictionaries and study further before he could unlock all these no doubt precious secrets.

Walking back to the entrance, he was almost floating. Tom was so alive. This year was going to be the best yet, he knew. He had his loyal followers, he had his plans, he had the Chamber of Secrets, and he had Hermione, more firmly than ever. Anything – *everything* – was possible.

It took a great deal of undignified shimmying to get back up the pipe, and Tom vowed to make another entrance soon. Going in and out of the girls’ bathroom was not a habit Tom wanted to continue, and he needed something more convenient, because he would certainly be spending a large amount of his time there from now on.

When he came out of the pipe, he saw Hermione, Abraxas and Patience standing near the door, facing away. They were very close to one another, and the two tall, pale blondes made
“Tom!” Hermione had turned, and rushed toward him, looking him over for damage. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“I’m excellent,” Tom replied as he put his hands on her waist and kissed her lips in an offhandedly possessive gesture. “You must all come down and see it now.”

Abraxas bounced on his toes, pausing only briefly at the entrance to ask over his shoulder, “So, no giant snake?”

“Oh, there’s a giant snake,” Tom laughed. “But she’s bound to serve the Heir of Slytherin, and she’s promised to leave my guests alone.”

“Did you cloud her eyes?” Hermione looked concerned.

Tom nodded impatiently. “Yes, I clouded her eyes, but as I said, she will obey me, and I explicitly told her no killing of people, and certainly not on the grounds of blood status. She’s retreated to her nest for the rest of the day, anyhow.”

That answer seemed good enough for Patience, who stepped past Abraxas to slide down the pipe, and Abraxas himself, who immediately followed.

Hermione walked to the edge of the entrance, but her feet didn’t move farther. Tom could feel her worry, her anxiety, her outright fear. He thought of the pain she had relived last night, that he had shared a small fraction of, and how she been subjected to pureblood prejudice, and how badly it had scarred her, both externally and internally. Though he usually enjoyed watching others be afraid, Tom did not like to see it in Hermione. He preferred her active, passionate, even angry and vicious, not withdrawn and rooted to the spot.

He pulled her into his arms, let his magic surround her. Her own magic responded instantly, reaching to his, and allowing her to be soothed. “How about a bit of trust, my little bird? I told you I would keep you safe. This is no different. Astarte will not harm you, and I would kill her a thousand times for even thinking it.”

Quickly, before she could protest, he gathered her up, and they slid down the pipe,
Hermione clutched tightly to his chest, the smell of woods and sunshine filling his nose from her hair. He smiled as she made a small squeaking noise when they landed on the pile of bones, and pushed him away in a huff.

“I was going to come down on my own!” she snapped, her hair coiling in snakish curls around her face, down loose as he preferred it. “There was no need to manhandle me.”

“But I enjoy manhandling you so much, dearest,” Tom replied. “Come on, let me show you around.”

The four entered the Chamber, and Tom watched with pleasure as they displayed proper levels of awe and excitement. Even Hermione relaxed, especially once they entered the library-potion lab area. So many books and magical objects won her over easily. Patience started fires at both sides of the room, then took a glass ball off one of the shelves and sank into a leather chair.

“This place is a bit creepy,” she spoke softly, though her voice carried well. “I like it,” she added as an afterthought.

Tom rolled his eyes, though he noticed with interest that she had made the glass glow a brilliant, sunny yellow with a shining ring of pink around it. “What is that?”

Patience gave him her slow smile. “It is an aura ball. It focuses the aura of those who touch it. My aura is yellow with pink, so when I hold it, the ball glows those colors. Do you want to try?”

“No,” Tom said shortly. Auras were a soft magic, not really something he was interested in, but he also wasn’t about to let Patience see and diagnose his internal self from the color of his aura. All knowledge was power, and Patience already had the uncanny ability to know things he had never told her – or anyone else, for that matter.

Abraxas came and sat beside Patience. “I will,” he took the ball from her, and it went clear for a few seconds, then became an almost solid silver, with a small bit of bright red in the center, like a drop of blood pooled in mercury.

Patience took Abraxas’s free hand, holding it tightly. “You are very rich,”

Tom and Abraxas laughed together. “That is hardly news, Patience,” Tom scoffed.
“The silver is his material wealth, which surrounds him and enables him to manifest many ideas, and the bright red is the love he feels,” Patience continued, unperturbed by Tom’s tone.

Three sets of eyes focused on Hermione, who had remained strangely in the center of the room, not touching a thing. She flushed, and all three smiled.

“Let’s be careful what we touch,” Hermione spoke, though she looked away in embarrassment. His soul mate wasn’t quite used to all the attention she was receiving, Tom noted. He found that adorable, and it only heightened his already buoyant mood.

Patience nodded gravely. “Yes, much of this room is either warded or cursed, but this ball is fine. It has no wards or spells on it.” She took it from Abraxas and walked over to Hermione, placing it in her hands.

Tom glanced at the ball, curious to see what color it would turn. He expected green, like the forest, or even blue, but the ball glowed a deep red. “What does that mean?” he asked Patience.

“I’m strong-willed, a survivor, a realist, very grounded and passionate,” Hermione answered, and threw the ball at him.

He caught it by instinct, and then dropped it in annoyance, but not before the glass sphere had turned jet black, with hairline cracks of purple spreading over it like a spider’s web.

“You absorb power, transfigure and transmute it, have little capacity for forgiveness, a great capacity for anger, and you are very magical,” Patience announced, floating the ball back to the shelf before it crashed to the ground.

“Once again, no surprise,” Tom scowled, giving Hermione a pointed look.

She shrugged. “Then there’s no need to hide, is there?”

He came to stand in front of her. “You are quite sassy today, aren’t you?”
“It is my birthday,” she grinned, her teeth tugging at her lower lip.

“Indeed,” Tom replied, looking down at her with darkened eyes. He did so like it when she chewed on her lip. It was like an invitation for him to do the same. “What would the birthday girl like to do?”

Hermione glanced around the room. “You want to use this area for our group meetings eventually, right?”

Abraxas frowned. “Not everyone, surely. The original group only, I’d say. It will be hard to keep this a secret if all the people currently in the study group know.”

“I agree with Abaxas,” Tom said. “This is more of an inner sanctum, and will have limited membership.”

“Still, that’s us, and Jacob, Corvus, Vidhi, Sebastian, Felicity, and Josephine,” Hermione listed.

Patience gave her a long look. “You left out Marguerite,” she noted, then gazed at Tom questioningly. “Are we leaving Marguerite out because you’ve been sleeping with her? Don’t you still want her money and influence? It doesn’t make any sense to leave her out once you’ve already invested so much time in her.”

Hermione’s face turned red. Abraxas’s turned white. But Tom beamed at Patience, looking at her with something other than annoyance in his eyes for the first time ever. “Patience, I completely agree with your assessment, and I’m sure our red-aura, pragmatic leading lady will see the sense in that statement now that you’ve pointed it out.”

“Fine,” Hermione ground out. “Marguerite, too. But she’s not allowed in the bedroom area. I want it warded against her. I want it warded against,”

“Everyone except the four of us?” Patience supplied helpfully.

Tom arched an eyebrow, a hint of teasing in his voice. “Why, Patience, do you have designs on my bedchamber?”
She shrugged her shoulders, as if he’d asked if she wanted to sit at the same table or share a sandwich. “I think you three need me, to even things out, magically. But I mostly like to watch and cuddle.”

“You do a lot of watching, Patience?” Abraxas asked in mock shock, his eyes playfully widened. “Just who have you been watching?”

Patience turned her dreamy pale blue eyes to his grey ones. “I watched you and Marilyn Tuttle on the Quidditch pitch last spring.”

“That girl from Gryffindor with the really big -” Tom began, smirking.

“Yes, they are quite large,” Patience agreed with a placid smile.

Abraxas flushed. “In all fairness, I was just curious. I’d never seen such enormous -”

Hermione’s mouth made a grim line. “Marilyn Tuttle can’t even do a proper accio, and she’s a sixth year, for Circe’s sake!”

“Well,” Patience reasoned, “one doesn’t need magic to get naked.”

“Or even half a brain, apparently,” Hermione muttered.

Tom was laughing out loud now. “And you get annoyed at me, little bird? You don’t want to share your toys, either.”

“I thought I was a pet,” Patience corrected gently.

“Yes,” Tom put an arm around her shoulders, in a way that would have been friendly and maybe a touch seductive if anyone else had done it, but with Tom, was all claiming and possessiveness. “Yes, Patience, you are our pet, I think.”
“Well, you do treat Damballa well. He is a very happy snake,” Patience was not at all disturbed or insulted.

“Regardless,” Hermione tried to change the subject. “If we are going to be down here, working on projects that are not sanctioned by the school, and that may stray into darker magic, we need protections in place. We can make a vow that everyone has to sign to keep the secret of the larger chamber, but there are things here that are not for everyone. I don’t care if Marguerite is part of the larger group, but I don’t trust her, nor do I trust Sebastian or Dolohov, and I think we need to go over the inventory of this place and move any sensitive or especially powerful items or books into the personal suite and ward it against all except us.”

Tom nodded. “Let’s get started, then we can do the warding at the end.”

They set to work. A quick use of revealing spells indicated which items were simply warded against use as opposed to cursed, and Abraxas moved the warded items to the smaller library area, as he was able to touch them without difficulty. They soon discovered Patience could handle the items as well, and Tom was not surprised. She had two magical parents, and though she didn’t claim to be wholly pureblooded, her line had been mostly magical for at least the last five generations. Hermione made no attempt to touch any item, working instead on the cursed objects, using techniques she’d learned from watching Galatea to try to undo the dark magic. Tom joined her, and they managed to undo several minor curses, mostly things like burning the hands of someone who was not of the Slytherin line who picked up the book or object.

When they had finished, all the books left on the shelves could be touched, as well as the remaining potion ingredients, useful items like mortars and pestles, small cauldrons, spoons enchanted to stir on their own, rolls of unused parchment, quills, and ink and several basic magical objects, including an early version of a rememberall, an enchanted cup that constantly refilled itself with wine, meade, or water, according to the drinker’s choice, and a pair of dragon hide gloves that shrunk or enlarged to fit the wearer’s hands.

The entrance to the larger room was already visible and it posed no problem to enter. Clearly, Slytherin had reasoned that with the outer entrance protected by parseltongue as a code, any one who came this far was likely accompanying the Heir of Slytherin. The back hall branched into the bathroom, then into the sitting room, and behind it, the bed chamber. They left the bathroom unwarded, but worked together to ward the sitting room door to their individual magical signatures, along with basic repelling and forgetful spells, so that anyone else would think this hall contained a bathroom and nothing else.

A clock chimed in the main room, a strange, haunting sound, like wood flutes hanging in the forest. It was dinner time. They had spent almost ten hours on magic, and they were all hungry and exhausted, but thrilled as well.
“The spells on the bathroom doors upstairs have probably faded by now,” Hermione told Tom. “It’s six.”

Tom smiled at her. “It’s not a concern. I shut the entrance behind us once we were all down here.”

She smiled. “Good. I know you said Astarte will behave, but I wouldn’t want anyone else stumbling down here on accident.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Tom admitted to the others, surprising himself with the confession.

“We can’t yet,” Hermione pointed at the pile of darker cursed objects they had floated to a distant spot on the floor. “We have to find a secure place to put those things until we can figure out the proper counter-curses or dispose of them safely.”

Tom eyed the collection. These were the much darker items, ones with curses that hinted at madness and death. Possession of these items alone was probably illegal and if someone accidentally touched or used one of them, time in Azkaban was a distinct possibility.

“There’s a large closet cabinet in the bedroom,” Abraxas said. “We could float these things in there, then lock and ward it. With the wards on the outer sitting room, it would be very unlikely anyone would ever find them.”

Hermione stared hard at one of the items, a delicately carved bone box, decorated with two entwined snakes on the lid. Tom followed her gaze. On the surface, it seemed innocuous, just a container for magical herbs or maybe rings or brooches. But the closer one got to it, the more one wanted to touch it – it almost had a siren song. Tom alone could hear the second voice, the one in parseltongue that warned the box was a trap, that opening it would mean death. All four of them had tried to cast silencing spells on the box, but it remained impervious for now.

Tom took her hand, and she shook her head. “Yes, that’s a good idea,” Tom kept his fingers tightly curled around Hermione’s, since the box seemed to bother her the most.

They each floated a section of the pile into the empty cabinet in the corner of the bed chamber. Then they locked, warded, and silenced the cabinet itself, and were relieved to find that the whispering from the box was no longer audible.
Patience went over to the large canopy bed hung with green curtains embroidered with what gleamed like real silver thread. The posts were high, and there was a three step stair by the bed, which Patience climbed. She threw out her arms and fell face first into the green comforter with a small “oof” sound.

“This mattress is surprisingly comfortable for being several hundred years old, though it does smell a tad musty,” Patience wrinkled her nose as she sat up and cast a few cleansing spells on the bed. “I’m ready for food and a nap.”

Tom watched her closely. Hermione’s best friend defied categorization. When he’d first met Patience, he’d dismissed her as flighty and odd, with the potential for intelligence, since she was a Ravenclaw, but unlikely to be practically skillful. He tolerated her because Hermione valued her for unknown reasons. But by the middle of their first year, and after watching Patience in their shared classes, Tom realized she could easily have been sorted into Slytherin based solely on how well she hid her talents. Over the years, he’d seen Patience grow into a strong caster, with a strange ability for absorbing knowledge without seeming to pay the least bit of attention. It was also becoming apparent that Patience had some kind of extrasensory skills that were not yet fully developed, but which could become critical in the future. Because she also read people on a deep level, it made sense to Tom to keep her close and happy. Of course, knowing what made her happy was not an easy task. The girl was wildly unpredictable. Nothing seemed to upset her, nor did anything make her excited. As a person who worked to keep his own emotions and responses hidden, Tom respected that about her.

As annoying as Patience could be, she was right about their complimentary magic, and Hermione was right about Patience growing on him. He suspected the way they fit together was due to the various elemental natures of their magic. In Ollivander’s shop, the wandmaker had said Hermione was aligned with air, and Tom with fire, and he believed Abraxas to be earth and Patience water, creating a magically balanced quartet.

The four of them had been partners in many classes over the past five years, and they knew each other’s minds and magic very well, often casting classwork with no need to work out who would do what. Tom had also had many other partners or opponents in classes, dueling club, and the study group. No one else’s magic fit with his in the same way. When they worked together, their spells were strong and instinctive.

Vidhi was fiery, like he was, and their magic worked best together when pointed in the same direction, casting the same spell. Corvus and Jacob were both very familiar, being his other roommates. Most of the others in the group had magic that was so much less in sheer force than Tom’s that it simply submitted to his. Josephine was an exception, her water magic somewhat temperamental around his, like Patience’s could be when it was only their magic alone, without Hermione and Abraxas as well.
“your birthday,” Abraxas was saying when Tom came out of his musings, his fingers surreptitiously stroking the side of Hermione’s hand where they sat side by side on the wooden trunk at the foot of the bed. Patience had rolled to the end of the bed, and was sitting behind Hermione, absentently braiding small strands of her hair. They all looked happy, and Tom found that this pleased him.

Tom crossed the room and sat on the bed beside Patience. When she had touched him the other day, hugged him and kissed his cheek, Tom had been surprised, but she, like Abraxas, was a lovely creature, and Tom did appreciate beauty, and even better, he liked to own things of beauty. “Yes, we’ve finished the first part of Hermione’s birthday adventure – uncovering all kinds of ancient magic. Now, we need the celebration.”

Abraxas frowned, looking over his shoulder at Tom. “We’ll have to go back up to get anything to eat, though there is that fantastic goblet in the other room.”

“There’s still so much to look at,” Hermione looked around the room wistfully, her gaze falling on the bookshelves, and the three other cabinets which they had yet to explore the contents of.

“That’s not a problem,” Patience announced, her unfazed smile in place as always.

“What?” Hermione and Abraxas said at once, but Patience had already summoned an old, wizened house elf who bowed low in front of the four of them.

Tom stood rapidly, his heart beating fast at the thought of his secret getting out, but Patience spoke before he could.

“Hello, thank you for coming. You can keep this place a secret, correct?” her high, sweet voice sounded like a constant song, even when she was speaking the most mundane of words.

The elf nodded primly. “Of course. The Chamber is a secret passed down with the Hogwarts magic. No Hogwarts house elf can reveal its location or even talk of it.”

Hermione made a face, probably thinking of Salazar threatening house elves with dark magic, but Tom was glad of it, because it protected the secret he didn’t want to share, and it made staying for longer periods of time easier if they could get food brought to them. “Would you be kind enough to bring us some food? Just some sandwiches or something?”
The elf nodded and was gone. “How did you know that, Patience?” Hermione asked.

“It made sense. I can’t imagine Salazar Slytherin making his own food, and he obviously spent a lot of time down here, so he must have allowed for house elves to enter to wait on him,” Patience answered, and used her wand to move a small table that was against the wall to the center of the room. Abraxas went to the main room and came back, floating a leather chair. Tom and Hermione pitched in, floating three more chairs to surround the table.

In a few moments, the table was laden with much more food than a few sandwiches, and Abraxas had pulled the magical cup off the library room shelf, commanding it to fill with meade, and the sweet, heady drink was passed around the table. By the time the strange wooden chimes had sounded again, everyone’s cheeks were flushed and even Tom’s laughter was coming easily.

-oOo0oOo-

Hermione knew that she’d had a bit much to drink. The meade was stronger than she’d allowed for, and it was easy to drink. She could recognize the looseness in her limbs, and the increased urge to laugh and smile. However, she refused to feel guilty. She hadn’t consumed so much that she was ill, and she could still think – everything was just a bit slower, softer, and funnier.

Though she had been very concerned, well, honestly, terrified, of coming down into the Chamber of Secrets, it had pleasantly surprised her. The snake was nowhere in sight (thank Circe), and the library and potions laboratory was beyond her imaginings. There were so many books to explore, rare potion ingredients to experiment with, perhaps even lost spells and theories to bring back to the magical world. From the books that she’d handled, she’d seen they were written mostly in Latin and old English, though there were some Greek and Egyptian, as well as a bit of Babylonian, Sanskrit, and Arabic. The Latin and Greek wouldn’t a problem, but the other books and journals would take some time to translate. Honestly? A library full of magical books that required time and research? Hermione couldn’t possibly begin to think of a better birthday present.

Magic itself was thick in all the rooms of the Chamber, and it was invigorating, though Hermione forced herself to channel Mad-eye Moody and remain vigilant while in the library, not touching anything until she had ascertained and undone any ward or curse on it. It was a testament to how paranoid and stingy Slytherin was with sharing magical knowledge that he had bothered to curse or ward anything in the Chamber at all. The whole place was a secret, after all, and only accessible with a parslemouth leading the way.

She was glad Tom had agreed to stash the darker objects that they couldn’t deactivate in the
bedroom for now. Hermione could never forget the horror of Katie Bell’s silent scream when she had touched the cursed necklace in their sixth year, or the look of Dumbledore’s blackened, withered hand. She wasn’t surprised that there was so much dark magic in the Chamber, but she was surprised that there seemed to be an equal, if not greater, amount of neutral or even light books, potions, and objects as well. Slytherin may have embraced darker magic, but he certainly didn’t seem to use it exclusively. There were books on healing, Herbology, magical history, and several handwritten rolls of parchment for spells that appeared to be just as likely to be normal things like headache remedies or sleeping draughts as poisons or pain-inducers or truth serums.

Hermione had great hopes for this space, for the knowledge it contained. She knew Tom was move into experimenting with darker magic, but perhaps she could show him that neutral or light magic could be just as powerful, and help temper whatever secrets they would discover here.

She nibbled on a chocolate biscuit, very happy with her birthday. Tom looked much more relaxed than normal, taking a drink of the meade and passing it to Abraxas. He caught her eye and smiled, a wide, toothy grin that went up to his deep blue eyes, as well as straight to her groin. Apparently the meade also made everything sexier, she noted.

“Enjoying your birthday, dearest?” he asked, reaching over quickly and pulling her out of her chair and into his lap. She rubbed her head affectionately against his shoulder, turning sideways so that she could loop her arm over his neck and pull him down for a kiss before she had really thought about it. His mouth tasted honey sweet, like the meade, and they kissed slowly for several moments, then pulled back to look at the other two people in the room.

Abraxas was watching them hungrily, his grey eyes closer to a stormy sky now. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, like a coil ready to spring. Patience was watching them as well, though her expression was as serene as an undisturbed lake, her posture gracefully slumped in her chair, both her long legs thrown over one arm.

“I think we should all give Hermione birthday kisses,” Patience said calmly. She didn’t wait for a response, but stood and walked over to Hermione and Tom, and sat on the other side of Tom’s lap, facing Hermione.

“Ah,” Hermione began, unsure of how exactly this would play out, or how Tom would react, but Patience was already leaning in and kissing her.

Hermione had never kissed a girl. She had no fear of doing so, or even repulsion, but she’d never really desired to do so, not with any girl except the one kissing her now. Over the last two years, she suspected that Patience liked her more than as a friend. Josephine and Felicity were her roommates, too, and they touched Hermione’s arm, or buttoned up the backs of her dresses, or gave her hugs, but that contact felt different from the way Patience touched her. Patience’s hand fit on
her arm in a different way, Patience breathed on her neck when she rested her head on Hermione’s shoulder, Patience cuddled. Hermione had also realized, to her surprise, that she liked the way Patience touched her, and if Patience had suddenly stopped, or had started touching her the way her other friends did instead, Hermione would have felt a loss. Patience was special. She was dear to Hermione in a way that she wasn’t sure how to explain. It simply was.

And, now, she knew, Patience had the softest lips in the world. Her tongue was soft, too, and also tasted like the honey from the meade, but where Tom was passion and danger and excitement, Patience tasted like peace. Hermione knew that was a ridiculous thought, but her intoxicated brain insisted it was the right description. Patience was peaceful and safe and a warmth that Hermione could fall into.

She hadn’t realized that she’d lifted her hands to Patience’s face, pulling her closer and kissing her more deeply, until they fell off balance and were jerked back by Tom.

“My, my,” Tom drawled dryly as they righted themselves. “If that was a sample of ‘friendly’ affection, then I’m surprised you ladies ever leave your tower.”

Abraxas laughed, trying not to choke on the meade he had been sipping. “It certainly gives a new meaning to bosom friends, doesn’t it?”

Hermione scowled playfully, but Patience looked confused. “Oh, I haven’t touched her breasts yet.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “But you apparently have plans to, pet?”

“Well, we are all need goals, don’t we?” Patience asked.

“I think that’s a marvelous goal. I’d love to see you reach it,” Abraxas grinned.

Hermione huffed. “I hope you all realize I have a say in who does and doesn’t touch my breasts,”

Tom kissed the top of her head and then pushed her off his lap, though he wrapped a loose arm around Patience’s waist, keeping her in place. “I think Abraxas would like to give you a birthday kiss as well, dearest,” Tom’s voice came out lower than usual, his arousal clear.
Hermione gave him an annoyed expression. “I’m only going because he’s a great kisser, not because you told me to,” she said as she walked over to Abraxas, and sat on the edge of the table in front of him.

For a few moments, they simply stared at each other, unsure of this permission to touch. Then Abraxas took her hand and lifted it to his mouth, kissing the ends of her individual fingers, then turning her palm up and sliding his lips along the curve of her thumb down to the place where veins showed a faint blue under her skin at the beginning of her wrist. Her pulse was jumping as his tongue delicately traced those veins, and her eyes closed involuntarily against the strength of the sensation. When she opened them, Abraxas was standing, pulling her against him, and kissing her like he hadn’t been able to touch her for weeks, as if he would never get enough of her. Where Tom and even Patience kissed her like they were sure of her affection, sure she would return their embraces, Abraxas devoured her as though she might try to escape, as if this might be his only chance to have her. With a gasp, they both pulled back for a moment of air. Hermione glanced at the others.

“That is not how he kissed Marilyn Tuttle,” Patience noted, her whole upper body resting bonelessly against Tom, who now had one hand splayed over her hip and the other at the bare skin where Patience’s knee socks stopped and the hem of her skirt hadn’t quite reached. His fingers were drawing circles on her skin, the same circles Hermione had felt only a few days before.

“Well, he didn’t love that silly Gryffindor,” Tom replied, and as Hermione and Abraxas watched, he rearranged Patience to face him as though she weighed nothing, as though she wasn’t only a few inches shorter than he was, with legs that went on for miles, and kissed her, twining his hands in her long, pale hair, tugging on it to force Patience’s head back, allowing him to kiss along the line of her neck, and giving them an excellent view of how wide his eyes went when Patience leaned forward and bit his ear, hard.

“Bad pet!” He growled, wrenching on her hair and biting her neck roughly in return. The skin on the place where her neck joined her shoulder instantly reddened, and would be bruised soon, but Patience didn’t cry out at all. Instead, she giggled, then brushed his lips lightly as a falling feather, her hips canting forward as though she were riding a horse.

One of Tom’s hands was on the small of her back now, pushing Patience closer to him, and even though he was annoyed, he was also clearly aroused. Abraxas was breathing heavily against Hermione’s ear, his lips skating her outer earlobe, though both their faces were turned to watch Tom and Patience.

“Do you think they might break each other?” Abraxas whispered, a bit of humor mixed in with actual concern. “They are at the opposite ends of everything.”
“Mmm,” Hermione breathed, the touch of Abraxas’s lips distracting her ability to produce rational thought. “My money’s on Patience.”

Abraxas laughed. “I had a feeling you were insane,” he lowered his head to her neck, lifting her hair out of the way, turning them so they could continue to watch.

Patience had risen to her knees, straddling Tom, and Tom had twisted her hair into a rope, winding the ends around his palm for a firm grip. She was kissing his face all over, his forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, cheeks, her lips moving quickly. Tom continued to make marks on her neck, above and below the original bite.

“Tom,” Hermione protested softly from across the table. “Her whole neck is going to be bruised!”

Tom lifted his head, his eyes darkening at the sight of Abraxas’s mouth on Hermione’s neck. “It’s your fault, for not teaching your pet better manners. Sad, really, that her discipline has fallen to me.”

Patience had half-turned in his lap and smiled at Hermione. “It’s ok. You can kiss it better later, Hermione. Plus, it hurts in a nice way. And I really like biting him,” she demonstrated how much right then by turning and biting Tom’s neck, and Hermione could see, even across the table, that it was a very hard bite. Tom winced and his mouth made an angry line, but Hermione had seen that look in his eyes before, and she had no doubt he was hard as a rock.

Standing quickly, Tom rose with Patience still attached to him, and walked over to the bed, throwing her on it. Patience rolled over onto her stomach, her lips and cheeks flushed, her pale hair a loose white blonde cloud around her as she laughed. Her laughter continued as Tom flipped up her skirt and pulled her knickers down just enough to expose her rather surprisingly shapely (given how straight and flat Patience was over the rest of her body) arse cheeks.

“Do you know what happens to pets who bite their masters, Patience?” Tom’s voice held no amusement whatsoever, though Patience didn’t look at all worried. Hermione’s stomach did a flip. It was one thing for Tom to dominate her. She knew she enjoyed it, and she also knew that Tom cared for her, and that, whether he admitted it or not, she had power over him as well. Patience was a mystery in many ways, even to Hermione, and she didn’t want to see her friend hurt or damaged, emotionally or physically.
“They get punished?” Patience answered, her voice near a taunt in a sing-song tone. She looked right at Hermione and winked. Hermione breathed in relief, resting against Abraxas, who had also taken a step forward in concern.

Tom nodded, and brought his hand down, the sound of the slap loud in the quiet room. Both Tom and Patience’s breathing became heavier, but Patience didn’t make a sound of protest, nor did she cry. The noises she made were moans, and her hips moved back toward the spanking as opposed to away from it. Her creamy flesh turned a bright pink, then red, before Tom stopped. He was biting his lip, and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Patience had clearly won this round, Hermione thought, though she wasn’t about to point that out.

“Do you feel better?” Patience asked, looking over her shoulder at Tom, who was on his knees behind her, his hands now lightly hovering over the skin he’d reddened. “You like punishing people, don’t you?”

Tom looked at her sharply. “Yes. Just as you like biting people,” he pulled her underwear further down and slid his hand between her legs. “And apparently, as you like being punished.”

Patience squirmed, more than she had during the spanking. “Oh,” she breathed, and Tom smiled, clearly feeling in control again and determined to press his advantage.

He lifted her onto her knees and pulled her hips to his. They were still fully clothed, and her skirt fell back down as they moved. One hand kept Patience’s hip against his, the other wrapped around and under her skirt. Patience’s head lolled against Tom’s shoulder as his fingers tapped out a rhythm beneath her underwear.

“Oh,” she cried again, and Tom’s hand moved faster, sensing a weakness. Abraxas and Hermione forgot to do anything but look at the two people on the bed, Tom’s expression arrogant and fierce and very lusty, and Patience’s perfectly calm except for the way her lips parted in a round, languid shape as her “Ohs” came out closer and closer together until they were one long string of sound, and her hips twitched against Tom’s tight grasp, a silent fight that Hermione knew would leave finger-shaped marks.

To Hermione’s shock, Tom kissed Patience gently on the cheek and eased her back onto the bed. He spoke softly, but Hermione heard him say, “See? Isn’t it better when you behave, pet?”

Louder, he said, “Hermione, dearest, come tend to your pet for a moment.”
Hermione kissed Abraxas and used the steps to climb onto the bed, pulling Patience into her arms. Though Patience was several inches taller when they were standing, she always scooted down in bed so that her pale head was nestled on Hermione’s chest.

Patience smelled like warm honey and sex and the lavender shampoo she used. Hermione stroked her hair, which was rather tangled from Tom’s twisting and pulling of it, and whispered, “Are you alright? You seemed to enjoy that, but it wasn’t too much, was it?”

Tilting her head back to meet Hermione’s eyes, Patience smiled broadly. “It was lovely. I’ve always wanted to be spanked. Tom is rather forceful, isn’t he? I can see why you needed to take a bath afterwards. I’m very sticky now.”

Hermione sighed in disbelief. “Only you, Patience. You aren’t a bit scared of him.”

Patience pushed herself up a bit, and kissed the underside of Hermione’s chin. It was somewhere between arousing and ticklish. “He’s like a wild thing, never taught how to love. He’s more scared of us than we are of him,” Patience whispered back between kisses, her lips moving up to Hermione’s lips.

In the space of only a few days, Hermione had learned quite a bit about kissing, and she’d realized the main reason why kissing had seemed so lackluster with Viktor and the Octopus also known as Cormac was that they simply weren’t good at kissing. Kissing required more finesse and less brute force than either of those boys had understood. Abraxas had it down to an art form, Tom was simply magic, and Patience made her forget herself. Those soft lips of hers were like having a flower petals drifting over her skin, leaving a trail of sensitized flesh and little shivers in their wake.

Patience put a hand up to the shiny red buttons that fastened the cardigan Hermione was wearing. Almost daily, she cursed the formality of dress in the 1940’s, wishing for jeans, a lightweight knitted jumper, and trainers to go exploring in the Chamber instead of one of the many ‘casual’ day dresses Narcissa had purchased for her that was still fancier than most dresses she’d owned in future. Her dress today was black, with bright red poppies printed on it, and a matching hued cardigan over top for warmth.

“Are you cold?” Patience asked softly as Hermione shivered.

Hermione whispered a warming spell. “Not now.”
With quick, nimble fingers, Patience unbuttoned the cardigan, and Hermione sat up. Patience undid the back, pulling the dress down to just above Hermione’s waist. She smiled at Hermione’s pale pink bra, and then put a hand out to touch the scar on Hermione’s arm.

“You always had this covered,” Patience ran a finger over the raised, knotted skin. “Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore,” Hermione smiled widely.

Patience kissed the length of Hermione’s scar, her soft lips moving from wrist to elbow, and though Hermione didn’t feel much through the scarred skin, it was a sweet sight that made her sigh. “That’s good.”

Hermione turned to her, looking at the tiny white buttons on Patience’s blouse. “May I?” At a nod, Hermione unfastened the line of pearl buttons, watching with fascination as Patience’s long torso was revealed, along with a white cotton bra.

The two friends stayed wrapped in each other’s arms for several minutes, foreheads touching, noses bumping, breath mingling, lips occasionally kissing, hands mapping out the lines of collar bones and ribs and shoulders. Every pass of their fingers became a bit bolder, sliding under the straps of bras, moving down and across the swell of a breast, or inching up from the diaphragm to press gently at the underside of the breast.

As the kisses grew longer, the bras disappeared completely, and Hermione felt a growing ache between her legs as Patience fondled her breasts and kissed them for what seemed like hours. She returned the favor, pleased to see Patience’s nipples grow hard under the attentions of her mouth and fingers. Hermione rubbed her thighs together, clenching her inner muscles, and moaned in frustration. Patience slid one of her long, lean legs between Hermione’s thighs pressing firmly against her throbbing cunt. Hermione bit her lip to keep from yelling.

“It’s ok,” Patience whispered against her lips, twisting one of Hermione’s nipples between her fingers, just hard enough to make her whimper. “Go ahead. I’m here. You’re safe.”

She pushed her leg up harder, and Hermione pressed down, and that was enough to unwind almost two hours of sexual tension and touching. Hermione’s whole body shuddered and Patience moved her leg back and forth until the shuddering stopped and Hermione went limp, her mouth open and gasping against Patience’s shoulder.
Hermione felt so relaxed, she almost didn’t notice when Patience pulled her up and over, bringing her back toward pillows that rested against the headboard, putting the cover over both of them and letting Hermione rest against her chest. Patience was cuddling, playing with her hair, and humming softly. Hermione wondered briefly why they had moved from the center of the bed, but then she looked over and saw the answer.

Tom and Abraxas were both standing, shirtless, by the side of the bed. Hermione had seen both of them shirtless before. Tom, a few days ago, and Abraxas once last summer on a particularly hot day when she’d visited Malfoy Manor with Narcissa to pick up Tom. The two boys had been flying outside, and Abraxas had done so without a shirt. Of course, when he realized there was company, and ladies at that, he’d hurried off to get dressed, but that quick glimpse from afar had been impressive. The two of them together made both Hermione and Patience take a deep breath.

“Aren’t they lovely?” Patience sighed.

Tom heard her and laughed, while Abraxas flushed. “Yes, tell us, Hermione, what do you think?”

Hermione clicked her tongue and snuggled against Patience under the covers. “You know you are both gorgeous, the two most handsome boys in this school.”

“I agree,” Tom said, and he kissed Abraxas, pulling the other boy up against his body, his hands sliding down Abraxas’s bare back to cup his arse and push his hips forward against his own.

Hermione sat up, leaning forward. This exhibition was incredibly erotic, and from Tom’s grin, she knew that he knew she was terribly turned on. Soon, Abraxas’s hands were mirroring Tom’s, and their kissing was more aggressive, their hips grinding against each other. Patience’s chin was resting on Hermione’s shoulder, and both girls watched enraptured.

“Do you know that Abraxas told me he’d do anything for me, as long as it didn’t hurt you, dearest?” Tom said as he pulled away from the kiss for a moment.

He glanced at Hermione and she saw that he was playing games, trying to manipulate them all with through their affection for one another, and the feel good chemicals of sex. She had to hand it to him, it felt like it was working.

Abraxas lifted his chin, looking sadly stubborn, and Hermione wanted to kiss his worry
“I meant it,” he insisted.

Tom tugged on the belt loops of Abraxas’s pants, keeping their groins pressed tightly together. Abraxas’s head fell against Tom’s chest, and he let out a deep moan. “I know you did, my friend. I was simply pondering whether I should let Hermione have you first or not. It is her birthday, and she’s been lusting after you for a while. Of course, she did just enjoy some time with our pet, who we both saw take very good care of her.”

“It’s obvious our pet plays favorites,” Tom shot Patience a dark look. “You didn’t bite Hermione, I noticed.”

Patience only smiled in return, then said, “Why not share him at the same time?”

“Good idea. On the bed, Abraxas,” Tom gave him a little push forward.

Abraxas looked like he was both thrilled and terrified by that suggestion, his grey eyes widening, but he did as Tom instructed.

Tom pointed his wand at the bed and enlarged it, making it big enough to easily accommodate all four of them. He got onto the mattress on the other side of Abraxas, and they were now in a row, Patience on the left of the bed, Tom on the right, and Hermione and Abraxas in the middle. Despite the extra room, they were close together, Patience pressed against Hermione’s back, Tom pressed against Abraxas, with Hermione only separated from a breathless Abraxas by the blankets Patience had pulled over them.

Reaching over Abraxas’s shoulder, Tom tugged gently at the sheets, and Hermione let him pull them away, leaving her bare to the waist, just as they were. Abraxas sucked in his breath with a shaky sound and Tom brought his hand back, deftly unbuttoned Abraxas’s pants until Hermione could see the white fabric of his underwear. Abraxas had stopped breathing completely.

“Touch her,” Tom whispered, his lips against Abraxas’s ear, though they could all hear it. “You want to, she wants you to, I want you to.”

Hermione gave the pale blonde a soft smile and leaned in to kiss him. It was a soft, sweet kiss. “Relax,” she said, and took his hand and placed over it her breasts. “They’re certainly less than Marilyn’s – you can handle them,” she teased.

They all laughed, and some of the tension was broken. Abraxas used his exceptionally light
touch to trace over her chest, her arms, her neck, and he followed his fingers with his lips. Occasionally, he would shudder against her violently because of something Tom was doing, and Patience would sigh over her shoulder, and Hermione would think how odd of a situation this must look like from outside of it, but how natural it felt from the inside.

“I think Abraxas needs to lose his pants, don’t you, dearest?” Tom asked as he watched his friend kissing the space between each of Hermione’s ribs.

Hermione moved her hand from Abraxas’s muscled chest to his hip, to the waistband of his pants. She dipped her fingers lower and found Tom’s hand. She slid her fingers into his and they both sighed in pleasure. Tom held her hand fast and drew it even further, until he was bending her fingers around the hard length of Abraxas’s cock, then wrapping his hands around hers to guide her in a rhythmic stroking.

“God!” Abraxas was gasping, and Tom leaned forward, kissing Hermione over Abraxas’s shoulder, keeping a tight grip on Hermione’s hand.

“Patience was right,” Tom smiled lecherously. “It’s good to share.”

Patience merely continued to hum, watching them while running her fingers over Hermione’s back and hair.

There was a feeling of cool air, and Hermione opened her momentarily closed eyes to see that all their clothes were gone. Abraxas was staring at the golden words spiraled over Hermione’s stomach. His hand hovered over them, not quite touching.

“See?” Tom’s voice was smug. “I told you she was mine.”

“And you are mine,” Hermione reminded him sharply, running her free hand over the words on his arm, and feeling satisfied in a petty way when he shuddered deeply.

Abraxas’s expression showed that he was both deeply aroused and deeply confused. “Why am I here? You are both so…” he was not going to use the words ‘in love’ because they had their hands around a rather delicate part of his anatomy.

Tom kissed his shoulder. “You are here because we want you,” he said simply. “Does there
need to be another reason?"

Abraxas shook his head, though he was clearly holding back.

“It’s alright that you love her, Abraxas,” Tom said, his lips now on his shoulder blade, his hand still closed over Hermione’s sliding up and down in a slow, torturous pace that kept the other boy on edge, hardly able to reason. “I was very upset that you coveted my soul mate at first, but I’ve been thinking very carefully about this situation, and I think this kind of connection between the four of us will make our magic stronger, make our bond stronger.”

Tom released Hermione’s hand and took Abraxas’s instead, pulling his hand behind him, and placing it over his own cock. Abraxas whined in the back of his throat as he felt Tom throb in his hand. “See how interested I am in our bond?”

Hermione made a tsking sound against Abraxas’s neck, where she was kissing him. “It isn’t just about the magic, Tom. We care for each other. I care for you, Abraxas,” she smiled.

Abraxas smiled back so widely, so happily that Hermione felt a pang in her chest. He did love her, unreservedly.

“Yes,” Tom said with some exasperation in his tone. “The three of you can cater to one another’s emotions. Now can we please continue with the sex? I think some people need to put their mouths to better use than all this talking.”

Abraxas tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a moan, as did Hermione’s because Abraxas was sliding down her stomach, and then burying his head between her legs. He was just as good at kissing down there as he was on her other lips. She twisted her fingers in pale blonde hair, tugging and crying out, but Tom swallowed most of her noises as he kissed her, pausing once in a while to whisper filthy things in her ear.

“My, he is excellent at this sex business, isn’t he?” Tom laughed lowly. “He makes you taut as a bow, dearest.”

“Uhhh,” was all Hermione managed in reply. Tom flicked at one of her nipples, a sharp movement that only added depth to the pleasure she was feeling.
Tom’s hand joined hers in Abraxas’s hair, and he forced the pale blonde’s head up. “Tell me what she tastes like now, Abraxas,” he commanded.

“Magic,” Abraxas answered with no hesitation. “Alive and buzzing and joyful magic.”

Tom slid down and kissed Abraxas’s mouth, both of them inches from Hermione’s cunt. After a few seconds, Tom pulled away. “What a clever boy you are. I agree. That’s exactly what she tastes like.” He pushed Abraxas’s head back down between Hermione’s legs and smiled up at her. “Is his tongue just as talented on your cunt as in your mouth?”

“Yes,” Hermione gasped, her head thrown back against the soft pillow of Patience’s chest, who was still behind her, her long fingers stroking the side of Hermione’s arm in a way that was both comforting and erotic.

Tom moved up just slightly and dropped a quick kiss on Hermione’s words, which made her whole body give a great shudder. Then, he was up by her ear again. “Shall we fuck him, dearest? He wants us both so badly.”

“Yes,” Hermione answered, her lips pressed to Tom’s jaw, just as turned on by Tom’s voice and words as by Abraxas’s ministrations. She could hardly believe she had said that. She would never, never, have thought that uptight, bookworm, killjoy Hermione Granger would be doing something as wild as this, let alone reveling in it. What had Tom said to her? That, as his soul mate, she was darker than she thought? Well, she wasn’t so sure about the darkness, but she was definitely setting aside society’s rules about love and sex and monogamy, and it felt wonderful.

“Oh, my little bird,” Tom murmured as he kissed her ear and nuzzled against her hair. “You really are a serpent in disguise, aren’t you? I love your mind, your magic, your lust,”

She shivered against him as his kisses turned into bites on her neck. “I love you, Tom.”

He yanked back on her hair, and brought her eyes to his. “I know, and you – you are my dearest, and we are going to rule the world together, whether you like it or not,” he kissed her fiercely, and she bucked her hips at something amazing Abraxas started doing with his tongue. Tom laughed and looked down. “He’s getting impatient, I think.”

“He’s not the only one,” Hermione moaned. She was on the edge, had been there for quite a while. Abraxas was a horrific tease, she was realizing.
“Well, let’s see what we can do,” Tom kissed Hermione’s breasts as he worked his way down, leaving behind bites and bruises in his wake. When he got behind Abraxas, and pulled him upright, almost in the same position he’d had Patience in earlier. Tom wrapped his hand around Abraxas and gave a few sharp tugs that made him cry out and weep clear fluid from the slit at the top of his cock.

“He’s very similar in size with myself,” Tom noted in a clinical tone. “A tad shorter, but maybe a tad wider? Honestly, a negligible difference. I’ve no doubt he can satisfy you, dearest.”

“No doubt,” Hermione echoed, her eyes focused on the two gorgeous boys in front of her. Was it possible to be even more aroused just from watching them? She thought she might have an orgasm right then, spontaneously, from the way her cunt was pulsing and clenching, all on its own. Patience squeezed the side of her hip, and Hermione had a feeling she was thinking the same thing.

Abraxas had twisted in Tom’s arms, was facing him now, kissing him deeply, and their lower halves where a tangle of hands on cocks and hips grinding together. They broke away, both panting. Tom turned him back around, held him by both hips, pushing his cock against Abraxas, and forcing Abraxas to hold still. He rested his chin on Abraxas’s shoulder, kissed his temple.

“Look at her, Abraxas,” Tom said quietly. “Look at my soul mate and her little pet. Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Yes,” Abraxas answered simply.

“Now, if Patience belongs to Hermione, then who does Hermione belong to?” Tom prompted.

“You,” Abraxas replied quickly.

“Yesss,” Tom hissed, his voice almost sounding like parseltongue. “And who do you belong to?”

“You and Hermione,” Abraxas said again, just as quickly as before.
“Mmmm,” Tom licked down the line of Abraxas’s neck, snapping his hips again as well. “I love having smart, beautiful, obedient things,” Tom smiled. “Will you serve her? Serve me? Do anything for us? Be ours?”

The part of Hermione still rooted in her old morality wanted to protest as she watched, but there was nothing to argue, really. They had been on this path for much longer than she had initially realized. The four of them had been harboring tangled emotions for one another for at least the last two years, and Tom was a dynamic leader with few limits. This was a test of loyalty, a way of binding Abraxas to them, and Patience as well, and everyone here was a willing and aroused participant. No one was being hurt, and Hermione thought that was quite a victory given Tom’s previous timeline. He had already killed and made a horcrux by this point in history. Kinky sex magic was definitely an improvement.

“Of course,” Abraxas was saying, looking down at Hermione with a soft expression in his eyes. Hermione smiled up as him, lifting her hands to stroke his trembling thighs. “I think I already am.”

“You are so good,” Tom sighed, and pressed him forward. “Show Hermione how good you are. Please her.”

It was her turn to gasp as Abraxas grasped her hips, pulled her down to meet him and entered her in a careful, fluid motion. He closed his eyes and moaned as he sank into her, but Hermione barely heard him because she was too busy making her own obscene sounds. Tom had been right. Abraxas was more than enough to please her, though the slow, long strokes he began to make were much more gentle than anything she’d felt from Tom. This, she thought, was what it was like to be adored. Tom wanted her, needed her, desired to take her apart and put her back together. What she and Tom had as soul mates couldn’t be duplicated, but Abraxas was making love to her, and it was beautiful, and she fell into it, let him worship her body and kiss her with reverence while Patience held her hand and played with her hair.

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Tom ran his fingers lightly down Abraxas’s spine as he watched his friend fuck his soul mate. This evening had been full of pleasant surprises. Even though Tom had been planning on having sex with them all as a group, for the benefits of binding the quartet and strengthening their magic, it was much more arousing than he would have thought, watching them play together. He saw Patience glance at him from beside Hermione and she gave him a sly smile.

Hermione’s little pet had been the first surprise. She was a bold thing, initiating the whole affair, which made Tom a bit suspicious. It seemed more and more likely that Patience had the unique ability to know what people wanted, and then give it to them. Though he’d never say it out
loud, Patience had almost made him come in his pants. Her sharp little teeth, coupled with that vacantly innocent expression? It had gone straight to his cock, and then she’d liked the spanking. Her cunt had been soaked, drenching her knickers and his fingers. When she’d come with that long, low moan, he’d had to use every bit of will power he possessed not to come as well.

Then, he had barely been able to calm down while he watched her with Hermione, the two of them the opposite of what he’d experienced with Patience. They had been slow and sweet and hesitant, and though he had been kissing Abraxas, they had stopped several times to look at the two girls, and watch Hermione come spectacularly just from the pressure of Patience’s thigh between her legs.

Tom had silently cast a sex magic spell when they’d first started drinking. He had begun researching sexual magic right after he’d started fucking Marguerite, and though even the Hogwarts restricted section didn’t contain much, the Malfoy and Rosier libraries both did, and Tom had borrowed several books surreptitiously, charming the covers to look like textbooks. He hadn’t used any of the spells on Marguerite because, one, they weren’t necessary, as she already did everything he told her, and, two, he wasn’t interested in having his magic mix with hers. She was smart and good at spell work, but her magic didn’t mix with his naturally in the way he wanted.

This spell was not for controlling; it was to strengthen their natural magical compatibility, which of course he didn’t need with Hermione, but would be helpful with Patience and Abraxas, and among them as well. It was meant to create a bond that increased with each orgasm, and Tom felt it begin to work with Patience, then get stronger when Hermione came. The air was abuzz with magic, and the look Patience had just given him told him that she knew what he’d done.

Hermione and Abraxas, on the other hand, seemed much too distracted to notice at the moment. The books had spoken repeatedly about the magical anchor in any practice of sexual magic, and though Tom had thought at first that he would logically be the anchor, he had realized tonight that the anchor was undoubtedly Hermione. She was the center of the group, the one that they all felt most strongly for.

The way Patience had touched her, and the way Abraxas was moving with her now was further proof. They were both in love with Hermione, in their own fashions, and Tom knew this would make the spell even stronger. The fact that his soul mate was such an object of desire was heady. Tom loved that she was his, first and foremost, and that she, as an extension of him, inspired such loyalty and devotion. They really would rule the world together, and it would be brilliant, with their beautiful blonde pets at their sides, grounding and strengthening their magic until they were unstoppable.

Tom watched Abraxas’s back, his slender hips and those rock hard thighs, muscled from clenching a broom. He lifted his wand, and spoke a spell he’d only recently learned. Abraxas made a gasping sound, and moved his hips back against Tom, who had moved to be flush against him.
“Are you surprised I did some research, my friend? I didn’t want to hurt you, not too much,” Tom let his voice drop low, saw the shiver go down Abraxas’s spine in response.

Abraxas moaned as Tom’s hand went between his legs, spreading him, and he slid two fingers inside him at once, with no warning. “That spell was for lubrication, as I’m sure you can tell. There was also a spell to loosen you, but I’m not going to use that one.”

He leaned forward and bit Abraxas’s shoulder, hard enough to leave a mark, looking down into Hermione’s brown eyes, which were mostly black from her dilated pupils. She gasped too, as Abraxas pushed into her harder at Tom’s invasion. “Because I want you to feel every bit of my cock as you take it, my friend.”

“Yes,” Abraxas answered, his head and hips thrown back against Tom. “I want that, too.”

Hermione moaned, biting her lip. Tom grinned at her as he thrust into Abraxas’s arse, and Abraxas cried out, a sound of pain and pleasure that reminded him of the sound Hermione had made when he’d taken her for the first time. It was such a wonderful noise, a sound of claiming, of conquering, and Tom closed his eyes, focusing on the way Abraxas’s walls squeezed his cock in a fucking death grip that felt like heaven. Sex magic, Tom decided, was the best magic. He barely gave the blonde time to adjust before he set a quick pace, and Abraxas was moving back to meet him and pushing back into Hermione who was quivering and moaning, and Abraxas was shaking, but maybe that was Tom himself, and he could feel the spell thickening around them, and then a cool hand was on the side of Tom’s hip and he felt Patience’s magic, too, and opened his eyes. Patience was sitting up, one hand on Hermione’s arm, one hand on his hip, and all of their magic was flowing around them, and it was fucking amazing.

Hermione started screaming, then Abraxas was shouting a string of obscenities, and Tom began to shudder, coming hard, shaking from the magic and the orgasm, the release so badly needed after so much stimulation, and he could hardly think for the pleasure.

There was a long silence, where the only sounds were their attempts to breathe normally. Patience was up on her knees over them, still naked to the waist, her small, pert breasts high on her long, slender torso, her hair falling straight over her shoulders. She pointed her wand at each of them in turn, using cleansing spells.

“Now you won’t be so sticky,” she smiled at them.
“Thanks, Patience,” Abraxas murmured, sounding half-asleep, collapsed on his side between Hermione and Tom. “You’re a gem.”

Tom reached out an arm and pulled her down, turning to face her. He wanted to keep an eye on their little pet. She returned his suspicious glance with a guileless expression. How had she known about the spell? Though, honestly, he was sure she’d given it a boost at the end. He had to admit that he appreciated the way Patience seemed to know instinctively what to do, and how to keep her mouth shut.

“Tom?” Hermione’s voice was exasperated, but too exhausted to hold much annoyance. “What spell did you use on us?”

He sighed. It had been silly of him to think she wouldn’t notice, no matter how many orgasms she had, he thought. “Nothing objectionable,” he responded.

“I’m pretty sure the definition of objectionable includes ‘lack of knowledge and/or consent’,” Hermione answered quickly. “Why didn’t you ask us?”

Tom didn’t have an answer for that. He could have, he knew. The four of them had just had group sex. It was unlikely they would have said no to sexual magic. He could tell Hermione that he hadn’t wanted to ask, but that would start a fight and ruin what had otherwise been a lovely day. So, instead, he said, “I’m sorry. I just wanted to make our magical compatibility stronger. It will be good for all of us.”

There was a huffing sound from Hermione, but she didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure if that was good or not. She had a tendency to hold grudges and explode about them later. He crawled across Abraxas and slid behind his soul mate, holding her against him, his finger tracing her words, because he knew that would relax her.

“Oh, Tom, you’re awful, but I’m too tired to fight,” she sighed. “Tell me now, right here, that you won’t do anymore spells on me or them without letting us know. And I want to see the book you got the spell from. Tomorrow.”

She pressed her fingers on his arm over his own words, and he felt her along his magic, knew she was checking to see if she could feel deception. “I won’t do any more sex spells without telling you,” he told her, honestly. They would probably be more effective with her knowledge, he reasoned.
He felt her magic, pleased and relaxed, and she closed her eyes. “Set an alarm for an hour,” she murmured. “We need to get back before curfew.”

“I will,” he whispered back, kissing her forehead. He looked over to see Abraxas watching him. He kissed him over Hermione’s shoulder, and even graced Patience, curled up behind Abraxas, who draped a loose arm around her, with a rare, genuine smile. They did make an excellent court, Tom thought. He was King, with Hermione as his Queen, Abraxas his knight, and Patience the soothsayer. Honestly, the world didn’t stand a chance.
Patience is a Virtue...A Virtue Tom Doesn't Have.

Chapter Summary

Flash-forward two months later. Our poor foursome has been hard at work preparing the Chamber of Secrets...isn't it time they had some fun? Patience and Tom certainly think so, though those two have each other figured out a bit too much for comfort.

Chapter Notes

Hey my lovelies! Sorry about the long wait for this chapter, but it's here, and I'm already about 2K into the next chapter, which will feature some fun Hermione/Abraxas action. Love to you all!!!

It was late November before the rest of the core members of the study group stepped foot into the Chamber of Secrets. Most of the delay was finding a way to create an alternate entrance. There wasn't much opportunity to go down except on the weekends, and it had taken all four of them several weekends to use their combined blasting spells to make way through the rock wall and fashion a low, slanting tunnel that came out behind the greenhouses. It was not ideal to be traipsing outside, close to curfew, especially as the weather grew cold, but at least the greenhouses weren't across the lawns, and it was better than trying to take a dozen students through the girls’ bathroom.

There had been an intense debate over how to conceal the entrance. Tom had wanted practically every spell known to man, in addition to the parseltongue password, but Hermione had argued that too much use of magic would flag the area to the staff and the more clever and magically sensitive students. In the end, the entrance was covered with rocks and brush that could be levitated, and then warded by the parseltongue, so that no one would be able to enter without Tom along. This restriction, of course, not only appealed to Tom’s desire for control, but also kept anyone from facing Astarte alone.

Astarte, however, had been on her best behavior. She went out through the pipes, into the lake, or through the new tunnel, and hunted in the Forbidden Forest or the mountains. She did not attack or even threaten anyone and stayed mostly in her nest behind the statue of Slytherin. Tom reapplied the clouding spell every time he went into the Chamber, and she didn’t protest. Rather, the giant snake seemed pleased to have freedom to roam and weekly company.

The effects of the sex magic spell were already making themselves known. When Tom, Hermione, Patience, and Abraxas did spells together in their shared classes, everything flowed exceptionally well, and when they practiced more advanced spells in private, the magic was even
better. The combination of their complementary magical styles made for strong shields and attacks in Dueling Club as well, and Professor Merrythought had started forcing them to be on different teams because when they were together, they were unbeatable, even when facing the best seventh year students.

On the weekend evenings, after they had exhausted themselves with blasting rock, they sat in the Chamber library, translating books that looked interesting. The work was slow, as none of them were fluent in ancient Egyptian or Arabic or even old English. They were all intelligent, though, and each worked on a different book, switching occasionally to check each other’s work.

Once the tunnel was complete, before noon on a chilly November Saturday, they all lingered in the library, strangely unwilling to tell the others, even though they had worked long and hard to be able to bring them down to the Chamber.

“We can bring the others down tomorrow,” Patience broke the silence, her voice echoing off the tiled walls as she twirled in a slow circle. “I’d like to keep it just ours for one more day.”

Hermione looked up from a very dense Egyptian text on resurrection that she was purposely taking sparse notes on – really, this was not the kind of thing Tom should be reading - ever. “I agree. The quiet is nice. Even with the muffling spells, all that blasting earlier gave me a headache.”

Abraxas went over to the potions along the nearest shelf and selected a bottle. He set the vial down beside Hermione’s hand, then moved her hair to the side and gently massaged her neck.

“Thank you,” she murmured, drinking the headache potion and leaning into his touch. “That feels good.”

Tom watched them all with a small smile on his face as he continued translating one of Slytherin’s journals. The man’s writing was not very detailed. Slytherin took just enough notes to prompt his memory, but not enough to enable someone else to copy his work. Luckily, Tom was quite skilled at reading between the lines, and he had an inkling that his mind worked similarly to that of his ancestor.

Although he wanted to see the looks of awe on the rest of the group’s faces, he understood the desire to keep the Chamber as their place for just a while longer. They hadn’t really been able to enjoy the Chamber since that first weekend, since they had been working so hard to make the second entrance and complete a few translations of books that looked especially interesting. Hermione was right – the blasting was loud and exhausting, and even though they had all
thoroughly enjoyed the delicious sex they’d had on their first night in the Chamber, they hadn’t had the time nor the energy to do much since then.

Not that they’d been chaste – touching was second nature in the Chamber. Down here, they were free with their caresses and kisses, and Tom liked that. He didn’t care for rules that were not of his own making, and he found it annoying that he couldn’t touch Patience or Abraxas in the hallways if he wanted to. He did touch Hermione, though, and the whole school had taken notice. Tom held her hand in the halls and kissed her cheek upon parting. Abraxas and Patience walked with them, sometimes on either side of the couple, sometimes behind them, holding hands, but even though the two pale blondes were unusually affectionate with one another, their relationship was not deemed serious because Abraxas was a Malfoy, and Patience was not from one of the sacred Twenty-Eight families he would most definitely need to choose a bride from.

Tom wasn’t too happy about that, either. Abraxas’s father had sent several letters in the last few months, urging his son to come up with some suitable candidates for a fiancé before his mother sent a list that would severely limit his choices. They would want him engaged by seventeen or eighteen, then married by twenty or twenty-one. Tom did not relish the thought of Abraxas married to some half-insane, dim-witted, magically null Pureblood wife. Money and connections were important, but power was paramount, and Abraxas was too valuable a resource to squander. Also, Tom admitted to himself, he did not wish to share Abraxas with someone outside their group. He rather thought it would be perfect if he could somehow convince Lord Malfoy to let Abraxas marry Patience, but short of the imperius or that potion he’d found when first coming down to the Chamber, that was impossible. The only Pureblooded girls in their inner circle were Marguerite and Josephine. The mere thought of Hermione’s reaction if Abraxas became engaged to Marguerite made Tom reconsider the use of the mind control potion.

Abraxas had not mentioned the letters to the girls, and Tom thought that was wise. Following the night in the Chamber, Tom had felt closer than ever before to Abraxas. Abraxas had shown the perfect combination of initiative and submission, and Tom had no more doubts about his loyalty. In fact, Tom had made it a point to rise early on several occasions, rouse Abraxas, ward and muffle the bathroom off their bedroom and press his pretty face pressed against the mirror while Tom fucked him roughly from behind if he was in a bad mood, or more slowly, face to face, with long, languorous kisses if he was in a good mood. Regardless of his mood, sex with Abraxas calmed him, and though he wished the others could have been there, Abraxas was the most accessible and the sex bound them tightly. Tom was mostly certain that Abraxas was in love with him as well as Hermione, and though Tom didn’t care about love as long as he had Abraxas’s loyalty, there was something uniquely satisfying about collecting hearts.

Marguerite’s heart was currently broken, Tom knew. He barely noticed her these days, as busy as he had been with the Chamber, though he was careful not to push her away or snap at her more than usual. Tom did want access to her money and connections, and he kept Marguerite guessing, flirting just enough to give her hope. Abraxas pointed out how cruel this was on more than one occasion, but Tom didn’t care. Marguerite was useful, but now that he had slept with Hermione, had felt the magic of joining with his soul mate, and the elemental magical combining with Abraxas and Patience, there was no need to have sex with someone who didn’t add to his
magic in some way, at least not at the moment. When she came to his room, pouting that he never made time for her anymore, he let her run her hands over his chest and kiss him, but always told her to leave before her mouth or fingers made it anywhere important.

Now, he pushed away thoughts of Marguerite. She would be here, in the Chamber, tomorrow, but for the rest of today, he was going to enjoy the lack of extraneous company. For most of his life, Tom had preferred to be alone. He didn’t have friends at the orphanage, or at school, and he spent all the time he could in hidden corners, reading, or practicing his ability to control things. And presently? He had many people who would classify him as a friend, and three people who knew him intimately and still wanted to be with him.

That was quite a feat, he understood. Tom was very self-aware, and he knew he was significantly different from other people in many ways, but especially in terms of feeling emotions and connections to other people. Walking down the corridors of Hogwarts, sitting in the classrooms, lounging in the library or Slytherin common room, he observed his fellow students. They were so relaxed with one another, girls giggling in each others’ ears and practically skipping arm in arm down the halls; boys teasing each other, lightly punching or wrestling when the teachers or prefects weren’t looking. It was no difficulty to fake casual connections, to smile at the appropriate times or open doors or give a few compliments, but touching…touching had not been a natural action until Hermione came into his life, and even now, years later, he preferred not to be touched except by a select few.

But with Hermione, Abraxas, and Patience, he wanted to be touched, wanted to feel their fingers on his skin, in his hair, down his back. He thought about touching them and being touched by them more than he would admit. He told himself that it was natural – he was a teenager, and there were hormones and drives and all that rubbish. It would calm down eventually, but best to satisfy that hunger when the opportunity was upon them.

Hermione had read the books on sex magic he’d liberated from the various libraries and reviewed the spell he’d used last time, and she agreed that it was neutral magic, strengthening without any draining or negative aspects. They had discussed some complimentary spells that could be used along with the first one, and spells that would bind individual pairs. There was a book in Slytherin’s library, thankfully mostly in Greek and Latin, that focused specifically on elemental magical connections. He and Hermione had translated it together and found many interesting spells.

As soul mates, their bond of air and fire couldn’t be any stronger, but there were several spells designed to help strengthen all the cross connections of an elemental quartet: fire and water, earth and air, water and air, fire and earth, and earth and water. According to the text, a successful and thorough binding of elemental magic would create life-long bonds and the ability to at least partially channel and use one another’s magic. He didn’t want any of them leaving Hogwarts, going off and getting married or studying abroad without being bound in such a way that they would always return, that when he was running the magical world, they would be at his side.
Tom’s plans for the future were starting to take shape. Between Slughorn, Gawain Malfoy, and Dolohov’s connections at the Ministry and his own brilliant mind, he had no doubt he could secure a place from which to work his way up to the top. The same was true for Abraxas and Hermione. Patience was a wild card, but he wasn’t worried. She seemed to instinctively know which direction to take in life to produce the best outcome. However, the more he reflected on the future, the more he realized that a direct transition into the Ministry was not the path for him. He wanted to study further, and reporting to a boss at the Ministry who would no doubt be inferior to him in every way would probably drive him to murder. No, he needed to distinguish himself in the public eye.

He thought of the mess with Grindelwald, and pondered that if he could bring down that man, seen by so many as one of the greatest wizards alive, that he would be famous – a hero. Just the sort of publicity that could propel him into a high position, bypassing the need for years of low-level work. Tom could be patient when he had to be, but he would always look for the most efficient way to rise. And the fact that Grindelwald, through his followers, had killed Hermione’s father and marked her? Well, that just made the idea of hunting him down, making him suffer, and then eradicating all traces of him from the planet all the more attractive.

He had begun keeping track of Grindelwald’s movements, reading the papers and listening to the radio broadcasts on low in the Slytherin common room in the late evenings. The man’s feats of magic were impressive, if they were truly as described, and Tom knew better than to rush in. He needed more practical dueling and fighting experience, but he wasn’t sure how to get it yet. Although the Dueling club was great practice, and Professor Merrythought had taught him excellent form and improved his casting speed, he couldn’t truly simulate battle conditions there. He had never fought for his life, and he needed to be comfortable doing so before attempting to face Grindelwald.

Right now, though, he thought as he closed Slytherin’s journal, he had more pleasant things to occupy his mind. They were done with all the Chamber preparations, and there were many, many hours before curfew. He rose, passing a closed eye Hermione who was still getting a shoulder rub from Abraxas. Though Tom doubted anyone except himself could make sense of Slytherin’s journals, he wanted to keep them locked away and safe in the warded area of the Chamber. Carefully, he placed the book on the shelf in the inner library-sitting room.

When he turned around, he found himself face to face with Patience, staring into those eyes the shade of pale sea glass, more a suggestion of blue than the color itself. Those glassy orbs were like mirrors, and Tom had never been able to read Patience in the way he did most others. He had tried legilimency on her, but unlike Hermione, whose brain had a clear and strong barrier that didn’t allow for any reading beyond what he felt as her soul mate, Patience’s mind was a wide-open, chaotic wonderland that he could spend hours in and never begin to understand. She mainly thought in pictures, and he caught flashes of dancing flowers and talking animals and honestly, it was so exhausting to try to translate into an actual thought, Tom had given up on it, at least at his current skill level with mind reading.
Since Tom had spent the better part of five years being thoroughly annoyed with Patience, his appreciation of her in the past few months had come slowly, with much thought. Patience was a contradiction. She was the least like him, all flights of fancy and no plans and half the time barely present in the room, unlike his extreme focus and hyper awareness. She was his opposite – the water to his fire.

And yet, she was the most like him in that she was not like others. Her brain wasn’t wired ‘normally’ either. Just like Tom, she didn’t feel or think like other people, and her morality was selective. She was the only other person who seemed to have no problem with Tom using sex to control others, or even Tom trying to control others in general. Tom was sure Patience was tapping into some psychic field, some sense of a bigger picture, that his actions were on the 'right’ or at least predestined course, and that was why she was so accepting of his behaviors when the others protested. He wished he could see what she saw or feel what she felt, but then, no, he thought, that would probably be like smoking opium. He wasn’t sure his brain could stand a trip through Patience-land.

However, his eyes were definitely enjoying the landscape. Like Hermione, though for different reasons, Patience was seen by the other students as beautiful, but untouchable. Tom simply reveled in having something no one else did. He’d overheard many a conversation since their third year about how pretty Patience was, what lovely, full lips she had, what long, long legs. He hadn’t really paid attention until this fall, but he was focused now. She was only a few inches shorter than he was, so tall for a girl, but slender and seemingly frail, though Tom would never be so foolish as to think her weak. No, there was a reason most students kept their distance from Patience. They could sense, on some level, that she was like a less malicious, but no less dangerous Siren, attractive to hear and see, but not to be approached.

Currently, despite the chill of November in Hogwarts, she was wearing those blasted knee socks. Like most of the girls older than second or third year, Hermione wore stockings that went up to her mid-thigh, so that no skin was visible below the hem of her skirt, only hosiery, which this time of year, had turned to wool. True, they were secured with a sexy silk and lace garter belt, and that knowledge sometimes drove him to distraction, but Patience’s knee socks presented a very singular temptation. Her skin was smooth and pale like marble, and a neat expanse of it was exposed from the distance from the top of her knee to the hem of her skirt, which Tom noted was decidedly shorter than when she had entered the Chamber.

“Patience, pet, did you shorten your skirt?” Tom inquired, laughter at the edge of his question.

“Of course,” she answered blandly. “You like to look at my legs.”
He did laugh then. “Yes, I do.”

“And we’re all going to get naked again.”

At that, he sobered, his lust hitting him like a stunning spell. Tom nodded. “Yes, we are, Patience. We’re going to do some lovely sex magic. Starting with the two of us.”

“No, we already started months ago,” she went over to the green leather chair beside the shelves and sat down, spreading her legs wide open, one long limb draped over each arm of the chair, her skirt now high enough to reveal sapphire silk knickers.

Tom stared. It had been a while since he’d seen under a girl’s skirt, and he liked the view. “True, but this spell is different. It is just for us.”

“You want to do the spell for the cross corners, the opposite elements?” Patience asked in her high, sweet voice, but Tom was more focused on how Patience’s fingers were moving up her leg, dancing closer and closer to the silk that was getting darker by the second under Tom’s gaze. Her fingers were long, pale, and slim, like her legs, and when they grazed the edge of her knickers and slipped under, it had a hypnotic effect on Tom’s brain.

He struggled for words. “Yes…did you see the spell I was discussing with Hermione last weekend?”

Patience hummed and nodded as her fingers began to make slick sounds against her flesh, and though those damned knickers kept him from seeing her pretty pink cunt, Tom remembered exactly how it had felt when he’d fucked her with his fingers. His hand twitched against his leg in memory.

“That’s a permanent spell, you know,” she spoke in a level tone, calm and easy, as if she weren’t touching herself, making obscene noises.

“I do know,” Tom replied, happy to hear that his voice was also calm, that his intense desire had not bled into it, giving him away. “Are you afraid?”

Patience shook her head. “We’re meant to be in each other’s lives – four elements, four directions, four chambers of the heart,” her eyes were not at all dreamy when she looked directly at
him and asked, “Are you afraid?”

Tom had started, very subtly, when she had said ‘heart’, and he knew she had noticed. He didn’t feel fear – he never felt fear. He was, however, attuned to recognizing potential weaknesses and any mention of a heart was a red flag.

“No,” he scoffed, a cold mask dropping over his face out of habit. “It’s my plan. Why would I be afraid?”

She shrugged. “Because connection of any kind with other people is difficult for you.”

“But you aren’t people,” Tom stalked closer, ready to shift the balance of power in this room. “You are my pet, Patience.”

Her answer was a decidedly cheeky smile, a cat in the cream. Tom wanted to smack it off her face and kiss her at the same time. She reached up and pulled her wand out from where she’d tucked it absently into the top of her long braid. Her hand was steady as she pointed it at Tom and said the spell in Greek, which roughly translated to, “burning water.”

Tom pointed his wand at her almost at the same time and spoke the accompanying words of “liquid flame.” There was a flash of purple light as their magic met, like fireworks, but it quickly faded, leaving nothing except a wall of sexual tension between them.

For a moment, Tom wasn’t sure how to proceed. Even though Patience seemed to know everything and have a very relaxed, at times even worldly presence, she was a virgin. He wanted her, very much, and he wanted her magic, but he wasn’t out of control like he’d been with Hermione, and he wasn’t running on pure lust, like he had with Abraxas. For some bizarre reason, he wanted to go slowly with Patience, to make sure he didn’t break her, not the least of which was that he knew Hermione would kill him if he did.

“You can’t hurt me, you know,” Patience smiled.

“I’m not known for being gentle,” he raised an eyebrow. “And you’re a virgin.”
“That’s a meaningless designation,” she replied, her fingers moving faster beneath the blue silk, though her breathing stayed calm and steady. “It sees us as separate bodies, bodies that do or don’t do actions to one another. We’re already joined in our minds. What happens with our bodies doesn’t really matter.”

Tom clenched his jaw to keep from laughing because he wasn’t sure whether or not he wanted to laugh. If he were less clever, it would be easy to write Patience off as half-insane, but Tom was brilliant, and Patience was too, in her own way, and if she said their minds were linked, he believed her, even though that made him wary as hell.

He put one knee on the chair cushion between her widely spread legs and pulled her hand from her pants, lifting her fingers to his mouth and sucking them one at a time. She tasted like sea foam, and Tom thought of the trips he’d made with the other orphans to the seashore, of how he’d delighted in the special power. That magic had been merely parlor tricks compared to what he could do now, to what he would do in the future.

“Just how are our minds joined, pet?” he asked, pleased that she’d made a breathy little gasp as he’d licked and sucked her fingers.

“By a little bit of choice and a lot of fate,” she said, leaning forward to kiss him. It was a small, chaste kiss, a mere peck on the lips. “Your plans are too grand for one person, or even two. But a solid elemental quartet will keep you grounded while letting you also rise.”

Tom pulled back, his eyes on her soft, wide lips. “How do I know I can truly trust you, little soothsayer?”

Patience stared at him with her pale eyes, unblinking. “You’ve already been in my mind.”

“And it makes no sense!” he snapped, annoyed that she’d felt his legilimency. “That isn’t a help.”

“You said that didn’t matter,” he threw back.
“It doesn’t,” she confirmed. “But you like to claim things, and that will make you feel good.” She came forward in a flash and bit his lip, hard. “Make me yours. It will calm you down.”

Tom didn’t need to be told twice, or even once, honestly. The spell was certainly intensifying their desire, and though he still wasn’t comfortable with the idea that Patience had access, at least in some small way, to his mind, he would deal with that as it played out. Whatever she could see or feel of his future plans, she clearly approved. His priority now was to get her bound to him tightly, to make sure she would always be the water magic in his quartet.

“Biting again, pet?” Tom wiped at his lip and found a faint smear of blood. “I know you don’t do that to Hermione.”

Patience shook her head. Tom bent forward and slid his hands beneath her legs, lifting her and turning them so that he was sitting in the chair and Patience was straddling him, their faces only a breath apart.

“What do you do with my soul mate, pet?” Tom whispered. Thoughts of Patience and Hermione sometimes kept him up at night, imagining what they did in their blue bedroom high above his.

Shimmying her hips against his to find the best balance, Patience sighed. “The same kinds of things you do with Abraxas in the dungeons, I suppose.”

Part of Tom’s brain exploded at the thought of picturing Patience and Hermione in some of the positions he’d been in with Abraxas. “I doubt that,” he smirked.

“You shouldn’t,” Patience smirked right back. “I’ve given her more orgasms than anyone else so far.”

Tom’s eyes darkened in anger. “Taunting me isn’t your best bet, pet.” Fuck going slowly, he thought as he yanked Patience’s hips against his own. “Hermione is mine, before anyone else. I let you have each other, but you are all mine. Remember who is in control here.”

With that, he stood and harshly pushed her against the bookshelf, the ledge of it at just the right height to set her on. He was a lethal combination of angry and turned on, and she was warm and wet and wiggling against him, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, her fingers threading through his hair, clearly excited as well.
“I think you like making me angry, pet,” Tom’s voice had dropped lower, and he pulled back enough to run his wand down the front of her blouse, magically undoing her buttons as he went. He was pleased to see her bra matched her knickers, the same sapphire silk covering the pale swells of flesh on her chest.

“I think,” he continued, vanishing her shirt, skirt, and shoes, leaving only her bra, underwear, and knee socks, “You do it on purpose because you like it when I punish you.”

Patience gave a little shiver, and Tom smiled. “So, it really isn’t much of a punishment, is it? It’s a treat, a reward,” he hooked a finger under her bra strap, caressed the line of skin from her shoulder to the beginning of the slope of her breast. “It simply won’t do to reward bad behavior, pet.”

Tom had never seen Patience pout, but the expression on her face was probably as close as she got to one. He laughed, pleased to have the upper hand. Her hands had settled just above his hips, and she was tugging at the back of his shirt, trying to untuck it from his trousers. He helped her, pulling off his shirt, standing before her naked to the waist.

Those pale eyes widened, taking him in with an appreciative glance. “What do I need to do to be rewarded?” Patience asked softly, as she pulled him closer with her legs, her lower limbs tightening around his waist, bringing her soaked panties flush with his straining trousers.

“How about doing as you are told for once, without any mouthy comments?” Tom answered, keeping his voice level and his hips still even though he wanted to rip off her knickers and pound into her. This was a test of wills, and he was going to win.

“I’d say that sounds hard,” Patience tilted her hips upwards, rubbing back and forth against his groin. “But I think you know exactly how hard it is.”

“Here’s your first lesson: good pets know how to be still,” Tom frowned, and waved his wand, using a sticking charm to keep her hips on the bookshelf ledge. Then, he quickly raised her hands above her head and repeated the sticking charm. He stepped back and admired his work. Patience’s face was calm, but her eyes were narrowed, and he knew he’d scored a point. Her long, lovely arms and legs were on display, spread out for him.

He took a silver knife from one of the shelves behind her and slipped it between her skin and the middle of her sapphire silk bra. Her pupils dilated as the flat of the cool blade touched her
“Knives, Patience? Really? You are such a naughty thing.”

“Only with you,” she whispered, her tone perfectly sweet and sincere.

And didn’t that just hit Tom in a soft spot. He knew he was vain. He knew he liked owning things others couldn’t have, people included, having parts of them that no one else would experience. He also knew under her sweet seeming exterior, Patience was a master manipulator, though how aware she was of that, he simply couldn’t tell. The risk – that she might know too much, that he might take too much – it was all part of their game – their dance of fire and water. The elemental opposites of their magic had to find a natural equilibrium, and he intended to establish his dominance thoroughly.

With a sharp tug, he sliced, smiling at the sight of her small, pert breasts with tips the exact winter rose shade as her lips displayed to great advantage by her raised arms. He experimentally dragged the tip of the blade up her sternum, over to her left nipple. Patience remained very still, as ordered, but a low moan escaped her throat and the barest hint of a shudder passed through her.

Very carefully, pressing hard enough to leave behind a fine pink line, but not enough to break her skin, Tom criss-crossed her chest with the blade, moving lower and lower until he reached her knickers, where he cut through the fabric at her pelvic bones, letting the scrap of soaked silk fall to the floor. He placed the blade back on the shelf and began tracing the lines he’d made with his tongue.

Through it all, Patience stayed perfectly still, though not silent. Her low, breathy sighs were distracting, and Tom’s cock was throbbing painfully against his pants. Because they didn’t usually have a lot of time, his sex with Abraxas tended to be rushed, quick fucks that left them breathless, not drawn-out like this. He was torn between a desire for instant gratification and a need to keep Patience wanting for as long as possible.

When his tongue finally made it between her thighs, Patience gave a short, high-pitched shriek. “Oh!” Tom responded with a quiet chuckle and used two fingers to spread her slick folds, holding her open for his tongue and teeth.

He could see her pelvic muscles strain, and he knew if it weren’t for the sticking charm, that she’d be mashing herself into his face. He turned his head and sucked a deep bruise into her inner thigh while he pushed his fingers inside her, going in and out in fast, hard movements. The muscles on the inside of her cunt were fluttering against his fingers, and he knew she was close to coming, so he pulled away and vanished the rest of his clothing.

Tom muttered an end to the sticking charms, and Patience was on him before he could react, her legs wrapped around him, one hand between them, squeezing his cock and lifting herself
onto him, pushing down and up against him. One second he was planning on torturing her for the rest of the night, and the next, he was inside her, gasping at the wet, hot glove around him – *liquid flame*, indeed.

She was bouncing on him, moving up and down like she weighed nothing and gravity didn’t affect her – had she spelled herself, he wondered briefly, before pleasure completely took over his brain. Tom held onto her hips, thrusting into her, his face buried in her chest, nipping and licking at the fine marks he’d made over her skin. Her nails were raking down his back and it hurt, but he liked it, liked that he brought out the animal side of Hermione’s little pet, made her lose control. He wanted to mark her permanently, mark her with more than a spell. She was one of his things now, and he was going to keep her.

“Now,” he ordered in the tone he saved for sex and violence, “be a good pet and come when you’re told.”

He expected a bit of a fight, some of Patience’s naughty little passive aggressive hold out behavior, so he was shocked when she immediately clenched around him, whispering the spell from earlier over and over, her voice growing in volume as her body spasmed, but he quickly joined her, speaking his half of the words and coming so hard his knees gave out and they fell in a sweaty, panting heap on the stone floor, magic shimmering around them in waves of blue-green fire.

Tom pulled her up into his lap and wrapped his arms tightly around her still shuddering form. “To whom do you belong, pet?”

“Hermione,” she smiled, her sea glass eyes dreamy and perfectly unconcerned.

Of course she would be difficult *now*, Tom thought. “And?” he prompted, squeezing tighter like a constrictor.

“You, my Lord,” she whispered, and Tom instantly tensed.

He had not spoken of his desire for that title to anyone except Hermione, and he knew his soul mate would not have breathed a word of it. Patience was giving him what he wanted and baiting him at the same time. If he weren’t buzzing with magic and the afterglow of excellent sex, he would have been angry. As it was, he settled for merely annoyed, which, honestly, was his default setting with Patience. Apparently even sex magic couldn’t change that.
“Don’t worry,” Patience cooed in his ear. “I’ll keep all your secrets, my Lord, even the ones dipped in blood.”

Her words coiled in him, like a snake at the base of his brain, waiting to strike. But he was a master of snakes, so he smiled, tilted her neck by pulling her hair and bit her along the throat until she was moaning against him, that curvy arse stirring his cock all over again. “Yes, pet, you will. Or you’ll be the one who’s bloody.”

She turned with an easy laugh, pushing him back on the floor and straddling him. How did she always end up on top? “You don’t need threats with me,” her voice was doing that sing-songy thing he hated and yet found a bit cute against his will.

“What do I need to do to keep you, then?” he asked, bemused by the fall of her hair over him like a pale, silky curtain, and the slide of her wet cunt over his stomach, down, down, until he was inside her again, and ohmygod that had to be sex magic, because being that hard again, that fast, should have been impossible, but the blue-green flames were still around them and he did feel on fire, in a good way. And Hermione would simply kill him if he drove Patience away, and he did like her, did want her, because she was rare and unique and so…Patience.

Patience didn’t answer right away. She put one hand flat on his chest, splayed over his heart, and she took his hand and placed it in a mirror image, and she chanted the spell again, and they were, unbelievably, coming again, together, the wavy flames rushing toward them until they were hit and Patience was knocked forward, her head to his shoulder, the two of them gasping for air, magic covering their skin like a heavy mist in the air.

“Swear you’ll never hurt her,” she breathed into his ear, and he swore he felt magic from her lips literally flow into his brain, surrounding it in a hazy, euphoric cloud.

He shook his head, still abuzz, but trying to speak nonetheless. “I don’t love people, Patience. Not even Hermione. But I would never hurt her. She is mine, a part of me.”

Those light blue eyes were icy at the moment. “You’ve already hurt her.”

“The thing with Marguerite?” Tom rolled his eyes. “We’ve been over this. And I thought you were on my side.”

“Hermione is my side,” Patience’s voice was more forceful than Tom had ever heard it. “Unlike you, I love her. You don’t have to change; you only have to be honest with her. She knows who you are. When you hide things from her, she finds out anyway, and then it’s a mess.”
“Fine. No secrets. I’ll be honest with all three of you.” Tom ran a lazy palm through the corn silk of Patience’s hair. It was almost like unicorn hair, he thought idly. He was pleased to know that the key to keeping Patience was simply keeping Hermione happy, which he already planned on doing, so it involved no real extra effort.

He brushed aside her hair and trailed his fingers down the long line of her back. Her skin was smooth and without marks, unlike Hermione and Abraxas, who both had little freckles and moles and assorted scars from life and war and Quidditch and, in Hermione’s case, his words. The lines on her chest from the knife had already faded, and Tom was filled with a desire to put a permanent mark on her so that anyone who looked at her would know she was claimed. Hermione might fuss and claim that was a barbaric tendency, but he knew she loved seeing her words on him, and that she’d probably secretly like some kind of variation of a magical tattoo of theirs on Patience and Abraxas.

“How are your drawing skills these days, pet?” he asked with a smile.
Abraxas Has It Bad...And It's Catching

Chapter Summary

While Patience and Tom were getting it on, Abraxas is helping Hermione with her headache. It starts out silly, turns sweet, then it just might break some hearts.

Chapter Notes

I got this out as soon as could. For those who love Tom/Hermione, don't worry. Spreading the love doesn't decrease the power of our main pairing, I promise. Love isn't limited; it is infinite and ever-expanding. Also, Hermione might be Tom's soul mate, but she deserves sincere love as well as his hot, sexy, possession. Love to you all!

Hermione’s head was throbbing. Even with the headache potion and Abraxas’s clever fingers working another kind of magic on her neck and shoulders, Hermione was only a few minutes away from a full-blown migraine. She knew the muffled sounds, vibrations, and magical exertion of the blasting had exacerbated the pain, but the true cause was the slow weaning from the potion she’d been taking daily for the last five years. Though there was nothing harmful in Narcissa’s potion, it did have mood enhancing effects, and to be on a much lower dosage this year, right when OWLs were looming, and Tom was exploring the Chamber of Secrets, and she had to worry about somehow triggering the final stage of the soul mate bond and giving Tom access to her mind? And to finally, finally, finally, after years of age regression, be able to explore her sexuality again, only to find herself in an elemental magic quartet that was bound mostly with sex magic? Well, stressed didn’t begin to cover it.

She’d read a few passages in Slytherin’s journals that Tom had pointed out to her, and they both decided, in their growing familiarity with old English, that the Hogwarts founders had been an elemental quartet, though not a sexual one. Slytherin and Gryffindor were soul mates, if rumors and the Hat were reliable sources, but Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were simply dearest friends with one another and with the other pair. They had clearly explored their complimentary elemental magic in the amazing act of building and warding Hogwarts, and it made Hermione hopeful for the future, that their combined magic could achieve great things.

She was well aware that Tom wanted them all bound quickly and tightly so that he could feel in control of the situation. From her roommate’s mischievous look when Patience had followed Tom out of the library, Hermione had a feeling there was sex magic happening right now, on the
In fact, she had more than a general feeling. She could sense Tom’s pleasure and humor, and that actually calmed her nerves a bit. What Tom seemed to be ignoring was that sexual magic worked both ways, and he was giving more of himself than he realized, making personal connections that the Tom Riddle from the previous timeline had never had. Also, if Tom was distracted by Patience and Abraxas, the chances that they would end up somehow fucking themselves right into the last soul mate stage was lowered, though she doubted that was truly a risk. Hermione still hadn’t been able to find any additional information on what caused total mental unity between soul mates, but her logical brain told her that it couldn’t simply be sex or even lots of sex. The soul mate bond was already sexual, so to push it to a further level must require something beyond mere physical intensity.

The last few months hadn’t allowed for much free time to research, between classwork and preparing the Chamber. It still made Hermione nervous to walk past Astarte coiled up in the antechamber, even if her eyes were clouded. She was a bundle of nerves, waiting for something to go wrong, and her continuous state of anxiety, as well as working hard to keep that feeling out of her bond with Tom, was beginning to take a toll.

“Your shoulders feel like they’re made of wood,” Abraxas murmured, his hands working against her shoulder blades. “What has you so upset? Is it Marguerite coming down here tomorrow?”

Hermione shook her head. “No,” she said honestly. “I’ve gotten over that. I’m not going to like her, but I really was holding Tom to a standard he simply couldn’t achieve, and, besides, I have you and Patience as well now.”

“He’s sent her away every time she’s come to our room the last few months,” Abraxas used his thumbs to push on a knot along her spine, making Hermione groan. “She’s not happy.”

“Mmm,” Hermione sighed. “Poor thing. I suppose you are more the cause of that than I am. Tom has you right there in his room, and he’d rather be with you than her.”

Abraxas mumbled something unintelligible. Hermione grinned, though she knew he couldn’t see it. She couldn’t resist teasing him a bit. “Two healthy young men like yourselves, I’m sure you’re working off plenty of…steam.”

“You forget that I’ve seen you riding Patience’s thigh, Hermione,” Abraxas replied, running his fingers up to her neck, making small circles at the base of her skull. “I am absolutely
positive that things are just as...steamy upstairs.”

“Point taken,” she paused. “Did you enjoy it? Watching us?”

“Of course. You are both beautiful.” His hands stopped then started again, fumbling slightly in her hair. “Did you enjoy watching me with Tom?”

Hermione felt a rush of warmth between her legs at the mental picture the memory supplied her with. “It was the most arousing thing I’ve seen – all of us together, sharing our bodies and our magic. It was a lot to process at once, not something I would have imagined myself doing, but now that we’ve all been together, it feels natural. Our magic fits together – we’ve seen that in action after the initial spell a few months ago.”

He nodded and continued to massage her shoulders, and she drank another headache potion, and the tension finally started to ebb away.

“Tom really wants to do more elemental bonding, with the various pairs, as well as all of us again,” Abraxas closed Hermione’s book and put her notes away on a shelf. He glanced toward the back rooms. “I think Tom and Patience may have already started on their pairing.”

“Oh, they definitely have,” Hermione smiled wickedly. “I can feel Tom’s pleasure, especially since he’s so close.”

He looked impressed. “How does that even work?”

“When he feels something strongly – pleasure or anger, I can feel it, like a tingling at the edges of my magic, in my body. It is usually a general sensation. I can’t read his mind, though the closer we are, the more I can intuit.”

Abraxas watched her carefully. “So, what do you sense now?”

Hermione laughed. “He and Patience are...bonding. And he is thoroughly enjoying it.”

Abraxas gave her a slow, sexy grin that increased blood flow to all her erogenous zones.
“I’d like to do some bonding as well.”

“And here I left all my ropes and chains in my room,” Hermione joked.

“We don’t need them,” Abraxas was beside her, pulling her to her feet and flush with his body. “I get all tied up inside every time you smile at me.”

She opened her mouth, but he was kissing her before she could think of a witty response. As usual with Abraxas, the kiss went on and on, slow and sweet, and just so good. He made kissing an art form, and Hermione barely had the presence of mind to transfigure one of the leather arm chairs into a chaise before they were lying on it, their hands in each other’s hair and down one another’s backs, but the kissing no more hurried.

After several minutes, he pulled away enough to press his lips to her forehead and sigh, “I could kiss you all day.”

She laughed softly into his collarbone, her own lips finding the hollow of his throat. “I don’t think this spell works with just kissing.”

He raised one pale eyebrow in mock offense. “Is this just a ploy to get me naked?”

“Yes, absolutely,” she nodded emphatically as she slid her wand from her sleeve. “I simply can’t stand another second with that gorgeous body of yours covered.” She waved her wand and his clothes were neatly folded on the table several feet away.

Abraxas laughed so hard, he almost fell off chaise. “I can’t believe you did that, you lusty wench!” He threw up his hand and Hermione’s clothes were simply gone, nowhere to be seen.

“Lusty wench? I hope you’ve been practicing on retrieving items as much as you’ve clearly been working on vanishing them, because I liked that dress, you insatiable rogue!” Hermione snapped, adding in a grudging tone, “Good work with the wandless and nonverbal spell, though.”

“Well, my motivation factor was high,” Abraxas admitted, running his fingers down her arms so lightly that she shivered. “I really am an insatiable rogue when it comes to you, and I’ve been dying to see you naked again for weeks.”
He summoned his wand from the table, pointed it at her, and spoke the spell. It translated to something like “dust in the wind,” which made Hermione think of the famous song, though, of course, that song didn’t exist yet, like the rest of her previous life. She had to make the most of this one, this amazing chance she’d been given to save the world. With a small flourish, she aimed her wand at him and spoke the accompanying words, which were a bit scary, since they seemed to mean “whirlwind” or “tornado.” She was sure this would be an intense spell, made more so by their feelings for one another.

They lay side by side, kissing and touching for several more minutes, and if Abraxas had pushed her at all, she probably would have panicked. It was overwhelming to go from zero to three lovers in such a short time, and to adjust years of belief in monogamy. She wasn’t a prude; she never had been, despite what Lavender Brown and her little gaggle had thought. Hermione had simply had other priorities and been unsure of her physical body. Now, having experienced sex in more variations than she would have imagined, she was more confident in her body, but her mind was still reeling.

Tom was her soul mate, and she loved him, even if he wasn’t capable of loving her back in the same way. He was also her duty, her obligation, her mission. She and Narcissa had assumed the awesome responsibility of rewriting history, and every decision she made had an impact on the future. Keeping Tom human, with an intact soul was her primary purpose, not her own pleasure. There had been more than one night since September when she’d worried herself to sleep, wondering if she was just as bad at pleasure seeking as Tom was, if pulling Patience and Abraxas deeper into Tom’s orbit was wise. He was so excited about the elemental magic, though, and could it really be a bad thing for him to connect to more people, to care for them in his fashion?

And, she thought, as Abraxas’s fingers tangled in her hair, and his mouth deepened their kiss, in Tom’s mind, he had given her Abraxas and Patience, as if they were presents, given them to her to supply her with the types of affection he couldn’t provide. Of course, the two had come willingly because they loved her, and she loved them, so rejecting them and trying to engage in some kind of traditional, one-sided monogamous relationship with Tom just because that was the model she’d always seen in society would be an insane level of masochism. No, she realized, she had to adapt to the realities before her, and make the best choices she could in any particular moment. And right now, in this moment, Abraxas was showering her with love and she needed to return it.

Hermione could feel the spell working on them, a sense of urgency building as their kisses became almost frantic, their hands moving faster, stroking lower and lower. She shivered as Abraxas’s finger lightly traced circles on the little dip at the top of her arse. She’d never realized how sensitive that spot was before. Her hips moved upward with no prompting from her conscious mind, her breath shortening.

“You are so beautiful,” Abraxas spoke against her lips, though his mouth began trailing
downward. “I can’t think when I’m touching you. I just want to please you.”

“I’m not the only beautiful one,” she protested, though weakly. Abraxas knew he was good looking. His desire to please was lovely and sweet, but she wondered if he had received much personal attention in the last few months. Tom had been all over him, she was sure, but Tom, though the sexiest thing alive, was not a particularly giving lover. He pulled orgasms from his lovers’ bodies, rather than gave them, forcing them to the edge of pleasure, then pushing them over with sadistic glee. “And I think it’s your turn to be pleased.”

She moved down, letting her curls slide down his chest as her lips kissed the line that went from his breastbone to his belly button. At his navel, she traced the blank skin, wishing briefly that she could keep him with her and Tom and Patience forever, that he wouldn’t have to get married and live a life separate from them in only a few more years. She wondered if Tom’s possessive nature was rubbing off on her, because she just couldn’t bear the thought, so she pushed it far away, concentrating on the warmth of his skin beneath her own. His temperature ran hot, and she wanted to wrap herself in him like a blanket.

Abraxas took a shaky breath when Hermione’s lips finally touched the place where his thigh met his groin. “You don’t need to do that,” he tried to pull her up, grasping at her shoulders.

Her fingers slipped between his legs, cupping the tender sac in her palm, one thumb ghosting over the thin, sensitive skin. “I want to,” she said firmly, dropping a light kiss on the head of his cock. “Show me what to do. I don’t have much experience with this.”

“Ah,” he closed his eyes briefly. “You seem to be doing very well.”

“You know I’m a quick learner,” she teased, her mouth now licking a path down his rigid shaft, swallowing the tip of him for an instant, sucking hard, then releasing him with a pop. “Always the top of the class.”

He gently placed his hands on either side of her head, guiding her without pushing. “You can be on top of me whenever you want, love,” he moaned.

His eyes were closed again, and Hermione didn’t stop moving her mouth, alternating long licks with twists of her hand and sucking and kissing along the head and shaft until he was thrusting his hips toward her, his fingers twisting tighter and tighter in her curls. Always the gentleman, he still wasn’t forcing her head down, but she found she wanted to go closer, take him more deeply in her mouth. With one finger pressed firmly to the spot directly below his bullocks (which she had read years and worlds ago in one of her mother’s guilty pleasure Cosmo magazines
was a magic spot for men), she surrounded him with her mouth, doing her best to relax the back of her throat. The sound from his throat alone was worth the effort, and she tasted a slight, salty flavor leaking onto her tongue as she swirled it around him like she would a lolly.

Once, she had thought that going down on a man seemed a bit demeaning, something women did to please men, but not themselves. Now, having done it twice (even though Tom had barely let her spend five minutes on him due to his control issues), she cheerfully revised her opinion. It was sexy and powerful, holding such a vulnerable part of her lover’s anatomy in her mouth, at the mercy of her lips, tongue, and teeth. And Abraxas was definitely at her mercy, writhing and groaning. Her cunt was slick against his leg, her inner muscles throbbing at the noises she was wringing from him.

“Oh, love, please, stop,” Abraxas managed to get out between gasps of pleasure. “I…that’s amazing…but I don’t want this to end just yet.” He lifted her head, staring into her eyes with a dazed but determined expression. “Come up here.”

She crawled up his body, grazing the hard tips of her breasts along his skin, the wetness between her thighs slicking his leg and hip. Resting her head to his chest, she listened to his steady heartbeat, felt it speed up as she closed her hand around his cock, lazily stroking up and down. His fingers, thick and strong, went between her legs, caressing lightly, then slipped into her, stretching at her walls, the callouses from holding the Quidditch brooms pulling at the ribbed lining of her cunt, each drag a flurry of sensation.

“Can we do this forever?” he asked, kissing her neck as he removed his fingers and pulled her on top of him.

Despite the fact she was no longer a virgin, no longer a novice, Hermione flushed. Abraxas’s desire for her, so much more than lust, the way he called her ‘love’, warmed her heart, and she wanted to pretend, even for just a few minutes, that this wouldn’t become terribly complicated. Her stupid brain didn’t get the memo, though, because a response tumbled out of her mouth before she could censor it. “I don’t think the future Lady Malfoy would like that.”

Abraxas was rather good-natured. He put up with Tom’s behavior, submitting like the obedient right-hand man he was. He worshipped Hermione and amused Patience, flirted adorably with all the ladies of Hogwarts who wanted him to, and saved all his aggression for the Quidditch pitch, where he was single-mindedly vicious in his protection of the hoops, earning a fearsome reputation that most students found difficult to reconcile with his easy-going attitude in school. But when Hermione spoke those words, his grey eyes blazed a terrible combination of rage and sorrow.

“You are the only Lady Malfoy I want,” his voice was harsh and forceful, more a tone that Tom would use. As he spoke, he tugged at her hips and was inside her, suddenly filling her with a
hard, burning stretch.

She gasped, both at the feel of him, which was delightful, and his statement, which was terrifying on multiple levels. “Your father,” she began, but then he was thrusting upwards and she couldn’t form words against the rush of pleasure.

“Fuck my father,” he hissed, moving faster. “I’m his only heir. He can’t give away the title or money, and he can’t force me to do anything.”

“Tom,” she gasped, biting her lip, because one of Abraxas’s hands had moved from her hip to her clit, and he was pinching and rubbing at the nub and she was sure she was going to fall apart or explode or something equally dramatic.

“You’re his, I know,” he moaned, his voice softening a bit as she began to ride him in earnest, chasing after the rising sensations inside her. “I know. But I’m his, too, and we’re each others, and we can all be together, but I have to marry, and I only want to call you ‘wife,’ and it will make the Malfoy money and power his forever. He isn’t the marrying kind, love.”

“I know,” she moaned, her orgasm coming closer and closer, the magic between them building, and she felt a bit of panic. What had they done? Binding their magic when there was already so much emotion involved? She wasn’t sure this had been a good idea, but it was too late now.

Abraxas sat up, pulling her close, embracing her upper half with incredible tenderness even as he fucked the living daylights out of her lower half. She pushed her fingers in the muscles of his back, scrambling for something solid, something to hold onto against the explosion that was coming their way. Whirlwind had been the right word. They were going to be blown apart, laid bare, and Tom was going to come and pick at their bones. Their love for each other, for their love for him, gave Tom all the power, and he would run with it.

Her body started to shake violently, and he was kissing her and whispering against her mouth, “I love you, Hermione. I love you. I want to marry you. I want you to have my children. I want you to be happy,” and those words made their way into all the vulnerable places in her heart and she came against him, screaming silently because she was actually gasping for breath as he thrust into her, shuddering and shaking until they may have passed out.
Tom and Abraxas: A Kinky Bromance for the Ages

Chapter Summary

Tom overhears something a bit troubling. Everyone has more sex. Tom confronts Abraxas, and...wait for it....more sex.

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so you didn't think Abraxas was going to get away with proposing to Hermione so easily, did you?

And don't worry, these guys still have two years of school! No one is getting married for a long, long while.

Warnings (though if you need them by now, I don't know which story you've been reading) for a little heavier D/s sex scene and some temperature play, as well as Tom being his usual self.

Oh, and I've been listening to specific songs while writing the various sex scene pairings, so I thought I'd share those for your listening pleasure - a list is provided at the end to enhance your reading/listening pleasure...also, I was thinking of recording this as a podfic when I'm completely done...does that sound like a thing people would like? Or would I just sound silly reading so much porn out loud, lol?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom stood in the doorway to the Chamber library, a naked Patience standing beside him, so close he could feel a few fine strands of her loose hair brushing his arm. He’d thrown his trousers back on, but his chest and feet were bare. He’d felt Hermione’s magic rising just as he and Patience had been collapsing against one another, and the pull of it was irresistible. Abraxas’s magic was there was well, mingled with his soul mate’s. Once he’d been able to move, he had tugged at his pet’s hand and they’d walked quietly down the short hall.

What they’d found was two bodies, one pale, one a bit more golden, tangled together, moving like one fluid machine, Abraxas whispering words of love and devotion, as well as a fucking marriage proposal, until they both shuddered themselves right into unconsciousness and the air was suffused with their combined magic. Tom remembered when he’d claimed Hermione, how it had felt like they’d left their bodies, how their words had transformed. Standing there in the doorway, he could feel her pleasure, knew it was intense, beautiful, but it wasn’t what they had experienced. That knowledge calmed the anger that had flared up and he let out a long exhale, clearing his mind.
“Love is sweet,” Patience announced, her cool fingers absently tracing the words on Tom’s forearm. “Hermione would make a lovely Lady Malfoy – better than any of the other ones so far.”

Only a few hours ago, Tom would probably have ignored Patience’s comment, or snapped at her. Now, after the spell they’d just done, he felt a connection to her, an awareness of her and her magic that made him more generous and tolerant, though not that generous and tolerant. “Love is foolish, a weakness,” he answered automatically.

“So, you don’t care, then?” Patience slipped her hand down into his, grasping his fingers.

Tom felt the surge of their magic. It was intoxicating, all that power Patience kept hidden. Their spell, and the remnants of the one in this room, made Tom feel a bit drunk on the magical energy flowing around and through them.

“Don’t think you can trick me into showing emotion that isn’t there in the first place, pet,” Tom replied calmly, his eyes running over the naked bodies in front of them. He’d touched both of those bodies, intimately, and wanted to do so again, very, very soon. They could do with a reminder of who was in charge, especially Abraxas.

Patience started to hum and danced away, taking a book off one of the shelves, settling naked and cross-legged on the floor in front of one of the fireplaces, which roared to life as she sank down.

Tom walked slowly toward the chaise, working through the complications before him as quickly as he could. Nothing had to happen right away, of course. They had two more years of schooling, and even if Abraxas’s parents were anxious to see him engaged, he could put them off at least until graduation. Even if Hermione had been touched by Abraxas’s romantic words, she was too strong-willed and sensible to want to get married at a young age. He knew that she was just as puzzled as he was at how quickly and seriously magical students as young as sixteen (and even occasionally younger) were paired off, engaged, and then married before the ink was dry on their Hogwarts diplomas.

She spoke frequently of all the advanced magical studies she was interested in, of seeking out apprenticeships for mastery levels. On the other hand, she probably would want a permanent home and family life one day, something like Narcissa had with Galatea. He tried to imagine a future with Hermione separate from him, living in a different home, or even a different city, and he found himself angry at the mere idea of it. Then, he tried to imagine the same without Abraxas, or even Patience. Even now, across the room, Patience was humming that bloody awful tune and he found himself involuntarily smirking. When had the company of three other people become so
much a part of his daily life that he was thinking of a future with them, not just his own plans?

Hermione was stirring, her head twisting as though trying to shake herself awake. She was very beautiful, his soul mate, and looking at her did make him feel like nothing else in the world, nothing except magic coursing through his skin. She was a part of his magic, a part of him, and just as Abraxas and Patience amused and pleased him, they made Hermione happy. He glanced at Abraxas, who had begun moving as well, one arm wrapped around Hermione’s waist, his face against her shoulder. They all had to stay together, Tom thought, because that was his will, and he would keep them together, even if that required some creative solutions in the future beyond Hogwarts.

Those honey colored eyes were open now, and when she met Tom’s gaze, her cheeks flushed a rosy tint. He grinned at her, ready to put her at ease for the moment. “I trust your cross corners bonding went as well as mine?”

Even though she was completely naked, she nodded primly as she sat up. Abraxas stood, looking sideways at Tom as if searching for cues. He couldn’t resist making the blonde squirm just a tad. “Though, I must say, I didn’t propose marriage to Patience, so we must have done something wrong.”

Abraxas went paler than usual, nearly snow white. “I simply said what I was feeling – you already know that I love her.”

Tom slid a hand behind Abraxas’s neck and pulled him close, until their lips were touching. “I’m not mad at you. I believe it’s called teasing.”

“Oh,” a shudder of relief passed through Abraxas’s shoulders, and Tom kissed him, more gently than he normally did.

“No one is getting married right now, anyway,” Hermione stood and hugged Abraxas from behind, her hands reaching past his hips and pulling on Tom’s as well. “And we aren’t going to hold what people say in the moment of orgasm against them.”

Tom laughed, kissing Hermione over Abraxas’s shoulder, thinking of some of the obscenities he himself had wrung from Abraxas’s lips, and the way ‘my Lord’ had sounded coming from both his soul mate and their pet. “A good policy, I’m sure,” he vowed to make sure Abraxas said those words very soon.
He was pleased to know that he was right about what Hermione wanted, at least for the meantime, and eager to do the group spell again now that they’d established some of the cross quarter bonds. Tom still needed to do the formal bond with Abraxas, and Hermione with Patience, but since those were the roommate pairings, they could probably find the time and space to perform those bindings late at night in a warded dormitory bathroom, or even in their beds with the proper blurring and muffling spells in place. Now, while they had the opportunity, he wanted to feel them all together, feel the difference in their strengthened bonds.

He looked directly at Hermione this time and spoke the general spell. She shook her head, but there was a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “Aren’t you exhausted?”

Tom held her gaze, and put his hands over hers, pulling her closer, and grinding his hips into Abraxas, who was still between them. “Abraxas isn’t too tired,” Tom noted as he felt his roommate’s cock stir against his own.

“You know, there’s a term that might apply to you - *nymphomaniac,*” Hermione scolded playfully, letting them go and walking over to offer a hand to Patience, who practically leapt into her arms.

“Shall we go sit on the bed and be entertained by our boys?” Hermione asked her, giggling at the indignant looks that immediately covered Tom’s and Abraxas’s faces.

“You read my mind,” Patience twirled one of Hermione’s curls and kissed her nose. “Do you think the house elves would bring us popped corn?”

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Three hours later, as well as several bowls of popped corn, Hermione didn’t think she had a body left. The sex had been wonderful, as always, but the magic raised and shared between them had left her in a state that she supposed was similar to some drug like ecstasy. Unlike with just Tom or Abraxas, when the magic channeled had overwhelmed her, this magic flowed easily between the four of them, spread out enough so that no one passed out, though they all felt euphoric and able to do anything.

Tom had insisted on doing spell after spell together afterwards to test the effect on their magic, levitating and vanishing half the furniture in the bedroom, summoning items from the library, and even unlocking the chest in the corner, and using their combined magic to disarm a few of the cursed objects they hadn’t been able to previously. One of those objects was a delicate silver bracelet that slowly cut into the wearer’s flesh.
After they’d removed the curse, Tom put on the bracelet on Patience, transfiguring the simple chain into a snake swallowing its tail. She, in turn, changed the color to a bold, metallic blue and made Tom teach her how to say “pretty” in parseltongue so she could enchant the snake’s head to hiss it periodically.

“Snakes do not slither around calling things pretty,” he’d protested, but he had made a series of low hissing sounds at Patience, repeating them three times until she was satisfied and her bracelet was making a vague approximation of whatever word he’d actually said.

Hermione had hugged him then, full of affection, and some amazement, at how normal he was acting. He kissed her hair and swung her onto the bed. Abraxas was on the bed, more asleep than not, and Patience was curled in the chair, alternately reading a book and hissing along with her bracelet.

“You are in an excellent mood,” Hermione observed, leaning into his fingers, which were tracing the words on her stomach. She sighed, enjoying the sensation, which was closer to love than she’d ever felt from him. He was very happy at all their magic, and he wasn’t upset by the variance in their individual bonds.

“So are you,” he replied, taking her hand and placing it on his arm, so they were touching each other’s words, and their magic was thrumming in the air, shimmering like a heat wave.

“Oh, Tom,” she smiled. It had been too long since they had done that, and the connection was stronger than ever, a joy she felt to her toes, to the ends of her curls. “I’ve missed this.”

He hissed low in her ear. “So have I, dearest. Just remember that I’m the only one who can make you feel like this. I am your soul mate, and my touch is the one your body craves most, the one your magic craves most.”

She didn’t smile because she knew he would see that as a challenge, and she wanted to reassure him, to soothe the tiny, rarely acknowledged part of him that still had the mindset of an orphan, that still worried she might not be his to keep.

“We are forever, Tom, beyond time and space and any other arbitrary boundaries.” Leaning down, she kissed his words gently, then raised up to kiss his lips. “I am yours, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Never doubt that.”
“I don’t.” His voice was cool and even a bit scoffing, but Hermione felt his relief through their magic, the way his emotions settled, and she relaxed fully for the first time in months, feeling safe and secure and more hopeful for the future than she had in years.

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When they finally left the Chamber, with hardly time to spare to get back to their dormitories before curfew, Abraxas kissed both the ladies’ hands, and even Patience flushed a little. Tom, in contrast, kissed Hermione’s mouth soundly and bit Patience’s neck, leaving behind a rapidly darkening bruise. Then, he walked away, silently laughing at Hermione tutting over another mark they would need to heal or disguise on the way to Ravenclaw Tower.

Abraxas followed him, and when the blonde caught up with his long strides, Tom teased, “You never kiss my hand.”

“Do you want me to?” Abraxas laughed.

“I imagine you’ll be kissing most of me soon enough,” Tom briefly squeezed his roommate’s arm in the empty hall. “We still have our spell to perform.”

A barely-there flush crossed over Abraxas’s cheeks. “Hermione might be right – how much sex can a person have in a day?”

Tom gave him a sideways smile. “Night has fallen, Abraxas. You’re just mine now.”

The flush came out in full-force at that, and Abraxas didn’t respond. They walked quickly toward the dungeons, but Tom didn’t let the silence stay.

“Why do you love her?” he asked, his voice neutral, no hint of accusation, or even real curiosity.

Abraxas stopped for a moment, looking directly into Tom’s eyes for a trap. When he didn’t see one, he resumed his pace, taking several seconds before answering, “For the same reasons you do.”
Tom laughed. “I don’t love anyone.”

“You do everything a person in love would do. You enjoy her company, like to hear her laugh, desire to impress her, not to mention, you can’t keep your hands off of her these past few months, and she is your bloody soul mate.” Abraxas had stopped again, his grey eyes not blinking as he faced Tom. “You might not feel things in the exact same way, but you value her the way a person in love values another. Call it what you like, but it’s love, in some shape or form.”

Though his first instinct was to push Abraxas against the stone wall, hard, Tom let out a breath and continued walking. “You didn’t answer the question,” his voice was cold as the air around them now. “Please do so.”

Abraxas shivered slightly. The more polite Tom became, the more danger was present. He gathered his thoughts. “I love her because she is everything I have never had. My family is not kind. They do not give away smiles, or help anyone without securing a deal in advance. The only thing that ties us is our blood, our traditions, which you and Hermione have forced me to re-evaluate and throw to the winds. She is the only person I have ever met who holds me to no standard other than basic humanity. She is the only person who has never asked anything of me. She doesn’t care about the Malfoy name or money – if anything, she scorns it. She is brilliant and beautiful and I feel like I could do anything when she looks at me with those big brown eyes and smiles simply because she is happy to see me.”

He had spoken while they walked, and Tom was glad he was not looking at Abraxas’s face. He wasn’t sure how well he would have taken the fucking adoration he surely would have seen if he had glanced over. He had already known, on some level, everything Abraxas had just said. Having spent weeks at a time at Malfoy Manor in the summer, Tom knew exactly how different Abraxas’s home life was from the easy, unconditional affection that was continuously present at the Merrythought estate, or the little cottage in Hogsmeade.

The Malfoys were not overtly cruel, but there was no hint of love, only approval, and that approval was contingent upon Abraxas’s performance at school, at Quidditch, at the social luncheons conducted entirely in French, and his impeccable personal appearance (no slouching, tie perfectly knotted, hair either tied back or pomaded within an inch of its life). If Tom allowed himself to be introspective for a minute, he could easily find parallels with the Malfoy home and the orphanage in London. Yes, Abraxas had anything and everything money could buy, but he was emotionally impoverished. Of course he would be enthralled by someone like Hermione – who was simply kind and loving because that was her core nature. If a person valued love, then Hermione was the jackpot.

“Do you not want me to love her?” Abraxas asked quietly, but they had reached the
“We’ll talk later,” Tom simply replied, not looking his way.

Marguerite was sitting on a couch by the fire, homework for History of Magic in front of her. She glanced up when they entered. “Rumors are starting about you two,” she said as she quickly returned her gaze to her parchment and scratched a few lines. Tom noticed that the quill she used was dull at the tip and smirked at the memory of Hermione's act of anger.

Tom walked over and sat beside her, reviewing what she had written. Marguerite was needy and grasping, but she was also clever and rich, and he didn’t want to completely alienate her. “I care nothing for rumors. We have a surprise for everyone. All these weeks, we’ve been working on something amazing, and we’ll share it with you tomorrow.”

She did her best not to look pleased. “Is that so? Well, I’m sure Thad will be happy.”

“Oh, you’ll be happy, too,” Tom replied, as he stood. “Be at breakfast by seven, please. And make sure Vidhi knows as well.”

Abraxas and Tom went toward the boys’ rooms and stopped into tell Dolohov, Sebastian, and Thad that the study group needed to meet first thing after breakfast, then headed to their own room, where Corvus and Jacob were playing a game of wizarding chess.

“Would it do any good to ask where you’ve been all day, again?” Corvus met Abraxas’s eyes. As the Slytherin House seeker, as well as a fellow Pureblood who was related as some fourth or fifth cousin, Corvus Black was probably Abraxas’s best friend after Tom. Their hours of practice together had made an unspoken bond, and they could read each other well.

“Ask me again in the morning,” Tom replied lazily, answering for Abraxas, sprawling across his bed.

Jacob took Corvus’s remaining bishop. “What does that mean? Everyone really misses our weekend practices. There isn’t enough time in the evenings to get into the better spells, not after all the OWL studying Hermione is making everyone do.”

“You’ll thank her after the tests,” Tom said from across the room. “You do need the extra
Abraxas pulled up a seat and watched the game. “He’s going to take your Queen in three moves,” he told Corvus.

Jacob reached over and punched Abraxas’s arm. “Don’t bloody tell him!”

Corvus glared at the board. “How? I hate this game!”

“We’re meeting after breakfast tomorrow,” Abraxas said as he moved Corvus’s knight for him to Jacob’s continued dismay. “Trust me, what’s happening tomorrow will have been worth the wait.”

“I hope so,” Jacob grumbled.

Corvus snorted. “You’re just mad because you haven’t had as much time with a certain little dark-haired Ravenclaw.”

Abraxas laughed as Jacob scowled. “Josephine is quite pretty,” he winced as piece of destroyed pawn flew up in his face.

“It is more important that she’s clever and powerful,” Tom added, still on the bed. “If you are thinking about getting engaged, those are more important factors. Looks fade, but power and intelligence remain.”

“No one is talking about engagement,” Jacob insisted, his ears red, his eyes on the board.

“Patience told me in Herbology that you’re on Felicity’s parents’ short list of suitable candidates,” Corvus grinned, starting to move his rook, then rethinking when Abraxas subtly shook his head toward the king.

“Stop helping him cheat, Abraxas!” Jacob muttered, then added, his eyebrows raised incredulously. “Patience says the weather is controlled by fairies. She’s hardly a reliable source.”
All four boys laughed at that, and the subject was dropped. They fell into companionable conversation on easy topics like schoolwork and professors and the upcoming Quidditch match with Gryffindor. Once Corvus had been beaten, though Abraxas helped him enough to draw the game out for an hour longer, they went to bed.

Tom cast a sleeping spell on Corvus and Jacob to make sure they stayed asleep, then went over to Abraxas, who was wide awake, staring up at the emerald hangings on the bed. His roommate looked troubled, and Tom was annoyed that he didn’t like to see the frown on Abraxas’s face. Caring for others was a horrible inconvenience, and it gave others power that Tom found unacceptable. Still, he could feel the effects of the group spell, tiny tendrils of Abraxas’s earthy magic reaching out to him, and Tom didn’t want to deny himself.

“Come with me,” Tom took his hand.

Abraxas didn’t move, nor did he look at Tom.

“That wasn’t a request,” Tom added, his fingers tightening around Abraxas’s palm, digging in.

“So you can take the anger you didn’t show Hermione earlier out on me now?” Abraxas asked, though there wasn’t any emotion in his voice.

“Well, you’ll need to get your arse into the bathroom to learn the answer to that question. I suggest you not make me wait any longer,” Tom said coldly, then walked to the bathroom.

Sighing, Abraxas followed him, knowing that testing Tom’s limits would only make matters worse. Tom didn’t hesitate to use hexes or worse if he was angry, though he always performed his angry magic wandlessly, and never anything that left a mark. Which didn’t mean that he couldn’t make it hurt like hell. Tom’s power had grown exponentially over the last year especially, and now he was finding new spells in the Chamber every week.

Tom was usually restrained, and only struck out at his fellow Slytherins when they did something he found either a personal insult or slurs about blood status. Even the most fervent Blood-purists soon learned not to speak about dirty blood. It was common knowledge that the term mudblood would send Tom into a rage. And once one had seen Tom in a rage? Well, one wasn’t likely to want a repeat performance. Abraxas hadn’t truly been on the receiving end of Tom’s rage, though he’d certainly felt his anger.
Abraxas couldn’t believe he’d spoken so honestly in the hallway, about Tom loving Hermione, and about how he felt about Hermione. *I must be the worst glutton for punishment in the whole fucking world,* he thought. *Maybe the Hat misplaced me, because that was a fucking dumb-ass Gryffindor move if there ever was one.*

The bathroom was only lowly lit, candles floating high in the air and creating deep shadows. The mirrors that lined the two opposite walls above the four sinks made illusions of a grand space. Tom was standing in the center, facing away, his hands behind his back, that pale, viciously curved wand twitching in his fingers. Abraxas swallowed as he shut the door and put locking and sound wards on it.

“Why are you so scared tonight, Abraxas?” Tom asked without turning around. “Have I ever really hurt you? Even when you touched Hermione without permission? Didn’t I forgive you?”

Abraxas looked in the mirror, gazing at Tom’s profile, which gave nothing away. He could have been carved from marble. “I think that when we start talking about love, then all the previous rules dissolve,” he finally said, deciding he would be honest, no matter the consequences. “Because love is the one thing that scares you.”

Whirling around, Tom had Abraxas up against the tile in what felt like an instant. Abraxas had seen it coming, of course; he was a keeper, he was used to having objects flying toward him at high speeds. He could have deflected the assault, but he didn’t. With Tom, he had learned, the greatest, and really only, power was in submission.

“I am continuously amazed at the growing number of people who think they know my mind,” Tom hissed. “Just because I fuck you doesn’t mean I owe you anything, that I feel anything for you.”

His lips twisted into a cruel smile. “Surely, you can see the truth of that, given the number of conquests you’ve had.”

Abraxas nodded. “Yes, but I also know the difference between a fuck,” he put the same inflection on the word as Tom had, “and sex that means something more. Are you really trying to say that you would rather me fuck Hermione than make love to her? Use her the way you used Marguerite? Like she’s nothing?”

“If you ever,” Tom began, his wand at Abraxas’s throat, a drop of blood welling at the tip.
“I would never, that’s the point, Tom,” Abraxas didn’t try to move away from the pressure, even as the drop became a line running down his clavicle. “We love her,” he leaned forward, even though the wand cut deeper, and kissed Tom’s lips.

Tom dropped his hand like he’d been burned. “Keep your opinions on my feelings to yourself, my friend.”

“Tom, can’t you see that I would never say any of these things to anyone else? I know you are destined for greatness. I want to be beside you when you are changing the world, when you are running it,” Abraxas smiled. “I’m your man.”

“And Hermione’s,” Tom bit out. “You want her more than anything.”

Abraxas titled his head, looked into Tom’s blue eyes. “Not more than anything,” he admitted.

Now, Tom grinned, like a predator finding a soft spot for a kill. “Do you want power more?” He asked, pondering aloud. “You already have power as a Malfoy.”

“No,” Abraxas smiled, sadly. “I want you just as much.”

Tom looked shocked, though he was so handsome, he wore it well. His eyes widened, his mouth opened slightly, and Abraxas felt lost. As easy as it was to love Hermione, as wonderful as it was, it was that hard and terrible to love Tom Riddle, but he couldn’t stop doing either. They were a pair, a package deal, and of course Patience as well, and even though their magic had only been truly linked and mingling for a few months, Abraxas couldn’t imagine not having it, not having them, for the rest of his life.

“Wanting isn’t the same as love,” Tom finally said, his tone cautious. “I don’t require love from you – just your loyalty.”

“It’s easiest to be loyal to something or someone you love,” Abraxas shrugged. “And I didn’t really choose it; it just happened. You don’t have to love me back, I don’t expect that. I would like to know, though, that you value me.”

It did not escape Tom that Abraxas had used the same word he’d mentioned in the hallway, the one he had equated closely with love. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Patience,
about being honest. These elemental and sex magic spells were having unintended side effects, creating more than magical connections. Now, it seemed, there were emotions that needed sorted out.

“I would have thought your value to me was obvious,” Tom was exasperated, and didn’t bother to conceal it. “How many times have we-”

“But you just said fucking me didn’t mean anything,” Abraxas argued.

Tom raised an eyebrow. “I think I’m done with this conversation. You and Hermione and Patience can save your talk of love and making love for one another. You know who I am. Either you accept that or you don’t. I will never be some tender lover, Abraxas, and I won’t have you thinking you can be in some tug of war for power with me. You may be the future Lord Malfoy, but I am the Lord and Master here – over all of you.”

“These are the facts: I let you touch my soul mate. I trusted you with her, alone. I touched you, wanted you over and over – I still want you. I am willing to enter a permanent magical binding spell with you, and let you in turn enter into one with my soul mate. If that doesn’t qualify as me valuing you, then you must be truly impossible to please, my friend,” he cupped the pale blonde’s jaw, running a thumb over his lower lip as he spoke low and harshly. “Now, if you’re done whinging about feelings, I’d like you on your knees, and we’ll get our spell started.”

Abraxas’s eyes glazed a bit at the feel of Tom’s thumb, and the press of Tom’s other hand on his shoulder, pushing him down to the floor as Tom pointed his wand and said the Latin words for the mixing of fire and earth, something like magma, and Abraxas lifted his and said the matching ones. Nothing seemed to get Tom as aroused as proving his dominance. And very little aroused Abraxas as much as submitting to it. He kept his smile inside as he thought of how much Tom had said, even though the word love had not been mentioned, nor likely ever would be.

“Your mouth has been rather impertinent this evening,” Tom smirked, one hand taking Abraxas’s wand and setting it on the counter, and his other hand twining in Abraxas’s hair, glad the length was just enough to wrap his hand in once over. “And we need to deal with that, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Abraxas quickly supplied. It was impossible to know for sure how much payment in flesh Tom would exact for his earlier admissions, for Abraxas stepping out of his usual character as unquestioning follower.

Tom shook his head, tipping up Abraxas’s chin. “Oh, no, that won’t do at all.”
Abraxas’s grey eyes were wide with confusion. Tom laughed, and it was a sound that sent a chill down his spine and up his cock, all mixed messages of sex and violence.

A sharp tug brought Abraxas’s head further back. “You see, my friend, since you’ve allowed yourself so much latitude with your behavior towards me, I feel the need to have you reminded of our relative positions. So, for the rest of evening, you will address me as my Lord, or there will be consequences.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Abraxas breathed, shocked at how hard his own cock became as he spoke those words. How could he have made the sweetest love in his life, a heaven if there ever was, with Hermione only hours ago, and now want to be torn apart and put through hell by Tom Riddle?

Tom laughed again, even lower this time, stroking his face with his wand, a light, tingling touch emanating from the wood like mild electricity. “Oh, you can be such a good boy when you want to be, Abraxas. I hate to have to punish you, but I think you need just a little, to help you remember what’s at stake when you disobey, don’t you?”

“Yes, my Lord,” his shoulders shook, half in anticipation of pain, half in desire.

“Undo my trousers, slowly, please;” Tom raised his wand, twirled it between his fingers while Abraxas ran his hand up the inseam of Tom’s trouser, lightly, until he reached the buttons and began to slide them free of their holes, one at a time. “You know, I’ve been reading so much on elemental magic, not only on joining with others, but on exploring the unique properties of my own. Elemental magic is practically a lost art.”

“For instance,” Tom sucked in his breath slightly as Abraxas freed the last button and his hand grazed Tom’s rigid cock, “I’ve learned I have a special talent for making things hot, and tolerating heat.”

He tapped his wand to Abraxas’s cheek and smiled. “Now, show your Lord and Master your special, earthy talent of making things disappear into holes.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Abraxas only just managed to gasp, because his lips, mouth, and throat had risen several degrees in heat. Tom pushed forward, through his lips and groaned in pleasure.

“Excellent,” he hissed. “You feel like a bloody sauna, so hot and wet.”
Abraxas could barely concentrate. His mouth was on fire and it made it difficult to gauge how much pressure he was applying as he moved his lips and tongue around Tom. He knew this was part of his punishment, especially when Tom laughed and held his head, fucking his mouth while Abraxas did his best. And he was still aroused, despite the heat, despite, or perhaps because, he knew it was a punishment. *How fucked up am I?* Abraxas thought, as a moan came out around Tom’s cock.

“Mmm,” Tom sighed, pulling back then pushing forward so hard that Abraxas’s head was forced against the tiled wall. “Do you know how to cool off, my dear friend? Do you know what to do?”

He didn’t pull out, so Abraxas could only make a slight shake of his head in between thrusts of Tom’s hips. He had a guess, though.

Tom confirmed it with his next words. “Swallow it all, Abraxas, show me how good you want to be for me, the Master whom you *love*.”

Abraxas started at the word *love* coming from Tom, throwing off the rhythm he had created, but it didn’t matter because Tom was coming, chanting the words of the elemental binding spell, and Abraxas was swallowing, barely tasting anything; instead, it was the blessed sensation of coolness spreading through his burning mouth and throat and he pressed Tom’s hips against his mouth, thanking any and all gods that Tom had kept his promise to end the heat. Tom smirked down at him as Abraxas sighed in relief at the end of the punishment spell.

“Are you ready to behave, then?” Tom asked, his beautiful mouth making him look like an angel, even though Abraxas knew better.

Abraxas nodded. “Yes, my Lord.”

“That sounds so good,” Tom held out his hand, helped Abraxas up. “And not because of a hereditary title – it is because I *am* superior, because I *am* a King among men. One day, we’ll show that to the world, Abraxas. And you will be at my side.”

“It would be my both my duty and my pleasure, my Lord,” Abraxas replied smoothly. He was nothing if not a quick study, and he knew Tom craved power and respect more than anything else.
Tom leaned close, kissed him for several minutes. “I like that you taste like me, with a hint of Hermione as well.”

Abraxas moaned his agreement, moving in for another, long kiss. Tom pulled at the front of Abraxas’s clothes, then got impatient and vanished them. He wrapped his hand around Abraxas, tugging a bit too harshly, but somehow Abraxas didn’t care.

“Hermione went down on you today?” Tom’s tone was a question, his hand stroking Abraxas’s cock quickly up and down.

“Yes, my Lord,” Abraxas gasped. “She did.”

“She did that for me, very briefly, the first time we had sex. It was very distracting, her sweet little mouth all around me. I made her stop because I thought I would come. Did you make her stop?”

His hips were moving now, and Abraxas bit his lip to focus enough to get out, “Yes, my Lord.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “How long has it been since you’ve finished in someone’s mouth?”

“Ahhh…” Abraxas nearly came at the question, his cock giving a thick spasm, his bullocks tightening threateningly. He knew instinctively, though, that Tom would not be pleased if he came without being told to do so. He tried to remember the question. “Ahh…sometime last year? Maybe Marilyn Tuttle? In the spring, my Lord?”

“Pining after Hermione so long that you couldn’t bear someone else sucking your cock?” Tom’s voice was low and seductive, with a hint of teasing. “Silly boy, she didn’t even know at the time.”

Abraxas wasn’t fooled into thinking that a teasing Tom was necessarily a safe Tom. There was no safety with Tom. Only intensity, be it pleasure or pain, joy or fear.

“I didn’t want to hurt her, my Lord,” Abraxas allowed, attempting to focus on something other than the growing need to explode all over Tom’s hand. “And I honestly didn’t want anyone else except….”
Tom gave an evil grin, followed by an evil twist of his hand, his finger skimming over the head of Abraxas’s cock, rubbing the pre-come over his shaft, using it as lubrication on his palm to move even faster. “No one else except me, Abraxas?”

Before Abraxas could answer, he leaned forward, whispering in his ear as he kissed and bit along the lobe, “How long have you wanted me, Abraxas? How long had you been dreaming about my hand on your cock, my cock in that pretty, wide mouth of yours?”

Abraxas closed his eyes against all the sensation — Tom’s voice, his lips and teeth, his fucking hand, his near psychic penchant for asking the questions guaranteed to elicit more arousal, both physical and mental. “I…since you stayed with me this past summer and we rode brooms without our shirts and we got caught in the rain, and you undressed in front of me in the shed, since we were soaked and we couldn’t use magic” it all came out in a rush, like a confession, even though they’d been having sex for weeks.

“My Lord,” he hastily added at the quirk of Tom’s mouth.

“Lie down,” Tom ordered brusquely, using his wand to transfigure a stack of towels into a mattress.

Abraxas quickly complied, speaking the required words of assent, feeling more exposed naked on the small mattress than he had standing. Tom vanished his clothing as well, revealing that he absolutely was not done for the night, then kneeled on the mattress, straddling Abraxas’s hips, low enough that he could continue that torture he’d been practicing with his hand, but now there was the added bonus that his own cock was bumping against Abraxas, and Tom’s naked skin pressing along Abraxas’s was wonderful and awful all at once.

“I’m not going to use a spell to keep you still like I did with Patience, and if you move at all, I will stop, and you will be sorry. Do you understand?” Tom asked while his fingers squeezed and released, squeezed and released, along Abraxas’s shaft.

“Yes, my Lord,” he could hear the whine and plea in his voice, and Abraxas wanted to be mad at himself, but it was too much effort to keep from coming.

“Oh, good,” Tom sighed, straightening out his legs and lowering his lips to within a breath of Abraxas’s leaking cock. “I just can’t wait to see how long it takes you to disobey me again.”
And then, Abraxas’s vision went white for a few seconds, and he forgot to breathe or have a heart beat or anything except clamp down on the urge to come because Tom Riddle’s mouth was all over his cock. Was it any wonder that Hermione was Tom’s soul mate? Neither of them had experience with blow jobs, and, yet, in the same day, they’d both given him the best ones he’d ever had. Trust Tom to turn something that could have been interpreted as a loss of control into a game of control. He’d suck Abraxas’s cock, but he’d also punish him if he moved. The man was the goddamned devil.

Tom laughed, and the vibrations from his mouth were Abraxas’s downfall. It was simply too much sensation, and he could feel the dam breaking inside him. “My Lord!” he gasped, his hips thrusting off the mattress despite himself.

“Say the spell!” Tom hissed, then put his mouth back on Abraxas and pulled at him with such suction that Abraxas literally ached from the pleasure as he yelled the spell out, over and over, spilling into Tom's mouth.

The air was hot and muggy with magic around them, and Tom gave him no time to recover before he flipped Abraxas over onto his knees, pulling his arse flush with Tom’s rock hard erection. Tom spoke the lubrication spell, and Abraxas shuddered. Why was that so sexy?

Abraxas felt the tip of Tom’s cock at his arse, put Tom only pressed lightly, not even entering him truly.

“You moved,” Tom said, in that voice that dripped with sex and power.

“I’ll give you points for effort, and you did warn me, thankfully for you, but the fact remains,” he leaned down and kissed Abraxas, first on one shoulder blade, then the other, then down the line of his spine, all the while keeping his cock head teasingly poised at his entrance, “that you disobeyed me. Again.”

“I’m so sorry, my Lord,” Abraxas was moaning now, and his hips were still twitching with aftershocks of previous orgasm. He thought he legitimately might die from wanting Tom to fuck him, and he really didn’t care how much he was punished, so long as Tom put his cock inside him.

Tom made a string of hissing sounds, the most musical parseltongue Abraxas had heard him speak. “I believe you are sorry, my dear friend, I do, but I have to admit, I lied earlier,” he entered Abraxas is one harsh stroke, making the blonde cry out, “I just love punishing you.”
The punishment became immediately clear. Tom’s cock was on fire, hot like Abraxas’s mouth had been, though not quite so severe. The heat and the pull and the pressure and Tom’s ability to hit that one spot, over and over, had Abraxas on the verge of a second orgasm in moments, and this time, he begged, pleading to come, nearly incoherent.

“Of course you can Abraxas,” Tom thrust harder and faster, his own breath coming in gasps. “You only had to ask nicely,” he spoke in time with his strokes, moving so deep so fast that they came together, gasping the spell yet again and falling, both face first, into the mattress, the floor around them glowing like lava, heat and magic surrounding them.

They twisted to face each other, and Abraxas was feeling so blissful, so high on sex and magic, that he stroked Tom’s cheek and kissed his lips and said, “I love you,” before he’d even processed any of those actions.

Surprisingly, Tom said nothing, just pulled him close and held him. They lay like that for a while, coming back to themselves, absorbing the magic and recovering physically from the exertion.

“So,” Tom spoke after several minutes. “There’ll be no more talk of how much you’re valued?”

Abraxas smiled against Tom’s shoulder. “No, my Lord. I have learned my lesson.”

“Excellent,” Tom replied, his lips brushing Abraxas’s temple, then pulled away and rose, helping Abraxas up. “We need to get to bed. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Chapter End Notes

Songs for Sexy Times with the Various Pairings/Groupings

Tom & Hermione: “From Eden” – Hozier

“Irresistible” – Fall Out Boy

“Fidelity” – Regina Spektor
Tom & Patience: “Hit Me With Your Best Shot” – Pat Benatar
“Wild Ones”- Flo Rida
“S&M” - Rihanna

Tom & Abraxas: “Closer” – Nine Inch Nails
“I Wanna Be Yours” – Foxy Shazam
“Love You Madly” – CAKE

Hermione & Patience: “Cool For The Summer” – Demi Lovato
“Honeysuckle Lullabye” – Moanin’ Michelle Malone and The Low-Down Georgia Revue
“True Colors” – Cyndi Lauper (The Body Acoustic version)

Hermione & Abraxas: “Crash Into Me” – Dave Matthews Band
“Ice Cream” – Sarah McLachlan
“I’ve Just Seen a Face” – Jim Sturgess (covering The Beatles in Across The Universe)

Everyone Together: “You Make Loving Fun” – Jewel (covering Fleetwood Mac)
“In the Dark” - Dev
“When It Don’t Come Easy” – Patty Griffin
Chapter Summary

Hermione spends some time with her roommates. Patience and Hermione perform their bonding spell, and Hermione realizes just how savvy our little blonde dreamer is.

Chapter Notes

Happy Fourth of July! Here's some fireworks! Love to you all!

And don't worry - plot is coming back...it won't all be porn until the end of time, sadly.

oOo0oOo

Hermione was trying desperately not to kick Felicity in the face. She had one of her feet, was painting her toe nails, but Hermione’s feet had always been terribly ticklish, and it was near torture to hold still while her friend ran fingers along the sides of her soles and toes, pushing her this way and that to get the right angle for applying the magenta varnish.

“I don’t even know why we’re doing this,” she said to Josephine, who was sitting on the pillows beside her, the dark haired girl’s own toes being seen to by Patience.

Josephine laughed as she painted her fingernails, carefully balancing the polish bottle on her extended knee. “Well, you and Patience won’t tell us what tomorrow is all about, only that it’s a surprise, and I just have a feeling that it will be like a party,” she added, “and it is important to be pretty at parties.”

“You mean it’s important to be pretty when you think Jacob will be there and looking at you,” Felicity said as she gripped harder at Hermione’s foot. “Stop trying to wiggle away. I’ve had to redo your last two toes three times. If you’d just keep still, I’d be done.”

Hermione made a sound that was a cross between a giggle and growl. “No one is going to be seeing our feet, though! We’ll be wearing stockings and shoes!”

“But we already did our fingernails,” Felicity explained. “Trust me, the boys will look at our fingernails and wonder if our toenails match, and that will have them thinking about our bare
legs, even if they can’t see them, and that means we are winning.”

“Winning?” Patience stopped blowing on Josephine’s big toe. “Isn’t it more of a draw if you are imagining them naked, too?”

Felicity and Hermione laughed, though Josephine blushed, a delicate pink shade that made her more adorable than usual. “I’m not imagining anyone naked,” she said primly as she capped the polish bottle. “Painted nails just look nice, and I like them.”

“Well, it isn’t really a party, anyway,” Hermione gritted out, fighting her instinct to jerk away from Felicity’s hand. “And next time, I’m painting my toe nails with magic.”

“What is it?” Felicity asked, for probably the fifth time.

Patience shook her head. “You’ll find out tomorrow. Words can’t do it justice anyway.”

“I hope this surprise, whatever it is, means our study group gets back on track on the weekends,” Josephine sighed, setting down the polish and picking up the bottle of butterbeer she’d brought back from their last Hogsmeade weekend. She took a sip and handed it to Hermione. “I could use the extra practical practice in transfiguration before the OWLs.”

Hermione drank from the bottle, noting again that something in the recipe had changed over the years. The butterbeer from the future had been slightly sweeter, though this version was richer, more buttery. She couldn’t decide which she preferred. There was a slight catch in her chest, as she had a pang of despair that she’d never see the future again, not in the same way. So much had changed, at her hands. And she could only hope she was making the right choice as the future slowly unrolled in front of her.

Felicity let go of her foot, and Hermione looked at the others. “Sorry, I was miles away. Everything will be explained tomorrow, and you will have plenty of opportunity for practicing, Josie, I promise.”

“And for flirting?” Felicity prompted, making Josephine blush again.

Hermione smiled. Josephine and Jacob were too cute together, the way they both tried to pretend they weren’t interested in one another except as friends. If even one of them actually
managed to flirt tomorrow, she’d be shocked. “Sure, flirting, too,” she gave Felicity a knowing smile. “Who’s going to be your victim?”

“Oh!” Felicity turned her nose up in mock arrogance. “As if I’d lower myself to flirt with a snake.”

Her face turned serious for a second, and she added, “They all play nice, but I know most of them still think I’m not good enough to be any kind of love interest. Sebastian looks at my arse when he thinks I don’t notice, and Corvus stares at my chest, but they wouldn’t ever actually touch me, other than the kind of ‘dirty secret’ tumbles that take place in abandoned classrooms on the west wing fourth floor.”

Folding up her legs, Hermione leaned over and hugged Felicity tightly. “You are wonderful and smart and pretty and any wizard would be lucky to have you, no matter any silly thoughts of blood status.”

“Yes, but I think I’ll stick with a Gryffindor or Hufflepuff,” Felicity joked. “Easier to control, since I’ll be the smart one.”

Hermione snorted, thinking of how not a single Gryffindor boy from the future, with the exception of Neville, had listened to her, especially when she was speaking common sense. “Better just stick to Hufflepuff, if you want a man who might listen.”

This observation led to a discussion of all the annoying things the male students at Hogwarts did, which continued until Josephine began to yawn. Patience was already asleep on Hermione’s pillow, and Hermione didn’t have the heart to wake her, so as Felicity put out the lights, Hermione whispered a spell to enlarge the bed that was not made for two, and snuggled backwards along the length of Patience’s form.

Soon, the other two girls were sleeping, as Hermione could tell from Felicity’s gentle, but deep breathing and Josephine’s mumbled dream talk, which seemed to mostly consist of giggles and Jacob’s name. Being an only child, Hermione had never had to share a bed, except for a few Christmases as the Burrow. Even the magical tent she’d called home while on the run had provided a separate bunk for her.

Now, with Patience so close, Hermione felt wide awake and painfully aware of how their bodies touched, Hermione’s back to Patience’s front, the gentle swells of Patience’s breasts pushing softly against Hermione’s shoulder blades, Patience’s arm thrown over Hermione’s waist, her long fingers splayed over Hermione’s abdomen.
Patience had been an amazing, ridiculous, beautiful surprise in Hermione’s life. For the first few months, Patience had felt like a link to the future, a way of still being with a friend who wouldn’t be born for decades. But as time had passed and Patience had become a closer and closer friend, Hermione simply loved her for who she was, not what she represented. Patience was kind, loyal, and much smarter and more powerful than most people realized.

Her grades didn’t always reflect this, because Patience either ‘forgot’ to do homework that bored her or would write long, complicated essays that had nothing to do with the actual assignment, and she had the dubious honor of being the Ravenclaw most likely to receive detention for these exact reasons. Professors often scolded her in class for not paying attention, as Patience was almost always looking off into space, that dreamy expression in her eyes, but when they asked her questions, she would answer correctly most of the time. Professor Kettleburn loved her, though, because Patience seemed to have not an ounce of fear in her body, and was always willing to volunteer to be the first to interact with whatever dangerous creature he’d brought to class.

Hermione couldn’t think of another person more different from herself than Patience. Even Tom had more similarities to her than the pale blonde Ravenclaw currently in her bed. At least she and Tom shared a passion for knowledge and magic, and a drive to see their wills made manifest, even if those wills were often very different. Patience was a giant question mark so much of the time – what was she thinking? What motivated her? What in the world would she do with her life after school? Sometimes, Hermione pondered a future for Patience, but no idea seemed feasible for more than a minute or so. Patience have a steady job? Patience undertake a mentally and physically grueling apprenticeship needed to become a ‘Master’ at a particular type of magic? Hermione honestly worried about her best friend quite a bit. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Patience to know what was best; it was that she didn’t trust the world to understand how beautiful and unique Patience truly was.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Hermione,” Patience whispered in her ear.

Hermione started, coming out of her thoughts, not so much shocked that Patience knew what she’d been thinking as that Patience was awake. “I know,” she turned to face her friend, her own arm circling Patience’s waist.

They were face to face now, as they had been many times since September. Patience had ended up in Hermione’s shower every Saturday and Sunday morning, and though time had been of the essence, as their two other roommates were early risers as well, they had become quite familiar with each other’s bodies, with all the secret places that elicited sighs and gasps and moans. Their fingers knew the right rhythms and thrusts, their tongues the exact twirls and perfect pressure.

Patience whispered a muting spell around the bed and laid a finger over Hermione’s lips.
“Our elements are begging to be combined.”

“Here?” Hermione squeaked, glad for the silencing spell. “Now? What if Josephine wakes up? She’s the lightest sleeper.”

“Here,” Patience nodded, sliding her hands under Hermione’s nightgown, rucking it up past her waist. “Now.”

Hermione shivered as Patience’s cool palm moved up the curve of her ribcage. “We’ve done so much magic today – do you even have the energy?”

“Our magic is circling around us. I can feel Tom and Abraxas’s. Can’t you?” Patience’s mouth was on Hermione’s bared shoulder, alternately kissing and sucking.

Closing her eyes, Hermione pulled at her magic, and felt it – Tom glowing with satisfaction, and Abraxas, radiant with pleasure. She was connected to both of them, and now, they were connected to each other. This was much, much stronger than the group magic they had done in the Chamber. That spell had laid the foundations for these deeper, permanent connections that were closer to the soul mate bond than Hermione had realized. Had Tom realized the impact of this yet? Was he still so overwhelmed by the initial wave of pleasure that he hadn’t completely experienced how tightly the four of them would be bound once these cross-circle spells were all done?

“Don’t be afraid,” Patience’s lips were at Hermione’s ear now, her fingers undoing the buttons on the nightgown. “We’ll be fine. *He needs us,* even if he doesn’t want to admit it. And *you need us,* so that you don’t get lost in him, in trying to prevent or counteract everything he does. You are not responsible for Tom, Hermione. Only he is.”

Hermione was used to Patience saying things out of nowhere, of Patience’s ability to pull thoughts and feelings from deep inside and lay them bare, but being used to it didn’t make it any easier. “But I am,” she protested quietly, unable to say more.

“No, no you are not,” Patience countered, pulling Hermione’s nightgown completely off her. “You are as bad as he is sometimes. You both think you can control the whole world,” she said these last words in amused frustration, her silky soft lips kissing Hermione’s neck between words.

“I do not!” Hermione protested, though her indignation was spoiled slightly by the moan
she made when Patience’s fingers lightly traced her areola, making that sensitive skin instantly respond by hardening. “I don’t think I can control -”

Patience’s grin was only just visible in the moonlight coming through the window as she interrupted her friend. “You want to control people just as much as Tom does. The only difference is that Tom wants to control people because he likes the feeling of power, and you want to control people because you think you know what is best for everyone.”

She would have immediately argued if Patience hadn’t placed her lips on Hermione, kissing her with those soft lips that made Hermione forget everything, that made her relax like some kind of drug designed to shut down thinking. Her hands moved along the edges of Patience’s knickers, slipping under the waistband to squeeze that curvy arse that even the boxy Hogwarts uniform failed to hide.

“Let all that responsibility go, Hermione,” Patience said, handing Hermione her wand from the bedside table. “Just for tonight. Let’s have fun.”

Hermione couldn’t help the smile that formed on her lips. Something about Patience brought out her lighter side, the part of herself that Hermione usually kept weighted down by a sense of duty, knowledge of future horrific possibilities, and the need to be the best in all her studies. That was probably why she loved Patience so much. With the pale, dreamy blonde who never seemed completely present, Hermione was able to find that lightness, the joy of simply being without the use of Narcissa’s potion.

“Fine,” Hermione murmured, using her wand to divest Patience of her nightgown and knickers, then cast “procella,” the Latin spell word that meant hurricane. She had always felt that her relationship with Patience was one of peace, and wondered just what she was getting herself into with invoking a destructive tropical storm.

Patience’s returned phrase was something similar – a gusty storm, and as soon as the words were spoken, Hermione felt the magic settling on her skin, sinking into her, making her hungry for touch, for completion of the spell. Patience clearly felt the same, because she pulled Hermione’s knickers off and asked in a husky voice that didn’t sound at all like her normal self, “Fingers or tongue?”

It was dark, which emboldened Hermione. “Both, please,” she replied.

“Good answer,” Patience laughed, and slid her body down Hermione’s front, kissing and licking as she went, taking her time to suck on Hermione’s nipples and leave little love bites on her
ribs. She even traced Tom’s words, whispering, “how lucky we all found one another.”

Before Hermione could ask her what she meant, her hips were canted forward as Patience slipped her hands under them, pulling Hermione as close as she could. She spoke again, this time with exaggerated emphasis, so that little puffs of air teased at the slick, sensitive skin Patience was less than an inch from. “You smell like lightening – the mix of your charged air and Tom’s fire as it hits Abraxas’s earth.”

“What about you?” Hermione asked breathlessly, aching to have Patience touch her with more than her breath.

Patience smiled, and she was so close to Hermione’s cunt that the movement of her lips brushed against her labia, gliding smoothly through the moisture there, no catching, just a whisper of a caress, and when she pulled back, Hermione could see how her lips glistened in the moonlight.

“I’m right here,” her lips curved upward in a wide smile as she ran a finger along Hermione’s seam, then suddenly thrust two fingers in and out, twisting and withdrawing in a move that left Hermione panting. “Do you think you’d be this wet without my water magic flowing all over you?”

“Patience,” Hermione gasped, half aroused and half embarrassed. She was insanely wet; she could feel it seeping into the sheets below her. This bed was going to need a serious *scourgify* before morning.

The pale blonde lowered her head, and Hermione finally understood fully the slang phrase “eating out,” because Patience was devouring her. Hermione wound her fingers in Patience’s hair, but it was more to hold on than to provide any direction. Usually, Patience was languid and gentle in her movements, but now she was much more forceful, her fingers long and curling into the soft inner walls, finding all the spots that made Hermione’s back arch, while her tongue worked a magic that made Hermione’s toes curl into the blankets.

Occasionally, she would raise up just long enough to make filthy comments that reminded Hermione how much she secretly loved dirty talk. “The boys taste your magic, but I can taste the girl underneath. You are sweet and tart and juicy, like a plum…and something else.”

Patience dragged her tongue at a painfully slow pace over Hermione’s clit, flicking it with her tongue, then grazing it hard enough with the edge of her teeth that a buzzing thrill shot through Hermione’s body even as warnings went off somewhere in the back of her mind.
“Something else,” Patience repeated, her lips massaging the upper part of Hermione’s labia while her fingers thrust and stroked the lower half, her thumb dipping below, toward the delicate skin of Hermione’s arse, ghosting over the spot that sent another thrill up her spine, along with a jump in her pulse.

Hermione tugged on the pale blonde hair, forcing Patience up. She kept her fingers in the silky mass and pressed her lips to Patience’s, tasting herself. There was a hint of ozone, the tingle of magic, mixed with the unique flavor of Patience, which was like the breeze from the ocean on a summer day – cool and wet with a hint of salt. As they kissed, Hermione let one of her hands drift down Patience’s chest, past her hips, and into the wetness between her legs.

It didn’t take long for the magic to reach a fever pitch around them with their fingers thrusting and curling and twisting, their mouths on each other’s faces, necks, and breasts. Hermione’s heart was beating so fast, her breath coming in such pants that she worried she would pass out again. Sex magic, she was learning, had the ability to shut one down completely, to temporarily short-circuit one’s magic from its sheer power.

“Hold on,” Patience whispered with a grin as her finger pressed into Hermione’s clit. “We’re coming.”

And they did, together, Patience with a joyful shout and Hermione with a bitten lip and a low, sustained moan of pleasure, their arms and legs wrapped around each other, somehow managing to work the words of the spell into their orgasms. Their combined magic settled around them, and the sensation was shockingly similar to a protection spell, the feel of it was one of being safe.

Patience brought her fingers to her lips, the ones that still glistened with Hermione’s juices and sucked on them. She cocked her head to the side, not dreamy for once, but lost in serious contemplation.

“Oh,” Patience said, her eyes and mouth wide as if she’d suddenly understood an ancient mystery. “You are a juicy plum,” her fingers went back to Hermione’s cunt, going deeper, making Hermione’s hips rise to meet them in the aftershock of orgasm and magic, “stuffed with juicy secrets.”

As Patience spoke the word secrets, Hermione froze, but Patience’s touch gentled, like someone approaching a spooked horse, and she whispered, “Don’t worry, Hermione, not even Voldemort could pull your secrets from my mind.”
“What did you say?” Hermione was filled with a paralyzing cold.

“Voldemort,” Patience replied easily, as if naming a cloud in the sky on a lazy afternoon. “One of the many potential futures for Tom, the one you are trying to change. I had a vision of him a few days ago, but it was not in our timeline.”

“How?” was all that came out of Hermione’s mouth, though it sounded more like strangled despair than a word.

“Did you hear that in my mind?” She knew that Patience was special, that she knew things, but it was easier for Hermione’s orderly, logical mind to believe in something like ESP than to believe that someone could see into the future, that things like divination (such a fucking ridiculous study that wasn’t even really a study) or prophesies were actually...true. She knew that Trelawny had predicted the future, but that prophesy wasn’t real until a crazed Voldemort made it so. Hermione was firm acolyte of free will, that one’s future was always in one’s hands, not predestined. The only time prophesies even worked was when one of the people who was involved heard the damned thing, then let that “knowledge” either consciously or unconsciously affect his or her behavior and life choices.

Patience was still between her legs, still touching her in a soothing way, her soft, sweet voice smoothing down some of the frayed edges of Hermione’s nerves. “No, I told you, I saw it. I’ve always been able to see the future, many different versions of it. It comes in flashes, and often doesn’t make any sense until the events have come and gone. Sometimes it is the near future, and sometimes I think what I see is far beyond my own life. I don’t control it. I’m just a conduit. But you’re out of time, Hermione. You and your mother, and being around you makes the visions come more often, because you are a split in time, a source of more than infinite possibilities.”

“How?” Hermione repeated dumbly, her brain in tatters.

“I don’t know,” Patience shrugged, then a fierce expression came over her face, and with her pale looks, Hermione was briefly reminded of Narcissa when she was angry. “But you are safe with me. I’m yours, mind, body, and soul, and I won’t let you fail.”

Hermione was crying, not realizing it until she felt the tears splashing onto her chest. She was still scared, but she was also relieved. The knowledge was such a weight, and Patience was offering to help carry it, to help her make the best decisions she could, to give her a shoulder to rest her head on when she was overwhelmed, which was so often these days since opening the Chamber, Hermione barely remembered what it was not to be stress-filled and anxious.
“Shhh,” Patience cooed, coming up to hold Hermione, though one of her hands stayed between Hermione’s legs, moving in long, slow strokes, not trying to arouse her so much as reassure her. She slid her other arm under Hermione’s shoulder, pulling her toward her chest, their loose hair tangling together. “We’re supposed to be having fun, remember? You are always safe with me, Hermione. And you are safe with Tom, too. I know it. I can feel it. He might still do bad things, but he will never be that. He will never be Voldemort – not now you are here. You did change the future.”

It was difficult for Hermione to reconcile all the emotions she was experiencing. There was the aftermath of the spell, of her body’s intense pleasure, and then there was her noisy brain, running through all the possible ramifications of Patience’s knowledge.

“I think I have impacted Tom’s life in a positive way, that Mother,” she paused wondering how much Patience knew about her ‘future’ self, whether it was simply knowledge that they were ‘out of time’ or details of their lives, “and I have helped put him on a much less angry path, but I don’t know that I’ll ever feel confident that the wrong series of events wouldn’t create Voldemort, all over again.”

“Between the three of us ladies, we’ll figure it out.” Patience looped both arms around Hermione’s waist, pulling her close and resting her pale head on Hermione’s shoulder. It was such a common position, Patience’s favorite one, that it was instantly familiar and comforting, and Hermione sighed in pleasure despite her busy brain.

“Oh, Patience, I hope so,” Hermione whispered into her hair, summoning their clothes, murmuring cleaning spells on the bed, and cancelling the silencing spell. Patience was asleep again in less than a minute, but Hermione lay awake for a long time.

Up until now, she and Narcissa had taken a rather organic approach to influencing Tom, simply providing affection and support, a home for him, space for him to learn how to be around others without the need to control them. This had worked very well for a ten year old, but now, Tom was only about a month away from sixteen, and almost an adult by the standards of the magical world. His ambition would only explode after leaving Hogwarts, and Hermione needed a plan to deal with that, with the fallout that would inevitably follow. He wouldn’t stop until he had climbed to the top, and Hermione couldn’t simply be running ahead of him, trying to prevent messes before they occurred. She had to be pro-active. Fortunately, she smiled to herself, planning was one of her strongest skills.
Secrets Are Made to Be Told

Chapter Summary

Hermione talks with Narcissa about what's happening down in the Chamber, and Narcissa shares some very valuable information. Tom tells Hermione his long-term plans, and Astarte tells Tom a secret.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is plot heavy to make up for the last few very porny chapters. Love and hugs to you all! I love this fic and all the awesome feedback!

The first thing Hermione did upon waking at five the next morning was run to her mother’s suite. Narcissa entered the sitting room in her robe as Hermione came in the door, which was warded to only allow immediate access to Galatea or Hermione.

“Darling, what are you doing here before dawn? Is something wrong with Tom?” Narcissa pushed a strand of light blonde hair behind her ear, her face lined with worry.

“Is Galatea here?” Hermione whispered, glancing toward the bedroom.

Narcissa shook her head. “I was at the infirmary over the night. Three second-year Hufflepuffs have some form of the measles we haven’t been able to cure yet. I actually just got back after Electra came to relieve me. I was going to take a bath and then a nap, but looking at you, I think I might need to call for tea.”

“Some very strong tea would be lovely.” Hermione sank into one of the chairs by the fireplace and pointed her wand to start a roaring fire.

After Narcissa had summoned an elf, who had a pot of tea and tray of toast and other breakfast breads on the tea table between their chairs in less than a minute, they sat facing each other. “Now, what has you so upset?”
“What doesn’t?” Hermione groaned. “I forgot how crazy OWLs made me the first time around, and add to that being in the Chamber with a basilisk trained to kill me, even if it does obey Tom, and all the spells Tom has access to now, and everyone is going down there today, and I just…” she trailed off, then summoned her courage to tell her the one thing that really mattered. “Patience knows we’re from the future.”

Even after five years, Narcissa continued to impress Hermione with her absolute sense of self-control. Her adopted mother barely batted an eye. “Is that so? I wouldn’t have thought Patience was aware of what day of the week it was.” The snark in her voice was the only clue Narcissa was at all bothered.

“She’s,” Hermione hesitated to use the word, but forced herself to do so, “a seer of some kind. She told me that she knew we were both ‘out of time’ and that being around us increased her visions.”

“What kind of visions has she told you of?” Narcissa calmly took a sip of her tea.

“Tonight, she used the name Voldemort,” Hermione answered.

Narcissa’s face remained impassive, but her teacup rattled on the saucer. “She’s seen Tom become the Dark Lord in this timeline?”

“No,” Hermione put a hand over Narcissa’s, taking the teacup and setting it on the table. “Patience said that was an alternate future, one that we’ve prevented. She said that she sees different paths, but she can somehow sense which ones are more likely to happen.”

“That’s an extremely rare talent among seers, who are already an extremely rare breed,” Narcissa observed. “Seers tend to keep to themselves and not make a lot of personal connections. Are you sure that Patience will keep this secret of ours?”

Hermione answered immediately. “Positive.”

“What makes you so sure?” Narcissa arched an eyebrow, telling Hermione without words that she was aware there was much more to this story than Hermione was currently sharing.

There was silence, and Narcissa squeezed Hermione’s hand. “You and I have promised to
be honest and frank with one another. We would not have been able to bear these past five years, if not for that surety. I know I am older, and that I have taken the place of mother in your mind, but you must never be embarrassed to talk to me, about anything.”

“What do you know about elemental magic and bonding?” Hermione replied with a question.

Narcissa blinked, then looked toward the fire, her expression thoughtful. “The standard amount, I suppose. Perhaps a bit more. There were many old books on elemental magic in my childhood home and in the Malfoy manor library. Combining one’s elemental magic was once widely practiced, about five hundred years ago and further back, and seeking out a balanced quartet was common, especially for powerful witches and wizards, a way to increase their magical abilities and hone their casting. Many times, two married couples would join and that was considered as binding as a group marriage if the permanent spells were used because they tied the casters for life. Usually, the children from the two pairs would be encouraged to marry because their magic was often very strong from birth.”

“Why did elemental magic and bonding fall out of common practice?”

“Oh, many reasons,” Narcissa waved a hand. “The biggest reason was blood purity.”

Hermione’s mouth twisted into a bitter frown. “Of course it was.”

“Elemental affiliations tend to run in families, so intermarriage over and over narrowed down the magical signatures. Most pure-blooded families have earth magic, and weak earth magic at that. Occasionally, a child is born with a different element to his or her magic, but not often enough to support the elemental quartets and maintain blood purity.”

Hermione concentrated, let her magic move toward Narcissa. “But you’re not earth. You’re fire.”

Narcissa nodded. “I am because my mother was, and so were both my sisters, but that really was unusual. Even here, a few generations in the past, most of the pureblooded students I treat are earth. Why do you ask, Hermione?”

“Well,” Hermione started, thinking that Narcissa probably already had a good idea of what she was going to say. “Tom and Abraxas and Patience and I have done most of an elemental quartet
Her mother closed her eyes and rested her head back against the chair. “Oh, Hermione. What is *most*? And *how* exactly did you bond? With sex magic?”

“We’ve done two complete group spells, and completed all the cross corners except for water and earth,” Hermione said, then added in a mumble, “and yes, it was sex magic.”

“Darling,” Narcissa began in a concerned tone, her brown eyes open and locked on her daughter now. “Have you been using the permanent spells?”

Hermione nodded, feeling vaguely ashamed and angry that she did. It wasn’t that she had entered into this behavior lightly, or at least, she didn’t think she had.

“What is it about the elemental bonding that has you so concerned?” she asked.

“Besides the fact that a group of fifteen and sixteen year olds have permanently bound themselves magically to one another for the rest of their lives?” Narcissa raised both eyebrows, which was rare for her.

Hermione frowned. “That isn’t uncommon in the magical world, especially in this time period. You told me you were engaged at sixteen.”

“Yes, that is the common practice, for purebloods and other half-blood families who have been magical for many generations, but it is not for everyone, and it is not a practice I would endorse for my own child.”

“You wouldn’t have seen Draco engaged in a few years?” Hermione asked before she thought.

Narcissa’s face flashed with raw pain before it quickly became her normal, neutral mask. “I was talking about you. *You* are my only child, because Draco won’t ever exist in this timeline, and since you have bonded elementally with Abraxas, Lucius isn’t likely to be born in this timeline, either.”
“What?” Hermione hadn’t even thought about potentially writing Lucius out of existence, and she felt awful for mentioning Draco, which she knew was a source of great pain to Narcissa, her biggest regret when it came to their actions was leaving her son behind.

“I don’t think you understand what you’ve done. When the Malfoys try to enter into a magical engagement contract with another pureblood family for Abraxas, several diagnostic spells will be conducted,” she glanced into the fire with distaste.

“Usually, these are mainly to ensure that the girl is a virgin, but they will also reveal any other magical contracts or bindings, to prevent hiding previous engagements or claims. Your bond with Abraxas and his bond with Tom will both be there, and if you continue forward, there will be one with Patience as well. And when Lord and Lady Malfoy see those bonds, they will try to break them, and I think we know just how well Tom will take that. We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t kill them and end up in Azkaban.”

Hermione’s stomach was churning as she tried to think of solutions, of words to reassure both Narcissa and herself. “It’s too late to go back now,” she kneeled in front of Narcissa, taking both her hands. “I know it seems rash, but believe me, our connection – all of our connections – are strong. Tom is better, more balanced with us, and this is healthy. It isn’t some lewd, purely sexual thing. He feels more than he used to, and that has to be a good thing, doesn’t it?”

“I’m not judging you by muggle morality standards,” Narcissa gently stoked Hermione’s cheek. “Don’t think that. Sex magic isn’t considered wrong or immoral, and neither is elemental bonding. It is simply, that because of the strength of both of these kinds of magic, they are not meant to be used by minors. I know that you are not really a minor, and that Tom is very mature, but what of Abraxas and Patience? Do they really understand what they’ve done?”

“They do,” Hermione said firmly. “We are all mature, more than you realize. These bonds, this magic, it is so natural. It’s like an extension of myself. I can feel all of them now, their magic filling in the gaps in mine, the weak spots shored up. It really is wonderful, Mother.”

They were both silent for a few minutes, then Hermione spoke again. “You said that the Malfoys would try to break the bonds,” Hermione latched onto Narcissa’s earlier words. “Can these bonds be broken?”

Narcissa shook her head. “Maybe if the magic had been weak, but with both you and Tom involved in the casting? I don’t think the Malfoys stand a chance, and the only other way to break it would be to kill the others in the bond.”
Her brown eyes filled with tears, something that never happened. “Do you believe for an instan
that the Malfoys would hesitate to hire someone to try to kill you and Tom and Patience? This is going to be a disaster. Abraxas is sixteen. His parents will be pressuring him to start looking at prospective fiancées. Even if he does put them off, it is only a matter of time before that fact that the four of you are bonded will come to light.”

Hermione needed to comfort Narcissa, but she wasn’t sure of the right way. “Mother, we’ve both stood against the most powerful dark wizard in history. What are the Malfoys to us? And we have some time. Abraxas will put off his parents, at least until we’re all seventeen, and then… What about the ‘good as marriage’ bit you mentioned? What if we can say we’re already bonded, in a public forum? If everyone knew, the Malfoys couldn’t try to hurt us without it being obvious they were behind it.”

“Darling, those are ancient customs, maybe not even actual laws,” Narcissa protested. “I have no idea if they are even still in place,”

“I’ll look in the Chamber,” Hermione cut in. “There has to be some information there, and we can find out from the Ministry about laws on this subject. I’ll request a copy of all laws pertaining to marriage and binding.”

Narcissa couldn’t hold back a startled laugh. “Hermione, that will be thousands of pages, I am sure. I don’t know if even you would be able to sort through it.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I have a year and three people to help me, isn’t it?” Hermione replied with a smile.

“Darling, you have five,” Narcissa corrected gently. “Of course, I will tell Galatea about the bonding, and we will help as well. She loves trouble and intrigue. Nothing will make her smile wider than the thought of a pureblooded family like the Malfoys being forced to include half-blooded members.” She shook her head. “Thank all the Gods and Goddesses that no one knows you are muggle born.”

Hermione had relaxed somewhat, though she knew Narcissa was still very concerned. “The primary goal was to keep Tom’s soul intact, Mother. This really is a step in the right direction, even if it raises other complications. We’re changing the future. It couldn’t all be smooth sailing.”

Narcissa arched one brow and her lips took on a sarcastic tilt. “Darling, this isn’t a little bit of choppy waters. This is going headlong into a hurricane.”
“Then, with so much water, the glass will have to be half-full, at least, right?” Hermione smiled so widely her face ached.

“You are a silly, silly goose,” Narcissa sighed, hugging her. “But I love you. And we’ll weather it together, as we always do, dear.”

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Hermione left her mother’s quarters about an hour later, heading down to the early breakfast. Narcissa had agreed to talk to Galatea about the situation and making the marriage laws request to the Ministry from Hogwarts, to make it look like a project for school, rather than a personal inquiry. They would find out if there was any law that would protect the completed elemental binding as superior to any engagement contract or subsequent marriage bond. If that was the case, then there wasn’t a lot of recourse for the Malfoys, though Hermione was sure they would take exactly the kind of measures Narcissa had mentioned. However, unlike Narcissa, who was concerned as a mother, Hermione was not scared of Abraxas’s parents, especially not with Tom, Abraxas, and Patience at her side, not to mention Narcissa herself and Galatea.

She did want to have a conversation with the rest of the group, though, to make sure they were truly aware of just how serious this was. Narcissa had told her that she thought if Patience and Abraxas remained unbound, then the other connections would weaken a bit with time and the quartet wouldn’t have the status to prevent any future engagements. Yes, the links to Tom and Hermione would show up, but they could potentially be ignored.

As much as Hermione thought this solved many of the problems of Tom’s possessiveness (and her own, if she were honest with herself), she had to be sure that everyone was on the same page, that no one was being lied to by omission. It would hurt greatly to see Abraxas married to someone like Marguerite, but that should be his choice, not hers, and not Tom’s.

Patience was standing outside the dining hall. She gave Hermione her far-away smile as she approached. “Look what Tom’s fire magic is letting me do.”

She waved her wand, tracing fiery runes for *desire* and *power* that burned brightly in the air, then making the runes wash away in what looked like rain, though no actual water fell. It was not practical magic, but it did require skill and effort for Patience to tap into the part of Tom’s magic that was bound to her own, and Hermione appreciated it from an intellectual standpoint. “Nice, Patience.”
“And this is from you,” Patience continued, forming the runes for beautiful, friend, and love in the air in hovering rain drops, then allowing them the blow away, as if by an unseen breeze.

Hermione took her arm and squeezed it. “I love you, too, Patience.”

The blue snake on Patience’s wrist hissed and Hermione’s locket rattled gently, apparently responding to even a bastardization of parseltongue. Patience looked pleased, and they walked into the hall smiling.

There were more students than usual so early on a Sunday, but they were almost all part of the study group, which meant that most of the students were at the Slytherin table, even the non-Slytherins Felicity and Josephine. Hermione steeled herself when she saw Marguerite sitting at Tom’s side, though she noted that Marguerite had left at least a foot and a half of space between them. Tom immediately noticed them, as did Abraxas, who was on his other side, and definitely less than a foot away.

“Hermione,” Tom called, his voice echoing. “Patience,” he added as an afterthought, though Patience didn’t seem to notice.

Corvus and Vidhi moved down to allow Hermione and Patience to sit directly across from Tom. “Thanks,” Hermione murmured.

“I was thinking of sending out a search party,” Tom said, his voice tart as a lemon. “We wanted to get started early today, as you both knew.”

Hermione met his gaze and frowned. “I was speaking to my mother, about something rather important, Tom.”

His mouth flattened into an unpleasant line. “Important? Really? More important than our work of months?”

Several of the Slytherins subtly began moving away, sliding along the benches. Hermione made her voice as calm as possible. She was not in the mood to deal with Tom’s autocratic behavior. She’d just spent an hour defending how far he’d come emotionally to her mother, and now he was acting like a spoiled brat.
“Actually, it impacts some of our work, and I’m happy to discuss it with you later. I’m here now, and I had breakfast with my mother, so I can leave whenever you are ready.”

Tom looked annoyed, but he nodded and stood, telling the others to follow him, quietly. The group exchanged many glances, but everyone followed Tom out of the hall, out the front door, and around toward the greenhouses. Hermione brought up the rear, erasing any tracks in the soggy ground and murmuring notice me not spells over the entire group as they walked.

When they reached the entrance, Abraxas and Tom levitated the rocks and branches and the whole group began buzzing as the tunnel mouth was revealed.

“Quiet, please,” Tom spoke firmly. “We need to get everyone in as quickly as possible to keep this location a secret. I need to go first, and Hermione will close the entrance behind us. Everyone move in a neat single file, please.”

The excitement was palpable, Hermione thought, as the small group instantly formed a line and disappeared down the tunnel, the taller ones ducking as they went. She closed up the entrance, and turned to Patience, who had waited for her, and walked down arm in arm.

The group had come to the wide-open antechamber, and even Marguerite and Sebastian, who were the most difficult to impress, were wide-eyed and open-mouthed in astonishment.

“It’s real? The Chamber is real?” Marguerite was asking repeatedly in a low voice for once not throwing angry glares at Hermione.

“This is bloody brilliant!” Corvus whooped. “The ceiling’s so high, we could fly our brooms down here!”

Several shrieks interrupted the joyful laughter and comments when Astarte slithered out of the mouth of the statue.

“Fucking hell!” Jacob yelled, which seemed to be the standard response, even from the girls. He threw himself in front of Josephine, who had moved back toward the wall in shock.

Felicity froze, her voice trembling as she held out her wand in a defensive posture. “Isn’t the legend that this thing kills muggleborns?” Her words echoed in the cavernous space.
Tom spoke in a rapid hiss and Astarte answered back and then slipped away again. He turned to Felicity, and Hermione was shocked when he actually put his hand over hers, lowering her wand slowly in a comforting gesture.

“You don’t need to worry, Felicity, Astarte is bound to serve me as the Heir of Slytherin, and I’ve told her that I don’t believe in blood purity. She would never attack anyone, regardless of blood status, without my command.”

“So, what you’re saying is that I need to stay on your good side?” Felicity joked, deflecting her fear with humor, as she always did.

Tom smiled, and it was a beautiful smile, all charm and reassurance. It would have worked on anyone, let alone a scared fifteen-year old girl. “You have nothing to fear from me or Astarte, Felicity. You are safe here.”

He let go of her hand and said to the group at large, “You are all my guests in the Chamber of Secrets. This room isn’t even the best of what it holds. Come,” he motioned for them to follow and led everyone into the library/potions laboratory.

There was another extended round of ooohs and aaahs as everyone walked around, drawn to different areas depending on their personalities. Jacob and Vidhi went straight for the books, browsing the titles and both groaning in frustration when they realized that most of the selection was in foreign languages, though Vidhi was delighted to find some in Hindu, and Jacob knew Greek, and they both could read Latin, as well.

Sebastian, Marguerite, and Josephine went to the potions ingredients, poking around in jars and holding vials up to the light, while Felicity found the aura ball, and promptly made it glow a deep green with spots of yellow like fireflies in a forest. Thad picked up the goblet and laughed delightedly when it filled with mead. Corvus examined the dueling platforms that ran along the curve of the northern wall, taking a light fall on the cushions to test the padding.

Tom came to stand beside Hermione, absently wrapping an arm around her waist. “What happened this morning?” his tone was less confrontational than it had been at the table in the Great Hall, and Hermione reminded herself that a powerful public image was important to Tom. No, not important, vital to his sense of self. He would always be more relaxed in their private conversations, more reasonable. That was something she had to get used to, as it would likely only get worse as he got older.
“I talked to Mother about the elemental binding,” she began.

“Why in the world would you talk to your mother about that?” Tom snapped, anger in his blue eyes.

*All anger is really fear in disguise,* Hermione chanted in her mind before replying, “I don’t have secrets from my mother, and I was honestly a little concerned about the ramifications of the connections – are you feeling the power of them yet?”

Tom nodded, his anger subsiding and curiosity taking its place. “What did Narcissa say? What does she know about these kinds of bonds?”

Abraxas and Patience had come over and were standing close, Abraxas looking concerned even as he good-naturedly allowed Patience to twirl her fingers in his hair. Hermione looked at them each in turn. “We all need to talk about this, but it will have to wait. We have guests now.”

Another smooth smile slid over Tom’s face as he was reminded of the others. “Of course. Tonight, then.”

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Josephine had been right, Hermione decided. Although there were a few solid hours of practicing spells and making plans to translate specific books or try out particular potions, the unveiling of the Chamber turned into a party rather quickly. The rooms themselves were magical spaces, the air charged with power and potential, and the group was giddy with it, as well as their inclusion in a secret and their new access to so much ancient magic.

Hermione had drawn upon her own previous spellwork for Dumbledore’s Army and created a binding secret keeping agreement, to make sure that neither the existence of the Chamber nor its many secrets could be revealed or discussed outside of their group. Tom had wanted to create the spell for this, but Hermione had insisted on being the maker. If she had let Tom do it, she was sure that the punishment for revelation would be something close to death. As it was, she had put in a tongue swelling hex and memory erasing charm (a modification of the powerful spell Lockhart had inadvertently used on himself in their second year), so that the moment the Chamber was mentioned to someone not in their group, the speaker’s tongue would swell, making words difficult to understand, and all memories of the Chamber would be erased from the speaker’s mind. It was a complicated and advanced spell, and Hermione had used the elemental connections to help create it, recognizing that her magic was indeed stronger from the binding spells, and she had even had Narcissa sign the contract earlier, in invisible ink, so that they wouldn’t be barred from discussing
the Chamber with one another.

None of the eight other students had hesitated before signing the document after Tom, Hermione, Patience, and Abraxas had done so, and once that was done, Thad had started passing around the enchanted cup and any pretense at studying was gone. Hermione did not have a drink, nor did Tom, and they sat in the chairs by the fire watching the rest of the group laughing and talking or practicing dueling over by the mats.

“This is not exactly what I had in mind,” Tom looked exasperated, which she knew would quickly turn to anger.

Hermione got up from her chair and sat in his lap. He glanced at her, surprise crossing his face, as they weren’t usually this affectionate in front of others. She couldn’t help but notice Marguerite’s expression of barely suppressed rage from across the room, and tried not to feel petty satisfaction. “They are happy and excited. They’ll settle down after visiting a few more times. And honestly, we still have more translation to complete before we can try out many new spells.”

Tom relaxed, putting his arms around her and pulling her back against him. His face was in her hair for a moment, and she felt him inhale deeply, then exhale hotly on the back of her neck. “I love the way you smell,” he whispered, his voice low and husky.

It was an effort not to wiggle in his lap at that comment, but Hermione just managed. Instead, she turned and kissed the corner of his mouth, their magic like electricity between them. “I love you,” she replied.

His smile broadened and he held her tighter, keeping her firmly against him as he gazed out at the others. “Do you think this was a good idea?”

Hermione thought quickly. It was not often that Tom expressed any kind of doubt, and never over his own plans. He had been the one who had most wanted to bring the others here. She wondered what exactly he wanted, what his long-term goal was. In this existence, he didn’t have followers in the same way as his alternate self did. There were no Knights of Walpurgis, but this group was loyal to Tom, willing to listen to his directions, lie and keep secrets from teachers for him. True, none of the secrets had been dangerous – yet. Hermione still cringed to think that she was the one who had caused the group to keep the worst secret – her injury of Sagitta Black back in their first year, and Tom’s subsequent obliteration of the witnesses. As well as she knew Tom, as much as she could feel this moods, she didn’t know his plans for this group, and it was time she did.
“That depends,” she spoke quietly, her face turned close to his ear, the back of her head resting against his shoulder. “If all you wanted to do was continue the study group, then this is a bit extreme. What is that you truly want from them, Tom?”

He was quiet for a long while, and Hermione could feel his struggle, a pulling back and forth along their bond as he debated what to say. Finally, he answered. “I’ve been asking myself that same question, dearest, and I am not sure. For a few years, I was thinking of the political route, but I think we both know I’m not suited for red tape or committees.”

Hermione couldn’t hold back a snort. “No, you are certainly not. You’d hex everyone until they did what you wanted and end up in a lot of trouble.”

Tom’s smile was wide enough that she felt it along the side of her face. “True, I’m not the diplomatic type. In the last year, I’ve thought more along the lines of ‘War Hero, Savior of the Wizarding World.’ What do you think?”

“And how would you accomplish that?” Hermione asked, pushing down the insane laughter threatening to bubble up inside her. Tom Riddle the Savior? The Hero? There was changing the world, and then there was turning it upside-fucking-down.

“Grindelwald,” Tom replied, his voice hardly audible. “If I can defeat him, then all doors will be open to us, and there will be positions offered without the need for years of menial work.”

She tried to twist to face him, but his arms kept her turned forward. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed again. His hold reminded her that they had an audience, and it was best to not over-react. “Tom,” she hissed lowly. “That is insane. You are a genius, and you will go down in history as an amazing wizard one day, but Grindelwald is also a genius, a Master at many forms of magic right now, and has decades of practical magical experience.”

“With the knowledge held in this Chamber, and a bit of practice in real battles, I think I will be able to defeat him,” Tom replied calmly, though he did not release his grip on her.

“You can’t simply simulate battle conditions down here, Tom, not without putting everyone’s life at risk, and possibly landing all of us in Azkaban!” She protested, adding, “Besides, even if you could, the magical skills of highly talented fifth years are not the same as the attack skills of Grindelwald and his army!”
“I know all of that, dearest,” Tom’s voice wasn’t angry, but it was determined. “We will explore the limits of dueling and simulations down here, but there is no doubt I need to get to France or Germany sometime soon, maybe over the Christmas break. If I can test myself against a small group of Grindelwald’s men, then I’ll have a better idea of how long it will be until I can face the man himself.”

Hermione’s heart was thudding in her chest, and she was at a loss for what to say. In this time, Tom hadn’t shown any interest in searching for the truth in the children’s tale of the Deathly Hallows, but Grindelwald did have the Elder Wand, and, given its violent history, Hermione did not want it falling into Tom’s hands. Add to that, Dumbledore knew about the wand as well, and though he was not antagonistic toward Tom, the Transfiguration Professor and Deputy Headmaster did not fawn over him and seemed a bit suspicious of his easy smiles. Tom going after Grindelwald would put Tom on Dumbledore’s radar, and not necessarily in a good way.

It was late 1942, almost 1943, and in Hermione’s original time, Dumbledore hadn’t had his famous duel with Grindelwald until 1945. There was no guarantee events would unfold like that now, but since Hermione and Tom had no direct contact or any kind of influence over what was happening in Europe, it seemed likely that series of events would happen roughly in the same way, if Tom didn’t interfere. And now that he had the idea, Tom would do his best to interfere. Of course, he didn’t know he was interfering, no one knew that Dumbledore would eventually step in to stop Grindelwald, though Dumbledore had to have an inkling of what was coming. That man played the long game, Hermione knew, and she would never underestimate his willingness to sacrifice the well-being of a child or children for what he thought was the Greater Good.

“Tom,” Hermione started slowly, thinking of the best way to continue. “You aren’t ready for such a step. And think for a moment what the perception would be. Even if you defeated Grindelwald, you would be this young, rash student who’d gone in without a plan, without sanctioning by the Wizarding world – you’d be a kind of…vigilante.”

Tom’s cheek rubbed hers as he laughed. “You are simply adorable when you are all concerned and indignant, dearest.” He kissed the side of her face, and then spoke again, his voice much harder this time. “I’ve made up my mind. This isn’t happening tomorrow, and I won’t go in until I’m sure of my success, but it is happening.”

Hermione slumped against him, a thousand disastrous scenarios competing to play out in her mind. It wouldn’t help to argue. She would need to talk to Narcissa and figure out some kind of way to influence Tom’s behavior more subtly.

The rest of the day continued in a festive mood for most of the group, and Hermione had to perform her tried and true role of kill-joy a half-hour before dinner by brewing a sobering potion
and making everyone drink it before exiting the Chamber to go to the Great Hall. She and Tom had already decided that it wouldn’t be a good idea to let the others know that they could summon the Hogwarts elves, because then it would be more difficult to convince the group to leave. Already, as she led others up the tunnel, she heard them excitedly chatting about next weekend in the Chamber, of the books and potions and spells they each wanted to test out.

She still needed to talk to Tom, Patience, and Abraxas about the elemental bonding, but they could do that after dinner, in the fifth floor classroom that still served as the get-together spot for the larger study group during the weeknights. It wouldn’t do to be running back and forth to the outside Chamber entrance multiple times a day. Hermione wished they could create an access point inside Hogwarts that didn’t involve going through the girls’ loo, but after her talk with Tom about Grindelwald, she had much larger worries to occupy her mind.

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As usual, Tom was the last person to leave the Chamber. He liked to take his time, looking around to make sure all the books and supplies were replaced neatly on the shelves, and when he came out to the antechamber, he called to Astarte. He made a point to talk to her every time he was in the Chamber. She had been alone for centuries, and though Tom didn’t exactly feel sympathy, he knew it was a good idea to remind her of her connection to humans, to give her at least a bit of company occasionally. And praise, also. Over the years at Hogwarts, and countless hours spent with Hermione, Narcissa, and Galatea, he’d learned about positive reinforcement. How much that mattered to a basilisk, he wasn’t sure, but it couldn’t hurt.

“Your restraint was excellent today, Astarte,” Tom hissed warmly. “I know you are bound to obey me, but it must have been difficult to hold back today, with a muggleborn here in the Chamber, after so many years of being told to kill them.”

Astarte rose on her coils, about a third of her height. The orbital bone above one of her eyes shifted, and Tom thought that if snakes could arch a brow, then she was doing so. “It was no different than any other day. There is always a muggleborn in the Chamber. Today was simply one more.”

“What do you mean?” Tom was genuinely confused. “Abraxas is pureblooded, but the rest of us are halfblooded.”

Astarte shook her giant head. “Your magic mate is muggleborn. I can taste it in the density of the magic around her.”
Tom’s expression shifted from confusion to disbelief. “I know Hermione’s mother. She’s my guardian. At the very least, Hermione would halfblooded, and Hermione is the most powerful source of magic I’ve ever felt. Her magical density is beyond compare. Perhaps you are getting old, Astarte, and your senses of taste and smell are waning.”

“No,” she spat rose up higher, towering over Tom. “I am a creature of magic, I do not age. And you, with your weak human nose, are confusing power with density. Pureblooded, halfblooded, and muggleborns have different levels of exposure to magic. Purebloods and halfbloods are exposed to it even in the womb, from either one or both parents. Muggleborns have only their own magic, none given from any other source. The density of their magic is less, but that has nothing to do with how powerful their magic is,” Astarte made a noise that would have been a condescending sniff in a human. “and your magic mate, even though she now has elemental bonds in addition to your mate bond, is a muggleborn.”

Though Tom was tempted to send a stinging hex toward Astarte for her tone, he did not. Instead, he hissed a low apology for the misunderstanding and quickly left the Chamber, his thoughts whirling.

He did not care in the least if Hermione was muggleborn, but he did care greatly about being deceived. And either one or both of the Bonneau ladies were lying to him. It was going to be his top priority to discover which of those conditions was true.
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

I struggled a bit with this chapter, but it's out now (yeah!). It's not super long, but it's setting up our next chapter, which will feature the bonding of our final pairing, those sweet, sexy blondes. Love to you all!

Narcissa’s day ended how it had begun, with a frantic teenager at her door.

Though Tom was not instantly admitted to her quarters like Hermione, she let him in as soon as the door magically announced his name. His energy was tightly controlled, but Narcissa was still able to sense that he was very upset about something.

“Tom, come in,” she motioned for him to enter, walking toward the chairs by the fire.

He did not follow her. Instead, he began pacing in the middle of the room, his magic now coming off of him in angry waves.

She was about to prompt him to speak when he turned to face her, their eyes meeting. Narcissa had spent most of her life protecting her mind from invasions. Every person who had cast legilimens on her had a unique feel. The spell was conveyed by the individual’s magic, so it contained that person’s magical signature, especially since legilimency was a very difficult, finicky spell that took great power to do correctly. The Dark Lord had used legilimency on her multiple times. His magic was strong, a burning buzz that snaked into her brain, looking for lies or discrepancies between what she thought and what she said. However, Narcissa was such a natural, strong occulmens that those attempting to break into her mind thought they had, that what they saw were her true thoughts, with no idea that she was completely in control of their spell’s outcome. Though Tom Riddle at fifteen was not the Dark Lord from her future, his magic was unmistakable, even if his touch was much lighter and worlds less menacing.
“It is rude to try to read my mind, Tom,” Narcissa spoke in a matter of fact tone. “If you want to use legilimency, which is illegal without consent from the other party, you will need to improve your skills to avoid detection.”

Tom’s mouth tightened infinitesimally; otherwise, his expression was blandly polite. “That is good to know, if I were going to do such a thing.”

“Yes, it is important to be aware of all the possible ramifications of our actions, especially if one is using magic generally considered dark or invasive,” Narcissa continued, racking her mind to think what could have happened to make Tom act so impulsively. His attempt at legilimency was not clumsy by any means, but it was noticeable, and he needed to realize this was not something he could do, especially not to the adults at Hogwarts.

Narcissa held her arms wide in an open gesture. “I think I’ve done my best to be honest with you, Tom. Perhaps you could simply ask me what you want to know?”

Tom smiled now, both handsome and horrible. “Fine, Aunt Narcissa,” he stressed the title sarcastically, venom dripping from his voice, which had deepened to a lovely baritone over his past summer, a voice very much unlike the high, shrill sound of the Dark Lord, though the inflections were similar enough to make Narcissa fight back a shiver.

“How is it that your daughter, my soul mate, is muggleborn?” he asked softly.

Whatever Narcissa had been expecting, it wasn’t that question. It was too close to too many important secrets, but piling lie on top of lie was not the tidy solution she wished for. She honestly contemplated obliterating Tom, but if he found out once, he would find out again, and he would come to a skill level soon where she wouldn’t be able to cast that spell on him, not without an actual fight.

The best lies had an element of truth, Narcissa decided. “Hermione is not my biological child. I adopted her when she was an infant. As you know, many purebloods have fertility problems, and I lost several pregnancies, as well as a son,” the pain in her voice was real, her memories of the miscarriages she had suffered and Draco’s face in the forefront of her mind.

Tom said nothing while she paused, collecting herself. “My husband was the magistrate of our small wizarding village in France,” she knew this was verifiable, if Tom wished to check. All the other Bonneaus were dead now, and she had long since secured the title and rights to the land,
though that wizarding village was currently controlled by Grindlewald. “Having a muggleborn mother, my husband was very comfortable with the muggle villages nearby as well, and had friends among the other, muggle landed gentry in our general area. He happened to be visiting one of these friends when the muggle police came to tell his friend, who was also a magistrate, that there had been a terrible crime committed in the village.”

“My husband went with them to the scene, a little cottage on the outskirts of town. Thieves had broken into the house, killing the husband and wife, but somehow, their infant daughter, only a few months old, had survived, and no one could enter the room with her crib, though the door was open. My husband quickly realized the child was magical, that her innate magic had protected her, creating a barrier spell to the room. He was able to subtly send a calming spell to the child, and enter the room. Once he picked her up, he knew she was indeed magical, and no muggle orphanage would be equipped to help her, and her parents had no close relatives. He convinced, probably with magic, though he never admitted that to me, the others to let him bring the child home to me, and we claimed her as our own, raised her as ours,” Narcissa finished quietly, certain that her reference to the muggle orphanage system would arouse Tom’s sense of protection over Hermione, as well as creating a story that echoed what the Dark Lord had done to the Potters, hopefully making him repelled by such an action at a younger age.

His brow was knitted, his hands clenched, but he looked more thoughtful than angry. “So, Hermione doesn’t know that she isn’t yours?” Tom asked, his eyes locked with hers, though he didn’t attempt legilimency this time.

Narcissa pondered quickly. If Tom asked Hermione a direct question about her knowledge, with their connection, she might not be able to hide the fact that she was lying. If, on the other hand, Narcissa told him that Hermione knew, he would be angry that she had kept that knowledge from him, though that would be more a lie of omission.

Narcissa decided to split the difference.

“I have never explicitly told her, no,” Narcissa answered carefully. “But Hermione is the brightest person I’ve ever known. There were whispers in the village when I suddenly had a child, and I’m sure she was aware of them as she grew up, as well as the fact that she looks nothing like either myself or my husband, who was also tall and fair. When she was attacked in the village, even though the word carved on her was supposedly referencing her father’s heritage, I believe that she put everything together, but, I simply don’t know for sure, because we’ve never discussed it.”

Tom nodded, and deep inside her mind, Narcissa relaxed slightly. He seemed to believe her, and to not be particularly angry, unless he was hiding it very well. “Why didn’t you tell her? Because of the fear of her being judged as less?”

“Yes,” she said, fleshing out the lie in a logical fashion. Narcissa was an excellent liar, with
decades of practice. “My husband’s mother had a particularly difficult time with being treated differently, and her experience shaped my husband. He wanted only the best for Hermione, as did I. We wanted to give her every advantage we could, though she was so smart and magically powerful from infancy, she barely needed our help.”

“Why do you think she hasn’t confronted you about this? Hermione is very vocal in her belief that blood status has nothing to do with ability. Why would it bother her to admit that she is adopted, that she is muggleborn? It wouldn’t make her any less of a witch to the opinions of those who matter,” Tom spoke slowly, reasoning out his thoughts.

Narcissa gave him a sad smile. “I suspect it is because the truth is painful. Hermione knows she is my daughter, that I would die to protect her, but if she admitted that she isn’t my biological daughter, then there is another mother out there, a father, too, who would have died for her – they actually did die for her, trying to protect her, though she doesn’t know that. As clever as she is, she must know that she was either given up, or lost her parents. Either scenario is a loss I don’t think she wishes to face.”

“I wonder about my father, sometimes,” Tom admitted. “Is he alive? Did he know my mother died? Did she leave him for some reason? What would he do if he knew I was alive?” These questions were spoken with an intellectual curiosity only, no feelings attached.

It took effort for Narcissa not to visibly react to this line of inquiry. “I don’t know, Tom. However, the muggle age of majority is older, and I wouldn’t like to see you put in a position where you might have to leave Hogwarts due to a custody concern. You are so talented, a natural at magic, and I don’t know that a muggle life, even part of the time, would suit you.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t,” Tom agreed. “I really am not that interested in searching for him. It is simply an idle thought now and again.”

Narcissa nodded, unsure of what to say next.

“I think you should talk to her about this,” Tom announced. “We are a family, you and Galatea, and Hermione and I, and we shouldn’t have secrets from one another. Hermione told me she didn’t keep secrets from you. You should return the favor.”

Tom Riddle lecturing her about family and keeping secrets? Narcissa felt the world shifting beneath her feet. Before she could respond, he spoke again.
“Hermione told me that she talked to you about the elemental bonding we have started with Abraxas and Patience,” he said. “We didn’t have a long discussion, but she implied that you had concerns.”

Narcissa hadn’t been so uncomfortable in years. Her brain could barely process the thought of her father-in-law, the Dark Lord, and her adopted daughter rolling around in a bed with that odd girl who was clearly an ancestress of the Lovegood girl who had been languishing in the Malfoy dungeons when Narcissa had left with Hermione for the past.

“Yes, I do,” Narcissa finally said. She pushed her embarrassment aside and spoke plainly, telling Tom what she had said to Hermione about the visibility of the bonds, of how they would certainly impact Abraxas, and perhaps Patience as well.

Tom listened quietly, asking a few questions, then sat silently for several minutes, lost in thought. “So, Hermione’s plan is to have Abraxas put off his parents for as long as possible, and use that time to research if there are any laws on record about elemental quartet bonding superseding betrothal contracts?”

“I believe so,” she answered, inwardly surprised at his calm. Perhaps Hermione was right about the elemental quartet being a humanizing influence on Tom.

“How like Hermione to want to solve a problem with research,” he murmured, a small smile at the corner of his lips.

Narcissa didn’t keep back her little laugh. “Indeed.”

He glanced at Narcissa, his beautiful face so deceptively angelic. She was thankful for once that the Dark Lord had changed his face. Somehow it would have been more horrible to see him commit atrocities with such a lovely visage. “What do you believe the Malfoys will do when they realize what has happened?”

She closed her eyes. “The Malfoys are one of the oldest and most powerful pureblooded families. Their wealth and position in society, combined with their pureblood status, makes them the shining example to other pureblood families, especially since they have managed to avoid madness or magical loss in the bloodlines. Lord and Lady Malfoy would do anything to keep that prestige. They can’t disinherit Abraxas, as that would be the end of their line, so be sure that they will fight to make sure he marries a suitable, pureblooded bride.”
“You think they would try to kill us?” Tom’s blue eyes narrowed, an indignant and haughty expression covered his face.

Narcissa gave him a thin smile. “I think you would find yourself narrowly avoiding many odd accidents, and needing to constantly scan your food and personal belongings for curses, especially outside of Hogwarts.”

“And if we find a law to support the validity of the bond and make that knowledge public, before any betrothal?” Tom was calm again, but a deadliness was emanating from his entire person.

She gave a noncommittal gesture. “I’m not sure, Tom.”

“I am not giving any of them up,” Tom said quietly, his voice cold and resolved.

“Alright,” Narcissa replied. “But you must be prepared for a fight when the time comes, Tom, and you must be smart about it. Landing yourself in Azkaban would make you lose them as well.”

Tom smiled, full of self-assurance. “I don’t believe there is a prison that could hold me, Aunt Narcissa.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t test that theory, Tom,” she shook her head. “You are young and impulsive. If you wish to rise to a position of power and influence, you need to reign yourself in. Act cautiously and with restraint until you are sure of victory. Isn’t that the Slytherin way?”

Tom laughed. “Certainly, for the followers. I am the Heir of Slytherin, and I set the course of action.”

Narcissa looked at him closely. Outwardly, he was near to perfect: incredibly handsome, charming, polite, with a touch of arrogance that only made him seem commanding and self-assured. Inside, she knew, he was manipulative and calculating, controlling and possessive, and purposely obscuring his true magical skill level. Where was he? His legilimency would work on most people now, she thought, though Hogwarts professors tended to be more powerful than the average witch or wizard. He hadn’t cast any Unforgiveables yet, she didn’t think, but he was certainly capable of doing so, and he had elemental bonds and a soul mate bond to draw upon, magical sources he had not had access to in the future timeline. This young man was growing more
dangerous by the day, and Narcissa realized her hopes that he might simply go into politics were unlikely to come true. How could she help direct him in a way that would be most positive?

“Tom, what do you want to do? You need to think about the future,” Narcissa was completely composed again, the perfect picture of elegance and restraint, of a wise and knowing witch. “Those who amass power are noticed, and then they are challenged. You must have an idea of where you are headed.”

Tom stood, took her hand, and bowed over it. He gave her a winning smile. “I’m headed to the top, Aunt Narcissa, and you’ll be there as well.”

With that, he left the room, and she sat there, lost in contemplation of what the fuck, to borrow a phrase from Hermione, was happening. She was still sitting, her chin in her hand, staring somewhere beyond the fire, when Galatea arrived.

“Bad day?” Galatea put her hand on Narcissa’s knee, drawing her back to the present. “You look far away, in an unpleasant place.”

Narcissa turned to her soul mate, at the older woman’s easy grin, at how youthful she managed to look, younger than Narcissa if one went by the weight in her soul. She and Hermione had discussed telling Galatea the truth, telling her about the future, but she had held back. Now, though, she felt terribly alone, and she was tired of that feeling, tired of lying to the one person she should be able to share everything with.

“I would like to tell you a story,” Narcissa began slowly.

“How coincidental! I would love to hear a story,” Galatea sat in the opposite chair, pulling it closer and taking Narcissa’s feet into her lap, massaging the soles through her stockings.

The paler woman shifted, her body relaxing into Galatea’s touch even as her mind wound tightly, her emotions a tangled mess of fear and need to share the truth. Galatea looked up at her. “You are scared, darling. Don’t be. I love you.”

Narcissa felt wetness on her cheeks, realized she was crying. “Oh, Tea. I love you, too. I… but…I’ve kept so much from you.”
Galatea nodded solemnly. “I know. You have walls so tall and thick I haven’t even tried to scale them. I knew you would share if and when you could. Nothing you tell me could make me love you less, Narcissa. You are my soul mate. I’ve waited my whole life for you. No past events could change that.”

“What about future events?” Narcissa asked, her voice breaking.

Galatea raised her eyebrows. “Our future?”

“No,” Narcissa shook her head sadly, her eyes on the fire again. “A future that is also the past.”

“Time travel?” Galatea asked slowly, putting together an untold story, using five years of evidence. She was a brilliant Ravenclaw, after all. “Are you from the future?” The green flecks in her hazel eyes seemed to glow in the light from the flames. “Is Hermione?”

Narcissa nodded, and then she told Galatea everything, beginning with her childhood, losing Andromeda to her marriage, Narcissa’s own marriage, losing Bellatrix, first to Azkaban, then to madness, Lucius’s decision to follow the Dark Lord, the rise and fall and rise again of the Dark Lord, the terror of war, of living in a house occupied by the most evil person she’d ever met, a terrible tyrant who retained only the barest shred of a soul. She explained her decision to change the past, the research she’d done, the curses she had combined, of how Hermione had been thrust into her path, of how she’d seen the soul mate words and known that Hermione was a vital part of whatever she would do in the past. Narcissa told her of taking Tom from the orphanage, of everything she had discovered from Hermione about the Dark Lord’s childhood. She laid out the differences she and Hermione had already created, of all the changes they had made.

And, she cried. Narcissa shed the tears she had held in for half a decade. The tears over Draco, the son she had unmade, of losing Lucius, her husband of over twenty years, of all the connections she’d lost, and possibly destroyed forever. She cried for Hermione’s losses, the parents and friends she would never have again. All through this, Galatea held her, taking her from the chair and leading her to their bed, wrapping her long form around Narcissa’s shorter one, enclosing her in the smell of cloves and comfort.

When her tears finally subsided and Narcissa felt she could breathe again, Galatea spoke. “I trust you, Narcissa. I trust you not because of what you say, which I believe, but because I feel the truth of it in my soul. You have literally taken the future of the wizarding world in your hands, you and Hermione, and though I could say from my safe vantage point as a person who hasn’t witnessed what you have that sounds incredibly arrogant, I know it was bad. That it was unlivable. I can see it in your eyes. You and Hermione are the two dearest people in my life. You are my family, and Tom is a part of that family as well. I will not turn my back on that, on you.”
Narcissa gave a gasp of relief, clinging to Galatea’s shirt. “Thank you. I know this is… overwhelming.”

Galatea frowned. “That is an understatement of massive proportions, darling. This is worldview-changing. As frightened as you are? As bad as Grindelwald is, and you say Tom grew up to be worse?”

“I really do think we’ve made quite a bit of progress,” Narcissa murmured. “Tom is a different person already. He hasn’t done any of the horrible things he’d already done by now.”

“Like murder Myrtle? One of my Ravenclaws?” Galatea’s voice was a bit harder now. “Yes, not murdering a fellow student is progress, I’m sure, but maybe we should raise the bar a bit.”

Narcissa sat up on her elbow. “How, Tea? You don’t understand how fragile he is, how hard Hermione has worked to keep his soul intact, to make him more human.”

Galatea’s frown was never quite as crooked as her smile, and Narcissa missed the un-level expression. Frowns didn’t belong on her soul mate’s face. “Darling, I might not know the future, but letting Tom do whatever he wants for fear of what he might become doesn’t seem like a solution.”

“I’m not letting him do whatever he wants, Tea,” Narcissa began, trying to keep the testiness out of her tone. They had never really argued.

“Darling! Your view of this situation is impossibly skewed by horrific violence and fear. Tom is amassing power; he’s creating an elemental quartet at fifteen! I think that constitutes unbelievable latitude,” Galatea replied.

“You are right,” Narcissa said coldly. “My view is skewed, because I know what Tom is potentially capable of. I’ve washed the blood off the walls, Galatea. I’ve buried the bodies. I nursed my son and husband after they were subjected to hours of the cruciatus curse. I need you to do more than believe me! I need you to support my decisions and accept that Hermione and I are acting in the best way we can, that what we are doing isn’t kowtowing to Tom, but subtly shaping him to be the best version of himself. Short of killing him, what would you suggest I do differently?”
Galatea stared at her, having never seen Narcissa so passionate, so clearly communicative of her thoughts and feelings. She took a deep breath, put her hand on Narcissa’s cheek, feeling her through their bond. “I do trust you, Narcissa. It’s just you are so close to the situation, and playing with time also plays with your mind. Magicians who move through time have a tendency to go mad with all the possibilities,” she paused, then added, “Have you thought of killing him?”

Narcissa nodded. “And I will, if I must. If he makes a horcrux, Hermione and I will destroy it and kill him.”

The professor was silent, taking in the anger under Narcissa’s statement, along with all the knowledge she had gained in the last hour. Narcissa was doing what she thought was right, Galatea could feel it, and between her soul mate and Hermione, Galatea couldn’t think of two more capable and determined witches. “Narcissa, I support you. I can’t promise to always agree, and I can’t promise I won’t argue with you, but I will always love and trust you.”

Narcissa leaned into Galatea’s touch, drawing from the love infused in her soul mate’s magic as it mingled with her own. “Thank you. That’s more than I thought I’d ever have.”

-oOo0oOo-

Hermione had asked Tom, Abraxas, and Patience to meet her in the fifth floor classroom after dinner. Abraxas and Patience were there, but Tom had disappeared, and Hermione could feel anger in their connection, though it eventually subsided. Abraxas and Patience felt it as well, though not as strongly. She started without Tom, telling the other two what she’d learned about the elemental bonding process. Patience, of course, took it in her usual, unbothered manner. Abraxas blanched, but his jaw took on a stubborn set, and he insisted that it didn’t matter, that he wouldn’t bow to his parents’ wishes.

They were on the floor, lying on the dueling cushions, staring out the windows at the stars, Patience occasionally pointing out a made-up constellation. Abraxas was in the middle, both girls with a head on his shoulders, their hands linked over his stomach, trying to calm his fears with their touch.

“They’ve already sent a list,” Abraxas said quietly, breathing out a sigh that smelled of the mint chocolate pudding he’d had for dessert. “They want an answer by the new year.”
“Oh, Abraxas,” Hermione rubbed her head against the side of his shoulder, her cinnamon curls tickling along his neck and jaw. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shook with frustration, his face rubbing Patience’s corn silk hair that somehow, impossibly, was scented with the ocean, all bright sea foam and clean salt, along with a hint of lavender. Her lips were soft as she placed a chaste kiss to the tender place behind his ear. “I didn’t want to worry you, to upset you. And I felt powerless. What am I supposed to do? If I refuse, what will they do to me? They certainly won’t disown me. My parents would never admit I failed as a pureblood, as a son, as a Malfoy. They’d take me out of school and torture me until I signed the papers.”

Hermione felt sick. As much as she couldn’t stand Lucius Malfoy, as much as she enjoyed the memory of punching Draco, she knew they loved each other, that Lucius would never torture his son. She wondered if that break in tradition had started with Abraxas, or if the Abraxas from the other timeline had been cruel to Lucius. It didn’t matter now, she supposed, though the nausea in her stomach remained.

“We won’t let them,” she said fiercely, and Patience hummed her approval. “Just narrow the list to give us more time. We’ll think of something.”

“Look, there’s a unicorn,” Patience murmured into his ear. “They’re good luck. Make a wish.”

Abraxas laughed despite himself, closing his eyes to make the wish Please, please let me stay with Hermione and Tom and Patience. He held onto the thought for several seconds, trying to make it stronger, before he let it go, opening his eyes to see Patience’s face over him. She was the last bond in his circle, the water to his earth, and he knew that to bond with her would solidify all the other bonds, amplify them, and quite likely, make him ineligible for any pureblooded betrothal contracts. He had never wanted her quite as much as he did at that moment – he needed her. She smiled at him in that knowing, dreamy way.

On his other side, curled against him like a cat, Hermione was all barely contained energy, though she was quiet. She was lost in her mind, coming up with a plan to save them all, he was sure. He had faith in Hermione like he had faith in Tom, like he had faith in the existence of magic itself.

The door opened, and Abraxas immediately began to sit up, though Patience pushed her hand down on his stomach. “It’s Tom.”
“Yes, it is,” Tom came to stand over them, tall, slender and so handsome sometimes it hurt to look at him.

Hermione stood, taking the hand Tom put out to her. Abraxas watched them, amazed all over again that he was allowed to touch both of them. They were so beautiful, especially when they were together. They practically glowed with magic when they touched, and the waves of magic they emitted were powerful – practically addictive. Abraxas was a junkie, he decided, always seeking the high of touching Hermione and Tom, of simply being in the same room with them.

They communicated, barely using words. “You’ve told them?” Tom asked.

“You know? From Mother?” Hermione replied.

“I know quite a bit, little bird,” he answered, and Abraxas shivered at Tom’s tone. Patience rubbed his hand, soothing him.

The two locked eyes for a long minute. “What would that be, Tom?” Hermione asked, a touch of defiance in her tone.

That touch was all it took for Tom’s temper to flare. “You’re adopted, Hermione. You know, even if Narcissa never said it out loud. You’ve known for years, I’d wager, and you never told me. Have you so little faith in me that you wouldn’t trust me to know that you’re an orphan, too? That you are muggleborn?”

Abraxas felt cold, as if ice water were running through his veins. Muggleborn? He shrugged it away, pulling strength from the magic bond with Hermione, a warmth that soothed him. His parents were already going to kill him for disobeying. Did it really matter if they killed him a second time for consorting with a muggleborn?

Hermione’s lip quivered. Either she was about to cry or about to scream. Abraxas hoped for anger. It broke his heart when she cried.

She squared her shoulders, looking up at Tom with a fierce expression, though Abraxas noted she had not dropped Tom’s hand. “I wasn’t sure. I thought I wasn’t hers, but I wasn’t sure, and she didn’t want to talk about it, and I trust my mother, and it doesn’t matter who I was born to – Narcissa is my mother, so I didn’t pursue it.”
For once, Tom didn’t seem angry. He continued to hold her hand and brought his other hand up to first pull at one of her wild curls, then to gently tuck it behind her ear. “Astarte could tell you were muggleborn – some kind of magic density, she said. It doesn’t matter, you know. You’re still magic, just like any other witch – better than any other, because you’re mine,” he glanced down at Patience. “I’m including your pet in that statement, so don’t get huffy.”

“Your mother told me to be honest. Patience told me to be honest. Maybe they should have been telling you, Hermione,” Tom’s voice was silky, the kind of silk that could form a noose around one’s neck while one was unaware, reveling in the delight of the touch. “I need you to be honest with me. With us. We are bound, and you are never escaping me, so you’d better learn some of that trust you like to preach about, my hypocritical little bird.”

Hermione’s brown eyes were wide with a combination of surprise and anger, and Abraxas thought, arousal as well. “I would appreciate it if you stopped calling me a hypocrite whenever I don’t do things according to your master plan, Tom. Just because we are bound doesn’t mean that we don’t still have boundaries,” she argued. “Healthy relationships need those.”

“While we are being honest, let’s be honest about you. You are possessive, extremely so. And while I know that all of us find that sexy in the bedroom, it doesn’t always work outside of it. We are people, with a right to privacy in our own minds. If you want me to trust you, start trusting me. I know you’ve tried to use legilimency on me, that you have used it on Patience and Abraxas. That is not acceptable. If you want to know how I feel, ask me. And if I have personal issues about my past that I need to work out, trust me that when the time comes to share and seek support, that I will turn to you, because I love you and want to share these kinds of things with you, but maybe, just maybe, I held back because I was scared – not rationally, but emotionally. I know emotions are hard for you to understand, but I am an emotional person. You have to accept that about me, just as I accept you aren’t.”

Abraxas would have probably held his breath through this whole exchange if Patience hadn’t whispered a reminder to do so in his ear. When those two were angry, their magic crackled like electricity – fire in the air – and it was hard to concentrate on anything else, even one’s basic functions.

“Fine,” Tom said simply, the anger around him dissipating, his handsome face stretching into an easy, devilish smile, and the other three stared at him in shock. “What?” he asked, looking at each of them in turn. “I can be reasonable. Besides, I understand negotiations. I give some and you give some. I won’t use legilimency on any of the three of you, and you’ll help me figure out how to get to France over the break.”
Abraxas is a Very Sweet Snake

Chapter Summary

Patience takes Abraxas to the Room of Requirement for some wet, wet fun.

Chapter Notes

If you thought that Tom was a bit too fast to agree in our last chapter, you aren't the only one. That will be explored in further chapters, but I had to round out our elemental bonding with my two favorite blondes. This chapter is a bit shorter, but still fun, I think. These two make me grin like a fool. Love to you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Abraxas walked the hall, Patience’s cool hand in his warm one. He was following her, letting her lead the way to wherever. That was helpful, really, because he was lost in thought. For the first time in his life, Abraxas was purposely and completely going to disobey his parents, to turn his back on everything that he had been raised to believe was true. As much as he wanted to be with Hermione, he hadn’t believed that it could really happen. He had resigned himself to enjoying what was left of his freedom before he was married off to someone like his mother, a woman perfect and cold who he’d dutifully try to impregnate at least twice a month to continue the Malfoy name.

It had been a bleak future, but one he had accepted as inevitable. Then, he’d kissed Hermione on the train, and Tom had kissed him, and they’d found the Chamber and shared their magic, and Abraxas had fallen in love not simply with Hermione, but with all of them, with their togetherness, and the passion and the power and the sheer joy he’d felt were something he couldn’t give up. He couldn’t know that he was capable of that kind of love, of sharing it with others, then settle for a future that was devoid of those qualities.

Still, Abraxas wasn’t sorted into Slytherin only for his last name. He was excellent at hiding his feelings and able to read others well. He could adjust his views and attitudes according to the needs of his company, and as required for his survival. Abraxas believed in the power of Tom and Hermione, of the quartet they were making, and that was where he was placing his loyalties. Eventually, this would come to light and his parents and the rest of Wizarding society would discover exactly what they were to one another, but the Malfoy heir was perfectly able and willing to lie his arse off in the meantime.
He would send replies to his parents, listing all his objections to the candidates, carefully crafted to play on all their worst worries. For his mother, that would be social awkwardness, lack of manners, and general idiocy. For his father, it would be the hint that particular witches were lusty, that they would be “slutty” wives who would attempt to pass off bastards as Malfoys. He would even make a goodwill gesture of taking a name off the list occasionally. It would not be difficult to be difficult. Though he was not a particularly spoiled child, certainly not by pureblooded standards, the Malfoy men (as their children were always boys, due to an ancient spell) were notoriously picky about their brides, and tended to marry a bit later than the average pureblood. His own father hadn’t married until he was almost twenty-one, so putting off his choice, if done skillfully, was possible.

Patience was humming quietly, and he glanced around. They had gone up more stairs and crossed halls while Abraxas had been preoccupied. He didn’t recognize this section of the castle, but then, Hogwarts was endless, impossible to explore fully. She had pulled him out of the room when Hermione and Tom’s argument over his ability to confront Grindlewald’s men had started to reach a dangerous level of anger. He left eagerly. When their magic began to snarl at one another, it was difficult to watch, to endure. They were highly combustible, and as sensitive as Tom was to anyone exposing his weakness, which was Hermione and his feelings for her, it was only a matter of time before they engulfed that room in flames, metaphorically, and perhaps literally as well. Abraxas had no desire to be there, because he was sure Tom would be looking for a handy person to punish to work out his frustrations.

Tom’s easy agreement to not using legilimency was so much of a shock that Abraxas was instantly suspicious. Of course he was lying. Deep down, they all knew it. He would keep using it on Abraxas as a way to gage his skill level, and Abraxas would let him, because he didn’t actually have anything to hide. His love for Hermione had been his one secret, and it was gone now. Abraxas didn’t honestly mind the legilimency. Tom would need to be a master at it, to do the things he wanted to, to achieve greatness, especially in a society where so many Slytherins were in positions of power. As much as he loved and adored Hermione, he was much more realistic in his expectations of Tom than she was. Somewhere in her heart, that amazingly loving heart, she still thought she could change Tom, make him kinder. Abraxas knew better, but he liked Tom just the way he was. Perhaps he was a masochist, but it was true. Raw power like Tom was never uncomplicated and rarely good. At best, it was neutral, but always chaotic. Around Tom, Abraxas was continuously on a bit of an edge, and it was thrilling, like riding at breakneck speeds on his broom with his eyes closed. It would be insane to think he wouldn’t suffer, but he was willing to pay the price for the ride itself.

“Come in,” Patience was saying, and Abraxas entered a large oak door with iron fittings.

Inside was a gorgeous bathing chamber, with a pond-sized pool, covered in tiny silver and blue opalescent tiles that sparkled when the light caught them. The light came from hundreds of silver floating candles, high above them. A set of stairs gradually disappeared into the water, which softly bubbled. The smell of fresh, clean, spring rain filled the air, a smell that made him think of running in the hedge maze in a light rain when he was five, one of this earliest memories, being
chased playfully by his nanny elf, Sebby, who always let him win.

“Let’s swim!” Patience was already pulling off her clothes, leaving them in a pile at her feet.

Abraxas paused, enjoying the sight of the miles of pale, perfect skin that were suddenly visible. Patience’s form was nearly an exact opposite of Hermione’s. His favorite little swot was just that – small, short even among the other girls, yet, she was curvy, with wide hips and thighs and a generous bust for her frame. Her bottom was delightfully rounded, though Abraxas spent most of his time staring at her beautiful face, those fine, amber eyes with their dark lash fringe, surrounded by that wild mass of cinnamon curls.

The water in their quartet, by contrast, was only an inch or so below his own height, with long, slender limbs, narrow hips, and small breasts. All the curves in her body were concentrated in one place – her lovely arse, which was the most beautiful arse Abraxas had ever seen, a perfectly shaped upside down heart. She was shaking her hair out of its braid, and the silky strands fell down to her waist, making a white blonde cloud around her. Abraxas thought, not for the first time, that Patience must have some fairy or veela blood in her ancestry, because the way her skin glowed, the way she moved, the look in her eyes, as if she could see through and beyond him, wasn’t quite human.

He waved his wand, disrobing in one motion. Abraxas knew he was handsome and fit, and he’d never been shy. Lowering himself into the water, which was warm enough to relax his muscles, but not hot enough to sting, he watched Patience splash and swim and wondered if it were possible for humans to mingle with merfolk. Patience was definitely attuned to her water magic, and she moved like a creature of the sea, graceful and easy.

A smile tugged at his mouth as she began to sing, some made-up tune about birds and snakes cuddling. Patience was endlessly entertaining, and she made him laugh every time he was around her. He’d nearly died from trying to keep a straight face last month when she told stuffy old Professor Binns that according to the ghosts of goblins she’d spoken to in her dreams, his account of the Goblin Revolt was completely inaccurate, and she therefore couldn’t complete the assigned three feet of parchment on the causes of said revolt without further dreams on the matter. When Binns said that she’d receive a ‘Troll’ on her assignment if she made up lies, she had asked him sweetly how he’d managed to pass his own OWLs, then. He’d promptly assigned her to three weeks of detention, which had only lasted three days, because apparently Professor Binns couldn’t handle that much time in Patience’s company. He’d also docked points from Ravenclaw, which Hermione had obsessively made up for in their other classes by answering every single question, before the professor had even finished asking them, to his amusement and Tom’s annoyance.

He’d also seen her subtly cast low-level jinxes at Marguerite several times when no one else was looking, usually after she’d glared at Hermione or said something rude. She’d even
winked at him once when he saw her throw a stumbling jinx on Marguerite right before the dark-haired Slytherin had bent over a tray of stinging nettles in Herbology. Marguerite had fallen face-first into the plants, and spent the rest of the class in the Hospital Wing. Most of the students at Hogwarts might think that Patience was an odd girl who didn’t really belong in Ravenclaw, but Abraxas knew she was powerful and loyal and special and...a treasure, really. As a Malfoy, Abraxas knew not to let go of power and treasure once it was in his grasp.

Patience glided through the water to him, placing one hand on either side of the tiled pool walls behind him. “Your eyes look like a storm, like the steel of a sword. Smile so I can see the sweetness underneath.”

Abraxas’s wide mouth immediately moved into a grin. He’d long since stopped trying to hide the fact of how amused Patience made him. “I’m sweet?”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Patience hummed, linking her arms around his neck, her body flush with his now, their naked skin not even separated by the water. “The sweetest snake I’ve ever seen. You just want to hug and squeeze with your coils, not kill.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to reply that he hoped he’d never have to kill, but he was Tom’s man, and that was an unrealistic expectation, especially with Tom itching to embroil himself in the Grindelwald mess. There was no doubt they would be taking a darker turn soon. Tom would not fight to disarm, nor would he tolerate Abraxas doing so. How that would intersect with Hermione’s desire to play nice, he didn’t care to hazard a guess.

“I would kill to protect what is mine,” Abraxas answered finally. “Not out of cruelty.”

Patience leaned in, pressing her forehead and nose to his own. It was a tender, loving gesture. He felt at peace with her, even when they were discussing violence. How odd, he thought distantly. “I know. I would too. And so would Hermione, though she’ll never say so. Tom would kill because he liked it, though.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t like it that much, then,” Abraxas joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Oh, but he will,” Patience said solemnly. “Tom loves blood. It’s our job to help him balance that desire, to be the conscience he doesn’t have.”

Abraxas barked out a laugh. “We can’t make Tom do anything,” he began.
“No, but we can ask him, reason with him, convince him,” Patience responded, her lips brushing his as she spoke. “He wants to keep us happy, even if he won’t admit it. And now that he wants to be a hero, our job is much easier. Heroes have rules, have morals. Tom needs us more than ever to keep him on the path to the top of the world.”

“What can we possibly do?” he breathed against her.

“Our magic is already doing it,” she said, a mysterious tilt to her smile. Abraxas knew she could see more than she shared. “Let’s complete our connection.”

Abraxas’s lower half was already there, he thought, and had been since Patience had gotten naked, since she’d smiled at him in the classroom earlier this evening. She was beautiful, and her presence always calmed him, made him feel energized in a peaceful way, not like drinking too much strong tea or pepper up potions. They touched each other all the time, holding hands and rubbing their feet against each other under desks. She had a tendency to trace runes on his arms when she was bored in class, her cool, thin fingers slyly creeping over his wrist with a feather-light caress, making all the hairs on his arm, along with his cock, stand up. He’d had to stay at his desk after class more than once due to Patience’s fingertips, though the two times the four of them had actually been naked in the Chamber bedroom, she had remained on the sidelines, offering tangential touches and strokes rather than more centered participation. Touching her directly felt new and exciting, a deepening of their friendship into something else that was not definable.

Hermione had spent at least half an hour explaining what her mother had said about elemental quartets, about the permanency of the bonds, of how they would affect their future lives, wanting to make sure they understood the consequences with continuing. Abraxas might be concerned about his parents’ reaction, but he was committed, and with this bonding with Patience, the quartet would be complete, all the links solidified, irreversible.

He wrapped his arms around her, sliding his hands down to cup that fantastic arse, her legs wrapping around his waist instantly. He whispered the spell, a forgotten word speaking of ancient, underwater caves, and she echoed it, and kissed him, letting go of the ledge, sending them sinking into the water, their lips and tongues still tangled. When the need to breathe finally reminded him to surface, Abraxas felt light-headed, magic vibrating in them, in the water around them. They swam to the steps, and Patience charmed the tile to feel like cushions against their knees and elbows and backs as they rolled over each other in the water, kissing and touching at an unhurried pace.

Patience was straddling him, her nipples pebbled and hard against his chest, her hair brushing his shoulders and back when she leaned forward to kiss him, her hips rocking against his. She lifted her head after a kiss that must have lasted a full five minutes. “Your lips are magic,” she
murmured, “Just like Hermione said.”

Abraxas laughed, their noses bumping gently. He ran his fingers down her spine, tracing the line of her vertebrae, his hands flaring out to grasp her hips when he reached the bottom. “You girls talk about me?”

“You are our lover,” Patience explained carefully, as if teaching a child. “We talk a lot about you, about Tom, about all of us.”

“Well, yes,” Abraxas said, “but you talk about the kissing?” The thought of Hermione and Patience discussing his abilities as a lover was both flattering and frightening.

Patience nodded. “And so much more. Hermione likes your shoulders,” she ran her eyes over that body part as she spoke, her fingers caressing the muscles he’d built up from years of Quidditch. “And your hands, how they are a little rough over her sensitive bits, but I like this spot.”

Abraxas sucked in his breath in a gasp. Patience’s hand had moved to his hipbones, to the line of muscle that made a ‘v’ shape down to his groin, and she was following that stretch of skin to his very rigid, very ready to explode cock, those cool fingers wrapping around him in a firm grip that he felt through his whole body. “My hips?” he breathed. “Well, they’re yours.”

Her laugh was a pleasant, throaty sound. “I know,” the words were spoken without a trace of arrogance, just Patience’s trademark, dreamy yet matter-of-fact tone. “Don’t worry, it’s a mutual claiming.”

“Excellent,” he murmured, bringing her body up in the water so that she was floating in front of him, her pale form mostly above the waterline. He explored her slowly, standing beside her, fingertips teasing across her legs and arms and chest. She was loud, more vocal than he had ever heard, full of little moans of encouragement and hums of approval, as well as filthy commentary that sounded like it could have come from Tom Riddle. She was bold as brass, and Abraxas found he liked that very much.

When he pressed his fingers to her cunt, then followed them with his mouth, she lifted up, her head dipping under the water as her hips canted toward his lips and tongue. Her hair spread out in a white blonde halo and her breath came out in a flurry of bubbles. Abraxas thought she was the strangest, most lovely creature he’d ever come across. She tasted like the water, like the rain that he sometimes opened his mouth to catch during stormy quidditch practices. He put a hand under her arse, ran it up her back, pulling her upper half back above the water. She didn’t splutter or snort, just laughed joyfully, then moaned at his continued ministrations at her cunt.
Abraxas was aware he had an oral fixation. He almost always had something in his mouth – a hard candy discreetly tucked into his cheek during class when he couldn’t use his endless supply of sugar quills, a magically enhanced quidditch mouth guard that tasted like oranges and chocolate when he bit down on it during games or practice. But, in the area of sex, Abraxas found his truest oral delights. He simply loved going down on his partners, and he could have happily drowned in the wetness between Patience’s thighs, with tracing the delicate folds of her skin with his tongue, then moving up to suck on the nub of her clit, then back down to thrust his tongue inside her, a variation of sensations that was making her pull rather aggressively on his hair, which he also liked. He was sure she was about to come, the way she was tightening around his fingers, when she suddenly pulled away, righting herself. Abraxas hardly had time to protest the lack of contact before she had him up against the stairs, twirling them around in the water so that she was on top of him, and she traced her spread hand down his face, his throat, his chest, leaving magical traces that set his nerve endings abuzz.

“Are you ready to fuck me, my sweet snake?” Her body flush with his, but not giving him the touch he wanted most.

From anyone else’s mouth, the endearment would have been ridiculous, but from Patience, in that throaty voice she was using, it was filthy and adorable all at once. Every part of Abraxas approved, most of all his cock, which gave a noticeable twitch at her words.

“Ask me for it nicely,” she commanded, the heat of her cunt hovering over the tip of him, a taunt and a promise.

Abraxas didn’t attempt any type of prideful response. “Please, please, Patience, let me fuck you, darling,” he spoke with his eyes closed, afraid he might come just from the look of lust in her eyes. He was so far gone, he could barely think.

“Do you love me?” she asked, sinking a tiny bit, taking an inch of him inside, just enough to torture him further.

He opened his eyes, looked directly into her pale blue-green eyes. “Yes,” he answered honestly. “Though it seemed to happen without me noticing, all of the sudden.”

“Love is the most powerful type of magic,” she smiled, and quickly brought her hips down the rest of way, encasing him in her tight, silky warmth to the root. He sighed out in blissful relief, the need to be inside her temporarily achieved, his head resting on her shoulder, kissing softly as he reveled in how good she felt, in the magic that was pooling around them, soaking through their skin.
Then, the urge to move built up and she must have felt it, too, because he was thrusting against her, and she had her knees on the step on either of his hips, moving up and down in sync with him, meeting each other like the crash of the waves on the shore, and she was speaking while she rode him, praising him, telling him how loved he was, how sweet and special he was, and he came, astounded by how her words affected him, how good it felt to be wrapped in her arms, this weird waif who’d somehow found her way into his heart. She came shortly after, tightening around him, sending aftershocks through his body, and they lay panting, the water lapping at their skin from all the waves they’d created, magic covering them.

As the pleasure subsided, the magic rose, and Abraxas could feel his connection to Hermione, to Tom, to Patience, and all the interconnections, an extension of his own magical field. It was like fine lines running through space, a spider’s thread of magic that could funnel energy and feelings between them. He could feel a great flaring of magic from the combination of Tom and Hermione, and he suspected that they were still fighting or fucking, or knowing them, probably both. Gently retreating, he reached out to Patience, and felt her magic, calm and cool and deep and mysterious, like the ocean. She twisted in the water, and he faced her, kissing her lips, tucking a strand of wet hair behind her ear.

Their kissing led to other things, and they ended up in the reverse position, Abraxas pushing Patience into the stairs, her fingers digging into the spot on his hips that she liked best, leaving marks there and on his shoulder, where she sucked and kissed as he slid into her slowly over and over, blatantly ignoring when she asked him to speed up, until she switched to dirty talk in that commanding tone and all attempts at teasing her melted away as he gave her exactly what she asked for. They came quickly, still high on their magic, and then they floated in the water, holding hands, sending joined spells into the air, making little runes and fireworks and a light breeze and a gentle rainfall. It was so natural, so easy, that Abraxas wondered if he was dreaming.

With Tom, all sex was a power play, edgy and dark, with only grudging and unspoken affection that was buried deeply. With Hermione, it was love-making, a worshipping of her, and a gratitude that she returned his feelings. What happened with their bodies was almost incidental because he was in love with her, not her body. And now, with Patience, he had a fusion of those two things, love and affection, but sexy play as well. How had he possibly found these people? How had he gotten so lucky that they wanted him, too? Not for the Malfoy name or fortune, though he knew Tom did like those aspects, but because they loved him, in their various ways, according to their capabilities? It felt miraculous. Magical. And though Abraxas Malfoy had grown up in a magical world, had always been told he was entitled to all that the world had to offer, he had never felt as magical as he did in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

Music Selections for this pairing:

"The Church of Hot Addiction" - Cobra Starship

"Do You Wanna Touch Me?" - Joan Jett and the Blackhearts
"Team" - Lorde

"Take Me to Church" - Hozier
Hermione and Tom didn’t speak to each other much leading up to the winter break. He was stubbornly insisting on getting to some place in France or Germany that Grindlewald was occupying, and he was determined to throw himself (and whoever went with him) into a full-blown battle, just to test his skills. Tom Riddle had decided that it was his new mission to work up to defeating Grindlewald, and nothing was going to change his mind.

They had yelled at each other on the fifth floor for what felt like hours, and neither of them was giving an inch on the matter. Well, Hermione didn’t begin with yelling. She had started out calmly, with all the logical reasons they couldn’t possibly go to France.

“Tom, think. Even if we could get to over there without using magic, we couldn’t use our magic to fight if we ran into anyone. We all have the trace on us until we’re seventeen,” she had argued, even though she knew the trace probably did not work on her, as she was long past seventeen, and even if it had been reapplied on the Hogwarts’ express every year, according to the persistent student rumor, it wasn’t likely to take or hold on her. Still, even if she was ninety percent sure, she didn’t want to have to test that if she didn’t have to – the consequences were too dire.

“It’s not a concern,” Tom smirked, all smug superiority. “I have been using magic for as long as I can remember, and no Ministry official descended upon Wool’s to punish me. I know the
Ministry likes to use the supposedly secret trace charm as a sword over our heads, but I think it is patchy and inconsistent. It doesn’t work at all at Hogwarts, and only seems to indicate magic was performed around minors, not who performed it. If we are amidst adults who are using magic, our magic can only be traced through our wands, which is why we’ve been working so hard at wandless magic.”

Hermione had to agree about the dismal record of the trace. In her own pre-Hogwarts childhood, she had performed several small spells that should have alerted the Ministry, and there had been the case of the previous timeline of Tom himself, who had killed his father and grandparents, in a muggle village, at the age of sixteen, with no one the wiser for years. “The unreliability of the trace is not a guarantee, Tom. Just because it doesn’t always work doesn’t mean it won’t work during your grand plan.”

“That’s why I have a backup plan, dearest,” Tom moved closer, reached up to pull on one of her curls. He did those things, invading her space, touching her, speaking in that low tone, when he wanted to bend her to his will, to win her over. It was infuriatingly sexy, and he knew it. “I found a potion recipe in one of Slytherin’s journals, one that he claims will cloak the use of the drinker’s magic.”

“Of course Slytherin had such a potion,” Hermione muttered, trying not to lean into his hand as it came up to cup her cheek. “Did you brew it yet? It might not even work, you know, or work in an unexpected way.”

Tom kissed behind her ear, then spoke into it. “I thought we could brew it together. You’re very good at potions.”

Hermione flushed. Praise was a weak spot for her, especially concerning her magical skills. Tom knew that, damn him, but what he didn’t know was that Hermione’s potion-making skills were hard-won, that potions had always been a challenge for her, and her second time around at Hogwarts had made vast improvements in her abilities. To be complimented on potions by Tom, who seemed to understand the subject effortlessly, was quite a stroke to her ego. She tried to push her pleasure to the side.

“Brewing a thousand year old recipe for a potion obviously intended for hiding dark magic?” Hermione breathed as Tom began to kiss down her neck. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It was only an invitation,” Tom spoke crisply, though he continued to kiss her, now at clavicle, toying with the collar of her shirt, undoing the top button. “I’ll brew it with or without you, dearest.”
She knew that, so she simply pressed on to the next logical argument, hoping something would take root in Tom’s mind, pierce through his arrogance to the common sense he barely used. “Fine. Even if you have the potion, you will have your wands, as you pointed out, and you cannot rely on solely wandless magic! You are brilliant and powerful, but wandless magic is draining and trying to go through a life and death fight with adult wizards without relying on the ease and focus your wand provides is practically suicide, Tom.”

He was frowning, but still unbuttoning her shirt, his fingers moving quickly, roughly. He was clearly choosing his words, and Hermione’s heart sank. She wished she could share her experience, to tell him she knew exactly what happened when a bunch of fifth-year students faced off against a group of highly-trained dark wizards. If the Order hadn’t shown up, they wouldn’t have escaped the Ministry alive. And even then, they had lost Sirius.

“Hermione, if I were a weaker person, I’d be hurt by your lack of faith,” he finally said, his hands slipping into her open shirt, settling at her waist, then lifting her. She instinctively wrapped her legs around him, and he walked them over to the sofa, sat down with her on top of him.

“It isn’t about faith, Tom,” she sighed. He was so handsome, even when his eyes were angry, even when the curve of his mouth was sulky. “You are amazing, but we are still young, still learning magic. Raw talent and intelligence doesn’t always beat experience. Grindlewald’s fighters have years on us, and several of those years have been spent doing practical magic, probably dark spells. Those spells aren’t even a thought to them – they’re in their muscle memory, cast before you can blink. And you may be the king of the school, of all the duels here, but that isn’t the same.”

Tom’s hands were holding her hips, tightly enough to leave marks. “You don’t think I can defeat any obstacle in my path?” his voice was a hiss, a cornered snake.

Hermione looked into his eyes. Despite his temperament, despite what she knew of one of his futures, despite everything, she loved him. She loved him completely and senselessly, beyond volition, into a simple state of being. She thought of all she had read of Grindlewald, of what she knew of Dumbledore. Genius was a difficult thing to compare – there were so many complications, so many variances. However, she’d had five years to watch Tom, to see and feel Tom’s magic, and it was so powerful, she could hardly credit it came from one person. “I believe you can do anything, Tom, but I don’t want you to get hurt in the process. I love you.”

His face softened greatly. When they were alone, completely alone, and she told him that she loved him, his face came close to mirroring her own. She felt his pleasure at her words, a warmth that he normally lacked. Snakes needed outside sources of heat, after all. “Dearest,” he began, but then kissed her instead of speaking further.
Their kiss was long and so distracting that Hermione’s thoughts of trying to convince him to do anything except pull off the rest of her clothes were abandoned. He was doing that, anyway, reaching behind her to unfasten her bra, tugging at the buttons on her skirt, pushing down her stockings and knickers, and since she was doing the same to him, they were both naked in short order.

They were lying on the couch, half-on, half-off, tangled in each other, and it was messy and urgent and became more so as they continued. Hermione had sweet with Patience, a feeling of love and safety. She had worshipful with Abraxas, feeling cherished and adored. But with Tom, she was consumed. He wouldn’t stop until he had her at his mercy, until she was writhing in submission, and she wanted to give him that, because she understood that was the closest he could get to expressing love, that for him to take her in, to feel that he owned her, was him saying that she was as precious to him as himself, as his own magic.

When they tumbled to the floor, neither bothered with cushioning spells. Knees and shoulder blades and hips pressed into hard wood, and Tom held her hands above her head, as he had the first time. She let him because it felt good to let go, in this aspect, to have him press into her hard and fast, as he liked. Her busy mind stopped pondering all the possibilities of disaster for a while, and that was nearly as blissful as the sex itself.

It was surprising, then, that halfway through a gloriously rough and tumble fuck, Tom stilled, pulling back to look in her eyes. “Come with me, little bird. I can do anything on my own, but I want to do everything with you.”

Hermione’s heart skipped and other parts clenched tightly. She wondered if it were possible to fall more in love him, because, if so, that was happening. He was binding her more tightly….no, it wasn’t just him…Patience and Abraxas must have completed their binding, because she could feel them, too, stronger than ever, and Tom…oh, his magic was so present in her that it was overwhelming.

He felt it as well, she could see his realization in the widening of his eyes, in the slow, almost gentle thrust of his hips. Tom lowered his head and kissed her, but it wasn’t tongue and teeth. His lips moved over her face reverently, in a way they never had before.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured against the hollow of her throat. “Your magic is so strong, so vibrant. I can feel it in me, not just at the edges, and I can sense Patience and Abraxas, too. My God, Hermione, we are unstoppable. How can you doubt that?”

Before she could answer, he was moving again, and she was screaming because he was hitting just the right spot with every thrust and the effects of the final link in their elemental binding, along with their soul mate magic prevented her from rational thought. She gave into the
sensations, and grabbed Tom’s arm tightly, stroking her words on his arm with her thumb, rubbing over and over, and it was a small, lovely victory to see him lose all control and come spectacularly, that gorgeous face lined in ecstasy, which was enough to push her over the edge herself, especially when he reached between their bodies and covered her stomach, his words, with those warm, rough fingers, and she vibrated with pleasure, body and soul and magic, everything both tangible and ephemeral about her whole being.

He rolled, and they lay panting side by side, her head tucked onto his shoulder. It was relaxing, more relaxed than she anticipated, given their earlier disagreement. Tom smiled down at her.

“No one has what we do, Hermione. Not in this century, probably not in a thousand years,” he spoke quietly, but fiercely. “You can’t deny it. Our magic can do anything, defeat anyone.”

“I’m not denying we are powerful, and that we will become more so. We are all very intelligent, and magically talented. Together, our magic is definitely a strong force, yes. But that doesn’t mean we should run out and put ourselves in danger.”

The argument had continued and rose in pitch until Tom, in his anger, set fire to Hermione’s sweater, which he had picked up from the floor. It flared and became ash in between his hands, and Hermione realized just how much elemental fire magic he had been practicing on his own. That began another argument about his use of untested, ancient spells with no regard for what side effects they might have, and Hermione had left, the door banging shut behind her so hard that it came off its hinges. She didn’t stop to fix it – Tom could deal with that, or set fucking fire to it, for all she cared at the moment.

For the next two weeks, they had been perfectly polite to one another in public. Tom still took her hand, pulled at her curls, wrapped a casual arm around her in the library or at the evening study group, kissed her cheek when they separated between classes or at night. Hermione allowed all these touches, but she kept a tight grip on her magic, and when they took the group to the Chamber, she sat by herself, pouring over three or four books at a time, but writing no notes or translations.

She knew Tom noticed, as did Abraxas and Patience, though they both seemed to think this was a problem Tom and Hermione needed to work out on their own, so they didn’t interfere. And, in a move she hadn’t foreseen, Tom seemed to be giving her space. Space to come to his conclusions, she was sure, but nonetheless, it was respectful even in its arrogance and Hermione appreciated it.

She put the time to good use, finding and reading any tomes she could get her hands on concerning elemental magic, particularly air, and also on cloaking magic and enhancing casting
speed and defensive barriers. At night, in her room, when even Patience was breathing softly in the bed beside her (Patience had started the habit of sleeping beside Hermione, and neither Josephine nor Felicity had said a word about it) Hermione would cast a soft *lumos* and practice tuning into her elemental magic. The books she’d read said that air magic was especially strong when it came to levitation, floating, and even flying, the thought of which made Hermione shudder. She thought back to spells she done that were instinctual and strong. The attacking birds came to mind, as did shattering the windows on the fifth floor and exploding the Slytherin fireplace. When she’d attacked Sagitta, she’d summoned the wand and she’d thrown the older girl against the wall. She did have an innate talent for moving things and people through space – well, everyone except herself. If she could get over her fear, she might be able to fly one day. She’d probably need to, to be able to keep up with Tom.

In the Chamber, she found another reference to the potion Tom had found in Slytherin’s journal, this time in a Babylonian text, written on thinly rolled animal skin, which was quite a pain to translate. From what she could tell, though, it wasn’t a harmful potion, though there were the temporary side effects of weakness and nausea when the potion wore off. It somehow disguised the use of magic, which was such a powerful tool, Hermione understood why someone as paranoid and greedy for magic as Slytherin seemed to be had kept it to himself. Then, she saw the ingredients list and the instructions. The finicky nature of the process put the draught of living death to shame, and almost made her wish for footnotes from Snape.

As the holiday break approached, Hermione continued to go back and forth in her own mind about what to do. Tom would find a way to get to France, she had no doubt. He had Abraxas to plot with at night, after all, and they could use the floo at Malfoy Manor to go to one of the Malfoy properties in France. If that was a problem, they could use Abraxas’s seemingly endless allowance to pay someone to make a portkey or even to apparate them to France. Getting there wouldn’t be a problem.

What happened after that was what had Hermione’s stomach in knots. If she didn’t go, she wouldn’t be able to help protect Tom and Abraxas, who she knew would do anything Tom asked. It was emotional blackmail because Tom knew she cared too much to let them go without her, no matter how stupid and risky the plan was. She was put in mind of Harry’s insistence that they had to save Sirius, despite her protests. Why was it her fate to love stubborn boys who rushed headlong into danger?
Galatea Gives Treats and Narcissa Gives Tricks

Chapter Summary

Our teens continue their plotting, and our "responsible" adults react in different ways.

Chapter Notes

So, yay! I got a little of my groove back, and here's the result. I focused a lot on Hermione, but there's some Tom at the end, as well as Galatea and Narcissa's very different parenting/mentoring styles.

I'm working on the next chapter, where the group will actually (finally) make it to France. Enjoy, and Love to you all!

She didn’t tell Tom that she would go with him. She didn’t need to. Somehow, he just knew, and on the Friday before the break, he took her hand after dinner and led her to the Chamber, Patience and Abraxas walking silently behind them. In the library, Tom summoned all the ingredients and the translated recipe for the magic cloaking potion. Hermione sighed, but nodded, and the four of them worked well past curfew to make a large batch of the potion, bottling it carefully in the early hours of the morning.

The next morning, Tom and Hermione walked down to Hogsmeade, to the little cottage Narcissa had purchased, along with Felicity, who like most of the muggleborn students who lived in the larger cities, was staying with friends in the magical world over the break because of the constant bombing. Professor Merrythought had talked with Felicity’s parents, and they wanted Felicity to stay safely out of Edinburgh, and since Hermione and Felicity were dear friends and roommates, she was staying with them.

Felicity was very quiet, not her normally laughing self, and Hermione thought of how hard it had been to stay away from her own parents, to know that if she went home, she would bring danger into their lives. Even if the situation was reversed, with the muggle world holding more danger at the moment, Felicity had to be upset about not seeing her family, especially since it had already been months.

She put an arm around Felicity’s shoulders, and showed her around the cottage, leading her to the room they would share for the next few days before heading to the Merrythought estate after Narcissa and Galatea finished up loose ends with their duties at Hogwarts. As soon as the door was
closed, Felicity began to cry.

Hermione hugged her. “I’m so sorry, Felicity. I know how scary war is, worrying about your loved ones.”

“It isn’t my parents as much. There are shelters and lots of solid rock basements in Edinburgh, but my brother, Robbie, turned eighteen this summer,” Felicity sobbed. “He joined the army right before I left for Hogwarts this year.”

There wasn’t much comfort to give to that, Hermione thought. Soldiers were, by definition, in danger, especially during active wartime. “I’m sure Robbie is clever, just like you, and he’s doing his best to stay safe and come home when he can.”

Felicity reached into her pocket and pulled out a dull yellow stone fixed in a bronze setting. Runes were carved into the metal, and Hermione could see that it was very old. The runes all mentioned finding, locating, knowing, as well as protection from danger.

“I bought this in Diagon Alley, when I went to get school supplies. It’s meant to glow if Robbie is in serious danger, and to help me locate him. I rubbed some blood from his shaving kit into the metal and did the spell as soon as I got on the Hogwarts Express. I don’t know if it’s better or worse to have this. I keep waiting for it to glow, and make myself sick knowing that even if it does, I can’t do anything about it,” Felicity’s brown eyes were awash in her tears.

“Oh, Felicity,” Hermione sighed. What Felicity had done was at best frowned upon, and probably technically illegal, but Hermione didn’t fault her in the slightest. She was about to say this when Felicity’s expression shifted rapidly from sadness to anger.

“It’s wrong!” Felicity cried, though her voice remained quiet. “Wrong that the magical world could help, and it won’t! Innocent people are dying every day! My brother is off at war. He isn’t a soldier. Robbie loves drawing, painting – he’s never shot a gun. He’s only two years older than me – eighteen. He carried me on his back for three months when I was eight and I broke my leg and had to wear a straight cast. He’s my brother, Hermione, and he’s in danger, even if this damned thing isn’t glowing!” Her words took on a strangled sound as she fought back tears. “My world is at war, and my other world won’t help.”

Felicity had no idea how sympathetic Hermione was to her pleas. One of her biggest problems with the magical world was how it walled itself away, how it refused to see how much the muggle world had changed since the need for the Statute of Secrecy, how much the magical world would benefit by embracing the times and abandoning its inbred tendencies that created a
stagnant society where deep prejudices flourished like algae overgrown in a mucky pond. Keeping wizards from exposure to muggles dehumanized normal people, made them other and expendable, easy to forget about. In her own time, Voldemort had occupied all her attention, but here in the past? She knew what was happening all across England, all across Europe, and she understood exactly how Felicity felt.

She squeezed Felicity’s hand tightly. “If it glows, and we are in a position to do something, we will.”

Even though it was a promise that would likely be impossible to keep, Felicity’s face showed her relief and gratitude. “You’re as dear to me as any sister could be, Hermione.”

Hermione smiled. “The feeling is mutual. I don’t consider myself an only child these days. I have you and Josephine, and…” she couldn’t add Patience to that list. Patience was not a sister to her; she was her lover, a part of her very being.

Felicity’s mouth quirked in an expression that was much closer to her normal, happy self. “I’ve noticed that you and Patience have a…special relationship. And then there’s Tom…and Abraxas. I honestly don’t know where the four of you get the energy for…whatever it is that you do.”

“Is it that obvious?” Hermione chewed her lip. She thought she was rather discreet, that only her relationship with Tom was common knowledge.

Felicity laughed loudly, her good humor restored completely, it seemed. “The whole school talks about the four of you. You must know that. Everyone knows that you and Tom are the smartest, most powerful students in school, even counting the sixth and seventh years. All of Slytherin House practically bows when he enters the room, and the rest of the school isn’t far behind.”

“Well,” Hermione flushed, “yes, but noticing our academic and magical abilities isn’t the same as gossiping about our private lives.”

“Private?” Felicity raised her eyebrows. “No such thing in Hogwarts! Hermione, you are never without Patience. And when Tom and Abraxas are around, they are always touching you and each other. I’ve heard some people wondering what Abraxas is going to do. He has to get engaged soon, you know, and the Malfoys won’t accept anyone not on their list.”
Hermione thought of Abraxas, returning to Malfoy Manor, and winced. Rumors could be powerful, and even if no one knew about the elemental bonding, it was still clear that the tangled, strong relationship between the four of them had not gone without notice. “It’s…complicated,” she began.

Felicity put up her hand. “I’m not judging. I love you, Hermione. And I love Patience. I meant it when I said you were like sisters to me. I think Abraxas is funny and sweet, and Tom… well, he’s gorgeous and powerful and, honestly, he terrifies me, but if anyone can handle him, that person is you. What the four of you do or don’t do is your business.”

There was a knock on the door, and Hermione opened it to see the terrifying boy (man… when had he become more of a man?) in question. Tom had taken off his Hogwarts sweater, and only wore the white Oxford with his black pants. The shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, and she could see the shadow of his collarbone. He was so handsome, Hermione felt distracted and flustered just glancing at him.

He must have felt her wave of affection and lust, because he gave her a wide, smug smile and reached for her hand. Their magic buzzed between them.

“Do you want me to leave?” Felicity quipped, a sly smile on her face. Hadn't she just proven her point?

“Not now,” Tom said easily, with his usual arrogance. “I came to ask you ladies down for tea. Aunt Narcissa and Galatea are waiting.”

The next hour was a study in how to conduct various levels of conversation. What people knew, and who knew what created multiple undercurrents and hidden meanings to nearly every statement. Narcissa had told Hermione about her confession to Galatea, but Hermione and Galatea had not yet had an opportunity to discuss her status as a time traveler, nor her hopes and fears for Tom with the woman who was, as far as she was concerned, her stepmother. Galatea had an idea of Tom’s possible darkness, but that didn’t seem to surprise her – she was very observant, after all, and Tom was Tom. Narcissa knew Tom was making plans, but he hadn’t told her what those plans were, and something had kept Hermione from sharing the existence of the cloaking potion and Tom’s desire to fight Grindelwald’s men. Felicity and Narcissa knew about the Chamber, but Galatea did not. Everyone present had different pieces, but no one except Hermione had the full picture (and even that was questionable, giving Tom’s penchant for keeping secrets). She thought of how Patience had said that she wanted to control others for their own good, and wondered for the first time if that were true, and what that said about her.
The next few days were peaceful, with the exception of the constant coming and going of Jeeves, Odysseus, and Iris. Both Patience and Abraxas were sending their owls nearly as often as Tom. Abraxas and Tom were plotting, but Iris brought letters from Patience that were full of odd questions and comments that didn’t make much sense, even to those who knew her well. They did manage to plan a day of Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley at the beginning of next week, and even though Tom hadn’t said so explicitly, Hermione was sure that was the day he was planning to try to go to France.

The day before the planned trip, Tom was buoyant, full of smiles and a jaunty step whenever he came out of his room, which he kept locked. He was carrying a book that looked like a plain journal, but Hermione knew it was one of Slytherin’s journals, charmed. Hermione herself spent so much time translating books she brought to the house that Felicity complained they weren’t on break at all, though she still helped Hermione with the work.

That night, she couldn’t sleep, and she went down to the kitchen, intending to make some chamomile tea, not that she really believed that would help. The lights were on in the kitchen, and Galatea was sitting at the small table, two cups of tea steaming in front of her.

“How did you know I was coming down?” Hermione asked, sitting in the empty chair across from her.

Galatea gave her a crooked smile. “I have excellent hearing, and you have been restless all day. I thought you’d have trouble sleeping.”

Hermione took a cup, wrapping her hands around the warm ceramic. It was a nice, safe feeling, something small and normal she’d done thousands of times in her life. “Why are you having trouble sleeping?”

Suddenly, Galatea’s gaze became concentrated, like a bird of prey. “I think pride is a dangerous thing, but false modesty is just as much a pitfall. I know that I am an intelligent woman, more so than most. There was always something about you and your mother that didn’t quite belong, and it wasn’t about coming from France. It was obvious you two were keeping secrets, but I didn’t pry. Narcissa is my soul mate, and I was confident she would share when and if she was able to do so.”

There was a pause while Galatea sipped her tea and Hermione wondered what direction this conversation was headed. There were several possibilities, many of them unpleasant.
“Narcissa has shared your story, and I still love her, and I love you – nothing can change that. But you have also put me in an impossible position. The two of you are deliberately manipulating others to achieve what you believe is the best possible outcome for the future, and-”

Frustrated, Hermione couldn’t stop herself from cutting in. “People do that all the time! That’s life! People are always trying to get the best outcomes for themselves, for others they care about, for society!”

“Yes,” Galatea allowed calmly, “but they don’t know the future, they don’t have knowledge that can uniquely affect others.”

“Both of us had soul mates in the past, so we were clearly meant to come here,” Hermione’s fingers tapped on the cup impatiently, her defenses rising. “The question comes down to whether or not you trust us to do the right thing with the knowledge we have.”

“Hermione, you are smarter than that,” Galatea gently chided. “You know such a complex issue isn’t merely a matter of trust. I trust you both to try to do the right thing, but…” she trailed off, looking down into her tea.

Hermione reached out her hand, upset by the sadness visible on Galatea’s face. Like Felicity, Galatea was a happy presence, all smiles and wit and hugs. To see her otherwise felt wrong, and it felt to Hermione that she had caused it.

Before she could speak, Galatea began again. “I’ve asked your mother not to give me any further details about the future, and I would ask the same of you. I know you both have already made many, many changes to Tom’s life, to my life, to the life of several students, as well as made it impossible for the two of you to ever see many of your original loved ones again. I don’t believe you made the decision to come back in time lightly, and I support you both, but even the smallest details you carry in your minds could be dangerous, especially if anyone else knew. Already, I’ve inferred several things simply from your behavior.”

“What?” Hermione asked, curious, though she agreed with Galatea’s decision not to learn more about a future that was being changed every day.

“I know you are muggleborn,” Galatea smiled softly. “And that means you would care greatly what is happening in the muggle world, as I do, as Felicity does. But even though the muggle world is in the midst of the most terrifying and wide-spread conflict it has ever seen, you
aren’t worried about it. I’ve witnessed you in the Ravenclaw common room, comforting other muggleborn and half-blooded students who’ve received news from home about the state of their towns, about the bombings and the rationing and the pervasive fear, and you always reassure them, tell them everything will be alright. And coming from you, that is the truth. Everything will be all right. Or you’d be a lot more concerned about what is happening.”

Hermione opened her mouth, but Galatea continued. “Don’t say anything, dear. It’s fine. I’m just making the point that everything you do is colored by your future knowledge, and having two of us in the family doing that is more than enough. I also don’t want to be a liability, a weapon that can be used against you. I’ve already put several spells in place on myself to prevent my being able to tell anyone that you and Narcissa are from the future. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if anything happened to the two of you because of me.”

Now, Hermione was out of her chair and hugging Galatea, who returned the hug just as tightly and kissed the top of her hair.

“It doesn’t feel like it did five years ago; it doesn’t feel like changing the future; it just feels like my life,” Hermione whispered against her stepmother’s silky house robe.

“Oh, sweetheart, I know,” Galatea whispered back. “Just promise me you’ll be careful. I know Tom has some plan for tomorrow, and I’m sure it’s completely inappropriate, dangerous, and probably illegal.”

Hermione hid her half-wince, half-smile against Galatea’s shoulder, but her stepmother’s sigh indicated that she exactly what expression was on Hermione’s face. She pulled back and said, “Hold on.”

There was the familiar sensation of apparating, and when Hermione opened her eyes, she saw they were in Galatea’s study at the Merrythought estate. She watched as Galatea went through drawers and looked on shelves and steadily made a pile of objects on the middle of her desk.

“Have you found the Chamber of Secrets yet?” Galatea asked.

Hermione’s eyes widened dramatically. Galatea looked up and gave a short laugh. “Okay, that’s a yes, but you can’t talk about it, some kind of penalty is at stake. Clever – nothing less than I’d expect from the smartest student I’ve ever had the pleasure to teach. Then you have access to many spells, potions, and magical objects, untested and untried for hundreds of years. Wonderful,” her voice had descended into something like sarcasm.
It took a great bit of willpower not to discuss it all with Galatea right there, and she bit her lip, hard. Hermione knew the Head of Ravenclaw House would be full of insight on the things they’d found. She’d have to get Galatea to sign the pact so she could talk with her in depth, perhaps get her assistance in translation.

“Later,” Galatea waved the topic away and turned back to the desk. “These are the objects I own that are most likely to be of help to you, and they are doing nothing on my shelves. Some of them are objects I’ve found in exploring Hogwarts, some are my own inventions, or things I’ve bought at various magical shops over the years.”

Hermione stared at the assortment. There were amulets and orbs of various materials – metal, glass, crystal, and precious stone, leather pouches and small daggers, flasks and a heap of fabric that shimmered gently in a way that reminded Hermione of Harry’s invisibility cloak, though she knew it wasn’t the true Deathly Hallow, merely a clever copy. The desk was a treasure trove of magical objects.

Galatea cleared her throat, and when Hermione glanced up, she saw a gleam of tears in Galatea’s eyes. “I’ve had many students I’ve been attached to, many children I’ve loved greatly, but I’ve never had one I consider mine. Hermione, you are like a daughter to me, and all my possessions are also yours, especially anything that will keep you safe and out of trouble.”

Hermione hugged her again, but this time Galatea only let it continue for a few seconds before she began listing all the items and their abilities. Hermione chose several – the cloak first, of course. Even if it wasn’t as powerful as Harry’s, it was still a help and incredibly useful. Then, she took one of the flasks, spelled to refill itself with the potion you last put in it, so long as you left a few drops of the potion in the bottom. It wouldn’t recreate difficult potions, Galatea warned, but she had tested it with basic healing potions for head injuries and internal bleeding and burns.

Though she wasn’t a fan of sharp objects, Galatea pressed one of the daggers on her, giving her a leather sheath that strapped around her thigh to carry it in. When Hermione protested that she didn’t need a knife, Galatea immediately argued.

“You do, and this isn’t a regular knife. Watch me hit the center of diamond pattern on the wall,” she picked the dagger up and threw it across the room, barely aiming, her throw wild. Yet, the dagger buried itself dead-center in the diamond, then, after a second, flew back into Galatea’s waiting palm.

Hermione studied the dagger with a new interest. “It works like a boomerang? Do you have to state your target? Or is silent intent enough?”
“Intent will do the trick,” Galatea took Hermione’s arm, the one she had healed. “Do not let anyone hurt you. If you have to hurt them first, do it, and do not hesitate.”

Nodding, Hermione lifted her nightgown and strapped the dagger to her thigh, getting a feel for how it fit there, how difficult it would be to reach it beneath her skirt.

“Is the trace on you?” Galatea asked quietly.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione admitted. “But I can’t know for sure.”

“Do a spell here, now, wandlessly,” Galatea spoke after a moment. “The trace only indicates that magic was done in the vicinity of an under-aged witch or wizard, not who performed the magic. I can do the same spell with my wand and claim I did it.”

Hermione licked her lips, still irrationally nervous at purposely breaking a serious Ministry rule despite her long and glorious history of breaking rules right and left over the past decade. “What should I do?”

“Something powerful, something that wouldn’t be missed by the Ministry if the trace was upon you,” Galatea answered, then added, “But do not destroy my fireplace. I like it too much.”

Galatea’s crooked smile, so much a part of all that was good about Hermione’s life for the past five years, put her a bit more at ease. She thought for a moment. The trace had been set off by Dobby in Harry’s aunt’s house for something as simple as a moving cake, then again when Harry involuntarily blew up his other aunt. She aimed for middle ground and did something difficult, yet practical, rearranging all the books in the library by color of spines instead of subject or title.

“Oh, Hermione,” Galatea breathed, as she watched the books float through the air, whizzing past each other to land on the shelves in order of hue, creating a rainbow of spines across the wall. “Your magic is always so graceful, so beautifully intuitive. And you did that wandlessly. You never disappoint, do you?”

Hermione’s cheeks flamed at the praise. “I’m always afraid I am disappointing someone, actually,” she admitted.

Galatea performed Hermione’s spell with her wand, carefully undoing and redoing the spell,
and as the books moved around them, she put her strong, warm hands on Hermione’s shoulders. “Don’t you dare believe for a second, anywhere inside, that you are less because you are muggleborn. If you do, they win.” She gave another grin. “Try borrowing some of your soul mate’s infinite self-confidence for a bit.”

“You mean his arrogance?” Hermione laughingly corrected.

“I was being polite,” Galatea answered dryly.

They waited quietly for over an hour, but there was no letter, no angry appearance by a Ministry official. After the clock had chimed the hour, Galatea announced her opinion.

“It isn’t absolute proof, because tracking in a magical household is certainly more lax, but I’d bet a very large sum that you are trace-free,” she gave Hermione a stern look. “Do not abuse that ability. Keep it for emergencies.”

Hermione nodded her agreement, and after she collected the items she was taking with her, Galatea apparated them back to the Hogsmeade cottage. She kissed Hermione once more on the top her head before she said goodnight and left the kitchen. Hermione went up the stairs on autopilot and slid into bed with Felicity as quietly as she could. Sleep seemed impossible, but she surprised herself and eventually drifted off.

-oOo0oOo-

Tom woke before the sun rose, as usual. He didn’t sleep much, never had, even back in the orphanage. Sleep put one into a state of vulnerability, and Tom hated vulnerability more than just about anything (which was a lofty place, considering how many things he despised).

He rose and dressed in warm, durable clothing, wool trousers with thick socks and boots, a flannel undershirt beneath his jumper. His wand was tucked up his sleeve, and through the use of an extension charm he’d cast yesterday morning while still at Hogwarts, there were several vials of the cloaking potion stored in his pants pocket. He’d use those soon enough, thankfully, because they felt awkward clinking against his leg.

Narcissa was in sitting room, the only other person up at the moment. When Tom came down the stairs, she motioned him over through the open door. She was beautiful, perfectly put together as always, but Tom could see she was tired and worried by the slight lines at the corner of
her mouth and the almost wistful look in her brown eyes.

“Tom, I know you are planning on going,” she paused long enough to convey her doubt effectively, “shopping today in Hogsmeade.”

Tom nodded, but did not reply. Narcissa knew him disturbingly well, so there was no need. He appreciated how subtle she was, how much she said without saying anything. It was very… Slytherin.

“Galatea and I both think of you as a son, our daughter’s soul mate, an indispensible part of our family,” she began softly.

Holding back a sigh of impatience, Tom nodded again. Why must feelings always be brought into everything?

Narcissa pursed her lips, as if she had heard the internal sigh. “I understand and respect your ambition, Tom. You are talented and brilliant, and you would be wasted following others, even if it were possible for you to follow rather than lead.”

Tom smiled, beatifically. He didn’t need praise, but it was still nice to hear. That made it all the more surprising when Narcissa pulled out her wand and cast an immobilizing spell before he could even react.

Rage flooded his entire body, down to the smallest molecule, as Narcissa bent over him, her own expression somehow fierce in its very blankness as she whispered in his ear. “But you are in over your head, Tom, a novice. You know nothing of battle, of fighting for your very life. The horrific pain you felt in your first year from that botched burning curse was nothing to what a talented wizard can do, Tom. Show me you can get free, now, or you will not be taking my daughter with when you go.”

He bristled at the challenge in her voice, the superiority. He hadn’t needed her fucking prompting; all of Tom’s magic was already hard at work, slithering around the spell that held him, finding its weakness, infiltrating, changing the nature of the spell itself, because, as he had learned from Galatea, all magic was, at its base, an act of transfiguration. With a gasp, he ended the spell, and his wand was at Narcissa’s throat the next instant.

With a wave of her hand, he was back in the chair, bound with a different spell, his wand on
the floor. “Again,” she said, her voice completely calm. “Faster.”

It took noticeably less time for Tom to slip the spell, even though he could feel that the second spell was stronger than the first. He reached for his wand, but she kicked it away, gracefully, like a dancer sliding across a floor. His magic began to crackle, and it built up inside him, ready to explode.

“How dare you!” Tom hissed. “Who do you think you are?”

Narcissa swiped down through the air with her index finger, and he was sitting in the fucking chair again. He couldn’t rise, but he tore at the armrests. She fell to her knees in front of him, sinking to the floor, her dress billowing around her, the scent of orchids filling the space around them. Her face was no longer blank. It was impassioned, and that was an expression he’d never seen on her face. He was too stunned to react for a moment.

“Never doubt that I am your shield, Tom,” Narcissa’s hands were on his own, holding them. “I keep you safe from adult interference. I give you more than you know, more than you will acknowledge, but that doesn’t matter to me. I am here to help save you, even if that means from yourself.”

Tom had an excellent memory. He might not recall how pages of text verbatim like Hermione could, but he remembered everything he deemed important. And apparently, though he hadn’t realized it until that moment, he remembered every time Narcissa had touched him. He remembered her cool hands on his back or shoulder, on his brow in the Hospital Wing, fixing a non-existent problem with his collar at home over the summer, and the three times she’d kissed his brow.

She was the closest to a mother he would ever have, and she was the best he would ever have. If someone had told him to make a list of qualities that he wanted in a mother figure, he couldn’t have made a woman other than Narcissa. She was powerful in her own right; she respected his desire not to be touched very frequently, yet still let him know that she cared about him; she did not judge his attempt to use legilimency on her other than to tell him to learn to be better at it; he was almost certain she knew about the Chamber, but made no move to keep him from access to it; she talked to him like he was an adult, and she believed in him. Though he was still angry, he was able to see that she was doing yet another job that belonged to a mother: she was preparing him for the world, showing him his weaknesses, teaching him to be on his guard.

“All I ask is that you keep Hermione safe,” Narcissa continued, still holding his hands, her fingers curled tightly over his.

Tom found he could move, and he wasn’t sure which of them had broken the spell.
“Hermione’s safety isn’t a question,” he responded, surprised at how *not* angry he sounded. “It never will be.”

She rose, easily for a person who had been kneeling only a second before. Tom stood as well, and put his hand out for his wand. He tucked it back in his sleeve and considered his mother figure. Narcissa was impassive again, cool, calm, and collected. They might have been discussing the weather, though the sound of footsteps hurrying down the stairs and a frantic Hermione rushing into the room raised the tension.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione’s magic was reaching out to him, soothing him, and Tom had to work to hide how pleased he was to see her, to know she was always linked to him, that she would come if she felt any threat or disturbance.

Narcissa arched an eyebrow, part question, part challenge. Tom had carefully catalogued her sins, and found her mostly guilty of wanting to protect both Hermione and himself, and he didn’t feel inclined to punish her for that, at least not now. One day, if she did such a thing again, perhaps, but she had put him on his guard, and though he would not say so, Narcissa was right. He had been sloppy. His easy mastery over fellow students at Hogwarts had made him so, and that was precisely why he needed to go to France, *today*.

“Nothing, dearest,” Tom spoke to Hermione, but smiled at Narcissa, and if that smile was a bit threatening, well, that was just in his nature.
Our wayward teens finally make it to France. Tom is ready to be a hero. Hermione just wants everyone to make it out alive. They have a pretty good plan, but we all know what happens to the best laid plans.

Things get a bit darker in this chapter, but I think that should be expected - they are heading into a town occupied by Grindelwald's forces (who are, by all accounts, earlier versions of Deatheaters, with only minor modifications in philosophy). So, be prepared for some violence, though I don't write graphic violence.

Assume that conversations in France are mostly spoken in French if spoken with French people. Everyone in the group speaks French except Felicity. I have no knowledge of French (I took Spanish in school), so I didn't even attempt to translate the words.

They used the floo to get to the Leaky Cauldron, where both Abraxas and Patience were waiting for them. The group of five immediately made their way to Knockturn Alley, where Abraxas had made arrangements to use an unlicensed portkey that would take them to a wizarding village in France that was known to be under Grindelwald's control.

“We aren’t going shopping, are we?” Felicity moaned quietly from beside Hermione as they turned down the crooked alley, and then into another one, even more narrow and sinister-looking, then into an apparently abandoned shop where the only items in sight were a terribly battered table and a dented iron poker propped against a cobweb filled fireplace.

“No,” Patience replied cheerfully from Hermione’s other side, her eyes managing to shine even in the dim light.

“You can stay,” Hermione whispered back as they shuffled into the small room. “Just go back to the Leaky Cauldron and wait for us.”

Felicity shook her head. “I had a feeling this was happening. Tom’s been talking about
Grindelwald, and I know...I know his followers killed your father, that they would kill my family without thinking. I would like to feel useful in at least one of my worlds, doing something,” she paused, then added lightly, “What are we doing exactly?”

Hermione gave her a bitter smile. “That depends on whom you ask. I think Tom would say that he wants battle experience, pure and simple. He wants to know how he fares against adults. I would say that if we going to fight Grindewald’s men, then we have an obligation to make some kind of positive difference beyond picking a fight. We need to destroy as much as we can of Grindelwald’s supplies or try to help anyone who is being held prisoner.”

She caught Felicity’s arm. “Whatever you do, stay by me, and always use defensive spells before attack. You’re stronger at defense.”

The redhead nodded, then frowned. “What are we doing about the trace?”

They were all by the table now, and Tom heard that question. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the vials, handing one to each of them. “This is a potion that will cloak the source of our magic. It lasts for approximately two hours, and that is all the longer we can spare. Abraxas, did you bring the map?”

Abraxas took a piece of paper out of his cloak and unfolded it onto the table, which creaked even from that slightest of weights. It was a magical map of the village of Fontaine de Puissance and its surrounding countryside, reminding Hermione of the Marauder’s Map, though this one simply gave a moving number over the buildings and other areas to indicate how many people were in each place, rather than names.

“I’ve been studying this all morning,” Abraxas began pointing to various spots on the map. “It seems from the concentration of numbers that most of Grindelwald’s forces are in this tavern, which has lodging above, in the local jail, where they are probably keeping prisoners, and in pairs patrolling the perimeter of the town.”

Tom nodded. “I’ve been listening to the wireless and talking to Slughorn about his connections abroad and what’s happening that isn’t being reported. Combine that with what Lord Malfoy has told Abraxas, and it seems that Grindelwald is very keen on pushing further into France. Even if his base of operations is the prison he’s building in Nuremguard, his trusted lieutenants are moving steadily in all directions from there, taking over magical towns as they go.”

“My father says that Ministry spies have established a new pattern. Grindelwald isn’t simply attacking blindly as he did at the beginning of the war. He’s gotten much more organized.
When Grindelwald’s followers come into a town, they imprison or kill the best fighters, then round up family members as hostages to force the town to swear loyalty to Grindelwald, and take most of the fighters with them to add to Grindelwald’s numbers, leaving a few loyalists behind to keep the civilians under threat and in check. If he is truly going to take over the continent, he’s going to need an army, and he’s building it. The Ministry estimates he already has almost a thousand,” Abraxas traced the numbers on the map. “This town is small; it only has about twenty people who are absolutely loyal to Grindelwald, and others who are fighting for him under duress.”

Hermione calmed her nerves the only way she knew how – by making a plan. She leaned into Abraxas, comforted by his solid, warm presence, and gestured to the map. “Where does the portkey land us?”

“Here,” Abraxas circled a wooded area at the edge of the town. “It has the best cover.”

“How do we know that the information on the town and the portkey is accurate?” Hermione was not about to trust an unknown person who was profiting from making illegal portkeys.

Tom raised an eyebrow at her. “We aren’t stupid, Hermione. Abraxas and I are the Slytherins in this group, after all.”

Abraxas gave her a sly grin, and Hermione wondered briefly how many bad habits Abraxas was picking up from all his time with Tom. “The man who made me the portkey has a vested interest in our success, Hermione. Jean is not a crook or even someone who does illegal things regularly. He was a legitimate businessman in France, an associate of my father’s. His sister is in the town, and he has asked, in lieu of payment, that we bring her back with us.”

Hermione was pleasantly shocked. “This is a rescue mission?”

“Isn’t that what heroes do, dearest?” Tom smirked, then added, “though she isn’t exactly a prisoner, not in a dungeon, anyway. According to the information from Jean, his sister, Sophie, is simply living in the village. She would like to leave, but Grindelwald has placed spells to prevent apparition, disabled the Floo networks, and, of course, has men patrolling the town. She managed to get facts about the men and this map to her brother through a desk drawer that works like a vanishing cabinet.”

He tapped a small house with a green cross over it, along with the number one. “This is where Sophie lives.”
Felicity gazed at the map. “Her house is in the middle of town. It will be very difficult to get to without being noticed.”

“Grindelwald’s people have been in this town for a while now. They are not actively fighting at the moment, and they are at ease. Seeing as how most of the men are stationed at the local tavern, I doubt they are expecting any kind of resistance, let alone an attack,” Tom responded easily, as if planning a surprise party.

Patience pointed at one building near the edge of town where the number read fifteen. “The nasty ones are here, torturing people.”

Hermione shuddered, the image of Bellatrix on top of her flashing through her mind before she could shut down that line of thought. Tom, Patience, and Abraxas all immediately gave her looks of concern. She was at once annoyed and grateful for their connection. “I’m sorry. I was thinking of my last encounter with people who tortured others.”

“No one will touch you again,” Tom said, his voice full of icy determination. He turned to Patience. “Can you tell how many are the ‘nasty’ ones, pet?”

The tall blonde’s eyes went glassy for a few seconds, even farther away than normal. She was gripping Tom’s arm tightly, and Hermione could feel that Patience was pulling on all four sources of magic in their quartet to power her first attempt at consciously tapping into her abilities. Her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. Concentration was not an expression often on Patience’s features. Finally, she sighed and relaxed. “Mmm…maybe three. No more than five.”

“So, approximately ten to twelve prisoners,” Hermione murmured. “Probably weak, no wands.”

Tom gave her a pointed look. “We only have two hours, Hermione, it’s unlikely we’ll be able to help everyone. We’ll go for the jail. I like our odds. There are five of us, after all, six if we get Sophie first.” He traced a route from the woods to Sophie’s house, then the jail with his wand, and the mark remained, a glowing orange path on the map.

“If these people are the ‘nasty’ ones, as Patience says, they won’t hesitate to use dark magic,” Hermione looked at Tom, her eyes hard. “We’ll need to disable them as soon as we come into the building. Surprise is our best weapon. If we give them the chance, they will kill us.”
She didn’t want him thinking that he could toy with these people as he sometimes did with opponents during duels at school. Too much was at stake.

Shockingly, he didn’t argue, but Hermione didn’t know if that meant if he planned to listen to her. They spent the next fifteen minutes going over the plan and the route. Hermione shared the items Galatea had given her, and they agreed to let Felicity, who was the weakest at offense, wear the invisibility cloak. Once they had Sophie, the two would share the cloak. Sophie was the main goal, they agreed, and if they ran into trouble in the streets, they would not attempt to breach the jail.

Abraxas took out five pieces of what looked like flesh colored silk. He handed one to each of them, and then pressed one to his face. It molded to his skin, openings appearing for his eyes, nose, and mouth, but otherwise leaving his features disturbingly blank and unrecognizable.

Though it was clever and necessary, Hermione couldn’t help but think of the Deatheater masks. Tom held his, staring down at the fabric. She could tell he was torn between wanting to be able to claim his deeds and wanting to be able to continue in secret until he reached a stronger fighting position.

With a grimace, he finally placed the mask on. “Even though we are slipping the trace, the spells we use with our wands can still be tracked if we are questioned by the Ministry. If you can do something wandlessly, do so.”

They uncorked the vials, staring at one another gravely as they drank. Hermione could feel their collective excitement and agitation rising with their magic as they walked to the fireplace and lined their hands up over the length of the iron poker. Abraxas counted down from three, and then the familiar hook was pulling at her navel, propelling her through space.

She managed to remain standing, though her hand sought out a support and found rough tree bark. The air here was colder, and Hermione was glad they had all been dressed for the winter weather, all three girls wearing thick wool tights under their skirts. She still wished for her denim, but Narcissa was very particular about how a ‘lady’ dressed, and appearance was one area in which she didn’t dare cross her mother.

The rest of the group was on their knees, breathing heavily from the spatial transition. Tom recovered first, rising beside Hermione. She could only see his eyes; the mask hid most of his mouth, though the magic made it perfectly comfortable to wear. She’d forgotten about it until she looked at him. Through their connection, she reached out, trying to get a sense of his mood. He was intently focused, full of sheer will. He returned the mental touch, his magic stroking hers
gently, like a rub along the arm. She knew he could feel her fear because she wasn’t trying to hide it.

Patience came over, and her calm came into the connection, shoring up Tom’s strong intention. Abraxas was behind her, and she could feel his excitement, determination, and like her, a bit of fear. Were they really doing this?

“Faith, my little bird,” Tom whispered in her ear.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak at the moment, and handed the invisibility cloak to Felicity, who covered herself quickly and walked behind Hermione.

The woods were slightly lower than the village, which was visible on the rise of the hill. There was a sharp wind blowing through the trees that made a lonely, haunting whistle, but otherwise, the day was quiet, no sounds of a normal village on a Saturday morning close to Christmas. The sky was overcast, and the whole feeling was rather dismal.

They walked quickly and quietly, following the tree line, then staying low until they reached the back of the first row of houses. Abraxas’s map showed the patrolling pair at the opposite edge of town. Hermione could feel a wave of magic in the air, like a wall.

“There’s an invisible boundary here – an additional enchantment to track those going in and out of the village,” Hermione whispered, putting out her hand to trace the air just beyond it.

Tom did the same and frowned. “The question is whether it will set off a general alarm, or if it will alert a particular person or group.”

Hermione was pondering that question when Patience pressed her wand into Hermione’s hand along with her mask. “We need to step over together, but one of us needs to remain behind. Come get me when you can,” she said calmly, then stepped over the line.

The others quickly followed, though Tom and Abraxas’s strong grips, combined, pulled Hermione away Patience, who remained in the open space. The answer to their question was immediately apparent, as a cater-walling alarm went off, obliterating the quiet. Tom, Abraxas, and Felicity were all whispering disillusionment and notice-me-not spells, dragging Hermione along the shadows of the buildings as they watched two men running toward a seemingly unbothered Patience.
“You! Girl!” the taller man shouted in French that was marred by a German accent. “Stop!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Patience responded airily, in much better French. “How can I stop?”

What they said in response was lost, because the group had turned the corner, though Hermione was still fighting against Tom and Abraxas.

“Hermione, if anyone can follow an intuitive leap and be fine, that person is Patience,” Abraxas spoke into her hair, pushing her along. “We would never leave her. The sooner we get to Sophie, the sooner we get back to Patience.”

Felicity made a low hum of agreement beneath her cloak, and Tom nodded as well. Hermione forced herself to calm down, feeling across her bond to Patience, who was still her normal, tranquil self. That feeling reassured her a bit, though she was very frustrated. She expected rash behavior from Tom, not from Patience. Her sense of control over the situation was unraveling, and that was frightening.

They made it to Sophie’s house without seeing another person. Hermione assumed the villagers were all terrified by the knowledge that someone had either tried to leave or enter their occupied town and were remaining safely inside where they couldn’t be accused of breaking any of Grindelwald’s rules.

Several rapid knocks at Sophie’s door went unanswered, and Tom finally used a powerful unlocking spell, causing the door to open wide with a loud bang against the wall. They entered quickly, shutting and locking the door behind them.

A young woman in her twenties with messy brown hair and rumpled clothing ran down the stairs, fear etched on her thin face. Her hands were out and open in front of her, in a gesture of surrender. She either had no wand, or it was well-hidden.

“Sophie?” Abraxas spoke quickly, putting his lifetime of French lessons to excellent use. “Your brother Jean sent us to bring you back to England. He is very worried for your safety.”

The woman nearly crumpled in relief. “Oh, thank God. Every day, these men are bolder,
“Get under the cloak with Felicity,” Tom ordered, his French much more accented than Abraxas’s, but still understandable. “Space will be tight – you must stay close to her and remain silent. Do you have a wand?”

Sophie shook her head. “Weber, the man in charge, had his men collect everyone’s when the town surrendered,” anger twisted her mouth. “We have been living practically as muggles. Only those who make an Unbreakable Vow to follow Grindelwald get their wands.” At that, Sophie spit on the floor.

Hermione thought that explained how cold the house was, with only the weakest of fires in the hearth, an under-baked loaf of bread on the table. Sophie herself looked disheveled, and the house in need of cleaning. It was probably very difficult for a person raised in the magical world to suddenly go about normal life without any magical assistance.

“You can use this one for now,” Hermione handed Sophie Patience’s wand and the mask. “Put this on as well.”

“Thank you,” Sophie took the wand and the mask and tucked into the cloak beside Felicity, who had stuck out her head.

“Do you speak any English?” Felicity asked anxiously. “I don’t speak French.”

“Of course,” Sophie responded in English, linking her arm with Felicity so they could hunch closer together.

Felicity sighed in relief, then looked at the clock. “An hour and fifteen minutes left of the potion.”

“You two will have to move slowly,” Hermione watched Felicity and Sophie adjusting the cloak around them. There was not much fabric to spare. “You should head back to the edge of the town. Stay near the line. When we get there with Patience, we’ll simply have to flat-out run back to the portkey. That alarm prevents us from sneaking out.”

Tom nodded his agreement. “Yes, ladies, go on. They’ve probably taken Patience to the
jail. We’ll start there, and meet you as soon as we can.”

Sophie’s expression was hidden by the mask, but her voice was tremulous. “Weber does horrible things in the jail. I hope your friend is not there.”

“Would there be any other place they would take her?” Abraxas asked.

“Perhaps the tavern, if she is not determined a threat,” Sophie shrugged, then added. “Though, if she is young and pretty, the tavern may be just as bad a place as the jail.”

Hermione’s whole body tightened at Sophie’s words, her entire being flooding with angry magic. Tom and Abraxas both turned toward her, but neither needed to say a word. She could feel their responses as well, and their combined rage was a heady mix between them, building to an unbearable need to act.

“We’ll meet you soon,” Tom bit out, and then they left, heading back into the empty streets, taking the opposite direction from Felicity and Sophie.

They paused outside their destination, looking at the map. The number above the jail now read twenty, and even if one of those additions was Patience, there was still likely to be four more people with wands, bringing the count of Grindelwald’s men up to seven or nine.

“Can you feel her inside?” Tom asked Hermione, his fingers clutched tightly over the yew wand.

Hermione stared into his pale blue eyes. She could see worry there, or at least the outrage that was Tom’s version of being worried. “Can you? It will probably work best if we all try together.”

The three of them concentrated, Tom and Abraxas’ hands on her shoulders making a circle of their magic, and, yes, there was Patience, her deep, calm magic pooled at the edges of their own, close by. Hermione pulled at the connection, and felt Patience’s magic ripple in response. She also felt something cold and unpleasant, something Patience was trying to hide at the back of her mind.

“They hurt her,” Hermione’s eyes snapped open, her hands shaking in anger.
“Don’t worry, dearest,” Tom smiled, and even through the mask, it was chilling. “We’ll take our payment in blood.”

There was no thought of disagreeing on this point. Hermione’s adrenaline was pumping, her magic was crackling, and she knew she would do whatever needed to be done to get Patience back.

“Blast in the door? Together?” Hermione asked. “I’m using my wand. Tracking be damned.” She cast a silencing spell around the building, hoping that it would work to muffle the blast. She’d never attempted such a thing before.

Her two Slytherins nodded. Tom looked at them, his eyes solemn. “Wands, then, for Patience,” he caught Hermione’s gaze and added in a low, rough voice, “Do not hesitate – they will not.”

They pointed their wands at the door and spoke the blasting spell. The result wasn’t so much that the door splintered as that the wall caved in, stones and mortar flying through the air. The sound was much reduced, more like the slamming of a door than a building being torn apart, and Hermione filed that success away for later application. While the occupants ducked and tried to orientate themselves to the source of the attack, the three climbed over the rubble, Hermione and Abraxas casting the strongest, longest-lasting knock-out spells they knew, Tom casting something much nastier, if the odd combination of paralyzed faces and twitching bodies of his victims was any indication.

Hermione counted as they moved forward, the first, larger room narrowing to a short hallway lined with doors. Five people disabled for the moment. That left at least two, maybe four, more, somewhere in the building. They looked at each other and each took a door, blasting it in.

Each of the rooms contained people chained to walls, and though Tom immediately moved on, Hermione took the time to magically loosen the chains, freeing them. She counted them as well, and came up with only five people left in the building. The men and women called out a combination of thanks and warnings in French, but Hermione couldn’t spare an extended response, only telling them to gather their families and get out of town during this chaos. As she came back into the hall, the last door opened, and a burly man whose face sported a goatee and a malicious grin stepped out.

“I knew our little lady wasn’t alone,” his tone was oily, and Hermione bristled.
“She is ours,” Hermione hissed, and her wand had swished through the air before she’d consciously thought.

“I think you took my line, dearest,” Tom said laughingly, adding to Hermione’s spell.

The man shielded himself, but the force of their spells still knocked him back several steps.

The three of them advanced, casting spell after spell, barely pausing for breath. Another man came out, but the trio’s elemental magic was performing beautifully, their spells casting so quickly that all the men’s energy was completely caught up in maintaining their protective spells, and when the two were pushed back past the door opening, Hermione ducked into the room, leaving them to Tom and Abraxas without a second thought.

A red flash of light hurtled toward her head, but Hermione ducked it. She threw back a few stunning spells that went wide as she took in the room. There were two men, one holding a wand to Patience, whose face was covered in blood and swollen. At the very least, she had a busted lip and nose and a black eye. It was possible her nose was broken. The other man stood a bit to the side, and he had an air of authority, making Hermione sure she’d found Weber.

“Herr Weber?” she asked, her shield up.

He nodded, unconcerned. “I’m not sure which resistance group you are with, but this little display will not go unpunished, I assure you. Grindelwald controls all this region, and you have nowhere to hide.”

“I will have no need to hide,” Hermione waved her wand, sending three spells in rapid succession; two at Weber, and one at the man holding Patience. The man holding Patience groaned as a spell that simulated volts of electricity coursing through the body hit him in the arm, and he fell senseless to the ground, his unconscious body still twitching. Weber deflected both of the spells she sent at him, and moved to grab Patience from the other man.

“You are powerful little thing,” Weber threw several curses her way, over Patience’s shoulder, one of them the cruciatus, she noted. “Grindelwald wants as many strong fighters as he can get. What can I do to convince you to stay on our side?”

“Nothing!” Hermione replied, returning his fire with more jolting and stinging curses. “Grindelwald is an insane megalomaniac.”
Weber laughed, a short, barking sound. He threw a few more curses and ran his free hand back and forth over Patience’s ribs, rubbing her. “Grindelwald doesn’t send pretty, young, wandless girls without a brain in their heads into a town full of soldiers as a distraction. He attacks outright, like a man should.”

Hermione sent several furious curses at him as she realized his hand was bloody, the knuckles split, though there was more blood than that could account for. The blood on his hand was from hitting Patience, from her lip, her nose, the cut near her eyebrow.

He sneered at Hermione as his fingers crept higher up Patience’s chest. “We don’t sneak around in masks, either. We take what we are entitled to, like the superior men we are.” His large, supremacist, blood-covered hand closed over Patience’s breast and gave a vicious squeeze. “Of course, if you act like a muggle, we’ll beat you like one.”

Later, when she was thinking of what she had done, Hermione wished she was able to say that she had acted instinctually, that her motions had been without conscious thought. However, that was so blatant a lie, she could not bring herself to even try to tell it. What actually went through her mind was that this vile man had touched her dearest friend, her lover, her Patience, had hurt her, and intended to do so again, to hurt all the people Hermione loved.

Hermione never forgot anything. Her memory was specific and nearly photographic, and yes, she might get stressed and something might slip her mind when she was panicked, or she might try to push away an unpleasant memory, but she didn’t forget.

When she stared down at the blood covering his hand, memories flooded her like a breaking dam. She saw Ron’s face twisting in agony as she fretfully applied healing spells and dittany, his blood soaking into her skin. She saw the splatter of Buckbeak’s blood across the pumpkin patch. She saw Cedric’s blank eyes, Neville’s broken nose, Luna’s busted lip, Harry’s I must not tell lies, so angrily inflamed she could barely stand to look at his hand. She saw Dumbledore’s broken body at the base of the Astronomy Tower, Snape and the other Deatheaters fleeing into the night while Hagrid’s hut burned. She saw herself, the girl who had been Hermione Granger, the girl who had limped into the bathroom after waking up in the past to face herself, haggard, unkempt, malnourished, a victim of torture, shaking and bloody, her arm mutilated with dark magic, despite Narcissa’s attempts to clean and heal her while she slept.

She was so tired of accepting pain, of being the ‘better’ person. Years of careful control evaporated under the force of her rage, and she pulled at the deep reserve of Patience’s magic, twining it with her own to cast a very strong protective shield, one that she knew would keep her safe for the precious seconds she needed for her next, absolutely premeditated act.
Weber had clearly been expecting an attack, and he paused for a second, staring at the visible shield. “Getting scared, little girl? You should be. When I’m done with your pretty, mad friend, you’ll be next. Grindelwald is the future, and if you aren’t with us, you’re expendable.”

He was casting the *cruciatus* again, but it bounced off the glowing, golden shield. Hermione lifted her skirt, which caught his eye and produced another disgusting leer. What violently lecherous remark he would have made, however, was cut off by the dagger Hermione threw that buried itself to the hilt in the center of his forehead, vibrating there for a few seconds before flying back to Hermione’s palm, blood spraying through the air as the dagger spun hilt over blade.

“That was an excellent aim,” Patience said, her voice was as light and calm as ever as Weber collapsed to the floor behind her. Whether she was smiling was not clear due to the injuries to her face.

Hermione couldn’t process what she’d done, not now. She could only run across the room and hold Patience, moving her wand and whispering spells of healing in a rush of words and magic. Instantly, Patience’s face, though still covered in blood, looked much less swollen, and her serene smile was visible, allowing both Hermione’s heart rate and anger to lessen considerably.

“Don’t do that ever again, Patience!” Hermione half-scolded, half-pleaded as she kissed Patience’s bloody face.

Patience lifted a hand to stroke Hermione’s cheek through the mask. “I knew you’d save me, Hermione. You’ve saved the whole world. I believe in you, Hermione. More than anything else I’ve ever seen.”

It took much strength of will not to burst into tears at the rush of love and gratitude she felt at Patience’s words. “We need to go, now.”

They had just turned back toward the door when the sounds of fighting in hallway outside ceased and Tom and Abraxas rushed into the room. Abraxas had a nasty burn mark covering most of the left half of his face, where some of his flesh was visible through the damaged mask, and Tom was noticeably limping. Both stopped moving when they saw Patience and Hermione.

“You have blood on your faces,” Tom observed with a cool tone that only those in the room understood meant he would be looking to hurt someone very badly in retaliation.
Patience tugged Hermione’s hand and they walked toward the boys, revealing the two bodies behind them.

“Are they both dead?” Tom asked in the same voice.

“Just the one that matters,” Hermione replied, taking his arm. “He paid in blood, as requested.”

Tom’s eyes met hers, and he looked incredibly pleased. “And the blood on you?”

“His and Patience’s, not mine,” she answered, gesturing with the knife she was still holding, that was still covered in blood. “I’m not hurt, but we need to go, now,” she repeated. “Felicity and Sophie are out there alone, and someone has to have noticed that half of the front of the jail is missing.”

“It’s unlikely they care,” Abraxas muttered, looping his arm through Tom’s to help him move more quickly. Tom did not protest, which worried Hermione. His leg must be rather badly hurt for him to accept help.

Hermione was about to agree when the caterwauling alarm went off, filling the air with aggressively ear-splitting noise. “I think,” she yelled, “the people we released are taking advantage of the moment. It’s going to be chaos in the streets.”

Patience put her hand on Hermione’s wand hand, waving it through the air and whispering disillusionment charms. Even though their magic was linked, Hermione was still surprised that her wand so easily and fully responded to Patience’s commands, watching the four of them fade like ghosts.

Tom spoke, his voice seeming to come from the palest of shadows. “Excellent work, pet, as usual. Let’s go.”

As they cautiously made their way back out, Hermione saw her guess was correct. People were running out of homes in family groups, heading for the edges of town, past the line where they could apparate, which was possible without a wand, though they were risking splinching. Some wizards, mostly in brown and black uniforms with the Deathly Hallows symbol—Grindelwald’s symbol, emblazoned on the chest, where firing spells at them, but so many people were evacuating, running in all directions, it was impossible for the men to stop them all. A few
who had managed to get their wands somehow were fighting with them in the streets, jets of light flying. The entire scene, combined with the ongoing noise of the alarm, was overwhelmingly chaotic.

The group moved as quickly as could, taking a more direct route this time, and made it to the last row of houses where people rushing past the boundary and apparating about half-way down the hill. A faint shimmer by a dustbin indicated the cloak, and Hermione gently touched the cloth.

“It’s us. We’re under a disillusionment charm, but it’s fading,” Hermione whispered, watching her hand become more solid.

Felicity sighed heavily with relief, and muttered, “Thank God! We’ve been nearly trampled about a dozen times.”

“The potion’s almost up,” Tom hissed. “We need to get down the hill to the portkey.”

Felicity handed the cloak to Sophie completely and Sophie handed Patience her wand.

“I’m glad they found you,” Sophie took off the mask and offered it to Patience.

Patience smiled, her teeth stained with red like the rest of her face. “That’s alright. The blood is mask enough, I think.”

Sophie shook her head in agreement quickly and disappeared under the cloak.

“We’re going straight down the hill, to the woods and the portkey. Everyone run as fast as you can,” Hermione looked at Tom, who nodded.

They ran over the line, though the alarm was still on-going. Felicity, Sophie, and Patience were in front, then Abraxas half-supporting Tom, and Hermione bringing up the rear. Some of Grindelwald’s men were on the hill, taking shots at those trying to escape, and their larger group, now mostly visible, caught their attention.
Hermione threw curses over her shoulder as she ran, as did Tom. Something hit her in the shoulder blades, and she screamed at the pain, stumbling forward from the force, but kept running. At her scream, she felt Tom gathering her magic and saw him send a wave of fire at the men who were chasing them. It hit them, a wall of flames, and they fell shrieking to the ground, rolling in the grass in an attempt to put themselves out.

The wall of flames remained, and no one else attempted to pass it. The group ran panting into the woods, to the large oak tree where they’d left the portkey. They counted down and grasped the iron, and found themselves coughing and gasping on the dusty floor of the abandoned store in Knockturn Alley.

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Only a few moments after returning, Tom felt a roiling sensation in his stomach, and was extremely thankful he hadn’t eaten in hours. His limbs were heavy, in addition to the throbbing pain in his right leg.

“The potion’s wearing off,” Abraxas observed with a groan, one arm still wrapped around Tom.

Sophie stood, putting the mask and the cloak on the table, which wobbled dangerously. “I am so very grateful. I owe you my life, I’m sure. Can you tell me where Jean is? I’m so anxious to see him.”

Abraxas pulled a small envelope out of his coat pocket. “You can meet him at this address. It’s only a few streets over.”

Sophie gave them all kisses on the cheek through their masks and said thank you about thirty more times before leaving.

Once the door was closed, Hermione gave Tom a look that was clear even through the mask. “What did you do to that piece of paper? There’s no way you’d let her leave with all the knowledge she has of us, even with the masks.”

He pulled off the mask and gave her a wink, which he knew she found especially exasperating. “Abraxas and I spelled the paper to make her forget the last few hours. She’ll still see
the address to meet her brother, but she won’t know what happened.”

“But Jean will still know who we are, or who Abraxas is, at the least,” she protested, tearing off her mask to reveal the exact look of frustration he happened to find so oddly adorable on her. Why was it that he found her so sexy when she was annoyed with him?

Abraxas shifted beside him, still carefully supporting Tom, which he didn’t need sitting down, but found he didn’t want to pull away from, either.

“No, I knew of Jean, but he doesn’t know me. All he knows is that he created a portkey for his sister’s rescue, for a concerned group of resistance fighters to use,” Abraxas reassured her. “Tom and I had been waiting for Grindelwald to attack a town my father somehow had connections with, so we could exploit them.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Felicity moaned softly, rolling onto her side and coughing.

“It’s a side effect of the potion,” Hermione said. “It will pass in the next half-hour or so.”

She pulled herself up slowly, digging through her bag and taking out a bottle. “Galatea gave me this potion replenishing bottle. It has a potion for healing minor bodily trauma in it.”

Hermione handed the bottle to Abraxas. “Drink it and then give it to Tom. You’ll need something more specific for the burn, and Patience will probably need a concussion potion, just to be safe.” She glanced over to Felicity. “Were you hit at all?”

“No,” Felicity managed between dry heaves. “I’m great.”

Tom watched in amazement as she continued to go through the tiny bag, pulling out bottles and salves. Her arm disappeared up to her elbow, and he reminded himself to ask her what modifications to the extension charm she had made. The first potion eased the pain in his leg by only a small amount.

“What kind of spell was it?” Hermione was touching his leg now, rolling up his pants leg, and as always, her fingers felt lovely, even when he was in pain.
“I’m not sure,” he admitted, his tone annoyed. The two men in the hall had fought fiercely, if not particularly skillfully. Once Hermione had gone into the next room, the available magic had diminished because Hermione was farther away and using her own magic at full power. He had felt the strength of her casting, and knew he couldn’t use any of her magic – if she was using that much, she had none to spare.

He and Abraxas had held their own, and they had sent both men crashing into the stone wall behind them, hopefully with bashed in brains, Tom thought. But the experience had not been as satisfying to his ego as he had hoped. This whole day had been a series of rude awakenings, and he vowed to redouble his efforts to increase his skill, speed, and power, so that he could handle anyone, on his own, if need be. Though the elemental magic was a boon, it would not do to become dependent upon it.

“Some kind of muscle-locking or spasm spell,” he grimaced as Hermione ran her fingers over most painful area around his knee. “My leg keeps wanting to bend, but I think if I let it, it will stay that way.”

She chewed on her lip and pulled out more bottles, giving him several disgusting potions to drink, and rubbing different salves into his leg, which was actually pleasant. Eventually, his leg began to loosen, and the pain subsided. The weakness and nausea were gone as well, so he stood gingerly and walked around the room while Hermione moved onto treating Abraxas’s burn, and then to Patience, cleaning her face gently with moist rags that somehow managed to also be in that blasted bag.

Within an hour’s time, they were all healthy and mostly clean, though Patience’s coat did have some blood on it that couldn’t be removed without magic, so she cheerfully took Tom’s grey wool scarf and covered the spots with it. He didn’t even protest as she pulled the scarf from his neck, her fingers dancing over his skin. He may have even smiled at her. Patience had surprised him again today, and he would be having a conversation with her about that, but at the moment, he was glad she was safe, and that the bastard who’d touched her was dead.

The fact that Hermione had murdered a man was another conversation that would need to be had, but it would wait as well. They had achieved their goals, he had gotten his first battle experience, and they were all in one piece. That would have to do for now, though his desire to destroy everything remotely related to Grindelwald had increased exponentially, and the sound of Hermione screaming, the sight of Abraxas’s burned face, along with the horror of Patience covered in blood, only added valuable fuel to the fire he would use to burn his foe to ashes.
Chapter Summary

Tom Might Just Be Getting the Hang of Being a Soul Mate

The aftermath of the battle in Fontaine de Pussiance from Tom's point of view. Galatea and Narcissa react to the partial news of what happened, and Hermione suffers some serious, previously unnoticed, side-effects of the curse she was caught with in battle. Tom takes additional risks to help her.

Chapter Notes

You are all such clever readers! Many of you asked, "Didn't Hermione get hit with something?" Oh, yes, she did. And this chapter will deal with it. It also contains some magical theories, and it focuses on Tom's conflicted thoughts about his growing dependency on his group. Also, Tom is pretty sweet to Hermione in this chapter, but I hope I've made it clear by this point that he's at his most unguarded when the two of them are alone, and what he does privately with her, and even Abraxas and Patience, does not negate the fact that he is still capable of being a vicious bastard. I've been rather sick with a nasty case of bronchitis, so replies to comments have been slow, but I'm finally on the mend, so I'll get those sorted soon. As always, love to you all.

The rest of the day felt bizarre to Tom, to say the least. Only a few hours before, they'd been fighting for their lives, performing thrilling and powerful spells, and now they were going in and out of shops, surrounded by annoying, childish laughter, running into many fellow Hogwarts students who were also buying holiday gifts.

Tom pasted a genial, non-threatening smile on his face as he greeted acquaintances and browsed through the stores, but he was frustrated, eager to find out what had happened after they'd left Fontaine de Puissance. Had Grindelwald been summoned? Had the rest of the people left for a safe place? Tom hoped so, not because he particularly cared, but because the loss of prisoners and townsfolk to hold hostage would certainly anger the man. It had been a glorious slap in the face, an opening move that Tom planned on following up with much, much more. How long would it take before news traveled? Would Grindelwald work to keep it quiet?

Slughorn cornered them in a candy shop, his arms full of boxes of crystallized pineapple, asking inane questions about their holiday plans, and Tom was grateful when Abraxas came over to distract their Head of House by telling him about all the famous guests his parents would be inviting to their Christmas ball, and to ask Slughorn if he'd received his invitation yet.

As had become normal, all three of his quartet seemed to understand he was agitated,
though he was sure he gave no outward sign. He went through the motions of buying a few books, and even a couple gifts, already longing for his magic again. It was ridiculous that students couldn’t use magic at home, especially if they lived in magical households. He understood that it would have been a problem to run around muggle London performing spells, but whom did it hurt for them to use magic in Diagon Alley, or in Hogsmeade?

The potion to cloak their magic he’d brewed had many rare ingredients, and they had used up most of them making a batch large enough for five doses. It wouldn’t be possible to make the potion regularly, though he could probably slowly order the missing ingredients over the course of the school year, and have them by summer, or faster if he had Abraxas obtain half of the needed supplies. He’d told Hermione he wasn’t concerned about the trace, but that wasn’t entirely true. Yes, he’d used magic as a child, regularly, with no interference, and yes, the students he’d asked about the trace seemed to think it was a matter of luck whether or not one was caught, but it was there, and Tom didn’t like to proceed without assured success. The situation called for further research in the Chamber, in all its books and Slytherin’s journals. They had barely scratched the surface of what it contained.

He was so lost in his thoughts and plans, Tom hardly noticed they’d returned to the Leaky Cauldron.

“Tom?” Hermione was saying, her hand on his arm. “We have to go back to Hogsmeade. Patience and Abraxas have to go home as well.”

Tom looked at her, at the face he’d come to see in his dreams, in all his plans. She was so lovely, all light and seeming innocence and kindness, passionate about the rights of everyone. And today, she’d killed a man. The weapon she’d used was strapped to her thigh, perhaps still containing traces of blood. He was incredibly aroused simply thinking about it, about the amount of darkness she contained under that airy surface, and she was his. He wanted to kiss her, to strip her bare and run his hands up those thighs, but that would have to wait.

“We need to find a way to get back to Hogwarts sooner, or at least get the group together again before the break is over,” Tom replied, looking at Abraxas and Patience, who were standing by the fireplace, ready to floo to their respective homes. He wanted his quartet – all of them, and he wanted to do magic with them, to celebrate their triumph with magic and sex all night long. Why should he be deprived of what belonged to him?

“Come to the Malfoy Christmas ball,” Abraxas said to the group. “I’m allowed to have a few guests of my own, and my parents already assumed I’d be inviting you, Tom.”

“I doubt your parents want you around a bunch of girls who aren’t eligible, pureblood matches,” Felicity observed, just a hint of sting in her voice.
Abraxas gave her a reassuring smile. “My parents don’t know half the people who show up
to this party. The guest list is about ten feet long. I’ll introduce you briefly as Hogwarts friends,
they’ll smile and nod, and then we’ll all take off to my rooms and spend the evening there.”

“Your rooms, plural?” Felicity looked dazed.

Tom laughed. “Yes, Abraxas forgets that not everyone has a whole wing of a mansion to
himself.”

“It isn’t the whole wing,” Abraxas protested.

“We’ll be there,” Hermione cut in. “Owl us with the details,” she kissed his cheek, at the
edge of his mouth, and his grey eyes briefly closed, his hands tightening around hers. Tom could
see he clearly fighting the urge to kiss her properly.

Tom was angry again, angry that they were being separated. Patience was absently petting
his hand, watching Hermione and Abraxas, and he leaned close, hissing in her ear in parseltongue.
She shivered, and her bracelet made echoing hisses, its tiny silver-blue tongue flicking at the
delicate skin on her wrist.

“If you behave yourself for the next few days, I’ll tell you what I said at the party,” he
whispered into the curtain of her pale, silky hair. He pulled back and ran his finger over his scarf,
wrapped around her long, lovely neck. Though it was unnecessary, since Patience was already his,
he liked that she was wearing proof. He wanted them all marked, and clearly.

“Keep the scarf,” he tugged at the ends, pulling just enough to tighten the scarf around her
throat. “It suits your eyes.”

“You mean I suit your eyes,” Patience carelessly corrected, leaning into him, not in the
least concerned he could cut off her air with just a bit more force.

He was filled with the desire to spank her, then fuck her, then run his fingers over her body
for hours, tracing runes of possession into her skin, but he managed not to rise to bait. She was such
a devilish thing, distracting him. “Yes, pet, you do,” he replied simply, and borrowing a page from
Abraxas’s playbook, he kissed her hand before half-escorting, half-pushing her to the Floo.
She and Hermione clutched each other, whispering things he couldn’t hear, and Tom turned his gaze to Abraxas. He was more than relieved that Abraxas’s handsome face was flawless once again, no trace of the burn left behind thanks to Hermione’s forethought and skill at healing. Tom hadn’t really thought much about healing spells and potions until today. Now, he was adding them to his list of skills he wanted to be more than proficient in. If he was going to be engaging in battle, he needed to know how counteract any damage done to himself or his group.

“Abraxas,” he said softly, having closed most of the distance between them. He wanted to stroke the blonde’s pale cheek, but instead shook his hand. After all, as Marguerite had mentioned, there were already rumors about them throughout Slytherin House, and though Tom didn’t give a fuck what his fellow students thought, it was important to keep any such rumors from reaching the Malfoys’ ears and causing them to take a closer look at Abraxas’s relationships.

“Tom,” Abraxas replied, his head slightly bowed, his thumb caressing Tom’s hand.

To Tom, it was clear from Abraxas's posture and low tone that he wanted to kiss him, and Tom felt the same, but he gave his best friend’s hand another squeeze instead, and reminded himself that he was working toward a future where he wouldn’t need caution, where he’d be able to announce the power of his quartet to the wizarding world, to claim them as his in front of everyone. “I’ll owl you tomorrow.”

Abraxas and Patience left, then Tom, Hermione, and Felicity went back to the cottage in Hogsmeade. They had a late supper with Narcissa and Galatea, who watched them closely. Tom wondered how much they saw. Both women were magically sensitive and very intelligent, and he suspected they were aware of much more than they let on at any given moment.

“We’ll be headed to Galatea’s house tomorrow, where we’ll spend the rest of the break, so you will need to pack your things either tonight or in the morning,” Narcissa announced. “I hope the shopping trip was a success?”

Felicity made a choking sound, which she quickly covered by drinking pumpkin juice, her cheeks nearly as red as her hair as she vigorously nodded. We need to work on her poker face, Tom thought sourly.

“Yes,” Hermione cut in. “It was…” she paused.

“Very instructive,” Tom finished, meeting eyes with Narcissa. It was as close as he would
come to telling her that she was right to put him on his guard this morning.

Her perfectly curved eyebrow arched and the edge of her mouth quirked. “I trust you didn’t incur any injuries from the…crowds?”

“Nothing that a few basic healing potions couldn’t fix,” Hermione reassured her, though Tom noted Narcissa’s mouth remained tight at the corners.

After dinner, they went to the study where Felicity and Hermione played a card game by the fire, Narcissa magically knitted a blanket with casual grace, and Galatea turned on the radio, a glass of elf wine in her hand.

Tom sat on the couch beside Galatea, close to the radio, listening eagerly for any news of what they had done. Galatea gave him a knowing look, and he held back a scowl. It was annoying how easily the older women in his life read his behavior, or at least, imagined they did.

It didn’t take long for the news to turn to the topic of Grindelwald and his activities on the continent, and then to mention that there had been a shocking turn of events earlier today in one of the towns Grindelwald had been occupying.

As the reporter continued, Narcissa’s knitting needles fell to her lap, and both Hermione and Felicity lost interest in their game. The reporter was talking quickly, clearly excited, praising a small group of masked ‘freedom fighters’ who had entered the town, attacked Grindelwald’s men, set prisoners free, and created enough chaos with the soldiers that most of the townspeople had been able to flee to safety.

“This is the first time in a year that Grindelwald has lost, rather than gained ground in France,” the reporter announced. “The survivors, along with all of un-occupied France, are celebrating tonight. This victory, though small, is symbolic.”

Tom could barely contain his swelling pride. Without turning his head, he could feel Hermione’s emotions were similar. She was happy that the people had escaped, happy that they’d all made it out intact. He wanted to pull her close, to celebrate as well, but for now, he settled for the pleasure of her mental, magical touch, surrounding him as he listened.

“Many of them have left France altogether, and have come to our Ministry of Magic to petition for asylum,” the reporter continued. “Minister Spencer-Moon declared earlier that he was
willing to offer aid to magical citizens fleeing from the violence in France and Germany. The minister also denies that any knowledge of the masked fighters.”

The voice of a very harried Minister filled the room. “No, you daft man, for the umpteenth time, I did not send aurors or hitwizards to France! And, according to witnesses, the group spoke in French the whole time. They are most likely French wizards who are tired of Grindelwald taking over their towns!”

Quickly, the reporter pressed on, though the sounds of shuffling could be heard. Most likely, the Minister was trying to get away from the reporter and failing. “So you say, Minister, but many British wizarding folk think it’s high time something was done to stop Grindelwald’s spread of power. Just last week, the Wizengammot held a closed session on the matter;”

“Who told you that?” Spencer-Moon snapped, and then there was a crackling sound, that might have been a snap-dragon hex, followed by several seconds of silence.

When the sound returned, the reporter’s breath was coming in puffs, as if he’d been running. “Well, folks, there you have it. Despite protestations and disavowals, our Ministry might finally be doing something about the Grindelwald problem. Tune in tomorrow, when I’ll be interviewing one of the villagers who escaped Fontaine de Puissance. For now, I’m Jared Fletchley for the Wizarding World News, signing off.”

The program immediately following was a variety show, and big band music filled the room, breaking an atmosphere that had gotten tenser the longer Fletchley had spoken.

Tom could see that both Galatea and Narcissa were upset by the combination of their expressions and their actively crackling magic. Most magical folk could feel strong magic, which explained Tom’s tendency to quickly clear a room when he was angry. Unlike Patience, whom Tom suspected from off-handed comments could see all magic, all the time, Tom only saw magic when it was coming from powerful witches or wizards, but he knew even that was extremely rare, further proof of how special he was. And right now, he could see the watery magic around Galatea, rising waves that were building to a storm, and the bright, fiery magic of Narcissa, magic that honestly reminded him a bit of his own. His motherfigure had depths of darkness she kept carefully hidden most of the time, but he could feel it. Darkness always called to him.

Galatea did not have the darkness, but she did have plenty of anger, and it seeped into her voice when she stood, setting her wine glass on the low table, facing Tom. “I’m not sure words exist in any language to convey how upset I am right now. The risks you took, the danger you put yourself and others in,”
“We helped innocent people! Grindelwald is evil, and someone should be doing something to stop him!” Hermione protested, her indignation clear, and Tom could feel the protective aspect of her magic folding around them both.

“Do you imagine that nothing is being done about Grindelwald, Hermione?” Galatea turned to her now. “It is the height of arrogance for you to assume that those in power don’t have plans,”

Hermione gave a dark, bitter laugh, not at all her normal sound. “The Ministry of Magic is a fucking joke! They never do a damned thing about -”

“Darling!” Narcissa cut in quickly, crossing the room and putting her arms around Hermione. Something was happening here, something Tom didn’t quite understand, and that was enough to set him on edge. “Galatea is simply worried about you, as am I. We know you wanted to help, that you did help, but the number of laws you broke, the fact that all of you could have been killed, it is frightening to consider.”

Galatea’s face had softened, and she nodded. “It is natural for young people to want to right the wrongs in this world, and Grindelwald is certainly responsible for many of the current wrongs, but it is also natural for us, as your parents,” she glanced at Tom and Felicity, “and as your teachers and mentors, to be gravely concerned when you take such serious risks.”

Tom had many, many things to say, but he was smart enough to know that most of his arguments would not be well-received. It was all well and good to claim that they were motivated by the desire to help others, but if he flat-out said to Galatea that his true aim had been to gain battle experience, to test himself, she would only get angrier and perhaps even try to restrict his movements. He had to play the game of caring, of acting like a normal person, at least for the moment.

“Of all people, Galatea,” Tom said softly, a careful touch of accusation in his voice, “I would think you would understand how dangerous Grindelwald is, how important it is to give people hope that he can be fought, that he can be stopped. If he continues to sweep France, how long before he comes to England?”

“Grindelwald fears Dumbledore too much to step foot on English soil,” Galatea responded quickly.

“And what of all people, magical and non-magical alike, on the continent? Grindelwald wants to abolish the Statute of Secrecy, to have wizards rule over muggles. How well do you
imagine muggles would be treated? Would it not be similar to what Hitler is doing to those who oppose him or those he hates, to the Jews, the Catholics, the…homosexuals?” Tom glanced from Galatea to Narcissa and back again very pointedly. “How long before muggles are enslaved, or simply wiped out completely? What defenses do they have against magic that they don’t even know exists?”

Galatea sucked in her breath at the small sob that escaped Felicity. “I’m not arguing that Grindelwald doesn’t need to be stopped, Tom,” she spoke slowly, as if holding back great emotion. “I’m saying that it is not the place of students to fight him.”

“But who else will?” Hermione asked quietly. “How long should we wait, when people are dying every day? That village was filled with terrified people – children whose parents were being tortured, women being raped. Why should we wait? How can we, if we call ourselves human beings with any sense of moral responsibility?”

Narcissa was still holding Hermione, and she gently stroked her daughter’s hair. “You’ve made your point, darling. The news was simply…alarming because we love you. I think everyone needs rest. We’ll discuss this further in a few days. Give us time to adjust.”

“And,” Galatea’s voice became hard, “in the meanwhile, no adventures, please.”

Tom didn’t like to be told what to do at the best of times, but as he had no more magic cloaking potion at the moment, and his leg was still quite sore, he had no plans for further immediate action. “Of course not,” he murmured soothingly, his expression as innocent and calm as he could make it.

Hermione and Felicity quickly echoed their assent, and everyone made their way to the bedrooms, Galatea and Narcissa on the first floor, and Hermione, Felicity, and Tom in gable, which had been divided into two bedrooms and a shared bath.

He was almost asleep when he felt pain tugging at his magic – Hermione’s pain. It was tightly controlled, as though she was trying to keep the worst of it back, but it had managed to seep through their bond. A pale sliver of light shone from under the bathroom door, which had entrances from both bedrooms. He opened the door and found Hermione sitting in the bathtub, her shoulders shaking.

On her back, in the center between her shoulder blades, was a blackened circle of skin. It looked either badly burned or necrotic, and Tom didn’t care for either of those possibilities.
“What spell is it? Do you know?” he knelt beside the tub, his hand reaching into the water for hers. Touch always made her feel better, he reasoned, ignoring the whisper in his mind that it made him feel better as well.

She grasped at him tightly, shaking her head, and he felt quite a bit more of the pain. It was not a sharp pain. Instead, it was a pain that rose and fell in intensity, like a wave. He reached further along their bond. “Don’t fight,” he whispered into her hair. “I want to know what it is. Let me help you.”

With a low, shaky exhale, Hermione’s head fell against his shoulder, and she opened their bond as completely as he’d ever felt, as intimate as any sexual touch they’d shared. He was in her magic, their magic, and for an instant it was beautiful, until the wave of pain crested, and Tom had to fight the urge to vomit. The pain felt like drowning, and it took several seconds before he could catch his breath.

“I don’t know what it is,” she gasped. “Some kind of dark spell that needs time to take root – the perfect spell for a fleeing opponent.”

He thought back to the moment when they’d been running toward the portkey, when Hermione had screamed, but had kept running, had seemed fine. Until now.

“I’ll get Narcissa,” he started to rise, but Hermione clutched at him.

“No!” she closed her eyes against the pain, and he had to push back intense anger, a desire to vanish into the night and find and torture that soldier. “Mother and Galatea will support us, eventually, if we are cautious, but not if we reveal how hurt we got.”

Tom’s jaw tightened. He had to agree that if Galatea and Narcissa had seen his group’s condition upon returning to Knockturn Alley, their reaction would have been…volcanic. But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t face an eruption to ease Hermione’s suffering. Her pain was unbearable to him, and the longer it continued, the less he would be able to hide that very troubling fact.

“Dearest,” he struggled to keep his tone light. “We must do something. You are in pain.”

She opened her eyes, and despite her discomfort, he could see a touch of mocking humor in her gaze. “Oh, Tom, you do care,” she laughed weakly.
Tom’s eyes narrowed as her shoulders began to shake against the building pain. “Hermione, you are mine, and no one harms what is mine.” He placed his hand against her back, just below the place where the spell had hit, and spoke the few healing spells he knew – basic ones for healing burns and cuts.

“No amount of aurors or dementors could take me away from you, Hermione,” he spoke before he thought.

She smiled at him, her eyes fluttering and then she lost consciousness, and he felt… something besides anger. She was so deeply in him now, so much a part of who he was, there was nothing he wouldn’t do to protect her, and she knew that, he realized. That should have angered him, the vulnerability of it, but right now, he didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was counteracting this spell.

He closed his eyes, concentrated on the elemental magical links to Abraxas and Patience, drew upon their magic. They were both far away, but he was still able to get a bit of power from them, a boost to his own magic. Then, he pushed deeper into his soul mate bond with Hermione. He dove underneath the pain, to her magic, which he could feel trapped under the curse, like an animal caught in a net.

“All magic is transformation,” he repeated to himself, allowing his magic, combined with what he’d taken from the others, to twine in, over, and through the curse, surrounding it. It hurt. This deep into his connection with Hermione, he could feel quite a bit of her pain, and as Abraxas woke to what Tom was doing, there was a vague sense of confusion and worry coming from his fellow Slytherin. Patience was calm, and Tom felt her magic push hard toward him, giving him additional strength. Abraxas did the same on Patience’s cue, voluntarily giving Tom more magic than he had been able to simply take. Even as he was focused on Hermione, Tom noted in the back of his mind that if his quartet were willing, the amount of magic he could temporarily siphon was much greater, perhaps nearly unlimited.

If Hermione hadn’t been in such pain, Tom would have been euphoric. The amount of magic coursing through him, from three powerful sources, was astounding. He pulled at the curse, unraveling it like a loose loop of thread in a jumper, marveling as he did so. He felt like a God, transforming the magic at his will.

Time was impossible to measure as he worked at the dark magic, changing its very nature,
shifting it from curse to a more compatible darkness, something closer to his own magical signature, though it still rested heavily on Hermione’s air magic, pushing it down. The magic needed to be moved out of her, but so much energy, so much magic, neutral or not, expelled out into the open would surely be noticed – by Narcissa and Galatea, surely, if not by the Ministry and its infernal underage tracking system as well.

*Take it. It's yours now.* Patience’s soft, dreamy voice was in his head, and though her obvious access to his mind was alarming, that wasn’t Tom’s current priority.

Instead, he asked, silently, *How?*

He felt something like the mental equivalent of a shrug. *Make it your magic, absorb it into yourself.*

Since his first year at Hogwarts, Tom had considered the concept of using the magic stored in cursed or spelled objects to add to his own magic. He had even purchased cursed objects with the intent to do so. However, he quickly discovered why Narcissa had told him that it was unlikely he would succeed. First, it was very time-consuming and difficult to transform magic. The skill with which Galatea had disarmed cursed objects came from great power and years and years of specialized training and practice.

Tom and Hermione had worked together over the last five years to counteract several cursed objects, but even with their combined soul mate magic, they had struggled to shift the magic of even the simplest curses. It hadn’t been until this year, with the elemental binding, and the additional information from Slytherin’s journals in the Chamber that Tom had been able to really disarm cursed items, and even then, he’d needed to draw upon his partners’ magic as well as his own. And that had been only to transform the magic, not to absorb it into himself.

From what he’d read in Slytherin’s writing and other texts, he understood that one’s personal magic radiated outward from one’s core or soul. The more powerful the individual, the wider his or her sphere of magic or magical aura. Absorbing additional magic widened one’s magical boundaries, giving the witch or wizard more reserve magic to draw upon. But, Slytherin had written, the wider the sphere, the greater level of control the magician must exert to keep that magic from escaping, bleeding into the neutral magic that made up the magical world, that seemingly endless well of magic that all witches and wizards drew upon to cast spells.

Very few wizards had great personal reserves of magic – most magic folk, whether they realized it or not, simply used their own core magic as a kind of spark to connect to the free-flowing magic in the air, water, earth, and fire around them. If they were cut off from that source, their own magic would be quite weak, like the people in Fountaine de Poissance who were practically helpless without their wands to act as a conduit between the core magic and the free
Slytherin had warned that if one absorbed too much magic without the sufficient level of control, then the personal boundaries could break, and the magician could potentially lose his or her core magic – hemorrhage it like blood spilling out of severed artery. And once the core magic was gone, it was impossible to replace. Slytherin had even theorized that squibs were children whose core magic had been damaged in utero, or whose parents had been so magically weak themselves that they hadn’t been able to pass on enough core magic to their offspring to make the child magically viable.

*What if I can’t control it?* Tom thought, not sure if Patience was still listening, half-hoping she wasn’t.

Laughter, soft and sweet, filled his head. *Control is not something you’ll ever need to worry about, Tom Riddle.*

Tom’s thoughts instantly went to a mental image of Patience over his knees, a sure demonstration of his control. Her laughter turned to a purr, and Tom had to fight to bring his focus back.

He reached into the magic, scooping it up with his own magic folding around it. The transformed magic was still in Hermione, but Tom’s magic was inside her as well, and her own magic was cooperating fully and completely with his, holding nothing back. The considerable depth of his soul mate’s magic was at his disposal. He climbed into the tub behind her, his thin pajamas instantly sticking to his skin as they were soaked through. Carefully, he adjusted her unconscious form, bringing her back to his chest, her head to his shoulder, wrapping his arms around her waist, making sure that the words on his bare forearm were flush against words on her exposed stomach. He needed to move the neutralized magic from her body to his own seamlessly, without releasing any of that magic outside of their bodies. Because she was wouldn’t remember it, he allowed himself a brief kiss to her temple, and a murmured, “I’ve got you, dearest.” Then, he tucked his legs over hers, so that their bodies were touching from head to toe, and began pulling the magic out of her.

The process was very slow going. The magic was not his magic, and though he had shifted its signature, it was not the free-flowing, neutral magic that anyone could simply use. It had been given a purpose when it was crafted into that particular curse, and it was attempting to cling to that purpose. The man who had cast the spell must have been a very strong wizard. But though the magic was stubborn, but Tom was more so. As he tugged on it, he used the borrowed magic from his quartet to work at it, surrounding small amounts of the former curse with his own core magic, overwhelming the weaker magic until it finally succumbed and became his. With each small victory, the process became easier, and Tom felt his magic growing, widening, strengthening. It was a heady experience, and by the time he was finished and Hermione was stirring against him,
Tom was glowing, his magic practically bursting from his skin.

He understood what Slytherin had meant by exercising control. There was a natural equilibrium of core magic to external, aura magic in every witch or wizard and Tom had flooded himself with additional magic, disturbing his balance. He pushed outward, moving the extra magic to the edges of his own aura, feeling it widen in spherical way around him. It took several minutes of concentration and whispered runes of “stop” and “boundary” to feel comfortable in the new, more spacious circle of his magic. The new magic wasn’t quite his still – it tingled like raw skin under a scab, but he was confident in his ability to use it.

“What did you do?” Hermione’s voice was weak, and Tom frowned at how small she sounded.

He gently pushed her forward, shifted the wild curls he loved so much over her thin shoulder. Lightly, he ran his fingers over the space between her shoulder blades, tracing the circle of skin, which, though no longer blackened, was several shades darker than the rest of her, though it was fading before his eyes.

“I transfigured and removed the curse,” he said simply, overwhelmed with relief that the spell had been handled, that she was alright.

Hermione shook her shoulders, experimentally twisting the muscles of her back. “The pain is gone. How did you transfigure,” she began.

Tom sighed in frustration. “You need to rest, not spend the rest of the night working out every aspect of magic we just performed. I’ll explain if you’ll be a good little bird and lie back and close your eyes.”

Hermione’s eyes flashed, but he tugged at her curls in warning and she shifted, falling back onto his chest with only a mild huff of protest. “We performed?” she asked against his wet nightshirt, her breath hot against his cold, wet skin.

Because he was in an excellent mood, he tapped playfully at her lips. “Hush, dearest, or I won’t tell you a damn thing.”

Hermione bit his finger, but it was more of a nibble, and he couldn’t help but smirk. “Now, now, none of that. I think you might be picking up nasty habits from your pet.”
She laughed, and that sound, her normal, happy, sexy laugh was so wonderful to hear, Tom couldn’t keep back his own laughter. He held her close and told her how he’d been able to use her magic completely, since she’d let him in completely, how Patience and Abraxas had leant him their magic as well, and he’d used the basic practice Galatea had taught them so long ago, transforming the magic to no longer be a curse.

He thought, but did not admit, that the addition of five years of challenging Transfiguration lessons with Dumbledore had pushed his own understanding and abilities at that most useful of magical disciplines. Galatea was not the only person who had said that Dumbledore was the sole reason Grindelwald had not pushed further toward England, and Tom knew that despite the old man’s harmless appearance and kind demeanor, he was shockingly, casually powerful in a way that Tom aspired to be, though he’d never grow such a ridiculous beard. If Dumbledore was as powerful as Tom thought, as everyone thought, he wondered what was stopping him from confronting Grindelwald. After all, Dumbledore professed to actually care about others, which should have been a great motivator.

“Did you absorb the magic?” her question held no accusation, and her body stayed curled comfortably into his own as she spoke.

Tom nodded, using her body as a blanket. She was always so much warmer than he was, ironically, given that he was the one with fire magic. Apparently, his cold-blooded, snake’s nature won out in that aspect.

“How?” He could hear the curiosity and desire for knowledge in her voice, but he could also feel how heavy her limbs were, and having felt only part of her pain, he knew she had to be exhausted from fighting the curse. He honestly couldn’t believe she hadn’t been screaming. She was incredibly strong, his soul mate.

“I promise I will tell you all about it, but not now,” he let his voice be cold and stern as he stood, pulling her up with him, and then wrapping her in a terrycloth robe and carrying her into the her bedroom.

Felicity sat up in bed as he put Hermione down on the mattress beside her. To her credit, she didn’t startle or ask any stupid questions, only, “Is she okay? Do I need to do anything?”

“She was suffering the after-effects of a curse from earlier that wasn’t properly treated. She should be fine now, though,” Tom smiled at Felicity, the charming smile that usually got him whatever he wanted. “You need to make sure she stays in bed for the rest of the night, and the morning. We’ll need to bring her a tray in bed and make sure she doesn’t try to pack half the library to take to the other house,”
“She can hear you,” Hermione protested, but her voice was slurred with sleepiness. “And I have some books I need to take,”

Tom cut her off. “I’ll pack the books myself. You go to sleep, or I swear I will pour sleeping draught down your throat.”

“Don’t worry,” Felicity assured him. “I won’t let her up until we have to leave.”

“Excellent,” Tom gave the redhead another beatific grin for good measure, then left his soul mate in her capable hands.

He returned to his room and after a few hours sleep, he was up again, sending letters about the experience to Abraxas, who he knew was worried. Tom didn’t bother writing to Patience. That girl knew too much of what he thought already. Then, he began work on further translation of a Slytherin journal, searching carefully for key words that would indicate content of particular interest, especially, cloaking, absorbing, and deadly spells. Tom could clearly recall the face of the soldier who had cursed Hermione, and he was determined to create a lovely surprise for him when their paths crossed again.
A Day in the Life of Abraxas Malfoy

Chapter Summary

Some insight into Abraxas - his past, his family life, and why he is accepting of Tom's controlling nature. Tom comes to visit, and Abraxas offers even more of himself.

Chapter Notes

I haven't really written much from Abraxas's p.o.v., but I devoted this chapter to him. I'm interested in his motivations, and why he is so loyal to Tom. I hope what I've written explains that. There is some mention of child abuse (in the past, and not graphically detailed). Love to you all! Next chapter will hopefully see us at the Malfoy party!

Abraxas Malfoy hated the holidays. Or, more accurately, Abraxas hated all the time he had to spend in his parents’ company over the holiday break. Summers weren’t such a problem because his mother usually travelled with friends, and he could spend most of his time outside, riding his broom, and only dealing with his father a few evenings a week. During Winter Solstice and Christmastime, however, his parents were always there, dragging him to one social engagement after the next, culminating in the grand exhibition of Pureblood culture and wealth that was the annual Malfoy Winter Solstice Ball, held every December 21st.

Once, Abraxas supposed, maybe fifty years ago when his great-grandmother Malfoy had started the tradition, the ball had probably been a smallish affair, with only close friends and family – all Pureblooded – invited. Over the years, though, it had grown into an important social event for all of the upper levels of wizarding society – the Minister of Magic, of course, and all the department heads, the Wizengamnot members, famous entertainers and quidditch players, and not all of these people were Pureblooded. He knew his mother found this a bit trying, but his father was a firm believer in fostering all kinds of connections to influence and power, regardless of their source.

And, every year, for as long as Abraxas could remember, his parents had the same passive-aggressive argument about the guest list over breakfast leading up to the night of the ball.

“You’ve invited practically the whole staff of Hogwarts,” Evangeline Malfoy pursed her lips as she lifted her gold-rimmed, antique Chinese tea cup that was rumored to have been made for the first emperor of the Chinese magical world. The red and black dragons painted on the side
moved sinuously under her touch, flying in endless circles.

"They are powerful wizards and witches, very talented, most of them, and in charge of our new generation's learning," Gawain replied smoothly. "I think it's good to have some contact with them."

"Really, Gawain? Some of them are so... raggedy," she continued. "That Kettleburn man managed to destroy three of my everlasting rosemary bushes at last year's party when he insisted on helping our elves set off the midnight fireworks."

Abraxas kept his eyes on the dragons on his own cup, studiously ignoring his parents. He knew from experience that he should remain silent and neutral for as long as possible.

"Well, then, I do hope you had a word with the nursery that sold you those bushes. Aren't they supposed to withstand all manner of spells?" His father lifted a pale eyebrow in a taunting fashion. He knew exactly how to needle his wife.

"Fiendfyre is not generally covered in that list," his mother hissed softly, then cleared her throat, returning her voice to its normal, bland politeness. "And that history professor – what is his name, again, Abraxas?"

"Binns," Abraxas quickly supplied, then went back to eating his toast.

Evangeline gave a delicate shudder of distaste. "He simply talks, non-stop, with no concept of when his audience is trying to get away from him. Hester Longbottom actually had to discreetly hex the man to end the five-hour conversation he dragged her into three years ago. You know, she hasn't come back to our party since."

"Hester is a crotchety old bag," Gawain smiled easily, because it bothered his wife when he treated her complaints casually. "She was probably thrilled for the excuse to use a hex."

"Gawain," Evangeline’s fingers were tapping on the handle of the butter knife. "You must remember that I told you her granddaughter is one of the candidates for our dear son’s fiancée. I’d like to have her here."

Abraxas’s head shot up at the mention of the fiancée list. "Do you mean Josephine?"
Both sets of parental eyes focused on him now. Abraxas struggled not to squirm. They might secretly despise each other, but when his parents found a cause that united them, they were a force to be reckoned with. Abraxas’s future was one such cause.

“So you are familiar with her?” Evangeline’s voice was syrupy sweet now. “What kind of girl is she?”

Abraxas swallowed the bite of toast he’d taken. It felt stuck in his throat. “She’s a very nice girl – kind, smart, a Ravenclaw. She’s been in the study group with Tom and me since our first year.”

Gawain smiled again, closer to a genuine expression this time. “That sounds promising. You’ve known her for a long while, and she’s nice. Is she pretty?”

Evangeline made a noise of disapproval. “Looks aren’t the main concern, Gawain. Breeding is foremost.”

“My lovely Lady Malfoy,” he gave her an icy grin as he swept his gaze over her very attractive face, “I couldn’t very well ask my son to use lower standards than I did. Your beauty was a major attraction.”

The compliment was not intended as such, nor was it taken as such. Evangeline nearly scowled, but caught herself at the last moment.

Abraxas spoke to try to shift the tension. “Josephine is nice to look at, but it doesn’t matter. I’m fairly certain she’s going to end up engaged to Jacob Selwyn by the end of the year.”

Gawain and Evangeline made mirrored looks of disappointment.

“What about Marguerite Rosier? She’s in your year, and in your House. I know you see her regularly,” his mother began. “And before you can say a word, Gawain, the girl is very attractive, though a bit on the small side. Her mother told me at a recent luncheon that Marguerite is near the top of her class, very bright and talented.”
“Yes, but the Rosier women are rather bold, though, aren’t they?” Gawain asked. “Maxwell’s mother had all number of affairs, and wasn’t quiet about it at all. It’s not even certain Max is truly a Rosier at all – he is a third son, you know.”

“I don’t think ancient and vicious gossip is appropriate conversation for the breakfast table,” Evangeline sniffed. “And the Rosier wards accepted Maxwell from birth, as you well know.”

Gawain grinned. “Yes, old lady Rosier was always excellent at ward charms, wasn’t she?”

“Back to the topic of the party,” Evangeline turned away from her husband, toward her son. “I know you already gave a list to the stationer’s for the official invitations, but I told you I wanted to look it over. Do you have the names for me?”

Abraxas nodded. “Yes, mother,” he handed her the piece of parchment he’d made that morning. “All of them are school mates, and many have parents who are already invited as well.”

Gawain used his fork to push on the edge of the parchment, forcing his wife to lay it on the table between them. “Patience Foster. Is she related to Wendell Foster, the inventor? I’ve been looking into purchasing some of his patents.”

“That crazy man who blew up his shop in Diagon Alley a few years ago?” Evangeline tutted. “Gawain, I’m sure you have better sense than to throw money after the work of a madman. Abraxas, if the girl is like her father, please be sure to keep her away from anything combustible.”

“Don’t worry about Patience, mother,” Abraxas kept his voice even, careful not betray any of the affection he felt at the thought of Patience. “Corvus and Thad are more likely to destroy something. Those two have no coordination off of the Quidditch pitch.”

“I see Tom on your list, of course,” Gawain observed. “That boy has a brilliant future. Between Lestrange and myself, every department at the Ministry would like to get their hands on this current crop of Slytherins in a few years. Slughorn tells me how talented a group you are every time we meet, and he never fails to lead with mention of Tom.”

Evangeline’s eyes lost their focus for a few moments. “Tom is a very…attractive boy.”
“Oh, I’m sure he has all the ladies, young and old, throwing themselves at him,” Gawain gave her a hard look.

Abraxas was getting a headache, and was very grateful when a giant owl swooped in through a high window left open especially for that purpose. He recognized Jeeves at once, and so did his parents. Tom usually sent him letters later in the evening, when they would be less likely to be received in front of his parents.

“Speak of the devil,” Gawain murmured. “What does Tom have to say today? You two are practically joined at the hip this year.”

He fed the bird a large piece of sausage and untied the letter. Tom knew the hours kept at Malfoy Manor, and there couldn’t possibly be anything suspect in the message.

“He writes that the Merrythought estate has been overrun by giggling girls preparing for the ball tomorrow, and that if we don’t let him come and stay the night, he may lose his mind,” Abraxas smirked, toning down the actual language used quite a bit.

Gawain laughed, and even Evangeline smiled. They both liked Tom so much, they were willing to overlook his blood status. After all, his parents had reasoned when they first discussed inviting Tom for the summer five years ago, the boy was a direct descendent of Salazar Slytherin, even if his father had been a muggle, and now, his legal guardian was a pureblooded woman from a wealthy and titled family, not to mention, as they discovered upon meeting him, the boy reeked of magical power, something the two Slytherin parents could not possibly resist.

“Of course Tom can come,” Gawain said. “He can keep you out of your mother’s way while she completes the last touches to the manor before the party.”

Abraxas had not been in the slightest danger of interfering with his mother’s plans, and they all knew this, but it was the kind of statement that parents made to children, and the Malfoys were well practiced at sounding and looking like a functional family.

“Have one of the elves connect the floo for him in the library,” Evangeline nodded, adding, “Remind him to bring his dress robes for tomorrow, dear.”

Abraxas excused himself from the table, and Jeeves followed him to the library, where he made his reply. It was hardly an hour later when Tom arrived, looking like a man who had escaped
a death sentence. He carried a few bags, which the elves immediately took.

“Firewhiskey?” Abraxas asked laughingly, his fingers dancing over the decanter.

“It’s only ten o’clock,” Tom raised an eyebrow and collapsed gracefully into one of the armchairs.

“I know, but you look like you need it,” he smiled unguardedly, simply happy to see his best friend. He hadn’t expected their time apart would be so difficult, but the change in the nature of their relationship had made going without Tom and the girls much harder, especially when faced with the lack of anything resembling affection in his home.

Tom’s mouth twisted. “You try getting any work done in a house where over a dozen women have converged to prepare for a ball.”

“A dozen?” Abraxas echoed, confused. “Who is over there?”

“Narcissa, Hermione, Felicity, Patience, Josephine, Vidhi, Marguerite, Marguerite’s mother, plus several dressmakers and their assistants. Galatea was the only one to show an ounce of wisdom. She left when I did.” Tom answered.

“Marguerite is there?” Abraxas wondered if she’d make it out alive between Hermione and Patience.

Tom ran a hand through his hair. “Narcissa and Orpha are cousins, if distantly, and Orpha owled this morning to discuss dresses. She was quite adamant that none of the young ladies wear dresses too similar, and I don’t believe she was willing to take no for an answer. Orpha wants a fiancé for Marguerite, and she thinks this ball is an excellent opportunity.”

“My mother would love to hear that,” Abraxas muttered. “If her party became some kind of Pureblood coming-out ball, she’d be thrilled. She mentioned Marguerite to me as a possible match this morning.”

Tom’s eyes darkened. “We’ll need to make sure that Marguerite understands you are not an option.”
“Do you want to go flying? I had my father buy a new broom for you to use.” Abraxas longed to change the subject and tried to think of ways to stay far from his parents’ eyes.

Tom shook his head slowly, and his blue eyes were hot for once, not cool at all. Abraxas didn’t need the link to know what Tom was feeling at the moment. He was feeling something quite similar.

“This manor must have at least one room warded to prevent anyone from knowing spells have been cast in it,” Tom finally spoke, his tone low and seductive, though he made no move to touch Abraxas.

“Only the dungeons, I think,” Abraxas replied. “They haven’t been used for a few generations, at least, though the wards are ancient, renewed with the birth of each new Malfoy.”

Tom stood and walked to Abraxas. He kept the distance between them a normal, friendly one, nothing that would be construed as too intimate. But his eyes, Abraxas thought, and the curl of his lips, spoke volumes.

“Don’t you miss your magic?” Tom asked softly.

Abraxas nodded. “But I’ve missed you more.”

Tom’s grin was wide and smug, and Abraxas was simply dying to kiss him. “Show me the dungeons, please.”

Like most of Tom’s statements, it was a command, even with the use of ‘please.’

Abraxas lead him to the back of the house, to a long, dark hall that seemed empty of any purpose, having no doors. The tall blonde walked up to the stonewall about half-way down and placed his hand against it. A doorway appeared, with stairs barely lit, disappearing into darkness past the fifth step down.

“Only someone who is Malfoy by blood or marriage can make the entrance appear,” he explained quietly.
He started down the stairs, Tom following closely. As they passed wall brackets, torches lit spontaneously, though the lighting was not bright by any stretch of the word. After steps that must have equaled at least two stories, they came to another hallway, though this one was lined with wooden doors that had tiny barred windows at the tops and metal sliding slots at the bottoms.

Tom stared, then began to open and close doors, looking over everything, and Abraxas felt vaguely uncomfortable. His ancestors had obviously had no problem imprisoning others, and the open area at the end of the hall held a wide assortment of ‘furniture’ and devices that were clearly meant for torture. Tom’s face was blank as he picked up thumb screws and allowed his hand to hover over a row of nastily curved knives arranged by blade length.

“Do you suppose they used the more physical implements on muggles?” Tom asked, his voice unreadable.

He followed Tom’s gaze to the Iron Maiden in the corner. “My father mentioned once, years ago, that there was a Malfoy about a century back who collected muggle torture devices. I think this is just his idea of a museum, one that no one has taken the time to dispose of.”

Abraxas continued with brutal honesty, because he knew that was what Tom expected. “I’m sure there have been muggles as well as wizards tortured down here – probably house elves and other creatures, too. But I imagine most of my ancestors would think of manual torture as below them. And when you have the cruciatus, what else do you really need?”

Tom turned at Abraxas’s tone, his dark brow furrowed in thought. “Have you felt it?”

Abraxas didn’t answer. He was looking down and away from Tom, doing his best to close off the connection that had been, until now, wide open. Some things were dangerous to share.

“Abraxas,” Tom’s tone was a warning, and he was closer now, his hand grasping Abraxas’s wrist. “Have you felt the cruciatus?”

“I can’t,” Abraxas licked his lips. “I can’t talk about that.”

“Fine,” Tom said softly, and pushed Abraxas’s chin up, locking eyes with him as he hissed, “Legimens.”
It wasn’t a surprise, really. He knew Tom didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, not from him. He had sworn his loyalty, his obedience, and Tom would hold him to that promise. This topic, though, was something so old, so forbidden, that Abraxas couldn’t voice it. Tom’s intrusion into his mind was almost a relief, because he wouldn’t need to speak it out loud.

He was drawn into his memories, to the answer to the question Tom had asked, to breaking things as a child, to making mistakes in his French pronunciation, to protesting a favorite House elf’s punishment – all times when one or the other of his parents had inflicted the cruciatus curse on him, and though they had used a weak casting and only a few seconds of cursing, Abraxas would never forget an instant. He knew Tom was seeing it all, and the flood gates were thrown open, with no more hiding.

Many Pureblooded families used dark magic on their children to insure compliance and loyalty. Some parents used such magic as a means to desensitize children to dark magic, to push their children to accept curses, to somehow prove to them that even ones labeled “Unforgivable,” were open to them, so long as they could be discreet. The Malfoys, Blacks, Rosiers, Lestranges – it was probably faster to list the ones who didn’t rather than the ones who did. Yet, no one spoke of it outside the walls of family estates. The practice was illegal, of course, though no Pureblooded child had ever been removed due to abuses. The heavy silence kept by all concerned prevented any such interference, and with the intermarriage of Pureblooded families, the relatives who might have taken someone in would likely follow the same practices.

Neither Gawain nor Evangeline had used the cruciatus on their son since his second year at Hogwarts. There was no need. Abraxas was gone most of the year, and when he did come home, he presented himself as a model, obedient, well-bred Pureblood son, a proud scion for the Malfoy bloodline.

Tom ended the spell, but he didn’t speak immediately. He simply cupped Abraxas’ face in his hands, and kissed him. The kiss was much softer, much sweeter, than any kiss Tom had previously given him, and Abraxas felt a touch of anger.

“That was years ago,” he tugged away from the gentleness. He would have readily accepted it from Hermione or even Patience, but with Tom, it felt wrong. “You don’t need to pity me, Tom,” he spoke to the wall.

Harsh fingers dug into his shoulders, spinning him back around to face Tom.

“I don’t pity you, Abraxas. Pity,” Tom spat the word, his beautiful mouth twisting, “is a useless emotion, like most of them. I recognize a debt, though. Your parents owe you their pain.”
And, since you are mine, the debt is also owed to me. The collection of that debt will need to be in future, perhaps years away, but I will not forget, and I will not forgive.”

Abraxas avoided Tom’s eyes, unsure of what he would see. Tom was frightening when he was angry, and Abraxas almost pitied whatever future he was planning for Lord and Lady Malfoy. Almost. “You don’t have to pretend to care, though,” he whispered.

Tom tipped his face up again, more forcefully this time, a finger hooked into the soft spot under his jaw. “With you, with Hermione and Patience, I pretend nothing. You are mine, and I protect what is mine. I also enjoy what is mine, and if I want to kiss you so softly you can barely feel my touch, or so roughly your lips bleed, I will do as I please, and you will like it, because I know you love being mine. You crave me. I’ve seen it in your mind.”

“Yes,” Abraxas nodded, letting his eyes meet Tom’s icy blue ones. He shivered at the desire he saw there, and despite Tom’s forceful speech and actions, he felt safe. Tom would make sure he wasn’t hurt again, and if he was hurt, Tom would exact revenge.

He barely had time to smile at the thought before Tom was kissing him again, still softly, and Abraxas felt wetness gathering in his eyes. Those long fingers, thin but strong, were twined in his pale hair, and Tom walked him back to the wall, pushing into the entire length of Abraxas’s body.

There were several moments of kissing, of frantic touches that wouldn’t be permissible anywhere else in the manor. Tom was kissing him with such need, a hunger that Abraxas hadn’t felt from his friend before. The Heir of Slytherin had always been aggressive and demanding, but now, in a place of pain and death, he was oddly tender.

“I need to be able to use darker magic,” Tom spoke against Abraxas’s flesh, his lips and tongue and teeth working at his collarbone, his tone almost pleading.

Abraxas was tugging at Tom’s shirt, pulling it from his pants. “I know,” he panted.

Tom bit at Abraxas’s shoulder as he slid his shirt down his arms. “I cannot realize my ambitions, I cannot protect what is mine, if I do not have the ability to truly hurt, to kill, if needed.”

“I know,” Abraxas repeated, the words coming out in a low moan as Tom raked his fingers down Abraxas’s exposed chest, scratching at the muscles.
“I must have practice,” Tom paused, whispering a spell of undoing, then, as Abraxas’s belt and trousers came open, slipped his hand into his pants, bypassing his throbbing cock to squeeze his upper thigh, fingers alternately ghosting over then kneading at that area so close yet so far from where Abraxas wanted him to touch. “With the intention behind the Unforgiveables. Do you trust me?”

“I don’t think that matters, but I do anyway.” Abraxas looked into Tom’s blue eyes. His pupils were dilated, and his pale cheeks a bit flushed, his hair tousled. Abraxas could feel his heart thudding in his chest. Tom’s beauty, his attention was overwhelming.

Tom arched an eyebrow and kissed Abraxas’s cheek. “The fact you tell me that your consent and trust doesn’t matter tells me just how much you do trust me,” his voice sounded raw, not like Tom at all. “I do not take that lightly. You are my right hand, Abraxas, an extension of my will and magic. As I rise, so will you. You will need to practice as well.”

“What about the girls? Hermione will never agree,” Abraxas said, closing his eyes as Tom’s fingers inched toward his groin.

He laughed, deeply, fingers digging into Abraxas’s hip. “Oh, Hermione, for all her talk of morality already contains all the viciousness required, so long as she has the proper motivation. After all, she is the first one of us to kill another person. If innocent lives are at stake, if our lives are at stake, Hermione will level the world.”

“And Patience?”

“Abraxas,” Tom smiled condescendingly, running a hand through Abraxas’s pale hair. “Haven’t you realized that our little pet is the most dangerous of all? She knew what was going to happen when she stepped over that boundary in France. Patience as good as gave that knife to Hermione, and guided her hand as she threw. Patience is a force of time and nature. You need not worry about the girls.”

Abraxas thought the truth of the matter was much more complicated than Tom was making it out to be, but he wasn’t in the mood to argue, not that arguing with Tom was a viable option, anyhow. Instead, he mirrored Tom’s action, leaving them both naked to the waist, with open trousers.

“Eager, aren’t we?” Tom laughed, grabbing at Abraxas’s hands, holding them at his sides, against the dungeon wall. The rough stone bit into his flesh, but Abraxas didn’t flinch. “We’re going to be starting our lessons with something pleasant,” Tom purred, a low, dangerous sound that
wrapped around all of Abraxas’s mind and body.

“I wouldn’t call being crucioed pleasant,” Abraxas tried to keep the fear out of his voice. He had promised Tom anything, everything, with his only condition that Hermione not be hurt. And Tom, he knew, was of the firm opinion that what Hermione didn’t know couldn’t hurt her.

Tom reared back, as if Abraxas had slapped him, and his expression was the closest to shock Abraxas had ever seen. “Do you really think I could use the cruciatus on you?”

“But you said you needed to practice the Unforgiveables,” Abraxas felt confused again, though that was a common experience around Tom.

“I told you I needed to practice the intention behind them,” Tom hissed, pulling on Abraxas’s hair, forcing his head back. “And I also told you that you were a part of me. Do you think I throw words like that around, Abraxas? I’ll be saving crucio practice for those who actually merit it.”

"For you,” He gave a wicked smile, all wide mouth and sharp, white teeth, keeping one hand tangled in Abraxas’s hair, and using the other to lightly trace Abraxas’s jawline, “Imperio.”

Instantly, Abraxas felt lighter, further away from himself. He’d never been a victim of the imperius, but he’d seen it used on house elves, and once, his father had used it on his mother, to force her “hold her damned tongue.” Evangeline had literally held her tongue between her fingers for an hour while her husband smiled and asked an eight-year-old Abraxas how his day had been over tea and scones.

“Don’t worry, my friend,” Tom kissed his ear as he spoke. “I won’t command you to do anything you wouldn’t already do quite willingly. This is simply to get a feel for the casting.”

True to his word, Tom spent the next hour commanding Abraxas to do several “tasks,” all of which were extremely pleasant for both of them, involving the need to be naked and sweaty. Afterwards, they lay side by side on their backs on the cold stone floor, arms and legs tangled together.

Tom ran a finger over Abraxas’s hip, tracing a rune of possession there. “How did it feel?”
Abraxas laughed. “Bloody brilliant, as always,” he pressed his lips to Tom’s shoulder.

“No, not the sex,” Tom corrected with a smug smile. “The curse.”

“Not much different than normal – I guess I felt a bit out of myself, like my mind was further from my body, not as in control of it, but I could still feel the pleasure,” Abraxas shrugged. “I suppose it would be quite different if you asked me to do something I didn’t want to do, or that would hurt.”

Tom’s finger continued to circle over Abraxas’s flesh. “Would you mind terribly if I hurt you, if I made you hurt yourself, so long as it was brief?”

“How?” Abraxas asked cautiously, though he didn’t see himself denying Tom anything, even his pain.

“I know that you are mine,” Tom spoke softly, in the voice that made Abraxas’s knees so weak he was thankful he was already lying down. “Hermione is already marked, with my words, but I want to mark you and Patience as mine, as ours, permanently, on your skin. I want everyone to know to whom you belong.”

“What kind of mark?” Abraxas was pleasantly surprised. Pain for the purpose of marking was much better than pain for pain’s sake. And belonging to Tom, to Hermione and Patience, their elemental quartet, gave him the greatest sense of joy, of love and belonging, of purpose and power that he’d ever felt. It was a feeling he never wanted to end.

“A magical brand of some sort,” Tom replied as he pulled Abraxas closer into his side, one hand on his chest, the other still teasing at his hip. “As much as I’d love to simply write my name all over you, I don’t think that wise. Hermione would protest, I’m sure. I asked Patience to make some drawings for me, of symbols for our quartet. I haven’t seen them yet, though.”

Abraxas relaxed further when he realized Tom wasn’t talking about doing it today.

Tom seemed to read his mind and gave a low laugh. “No, not today. I want all four of us to do it, in the Chamber, together. I’m sure Hermione will insist we all have them, not just you and Patience. She loves to pretend equality exists, after all.”
Abraxas smiled into Tom’s chest. For all of his Pureblood childhood, Abraxas wasn’t nearly as cynical as Tom. He loved Hermione’s stubborn insistence that people were basically good, that the world could be made better, that love would win the day. It was one of the qualities that made him love her so much. And he knew, from five years of watching her win over and gently coax one Slytherin after another in their classes and study groups, that Hermione wasn’t all talk. There was something about her that made others want to do better, and even Tom himself tried to please her, or, at least, not upset her.

Tom and Abraxas stayed in the dungeons for several hours more, practicing various spells. Tom had brought a journal from the Chamber, and they tested a few battle curses, aiming at the wall, simply to understand pronunciation and casting strength. Quite a lot of stone rebounded at them, signaling the power of the curses, and they both laughed with pleasure as they threw up shields.

Tom used legilimens several more times on Abraxas, but always non-verbally. Tom had asked him to keep count of the number of times he felt Tom in his mind.

“I tried to use it on Narcissa, and she felt the intrusion. You know me and the feel of my magic intimately. We are attuned, our magic mingled, through our elemental binding. If I can slip into your mind without you being aware, I will be on my way to mastering Legilimancy,” Tom explained.

He was rather peeved that Abraxas had been able to feel him immediately, each and every time, and his annoyance wasn’t improved until Abraxas suggested more practice with the Imperius, which delighted Tom. During this session, Tom told him to do neutral things – not things Abraxas would have done on his own, but nothing objectionable. He commanded Abraxas to open and close doors, lift objects, perform small spells of transfiguration or charms.

Half-way through, Tom asked Abraxas to try to resist his commands. It took several tries, but Abraxas did manage to delay and eventually ignore the orders given. Then, Tom began to cast at a stronger level, and Abraxas repeated the process, following the orders until Tom asked him to try resisting, though once Tom began casting with firm intention, resistance was not an option, nor even the hint of an option.

“How do you feel now?” Tom asked, kneeling beside Abraxas, who had been trying resist Tom’s command to lie flat on the floor.

“Exhausted,” Abraxas answered honestly. “Like I’ve just played the hardest, longest quidditch match of my life.”
Tom gave him a look of interest. “So, the exhaustion is more physical than magical? Can you do a spell at all at the moment?”

Abraxas raised his wand and cast a weak *lumos*, one of the first spells he had learned. “Ugh,” he groaned. “My magic is weak, too.”

“Here,” Tom took his hand, and Abraxas felt magic flood into him.

“What is *that*?” Abraxas breathed. He knew Tom’s magic, but this was new, even stronger, and the fact Tom had willingly shared it was surprising.

“It’s some of the magic I transformed from the curse on Hermione,” Tom smiled. “It is quite something, eh?”

Abraxas nodded, feeling more like himself, though his muscles were still sore. He shifted to face Tom. He started to form a question, but Tom looked into his eyes and pressed a finger to his lips. Abraxas felt Tom in his mind, though his touch was definitely lighter than it had been earlier this morning. He was amazed at how much progress Tom was able to make in such a short time.

“Thank you,” Tom smirked. “And, to answer your question, I want you to resist because I don’t want anyone to be able to use that curse on you. I want you to be able to throw off both the *imperius* and the *cruciatus*. I want you at no one’s mercy except mine, Abraxas Malfoy.”

As dark and possessive as that sounded, Abraxas took it for the statement of affection that it was, coming from Tom.

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If Abraxas had any concerns that Tom would act differently around his parents after having seen the memories of Abraxas’s childhood, those fears proved unfounded at dinner. Tom was his usual, charming self, lightly flirting with Lady Malfoy while simultaneously impressing Lord Malfoy with his intelligence.

He had known Tom was an excellent liar, that he could charm most anyone, young or old,
male or female, but he had also seen the anger in Tom, had heard the rage in his voice in the dungeons, and the way that Tom was clearly able to compartmentalize his desire for revenge, to hide it, was absolutely frightening. Abraxas marveled at him, reaffirmed in his faith that Tom Riddle could do anything.

“So, Tom,” Evangeline smiled at her son’s guest in a way that would have been vaguely predatory with any other not-quite-sixteen year old. “Tell us about the girls Abraxas likes at school. He’s been dreadfully tight-lipped on the subject.”

Tom’s expression was a perfect impression of boyish embarrassment, his long lashes fluttering downwards, his cheeks flushing at the attention of a pretty, older woman. It took some effort for Abraxas not to choke on his potatoes.

“Abraxas is a bit of a ladies’ man, Lady Malfoy,” Tom allowed a hint of a smirk to show, every movement of his face calculated to appease and fool the Malfoy parents. “I’m sure he’s simply following the code of a gentleman not to ‘kiss and tell’.”

Gawain laughed and winked at his son. “Well, that’s fine. It’s good for a young man to have some variety before he settles down.”

Evangeline’s mouth twisted downwards. “Yes, Abraxas is a handsome boy, of course the girls like him, but who does he like?” she persisted.

Tom looked at Abraxas and raised an eyebrow. Both parents noticed. “Lady Malfoy, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Mother, there is no one in particular. Hogwarts is full of pretty girls, but I really don’t have a favorite,” Abraxas protested lightly.

His mother opened her mouth, but Gawain cut in. “Let’s leave it at that for now, dear. He has two more years at Hogwarts before any decisions need to be made. And, remember, I didn’t marry you until I was twenty-one.”

“Yes, and your poor mother was in fits for three years. I’d rather not suffer that myself,” Evangeline murmured sourly, but dropped the subject.
After dinner, Tom and Abraxas went to the west wing. Abraxas’s bedroom, personal library, and study were there. He also had a large game room filled with various magical toys from over the years, as well as the run of a long, wide corridor lined with paintings two stories high, that he used to fly indoors on cold or rainy days.

Since they couldn’t be sure of triggering the trace outside of the boundaries of the dungeon, Tom sat quietly in the library, by the fire, translating more of the journal, while Abraxas worked out his frustration over his parents by dodging specially charmed bludgers in the painting corridor.

He flew fiercely, testing his already sore muscles, trying to turn off his overactive brain. Abraxas couldn’t wait to be out from under his parents’ control, for Tom to achieve enough status and power that they could be together, the four of them. He imagined their bond made public, recognized as binding and valid as any marriage, of one day having a child with Hermione, a Malfoy who would be publicly half-blooded, his parents unable to stop him from living the life he wanted.

When he came back into the library, Tom looked up and narrowed his eyes. “You know, I don’t understand your desire to impregnate my soul mate.”

Abraxas had felt the legilimancy, but barely. He didn’t look away, because he had nothing to hide. “I love her. I think she would make an excellent mother one day.”

“And give the next generation of Malfoys the wonderful mum you never had?” Tom’s voice had a taunting ring. “Hermione doesn’t want children right now, and she doesn’t take kindly to being manipulated.”

Abraxas couldn’t hold back his snort of amusement. “I’m well aware. I’ve seen how she fights with you,” he smirked. “Just because I think of something, Tom, doesn’t mean it is something I want immediately, but I think Hermione will want children, one day, and I don’t think you’ll want to be a father. The magical binding we’ve used lasts for our lifetimes. There’s no rush.”

Tom looked into the fire. “True, this is a long game, though I have to admit that when we are finally able to reveal our relationship, I will absolutely savor the look on your parents’ faces. Your mother wants to fuck me, you know.”

“I know,” Abraxas muttered, the quick flash of anger in his voice fading to grudging acceptance. “Almost everyone wants to fuck you, Tom. You’re gorgeous and brilliant and powerful, and that’s an irresistible combination.”
“Irresistible, you say?” Tom reached out quickly and yanked Abraxas toward him, kissing him for several minutes, his tongue reducing Abraxas to a mess of hormones. “You taste like salt and sweat. We need to get you clean, you filthy boy.”

Abraxas shuddered. “Lead the way.”

“Don’t I always?” he smirked, taking Abraxas’s hand and heading to the bathroom.
The Ladies Play Dressup

Chapter Summary

Hermione and her friends prepare for the ball. Marguerite and Hermione form a tentative peace, and Hermione re-thinks her beliefs on right and wrong.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit shorter, but I have a lot of grading to do in the next few weeks, so I wanted to get something out to hold everyone over. I'm still excited about a lot of drama at the Malfoy Ball, but it will have to wait until the next chapter. Love to you all!

Hermione was in hell. There were many kinds of torture, and Hermione had endured a wide variety in her life, but the last twelve hours were near the top. In her old life, as she thought of it, she had never particularly liked dressing up, and preferred, if allowed, to wear jeans and t-shirts with a well-broken-in pair of trainers. The Hogwarts uniform for girls had given her plenty experience in wearing skirts, and her journey to the past had forced her to wear skirts and dresses most of the time to fit in with peers. Thankfully though, in the last year, Galatea had noticed Hermione’s longing looks at trousers, and had gotten her several pairs, tailored in the sleek, fashionable style the Ravenclaw Head of House wore herself. Narcissa had protested lightly, but so long as Hermione only wore the trousers around the house over the school breaks, she let the matter drop.

She didn’t deny that she had enjoyed the occasional ‘dolling up’ for parties, but those events were few and far between, and it was hard to get excited about a ball held in the very house where she’d been literally tortured, especially when she was preparing side-by-side with an ancestress of the woman who’d tortured her, an ancestress who, one, looked very much like Bellatrix, and two, who had fucked her soul mate.

Hermione had done her best to get over her anger toward Marguerite. Tom was right when he’d said Hermione hadn’t given him any signal up to that point that she was interested in a sexual or romantic relationship, and even when Tom had been sleeping with Marguerite, he had never once shown the slight hint of preferring Marguerite’s company over hers. Hermione knew Tom well enough to believe him when he said that having sex with Marguerite had been due to proximity, curiosity, and a desire to have further control over a girl from a wealthy and powerful family, nothing more.
Marguerite was very clever, and Hermione imagined she understood exactly how Tom had used her, but that she was either in love with him or in love with the power he had (or both). It was a bit sad, really. Marguerite didn’t know Tom had a soul mate, but Hermione’s relationship with Tom was common knowledge across school now, and she knew she couldn’t have Tom in any fashion. She was to be engaged as soon as possible, within weeks, if Orpha had her way.

As she stood on a stool in the large sitting room, staring at Marguerite, who was also perched on a stool, both of them surrounded by dressmakers with measuring tape and flying pins and shears, Hermione worked to find empathy. The presence of Patience, Felicity, Josephine, and Vidhi helped. The other four girls chatted lightly, having already had their own final fittings, going through the selection of ribbons, hair clips and bands, jewelry, and wraps the dressmakers had brought with them to help the girls accessorize their gowns.

Narcissa and Orpha were giving input to the dressmakers, and the dressmakers were answering politely, yet firmly, trying to keep some control over their actions.

“I’d like the neckline to be lower by at least a half-inch,” Orpha moved in and tugged at the black lace edging Marguerite’s wine colored gown. The lace rose high over the underdress, which was strapless. It was an elegant dress, with long sleeves and a full skirt that bloomed outward from Marguerite’s very small waist.

“Madam,” the frazzled dressmaker gently protested. “Your daughter’s petite form doesn’t lend itself to an…expansive décolletage.”

Marguerite’s face was absolutely blank as her mother argued and pulled, and the whole room, filled with classmates, saw and heard how powerless she was. Her form was, indeed, very petite. She’d always been small, and though she had gained hips and breasts last year, they were slight curves. It was clear she’d never have what would be termed a ‘womanly’ form. In contrast, Hermione, though petite, was curvy, as well as a good four inches over Marguerite’s scant five foot height.

“Perhaps only lower it in the middle?” Narcissa attempted to make peace. “Make the neckline more of a ‘V’?”

The dressmaker shook her head gratefully. “Yes, that would work, I think.”

Orpha sniffed imperiously, but nodded her assent. She stepped back and carried on her
conversation with Narcissa. “Tom and Hermione have become quite…*close*, I noticed.”

Marguerite looked up, and Hermione caught her eye. Her nearly black irises were glittering, like obsidian in the sun, and Hermione glanced down. She didn’t want to make Marguerite more of an enemy by witnessing her weakness.

Tom had left hours ago, entering the floo only a few minutes after Marguerite and her mother had arrived, kissing Hermione briefly on the lips in front of the entire group before ducking into the fireplace. She had not missed the tiny flinch Marguerite had made.

“Yes, they have been close for years,” Narcissa replied evenly. “They are cousins.”

“So are Tom and Marguerite, technically. It’s clearly more than that now. He kissed her on the mouth,” Orpha frowned, not caring that the whole room was watching. She was probably thrilled to be pointing out what she perceived as Narcissa’s faults in front of an audience. “I know they are both only half-blooded, but surely you’ve made sure they are at least properly engaged? A girl’s virtue must be protected or her prospects will vanish.”

No one in the room except Hermione recognized the signs of Narcissa’s subtle anger. Hermione knew that being around Orpha was a trigger for Narcissa, a reminder of the life she’d left behind, with its narrow-minded beliefs and endless rules.

“You needn’t worry, Orpha,” Narcissa spoke crisply, her posh voice perfectly enunciating her words. “Hermione and Tom are bound by fate and magic. I have no doubts about their intentions toward one another, nor do I feel the need to police them.”

Orpha smiled, taunting and cruel. “How…*modern* of you, Narcissa.”

It was at that moment Galatea entered the room, in her customary muggle men’s clothing, tapping her wand against her riding boots, looking for all the world like the perfect representation of everything Orpha despised. She strode right up to Narcissa, and kissed her hand, producing an instant, and Hermione thought, lovely, flush across her mother’s cheeks.

“Ladies,” Galatea announced loudly, her crooked grin broad with mischievous amusement. “When you get tired of making yourselves more beautiful than you already are, the elves have laid out an excellent lunch. Narcissa, darling, I’ll be in my library if you need me.”
She gave a saucy wink to Orpha, who scowled in return, and left the room.

“You could have remarried,” Orpha turned to Narcissa. “A pureblooded woman has a duty to our culture. You could have pureblooded children.”

Narcissa’s anger was visible now, though her tone was perfectly controlled as she answered. “I did remarry. Galatea is my wife, and my soul mate. Surely there is no greater calling in our magical destiny than to find one’s soul mate? But you never found yours, did you, Orpha?”

“I’m very hungry,” Hermione announced loudly, cutting into the rapidly devolving conversation. Orpha looked ready to throw a curse.

“So am I,” Marguerite echoed, twisting to scowl at the three dressmakers surrounding her. “Are we done with the fitting? What use are magical dressmakers if they take as long as muggles?”

The dressmakers immediately began to make tutting noises of annoyance, but unpinned the girls and let them step down. “The dresses will be finished by the time you are done with lunch,” the head dressmaker said, looking as if she were holding back a few curses of her own.

After the luncheon, the six girls went back to the sitting room, but this time, they viewed the dresses, displayed on enchanted dressmaker’s dummies to float and turn. Josephine and Vidhi had already had their dresses, but those were displayed as well, and the dressmakers had remade Patience’s gown under Narcissa’s directions.

Narcissa had told the girls that she would treat them to whichever accessories they desired, so the six teens descended on the selection, holding necklaces up to dresses, draping wraps and scarves, dangling bags and fans from their wrists against the skirts, trying to find the perfect finishing pieces.

All the girls knew and liked Narcissa greatly. Over the course of five years, they had each visited her in the Hospital Wing for various illnesses or injuries, and though she was not effusive nurse, she was gentle and non-judgmental. She helped treat everything from colds to cramps to acne outbreaks to Felicity’s quidditch sprains and strains, as well as hexes gone astray during dueling club or beauty charms applied incorrectly to disastrous results. Madame Selwyn might be the official healer of Hogwarts, but Narcissa was the students’ favorite, and more than one student thought of her as their mother away from home.
Even Marguerite murmured how nice it was of Narcissa, as she looked at the necklaces. Hermione came to stand beside her, looking down at the jewelry. She wanted to reassure Marguerite in some way, try to make it clear that there were no grudges, that she was willing to let the past go, but Slytherins were so difficult to read, and they rarely took anything said to them at face value, even if the speaker meant what he or she said.

“I don’t think you need a necklace,” Hermione said quietly. “The lace edging on your dress is eye-catching enough. Maybe something sparkly to clip back your hair?”

Marguerite nodded. “I suppose the same is true for you. You have Slytherin’s locket. You never wear anything else.”

Out of habit, Hermione’s hand went to the place between her breasts where the locket rested under her clothing. She very rarely wore the locket on display at school, given house rivalries, but in the last few months, since they’d started a physical relationship, Tom had begun a habit of pulling the locket out in their shared classes and at the study group.

Glancing over at Hermione’s gold and black gown, with its low center neckline, Marguerite smirked. “You won’t be able to hide it tonight, though why you hide it at all is beyond me. If Tom had given me precious family heirloom that was a powerful magical object once belonging to Salazar Slytherin, I would have worn it with pride.”

“Do you love him, Marguerite, or just the power he has?” Hermione was tired of dancing around the issue at hand. “Or was it just about the sex?”

Marguerite’s eyes widened, and her shoulders stiffened. It was probably more of a reaction than she meant to give. “His power is who he is. If I love Tom’s power, I love him. The sex,” those eyes, with irises so dark they nearly matched the blackness of the pupils, glared at Hermione, “was sporadic, and usually didn’t involve my pleasure at all. I hope, for your sake, that he’s... improved in that regard.”

The smaller girl’s anger was palpable, but Hermione understood, and even thought it justified. She remembered how casually cruel Tom had in his dismissal of his physical relationship with Marguerite. Hermione felt the insane urge to hug the little Slytherin who was trying so desperately to hide how wounded she was. Still, knowing that would be the absolute worst thing to do, Hermione shrugged instead.

“He’s fine. We’re fine. We...” she wasn’t sure how much to tell Marguerite. Hermione had the innate desire to believe the best of others, but life had taught her that desire often needed to be
repressed for purposes of self-preservation. “We will never be separate again,” she said finally, then added, in a strong, yet non-accusatory tone, “Even if Tom uses sex to solidify alliances, nothing can break us apart.”

“Oh, I’m aware of that,” Marguerite responded blandly, moving a few feet over to the hair accessories, her delicate, child-like hands lifting a large black gold comb with colorless stones charmed to match the wearer’s clothing. Fine wires extended from the base of the comb, each ending in a jewel, giving the impression that the gems had exploded outward like fireworks.

“Tom has made it clear that you are sacrosanct, that any affront to you is an affront to him, that you are to be treated as an extension of himself. He’d reduce any one who so much as looked at you cross-eyed to dust,” Marguerite raised the comb to her hair, and the gems turned the precise shade of blue of her current dress. “And his dragon, Abraxas, would finish any off remnants.”

“I don’t need Tom or Abraxas to protect me,” Hermione couldn’t stop herself from making that point clear.

Marguerite laughed, a short, sharp sound. “I’m well aware of that, too, Hermione. I’ve been in your classes, watched you duel for five years. You are as powerful as he is, maybe more so. I have a feeling you restrain yourself, which, considering what happened in the hall in our first year, I imagine is for everyone’s safety. I’ve also seen how the Malfoy heir watches you both, like he wants to sandwiched between the two of you for the rest of his life, and how Tom looks at him, and how you all look at Patience. Tom calls her his pet all the time. I wouldn’t think you’d put up with that if you weren’t intimately aware of the circumstances. Ironic, isn’t it, that Slytherin girls are ones everyone makes dirty jokes about, when it’s really the Ravenclaw ladies who are testing the boundaries?”

“I think that comb would be lovely with your dress,” Hermione ignored the bait, moving into Marguerite’s space, and lifting a section of her dark, thick hair, holding it up as the comb would. “If you wore it up, here.”

“I’m sure my mother will decide on my hairstyle, like everything else,” Marguerite said, but she didn’t move away. She arched a dark eyebrow at Hermione, her expression pure Slytherin guile. “Are we going to be friends now?”

Hermione let her skepticism show as she dropped Marguerite’s hair. “I don’t think you’d allow anyone to be your friend, Marguerite, but so long as we both believe in Tom and his future, we will be allies.”
“And what is Tom’s future?” Marguerite asked. “Or, maybe where is the better question. How is northern France these days?”

“I think you’re smart enough to figure that out,” Hermione picked up a set of silver and gold barrettes, studded with diamonds and clear yellowish tanzanite stones that would match the color of the locket.

Marguerite took the clips from Hermione’s hand and opened them, gently arranging Hermione’s curls on each side of her face and fastening the clips. “Yes, I’m smart enough for a lot of things,” Marguerite murmured.

“Too smart to be a trophy wife,” Hermione added. She hated the thought of any woman, any girl barely out of childhood, being bartered away, pushed into loveless arrangement.

Marguerite froze for a moment, her face giving away nothing. When she spoke, her tone was tightly controlled. “I won’t be any such thing, Hermione Bonneau. Who do you think runs the Rosier household? My mother. Just as I will run the household of whomever I marry.”

“Tom and I want to change the rules, Marguerite, to allow more freedom to everyone, to stop the insane pull of these ancient traditions – and Pureblooded women will stand to benefit greatly. Wouldn’t you like to be free of the expectations your family places on you?”

“Tom wants power, Hermione. Your crusade for rights is simply a convenient cover for his actions, an excuse that can be swallowed by the public,” Marguerite hissed. “And no matter what he does, even if he were made Minister tomorrow, with absolute power, he wouldn’t be able to free me. The best I can hope for is a stupid, malleable husband who doesn’t find me attractive enough to seek out sex after we’ve had a few children and doesn’t interfere with how I run the household.”

“That’s horrible,” Hermione wasn’t able to stop the words. “You aren’t chattel to be bartered, Marguerite. This way of living is fucking medieval!”

“It is the situation, Hermione, and you can’t stop it,” Marguerite replied, the emotion drained from her voice, leaning in to undo the clips and handing them back to Hermione.

As she spoke, Orpha entered the room, looking annoyed. “Come, Marguerite, we need to get home. The ball is tomorrow, and there are still preparations to be made.”
Orpha glanced at the comb Marguerite had picked back up. “Is that the hair clip you want? It might work. Go ahead and bring it. We’ll see what Yeza and I can do with it.”

Marguerite and her mother left, and the other four girls instantly came over to Hermione. It was no secret that Vidhi and Marguerite did not get along, and Hermione’s roommates hated Marguerite on principle.

“What did you two talk about for so long?” Felicity asked.

“I asked her about Tom,” Hermione replied honestly.

Vidhi snorted, the tiny emerald stud on the side of her nose twinkling at the movement. “And she didn’t hex you? That’s a bloody miracle.”

“She said she knows Tom and I are together,” Hermione shook her head. “I think we have a tentative peace.”

“We’re going to need it,” Patience nodded solemnly. “Trust is important for future ventures.”

Josephine eyed Patience with half-affection, half-exasperation. “You say the oddest things, Patience. I think you have the touch of a seer. Put it to good use and tell me if Jacob’s going to be at the party.”

The conversation quickly devolved back into giggles over potential crushes. Felicity had her eye on a Gryffindor quidditch player, and Vidhi firmly stated that she wasn’t interested in anything except her studies, though her parents had mentioned a potential alliance with a magical family from her grandmother’s village back in India after her graduation from Hogwarts.

They modeled their gowns for one another, and chose the accessories. Josephine’s gown had been her grandmother’s, and had been carefully updated and fitted for her use by expert dressmakers. It was a sapphire blue, with a high neckline that barely revealed her collarbones and sleeves with enough fabric to make another dress. The blue velvet was overlaid with a fine webbing of silver thread, creating a faint, shimmering diamond pattern. She looked like a Ravenclaw princess in it.
Narcissa had insisted on purchasing Felicity a gown, since she was their guest for the holidays, and would be coming to the Malfoy ball with their family. Felicity had requested something simple, with no frills or lace or sparkles. The dressmaker had risen to the challenge, making a dress that was still appropriate for a formal occasion, but without many adornments. Though the dressmaker had tried to lobby for an emerald green against Felicity’s red hair, Felicity had informed her tartly that she wouldn’t wear another House’s colors. They settled on deep plum. The dress was made of at least twenty layers of chiffon that gathered gently at the waist and flared to Felicity’s ankles. It had long sleeves that fitted at the wrists, and keyhole slits on the upper arms, with a keyhole slit in center of the neckline to match.

Vidhi’s mother and father, who would both be attending to ball, due to Vidhi’s father’s position in the ministry, and Vidhi’s mother’s fame as a classical musician who specialized in magical instruments, had commissioned a traditional Indian gown for their daughter. Vidhi had informed her friends, in her normal, dry humor, that she was sure her parents had done so to mark her as apart from her friends at Hogwarts. “They have plans for me, even if they haven’t mentioned them yet.” The pale saffron underdress was a simple shift at the top, with a flared skirt heavily beaded with green and red jewels. The overdress was more of a jacket with its high standing collar and long, wide sleeves, bright emerald with saffron embroidery and red beading. The dress was beautiful and regal, but it was distinctly styled, and looked nothing like those of the other girls.

Patience, being her usual, eclectic self, had shown up with a gown that looked like it had been haphazardly sewn by drunken trolls. “I made it myself,” she’d announced to the room, holding it up with dreamy eyes. Narcissa had quickly confiscated it and handed it to one of the dressmakers, who nearly cried at the sight of it. Hermione had heard Narcissa promise the woman double her usual rate if she could salvage a dress from the fabric. The woman had done more than salvage, though. The dress she’d created for Patience was amazing, and once on Patience’s tall, thin form, it hung perfectly. The gown was empire-waisted, with only one shoulder covered, like a Grecian toga. The seafoam colored fabric fell beautifully to the floor, and matched Patience’s pale eyes. Patience asked Narcissa to temporarily charm her snake bracelet to match the dress, which Narcissa did with good humor, actually laughing when Patience informed her what the parseltongue phrase was.

Although Hermione wasn’t usually too concerned about her outward appearance, and went without makeup or any beauty routines beside washing herself, attempting to tame her hair, and applying lotion to prevent dry skin, she wasn’t about to be shown up at this ball. Most of the Slytherin families would be there, and Sagitta Bulstrode, nee Black would definitely be in attendance, as well as other potential antagonists. Hermione wanted to look stunning. When Narcissa had looked over the gown design sketches, she had raised an eyebrow. “Circe help us all when Tom sees you in this,” she’d murmured.

The dress was a strapless black silk covered with golden embroidery that made swirls across the bodice, tightly fitted to the tops of the thighs, then flaring out in multiple layers of black tulle studded with flecks of gold that shone with every move like fairy lights. The neckline was not especially daring, but it did reveal the upper swells of Hermione’s breasts, and dipped low between them for several inches, making Hermione glad that it was held up by enchantments and sticking
Hermione had requested the special notch in the neckline to allow for display of Tom’s locket. Even before Marguerite’s comment, Hermione had planned on showing the entire Malfoy guest list not only Tom’s power and inheritance, but also their mutual claim to one another. It would help to lessen the sting of not being able to do the same with Abraxas for the time-being. Hermione knew Patience was doing something similar by wearing the snake bracelet. No one else would have jewelry that responded to Parseltongue.

Hermione woke in the night, gasping from a nightmare. It had been a horrific tangle of images of past and future, ending with Harry and Tom both dead, her crying over their bodies. The body of Grindelwald’s general had been there, as well, the magical dagger stuck in his head.

She knew that she had pushed aside dealing with the fact that she’d killed someone. Between holiday and ball preparations, Hermione had been kept busy, and she suspected that Narcissa had done that on purpose, taking her shopping with Felicity, and sending both of them to muggle London with Galatea to get a few small gifts for Felicity’s family. Tom had been there, but with everyone else present, they hadn’t been able to speak privately.

In her mind, though, the events of last week replayed vividly, usually at night. What upset her the most was that she wasn’t really upset. She didn’t regret her actions, just as she felt no guilt for leading Umbridge into the company of the centaurs, or scarring Marietta Edgecomb for life. And that was the crux of the problem. Hermione had always thought of herself as a good person, a person with strong moral convictions who believed in the betterment of society, of working to achieve equality and peace. However, as Tom had pointed out more than once, when Hermione was faced with battle situations, when she or her loved ones were threatened, she responded with quick and deadly force, and she didn’t see that changing any time soon.

Was it possible to expand her concept of good to include someone who killed others? Was it ever right to kill another? If she had been a better person, would she have simply used a disabling curse? Had Tom’s soul mate connection influenced her, made her…darker?

She stared at the ceiling, and took deep breaths. Hermione was a person who believed in self-awareness, in examining one’s motivations. When she was young, when she had entered Hogwarts for the first time, she had been full of naivety, firm in her conviction that the lines between good and evil were clear, that she would never cross them. By her fifth year, though, her life had changed drastically. She’d seen evil, and had known it couldn’t be fought with simple little hexes that faded in seconds.
No, none of Hermione’s research and experimentation with darker magic had been due to her connection with Tom, which hadn’t even manifested at that point – that had all been her own decision, her desire for knowledge, and, if she was being honest, power. She had longed for the power to defeat everyone who had threatened her and her friends, from petty tyrants like Umbridge, all the way up to Bellatrix and Voldemort himself.

But did taking the life of another person change her, fundamentally? And if it didn’t, what did that say about her? Hermione had a feeling that Tom, Abraxas, and Patience would all say she was over-thinking this issue. No, she decided, being realistic, being pragmatic, and protecting herself and others from a vicious, sadistic, supremacist didn’t make her less of a good person. She was making peace with that, and with the fact that she might have to kill again in her quest to create a better future.

Marguerite had said that Tom was only interested in power, that he was using Hermione’s desire for a more equal society as a smoke-screen for amassing power. This was true, but only to an extent. Marguerite had no knowledge of the elemental quartet they had created, and she had no idea how much the access to three other people’s emotions had impacted and influenced Tom. On his own, he felt very little positive emotion, but with Abraxas, Patience, and herself, Tom was able to experience something closer to the normal range of human feeling, and though he wasn’t going to change his core nature, it was definitely changing how he thought about and pursued power. Tom Riddle didn’t want to be the villain. He wanted to be the hero (or at least an anti-hero), and Hermione considered that serious progress.

“Do you want to talk?” Patience’s soft voice came from beside her. She had spent the night, and though there were plenty of guest rooms at the Merrythought estate, Patience had crawled into Hermione’s bed, cuddling up against as she always did in their dorm at Hogwarts.

Hermione turned in the bed to face her best friend, the person she probably trusted most, besides Narcissa. The events in France had shaken her a bit, though. “You knew I was going to kill someone when you let yourself be captured, didn’t you?”

Patience nodded, the moonlight coming from the window behind her making her look even more ethereal than usual.

“Why was it important for me to do that? Do you know?” Hermione was wary of asking Patience too much of the future they were creating together. And it wasn’t like Patience gave clear answers, anyway.

“You are not _evil_, Hermione,” Patience stroked the wild curls around Hermione’s face, twisting the tips around her long, slender fingers. “The world is complicated. How can saving it be any less complicated? You need to be comfortable with that.”
Hermione put her head on Patience’s chest, the opposite of how they normally embraced. She listened to the slow, steady beat of Patience’s heart and let it relax her. “So the ends justify the means? Is that what you are trying to say?”

“I’m saying the means are simply what they are, and analyzing every action you make can lead to paralyzing moments in the future. You need to be at peace with yourself, to react freely in the moment, especially in the midst of a fight. All you can do is strive to make the best decision in any given situation. If you make a mistake, then you can attempt not to repeat it, but sometimes, we need to make the same mistake many times before we can fix the underlying cause,” Patience’s response was one of the longest Hermione had heard from her friend.

She thought for several seconds. “Did I make a mistake?”

Patience kissed the top of her head. “No, love, you saved me, just like I knew you would. And you saved a village full of people as well.”

Hermione nodded, reassured, her lack of sleep suddenly catching up with her. She snuggled into Patience, who held her tight and hummed that silly ballad of hers until Hermione drifted off to more peaceful dreams.
Malfoy Manor Manners

Chapter Summary

Our teens party at Malfoy Manor. There is love, anger, magic, roaming eyes and hands...what more could one ask for? Maybe less evil Malfoy parents?

Chapter Notes

Well, I'm back...hopefully the various plagues that have descended upon my household will be cleared away with the New Year. Thank you to everyone who wrote and encouraged me. Between the election and various family illnesses, I haven't had the time or heart for much writing, but I was inspired by the kind thoughts and requests. Love to you, and a Happy New Year!

And the information about Hermione's title is based on only a small bit of research about how French hereditary titles would work, so please forgive any mistakes. If I had been more faithful to the facts from the beginning, I would have made Narcissa a Viscountess, not a Lady, given that her husband was French, with a French title. As the only child of a non-entailed estate, Hermione would inherit her father's lands and titles upon reaching the age of majority, in this case, seventeen. Narcissa would still maintain the honorary title she received for marrying a vicomte, that of Viscountess Bonneau, but Hermione would be The Viscountess Bonneau, with the definite article before the title, if I'm understanding correctly.

Hermione apparated side-along onto the steps of Malfoy Manor, her hand resting on Narcissa’s arm. Galatea was behind them, Felicity and Patience on either side.

“Are you prepared to go in?” Narcissa asked gently, her voice hardly carrying over the whipping winter wind.

“Are you?” Hermione looked at her mother with concern, her face hidden from those behind her by her hooded cloak. This manor had been Narcissa’s home for most of her life and held innumerable memories, both pleasant and painful.

Narcissa drew a deep breath and patted Hermione’s hand. “I'll be fine, darling. This isn’t my life anymore. I have Galatea and two lovely homes, and you and Tom, and my work at Hogwarts. Also, I have advantage of many happy memories to outweigh the bad, even if they are
bittersweet now. I’m worried you will have an intense reaction, no matter how you’ve prepared yourself.”

Hermione shook her head. “I’ll be fine, too. Those events don’t even exist anymore, except in my memories. I give them any power they have, and I’m determined not to feed them.”

Narcissa nodded her approval. “Just remember to breathe. At least the ballroom is on the other side of the manor.”

They entered the manor, greeted by house elves who took cloaks and pointed the way to the ballroom. Lord and Lady Malfoy stood by the wide doors, greeting their guests.

Galatea and Narcissa were in front, and Hermione had linked elbows with both Patience and Felicity. Lord and Lady Malfoy gave courteous greetings, though Evangeline looked a bit scandalized at how clearly Galatea and Narcissa presented themselves as a couple. Galatea grinned at her with obvious amusement, then whisked Narcissa to the dance floor.

“Ladies, you are all schoolmates of Abraxas, aren’t you?” Gawain smiled at the trio of girls, ignoring his wife’s glares at Narcissa and Galatea’s retreating forms. “I know Hermione, of course, being Tom’s cousin.”

“Lord Malfoy,” Hermione nodded graciously. “Allow me to introduce Patience Foster and Felicity Fraiser, both Ravenclaws in our year.”

“Ah, yes, Miss Foster,” Gawain’s eyes lit up as he swept a glance over Patience’s tall, slender form and loose, pale hair. The gaze was not an innocent one, and Hermione had to force back a scowl, though Patience was unperturbed, as always. “Your father is quite the inventor. I’m looking forward to working with him more closely.”

His eyes traveled down Patience’s bare arm, where her snake bracelet rested, its tongue flicking out intermittently. He raised an eyebrow, and Hermione saw a bit of Abraxas in the clear amusement on his face, though Gawain’s was tinged with lechery. “That’s an interesting choice of jewelry for a Ravenclaw.”

“Oh, I love snakes,” Patience replied dreamily. “Hermione does, too. She’s wearing Slytherin’s locket, after all.”
Both Lord and Lady Malfoy’s attention snapped to Hermione’s necklace, all inappropriate flirtation forgotten. Hermione groaned inwardly. Sometimes, Patience’s revelations could be awkward, but Hermione had learned to have faith that there was a point to them, so she kept calm.

Evangeline leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. “Tom gave you that?” She smiled, in a distinctly non-friendly kind of way. “He has mentioned his direct descent from Slytherin through the Gaunt line, but he didn’t say he still had such precious heirlooms. I’m surprised he didn’t save that for his future wife.”

The implication, being, of course, that Tom could do much better than Hermione. Angry magic began to rise around her, and Hermione felt her carefully coiffed curls escaping from the barrettes.

Gawain frowned as well. “That is quite the powerful magical object, with great meaning for many Pureblooded families. Its display will be taken as a statement of…many things, Miss Bonneau.”

“I’m not too worried, Lord Malfoy,” Hermione smiled with false sweetness, pushing her anger into words rather than her tone. “After all, the fact that Salazar Slytherin’s own magic has accepted me as worthy to wear the locket is the ultimate seal of approval, isn’t it? Perhaps his issues with blood purity were more about safety and security during a superstitious time, and less about fascism.”

Lady Malfoy appeared to be on verge of ripping the locket off Hermione and spitting in her face, if her red cheeks and furious expression were any indication, but Lord Malfoy was the consummate politician who knew how and when to pick his battles, and he simply nodded tightly.

“Indeed, Miss Bonneau. Abraxas should be close by, with Tom. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you. Ladies,” he gave a curt nod of his head.

“Excellent. We’ll find them directly. Thank you again for the invitation, Lord and Lady Malfoy,” Hermione said with perfect politeness. She tugged on her friends’ arms and pulled them away before anything more could be said.

The ballroom was as large as the great hall in Hogwarts, and though the ceiling wasn’t as high, it was charmed similarly, a dark sky made bright with stars and, lower down, floating candles. The room was crowded with guests, both on the dance floor and along the sides, talking and eating. Hermione noted that more than one person stared at them as they passed. Most of the guests were older, and most of the women much more conservatively dressed.
Tom and Abraxas were toward the back of the room, near the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the gardens set aglow, the snowy ground reflecting the fairy lights twined through the hedges and trees. Most of their study group from school was there as well, along with friends who had graduated in the last few years. The majority of the students were Slytherin, but all the houses were present, and Hermione felt another rush of accomplishment at the level of inter-house cooperation she had helped to foster, something that had not existed in her original time.

Tom was in the center of the group with Abraxas at his side, both young men dressed in tuxedo robes, beautifully complimentary, one light and one dark. Hermione’s heart sped up at the sight of them, and her magic tingled. She felt the same from Patience, who squeezed her arm.

Abraxas immediately crossed to them, kissing each of their hands in turn.

“I am shocked, truly,” Abraxas murmured. “I didn’t believe it possible for you ladies to be more beautiful.”

“Well, that’s magic for you,” Felicity answered saucily, then glanced around the room, with its high ceilings. “Do you fly in here?”

“No, but I do in the long hall upstairs; we’ll be up there later, and I have a few extra brooms,” Abraxas began. Hermione rolled her eyes as the two immediately launched into a detailed conversation. Once Abraxas and Felicity got on the subject of quidditch, they would be lost to everyone else for at least an hour.

“Dearest, what am I to do with you?” Tom’s low, dark tone sounded from over her shoulder, and she could feel him behind her. When had he moved?

“Kiss us?” Patience supplied, turning to face him, and pulling Hermione around with her. “Abraxas kissed our hands.”

“But there’s so much flesh to choose from, so much of your flesh on display,” Tom smiled, a touch of anger in his eyes which softened when his gaze dropped to the locket nestled in the notch of Hermione’s necklace. “Though I do appreciate how clearly you’ve marked yourself as mine.”

Hermione gave him a devilish grin. “You don’t like the dress?”
She expected a verbal response, as they were at a party, in full view of classmates, teachers, and guardians, so Hermione was more than shocked when Tom pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek, slowly enough to be sensual.

As he pulled away, he rested his forehead against hers. “You are the most beautiful thing I’ve seen, wrapped in my magic, and my only complaint is that I can’t ravish you here and now, dearest,” Tom’s hands ran down the side of her neck, over her shoulders and down her arms.

He held her wrists tightly, and squeezed. “That and the fact your bare shoulders aren’t really meant for public consumption.” He glanced at Patience, who was watching them with undisguised pleasure. His brow furrowed. “Our pet is not wearing enough fabric, either.”

Hermione laughed. “You should have seen the dress she first showed up with. Trust me, this is an improvement. And I thought with your massive ego, you’d love to have your things on display, where everyone can look but not touch.”

“So you admit you’re mine,” Tom grinned, still holding her hands.

“I admit that we are one another’s,” Hermione countered, but playfully. She was determined to enjoy herself. It was the holidays, and they didn’t have any battles to fight right now. Those would come soon enough.

Tom dropped one of her hands and took Patience’s arm, bringing her in to kiss her cheek, close to her ear. He murmured something Hermione couldn’t hear, but she could guess the content from Patience’s pale flush. It took a lot to make Patience flush.

“Do you think they’d notice if we disappeared into a bedroom?” Tom asked softly, nodding toward Felicity and Abraxas, who were arguing over which player in the current league was the best.

“Probably not,” Hermione allowed, her desire to be naked with Tom sky-rocketing from the combination of his touch, his tuxedo, and his tone, then sighed as she glanced over at the classmates watching them with various combinations of delight, disgust, and desire. “Though the other guests surely would.”

Once again, Hermione was surprised that Tom didn’t pull away as they walked back over to
the others. He was usually allergic to displays of affection in front of anyone, but he held Hermione’s hand tightly and let Patience hold his arm as if he weren’t bothered at all by the physical contact.

She wondered if he was deliberately distancing himself from Abraxas, to avoid the spread of rumors. It was the smart thing to do, for now, and Tom was nothing if not clever, but she could also feel his frustration, and it wasn’t all sexual in nature. Tom wanted all his things clearly marked, and as much as it pleased him to see Hermione wearing his locket and Patience wearing his bracelet, he longed to have his entire set. Hermione could read those thoughts with no trouble, so strongly was Tom thinking them.

Marguerite was standing in the larger group, watching them approach with a smirk. She came forward and gave Hermione a kiss on her cheek. “You look lovely, Hermione. Those hair clips match your locket perfectly.”

The entire group around them seemed to be holding its breath, and Tom stiffened beside her, but Hermione sent her calm toward him and returned Marguerite’s kiss as if they were sisters. “Thank you, Marguerite. I’m glad I took your suggestion in picking them. You look beautiful, too.”

“Yes, everyone cleans up well,” Tom muttered, looking a bit lost and a lot annoyed at the odd truce between the ladies. He opened his mouth to continue, but Professor Slughorn had appeared, with Vidhi, Dolohov, and Sebastian Lestrange’s fathers.

Any hopes of keeping the locket low-profile were lost as Slughorn made introductions between his various star pupils and the Ministry officials. As soon as Slughorn’s gaze fell upon her, he focused on the locket, his eyes widening with undisguised delight.

“Miss Bonneau,” Slughorn smiled broadly, and Hermione didn’t need any magic to know he was calculating the necklace’s provenance and worth. “That locket looks exactly like the one Salazar Slytherin wears in the portrait in my office. I know your cousin is a descendant of Slytherin. Could it be?”

Tom cut in. “Of course it is,” he bent over her and hissed a few words in Parseltongue. The locket opened, revealing the densely engraved runes inside, and all three Ministry officials suddenly became much more interested in meeting this group of Slughorn’s ‘prodigies,’ talking with the assembled study group for nearly a half-hour before singling out Tom to come with them to meet others. He agreed, but never let go of Hermione’s hand.

Hermione watched in amazement as Tom proceeded to charm what seemed like everyone in
the room. She had watched Tom do this at school for the last five years, but the atmosphere here was different. Tom was not a student speaking to teachers. Yes, Tom was young, had two more years of school, but he was as tall as a full-grown man, and so handsome and witty and self-assured that he easily controlled every conversation he entered. The subject didn’t matter; Tom was well-versed in current topics, in politics, in history, and thanks to the influence of Abraxas, Corvus, Thad, and Felicity, he could even discuss the chances of the various quidditch teams for the next season.

Slughorn smiled at Tom in the same way he had at Harry, and Hermione had to fight back the urge to hex the man. The Potions Professor wasn’t a bad man, just greedy for attention and access to power, things most humans wanted. Many of the guests, however, were the grandparents to those she’d fought against, the generation that had given rise to two generations of Deatheaters. Though Tom stood before them as proof of how baseless blood purity was, with his muggle father’s name, making no apology for being half-blooded, Hermione catalogued their expressions, the back-handed compliments, and veiled insults. She memorized every flick of the eyes toward her locket, but otherwise, remained mostly silent beside Tom, only occasionally answering a question or offering an opinion.

This was Tom’s moment to shine, his first widespread introduction to the powerful people in magical society – to lawmakers and business owners and wealthy potential future benefactors. His pleasure at winning over the crowd flooded their bond, and she smiled in true enjoyment. Maybe she didn’t feel the need to impress the Pureblood supremacists, but she could appreciate that winning them over was important to Tom, and to her overall mission of creating a magical world with less prejudice. This was the right way, the less violent way, to make change by securing connections with the Ministry, to perhaps join the Ministry in some fashion in the future, and she was awed that Tom had tempered himself so much.

Tom held her hand, his fingers tracing over her knuckles, tickling at her wrist. Everywhere they moved, he kept her by his side, their physical closeness leaving no doubt as to their emotional closeness. Hermione could feel that something in him had shifted. For so long, she knew he had viewed her as a weakness, thinking that caring about her was a liability, but now, he was announcing his attachment to her in a public setting beyond school, in front of many adults who would view such behavior as serious. She thought of Orpha’s earlier statements, and knew that Tom was branding her with his public touch, as clearly as with the necklace, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind to whom she belonged. Though their touches could potentially be dismissed as the affection of close cousins raised in the same household, anyone with eyes could see the tension between them.

Honestly, though, it didn’t bother her. In an abstract sense, to say that she was in a relationship with someone dangerous and possessive sounded awful to her 21st century sensibilities – the kind of relationship she would want to help another person escape, but in the concrete practice of her life, she knew that it was different. He was her soul mate, her magical foil, and they, along with Abraxas and Patience, made beautifully powerful and balanced magic that would help create a better future than the one Hermione had been living.
After what felt like hours of talking, Tom finally excused them, saying that he wanted to dance with ‘his lovely lady,’ a title that widened some eyes, though Hermione, since the death of her ‘father’ was, through Narcissa’s careful planning, The Viscountess of Bonneau because she was the Vicomte’s only child and inherited his title and lands, even in her ‘exile’ from France, though she wouldn’t formally assume the title until she turned seventeen, and not in truth until the war was over, and return to France was possible.

Good to his word, Tom swept them onto the dance floor, and Hermione thought back to dance lessons from her fourth year that was a lifetime ago in more ways than one. Tom seemed completely at ease, leading her with the innate grace and skill he displayed in most things he did.

“When did you learn to dance?” Hermione asked softly.

He smiled broadly, not answering for a few moments, knowing that she hated not knowing things. “Abraxas may have taught me a few things, at my request.”

She grinned back. “I’ll bet he did.”

Tom’s face fell for an instant. “One day, we’ll all be together, in public.”

“I know,” she answered softly, and laid her head on his shoulder. It was an intimate action, a sign of closeness and comfort – an ease of being with one another that transcended a passionate kiss.

He bent his head to her upturned ear and hissed something low that curled around the base of her spine in manner both protective and arousing, the sound sweeter than she’d ever heard from Parseltongue. Warmth spread through her chest, emanating from the locket, traveling down her solar plexus to meet the rising wave from her spine, crossing her chest and exploding like fireworks through her entire body, a tingling like champagne bubbles bursting across her flesh from her scalp to her toes. It was…powerful, but also gentle and beautiful and very, very magical.

Hermione had long ago come to terms with wearing the locket. In its non-horcrux state, the enchanted object did very little. She could feel the power resting in it, but it mostly stayed put, concentrated in the metal and glass and stone. Now, whatever Tom had said seemed to make some magic leak out of the locket, and the tingling sensation of powerful magic was filling her body, pushing outwards.
“What did you say?” she asked, her eyes wide, her magic open to him, so that he could feel what she felt – love, awe, and thankfulness.

His smirk was gone, but he didn’t answer. He held her closer, pushing her into his chest, and she sensed he was scared, hesitant to admit the depth of whatever he’d said, even though she could clearly feel his words. So like Tom to say something emotional and profound in a language she would never understand, but she would give him that last shred of emotional protection he was clinging to. Pressing him would only make matters worse. She knew better than to corner a snake.

The song ended, and the next one was a fast, big band sound. She held back a snort at the thought of Tom doing something like the Jitterbug. He pulled on her hand, and they began walking back to their group. Halfway there, he stopped suddenly, leaned in quickly and whispered in her ear, “I told the locket that you are my soul mate, that everything mine is yours, including Slytherin’s magic.”

If Hermione had ever been happier in her life, her perfect memory failed to record it. Tom was telling her that he loved her, in the only way he could – by willingly giving her access to his magic, to his power, to his legacy as the Heir of Slytherin. His beautiful blue eyes looked down at her, his smile broad and genuine for once.

“I love you, Tom,” she whispered back, and though the words were simple, her emotions were not, and she pushed them at him again. The magic between them curled and pulsed, and though she knew most of the room had stopped to watch them, their unintentional exhibition of magic gathering nearly every eye, she leaned up and kissed him, just a brief graze of her lips across his jaw.

There was a collective gasp, but it wasn’t until she and Tom had pulled apart that Hermione realized that their combined magic had flared so strongly that the candles floating directly above them had exploded into a mess of fire and wax, though all the pieces rained down everywhere but on them, tiny glowing embers falling like fiery snow, creating a perfect ring of fire around Tom and Hermione’s feet.

Professor Dumbledore appeared from the crowd, a mirthful smile on his face, paired with appraising eyes behind the familiar half-moon spectacles he’d started wearing this year.

“Well, that was some impressive spontaneous magic. Good thing most of the Department for the Restriction of Underage Magic is currently congregated around the open bar, being distracted by an amusing tale of Galatea’s.” He winked, and waved his wand, and Hermione felt his magic, air-based like her own, create a gust of wind which swirled around them, lifting the
burning wax back to the height of the other candles, spinning the pieces faster and faster, like a centrifuge, until the wax coalesced back into several larger candles. Then, he nonchalantly snapped his fingers, setting the candles alight once more.

He looked from Hermione to Tom, then back again. “Perhaps my two best fifth-year Transfiguration students should dance with others for a while?”

“Of course,” Tom smiled, easily but she could feel his annoyance, and was sure Professor Dumbledore could as well.

“Thank you, Sir,” Hermione added, as the Deputy Headmaster nodded and made his way back across the room. She kept her gaze forward as she and Tom walked the rest of the way back to their school group.

Abraxas was standing beside Marguerite, who had a casual arm looped through his, having just returned from dancing together. Hermione felt her annoyance meet and feed off of Tom’s, and struggled to keep all the magic still loose around her in check.

“You two don’t do anything by halves, do you?” Marguerite’s eyes were opaque, giving away none of her thoughts.

“It isn’t in the nature of brilliance to dim itself,” Tom replied, his own gaze equally shuttered.

Abraxas grinned. “No, apparently, it lends itself more toward explosions,” he winked at Hermione. “Quite some air magic there, lo-” he stopped short.

Hermione knew he had been about to say “love.” It was his preferred endearment for her, when they were with their quartet, or alone together. Those moments were rare, but she cherished them.

“Thank you, Abraxas. I’m sure you’re coming along nicely with the earth magic as well. Have you been practicing?” She kept her tone in between friendly and formal, giving the Malfoy heir the space to collect himself. A slip like that in Malfoy Manor would be disastrous and wreck their timeline to shreds.
“Elemental magic?” Marguerite perked up. “I’d been interested in exploring that. Is there much literature in,” she paused, choosing words that wouldn’t trigger the secrecy clause, “the library about it?”

“It’s in the restricted section,” Tom responded evenly, though a smirk appeared on his lips. “You’ll have to get permission to access it.”

Marguerite nodded her head submissively. “Of course.”

That seemed to please Tom, though Hermione expected Marguerite was only ever as docile as the situation called for, and she would turn quickly if power ever changed hands. Hermione also thought that Marguerite would be willing to risk Tom’s wrath if she was able to become the next Lady Malfoy. Her hand had not moved from Abraxas, and it was no secret that those two families were considering an alliance.

Patience wandered over from the dance floor, Corvus Black at her heels, watching her from behind, like most of the boys at Hogwarts did. She came up and threaded her arm through Hermione’s, the three of them now facing Abraxas, and all keenly feeling their lack of direct connection with him.

“Is it time to leave the old people yet?” Patience asked brightly, breaking the growing silence between the group.

“Old? I should be insulted, but I suppose I’ll just have to have some patience,” Gawain Malfoy drawled. He had emerged from the crowd, also behind Patience, and gazed at her like a wolf does a lamb. He placed a hand on her exposed shoulder, and Hermione felt a wave of anger from three directions.

Patience smiled though, and took his offered hand. “You need to lead a young woman of different magic for the Solstice Dance?”

Gawain looked surprised that Patience knew that, but recovered quickly. “Yes, if you would oblige me, Miss Foster?”

They walked off together, Tom, Abraxas, and Hermione all trying not to glare. When Lord Malfoy reached the band, they stopped playing, and he magnified his voice, a long, sharp-looking wand pointed at his throat.
“Good evening, lady witches and gentle wizards. I hope you are enjoying the annual Malfoy Winter Solstice Ball. It is time to honor the old tradition of dancing between the various elements on the longest night of the year. Please pick a partner of a different magical type to help ensure a long, magically fruitful year to come. Miss Foster, a lovely young Ravenclaw with water magic will accompany me in starting the dance.”

Gawain signaled to the band, and a low, haunting song began, closer to “Danse Macbre” than “The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy.” He took Patience’s hand, and began to spin her gracefully across the dance floor. He was only a few inches taller than she was, and they made a striking pale pair, much like Patience and Abraxas. Though other couples began to fill the floor after the first pass, Hermione noticed that Gawain was holding Patience closer than was called for, his hand low on her hip.

Hermione grabbed across to Abraxas before Marguerite could protest, not about to let another of her magic mates be groped. “You’re both earth magic,” she used her ‘it’s only logical’ tone, smiling blandly at Marguerite.

A dark, approving smirk crossed Tom’s face as he offered his hand to Marguerite, who accepted it with only the slightest of pouts. There was no way Marguerite would attempt any unwelcome touches on Tom’s person, especially not under her mother’s watchful gaze.

The feeling of Abraxas’s warm, strong hand wrapped around her waist, of his earth magic flooding their connection, was so wonderful, Hermione had to bite back a sigh of relief. Abraxas was the member of her quartet she had the least access to, and every touch counted twice as much because of that.

“I missed you, too, love,” Abraxas whispered, drawing out the word he hadn’t been able to say earlier. “You three are killing me tonight, all so beautiful and so out of reach. My father is pawing Patience, and I can’t do a damned thing about it.”

Hermione shuddered slightly. “Don’t worry about Patience,” she murmured, seeking to reassure herself as much as him. “She can more than hold her own, though if your father’s hand moves much lower, I’m hexing him.”

Abraxas laughed and spun her out, her tulle flying in a circle around her legs, then pulled her back, breathless. She glanced up at him, shocked. He was as graceful on the dance floor as on the quidditch field, leading her through intricate moves with ease.
“Don’t be so surprised,” he smiled down at her, his grin charming with a hint of sexy, making her want to kiss him for hours. “I’ve had all kinds of training in the proper graces, from selecting the correct wine for dinner to dueling for my family’s honor.”

“Your father had you trained in dueling?” The question was rhetorical. She knew she shouldn’t be surprised, but Abraxas was so different at school, so far removed from all she knew of Pureblooded behavior, that even given his obvious Malfoy appearance, she often forgot where he came from. Here, in the Manor, seeing him forced to be someone else entirely, she was reminded of the childhood he had overcome to love her, something he had done without any prompting. In fact, their attraction had been a major catalyst in the formation of the quartet.

A fierce, deep love rose in her, and she pushed it at him, through their joined hands. She would not let him be a casualty of Pureblood tradition. She would not let Marguerite or anyone like her have him. Abraxas was hers. Hers and Tom’s. Like Patience. The four of them would not be separated.

Abraxas’s slate grey eyes didn’t meet hers, but he squeezed her hand and waist tighter. “One day,” he whispered softly, his head bent toward her ear, but not so close it could be construed as inappropriate, his tone reverent, like a man praying at an altar, “I’ll lead you across this floor as my wife.”

He had mentioned more than once his desire to marry her, but to hear it in the ballroom of Malfoy Manor, spoken aloud, even if in a whisper, was electrifying. Hermione fought a blush, her heart pounding. It felt so good to be loved, to be wanted, especially at such a high cost. Abraxas Malfoy would risk everything to have her, and that left her terribly humbled and heady all at once. The amount of love being given her tonight was overwhelming.

Tom was staring at them across the ballroom, and Hermione winked at him. He scowled back, but in an oddly playful manner. Abraxas noticed and grinned. “I think he’s finally coming around to the idea.”

“We’ll see,” Hermione said carefully. “You know there’s no rush. We’re already bound for life, Abraxas. I’m not going anywhere.”

He nodded, the movement stiff with anger. “But my parents don’t know that, and Tom has plans beyond school that require access to me, and to my fortune.”

The tall blond paused, as if on the verge of speaking heresy, then spoke his next words in a great, low rush. “We will both be seventeen next year, by the first few weeks of school. You are
only half-blooded by the strictest terms, as far as anyone outside our circle knows. On the records, your mother and father were both magical. Your mother is from a respected Pureblooded family, and your have land and titles from your father that are at least half my own. No reasonable magical person would see it as an unequal match. If we elope from school, apparate to Scotland and get married on a weekend, there is nothing my parents can do. There are no other Malfoys. My father is much, much too proud to let the estate and titles go to a distant cousin. They would be furious, probably not speak to me for weeks, but their hands would be tied in the end.”

Hermione stared at him, doing her best to not let the shock she felt be too obvious to anyone dancing by them. “Abraxas, that’s…” she searched for words beside insane.

“It makes more sense than coming forward with the magical quartet,” Abraxas argued, having clearly thought this out. “My parents would fight that much harder – it’s too controversial, being with another man publically, especially one who is half-blooded by definition, no matter how powerful Tom is. And if we’re already married, my parents won’t be doing any diagnostic betrothal spells to see the bonds. Tom can keep those private for as long as he likes. Our marriage would buy us precious time, and save me from any potential betrothals. Have you seen the way Marguerite is looking at me? How the mothers and grandmothers here are calculating my match with their girls?”

“I,” she was still dumbfounded. The thought of being married at seventeen, even though she was more like twenty-four in actually lived years, was daunting, but it did make some sense, and it was true that a marriage between them would be much less scandalous and attention-getting than the announcement of a permanently bound elemental quartet. That was knowledge that Tom would like to keep on a need-to-know basis. “We’ll have to discuss this with Tom and Patience, and maybe my mother and Galatea as well.”

Abraxas beamed at her, the happiness on his face melting her resolve. “Great. We can discuss it back at school.”

The music was ending, and Hermione was left with mixed emotions. Abraxas had been so transparent in his feelings while they had been touching, but as soon as he escorted her off the floor, he was walled away again. That was for the best, but it still hurt, like a limb suddenly removed.

Tom and Marguerite had returned, and Lady Malfoy came over just as Lord Malfoy brought Patience back. Evangeline’s eyes narrowed as she watched her husband’s fingers glide down Patience’s bare arm before releasing her.

“Abraxas, darling, I think it is time for you to escort your younger guests to your rooms. The elves have placed refreshments in the long hall.” She gave her son a piercing look. “All guests
will need to use the Floo out by two am, please, if they are not meeting their parents back down here.”

Gawain smiled at Corvus, Thad, and Sebastian, who were all nearby as well. “And if you boys fly in the hall, don’t break anything; it gives Lady Malfoy vapors.”

The only reaction Evangeline made to her husband’s statement was to address Marguerite, who was standing between Tom and Abraxas. “Miss Rosier, do try to keep an eye on this crowd?”

“Of course, Lady Malfoy,” Marguerite bowed her head, but Hermione saw her canary-eating grin. Evangeline’s acknowledgment made it clear who was the favored guest, and whom Lady Malfoy considered appropriate opposite-sex company for her son.

A trip to Scotland was suddenly looking like a good idea, Hermione thought with an internal grimace.

The group of Hogwarts students filed out the ballroom, up stairs, across hallways, and up more stairs. A house elf was leading the way, Abraxas having stayed behind for a few minutes at his parents’ request.

“How big is this place, really?” Felicity asked with a laugh. “Because I’m thinking, like Hampton Court Palace? It’s so hard to tell with magical buildings.”

The elf looked scandalized that Felicity insinuated there might be a larger residence. “Hindie doesn’t know about any Hammy Palace, but Malfoy Manor is being the greatest magical manor in all of England.”

“Of course it is,” Felicity soothed, winking at Hermione, who sighed, wondering if Dobby were here, and hoping that this generation of Malfoys was nicer to their elves.

They turned another corner, and the hall widened into an open space that was about half the size of the ballroom below. Felicity whistled.

“Where are the spare brooms?” she asked.
Tom opened a hidden closet before the elf could point it out. He handed them out, and watched as Corvus, Thad, and Felicity took off above.

“I’ll never quite understand their passion for that sport,” he murmured. “Though I do love to fly.”

She thought of the air spells she was researching, of how they could learn to fly without brooms. He would be a sight, flying through the sky. “Maybe I’ll get over my fear of heights one day.”

He put an arm around her waist, pulling her close, his face nuzzling her hair. “You needn’t fear anything, dearest. And you are my little bird. You were born to fly.”

Patience had made her way over, all seafoam gauze and pale skin. “Not all birds fly. There are ostriches. And penguins. And the magical version of a duckbilled platypus, which is a duck that doesn’t fly.”

Hermione laughed, for once not caring about doing a fact-check, though she’d never heard of a magical version of a duckbilled platypus. She leaned forward and took Patience’s arm. “How did you escape Lord Malfoy?”

“Oh, I told him I’m sleeping with his son,” Patience smiled dreamily. “And that it would be vaguely incestuous for me to sleep with him as well.”

“You didn’t!” Hermione was aghast, and even Tom looked stunned.

“Honestly is usually the best policy,” Patience replied. “I told him that we have no plans to get married, that we are just friends having fun. I think Lord Malfoy approved. He told me to come see him once I graduated from school. I thanked him, but told him I planned on advanced studies, so that was unlikely.”

Abraxas had entered the room, and made a beeline for them. His expression matched Tom’s. “What did you say to my father, Patience?”

“You really don’t want to hear the answer to that question,” Hermione moaned, a hand over her eyes.
Abraxas raised both pale eyebrows. “He wasn’t himself; he kept patting me on the back, calling me ‘old boy,’ and ‘lucky bastard,’ telling me I was making great sorts of friends at school, and to keep up the ‘good work.’ He was making my mother quite nervous with his exuberance.”

“Patience headed off his attentions by telling him that she’s been warming your bed, with no strings attached,” Tom said, finally finding his voice.

“It was the path of least resistance,” Patience reached out and stroked Abraxas’s cheek, using a long finger to gently close his gaping mouth. “And everyone at Hogwarts already thinks that about us, anyways. We’re the two usually touching in the halls and classrooms. It makes a good cover, a reason for your distraction, and it convinces your father to give you some time to be free before pressing a betrothal.”

“But he propositioned you; he thinks you’re -” Abraxas protested, his grey eyes stormy.

Patience laughed, an unconcerned and light sound. “The people I care about will care enough about me to know better. I’m not worried about what anyone else thinks.”

“Don’t worry, Lord Malfoy is simply adding to the debts he owes to us,” Tom’s voice was the coldest it had sounded since the fight in France. Hermione sensed that something had happened earlier between Tom and Abraxas that she had yet to learn about. Given what she already knew of the Malfoy parenting style, she had a few guesses as to what had angered Tom.

“Malfoy! Get up here! I need someone who can actually throw a decent quaffle my way!” Felicity yelled down from her broom.

“Go,” Tom motioned upwards. “We can talk about this later.”

It was almost one before most of the guests had left. The study group played games, told stories of their holiday breaks so far, and flirted heavily. Josephine and Jacob sat quietly in a window seat, talking in low tones and holding hands all evening. Corvus and Sebastian tried to follow Felicity’s demonstration of how to Charleston, to hilarious results. Marguerite seemed to find any excuse she could to put a hand on Abraxas, asking for advice on her chess match with Vidhi, or tripping over a broom to nearly land in his lap.

Hermione could feel Tom’s anger, but she didn’t really think it wise to complain at the
moment. Her relationship with Tom had been on display this evening, and that combined with Patience’s confession to Lord Malfoy, was likely to assuage the Malfoy parents’ minds about any rumors concerning Abraxas. If she and Tom started acting possessive over Abraxas, who was considered the most eligible young Pureblooded catch of the decade, they would raise both eyebrows and suspicions. They would have to get used to the uncomfortable sensation of biting their tongues, at least in the short term. Hermione had a sinking feeling the new year coming was going to be bloody in more than one way.
A Proper Luncheon with a Side of Intrigue

Chapter Summary

Abraxas gets dragged to Paris by his mother, but he manages to make good use of his time, with Marguerite's help. Tom and Hermione discuss the future.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay - I've had back to back illnesses, and my children have been sick as well. As a fair warning to my lovely readers, I must be honest and say that there is not a definite end in sight for this story. My writing occurs in fits and starts, and I don't do very well with plotting out a story in advance. I have a general idea, but I make up most things as I go along. Thank you for your patience - I try to create interesting reading, though I know once we're at novel-length, the story could do with more careful trimming and plotting. I'll do my best to tighten it up as I go along. Love and hugs to you all.

Despite the fairly innocuous title of the Sacred Ladies Annual Winter Luncheon, the gathering of mothers from the pureblooded families with children of an age for engagement contracts was, as always, a verbal and emotional bloodbath. About a century ago, the tradition had occasionally involved literal bloodshed, with mothers discretely removing rivals from their children’s paths, but after one incident ending in three deaths, the luncheon had been moved from private homes to more public, though still exclusive, venues.

This year, the mothers were making their alliances and trading subtle barbs over the delectable selection of macaroons at Mozart’s, a prohibitively expensive patisserie in the magical section of Paris. There were tables arranged throughout the space, but most of the women were standing, mingling gracefully with one another, pointing out or calling to their children, who slumped in the seats or tried to disappear into the wallpaper. The teens sat in small groups, awkwardly conversing while desperately avoiding prolonged eye contact for fear of encouraging their mothers to declare a match. Most of the sons and daughters ranged in age from sixteen to eighteen, though there were a few fifteen year olds, as well as some nineteen and twenty year olds from the more liberal pureblood families who didn’t push for very early engagements.

Abraxas swallowed his third cup of tea, drawing upon years of self-restraint to hide his boredom. He’d been dragged along with his mother to her Parisian shopping trip, on the flimsy excuse that Evangeline wanted company. She had barely gone to any stores, instead taking her son to this large luncheon of other pureblooded mothers with marriageable children. He cursed himself, realizing he should have known his mother would never actually simply want his company.
Still, he’d put on his best smile, charming them all with his impeccable French and beautiful manners. Evangeline was pleased, though he knew that she wished he showed more interest in the choices being paraded before him. Several of the French and German magical families had homes in Paris’s magical enclave, and it seemed all those families were at this tea, along with the British mothers he already knew.

Perhaps sensing her son’s hidden restlessness, Evangeline turned to Orpha Rosier, who had walked with her over to the table where Abraxas was seated. “Maybe we should let the children explore the shops in this section of town while we finish our tea?”

Thad and Marguerite were at the table as well, and it was clear from the way Evangeline and Orpha were eyeing them that both mothers thought an alliance between the Rosier and Malfoy family ideal, even though Marguerite wouldn’t be sixteen until the spring. Thad, who had recently turned seventeen, had been betrothed only a few weeks earlier. His intended was Jessica Yaxley, a sixteen year old who had never been to Hogwarts because her parents thought girls were best served being homeschooled. They had only met in person twice, but Thad didn’t seem to mind. With her older child’s future secure, Orpha could turn her full attention to getting Marguerite engaged.

“As long as you stay with your brother and Abraxas, Marguerite,” Orpha nodded, watching with undisguised approval as Abraxas politely offered Marguerite his arm. “Meet us back here in one hour.”

Once the trio had exited the building, they all sighed in relief. “Yes, let us explore the consolation of shopping while they decide our future,” Marguerite mumbled, squeezing Abraxas’s arm.

“It’s not so bad to be engaged, Margie,” Thad smiled broadly. “And if you two end up together, it will be perfect – all our friends married to one another. Our lives will be like Hogwarts forever!”

Marguerite ignored her brother and addressed Abraxas. “You do realize that our mothers intend to see us engaged in the next year?”

Abraxas shrugged. “I told my parents I’m not interested in an early engagement. My father supports that, and my mother, however much she dislikes it, can’t make that decision on her own.”
“How lovely that your parents are willing to take your feelings into consideration,” Marguerite’s face took on a cruel expression. “It helps that your father approves of your choice of bed-warming partners, doesn’t it?”

“What?” Thad, as usual, was lost. He looked from his sister to his friend. “Who’s warming whose bed?”

“I’d be careful about the rumors you spread, Marguerite,” Abraxas borrowed the tone Tom used when he was angry.

Marguerite didn’t seem daunted. “I don’t need to spread anything, Abraxas. All of Hogwarts had its suspicions, and Patience confirmed them herself by announcing to your father that you two were sleeping together in a crowded ballroom.”

“You and Patience?” Thad stared at Abraxas, open-mouthed. “She’s an…interesting choice…isn’t she part veela?” He looked intrigued at the thought.

Abraxas ignored Thad as well. “Why does it matter to you, Marguerite? We’ve never been anything except distant cousins and classmates. We barely talk. You have no love for me. Everyone knows you’re obsessed with Tom.”

“And you have him, too, don’t you?” Marguerite snapped, her voice low and hissing. “If you would make an alliance with me, both our parents would leave us alone, and we could leave each other alone. I defy you to look at the available choices and find a potential pureblooded wife who is smarter than I am, more capable of running the vast Malfoy estates, and more willing to let you have your freedom. We make sense, Abraxas. You must see that. I know you are much more clever than you let most teachers or parents see. You aren’t just a quidditch star with a handsome face. Tom would have no use for you if that were the case.”

Thad had given up trying to contribute to the conversation, and was now several steps ahead, looking into a gaming store window, staring at the marble and gold wizarding chess pieces and the various exploding snap and gobstone sets.

Abraxas stopped walking and turned to face Marguerite. She was several inches shorter than he was, even smaller than Hermione, and though she was frowning, her features were still objectively lovely. He’d never liked Marguerite, but he’d always pitied her, in the way that he sympathized with most other pureblooded children. He knew intimately what her upbringing had been like. Marguerite was very, very intelligent, ranking in the top ten students in their year in every subject, and undeniably a powerful witch. If he hadn’t fallen in love with Hermione, and then Tom and Patience, if he hadn’t become part of a quartet that completed him, he wouldn’t have any objection to marrying her. She was a safe choice, a smart choice, but Abraxas had already
made his choice. The problem now was keeping that choice hidden until it could be safely revealed.

“Marguerite, we have time, at least the two more years until we graduate from Hogwarts, before we need to worry about this,” Abraxas finally said, because he had to say something, and the truth wasn’t an option. “I know the pressure is strongest when we’re at home, but the holiday is over in another week, and we’ll back at school. I simply am not going to let an early engagement ruin my current level of freedom at school, and I honestly don’t understand why you would want to, either.”

“Was that a reference to my past activities with Tom?” Marguerite’s face darkened, her brows drawing together in anger. “Just because you feel the need to ‘sow your wild oats,’ doesn’t mean that everyone else feels the same. Before you judge me, which you have no standing to do, you should know that I slept with Tom because I loved him, and I knew that I’d never be able to have a love match. I just wanted to be…” her voice trailed off and she looked away, her eyes shining, the energy of a moment ago evaporated.

“Oh, Marguerite,” Abraxas took her arm again and gently squeezed as they began walking once more. “Tom’s power is seductive, I know, but he’s a poor choice to experience affection. He has very little to give,”

“And it’s all used up on Hermione, I know, with small bits thrown to you and Patience,” Marguerite sniffed. “I wasted myself on him, I am well aware.”

Abraxas knew exactly how Tom could tie a person’s emotions into knots. “I wouldn’t say wasted, Marguerite. Tom still thinks highly of you, wants you in our inner circle.”

“Really?” Marguerite’s mouth twisted into a deeper frown, making her seem like a petulant child. “I wasn’t invited to your little war party earlier this month.”

“This isn’t the place to discuss that,” Abraxas tightened his grip on her arm in a warning. “You would have been welcome, but there were logistics to consider, and your mother barely lets you out of her sight when you are home.”

Marguerite made a small, fluttery sigh of defeated acceptance. “That’s true, but I can contribute greatly, you know that! Other than Tom and Hermione, I am the strongest at offensive spells!”
Abraxas heard her speak, but his attention was fixed elsewhere. A block ahead of them, at the corner where the street narrowed and twisted into the Parisian version of Knockturn Alley, he saw the burly man with the goatee he and Tom had fought in Fontaine de Puissance. Though he wasn’t wearing the dark brown and black uniform of Grindelwald’s men, Abraxas knew his face well. The man had put up a vicious fight, and Abraxas felt the echo of the pain from the burn the man had left on his cheek.

“What is it?” Marguerite, observant as she was, had followed Abraxas’s gaze. “Who is he?”

“One of Grindelwald’s men,” Abraxas answered quietly.

Marguerite pulled on his arm. “Let’s follow him. Tom would want us to.”

That was true, and Abraxas had been thinking the same. “Fine, but don’t,”

“I don’t need you to direct my behavior,” she cut him off, and Abraxas had to quicken his pace to keep up with her.

Thad had gone into the game store, so they simply continued down the street, trying to act casually, keeping the man in their line of sight. He entered a shop with filthy windows and a battered sign that advertised magical books in faded and flaking gold lettering.

Abraxas paused, and Marguerite smirked. “Surely you aren’t afraid?”

“No, and you would be as well if you weren’t insane,” Abraxas replied caustically, though he pushed the door open and entered with her. His face had been hidden when Abraxas had last seen the man, but that didn’t mean Grindelwald’s flunky would take kindly to anyone who seemed too interested in his activities.

The interior of the store was terribly dim, and it was the work of several seconds to allow their eyes to adjust enough to make out the shapes of shelves and a long, high counter. A figure in a cloak with matted hair and a lined face of indiscriminate gender stood behind the counter and met Abraxas’s eyes, but made no move to approach or speak to them.

Marguerite dropped his arm and went down a narrow aisle to their left. Abraxas was unsure whether he should follow her. As he was debating, the burly man came out from another aisle
further back and walked up to the counter. Abraxas crossed over to a glass case under the dirty window and pretended to be interested in the text on display there. He recognized it as a copy of a rare potions book from his father’s library, one Tom liked to read.

The burly man was speaking to the clerk in low, rapid French. He must have used a muffling spell of some kind, as his words were oddly garbled. Abraxas thought he caught the word “Friday,” but that was only a guess. Though he would have loved an opportunity to get the man alone, Abraxas knew there was little he could with the active trace and no wand. His wandless magic was best at blocking and defense, not attack.

The figure behind the counter made a growling sound. Abraxas inched closer, but apparently that was the end of the conversation because the burly man left.

Abraxas went down the far aisle the man had exited, and found Marguerite pulling a book off the shelf.

“This one was pulled out further than the rest. I think it was the one he was reading,” she nodded at the leather-bound volume in her hands.

“It could be spelled,” Abraxas cautioned, but leaned over her shoulder to peer down at the pristine vellum pages.

“Reveale,” Marguerite commanded sternly and though Abraxas was sure her wandless magic was strong enough for that spell, the page remained empty. They both sighed.

A hacking cough sounded directly behind them. “Can I be of assistance?” the aged clerk appeared even older and dirtier up close, but the French was oddly formal and sounded well-educated. Abraxas only just managed to keep his nose from wrinkling at the strong smell of sweat mixed with cheap fire whiskey. Maybe a scholar fallen on hard times?

While Abraxas was trying to think of the best response, Marguerite answered in French that was at least grammatically correct, “We’d like to buy this book.” Her voice was cold and firm, and despite her poor pronunciation, Marguerite had an air of power and privilege.

“Why? You can’t possibly know what it holds,” the clerk cackled, revealing teeth that were various shades of yellow and brown. “That book needs a special password.”
Since Marguerite had already committed them to a course of action, Abraxas decided to provide support. He drew himself to his full height and allowed his magic to rise to the surface of his skin, a technique Tom had taught him. No magical being with an ounce of sensitivity would be able to ignore the implied threat.

“Then we’ll buy the password as well,” Abraxas replied, adopting the verbal formality of the clerk and the arrogance of Marguerite.

The cackle was louder this time, and transformed into a near death rattle midway through. “Passwords are expensive,” the clerk raised a gnarled finger with a blackened nail and wagged it in a prohibitive gesture.

“Money is not an object,” Abraxas shrugged, then allowed his voice to drop into a more threatening tone, as he continued, “though I am sure the French Ministry would be happy to reward a person with knowledge of French citizens colluding with Grindelwald.”

Marguerite stepped forward, and Abraxas could feel her magic rising as well. “I’m sure many of your neighbors would be disappointed, too,” she added, glancing pointedly out the dirty front window to the shops across the street.

The clerk was unfazed. “Neighbors leave each other alone in this part of town. And children without wands aren’t in much of a position to frighten me, but I’m no friend to Grindelwald’s cause, only a humble shopkeeper who needs to pay the rent.”

“One hundred galleons, then?” Abraxas pulled out the magical wallet he always carried. It did no good to be wealthy if that wealth was not available at all times. The sum was exorbitant, but he started high to make it clear to the clerk that he wasn’t lying when he’d said money didn’t matter.

“Five hundred,” the clerk’s pale pink tongue darted out and licked at a thin, cracked lip.

Abraxas smiled in the way his father did whenever he had the upper hand in an argument. “For five hundred, I’ll need you to throw in the potions book in the glass case as well.” It didn’t do to appear too desperate, and he’d like a copy to give to Tom for his birthday.

The clerk nodded, putting out a palm smudged with what Abraxas hoped was only ink and dust. Abraxas held the money above his hand, not releasing it. “The password?”
“The Deathly Hallows,” the clerk grinned in a way that made Abraxas’s skin itch. How odd to have a children’s story title as a password.

He glanced at Marguerite, who was still holding the open book. She spoke the words, and smiled. He did as well when he saw the blank page fill with a map of northern France. There were arrows and notes drawn on in a messy hand.

Abraxas sucked in his breath as he scanned the writing. The map indicated which villages would be easy targets, which would pose a challenge, and which would have to wait until more fighters were available. Marguerite flipped the page, and on the next one, Abraxas saw a list of dates for possible attacks.

“Are there any spells or traces on this book?” he asked. “If you lie, there will be unpleasant consequences, believe me.” He thought of Tom raging through the store.

The clerk made a snort. “No. They didn’t think there would be anyone simultaneously clever and stupid enough to interfere with their plans.”

Abraxas nodded, and careful not to actually touch either skin or clothing, he dropped the money into the clerk’s hand. The clerk pulled out a long, brittle looking ash wand and waved it at the glass case. The potions book flew across the room, and Abraxas caught it easily.

“Though,” the clerk rasped tauntingly, “removing the book isn’t all that clever, really. It will only be about a week before the volume is missed, and plans are changed, making it useless.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Marguerite eyed him suspiciously, her French worse when she tried to hurry her speech.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I am no friend of their cause,” the clerk replied simply, enunciating the words for ease of understanding, which was clearly a jab at Marguerite’s poor language skills.

Marguerite scowled and pulled another book off a nearby shelf, without even reading the title. “How much to set a protean charm on the book, and leave it where it is?”
Abraxas admired his fellow Slytherin’s quick thinking, and took out his wallet once again. “An untraceable protean charm, with no noticeable magical signature on the book,” he added.

“The book is already enchanted,” the clerk’s milky eyes were focused on Abraxas’s wallet. “A protean charm will not be noticed, though I would need to update the charm periodically, and the spell can be finicky…”

Abraxas thanked all higher powers that he hadn’t spent much of his allowance for several months. He took out the remaining five hundred galleons he had and put it in the clerk’s hand.

Marguerite pushed the book across the counter. The clerk took both books and performed the spell. Abraxas watched the movements closely. Despite the filth and shabbiness in appearance, the clerk’s magic was crisp and competent. Marguerite examined the copy with a critical eye, but said nothing, clearly unable to find a visible fault.

“Thank you,” Abraxas added. It couldn’t hurt to be polite, and the clerk was taking a risk, even if it had been a profitable one.

The clerk’s grin was sly and knowing. “Our young freedom fighters need to get their information somehow, don’t they? Many look forward to another event such as the recent occurrence at Fontaine de Puissance.”

Abraxas had no safe reply for that, so he only nodded and took Marguerite’s arm as she tucked the copied book into the folds of her outer cloak. They needed to put distance between themselves and this area of town immediately. Regardless of any absence of spells, Grindelwald’s man could return or be watching the store, and Abraxas didn’t want to linger, especially if the clerk thought there was some link between them and the events in Fontaine de Puissance.

They left quickly, heading back to the main road of the shopping district. Abraxas could feel Marguerite’s magic tingling excitedly, and he knew his was as well. Now, though, they had to find Thad and get back to the luncheon before the hour was up.

“Twenty galleons says Thad is in the quidditch supply shop,” Marguerite read his thoughts, and steered him toward that store. It had one of the most prominent facades on the street, with front windows two stories high where several golden snitches darted about in a magically enclosed display, chased by miniature versions of seekers from professional quidditch teams who each performed their own signature moves as they sought the glittering balls.
Thad was indeed there, and though he briefly complained about being left alone, he seemed to think they had wanted time to ‘be romantic.’ Abraxas considering setting him straight, but decided it would take too much effort. Marguerite was apparently of the same opinion, as she said nothing about Thad’s remarks.

The three returned to the patisserie, and once Thad was off to the dessert table, murmuring about honey and pistachio macaroons, Abraxas and Marguerite found an empty table in an isolated corner.

“What now?” Marguerite asked. “How are we going to get this information to Tom?”

Abraxas tapped his fingers absently against the lace tablecloth. The fine fabric caught on his skin, calloused from quidditch and chopping potion ingredients. “I’ll owl Tom when I get home and send him the book. His birthday is in a few days – he’ll be having the usual gathering of our group at Fortiscue’s. We can talk more then after he and Hermione have had a chance to look the book over.”

Marguerite slipped the volume from her cloak, handing it to Abraxas under the table. He grasped the book, but she tugged back on it slightly for a moment. “Don’t leave me out this time, Abraxas,” to anyone who wasn’t used to dealing with Tom, her tone would have been intimidating.

Abraxas pulled harder, and she let go. “That isn’t my decision, Marguerite, but I told you, Tom didn’t leave you out as punishment.”

“Are you sure? Tom does love to punish,” Marguerite muttered, then straightened and added, “At least make sure he knows of my contribution.”

Continuing the conversation was not an option, as Evangeline and Orpha had come over, both smiling widely at their children. “What are you two doing in the corner, Abraxas?” his mother asked, a pleasant smile on her pretty face.

Abraxas knew his mother’s smiles were always dangerous. He put the potions book on the table. “Talking about Tom’s birthday party. I found him a gift.”

Orpha’s face fell a bit, but she managed to keep a slight smile pasted on. “Yes, Tom is a great friend of yours, I understand. Such a pity he’s half-blooded.”
“Tom is a prodigy,” Evangeline countered tartly. She had a well-known soft spot for Tom. “He is the Heir of Slytherin, a direct descendant through the Gaunt line. Salazar’s own locket responds to his commands. So long as our bloodlines remain pure, I don’t see anything wrong with encouraging powerful friendships. They will certainly be helpful in Abraxas’s future.”

“Of course,” Orpha agreed, though her expression didn’t match her words. “Narcissa is a cousin, after all, and her daughter and ward are always welcome in our home. It’s simply that when we are working to make permanent alliances between other pureblooded families, it is a good practice to limit exposure to those not in our circle, at least until those alliances are solidified.”

“I don’t see any harm in a birthday party, especially when most of the attendees, and all of the boys except Tom, are pureblooded,” Evangline needled. “Unless you’re worried Marguerite is going to run away with Tom?”

Marguerite’s face paled, and Abraxas laughed loudly, trying to draw attention away from her. He might not like Marguerite, but he had a sense of loyalty to anyone whose mother was so similar to his own. “Tom is going to marry Hermione,” he lied as easily as breathing. “Surely you can’t doubt that after seeing them together at the ball?”

Evangeline didn’t comment, but Abraxas saw his mother’s mouth twist in annoyance before returning to a smile.

Orpha noted Evangeline’s reaction and looked pleased. “No, after that display, I would consider the two engaged, though Circe knows that Narcissa is a much more lenient parent than one would expect for a woman raised in a pureblooded family.” She glanced at Abraxas and then to Marguerite. “I would feel better, though, if Abraxas would promise to be Marguerite’s escort to the party.”

“Mother, it’s only at Fortiscue’s,” Marguerite raised her eyebrows, “in the middle of the day, not a ball or even a formal dinner.”

“Still,” Evangeline nodded her approval, realigning herself with Orpha. “I think that’s an excellent idea. Abraxas, you don’t mind, do you?”

There wasn’t much to say, and Abraxas knew it. “I’d be honored,” he smiled broadly, even as his stomach dropped. Maybe he’d under-estimated the combined powers of his mother and Orpha’s motivation.
Tom was working on translating one of Slytherin’s journals, sitting at the desk in his room. Hermione was beside him, her curls brushing against his cheek when she leaned over to look closer at a particular phrase or turn the page. Since the Malfoy ball, when he’d told her what he’d said to the locket, she’d been much freer with her smiles and touches, in the way she’d been when they were younger. Her magic was completely open to him, and when they sat close like this, it was impossible to tell where his ended and hers began – their combined magic had no boundaries, and the sheer power filled him with a euphoric sensation, a feeling of infinite possibility.

Even four months ago, he would have considered the open affection he’d displayed at the ball a weakness, but much had changed since the start of the school year. He and Hermione had solidified their soulmate bond, they had performed the elemental binding magic with Abraxas and Patience, and they had opened the Chamber of Secrets. Tom had never felt so satisfied in his life. The Malfoy ball had been a great success as far as making connections with powerful adults outside of Hogwarts, and he had several ideas about plans for after graduation.

“I think this is a spell for flying,” Hermione was muttering, fully distracted by the task of translating the journal first from Middle English, and then from the deliberately obtuse wording Slytherin preferred to use.

Tom looked at Hermione’s translation, his brow creasing. “Fascinating, but this is advanced elemental air magic,” he noted as he read. “Slytherin’s magic was water based.”

“Yes, but Slytherin was in a bonded quartet, and he had access to Rowena Ravenclaw’s air magic. Apparently, that link and his own high level of skill was enough.” Hermione replied absently, still working on the rest of the paragraph.

“I’d love to fly with you, little bird,” he said, before he could censor himself.

She glanced up at that, her brown eyes warm though her smile was nervous. “I don’t like heights, you know, but I might try it if you promise to catch me.”

“Always,” he promised, and kissed her temple. His hand absently rubbed her back, and he thought of the spell that had hit her when they were fleeing France, of that entire day’s events. They hadn’t had a chance to discuss the experience in detail, being at home with Narcissa and Galatea, and having Felicity as a guest as well.
Today, though, Galatea had taken Felicity to Edinburgh to visit her family for the day, and Narcissa had gone for lunch with a friend in Hogsmeade. They were alone except for the four house elves, who rarely visited Tom’s room.

“How are you?” he asked her, taking the pen from her hand and closing both books. “You killed a man, Hermione, and you haven’t said a word about it. That’s not at all what I would expect from you.”

“How would you expect?” she asked tartly. “Tears? Hysterics? That definitely isn’t me.”

Tom pulled her into his lap, and though her expression indicated annoyance, she went willingly. The closer she was to him, the more they were touching, the easier it was for him to feel her moods, the emotions behind her words that often conveyed much more than the words themselves. “Dearest, you know I support the decision you made, and I would have probably killed the man myself if you hadn’t. What I am concerned about is that you have a…different set of values than I do, and I want to make sure you aren’t torturing yourself with that overactive morality of yours.”

“We were in a battle,” she spoke after several seconds of silence. “He was going to kill Patience, kill all of us. When we made the decision to enter the village, I had already accepted that we would probably need to fight, with serious magic. I threw that knife with deadly intent, and I don’t regret it.”

“Good.” He locked his hands at the base of her spine, pulling her entire body close to his. Their foreheads touched, and their breath mingled. “You were magnificent, and anyone who touches what is ours, or who is ours, deserves to be met with deadly force.”

Once, she might have protested such a statement, so Tom was pleased when she simply kissed him instead. “Does that include Abraxas’s parents? I could feel your restrained anger at the ball. What did they do?” She pulled back and stared at him. “Beside the standard list of horrible things many pureblooded parents do?”

“They used the cruciatus on him, more than once, during his childhood,” Tom hissed, his anger at the memory of the conversation coming to the surface.

Hermione went stiff in his arms when he named the curse, though she tried to relax almost immediately. It was too late, though. He’d felt her panic and pain ripple through their magic.
“Dearest,” he asked, his voice carefully emptied of any emotion, “has someone used that curse on you?”

Her lack of an immediate answer was the only answer he needed. Tom could feel the measured calm that she was trying to push at him through their link, the way she was trying to soothe him, but he rejected it, allowing his anger to overwhelm the peace. “It was the same man who marked your arm, wasn’t it?”

She paused, then nodded, her eyes falling to the newly healed place on her arm. “Tom, don’t waste your energy on the past. I’m fine. I’m here with you. Let’s enjoy this moment.”

“Well, at least it isn’t another person I need to kill, just a longer amount of time to make him suffer,” Tom sighed, allowing Hermione’s calm to enter just a bit. After all, it was a nice feeling, in moderation.

“You can’t kill Abraxas’s parents,” Hermione’s eyes went wide and her hands clutched at his.

Tom smirked. “Actually, I think you’ll find that I could, though killing both of them would be awfully suspicious. Maybe I’ll lure them to the Chamber and feed them to Astarte instead, let the world think they simply disappeared.”

“Now I know you are trying to get a rise out of me,” Hermione shook her head, and Tom had to resist the impulse to pull at her curls. “I agree they are horrible, but Grindelwald is our priority. Your revenge list will simply have to wait.”

He stroked the side of her cheek, letting his palm cup her jaw, his thumb tracing that delicate line of bone. “It isn’t only their past deeds that are the problem, dearest, though those are more than enough to merit a response. Narcissa said the Malfoys would try to harm us if they found out about the bond we’ve made with Abraxas. The situation might be on hold, but it must be dealt with sooner rather than later. His parents won’t wait forever to see him married off.”

“True,” Hermione leaned into his touch for a moment, then pulled back and stared into his eyes. “Abraxas has a potential solution for that, one that doesn’t involve cold-blooded murder, which is something I believe we should avoid.”
“You’re the only one who has killed anyone, dearest,” Tom frowned. He could feel disapproval and…hesitation coming from her. She was concerned she was going to upset him, which usually meant that she would succeed. No one else on the planet had the strange ability to both enrage and please him beyond words.

Hermione got up, and he knew that she was trying to get space. “Killing someone in the heat of battle, when it is a matter of killing or being killed, is not the same as killing someone who has upset you.”

“I am not interested in revisiting our old debates of morality,” Tom sighed. “So, let’s simply leave that point for the moment, since I’m not actively plotting anyone’s death.”

The surprise showed on her face and Tom laughed, though he knew she could still feel the undercurrent of his anger. He was willing to accept her as she was – why couldn’t she do the same for him? After all, he wasn’t proposing to murder anyone who didn’t deserve to die. “Let’s discuss this plan of Abraxas’s instead. I assume it involves his new favorite idea of marrying you.”

Hermione stopped pacing and nodded. Her emotions were conflicted, he could tell. “Logically, a quick elopement once we both turn seventeen does make the most sense. If we announce the marriage publicly after the ceremony, there isn’t much the Malfoys can do. There is a possibility that they would go extreme and disown him, but continuing the Malfoy name will probably be the stronger impulse. After all, I have a title, money, and powerful magic. The only fault his parents could have with me is that I’m not pureblooded by their extreme standards, and despite the protestations of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families, there must have been multiple broad interpretations of what constitutes pureblooded over the centuries, or these families would all be extinct.”

“You are not pureblooded at all,” Tom corrected, his tone icy. “You are actually muggleborn, dearest. What if the Malfoys look closer, find that out?”

She flinched at the vehemence of his response. “My mother hid those secrets well. No one will find out.”

“And if they do?” Tom persisted. “If they corner you in the Malfoy dungeons, torture you? Kill you?”

“That won’t happen, Tom. The Malfoys don’t have a basilisk, and despite the vehemence of pureblooded rhetoric, there isn’t a spell to test or prove blood status.” Hermione went to put her hand on his arm, but he turned away. Her emotions were strong enough without the boost of
physical contact. “I want to do what is best for our future, and our rash binding has put us into a situation with imperfect solutions.”

“By running away with Abraxas?” Tom’s voice sounded foreign to himself. This anger, tangled tightly with jealousy, was intolerable, a horrific feeling. It made him want to hurt her and kiss her at the same time.

She didn’t get angry in response. Her calm was even more infuriating. “No, Tom,” she answered softly. “I wouldn’t run anywhere without you, and neither would Abraxas. Patience might, but she’d come back eventually.”

He refused to let laughter escape his lips, but his mood shifted, lightened. “Just how do you imagine this would work?” he sighed.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted, coming to take his hand.

Tom sighed again, this time with satisfaction. When their hands met, he knew the truth of her love. He could feel it, and though his intellect might try to argue against emotions, the power of her affection was undeniable. It was a drug he was becoming dependent upon, whether he liked it or not.

“I wouldn’t, I just couldn’t live in Malfoy Manor, especially not with Gawain and Evangeline.” Hermione’s fingers were entwined with his, their magic thrumming between their joined hands. “My mother and Galatea would help us find a place of our own, a place where all four of us could come and go from our advanced studies and various jobs after school – a home base well protected from the Malfoy’s influence.”

He snorted. “Neither of Abraxas’s parents would be happy about that.”

“Well, I don’t care,” Hermione snapped and Tom enjoyed her flare of rage. When his little bird got angry, her magic crackled in the most delightful way, leaving filling him with a physical tingling sensation. “They may have controlled Abraxas in the past, but after next year, they won’t be able to. He’s ours now, and if the Malfoys have any sense of self-preservation, they’ll recognize that.”

Tom was about to voice his approval for that sentiment, and perhaps tease Hermione about her earlier claim that killing the Malfoys wasn’t a good idea, when Abraxas’s owl tapped at his
He opened the small package while Hermione stroked the bird’s feathers. “Abraxas was in Paris today,” he scanned their lover’s sloppy handwriting on the enclosed note, “with Marguerite,”

Hermione made a hissing sound, and came to read the letter beside him. “We need to see this book,” she said, excitement in her voice now.

“Yes, we do,” Tom agreed. He handed her the note as he opened the book. “It says the password is ‘the deathly hallows’ – what is that?”

A coldness flooded their bond, and he glanced over at her. Hermione was fighting back strong emotion. He raised his eyebrow in question. “I thought you weren’t trying to keep your emotions from me any longer.”

“I’m not,” she took a deep breath and pushed reassurance at him. “It’s a childish fear, that’s all, a silly one I’m not proud of.”

“What is it?” he repeated, his patience thinning.

Hermione spoke the words over the book, and they watched the pages fill with maps and notes. “The Deathly Hallows is a children’s tale, from a collection similar to the muggle Grimm’s fairy tales.”

Tom was confused. “Grindelwald, the wizard the world fears, used the equivalent of ‘Snow White’ or ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ for a password? How supremely disappointing.”

“Not exactly,” she laughed, but there was still nervousness in her voice. He waited for her to elaborate on her discomfort.

“The tale used to scare me as a child,” Hermione finally admitted. “I was afraid of the drawings of Death in the book we had, all cloaked, with skeletal hands like a Dementor,” she shivered.
He put an arm around her shoulders. “I’ve heard people say that childhood fears are never rational,” Tom said, then added, in a low voice, “But I saw a child die once, an orphan with a terrible fever. I was in the next bed, sick as well. One moment, he was coughing, the next, he was silent, glassy eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling. Death is a completely rational fear.”

Hermione relaxed under his touch; he felt her magic and emotions return to their normal state. She straightened and pointed to the map. “It looks like this is the next village on Grindelwald’s list.”

Tom was glad of the reminder of the task at hand. The last few days, with Hermione’s emotions ever-present, had him feeling in a way that wasn’t entirely comfortable. Some violence and bloodshed seemed like an excellent antidote, and no matter how well they planned, there would undoubtedly be both the next time they interfered with Grindelwald’s plans.
Hermione thought she had done an admirable job of keeping herself together at the mention of the Deathly Hallows. Grindelwald’s obsession, which Tom didn’t share, yet, was a deep trigger – all those nights she’d spent pouring over Dumbledore’s book, examining it backwards and forwards, parsing every word for hidden meaning. Tom wouldn’t care about the story, but he would care about the Elder wand as a powerful magical object, and Hermione wanted to keep that knowledge off his radar for as long as possible. The only person the long history of the Elder Wand had seemed unable to corrupt was Dumbledore, and heaven knew that Tom wouldn’t need much corruption, more like a gentle nudge.

However, she had sensed a change in him these last few days. He had been calmer, more expressive, more human than she’d ever seen. As lovely as it was, she knew it couldn’t last for extended periods – it was a soft underbelly that wouldn’t allow itself to be exposed for long. Who Tom was able to be when he was alone with her and their quartet was not the same as who Tom was able to be in general. If she pushed too hard, he would close up, and possibly strike out.

In fact, annoying him would probably put him back into his comfort zone, she thought.
“You know we’re going to have to approach this much differently than last time, don’t you?” she said.

“Well, yes,” he replied testily, and she bit back a smile at his expected display of annoyance. “We don’t have any more of the magic cloaking potion brewed, nor do we have a portkey, but we must be able to do something.”
“Nothing as direct as you’d like,” Hermione answered. “We can establish anonymous connections in these towns, give them warning of when an attack is likely to occur, giving them a chance to either fight back or flee, but we’ll be back in school next week,”

Tom smiled. “Yes, we’ll be back in the Chamber too, with the ability to practice our magic freely. I know there is much more to be discovered. Grindelwald would have easily fallen at Slytherin’s feet, and I am his heir. It is only a matter of time, Hermione.”

“Well, we must work with what we have right now, Tom,” she thumbed through the other pages with writing. There were only four: the map, which took up two pages, a list of dates, and a list of names. “And if these people and places are the current targets, we need to warn them as soon as possible.”

“Fine,” he conceded, and leaned over her shoulder to run a finger down the list of names. “Especially since these people are probably the ones he’d like most to press into service. We need to deprive him of the better fighters, so that when we do go up against his forces, they won’t be as strong as they’d like.”

“And save innocent lives,” Hermione added, but without venom, and began writing down notes of possible actions. Tom read over her shoulder and offered suggestions for a moment, then started to pen a response to Abraxas. She counted his willingness to warn others even if it didn’t give him immediate benefit as a win, though she knew that now he’d been in an actual fight, he would be impatient to do so again as soon as they were able.

Later that evening, after dinner, Hermione sought out her mother in the small greenhouse behind the main house. Narcissa was tending several of the rare medicinal plants she grew at the Merrythought estate, trimming leaves, spelling the soil to remain the perfect level of dampness, using the magical gardening set Tom had purchased her for their first Christmas to harvest the mature pieces with the correct types of blade – bone, various metals, or even crystal.

Hermione picked up a golden knife and began gently cutting away ripe sloth mallow pods. Narcissa had taught her how to handle the extremely delicate and slow-growing pods, the seeds of which were used in several repair and growth potions, like skele-grow.

“You’re confused,” Narcissa observed as she handed Hermione a glass dish to place the pods in. “I am, too. How much can we change? How much should we? Galatea is still very upset about your actions in France.”
“And how do you feel?” Hermione took the dish with her free hand, noticing that her mother looked very tired.

Narcissa gave her a small smile. “You are alive and healthy. So is Tom, and he’s not a vicious murderer intent on taking over the world. That means our plans are working, doesn’t it?”

“But?” Hermione prompted.

“I don’t know, darling,” Narcissa sighed, brushing back a stray lock of pale hair. “The idea that Tom wants to fight Grindelwald, to be the hero of the magical world, that’s…lovely. Better than I could have hoped for. He actively wishes to do something good,”

“Yes, but he’s more motivated by the desire for praise and adulation than the desire to help others,” Hermione was relieved to be talking about this to her mother, to get her hopes and fears out in the open.

“Everyone desires praise and approval, especially an orphan who went the first decade of his life without much of it,” Narcissa took the full jar from her and magically sealed the lid. “At least he isn’t motivated by sadism and the desire to instill fear and subjugate others. Your love, your presence, has changed him for the better.”

Hermione nodded. “I know that; I can feel the change in him, but I also know that he still has a great potential for darkness, for abuse of power. It is important to give him a plan, a way to channel his energies in a positive way.”

“I agree,” Narcissa spoke slowly, as though carefully choosing her words. “Grindelwald is dangerous, though. It took Dumbledore to defeat him in the original timeline, and though I have my problems with the man, he is undeniably a great wizard, with much more life experience than Tom currently has.”

“I know. I’ve been thinking about what to do,” Hermione quickly explained the book Abraxas had sent them earlier. “And if we only engage from afar, providing information to keep additional soldiers and villages out of Grindelwald’s grasp, then I would expect the duel between Grindelwald and Dumbledore to remain the most likely event for his defeat.”

Narcissa sat on the wooden bench beside the potting table. “It’s as likely as anything else remaining the same, I suppose, but we’ve changed so much, there’s no guarantee. And if it
comes down to a duel between Grindelwald and Tom,” she paused, and Hermione was surprised to see that her mother looked close to tears.

“He’s become more like a son to me than I would have ever dreamed,” Narcissa continued after a moment. “And I wouldn’t like to see you deprived of your soul mate, darling, or hurt yourself in a hopeless battle. The experience and power differentials are simply too much to bridge this early in his life, I fear.”

“Maybe,” Hermione responded, thinking of Harry and Ron, of all the dangerous situations they had found their way through, of the members of Dumbledore’s Army, of how much fighting for a cause with friends seemed to amplify one’s powers and abilities. Tom’s starting point, though, was much higher than any of her future friends. “But he isn’t alone – he has an elemental quartet, Slytherin’s locket, and his own amazing raw talent to draw upon.”

Waving her wand to produce a light mist over a tray of glowing orchids on the table, Narcissa pursed her lips. “Yes, you’ve made him more powerful at a younger age, though more temperate, with positive connections to others. He’s still incredibly arrogant, and arrogance leads to mistakes. If we can keep him on the sidelines of this fight, it would be for the best.”

“To do that, we have to find a way that will give him an outlet for his ego, actions he will be able to eventually take credit for, to earn public approval from,” Hermione took her own wand out and formed a magical dome over the orchids. The glowing of the petals intensified, the colors sparkling in the millions of tiny prisms in the fine droplets of mist.

“Yes,” Narcissa nodded. “I agree, but what?”

Hermione stared at the orchids, the glow almost mesmerizing. How nice would it be if she could simply be a student? Simply enjoy life and not worry about life and death situations or fighting dangerous, megalomaniacal wizards? She shook her head and focused again.

“We need to think of what Tom did in the past, actions he was taking, and alter them for these set of circumstances. By this point, he’d created his band of knights. In this timeline, he has our inner group, loyal to him. He has the Chamber at his disposal, but he isn’t obsessed with eternal life, at least not now. I think encouraging him to formalize the group, giving it a name and a purpose – disrupting Grindelwald – would focus him. If we could find the base spell that he used to put the Dark Mark in the air, and use it for some kind of warning sign over the villages that are being targeted, I think Tom would be pleased. The mark would be unique, something only he and his followers can create.”

Narcissa’s brow furrowed, and Hermione had no doubt her mother was reliving painful memories associated with the Dark Mark. Hermione had a few of them herself.
“That is a good idea,” Narcissa said finally, her voice controlled. “But you’ll need to find a way to greatly amplify the range of the spell. Originally, it could only be cast in the area the caster was physically in, not across the Channel into another country. Distance spells are some of the most difficult to perform.”

“That’s perfect, though,” Hermione was caught up in the plans unfolding rapidly in her mind. “Tom loves a challenge, loves proving that he can perform magic that others cannot.”

“What about the village next on the list? That spell will take time to find and develop,” Narcissa pointed out.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. “I’m not sure. Maybe simply a letter of warning for now?”

“Will they listen to the word of anonymous strangers? Perhaps they would be worried it was a trap, a trick to get them to abandon their village,” Narcissa frowned.

“In his letter, Abraxas said the clerk in the bookstore mentioned the young group of freedom fighters, that people are expecting more action,” Hermione said, trying to switch tracks in her mind. “Even if a few people listen, that’s still less of a victory for Grindelwald.”

Narcissa shook her head. “We need to help as many as possible, be as convincing as possible. Do you still have the masks you wore?”

To say that Tom was surprised when Narcissa and Hermione came into his room wearing the masks Abraxas had procured was more than an understatement. Hermione felt his shock, followed by the bright thrill that went through his magic like an electrical current. It was a testament to how much he trusted both women that he put on his own mask and took the arm Narcissa offered him with no questions.

She apparated them to the sleepy village of Auge, at the edge of town. Darkness was falling, but people were still out, walking to and from small shops and the local tavern in the light dusting of snow. As they moved toward the town square, the appearance of three masked figures was enough to send several people running for cover and make the braver of the townsfolk draw their wands and strike defensive postures.
“We mean you no harm,” Narcissa called out, using her wand to slightly magnify her voice. “We have come to warn you that your village is an intended target of Grindelwald. He will attack here soon.”

A woman of about seventy with grey hair twisted into a severe bun, and a man maybe twenty years younger in a heavy wool cloak both stepped forward.

“Why?” The man demanded. His nose was very red, and he sounded like he had a bad cold. “This is a very small village of no consequence. We do not have any great fighters, nor are we in a particularly advantageous location.”

Hermione listened, but the tingling of her magic, of it reaching out toward other, older, deep magic somewhere nearby, distracted her. Through their masks, she met eyes with Tom. He felt it as well.

“You tell us,” Tom answered. “There is something magical here that Grindelwald wants, and you need to move it, and yourselves, out of his path.”

The older woman cleared her throat, stopping the man from responding. “You are the fighters from Fontaine de Puissance. My son and granddaughter were trapped in that town. You saved them by standing up to Grindelwald. How can you expect us to do less?”

“If you know about an attack in advance, it only makes sense to fight if you know you can win,” Hermione protested, still distracted by the extra magic in the air. “This village has few defenses against an army. At the very least, you should evacuate the children and weaker fighters, and relocate whatever is putting out that magic. Grindelwald clearly wants it. Keeping it from him is a form of resistance.”

“It can’t be moved,” the woman’s lips drew into a tight line. “There is a cavern of healing crystals under the town. This wouldn’t be the first time in our history that armies have tried to take the town. It is the perfect place to turn into a field hospital for this region. Those crystals are healing on their own, giving longer life and strength to the villagers, but if harvested and ground into potions, they give temporary invincibility. If we abandon our village, I doubt we will ever get it back.”

“Better to have your lives,” Narcissa observed. “You need to leave the town, but before you do, you need to block access to the caverns.”
“Or render the crystals unusable,” Tom added. “We could blast the cavern, or use fiendfyre in it.”

The red-nosed man gaped and made a choking sound. “You want to use fiendfyre on the healing crystals?”

“No, no,” Hermione interjected. She could feel Tom’s impatience, and pushed calm at him. “What about cursing the cavern and any who enter it? We could use a counter-curse later, when Grindelwald is finally defeated.”

“We will not curse the healing crystals!” The woman protested angrily.

“Then you will be giving aid to your enemy. This is war – it is full of difficult and painful decisions,” Hermione frowned.

This supposedly “easy” warning mission was not going according to plan. Hermione wondered if they shouldn’t just go. They had done their due diligence, and they couldn’t force the townspeople to leave or do anything to cavern. More people had come out to listen, and the feeling of the crowd wasn’t as friendly as it had been. Tom was starting to lose patience, and if he let out his temper, all the good will they’d obtained might evaporate.

“What about dragonscale moss?” Narcissa said after a moment of tense silence. “If we introduce even a small amount to the moist walls of the cavern, it will spread rapidly, covering the entire area in a lichen so thick it can’t be cut or blasted away. It can even withstand fire, but it won’t damage the crystals underneath.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “I know of that plant. It is incredibly invasive, and has destroyed many a town’s water supply over the years. Using it would just be another form of cursing, without magic.”

“But removing it is possible,” Narcissa continued. “It is a slow, multi-step process, taking over a year, more time than Grindelwald would be willing to invest, but I would come back and help you clear the cavern, I swear it,” her voice had become passionate, more so than Narcissa’s normal tone. “You cannot allow such a powerful resource to fall into Grindelwald’s hands, nor should you risk your lives in a futile fight. Grindelwald has an army. You have a handful of villagers.”
After a brief fit of coughing, the man spoke again. “How do we know you will keep your word?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Narcissa countered. “We are here because we want to help you and fight against Grindelwald’s interests, not to gain anything.”

“I am mayor of this village,” the woman turned to the villagers behind her and spoke to them. “I have been for several decades. Years ago, I took a vow to protect the people and the crystals. There are safeguards against average thieves, but I don’t doubt Grindelwald could undo them in seconds. We do not know these visitors, but I believe what they say. We have had fear for months that Grindelwald would come for our village. I ask you, people of Auge, to raise your hand if you support using dragonscale moss on the cavern and abandoning the village for now.”

There was intense murmuring, which became arguing, but within a few minutes, a majority of the villagers assembled outside had raised their hands in the air. Hermione allowed herself to relax, and she felt Tom’s satisfaction. Narcissa and the mayor made quick plans, then Narcissa apparated them back to the Merrythought estate. They went to the greenhouses and gathered the small sample of invasive moss, which Narcissa kept in a strong, magically reinforced container.

An hour later, the cavern, which had been a beautiful, glowing space filled with the sparkling pale blue light of the crystals, was a dark, dank pit smelling of dirt and iron. Hermione had known that dragonscale moss spread quickly, but she’d never witnessed its use. Even though she knew this was a necessary measure, watching the crystals disappear under the hard lichen was depressing, and she saw the mayor wipe tears from her eyes as they climbed out of the cavern, using only the light from Narcissa’s and the mayor’s *lumos* spells.

They left shortly afterward, apparating back into Tom’s bedroom. Narcissa immediately pulled off her mask and handed it to Hermione, who had done the same. Tom took his off, revealing an annoyed expression.

“It would have been nice to harvest a few of those crystals,” he remarked sourly. “Invincibility for the course of a fight would have been incredibly useful.”

“The purpose of the visit was to warn the villagers and disrupt Grindelwald’s plans,” Hermione reminded him. “We succeeded on both accounts. We may not have access to the crystals, but neither does he.”
Tom scowled, but didn’t reply. Hermione told herself that was simply Tom, never satisfied. She turned to Narcissa. “Thank you, Mother.”

Narcissa kissed her forehead, then crossed to Tom and kissed his cheek, since he was now taller than she was by several inches. He looked down at her, and his expression softened slightly. “Yes, thank you, Aunt Narcissa.”

“Don’t you think you could call me Mother as well by now?” Narcissa asked. “I am the mother of your soul mate, and I consider you my son in every way that matters to me.”

His expression now was a rare one of dumbfounded. Hermione felt his conflict – the desire to close himself away, warring with the pleasure at being valued so highly by a woman he held in high esteem.

“It’s no rush, Tom, and entirely your choice,” she smiled, a bit sadly, and kissed his cheek once more before leaving the room.

He turned to Hermione, his face completely blank. In future terms, Hermione thought, Tom was having a meltdown. Since the beginning of the school year, Tom had been flooded with more feeling and emotion than he’d probably experienced in his entire previous life. The magical quartet links, the sexual relationships, the solidification of their soulmate bond, and now Narcissa’s love, was too much for him to process.

She reached out tentatively through their bond, but she already knew he’d walled himself off. He needed space, and though she longed to comfort him, he was not in the mood to receive it.

“I’m going to go find Felicity,” Hermione announced in a neutral tone. “I’m sure she and Galatea are back by now.”

He nodded, and Hermione left the room, knowing she’d made the right choice, even though she wanted nothing more than to pull Tom close and cover him in her love.

Tom remained almost entirely in his rooms for the next two days. Hermione didn’t press the issue, and she could still feel his magic and moods, so he hadn’t pulled away completely. She spent the time planting with Narcissa, discussing advanced magical theory with Galatea, and walking and talking with Felicity. On Tom’s birthday, Hermione woke up before dawn and quietly
He was in the bed, though Hermione doubted he was sleeping. Tom seemed to need less rest than most people, and she knew he still vividly remembered the attack from his first year. Sleeping made him feel powerless, which was a state Tom could not abide. She crossed to the canopied bed and slid under the covers, moving to press her entire body against his.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered, laying a hesitant arm over his waist.

“Thank you,” he replied evenly, turning to face her, wrapping his arm around her waist in return.

She felt his calm, and was relieved. Perhaps he had worked out his concerns over the last few days. As much as she wanted to kiss him, she waited, allowing him to make the first move to help him feel in control. He needed that illusion more than she did, and she was happy to give it to him.

“Emotion makes little sense to me,” he spoke into the near darkness. “In most instances, they are weak, messy, and useless.”

Hermione let the silence continue, knowing he had more to say.

“But, I know it is important to you, to Abraxas, Patience, and Narcissa, even Galatea,” his fingers tightened at her waist, digging in enough to send a rush of desire through her. “I can accept that because you are people I value, whom I want to keep in my life. I can even call Narcissa ‘mother’ because that is as much claiming her as her claiming me. But this is all I can give; I’ve reached my limit. There is no secret well of emotion inside of me that you can discover, Hermione. I will never ‘open’ up and be like other people.”

Slowly, she raised her hand and traced the line of his jaw, bringing her fingers to rest in hushing motion over his lips. “I know, Tom. I don’t need you to be anything, anyone other than who you are.”

In the dim light coming from the gap in the curtains, she saw his dark brows arch. “Are you sure? Since I’ve known you, you’ve pushed and pulled me toward emotions more and more. Our bond and the bonds with Abraxas and Patience allow me to understand what I couldn’t on my own, but I can’t feel, not in the way you can, not for people in general. This small circle is all I can
manage. I’ll never want to save the world.”

“Tom,” she paused, thinking of the best words. “I know we’ve argued in the past over this issue, but I won’t hold you to an impossible standard. I love you as you are, Tom. Never doubt that.”

His hand had slipped under her nightgown, and was now on her bare skin. It felt like the fire he was. “I didn’t,” he said, as his lips went to her throat, barely touching the now racing pulse there, his other hand following the locket chain down to the space between her breasts.

Hermione was not about to argue, though she knew he had, or they wouldn’t have had the previous conversation. Tom sought power because he had spent so much of his life without any, and though he might not experience emotion in the way most people did, he still had doubts and fears. The fact that he had spoken to Hermione about the topic at all was further proof of how far he’d come, how much he’d grown and changed from the influence of people who cared for him. Now, it was vital to keep him from considering those changes as weakness or manipulation that needed to be stamped out.

“Good,” Hermione kissed the space under his jaw. “Because we are meant for each other, and there is no room for doubt given the words on our skin and the way our magic sings together.”

Tom’s lips quirked. “You’re very poetic this morning,” he kissed down the trail left by his fingers, then turned his ear to rest over her heart.

Even though their bare flesh was touching, the way his cheek lay against her breast was more tender than erotic. She pulled him closer, wrapping both arms and legs around him, leaving no space between their bodies. Slowly, after several seconds, he turned his head back and began to kiss her breast, then gently pulled her nipple into his mouth, sucking harder and harder until her hips bucked and she cried out.

“Mmm,” he spoke against her, his breath making her nipple tighten even more. “I do like the way you sing for me, little bird.”

Her fingers were in his hair, twined in his curls, and she tried to push his mouth back to her breast. He pulled away, grasping her wrists and holding them down on the mattress. “It’s been far too long if you think you are in control in this situation, dearest.”

Hermione couldn’t stop the little huff that escaped her lips, and Tom grinned widely. “How wonderful of you to give me the birthday present of putting you in place.”
She rolled her eyes, knowing that would set him off, and give him a way to ignore the vulnerability of his earlier tenderness. “Do go ahead and try, Tom.”

“Mouthy, mouthy,” he murmured, then bit, hard, at the swell of her breast. She swallowed a yelp, since there were no muffling spells on the room and Galatea and Narcissa were just down the hall.

He rolled, so that he was straddling her, and then grabbed at the bed sheet, viciously tearing a strip off. “I might not be able to use my magic right now, but that doesn’t mean I can’t cage you, little bird.”

Quickly, he wrapped the strip of cloth around her wrists, binding them together, then to one of the bedposts. Hermione wiggled against him, as part of the game, but they both knew how turned on she was – submitting to Tom sexually was at the top of her desires. He pushed his erection against her and she moaned louder than she’d intended.

“Hush, or I’ll tear off another strip to put over your mouth,” Tom smirked, pushing her nightgown up and over her head, but not her arms, so it provided another layer of restraint.

Moving so slowly it was a form of torture, Tom slid his hands down her bared skin, over the side swells of her breasts and the spaces between her ribs, stretched from the position of her arms, to the curve of her waist and the lace of her knickers. She expected him to pull them off, but he just traced over, rubbing her mound through the damp fabric while she fought the urge to tilt her pelvis up to meet his touch.

It wasn’t long before his fingers came back up to her navel, tracing the words there, which were always so sensitive to his touch. He lowered his mouth to them, but used his tongue to trace the letters, not his lips. A high whine formed in the back of her throat, and part of it came out, a short, sharp sound.

His eyes seemed to darken as his pupils widened in pleasure at the noise, and Hermione knew he was reveling in the love coming from her, and the trappings of dominance and submission allowed him to do so without feeling exposed. He kissed at his words, letting one hand drag its way back down her hip, circling the bone there gently before inching past the scrap of soaked lace to slide two fingers easily inside of her, rubbing the delicate ridges, his thumb coming up to tease at her clitoris. His other hand splayed from her collarbone to the curve of her shoulder, squeezing just slightly at the side of her throat, not enough to interfere with her breathing, but enough to place a steady pressure and give a sense of physical power.
“Beg me for your release, dearest,” he whispered against her skin, his lips and tongue sending shudders through her body.

“Tom,” she whispered, her voice needy. As much as giving him control was something she knew he needed, giving up control was something she needed, a freeing sense of letting go, of not having the weight of the world on her shoulders for a few moments.

“Those aren’t the right words,” he nipped sharply at her stomach in warning. “You know what to say.”

“My Lord,” she answered immediately. There was likely very little time for games this morning, and she was unbearably aroused. “My Lord, let me touch you.”

Tom laughed, and began moving his fingers back and forth inside of her with a rougher, faster touch. “You are so wet, Hermione,” he sighed into her navel. “I could do this all day. It would be an amazing way to spend my birthday. Or,” he lifted his head and grinned down at her, his thumb pressing on her nub, then wiggling side to side over the delicate flesh, “I could stop now, send you back to your room and make you wait until tonight to finish. Your pouty face all day long might be an even better present.”

“Please don’t,” she gasped, her hips rising to meet his fingers.

“Tell me you are mine,” he moved up, so that his face was beside hers, his lips on hers.

She kissed him, deeply, her neck straining to follow him as he moved back. “I am yours, my Lord. Yours, always.”

His eyes closed for only a second, but she saw and felt the combination of relief and satisfaction flash across his face. His thumb pressed in at the hollow of her throat as his fingers pushed inside her, curling at the soft flesh, dragging over every sensitive spot that made her moan and bite her lip. “That is right. We are Magic, dearest.”

The echo of her words to him made her want to cry from the deep emotions she felt, and she tried to keep them from flooding the bond, afraid they would cause Tom to pull back.
“No,” he ordered, his hand withdrawing to rip at her knickers. “No, don’t hide your feelings – they are a part of you, and I want all of you,” the lace came apart in his fingers, and he threw them on the floor. “I told you I can’t feel more on my own, but I never want you to stop feeling. The way you feel is…” he paused, his voice now barely a whisper, “magic itself, beautiful and precious.”

She felt tears at the corners of her eyes, ancient wounds of feeling plain and unwanted suddenly open. No one in her old life had called her beautiful. Harry had loved her as a sister, and she and Ron had had something that was hard to define – a friendship that might have been more but for all the layers of misunderstandings. She’d had friends and a cause she would give her life for, but she’d never been cherished like she was here.

“Tom,” she half-cried, half-begged. “Let me touch you.”

He kissed at her tears, then pulled roughly at the ties, freeing her wrists. She shrugged the rest of the way out of the nightgown and then fumbled at the buttons on his nightshirt. Tom helped her, then took off his pants.

“Finally,” Hermione murmured appreciatively as she pressed her naked body to his, her hands running over his shoulders and back, down to his hips, then around to circle his cock. She squeezed and stroked, but only for a moment before Tom shifted, pushing her wrist into the mattress once again and sliding into her.

They both sighed for a moment at the pleasure, and then Tom began to move. His thrusts were harsh, as they almost always were, but Hermione got sweet and tender from Patience and Abraxas. This frantic need was unique to Tom, and she wanted it, craved the way he took her like he had to have, like he’d perish if he didn’t.

So she was startled, when they were both on the precipice, that Tom didn’t order her to say that she was his, but instead, “Tell me you love me! Tell me you love me above all others!” His voice was ragged with exertion, dark with need so deep it was almost anguish.

“I love you more than anything!” she cried out as she came, and felt him do so as well. Their magic filled the air around them, heavy with power. Every time they had sex, the magic seemed to intensify, and Hermione wondered absently with the minimal part of her brain that continued to function after such an amazing orgasm, whether they would start setting things on fire in the near future.

Tom could hardly imagine a better start to his birthday, unless he’d been with Hermione in the Chamber, where they could have used their magic, and if they’d been joined afterwards by their pet and Abraxas. He wanted them all, and he wanted their magic mingling with and strengthening
his own. He wanted to defeat Grindelwald, be hailed a hero, and rule magical Britain with Hermione, Abraxas, and Patience at his side. The ruling might not be in the form of public office, but who wanted to spend all day in an office when one could be exploring magic? Power wasn’t restricted to that role, and being the person who made decisions behind the scenes was a possibility. That was in the future, anyhow; he had Grindelwald to deal with first.

He’d been annoyed at how Hermione had turned to Narcissa, Mother, at first, but upon watching events unfold, he had to admit that his soul mate had excellent judgment and a brilliant mind for making plans.

He pulled her close and kissed her face, smelling her hair and neck. She always carried the scent of the deep woods about her, like the smell that crept out in the fog from the edges of the Forbidden forest. It was at once light and airy, but also dark and mysterious. The contradiction of Hermione was intoxicating. And she was his. She loved him, above all others.

“I have to get back to my room,” he felt her smile against his chest as she hugged him again. From anyone else, such constant affection would be suffocating, but from her, he accepted it as the way it simply was between them.

“Yes,” he pulled gently at her curls, loving the way they were rioting wildly around her face at the moment. He really needed to find a spell to make her hair into temporary binding for sex, to join his two loves of playing with her curls and tying her up. “Can’t have Mother and Galatea having fits, can we?”

Tom didn’t miss the way Hermione’s eyes lit up at the use of the term “mother” for Narcissa, but she quickly twisted her expression into one of annoyance as she picked up her torn nightgown. “I’m sure they are well aware of what we do, but there’s no need to rub it in their faces.”

He leaned over and kissed the bare shoulder where the nightgown had ripped. “Then you’d better hurry, the house will be up soon. The elves are probably already making breakfast.”

She stood, and Tom swatted her backside. She shot him a dirty look and left, though he noted the extra sway in her hips with a smile.
The day continued to be excellent. When Tom went down for breakfast, he found the elves had made beautifully airy crepes dusted with powdered sugar and surrounded by a circle of bright raspberry sauce. Though he had never stated this meal was a favorite of his, he knew the elves kept a close eye on who eat what and how much. They were amazingly perceptive, drawing accurate conclusions based on one’s daily activities and off-handed comments. For instance, the blanket Tom preferred was always on the chair he used in the library, draped over the back. When he called for tea, the biscuits he liked best were on the tray. Though he had several pairs of nightclothes, the green silk pants and matching buttoned top that fit just so was daily cleaned and laid on the edge of the bed. After his first visit to the Merrythought estate, when he’d complained in passing to Hermione that the soap in his bathroom smelled like an old woman’s perfume, it had been replaced the next day with a freshly milled bar scented with cedar and myrrh.

Tom might have once found the elves annoying, but they didn’t bother him any longer, and he appreciated the quiet, unobtrusive manner they had. He wasn’t about to sit in the kitchen and chat with them like Hermione did, but having the background of his life tended to so efficiently was a pleasure. In the orphanage, very little was handed to him – two sets of itchy, cheap clothes, an ill-fitting pair of boots, a threadbare coat. School books were not his to keep, and even blankets and beds were not technically one’s own – room assignments could be changed, and the winter blankets were switched out for the summer weight blankets too early every year, resulting in three weeks of shivering through the night. Food was plain and never enough. He’d had to take every small thing he’d had.

A breakfast like the one the elves had prepared would have been beyond any expectation, and Tom hadn’t even had to request it. The elves simply knew that Tom had a sweet tooth, and that this meal would be the perfect start to his birthday. Because they had all smiled up at him adoringly, and because Hermione had been in the room, he gave the four elves a polite, “Thank you, this breakfast is perfect.” That declaration had practically made them cry in gratitude (one of them cried literally, but he could never keep their names straight), and brought a wave of affection from his soul mate.
After breakfast, Galatea asked him to come into the library. She usually gave him his birthday present earlier in the day, and it was always something unique – often a magical object she’d found in her estate sale hunts or her searches through Hogwarts.

“I know you’ve discovered the Chamber of Secrets,” she said, once she’d closed the door behind them.

Tom went still, pulled in his magic to keep from giving away his flare of anger. He couldn’t imagine that Hermione had told Galatea – there were too many penalties, ones Hermione herself had devised. However, besides the elves of Hogwarts, the crabby caretaker, and perhaps Dumbledore, Galatea was probably the person most familiar with the castle and its grounds. She had spent most of her life there, had transitioned from student to teacher quickly, and had searched the place with Dumbledore on her free time, looking for cursed objects, hidden passages, and other secrets. There was no denying that Galatea was brilliant and magically powerful. Even if she couldn’t have opened the Chamber, she would have known of its existence, and once it was opened, she might have felt the shift in the magic, the power rising from beneath the castle. He had a slight moment of panic, wondering how many other professors would have noticed something – surely Dumbledore at the very least, maybe even old Dippet. The man was physically frail, but still had a keen mind. Tom was convinced the Headmaster’s strong magical aura was all that was keeping the ancient man tethered to this plane.

He gave no answer, which was an answer in itself. There was no use denying it, and Galatea didn’t seem upset.

“Yes, I’m sure you have all sorts of nasty punishments for discussing the seat of Slytherin power,” Galatea continued, still more matter of fact than angry. “The reason I bring it up is because I know that there is a wealth of magic there, and not all of it is friendly or controllable. You are brilliant, but you are arrogant,”

Tom’s jaw tightened, but he remained silent. He didn’t trust himself to respond yet. The angry magic was still pressing at his edges, straining for release.

“When you are a prodigy, when you spend much of your time around others who can’t hold a candle to your power, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that all others are beneath you, that no one can match you,” Galatea didn’t break eye contact with Tom as she spoke, and he respected that about her.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I am being honest with you, Tom. You are not ready to face someone like Grindelwald. Magical battle skill is a comprehensive talent – it isn’t
simply raw talent – it is the brain’s catalog of spells, the body’s memory of the spell movements, the casting speed, the force and intention behind the spells, and a thousand other factors including knowledge of one’s surroundings and one’s opponent. Grindelwald has been fighting for years now.”

Tom gazed back at her, unwilling to look away. “I know that, Galatea. Between Narcissa and the fighting in France, I have recognized I have some…deficits that I need to correct.”

Galatea’s mouth, with its crooked tilt, twisted into a thoughtful frown. “I suppose we can add more battle magic to dueling club practices. It does seem likely, the longer this conflict continues, that it will spread to our shores, and students with no knowledge of how to defend themselves are vulnerable targets.”

He felt a bit of surprise at how easily Galatea was agreeing to help him, and waited for the cost to be announced. It wasn’t long in coming.

“I would like you to bring any unknown spells or potions you find in the Chamber to me for testing before you attempt to use them,” Galatea said, her expression stern.

Tom bristled, thinking of a way to discuss this without triggering the spells from the agreement. “I am the Heir of Slytherin. What was Slytherin’s is mine by right.”

Galatea crossed to him and put a hand on his shoulder. He felt her watery magic, cool and strong, brushing at the edges of his fiery boundaries. There was something soothing about the older woman’s presence, and Tom relaxed slightly despite himself.

“I’m not asking as a professor, Tom,” she said, her eyes kind. “I’m asking as the wife of your guardian, as a member of your family who is concerned about you. You’ve spent two-thirds of your life essentially alone, depending only on yourself, and I understand that doing so is comfortable to you. You are strong, independent, and you chafe at answering to anyone, even to an older, wiser person who has your best interests at heart. I understand, truly. But like it or not, you are in a family now, Tom. Hermione, Narcissa, and I all love you. I know you have Abraxas and Patience as well. That must seem like too much at times, considering your background.”

He didn’t answer, because putting those thoughts into words felt dangerous. Tom would never, ever, be comfortable with discussing the mystery of feelings.
Galatea gave his shoulder a squeeze, then pulled back. “I’m only asking you to let me see anything that you are unsure of, anything that gives you pause – cursed objects and dark magic are my specialty, you know. Consider me another reference book, one that actively works to keep you and the others safe. Please.”

His eyes met hers again, and he saw the affection there, the truth of what she was saying. “I’d have to know anything I brought you would be treated confidentially,” Tom responded slowly. “That other professors wouldn’t be involved.”

“Unless an object or spell presented an imminent danger to the castle or the students, I would agree to keep silent,” Galatea held out her hand. “Is it a deal?”

Tom nodded. “Yes.” He turned to leave, but Galatea’s hand closed on his arm again. He was surprised at how little it bothered him. A year ago, even six months ago, this conversation would have enraged him, and his magic would have struck out at Galatea’s touch.

“It’s still your birthday, Tom,” Galatea’s crooked smile was back in full force. “I have something for you.”

She pointed her wand at her desk, and a drawer opened. Something small, wrapped in white paper with a red bow floated toward him. Tom put out his hand, and it landed heavily in his palm, weightier than he expected for its size.

“Generally, I look for practical gifts,” Galatea grinned, her eyes now sparkling with anticipation. “But this was such a find, I couldn’t resist.”

In his curiosity, Tom forgot himself and undid the bow and wrapping magically, vanishing them in the blink of an eye. He glanced up, knowing he’d broken the rule, but Galatea only winked and murmured, “We’ll let that one slide.”

Looking back down, he examined her present. It was a creamy marble disc, carved deeply, then painted with the image of a man, painfully slender, with snakelike features and long, dark hair parted sharply in the middle, but swept over each half of his head, fanning out like the hood of a king cobra. The style resembled the art on the walls of Egyptian tombs, though the lines of the face were delicate and incredibly life-like. As Tom watched, the man’s eyes blinked, a second lid sliding sideways over the pupil like some snake species.
“Is this?” Tom began excitedly, hardly believing what was in his hands.

Galatea laughed and nodded. “It is a magical portrait, dating back to the Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt, around 2000 B.C.. Rashad, a friend of mine and fellow collector from Turkey, had the portrait for years, hoping the man would speak to him, that he could gain ancient magical knowledge now lost, but man painted is a parselmouth, and he won’t speak in anything but Parseltongue. I asked Rashad about his progress a few months back, and he said he was defeated and tired of listening to the man hissing in the corner of his study, so Rashad agreed to sell it to me.”

“I,” Tom began, unsure of what to say. Gratitude did not come easily to him, but he was very aware of the lengths Galatea had gone to in order to show him her affection through this gift – an object such as this was nearly priceless. He settled on the simple approach. “Thank you,” he pushed his magic toward hers, letting his edges brush hers in the friendly way he reserved for so very few others.

Galatea clearly understood the significance, because she swallowed, emotion in her face. “I placed several strengthening and preservation spells on the portrait when it first arrived, but it is still a very fragile object,” she warned. “For some reason, spells don’t linger long on it – I’ve reapplied the spells twice since early November.”

Tom nodded, staring at the man, who was now gazing back at him with great interest. Though magical painted portraits on canvas were common in the magical world, older versions on fragile wood or stone were not often found, most having been lost to time. An ancient magical portrait alone would have been an amazing gift, but one of a parselmouth? Tom’s magic tingled in anticipation that was practically giddy.

Greetings, Elder, Tom hissed at the man. Respect was second only to power in the language of snakes.

The man’s thin mouth curved in something that wasn’t quite a smile. His features were too snakelike for normal human expressions. It is good to hear another voice. I thought our kind gone forever. We were few even in my time.

We are few still. I have never met another until now, Tom responded. I am Tom.

I am Apep, known by the foolish na-Heka as the Eater of Souls, his mouth was now pulled tightly, and his harsh rasping was angry, especially as he spat out the one word in Egyptian.
In translating some Egyptian texts, Tom had seen that phrase, *na-Heka* – it literally translated as ‘no magic’ and seemed to be the ancient Egyptian equivalent of the word ‘muggle.’ Given the love/hate relationship Egyptians had with snakes and snake gods, Tom could see how a man who looked and sound like Apep would be fearful to the general populace.

*Do they still fear us?* Apep asked.

*They know nothing of us,* Tom said. *Our world is hidden to them. If they encounter us, their minds are wiped afterwards.*

Apep nodded. *This is good. Their small minds cannot understand magic.* He studied Tom’s features critically. *You do not look like our kind. This is a powerful camouflage,* he sniffed, and added, *I had none.*

Tom could see that was true. The man did not look entirely human, and that visible difference must have made his life very difficult. *I will take you some place safe, some place that contains a basilisk and much powerful parselmouth magic. I have many questions for you, Elder.*

*That will be a blessed relief. The last man was practically na-Heka, his magic was so weak. I will rest until you call upon me. Place me somewhere warm now, youngling.*

The title ‘youngling’ in Parseltongue was one of respect, though Tom still bristled at it a bit. He carefully placed Apep on the mantel where the stone of his portrait would absorb the heat of the fireplace, then asked Galatea politely to cast a temporary sticking spell to keep the stone safe. She complied, and though Tom could see she was curious about what had been said, she didn’t press him for details.

“Come, we should get ready to leave for Diagon Alley. Your party will start soon,” Galatea smiled, and they walked out together.

-oOo0oOo-

Tom only just succeeded at not scowling when Abraxas entered Fortiscue’s with Marguerite on his arm. Hermione did not. Most of the invited study group had arrived, and though Abraxas had complained in his last owl about having to escort Marguerite, the sight of Marguerite’s smug smile was still infuriating. She looked like she already considered herself Lady
Malfoy, though Tom supposed that was possibly Marguerite’s natural arrogance, which was in no short supply.

Patience, who was sitting beside a tense Hermione, lowly whispered, “Don’t worry,” and immediately stood and walked over to them.

“What is our pet up to?” Tom asked Hermione quietly, more out of curiosity than concern.

Hermione shook her head, though Tom could see a hint of amusement around the corner of her mouth. “Nothing good, I’d wager.”

Indeed, Patience seemed determined to throw a match onto the petrol-soaked rumors from the Malfoy ball. She stopped in front of Abraxas, and utterly ignoring Marguerite, raised both hands to lovingly cup his cheeks and pulled him in for a long, slow kiss. Abraxas’s free hand came up and threaded in her long, pale hair instinctively. It was not a kiss that could be interpreted as anything except as one between established lovers, and Tom heard more than one gasp.

Tom was glad that all the parents were over enjoying drinks at the Leaky Cauldron rather than watching this scene unfold in the ice cream parlor; after all, he’d rather not have to murder the current Lady Malfoy and Marguerite’s mother on his birthday. Hermione would frown on that.

Marguerite’s face went from a pale white to a flushed red, and her magic crackled. Her empty wand hand twitched at her side, Tom noted, and he also felt Hermione’s magic push outwards protectively. He sighed, knowing this was going to devolve quickly.

“Pet, that’s enough,” Tom announced lazily, and for once, Patience listened.

She ended the kiss, a wide, ethereal smile on her face. “I missed you,” she smiled at Abraxas.

“Thanks, Patience,” Abraxas replied, slightly dazed. “I missed you, too.”

“It was nice of you to escort him in, Marguerite, but I can take him from here,” Patience looped her arm through Abraxas’s and pulled him sharply away, leaving Marguerite the two unpleasant choices of either dropping Abraxas’s arm, or being tugged along like a rag doll. She dropped his arm, though her face silently screamed her rage as she walked to the table alone.
Sebastian Lestrange hastily stood and pulled out a chair for her, and Marguerite sat, her composure mostly returned. It was no secret that Sebastian was on Orpha Rosier’s list of approved suitors, and Marguerite, with her strong magic and family money, was a catch herself.

Abraxas and Patience came around to Tom’s side of the table, Patience sitting on Hermione’s left, and Abraxas on Tom’s right. Their chairs were closely spaced, and their sides and knees bumped. Tom could feel their elemental bond surging through the contact chain. He had underestimated how much he would miss not having them near him after completing the quartet spells. Simply having them all assembled was a gift in itself.

Hermione murmured something, and Tom felt the muffliato spell begin. He smiled at how she anticipated his desires, as well as the way she was willing to break rules for him. Tom glanced down the table, at the core study group he’d led for the last five years. Mostly Slytherins, with a few Ravenclaws, they were intelligent and talented (with the exception of Thad, who made up for his lack of brains in absolute, unquestioning loyalty). The group was already bound in their protection of the Chamber, and Tom thought it might be time to create something even more formal, something with a purpose beyond Hogwarts. He’d need to have a stern talk with Marguerite about not disrupting the group dynamics once they were back at school.

“Thank you all for coming,” Tom said, giving his most charming smile and saying the words he knew they wanted to hear. “I know the holiday break is a busy time, and yet all of you have managed to help me celebrate my birthday for the last five years. In two short years, we’ll be out of school, but I trust we’ll still be in close contact. Before we start the ice cream and butter beer, I’d like to mention something serious – Grindlewald.”

Several of the faces around the table looked uncomfortable at the dark wizard’s name. Tom inwardly scoffed at the fear of a name, but continued. “I know we are young, but I believe that we are all destined for great things. Our magical talents prove this. I also believe that, together, we can disrupt Grindlewald’s actions in Wizarding Europe, and I’d like you all to think about how dedicated you could be to such a cause. I won’t ask for answers today. We’ll discuss your thoughts once we are back in the Chamber, a week from today, but please consider carefully how far we’ve come, what the Chamber can offer us, and how we would feel if Grindlewald reached Britain’s shores.”

“The group in the French town,” Josephine looked sharply at Tom and Hermione. “Was that you?”

“Let’s save those responses for a week from now,” Hermione murmured, giving the whole table the answer to the question. Tom squeezed her hand under the table. There was something arousing about her prim, circumspect tone.
Now, the group wore expressions that ranged from impressed to terrified. His request was not a simple one, and Tom understood that. He might have trouble with most emotions, but fear was one he grasped. Though he’d schooled himself since conscious memory to never show it, he’d certainly experienced it – fear of hunger, fear of never getting out of Wool’s, fear of dying like that boy, great, racking coughs consuming him. Until he’d met Hermione, his fears had been basic, linked to pain or death. Since finding his soul mate and his quartet (his family, as Galatea had put it), there were other…not fears, but concerns regarding the people he’d allowed to become close to him. But he wasn’t dwelling on those (which probably weren’t his own, anyway – the idea of worry had probably bled through from his connection to the others); he had supreme confidence in himself and his quartet. And, he had confidence in the group he would be leading. They would come around. He was confident of that as well.

Patience stood, lifting her butter beer. “To one of my favorite snakes,”

The tension broke as the others raised their various glasses and bottles, smiling at Patience’s phrasing as usual.

“I’m glad you were born,” she finished in a sweet, dreamy voice, looking directly at Tom with those sea glass eyes. He gazed back, realizing with an internal start that this was the first time anyone had spoken that phrase to him. In fact, at Wool’s, the assumption was that no one was glad any of the children there had been born, that they were all bothers, a drain on society. It took a further few seconds to realize that she’d said the last bit in his head, not aloud, and he once again appreciated Patience’s discretion where he was concerned.

The others were adding their birthday congratulations, and the table had filled with sundaes and a green and silver cake. His classmates were smiling and laughing, the worries of a few seconds ago vanished as if by magic. Tom was glad of the distraction, though he still struggled with the strong waves of affection he felt coming from Hermione and Abraxas, as well as the feeling of Patience in the back of his brain. As Galatea had suggested, it almost felt like too much, especially in front of all the others. Yet, as soon as his discomfort (which was the same thing as his anger) began to rise, all of them fell back, giving him the space he needed to play the charming, detached host of his birthday celebration. They might just be the perfect quartet, he thought with satisfaction. Tom’s spirits were further bolstered by the knowledge that the holidays were nearly over, allowing for the return to Hogwarts and the open use of his magic, the appropriate punishment of Marguerite, and the formation of the group he would lead to great things, including his own glory. Nothing would stop him from getting everything he wanted.

Chapter End Notes
I watched Fantastic Beasts for the first time this past weekend, and I wrote the Egyptian "na-heka" before I heard the American phrase "no maj". I was a little thrilled my brain had gone someplace similar to Rowling's, even if it was an obvious place. And, lol, you have no idea how much time I wasted trying to find the pronunciation of the hieroglyph for magic.
The Parentage of Patience

Chapter Summary

What it says in the title - how our lovely Patience came to be who she is. There are some familiar faces in her past, and familiar family names. Also, the beginning of tussle that could be serious trouble.

Chapter Notes

Some background information on Patience that I simply couldn't get out of my head until I wrote it down. Everyone else has a backstory, so now my other favorite blonde gets one. I actually have about 2500 words more written, but this seemed like a good stopping point to keep the final version of the chapter from being super long, and also, I wanted to update more regularly now that I have a bit more free time. My goal (how I laugh at myself as I type this) is to get this story completed by the end of summer.

Also, coming up with names for children that are a) constellations, b) not already taken, or c) not ridiculous, is hard work, so, "c" might be a problem below, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Patience Layla Foster was born outside of her body. The main reason for this oddity could be traced back to her maternal great-grandmother, Isolde Black. Isolde was only a Black by marriage, having come from the much less political, do-what-gets-you-furthest-in-life Ollivander family. However, her ambition caused her to embrace the Pureblood fanaticism of her new clan with a vengeance. Her husband was a third son, with middling magical abilities, a stable but non-influential job at the Ministry, and no chance of inheriting the family estate. To cement her place in the cutthroat Black hierarchy, Isolde immediately set to work on furthering the glorious Black line.

Her first child, Cepheus, was an utter disappointment. The boy was sickly from the beginning, and showed no early magical abilities. Isolde was secretly relieved when he died of the Dragon Pox at the age of six. She had much higher hopes for Gacrux, who had arrived eighteen months after Cepheus, and even more for Ursa, who was born nine months after Gacrux. Ursa was a lovely child, though her pale hair and eyes were clearly from the Ollivander side of the family. She performed spontaneous magic by four, and the Black family name, combined with her pretty face, made her a sought-after match even before she had received her Hogwart’s letter. Flush with the successes of children numbers two and three, Isolde had another, but, to her absolute horror, Perseus was not only a squib, but was very intellectually slow, lacking the good sense Cepheus had had to die young.
Though Isolde tried to discourage it, Ursa loved Perseus, which probably spared him in the early years of his life. When Ursa left for Hogwart’s, Perseus fell and died trying to ride on Gacrux’s broom, which he couldn’t control, according to Isolde’s version of events. Though Perseus died in the late fall, neither of the Black children learned of their brother’s death until they came home for the winter holiday. Ursa received her mother’s message clearly: squib children were not to be tolerated.

Isolde spent the next six years planning the perfect match for her daughter. She would have preferred a Malfoy match, but the current Malfoy heir was only three, and though they produced very powerful offspring, that family seemed only capable of one child per generation. From the Pureblooded families with male children in the correct age-range, the only one Isolde deemed ‘good’ enough in levels of magical ability and monetary value was Evan Longbottom. He was three years older than Ursa, and a tad awkward, but Isolde took that as a sign he would be a husband easily managed.

Ursa’s sweet smile and soft voice did the trick, and Evan married her as soon as she graduated from Hogwart’s. They were not soul mates, but they cared for one another, and they probably would have been very content, if not happy, except for the near-constant presence of Isolde. She visited almost daily, hounding Ursa with fertility potions designed to prevent squib births. Evan laughed that Longbottoms didn’t produce squibs, but Ursa’s upbringing had left her terrified at the mere thought. Her own magic was above-average, but she was no genius. Her mother had stronger magic than Ursa, and two of her siblings had still been squibs.

A little over a year later the fertility potions more than did the trick because Ursa had twins girls, both of whom were blessedly healthy. Isolde watched her grandchildren closely, watching for signs (or lack thereof) of magical ability. The oldest by a few minutes, Kitty, made her blocks float around the age of three, and Isolde turned her attention to Emma. In looks, the girls were indistinguishable, slightly paler copies of their mother, with the larger shape of the Longbottom eyes and the added Longbottom height. Their magic was clearly different, though. Emma produced only very weak magic, and only rarely. In Isolde’s eyes, this was as bad as being a squib. Evan was fiercely protective of his youngest daughter, as were her Longbottom grandparents, who assured Emma that Longbottoms who bloomed late ended up being the most magical of all.

Ursa was silent on the matter, not blaming Emma, but not providing encouragement, either. She also showed a preference for spending time with Kitty, whose magic seemed to grow daily. It wasn’t that Ursa didn’t love Emma, it was more a matter of emotional self-preservation. Emma’s sweet, mostly non-magical presence reminded Ursa, painfully so, of her brother. As the Hogwart’s age approached, it became clearer that Emma didn’t have magic, certainly not enough to receive a Hogwart’s letter. This was confirmed when only one owl came, with only one invitation.

The scene that occurred on the day her Hogwart’s letter arrived shaped Kitty’s life, and by extension, that of Patience. When Isolde stepped out of the fireplace, she looked for all the world like a dragon, dark cloak billowing out like wings, a small cloud of embers in the air around her. Kitty had no doubt her grandmother could breathe fire. Ursa told the children to go to their room,
but Isolde magically blocked the doors.

“Is she a squib, Ursa?” Isolde’s haughty expression indicated she already knew the answer. “The school is always right – its ancient magic simply knows.”

Ursa stubbornly shook her head. She was not going to give that designation to her daughter, no matter how little magic Emma had. “No. We are going to work with her at home until her magic develops enough for Hogwarts.”

“She doesn’t have any magic, dear,” Isolde sneered. “That’s the problem. I can’t believe after all the trouble I went to, procuring you a good husband and spending thousands of galleons in squib prevention potions and spells, that you still managed to produce one.”

Emma was crying now, though her tears were silent. Kitty was standing in front of her twin, her arms slightly out from her body in a protective gesture. Ursa looked at her daughters, then at her mother. Something gave way inside of her.

“Emma is not a squib, but if she were, I’d love her still, like I loved Perseus. You are only one who has produced squibs, mother, and not one, but two,” Ursa snapped, her pale eyes narrowed and her lips tightened in anger.

Isolde had never been one to spare the wand in disciplining her children. Though her own parents had not been very strict, she saw that as a fault. The rigorous training of children that the Blacks employed was much more to her liking. The fact that Ursa was an adult didn’t stop Isolde from punishing her daughter now. She threw a nasty curse that was a watered down cousin of the Crucius, and Ursa crumpled to the floor, crying out in pain and twitching helplessly.

Kitty ran for the fireplace, dragging Emma behind her. Her instincts told her that Emma was in more danger than their mother, and she needed to get her sister safely to their father. She grabbed a handful of powder from the box on the mantel, yelling out her father’s workplace in Diagon Alley. Her other hand gripped tightly at Emma’s sleeve, but when she stepped through to face her surprised father, she was alone.

Her father apparated home immediately, yelling at Kitty to go into the other room with his boss. Because she listened to her father, Kitty was spared the sight that her father saw when he returned home. Between the powerful Longbottom and Black families, and the mess bleeding over from the first muggle world war, the incident was quietly swept under the rug. It was tragic the child was dead, but it had been a terrible accident. The official story became that Emma had tried to play with her grandmother’s wand, and it had backfired a curse on her, sending her flying across
the room and breaking her neck. Isolde was put on a discreet yet non-negotiable house arrest, though that only lasted three months before her house elves found her dead in her parlor, with no known cause. Ursa withdrew into herself, leaving Evan and Kitty with a family that shrunk to two, not three.

Kitty managed to put the loss of her sister behind her over time, mostly with the help of her Longbottom relatives and friends made at Hogwarts. She was a Hufflepuff, loyal and kind, and thoroughly shunned by her Slytherin Black cousins, though she didn’t care in the slightest, and ignored them right back. She found her soul mate in John Foster, a charming Gryffindor who had no problem hexing Slytherins on Kitty’s behalf. Ursa quietly protested that John was not a Pureblood, but Evan gave his daughter his full blessing.

For the first five years of her marriage, Kitty was deliriously happy. She and John had decided to wait for children, and they both worked on further certifications instead, Kitty in enchantments and John in potions. Though they weren’t master levels, it was enough to get them both good jobs, and they saved enough for a snug little cottage in Hogsmeade. After that, John began asking gently about children. Kitty found herself strangely reluctant. Women in her line didn’t have good luck with children, she’d tell her husband. We’ll make our own luck, he’d reply. Wanting to avoid past mistakes, Kitty went to her mother, to learn more about Ursa’s childhood, about what Ursa had done when pregnant herself. Ursa gave Kitty a very scant account, but emphasized her belief that women in their family were cursed to have at least one squib child. As much as Kitty didn’t want to believe her mother, those doubts crept in, slowly but surely. She found herself wandering the back alleys of magical cities, collecting charms and amulets for strong magical babies, creating a veritable shrine on the desk in her tiny study. Her husband tolerated this, knowing of his wife’s painful childhood, but when they discovered that Kitty was pregnant, after barely a few months of trying, the obsession grew.

Despite reassurance from her grandparents, father, and husband, Kitty spent long hours in every library she had access to, searching for a way to ensure that her unborn child was born healthy and magical. She knew that the magical world, her world, was cruel to any children with low magical abilities and especially brutal to squibs, and after what had happened to Emma, she simply couldn’t bear the thought of history repeating itself. And that was why, at nine months pregnant, only a few days before she was due to give birth, Kitty snuck out at two in the morning to wade into an enchanted pool under the full moon deep in the fairy forests of Ireland that was rumored to bless and protect all things and people it came in contact with.

What she would never have imagined was that, at that particular moment, an ancient and powerful water spirit was also in the pool rejuvenating, nearly invisible in the water, watching the human woman cry and pray aloud for her baby. The spirit was moved and sent a formidable amount of her water magic into the child in Kitty’s womb. The baby was already magically strong, the product of soul mates, and the infusion of non-human magic awoke the child’s consciousness. Kitty had no idea whether the blessing had worked, but she did realize the signs that her labor had begun, so she quickly returned home, barely having time to whisper a drying spell on
her clothes before waking her husband.

Though John immediately sent for the midwife, the baby was born within minutes. “She has no patience,” he murmured as he gazed down at the surprisingly alert and calm infant between his wife’s thighs.

“We should name her that,” Kitty half-laughed, half-groaned, exhausted and exhilarated as John lifted their daughter up to her chest.

“What?” John was too enthralled with the baby to follow the conversation.

Kitty laughed again, softer this time. “Patience. We should name her Patience.”

As her parents stared lovingly at their new daughter and one another, Patience herself was watching them, her consciousness not yet completely tethered to her physical form because the water magic given to her from the spirit had widened her magical boundaries so greatly, Patience’s tiny body couldn’t contain it. Aware of her parents, yet free to float high above them, Patience’s magical aura and consciousness connected with all the unbound magic flowing around the earth, with Time itself, enabling her to see forwards and backwards and across parallel possibilities. She lingered there until she felt a sharp pull toward her distressed body. Her parents and the midwife were panicking over the non-responsive baby, then all sighed in relief as Patience let out a long, low gurgle, her skin turning a healthy pink.

Much of the details of the experience faded from Patience’s memory, but the feeling of being connected to the universe remained. This, coupled with the visions she started having from the age of four, gave Patience an unusual level of confidence in herself. She knew the universe loved her, she knew her life was blessed, she knew that all things would eventually turn out as they should. Even as a toddler, Patience had a firm sense of self and her place in the world, and was unfazed by…well, anything.

Her parents were both delighted and bemused by their daughter, who was not a normal child. The first clue was that Patience never cried, even as a newborn. She waited for her parents to attend to her, and the fact that she never cried probably made them check up on her more because they were first time parents with no cues. The second clue was her intensely strong magic, which was apparent from the first year of her life. Toys floated to her outstretched hands, flowers parted when she crawled through the garden, and mashed potatoes turned sunflower yellow in front of her. The third clue was when a five year old Patience somehow managed to slip through the magical barriers in the family’s yard in Hogsmeade, wander onto Hogwart’s grounds and into the lake. A frantic search party found her a few hours later, cresting the surface of the water, merfolk pushing her upwards.
Several Hogwarts instructors and her parents watched in shock as the child waved at the notoriously unfriendly creatures, then levitated herself just above the water, walking on its surface as if it were frozen solid.

“My goodness,” Headmaster Dippet said, as Patience stepped foot onto the shore. He worked up a stern face quickly, though. “You are not allowed on the grounds yet, little Miss.”

Patience nodded solemnly, then glanced over at Professor Kettleburn. “The merfolk say that trying to breed grindylows is a bad idea, sir.”

Professor Dumbledore tried to cover a snorted laugh while Dippet scowled at Kettleburn. “I think we’ve all had enough excitement for today, haven’t we, Miss Foster?” He waved his wand to dry Patience’s soaking dress, but saw that it had already dried. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, his mouth quirked into a smile. “I look forward to another five years from now.”

After her parents had profusely apologized and thanked the staff, Patience was apparated home. John and Kitty were unsure of how to punish their daughter. There was no ill intention on her part, and her magical power was so strong and instinctive, they weren’t sure restricting her movement would even be effective. The problem was solved when Patience came into the study, her pale eyes solemn.

“I’m sorry I worried you, but the merfolk wanted me to play with them,” she said, her tone that disconcerting mix of matter-of-fact and dreamy. “They’ve been asking me for weeks, and I thought it was rude to keep saying no.”

John shook his head. “You can hear them from here? That’s at least two miles away, Patience, not to mention underwater.”

“Theyir songs carry through the water in the ground. I hear them when I take a bath. They make beautiful songs,” Patience smiled broadly.

Kitty sighed. She’d wanted a magically powerful child, and now she was learning what a challenge it was to raise one. “Darling, I’m sure it is beautiful. But, as smart as you are, surely you can see that leaving the yard without telling us made us worry. We were afraid something might happen to you.”
Patience’s eyes widened, and she placed a cool hand on her mother’s arm, patting her lightly. “Don’t worry, mummy. I’m going to live to be one hundred years old. I’ve seen it.”

“Oh, Patience,” Kitty felt tears in her eyes as she glanced over to her husband.

“Sweetheart,” John began, wondering how such an ethereal being had come even partially from such a practical person as himself. He’d barely missed earning a ‘Troll’ in Divination studies. “We know you see things sometimes, but that doesn’t mean those things will actually happen.”

“I can tell the difference,” Patience persisted. “It looks different – things that might happen glow silver. Things that will happen glow bright yellow. The willow tree in the backyard is definitely going to be struck by lightning tonight. We should put a shield around it – the branch will go through the roof otherwise.”

Her parents did place barriers around the tree, and extra protection on the roof. A violent storm came through after dinner, and as Patience was happily eating pudding and her parents were picking at their plates, a deafening crack sounded from the backyard. John and Kitty shared meaningful glances. They would need to research how to deal with an extremely exceptional child.

The rest of her childhood was mostly a whirlwind for Patience’s parents. Their daughter was not disrespectful, cruel, or rowdy, but she had an unerring knack for ending up in the most bizarre situations, often with magical creatures. Kitty learned quickly that any trip to Diagon Alley meant at least an extra hour dealing with whatever befell Patience – whether it was a niffler hiding in Patience’s cloak after robbing a Gringott’s customer, an owlet attempting to nest in her silky hair, or the time when Patience brought home a dragon egg. Kitty was never completely sure where Patience had found the egg, though the Department for Magical Creatures was happy to send the egg to a mother dragon in Romania.

Plants were attracted to Patience as well, and seemed to respond to her touch, though nothing living surpassed Patience’s connection to water. Whether it was in the bathtub, a lake, or the ocean, water loved Patience. She floated in a way no human did, stayed underwater for unnaturally long times (which gave Kitty no end of panic attacks), dove down impossibly far, and occasionally walked on the surface. Kitty had even seen the water at the beach part around Patience when she’d fallen asleep close to the water’s edge. The waves swept up and around her, never getting her wet. Temperature also didn’t seem to be an issue – Patience would run into a lake even when ice floated on its surface.

As much as they loved their daughter, and they did cherish her, both John and Kitty were a bit relieved when Patience went off to Hogwarts. Though Patience herself was calm, she was like the eye of a hurricane – the beautiful sunny spot in the center of a swirling circle of chaos. Kitty
completed more projects in the first month after Patience went to school than for the previous ten years combined, and she still had time to write her daughter weekly letters, though Patience’s responses, in her typical stream of consciousness style, took effort to decode.

Kitty worried about Patience’s inconsistent grades, but every time she started to fret, John would laughingly tell his wife that Patience would end up ruling the world, and good grades weren’t necessary for that position. John also sent all the marriage-minded half-blooded mothers who came to tea asking about Patience as a possible match for their sons packing, telling them firmly that Patience would marry for love, just as her parents did.

-oOo0oOo-

The product of three generations’ intense fear of squibs wandered the halls by the dungeon, heading slowly toward the Slytherin dormitory. As usual, she had no particular plans, just a feeling that she should head that way. It was difficult for Patience to imagine how hard Hermione worked, formulating plans, calculating possibilities, charting out what she hoped would be the best future. Patience’s life flowed, like the water magic that sustained her, and it always went where it needed to go. She was a happy person, with a life that, even in her short sixteen years, had been full of unusual and lovely events. Still, she could not have anticipated how much happier she would become once she’d found her quartet.

Tom was the negative version of her, dark where she was light, all tight control where she was free, and when they joined, they became more than themselves. He wanted to control her as well, but that was impossible – she was the water that slipped through his fingers, the steam that evaporated at his touch. She very much enjoyed his attempts, though, and she played along because she had seen Tom’s deep thoughts and desires. His confidence rivaled hers, not because he was in connection with time and universal magic, but because he believed, with no room for doubt, that he could and would make the world his own. Of the time limes Patience had seen, this Tom was the best, and she wanted to keep him that way.

Abraxas filled her with love; Patience knew that no one else in the quartet was as purely loving as he was, a miracle considering his background. How wasted he would have been in the other timeline she’d seen, how his love would have been trodden upon and twisted into a wounded creature, chained deep in his chest; he only wanted to please others, to give love and be loved. She was still waiting for Abraxas to realize that he was her soul mate, but she understood his distraction. He probably thought the sense of good feelings and connection they had was the product of their elemental binding. Their quartet’s combined magic was so powerful, and the presence of Tom and Hermione was a blinding light that drowned out everything else.

Then there was Hermione herself. Hermione was the love of Patience’s life, her first
loyalty, the girl who had jumped into time to put right what had gone wrong, more than once. Patience had been seeing Hermione’s amber eyes and wild chestnut curls in her dreams since she was four years old. She’d watched the future Hermione, had seen her petrified by Astarte, call to werewolves, sort out spells to save the day over and again, coordinate a run from the darkest wizards who had decades on her magical experience, and suffer torture rather than give away her mission and her friends.

But even more than her actions, Patience loved Hermione for the purpose she brought to her life. Patience had always known she’d do great things, that she was important, but the details were hazy. This wasn’t something she minded, but the instant clarity she had felt when Hermione entered her life was a level of completion she hadn’t imagined. When they had performed their quartet binding, Patience had found bliss for the first time in her life, and she never wanted to stop feeling it. Like her elemental cross corner, Tom, Patience was willing to do whatever needed to be done to preserve it.

She stopped in front of the dorms and dropped to the floor, sitting cross-legged on the cold stone. Her bracelet hissed softly in warning, but she already felt Marguerite’s magic at her back.

“What are you doing down here? Do I really have to deal with you on our first day back?” Marguerite’s dark hair was pulled into a severe braid and the lines of her face were tight with anger. “I’d like to have just one space in my life free of pesky birds.”

“I was waiting to talk to you,” Patience said, her tone light and dreamy, as usual.

Marguerite snorted. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Tom is going to punish you,” Patience replied matter-of-factly, no taunting or malice in her voice.

Marguerite’s face blanched, her eyes widening, but she didn’t say anything.

Patience stood, gracefully rising on her long limbs to tower over Marguerite. “I can stop him or I can join him.” Once again, her words were stated as fact, not threat.

“What?” Marguerite shook her head. “You are just insane as he is. I could just go to Slughorn right now. I’m not anyone’s jinxing dummy.”
Instantly, with no outward effort, Patience pinned Marguerite to the wall, pulling on some of Hermione’s air magic to lift Marguerite enough off the floor to be level with her eyes. “I wouldn’t jinx you, Marguerite. That’s just silly.”

“Put me down!” Marguerite’s facial expression indicated she was trying to struggle, but her muscles didn’t respond. “What the hell do you want from me?”

“I want you to know your place in the scheme of things, Marguerite,” Patience answered, as if explaining a complicated concept to a small child. “You keep trying to take the lead. You are not a leader in this story.”

“Fuck you!” Marguerite spat, still trying to move. “I don’t care whose pet you are, or who likes fucking you, you don’t order me around!”

Patience shook her head, but her face remained calm, as did her tone. “I’m not giving you orders. I’m telling you the truth. You can be respected, valued, placed in a position of power as a trusted follower who does as she is told, when she is told, or you can be punished, cast out, and eventually murdered. Look in my eyes and tell me that you doubt that Tom is capable of killing you if you make him angry enough.”

Marguerite’s dark eyes glittered and she made a sound somewhere between a gulp and a sniff. “I don’t doubt it,” she whispered.

“Then stop going after Abraxas,” Patience continued. “Get engaged to Sebastian Lestrange. You will make an excellent pair, and your mother will only be slightly disappointed.”

She released the spell, and Marguerite quickly threw a slicing hex. Patience made no attempt to block it, allowing it to cut a fairly deep line from the corner of her right cheekbone to the edge of her right eye. She didn’t wince or pull back, either.

“Oh, Marguerite,” Patience sighed. “That was a mistake.”

Chapter End Notes
I am using Pureblooded families here who marry some half-blooded people. As far as family lines, I think that the Longbottoms or the Blacks could still be considered "pureblooded" so long as there is at least one direct line that has not married (or at least hasn't admitted to doing so) outside the Pureblooded pool. For example, Narcissa and the other born Blacks are still considered Pureblooded even though Andromeda married a Muggle. So, I don't believe it unrealistic to have branches of Pureblooded families in Patience's past.

Also, like the new Fantastic Beasts shows, sustained physical and emotional abuse comes out in weird and tragic ways, and the effects linger for generations.
Chapter Summary

Hermione is stressed and over-extends herself. Her quartet deals with the situation in a their typical fashion. Marguerite learns very quickly about consequences, and Tom enjoys himself thoroughly.

Chapter Notes

Who loves you?
I do!
Because, although Marguerite deserves to be tortured (at least a little), my beloved readers definitely do not! Kisses!

Also, extra kisses to the readers who find the line spoken by Alan Rickman when he played Sheriff of Nottingham.

Chapter 41

Two days earlier – Wednesday evening/Thursday morning

Hermione had mixed emotions about being back at Hogwarts. She had spent so much of her life in this place, the castle was home in many ways. Living here, surrounded by centuries of concentrated knowledge and magic, was comforting, and she enjoyed the routine of class and study schedules. Still, she hated knowing that Grindelwald was out there, imprisoning and killing people, and she was doing what felt like nothing. After only three days, she was going stir-crazy. As hectic and frightening as being on the run with Harry and Ron had been, she had been sustained by the knowledge that she was hunting horcruxes, that she was taking steps to end Voldemort’s reign. Here, it was like being trapped, especially fresh off the success of helping evacuate the French village. Her old Gryffindor nature – the desire to run into and confront danger, to be proactive – was rearing its head inconveniently.

She and Narcissa had reasoned that Dumbledore’s defeat of Grindelwald was still likely to happen, but there was no guarantee, given all that they had already changed. To combat her feelings of helplessness, Hermione did what she did best – she researched and planned. Since returning to school, she’d poured over the book from France, studying the map and the name list, as well as mentally reviewing all she knew about Grindelwald from the previous timeline. During study periods, as well as before breakfast and after lunch, she had pulled copies of all the major magical newspapers published in England, Germany, and France since Grindelwald’s rise, taking notes on stories featuring Grindlewald’s actions and movements.
In the evenings, after curfew, she snuck out, going to the Chamber with Tom, Patience, and Abraxas, and had located what she believed to be the foundational spell for the Dark Mark. The quartet had modified it, and it would be ready to use this Saturday, provided the group agreed (the issue of consent had brought up a debate, as always, but Tom seemed to understand its importance, at least in this particular instance). In the last three days, Hermione had only managed about three hours of sleep, abusing Pepper-Up potions and drinking so many cups of coffee and tea with so little effect that she suspected the Hogwarts house elves had started to give her decaf. Maybe shutting her eyes for a moment wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

“Dearest? I think you are drooling on Slytherin’s journal,” Tom’s voice was slightly muffled through the haze of sleepiness. Hermione sat up, realizing that she had fallen asleep over the book, and was, in fact, a bit wet around the mouth. She hadn’t slept this deeply in days.

She reached for the bottle of Pepper-Up, but it vanished before her fingers could close around it. “I think that’s enough,” Tom leaned down to look in her eyes and frowned. “You have been pushing yourself far too hard, and although I admire your desire for excellence in all things, you seem especially driven this week. I must ask, what is going on?”

“I want to prepare for our next encounter with Grindlewald. I want to find ways to keep him from hurting people, and to keep us safe,” Hermione managed most of those words through a yawn.

“And we will,” Tom replied, wiping absently at the corner of her mouth. “But you won’t be much use to anyone if you fall over from exhaustion. I’m all for pushing limits, but sleep seems to be a requirement, even for the most magical of individuals.”

Hermione huffed lightly. “You hardly sleep and you seem to do just fine.”

“You aren’t me. You don’t exist on sheer willpower and occasional bouts of rage,” Tom grinned arrogantly. “Don’t worry, Dearest; you are special in other ways.”

She slapped at his hand, but not hard enough to keep him from pulling her up and kissing her. “Go to bed,” he ordered. “And take our pet with you.”

But she was more awake for the moment, and ready to argue. “Not yet. We need to talk about how to present the binding marks to the group.”
Tom gestured at Patience, who was asleep on the floor in front of the fire, her pale hair spread like a fan over the marble tiles, curled up beside an equally unconscious Abraxas. “She’s designing the mark, though she won’t tell me what it is yet.”

“The symbol doesn’t matter to the spell itself,” Hermione gave Tom a mischievous look, “but rest assured, I vetoed her first choice of a unicorn, and her second choice of a niffler.”

He didn’t dignify that with a response. “I had planned, with your help, to present the situation very much as I alluded to at my birthday party – we’ve already grown so much magically as a group, and we’d like to continue to explore magic and help rid the world of an evil tyrant at the same time. Let’s not over-complicate it.”

“Yes, the Ravenclaws will see that as sufficient reason to participate, but the loyalty binding is a step further than some might be comfortable with,” Hermione said, allowing her tired body to lean against his.

“We aren’t asking them to sign over their souls in a Faustian pact,” his arms tightened around her, and she felt their magic thread together, like it was joining hands. There was nothing like that, and she sighed in pleasure, her drowsiness returning full-force. "The spell isn't imperio, it doesn't negate free-will."

Hermione could feel her eyes fluttering, and she struggled to gather her thoughts. "No, but it does bind the group to a common cause, and, to a lesser extent, the orders we give - it feels very...militaristic."

“It is, somewhat. But that is for the best. The Slytherins are used to obeying a person in power – you are well aware of how Pureblooded parents treat their children. The fact that I’m offering them something in return for their obedience will be a lovely novelty for them,” he assured her. "The promise of future power, respect, and acclaim is enough for them."

“As for the other Ravenclaws, well, Josephine and Felicity are both smart enough to understand that what we will be doing, what we have already done in some cases, could get us expelled or even imprisoned.” Tom’s breath was warm on the side of her face, and she felt him inhale against her hair. Cuddling up for the night in the Chamber bedroom sounded like heaven. “Having leadership built into the bond, with you and I in charge, creates a chain of command for dangerous situations, which is a protective benefit for everyone, and the marking will allow us to call to one another or warn each other. And the permanent binding protects the anonymity of the group from retribution now and in the future. I’m confident that they will see the logic in a magical binding of the group, solidified with the mark.”
“It is logical, but people aren’t always logical, Tom. There are petty jealousies and thwarted
desires and a thousand other messy emotions that come into play when dealing with a group of
teenagers,” Hermione yawned again, turning into his arms, burying her face into his chest,
smelling the hint of copper and fire and sandalwood that always clung to him. She was so tired,
and he felt and smelled so good.

One moment, she was upright, the next, he’d swept her into his arms. He called to Patience,
who rose gracefully, as if she hadn’t been asleep at all, and Abraxas, who came to with a start, and
the four of them left the Chamber. Tom didn’t put her down until they reached the hall with the
stairs where their paths parted. He kissed her forehead, and pushed her toward Patience’s arms.

“Take care of her, pet,” he said quietly, meeting Patience’s eyes over Hermione’s curls. “We
have three more days until the full group can meet in the Chamber on Saturday, and I don’t want to
see her there before then. She needs to catch up on her rest to be at her best for the group binding.
It will take a high level of magic from all of us. Dose her with sleeping draughts if you must.”

“I already put some in her butter beer tonight,” Patience’s sea glass eyes sparkled in the
moonlight filtering through the hall windows, making her look more ethereal than usual. “Why do
you think she’s so sleepy already?”

“I can hear you,” Hermione mumbled against Patience’s chest, where the taller girl was
keeping her from falling over. “And I’m mad at both of you. Just wait.”

“I don’t care,” Tom replied with a grin, then turning to Abraxas. “Besides, it is three against
one, not two against two. You agree with that plan, don’t you, Abraxas?”

The future Lord Malfoy glanced over at Hermione, half-asleep on her feet, her cheeks flushed
and her hair wild, and smiled in amused affection. “Yes, whole-heartedly. Our lady needs to sleep.
I only wish I could be there to tuck her in.”

Tom smirked. “One day, Abraxas. This plan is a step in the right direction. Now, let’s get to
our dorms before Peeves or that ridiculous Gryffindor ghost appears to tattle on us.”

“He’s never forgiven us for *accio*’ing him five years ago, the pompous git,” Hermione laughed
sleepily as Patience drew upon some of her air magic to float Hermione just enough off the ground
to glide her forward and up the stairs to Ravenclaw Tower. “I hope Peeves drops a dung bomb on
all of you, you…druggers,” she muttered, though still rested her head against Patience and kissed
her shoulder.

Now – Friday evening

The entrance to the dormitories opened, and Tom stepped out, Abraxas close behind him.

“We thought you were staying with Hermione to make sure she slept this evening,” Tom began, then he saw the cut. His tone shifted to a deadly calm. “Pet, you are bleeding. Why?”

Abraxas had crossed to her, and was waving his wand, murmuring a healing spell he’d learned from Hermione. The bleeding stopped, though the mark remained, a stark red against Patience’s pale skin. “I’d like to know as well,” his tone was just as dangerous as Tom’s as he glared at Marguerite.

“I have a right to defend myself,” Marguerite’s back was ramrod straight, and her chin tilted defiantly. “Patience assaulted me.”

“Irrelevant,” Tom replied quickly. “And you aren’t bleeding, so whatever ‘assault’ Patience conducted clearly wasn’t worth that title.”

He quickly moved toward Marguerite, backing her against the wall. “I think we need to continue this conversation in our special place.”

“As if I’d go anywhere alone with you,” Marguerite retorted, two bright spots of anger blooming on her pale cheeks.

Tom leaned in closer, one arm stretched on the wall above her head, his beautiful face inches from hers. “But Marguerite, you used to love being alone with me.”

“I was a fool,” Marguerite swallowed, clearly affected by Tom’s proximity despite the danger.

Stretching out his hand, Tom traced a slow line from her ear to her chin along her jaw. “Are you
afraid now, Marguerite?”

She nodded quickly.

“Then you aren’t as foolish as you think,” he smiled, though there was no comfort in that expression. His fingers came up to her temple. “Imperio.”

Patience hummed her ballad softly as the four entered the Chamber library. Her tune was immediately drowned out as Tom lifted the curse on Marguerite.

“Who do you think you are?” Marguerite’s voice was shrill with rage, bouncing in angry echoes off the walls.

“That’s an excellent question,” Patience answered before Tom could, coming to stand in between Tom and their small Slytherin captive. “But the better one is who do you think Tom is?”

Tom quirked an amused brow at Patience, then made a lazy ‘go ahead, help yourself,’ gesture, seating himself in one of the chairs by the fire. Abraxas watched quietly, standing behind Tom’s chair, not taking his eyes off of Marguerite. Though he appeared calm, Patience knew he was actually angrier than Tom was.

Marguerite frowned, glancing toward Tom. “Is this my ‘punishment’? Letting your brain-damaged pet ask me riddles?”

“Your ‘punishment,’” Tom replied smoothly, “hasn’t yet begun, Marguerite. You might as well enjoy the scream-free prelude.”

Color drained from her face. Patience made a tutting sound at Tom and patted Marguerite’s arm. Marguerite jerked back, clenching her hands and jamming them into her pockets.

“Oh, we have your wand,” Patience smiled. “I did tell you that this was going to happen, Marguerite. I was trying to help you.”
She gave a horrible, bitter laugh. “No one wants to help me. I have to help myself.”

“I’d say you’re failing at that,” Tom smirked.

Patience ignored him, stepping nearer to Marguerite, her stance non-threatening, the way one would approach a cornered animal. “There are some lessons we must learn. Life will present them over and over until we do. The only choice we get is whether we learn those lessons quickly and easily, or slowly and painfully. You are poised at the edge, Marguerite.”

“Don’t promise her there won’t be pain, pet,” Tom called, twirling his wand between his fingers. “That would be a lie.”

“You can’t just torture me at Hogwarts,” Marguerite protested.

“We absolutely can, Marguerite,” Abraxas spoke for the first time since arriving, his hand clenching and unclenching on the back of Tom’s chair. His face was impassive, but there was anger in his voice.

Her dark eyes flew to his, sparkling with held-back moisture. “Why? Because I hexed your pet? Slytherins hex each other all the time. A splash of dittany and her face will be fine. My own mother has done much worse to me, and I know yours has, too Abraxas. I didn’t do anything to merit being dragged down here under the Imperius. You are being unreasonable.”

“This Slytherin habit of in-fighting is both boring and offensive,” Tom’s tone was icy. “And Pureblooded parents who abuse their children and call it discipline are not exactly the model for reasonable behavior. I demand loyalty, not jealous back-stabbing.”

“I’ve never sworn loyalty to you,” Marguerite scoffed. “I promised to keep this place a secret like the others in the study group, but the only person I’m loyal to is myself.”

Patience smiled sadly. “That’s the problem, Marguerite. If you want the rewards of being associated with the most powerful witches and wizards of this age, the cost is unquestioning loyalty.”
“The one and only lesson you could learn from your older brother,” Tom observed dryly.

Marguerite shifted uneasily. She was a Slytherin, after all, and had no use for brave gestures. She adjusted herself to the situation to achieve the best outcome. “And if I swear loyalty, now?”

“Well, there are several problems with that scenario, Marguerite,” Tom’s voice was gleeful, and his lovely lips were stretched in a smile so broad it revealed the dimple he detested. “Let me enumerate them for you. One, you thought you could harm my pet. Two, you are under the mistaken impression that you can bargain with me. Three, you believe I care whether or not you are in the new group we will be creating.”

“And you don’t?” Marguerite folded her arms.

Tom stood, shrugging his shoulders casually. “I had hoped that you would factor into my future plans, simply because I like having the best at my disposal, and you are one of the smartest and most talented witches in the school, behind only Hermione and our pet, really. Your knowledge of darker magic, of hexes and curses, as well as your overall understanding of the various magical disciplines makes you valuable. But not invaluable.”

He had come to stand in front of her, his face blank except for the fire in his eyes. “And I let you touch me, Marguerite. I gave you license to put your hands on my person in very intimate ways, and I touched you in return,” he gave her a mocking smile, his voice shifting into an affected affronted tone. “I’m a bit hurt that you seem to have forgotten this. Very few people have been afforded that privilege. I had assumed that you understood what an honor that was, and that you would be a most trusted general in my future endeavors, but I was apparently, and quite uncharacteristically, wrong.”

There was no movement, no warning. The only indication that any magic had occurred was Marguerite’s soft gasp and the sudden appearance of a bloody red line across her cheek that mirrored Patience’s perfectly, though it was deeper and bleeding profusely, trailing down Marguerite’s jawline to drip on her sweater.

“You will not attempt to heal that if you have a single shred of self-preservation,” he announced in a bored tone.

Marguerite’s mouth curled into a snarl. “Can you hear yourself, or are you so far gone on arrogance that you’ve lost touch with reality? I’ll tell you what I see when I look at you. I see a sixteen year old who thinks he is the next Grindelwald, playing at being a dark lord.”
There was a muffled shrieking sound as Marguerite’s mouth was suddenly sewn shut, metallic silver thread appearing across her lips, piercing the skin.

“I am the solution to Grindelwald, and I play at nothing!” Tom hissed, snakes rising out of the floor, a fluid version of the marble they had formed from, to twine around Marguerite’s wrists and ankles, holding her still. Summoning snakes from any surface was a nice little spell he’d learned from his fellow parselmouth, Apep.

“I will run the wizarding world one day, Marguerite, and that is simply fact, not a delusion of grandeur or false arrogance. Look around this chamber. I am the Heir of Slytherin,” he shoved up his sleeve, revealing the golden letters there. “I am also half of the most powerful soul mate bond formed in centuries, and I am one-quarter of an elemental bond to rival the Hogwarts founders, and we will collectively destroy anything that stands in our way. Recognize the truth of this, or you will pay the price,” Tom’s magic was swirling around him furiously, strong enough that everyone in the Chamber could feel it, like a static charge in the air, ready to spark and engulf them all.

Marguerite’s brown eyes were wide with terror as he spoke, becoming wider with every new revelation, as well as his palpable rage, and she nodded furiously. Patience reached forward, running a long, pale finger across the other girl’s lips. The silver threads evaporated at her touch. The snake on Patience’s bracelet slid down her wrist and made threatening noises in Marguerite’s face. The two stared at each other for a long moment.

“I understand what I didn’t before. I’ll swear loyalty,” Marguerite said quickly, the blood from her cheek mingling with the blood from her lips.

Abraxas snorted. “For how long? For a day? Or until it suits you to betray us?”

“Yes, it is a pesky thing, trust,” Tom commented. “You know about Grindlewald’s book, and you haven’t said anything, which is a good sign,” he came to stand beside Patience, ghosting his fingers just above the cut on her face.

“But you have this bad habit of harassing my most valued associates – Hermione, Patience, and, of course, your pursuit of Abraxas, which is non-negotiable.”

“Hermione and I get along fine,” Marguerite protested, even as her blood dripped on the floor. “I can’t help it if your pet attacked me, and as for Abraxas,” she straightened, her jaw jutting out in defiance, “I won’t apologize. I have to get engaged, and so does he. Both of our parents smile upon
the match. Why must you get everything?"

Tom smiled widely. “Because I deserve everything. And let me be clear, Marguerite. Once I have claimed something, it is mine.” At those words, his magic flared around him, pushing outwards with great force. Marguerite probably would have gone flying across the room had she not been secured in place by the snakes.

“I,” Marguerite started, then stopped, her breath in gasps. “I will cooperate.”

“She is telling the truth. She’s ready to cooperate,” Patience announced, turning to Tom and Abraxas with a smile.

Tom smirked, looping an arm around Patience’s waist and pulling her close to his side. “See, Marguerite? This is what trust looks like. My pet tells me something, I believe her, and trust her to be correct. And aren’t you lucky that I do?”

Marguerite was silent, only nodding in response. Her lips were lined with small, bloody circles, dark and raw against her chalky skin.

“And though I do trust my dear pet,” Tom continued, clearly reveling in Marguerite’s fear as he leaned forward to brush back a lock of dark hair that had come loose from her braid. Marguerite gave the tiniest of shudders. “I am a firm believer in being thorough. If you don’t cooperate, you will be sorry.”

“I made the design,” Patience smiled, waving her wand, a symbol erupting in a fiery outline in the air. It was an ouroboros, the ancient symbol of power and rebirth and eternity – a snake swallowing its tail to create a perfect, never-ending circle.

Tom nodded his approval. “Excellent, pet. You never disappoint. Shall we test it?”

“What?” Marguerite finally spoke, her question coming out in a near squeak. “What are you going to do to me?”

Abraxas looked from Patience to Tom, his brows raised. “Yes, what are we doing?”
“We are going to test the efficacy of the group binding spell right now, on Marguerite,” Tom said.

“Hermione will not be happy about this,” Abraxas noted. “She detests anything coercive, and Marguerite is clearly not in a position of free will here.”

Tom and Patience smiled in unison, a beautiful and frightening sight to behold. “Marguerite has a choice. The spell must be entered willingly, or it won’t take.” Tom turned to the tiny Slytherin who was practically vibrating with fear.

“What is the choice?” Marguerite asked, licking nervously at her bloodied lips, then wincing.

“Join us,” Patience answered in a low voice, “join us or die.” She waited for a few seconds before she threw her head back and laughed, a strangely musical and not at all human sound. “Not really. We aren’t going to kill you.”

Tom looked at Abraxas with an expression of immense amusement tinged with pride. “I told you she was the vicious one.”

Marguerite was silent, unable to move as the marble snakes still ensnared her. Her face spoke volumes though – a mix of fear and rage and helplessness.

Patience stretched out a long arm, running her fingers down the other girl’s face. “You are very smart, Marguerite, very talented. We want you with us. I see in your heart that power is the most important thing to you, greater than your pride, greater than thoughts of love. You will never find the power we can offer you on your own. Swear your loyalty and you will be rewarded.”

“Why should I trust you?” Marguerite whispered, her eyes flicking to the mark across Patience’s cheek. “You hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Marguerite. I don’t lie. I really did come to speak with you to prevent this, but I should have known that you would require a more…intense persuasion. Snakes are so stubborn.” Patience replied. “And you don’t have to trust me – look for yourself.”

She pushed a vision into Marguerite’s mind, the sight of an older Marguerite sitting in a grand
Marguerite closed her eyes, soaking in the sensation of her dreams being fulfilled. Finally, she nodded slowly. “Fine. What must we do?”

Tom waved his hand and the snakes released her, melting back into the floor. He produced Marguerite’s wand from the air and held it out to her. She reached for it, grasping the handle gingerly, then immediately slipped it into her pocket, making no attempt to either attack or heal herself.

“First test passed,” Patience drew her own wand, healing Marguerite’s lips. “So long as you serve our interests, your own will be served as well.”

“You are, I hope, aware of how lucky you are that Patience intervened on your behalf?” Tom spoke harshly. “I had planned on doing things that would have made Hermione mad at me for months.”

Though Marguerite looked like she wanted to argue over how ‘lucky’ she felt, she remained quiet. She watched disbelievingly as Patience wound her arm through Tom’s with a careless ease.

“That’s why I’m helping,” Patience smiled at him.

“But you are depriving me of such fun,” Tom scowled at her, though without much venom. “I could do with less help, pet.”

“Not true,” Patience replied in a sing-song voice, then released Tom and took Marguerite’s arm. “Which side is your dominant one?”

“Left,” Marguerite frowned as Patience pushed up the left sleeve of her sweater and unbuttoned her Oxford’s cuff, rolling it up as well to expose the pale, thin arm underneath.

“Kneel,” Tom commanded.
Marguerite did so, her knees slipping slightly in the slick blood that had fallen from her face onto the floor. The wound on her cheek still bleed freely.

“Young binding will be stronger than the others, because I trust you less,” Tom tipped up her chin, tracing the wounded side of her face with his wand. “This could have been so much easier, so much more pleasant, Marguerite, but you have chosen the difficult path, as well as offended me by injuring my pet, so I’ll make sure it hurts.”

“I’m not afraid of pain,” Marguerite answered coolly, her left arm raised up to Tom.

“No,” Tom smiled down at her, bringing his wand to her forearm. “But you are afraid of insignificance, of powerlessness. If you will simply follow me, follow Hermione, then you won’t ever have to fear those things again. Take out your wand.”

She fumbled slightly with her right hand, but managed to get her wand out of her left pocket.

“Do you know the process for an Unbreakable Vow?” Tom asked. “That’s part of the basis for the spell.”

“In theory,” Marguerite replied, her eyes widening. “If you break that vow,”

“You die,” Patience supplied. “Or at least lose your magical abilities.”

Marguerite was shaking now. “I…”

Abraxas shook his head. “I knew she wouldn’t. We should heal her and obliviate her. She’s too much of a risk.”

“Remember the vision, Marguerite,” Patience murmured, placing a hand on Marguerite’s shoulder. She leaned down, whispering in the Slytherin’s ear, “do you want to bound to an estate, to a husband, to producing Pureblooded children, or do you want to be bound to Greatness? This is the place were the decision is made.”
“Well?” Tom snapped, annoyed with the delay. “You must give an answer. I wasn’t lying when I said the spell won’t take unless it is undertaken voluntarily.”

Marguerite drew a deep breath, then exhaled. “Yes.”

Long, fiery threads, the blinding color of white-hot flames, erupted from Tom’s wand, winding themselves over Marguerite’s arm and encasing her wand as well.

“How do you, Marguerite Emmeline Rosier, swear loyalty to me, Tom Marvolo Riddle, Heir of Slytherin, and to my magical extensions, my soulmate and bound air magic mate, Hermione Jean Bonneau, my bound water magic mate, Patience Layla Foster, and my bound earth magic mate, Abraxas Charles Malfoy, for the rest of your life?”

“I do,” Marguerite swallowed, clearly understanding fully the nature of the quartet’s bond for the first time. The fire around her arm and wand grew brighter, and Marguerite grimaced.

Tom noticed and gave a satisfied smile, and followed with several additional questions. “Do you promise to faithfully follow all orders from myself and my magical extensions, for the greater good of our group? Do you swear to keep the secrets of the group and to protect others in the group to the best of your ability through word, deed, and up to the shedding of your own blood? Do you promise to refrain from harming anyone in our group, with the exception of an event of betrayal? If a betrayal is committed, do you swear to execute the punishment if called upon? Do you promise to devote yourself to destroying any and all enemies of our group, starting with Grindelwald and his allies?”

As Marguerite answered each question in the affirmative, the fiery threads grew brighter and hotter, moving up her arm and across her torso, crawling like a drunken spider over her entire body. She bit her lip against what was clearly pain, but didn’t cry out. Though the web of light covered her from head to toe, the most intense spot was concentrated on her inner left arm and wand hand.

Tom looked on approvingly. “In return, I, Tom Marvolo Riddle, Heir of Slytherin, pledge to protect you with my magic, and that of my magical extensions, so long as you remain loyal to all your oaths. I pledge the use of my influence and power to further your goals, so long as they are not in conflict with my own and that of the group.”

At these words, the light retracted, the threads pulled toward Marguerite’s elbow, like a rubber band snapping back into place. There was a sound of sizzling flesh, and Marguerite did scream at this, loudly. Tom, Abraxas, and Patience stared down at her exposed arm, now decorated
with an ourboros the size of a galleon coin, and the same bright golden color.

He put down a hand, and Marguerite took it after only a second of hesitation. With another few waves of his wand, he vanished the blood from her face and clothing, and healed the cut enough to stop the bleeding.

“Thank you,” she murmured, looking at him questioningly.

“Don’t bother to try to heal it further,” he warned. “I cursed the wound – it won’t respond to healing spells or dittany, and will only get worse if you try to treat it. I want you to be reminded of your foolishness every time you look in the mirror, so you’ll know better than to repeat it.”

Marguerite nodded, slowly rolling her sleeve back down. She stood stock still as Patience buttoned her cuff, then hugged her. “See? That wasn’t so bad,” Patience said in her sing-song voice. “You’re still alive and in one piece.”

Abraxas made a choking sound that might have been laughter. Tom smirked. “Why don’t you head back to the dorms, Marguerite? I think you’ll want extra rest tonight.”

She was gone quickly, out of the room at an unnatural speed.

“You scared her,” Patience sighed, looking at Tom.

Tom snorted. “I think you might have scared her more, pet.”

“You are both terrifying,” Abraxas said, then added in a mutter, “but not nearly as frightening as Hermione will be when she finds out about this.”
Circle of Friends

Chapter Summary

The larger group undergoes a binding ceremony and Hermione confronts Tom concerning Marguerite.

Chapter Notes

So...yeah, I need to stop making plans completely. I had assumed summer vacation would bring more free time for, but in the words of Samuel L. Jackson, from the kitschy, yet horribly underappreciated movie, /The Long Kiss Goodnight/, "Everybody knows when you make an assumption, you make an ass of you and -umption." But, I finally got something out, with a little action and a little smut. Hugs and kisses!

Hermione stared up at her scarlet Gryffindor canopy, a perfect replica down to the tiny splatter stains from when Lavender had handed her a butter beer that had been dropped on the floor. It had exploded in a mess of fizz when Hermione had opened it, and though she’d cleaned herself and the bed, she’d missed the canopy spots, only noticing the slightly darker circles weeks later. Though it seemed silly, the stains were comforting, some kind of proof that her future that no longer existed could still be manifested, at least temporarily, in the Room of Requirement. She half-expected Ginny to burst in asking for advice on a homework assignment, to hear Pavarti’s laugh, or smell the obnoxiously cloying rose-scented perfume Lavender insisted on spraying all over herself.

She’d fled here for refuge from the last week, and all the memories and emotions that had flown at her, like hornets from a kicked nest. First, there had been the physical exhaustion, which had reached a point where her brain and her magic had started to suffer. Even though she was aware this was counter-productive, she’d been unable to stop herself. Books and research were safety, a wall of words and knowledge that had always protected her. The parallels between fighting Death Eaters and hunting Horcruxes and trying to undermine Grindelwald and eventually bring him down were clear, and her wartime mindset had been activated. Hogwarts, and even England, were safe from Grindelwald and his forces in a way that they had never been from Voldemort, but that didn’t stop the feelings of fear, of waking up from barely thirty minutes sleep in a cold sweat. Having once been in constant danger, Hermione could never un-know the hyper-alert state it brought, and when those feelings were triggered, survival mode took over.

She could forgive Patience and the others for the sleeping draught. Really. It wasn’t ideal to be drugged, but Hermione could recognize she’d gone overboard, and that reeling her in through logic
would have been difficult. Also, the version of sleeping draught Patience had given her was harmless, and Hermione had absolutely needed to have her brain shut off in a long, dreamless rest. What she was not so ready to forgive was what had happened with her quartet and Marguerite while she’d been passed out. She kept drawing lines with Tom, then watching him cross them. How could she keep her soul intact, her sense of morality, when Tom kept pushing and pulling her beyond the limits of what she found acceptable, what she found right?

Hermione had woken up late on Saturday afternoon to an empty room, concerned about the group bonding, but committed to creating it. The group, so different from the Death Eaters, would give Tom focus and a sense of accomplishment, which could only be good thing, she reassured herself. She showered and dressed, reveling in the sense of feeling rested for the first time in a week. As her mind came fully awake, something new sparked at the edges of her magical boundaries, another connection – a dark, earthy magic that she had access to, if she wanted it.

But she wasn’t sure she did, at least not without an explanation and careful exploration. Tom and the others had bound someone to them, before the group spell that was supposed to take place later today, and Hermione knew exactly whom that someone was. Marguerite’s magic was wickedly sharp, like the jagged edges of a rocky cliff with few safe handholds. Her power was there, but Hermione had a feeling it was not fully willing, and perhaps littered with booby traps. Marguerite had not been the President of Tom’s Fan Club for quite a few months now. Hermione had even considered that they might need to obliviate her after offering the group bond, because Hermione honestly thought she would refuse. What could have changed her mind?

After grabbing a quick bite in the Great Hall, she’d felt Patience in her head, gently leading her toward the bathroom entrance to the Chamber. As she walked the corridors, Hermione felt her anger growing, even as Patience tried to soothe her. When she’d entered the room, Patience was wisely silent, using her snake bracelet to reveal the path to the Chamber.

The whole study group was in the Chamber library, and Hermione was well aware that this was not the time for airing her grievances. She stood beside Tom, with Patience and Abraxas bracketing them, and did her best to look supportive while Tom shared his plans and offered the group the bonding ritual. Though her facial muscles didn’t move, she was infuriated by how smooth and convincing Tom was, how he presented the group bond as a gift, as an opportunity that no one in his or her right mind would pass up. He answered every question, assuaged every fear, all with a broad, beatific smile on his face that insanely put her in the mind of the Grinch explaining to little Cindy Lou Who that he needed to take her Christmas tree to fix its broken light. Marguerite even stood at his prompting, showing the others her mark, with something that might have been a smile on another, softer, girl’s face.

Spending the last week lost in memories of her past (the future she was rewriting), there had been plenty of moments pondering just how horrible Voldemort and his followers had been, how much pain they had caused. She didn’t want to list all the casualties, though Harry’s parents, Neville’s parents’ sanity, Sirius, and Cedric came quickly to mind. Her Tom, and how odd she knew that was, that he was her Tom, was perfectly capable of such cruelty, of such evil, if she didn’t provide
him with balance, with an alternative outlet for his need for control. Hermione had even proposed this plan to Narcissa, but that didn’t mean that she didn’t have some reservations about giving Tom’s ego such a banquet.

And, oh, how he feasted. Corvus Black had been first, and Hermione was forced to hide her shock when Tom had ‘outed’ their soul mate bond and their elemental bond with Patience and Abraxas. Of course, the group loyalty vow made their secret safe, and the announcement certainly had shock value, and impressed upon the group just how powerful Tom was. As he had predicted, that was plenty of incentive for the Slytherins. One by one, they knelt, and their inner arms were marked with a small, golden ouroboros. With each member of the study group who knelt before them and pledged loyalty, she felt Tom’s pleasure expand, until she was almost giddy herself with the shared sensation.

It had been an additional shock when, as Josephine stepped forward, Tom stepped back slightly, and motioned for her to kneel in front of Hermione, not him. Hermione had told him that the Ravenclaws had different motives than the Slytherins, and apparently he had paid more attention than she’d realized. Having Josephine and Felicity swear their loyalty to her rather than Tom made no real difference in the spell, especially given how entangled her magic was with that of her soul mate, but symbolically, it was significant. Her roommates were like sisters to her, and their trust for her was much deeper and more instinctive than what they felt for Tom. Hermione also knew that by having her perform the spell for part of the group, Tom was proving a point, making her just as responsible for their actions as he was. He could feel the anger she had been tamping down, and now he was poking it. She pushed it down even further and continued the spell, repeating Tom’s words.

When Josephine and Felicity had gone, Patience and Abraxas knelt simultaneously, Patience before her and Abraxas in front of Tom. They had spoken earlier in the week about this, though Hermione had been incredibly sleep-deprived at the time. She remembered vaguely arguing with Tom that everyone in the group needed to be marked with the symbol, or the group would feel unequal. Tom had tartly responded that the members were unequal, and that they, and by extension their elemental quartet, were the leaders, placing them above the others. Hermione hadn’t given up, telling him that of course the group would realize that; they were swearing loyalty to him, after all, but that the best leaders fostered a sense of oneness and camaraderie with their followers, and that having all of them marked would strengthen the group identity and morale.

Due to the strong elemental bonds already present, the vows felt much more intense, and Hermione wasn’t at all surprised to see that inside the circular symbols on Patience and Abraxas’s inner arms were smaller, runic symbols for water and earth, respectively. When they were finished, Hermione and Tom turned to face another, sleeves rolled up, wands crossing to connect with each other’s inner arms, Tom’s without her words, and hers without the remnant scar. As they spoke the vow, their magic rose around them, filling the Chamber. There were several gasps, and Hermione glanced away from Tom long enough to see that their magic had become visible, and was surrounding them in swirls, Hermione’s a bright white-gold, and Tom’s a dark black with hints of a silvery sheen. It dispersed into threads, wrapping around each other and weaving into a domed net around them, then, as they finished the spell, diving into their arms, knocking them both to their
“What a pair we make, little bird,” Tom whispered, running his finger over her inner arm, where the ouroboros shone a brilliant gold with the symbol for air glittering in the middle.

Hermione didn’t respond. She felt too overwhelmed by his touch on the mark on her arm, which produced a sensation very similar to the way her body felt when he traced the words on her stomach. Instead, she brushed her own fingers over his mark, which included the fire symbol, and was pleased to see him shudder slightly.

“Let’s finish this,” she managed to murmur, as they used each other’s forearms as leverage to rise up from the floor. “We still need to perform the entire group bond.”

Tom nodded and ordered the group to come forward. There was more than one hesitation, after the display of power they’d witnessed, but the group formed a tight circle, each member stretching out his or her newly marked arm into the center, and touching wand ends.

“Go ahead, Dearest,” Tom spoke, his voice ringing through the Chamber, “Bind us all. You’ve done the most research into this.”

Once again, Hermione wondered what he was playing at, but she didn’t have time to go down that rabbit hole, or snake hole, more accurately, and he was still immensely pleased, his euphoria flooding her so strongly that it was difficult to concentrate. She gathered some of his magic, which felt nearly indistinguishable from her own at this point, then at Patience and Abraxas, who were also closer than before. That combined magic made her body vibrate, and it was all she could do to keep her wand hand from shaking. Slowly, giving herself time between each one, Hermione collected magic from the eight new sources now available to her.

The unique signature of each person’s magic was fascinating, and Hermione’s love of compiling and cataloguing information battled fiercely with the performance of the spell. She reminded herself that she was making a permanent bond, and that she would have plenty of time to explore these magical connections in the years to come. Still, she couldn’t help making mental notes about the members, how Vidhi’s magic crackled like a hearth fire just barely contained, how Josephine’s curled around her in warm waves, like the water on a tropical beach, how Felicity’s air magic buzzed and darted, like Felicity herself did when she played Quidditch. Even the others, who were all earth magic, felt wildly different from one another, and Hermione thought their magical signatures were linked to their personalities or perhaps vice versa. Corvus was a lonely mountaintop, Jacob a forest clearing, Sebastian was a wide, open plain littered with dangerous bogs, Dolohov was a tar pit, and Thad a meadow, filled with daisies. Marguerite, of course, was the rocky cliff side, a nearly sheer face with several dark cave entrances that one wouldn’t dare to take refuge in.
Forcing herself to focus, Hermione turned away from the study of the group’s magical signatures and back to the spell. She connected with each member in turn, using her wand to draw a wispy thread from each person’s mark, like picking a stitch from a woven blanket. The threads rose up in a slanted line above the circle to meet in the center in a single, braided thread. Hermione thought it beautiful, really, a lovely spell that focused on loyalty and interdependence, not simply submission and dominance like the earlier vow had. She had lobbied Tom hard for this addition, and she was glad she had. Every member of the group looked reassured by the spell.

As the joined, multi-colored thread twisted back to the marks, so that each person had two threads over his or her arm, creating a loop that disappeared into the mark, Hermione spoke the accompanying words, “In each other, we find our strength. In our joined magic, we will create the world we would have. Our loyalty is not simply to One, but to All who give the One the strength to lead.”

There was a burst of energy, and then the loops of magic absorbed back into the marks, leaving everyone in the group with a link to every other member. It was strong magic, but subtle, and though it wouldn’t interfere with day-to-day activities, if one member of the group was in danger, the others would be able to trace back the entwined thread to determine who needed help.

Hermione looked around the circle, and saw the expected expressions of shock from strong magic, residual wariness from having made such a deep commitment, and a matching giddiness from having been reckless teenagers who had thrown caution to the winds, creating bonds to circumvent grown-ups and save the world (or amass power, depending on the group member). They needed an outlet for all their conflicting feelings and restless energy.

This wouldn’t occur to Tom, but Patience and Abraxas understood, and before Hermione could say anything, Abraxas was pulling down the enchanted goblet and Patience was tuning the wireless to an upbeat big band song, and the group seemed to make a collective sigh. Jacob and Josephine ended up in a pair of the armchairs, holding hands and talking quietly. Abraxas and Corvus began a game of wizarding chess, arguing over who was winning from the first move. Felicity, Vidhi, Sebastian, and Dolohov went to the dueling mats and started practicing the list of attack and defense spells that would be in the practical portion of the OWLs later this year, occasionally throwing in ridiculous hexes that did things like making ears sprout wings or hands turn to flippers. Patience danced to the music in an odd circle, not at all to the rhythm of the music. Tom leaned against a bookshelf, watching the room, still riding the high of magical bliss, Hermione knew, because she was as well. He smirked at her, and she looked away. It really wouldn’t be good for the newly bound group to have mom and dad fighting so soon.

So, she went to Marguerite instead, who was sitting in one of the green chairs on the other side of the room, staring at the empty, dark fireplace. Hermione pointed her wand at the hearth and it
sprang to life with hot, orange flames. It was a spell she had done many times, but she noted that since this school year, fire magic had come to her more and more easily, and now, after tonight? Casting that spell felt like pulling Tom into her arms, having his magic caress her. And she knew he felt it, too. What would it feel like when she cast a water or earth spell? Or, Circe forbid, one that combined all the elements? These emotions were running riot through her ordered mind.

“Marguerite,” Hermione said softly, resting on the edge of the chair opposite the small Slytherin whom she used to hate. “Are you alright?”

“What do you think?” Marguerite turned her head, pushing back the line of dark hair that had obscured the side of her face. Hermione had thought it odd that Marguerite’s hair was down, loose around her face – she never wore it that way, not once in the five years Hermione had known her.

A cold chill ran through Hermione as she viewed the raw red line on Marguerite’s cheekbone. It reminded her of the wound the future Dolohov had given her at the Ministry, the one that had bisected her chest in a painful, angry line until Narcissa had finally managed to heal it four years ago. “May I?” she leaned forward, her hands tentatively reaching out.

“You can’t heal it; that will only make it worse,” Marguerite warned, but didn’t draw back. “He cursed it. He wants the scar to show.”

Of course he does, Hermione thought. Visible marks of his power meant a great deal to Tom. And though she supported the voluntary binding just performed, she could not condone this. Marking others in anger, through torture, was the beginning of a dark road. She knew there was a story there, but she was sure that whatever Marguerite had done, it couldn’t have merited permanently scarring her face.

“What happened?” Hermione asked as she ran a hand over the cut, not quite touching it, to feel the dark magic inside of it. It was Tom’s magic, and like all of Tom’s magic, it called to her, even if it was hissing angrily.

Marguerite shook her head, leaning back in her chair. “Your soul mate, our self-appointed Lord and Master, was simply reminding me that I am never, ever, to touch his things.”

Hermione knew her expression was one of exasperation. “Just speak plainly, Marguerite. I thought we had come to respect one another enough to be honest.”
“I suppose I do, though I really hate you, so it will have to be brutal honesty,” Marguerite gave her a smile that was pure Slytherin, then related the events of the night before.

“The spell isn’t supposed to work if you aren’t willing, but I am sure Tom could have modified it,” Hermione chewed her lip. “Do you want to be here, Marguerite? To be a part of this group? Because if you are under duress, truly, I will find a way to undo the spell.”

She frowned. “My life hasn’t been full of many choices. No Pureblood’s is. But I know how to fight, and if I had really wanted to resist Tom, I could have done a better job. I probably wouldn’t have won, but I could have given him a few marks of my own. I did take the vow freely. Your pet might be insane, but I do think she can see the future, at least some of it, and she showed me a path I’d like to follow.”

“And that path requires following Tom as well?” Hermione asked.

Marguerite nodded, unconsciously tucking her hair behind her ear, revealing the scar again. “And, after tonight’s display, I would be insane myself to pass up a connection to such power.” Her mouth twisted into a self-deprecating smirk as she inclined her head in a small gesture of fealty. “Consider me at your service.”

“I will get that cut healed,” Hermione ground her teeth.

Her defensive magic was rising at the mere sight of Marguerite’s face. The vow that she had made to the group meant something to her. It hadn’t been a one-way spell. Hermione had pledged to help protect this group, and that included Marguerite. Yes, she had attacked Patience, but Hermione had to agree that Tom’s revenge had been disproportionate. After all, Patience’s mark was completely healed, with no trace left behind. Salazar Slytherin had been obsessive in his collection of knowledge of the Dark Arts, and that included information about how to heal wounds inflicted with dark magic, as well as countering and absorbing even powerful curses. Between the Chamber and her mothers’ knowledge, Hermione was confident she could heal the mark on Marguerite’s cheek eventually. Of course, that would require head-to-head combat with Tom, but after the last week, she had to admit she was raring for a fight.

The group stayed as long as their curfews would allow, and Hermione lingered to speak to Tom after Patience had taken Abraxas’s arm with a knowing smile and led him away.

“Do you have a new list of grievances, Dearest? Or is going to be a revisiting of the classics?”
Tom’s tone was smug and his smirk matched it in arrogance. “Shall I get us started? I’m too angry, too dark, too violent, too possessive, and the worst of all, too unfeeling.”

Hermione drew in a shaky breath. “I know all those things about you, Tom. Whenever we fight, it’s always about you. It’s about me accepting you. You say I need to let you be who you are. But who we are is defined by what we do. You can have impulses to do something cruel, yet resist them. You simply choose not to. And you need to accept that I will not stand by and allow needless cruelty. Accept me, too.”

Tom stepped closer, and their magic, still energized from the rituals and the biofeedback loop of each other’s presence, sang. A wave of euphoria swept over her, attempting to carry away her anger. She clung to it. “We cannot simply go back and forth, yelling for the other to change. If you want to be a hero, if you want to rise to power and not be hated behind your back, with insubordinates plotting to take you down, you must lead with respect, not fear.”

“No!” Hermione cut off. “You over-reacted. Marguerite is still two months from turning sixteen. She’s being pressured to get engaged, and the top choice is being held off-limits by the person who took her virginity and then treated her like nothing. She was angry and scared and she lashed out. The slicing hex to Patience wasn’t anything half as bad as what the older Slytherins did to us in our first year, or even what some students do to each other in the halls before a Quidditch match. You wanted to punish her not because she truly deserved it, but because you enjoyed it.”

Tom smiled, but it was all teeth – more of a snarl. “You do know me so well. And I have no need to lie to you. I enjoyed making Marguerite scream and seeing the blood flow from her cheek. Just like you enjoyed killing that man in France. If we are comparing bloodlust, Dearest, I think come up short next to you.”

“There is a difference between a battle situation and cold-blooded torture, Tom, and you know it,” Hermione had always suspected he’d felt her pleasure, the vicious satisfaction that had flooded her body and magical aura when she’d thrown that knife. He had never taunted her with it, though, and had even reassured her that she did the right thing. But what did it mean when Tom Riddle thought you were doing the right thing?

She drew herself up, looking into his eyes. “I’m not going to argue with you, Tom. You are my first priority. I love you, and I want you to be successful. I want you to reach the heights you are striving for, and I understand that violence will sometimes be necessary. But this wasn’t. Acting out like this will only hurt our cause. I am going to heal Marguerite’s face, and I’m telling you
right now that if you try to ‘punish’ anyone else in our group for an unjust reason, I will not stand by.”

“Will you fight me, little bird?” he whispered, his hands coming up to cup the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair as he pulled her face close to his.

Hermione leaned in and kissed him. When he was so near, she couldn’t resist the desire to touch him. “Only if you make me,” she spoke against his lips as she pulled back for a moment. “Please don’t make me. You can be a great leader without everyone being terrified of you.”

Tom’s hands dropped lower, resting on her waist, his thumbs making circles over her hipbones. “But I like the terror,” his teeth grazed the side of her neck, gently biting and sucking.

“The love and respect you’ll gather will feel just as good,” she moaned. “Even better, because it will produce true loyalty. Just give my way a chance. You made your point with Marguerite.”

“Fine, for now,” Tom had lifted her now, and her legs wrapped around his waist instinctively. “But if she touches any of you again, I won’t let even you stop me from teaching her an even more permanent lesson.”

“She won’t,” Hermione managed to get out, though she was very distracted by the long fingers brushing past the waistband of her knickers. “The oath bound us all. And she wants a future where she’s free. Can’t you understand that?”

Tom slid two fingers over her clit, circling and tapping in the way he knew put her immediately on the edge. “Why are we still talking about Marguerite?”

“Because if we are going to change wizarding society, we must include people like Marguerite. Purebloods can be just as much a victims of their traditions as Muggleborns,” she panted.

“My seduction techniques must be slipping,” he hummed against her throat.

“Or I’m just that stubborn,” she said between kisses, her hips rising to meet his touches.
He laughed darkly, plunging a finger into her. “I’ve never doubted that, Dearest. Without your fire, your brilliance, you wouldn’t be my soul mate.”

She pushed one hand down into his pants, took his hard length in her hand. His head fell against her shoulder, his breath heavy on her collarbone. “Just try it my way, Tom, don’t be afraid of being loved. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Ever.”

“That’s my line,” Tom bit his lip.

“Say yes,” Hermione used her nails to lightly scratch at the sensitive skin along the underside of his cock. “Say yes. If someone truly betrays us, I swear I’ll help you kill them.”

Tom’s eyes met hers. She could feel his love, his frustration, and his magic, all wrapped around her. He wanted to be respected, adored, even if he wouldn’t admit it. He was going to give in, she could feel it, but he would make her pay for it in submission. She shivered around his fingers, her cunt clenching.

“Fine,” he bit at her collarbone, sucking hard at the skin. There would be a deep bruise when he was done, but Hermione was only aroused further at that thought. “Now, try very hard to be a good girl for just a few minutes and do as you are told.”

“Yes, my Lord,” she murmured, watching his eyes light up as she spoke.

He put her down, withdrawing his hands long enough to whisper disrobing and incarceration spells. In an instant, she was naked, spread over one of long library tables, her arms and legs bound by writhing snakes that had sprouted from the oak surface.

Hissing in Parseltongue, his mouth hovered over her skin, his lips barely grazing the fine hairs on her arm as he began to kiss her from head to toe. It was painfully arousing, slow, and teasing. She couldn’t understand his words, but his tone and his emotions were clear. He was channeling all the need for control into this moment, and he was telling her that she was his, that she would always be his, along with whatever filthy endearments existed in a reptilian language.

Once every inch of her front was on fire with his touch, he used magic to flip her over, conjuring a wedged pillow to lift her hips off the table and thrust her arse into the air. Between the two of them, the rising excitement was unbearable. She squirmed restlessly against the snakes, which twisted smoothly around her wrists, circling over and over her pulse points in an oddly erotic
fashion.

“What we have,” Tom finally spoke in English again, his mouth over the small of her back as he licked the length of her spine, “is not something I ever imagined was possible. And I treasure you, Hermione, along with Abraxas and that blasted pet of ours, but I will make you keep your word, and that if anyone touches what is mine, death will be a blessing to them, and you will help me.”

She didn’t say anything, because that wasn’t what he needed right now. He was feeling out of control, she could sense that pouring into her through his touch, through his magic. There was the sound of something whistling through the air, and she knew he wouldn’t be using his hand like he had on Patience. That thought had barely registered before there was a sharp sting and blossoming warmth radiating across her posterior.

“My little bird, do not doubt I will be the Lord of all we see, and you will be my Lady, elevated higher than any other,” Tom stroked her softly now, with his large palms cool over her burning flesh. “But you are still mine, and right now, I feel the need to remind you of that.”

The hits continued, and the burn built along with her arousal, pain and pleasure mingled. Hermione opened herself up to him, and he responded and they both felt the heady mix. His thoughts were in her mind, and she whispered something, an echo that floated past. It was only as the snakes disappeared back into the table that she realized she had phonetically spoken the Parseltongue spell he’d thought, releasing herself from the bonds.

His eyes widened, then immediately narrowed. She distracted him by turning and pulling him into her, aligning their hips so that he slid perfectly inside her. It was another delicious, burning stretch, and all thoughts were gone for several minutes.

*Curfew*, Patience’s voice warned in her head, rousing her from the sleepy stupor that had settled over her after she and Tom had come together. Every time they had sex, it felt more intense than the last. And now she was hearing Tom’s thoughts? Were they progressing toward the final stage of the soul mate bond, the complete unification? Tom would want to explore the fact that she had heard his thoughts, even if only fleetingly, and Hermione would also need to redouble her occlumency efforts. He could never, ever, be allowed to read her thoughts. The world depended on it.

“We need to go,” Hermione stood, summoning her clothes and rapidly dressing.

Tom rose, doing the same, and nodded. He wasn’t ready to question her yet, she could tell, but when he was, there would be a very dangerous conversation to be had. Hermione ran from the room, away from Ravenclaw Tower, and to the Room of Requirement. She needed a place to be alone, to find a moment in time when the world's weight wasn't on her shoulders.
Conversations of Soul Mates, Friends, and Snakes

Chapter Summary

Abraxas figures out just who Patience is, Galatea pushes Dumbledore's button, and Tom talks to snakes. One out of three satisfied conversations isn't so bad, right?

Chapter Notes

Oh, my. All I can say is life. It get me every time. But I'm back on track, hopefully. Love to all my readers, and I'm sorry for the absence.

February, 1943

Abraxas stared at the letter from his mother, the third this month. To most anyone else, Lady Malfoy's words would have seemed cordial, perhaps gently chiding, but nothing a mother who was concerned for her son’s future wouldn’t write. Abraxas knew better. Evangeline was very angry about the late January announcement of Marguerite Rosier’s engagement to Sebastian Lestrange. With the additional announcement of Josephine Longbottom’s betrothal to Jacob Selwyn only a week past, the number of potential Pureblooded brides of suitable age range and fortune who were more distant than second cousins was dwindling. He could read the threats between the lines, the veiled references to eliminating ‘distractions,’ which he knew referred to Patience. The missive ended with a warning that Evangeline was ready to make arrangements without his involvement if he didn’t put forth any effort. She had enclosed another list, this one with only five names, and had instructed him to rate the list in order of preference.

Of those listed, Abraxas had only met two: Hortentia Slughorn, Professor Slughorn’s niece, who was just a second year, and Iris Burke, a third cousin of his mother’s who was unmarried at twenty-three because she was notoriously disagreeable, even for a Burke. Iris had a habit of hexing anyone who sat near her at any family functions, and usually managed to get a corner table all to herself. The other three he knew by name: Olive Travers was not at Hogwarts yet – being only nine; Jesepa Crouch was in her fourth year at Beauxbatons because her parents considered women who graduated from Hogwarts not good wife material; and, finally, Maryanne Fawley, a twenty-five year old who’d gone into seclusion at seventeen when she’d caught a bad case of Dragon Pox and been scarred so badly that she refused to go out in public. His mother had wryly noted beside the last name that scars did not transfer to children.

Abraxas quickly composed two letters – a short, non-committal response to his mother that avoided the list altogether and a longer letter to his father asking for more time, reminding him subtly of his father’s own delay in getting engaged, and his approval at the Winter Solstice Ball of Abraxas’s
‘sowing of his wild oats.’ Though he hated to refer to his relationship to Patience in such a way, Gawain was a notorious womanizer, and there was no doubt he would be pleased to think of his son following in his self-styled Casanova footsteps. He immediately went up to the Owlery, trying to ignore the knots forming in his stomach.

He was worried that his mother would wear his father down, remind Gawain of their son’s duty to continue the Malfoy line one too many times, and then? Well, then there would be trouble on a massive scale. Once any type of engagement spell was performed (some of which could be started without his presence), his parents would find out about the bonds he’d made and try to break them, one way or another. He didn’t put it past his parents to try to have his bond mates killed, nor did he doubt for an instant that Tom would retaliate with equally deadly force. Abraxas was the happiest he’d ever been in his life, and he wanted to keep it that way. He was a worrier by virtue of his childhood, though, and he couldn’t shake the dread that was filling him.

Suddenly, as he rounded the last curve of the staircase that opened into the tower housing the owls, he felt lighter, buoyed by an odd joyfulness, a peaceful calm. It was only a few seconds later that the sensation intensified and he found himself face to face with Patience. She was standing in the middle of the room, absolutely still, her eyes closed. Despite the strong chill, she was without a robe, the early morning winter sun shining through the edges of her thin Oxford button-down, and the breeze blew the fine strands of her hair out in a halo around her face and shoulders. She looked like a Goddess, and Abraxas couldn’t imagine not worshipping her.

Since their initial bonding in September and the more intense bondings in November and December, he had been aware that being in the company of Patience was like taking calming draughts and Pepper-Up potions all at once. The closer she was, the more his skin felt abuzz, and his magic felt alive. Unlike with Tom, they were rarely alone – he never had much time with either Hermione or Patience without others around. His bond with the individual members of the group was usually drowned out by the collective, but right now, a door previously locked was opening in his mind, and Abraxas knew a truth he hadn’t before.

“We’re soulmates,” he breathed quietly, the words coming out in white puffs in the frozen air.

Her eyes opened and her mouth widened into a smile that was somehow innocent and knowing at once. “Of course we are.”

“How long have you known?” he asked, reaching out to pull her into his arms. She was soft and smelled like the ocean. The comfort increased exponentially. He could hardly breathe. Did he need to breathe if everything was perfect? Would it break the moment?

She leaned into him, her magic seemingly bottomless in the way it rolled over him, pulled him in, bathed him in love. “Forever.”
Abraxas didn’t scoff at that statement, or question it. Even Tom, perhaps one of the most skeptical people alive, didn’t doubt Patience. He held her closer, and simply drank her in. Their embrace was not sexual, it was deeper – a recognition of a part of one’s self in another. As long as he was in her arms, as long as he had her, Tom, and Hermione, he didn’t need to worry, he realized. What could stand against their love? Or against Fate itself, which had clearly brought two pairs of soul mates together to make a quartet of unbelievable power?

“You need to send your letters,” she spoke against his ear after several minutes of embracing. “Your mother will be angry, but your father will laugh.”

“How did I even come from them?” he pondered aloud, not really expecting an answer, as he tied his letters to Odysseus’s leg.

Patience turned as she tied a letter to her small grey owl, Iris. “It doesn’t matter who we are born to – we make ourselves.”

“Easy to say when your parents are perfectly lovely,” Abraxas’s mouth only formed half of a smile.

“They are wonderful, yes,” Patience agreed, coming to take his hand again. They watched their birds fly away. “They will want to meet you soon.”

“You haven’t told them that we…?” He couldn’t imagine meeting Patience’s parents if they had even the slightest inkling of the things what he had done with their daughter. After she’d point-blank told his father that they were sleeping together, he took nothing for granted with Patience.

She shook her head and he let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “But I did tell them that I’d found my soul mate. My parents are soul mates, too. They have always wanted that for me – the happiness they have.”

Abraxas’s chest tightened painfully. Patience’s hand immediately came up to cover his heart. “Don’t worry. They aren’t going to call on your parents to plan our wedding. My grandmother was a Black before she married a Longbottom.”

“A Black?” Abraxas raised his eyebrow. He couldn’t imagine Patience coming from the same bloodline as Sagitta, no matter how far removed, nor had he realized how close Patience was to being Pureblooded.
“Yes,” she nodded. “So I know all about angry Pureblooded relatives.” She brought her other hand down and threaded her fingers through his. “And my mother knows even more. Just because they are loving doesn’t mean that their lives have been easy.”

Abraxas flushed. “I didn’t mean-” What was it about Patience that made him practically incoherent?

“I know,” she hushed him with a soft, sweet kiss, barely a whisper of her lips against his. “Let’s get breakfast.”

Galatea was enjoying the quiet of an empty staff room, sipping lemon ginger tea by a roaring fire. Even though she’d mastered temperature spells decades ago, there was something about being soothed by a fire on a chilly winter morning that couldn’t be replicated with a warming charm. She was an early riser by nature, and on the mornings when Narcissa was occupied in the hospital wing, she usually reviewed lesson plans in the staff room.

The door opened and Professor Dumbledore entered, floating a brown-paper wrapped package the size and shape of an enormous book in front of him. He lowered it gently to the table, which groaned softly under the weight.

“Good morning, Galatea,” Dumbledore wore his usual bemused smile.

Galatea returned the expression with her lopsided grin. “Good morning, Albus. What in the world do you have there? It looks to be about a dozen copies of the unabridged version of *Hogwarts, A History.*”

“It’s actually *yours*, Galatea, or more accurately, your daughter’s,” he peered at her over his half-moon spectacles. “The ministry sent it poorly marked. The main addressee was simply Hogwarts, and it took both a cleansing and magnifying spell to read the ‘care of’ line. Apparently Miss Bonneau is doing a project on the history of marriage and bonding spells and laws?”

Though she had a very practiced ability to hide her emotions, Galatea knew that such an effort would be useless with Albus. They had highly compatible magic, and were tuned into one another from years of performing spells together as they broke curses and disenchanted objects. More than
that, though, he was her best friend at Hogwarts, a person she’d spent countless hours exploring the castle with, and equally countless hours drinking butter beer (or fire whiskey, on bad nights) while sharing her latest disappointment in love. Being a gay man in a world that didn’t welcome homosexual relationships, Albus had his own disappointments to share, and they had a strong bond. She was one of the few people who knew Albus had been in love with Gelwart Grindelwald in their youth, and though he didn’t talk extensively about his past, Galatea knew he felt deeply affected by how evil his former lover had become.

However, Galatea also knew that this ‘research’ project of Hermione’s was a cover for learning more about the permanent elemental quartet her adopted daughter had, in Galatea’s opinion, rushed headlong into at an inappropriately young age. The resulting bonds were a secret at the moment, and they were connected to other, much more dangerous secrets: the discovery of the Chamber, the creation of some kind of group that followed Tom and Hermione, that group’s mission to undermine Grindelwald, and the deepest secret, Hermione and Narcissa’s status as time-travelers.

She was certain Albus, who had always had an uncanny ability to know what students were up to, had already discerned part or all of many of these secrets, but she still had a sworn obligation, as well as several magical interventions placed on herself, to keep those secrets.

“You know Hermione, Albus,” she said lightly. “Her thirst for knowledge cannot be contained to the Hogwarts library.”

“Yes,” he hummed in reply, catching Galatea in an uncharacteristically sharp glance. “She won’t be contained at all, I think – not by her youth, school rules, the expectations of ingrained Pureblooded culture, the borders of countries, or even by international magical law.”

“Hermione is a brilliant young woman,” she held his gaze. “I don’t doubt she will leave her mark on our world for the better. Sometimes, that means thinking outside the bounds of common behavior. You and I are outside ‘common behavior’ in many ways, ourselves.”

For an instant, Albus’s expression lost its usual guard. “Galatea, I care about you and your family. Hermione and Tom are the brightest students I’ve seen, but they are acquiring followers and power at a rate that will only be matched by the enemies they will soon have. I fear their plans may be beyond their current level of skill, and that the consequences of their rash behavior could be… catastrophic.”

“When we see our students being bullied over blood purity and pushed into betrothals still as children, isn’t it time to challenge the status quo? To do something about all the injustice and bad behavior on display?” Galatea asked, letting out some of the anger Hermione’s speech over the break had awakened in her.
She felt her anger grow as she continued. “When our world is in danger, and seems on the verge of burning down around us, isn’t that the time for the brave and capable to act, even when the odds of failure or loss are stacked against us? It isn’t only the adults who feel the price of all the war, both magical and muggle engulfing us right now, Albus. There is a muggle saying about the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. But these children aren’t us. They are smarter and braver, and we can’t expect that they will follow our example and do nothing.”

Albus flinched, as if she had struck him. He didn’t speak for several tense seconds, then answered quietly. “These particular sins have nothing to do with these children, but I think you are right. It is time for the brave and capable to act, especially those who bear some of the weight of Grindelwald’s actions.”

Galatea felt her face soften as she reached out a hand, touching her friend’s shoulder. “Albus, Grindelwald’s beliefs and actions are his own, no matter what mistakes were made in your youth. All we are responsible for is whether or not we allow him to continue destroying our world unchecked.”

“I’ve avoided the problem for years now,” Albus sighed. “Our whole country has. The Wizengamot has been mute on the pain and suffering we’ve seen, but the people are turning against the silence. I suppose it was naïve of me to imagine that our students wouldn’t hear and respond with the brash bravery of youth. Since the liberation of Fontaine du Puissance, and the escalation of this second muggle ‘world war’, there has been a growing call for action. Perhaps I must shake the sand from my ears and set to work.”

He exited the room, looking lost in his thoughts. Galatea felt slightly bad about triggering the guilt she knew he carried over his past with Grindelwald, but only slightly. Everything she had said was true, and his rumination over the need to act was a temporary distraction from his sharp mind examining the actions of Hermione and Tom and their followers.

She’d protested to Hermione that the Ministry was doing something about Grindelwald’s behavior on the continent, but when she’d begun to make discreet inquiries with her friends and former students in the defensive and international departments at the Ministry, she’d been shocked to find out that little to nothing was happening, that the policy was still ‘wait and see,’ over three years into all-out war just across the English Channel. Galatea didn’t want to see Hermione hurt, but she wasn’t about to stop her from trying to make the world a better place.

Turning back to the table, she stared at the bundle of papers. She’d need to brush up on her librarian skills charms to search efficiently through the thousands of pages there, but she was the Head of Ravenclaw House for a reason, and research was more delightful than daunting. With Narcissa and Hermione’s help, she had no doubt they’d have their answers, good or bad, within a
few days.

In a change from the normal way of things, Tom had avoided Hermione, specifically being alone in her company, for nearly a week. They worked side by side in classes, and went over Grindlewald’s movements and potential plans for their next mission in the Chamber, but he rarely touched her other than to pass ingredients or a text.

This change by omission was noticed by everyone, but no one mentioned it, especially since Hermione didn’t seem to be bothered. She smiled at him the same amount as usual, wore her Slytherin locket in full view, and participated fully in all spells and discussions. Tom did not return her smiles, however, and his expression was strangely bland toward everyone, as if he were wearing a handsome, but immoveable mask.

Even when Abraxas had excitedly announced to the group, now that the bond kept all secrets safe, that he and Patience were soul mates, Tom had barely reacted. He murmured something about that being wonderful for the strength of their quartet, and went back to translating a spell for enhancing disillusionment charms, occasionally hissing with Apep’s portrait, as the spell was written in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The past two evenings, after the group had dispersed, Tom had remained in the Chamber, and had even slept there. He did so again this evening, hanging back as Hermione and Patience linked arms with Abraxas and went up the tunnel path toward the greenhouses. He wasn’t truly alone, because Damballa was curled up in front of the fire, Apep watched him from his secure location on the mantle, and even Astarte had poked her enormous head through the door to the library area. Snake, human, or somewhere in between, they all had comments on Tom’s current mood.

Damballa was unapologetically pro-Hermione. *Your bond with your mate is stronger, but you are upset. You are foolish.*

*You know nothing,* Tom dismissed him, still focusing on the faded spell etched on papyrus.

*The bright one is right,* Astarte hissed, using her nickname for the nearly neon tropical snake. *Your magic mate is too entwined with your soul, with your magic to cut her out. Why are you trying?*

*She isn’t one of us,* Apep managed to both sniff haughtily and hiss all at once. *Are you sure she is*
your true magic mate? Why would fate give you one who doesn’t match your skill?

At that, the veneer of calm Tom had been cultivating vanished. The papyrus was set ablaze in his hands, turned to ash in seconds, and he stood, advancing with a furious expression toward the fireplace. How dare you! She is mine, and has more magic than you have ever dreamed of. Disrespect towards her is disrespect to me. I don’t value your input so much that I wouldn’t dash you into a million pieces if you speak about her in such a way again.

If a snake could smirk, Astarte would have been doing so. You defend her, as you should. She is a part of you. So why do you fear her?

Go away, Astarte. Find some dinner. Tom didn’t look her way, even though her clouded eyes posed no danger. He stared down at the remnants of the spell he had been very interested in and cursed loudly.

Apep was silent, his face turned sideways, though he kept darting glances toward Tom, clearly unsettled by his threats.

Damballa was not put off though. He’d been Tom’s familiar for five years, but he’d also lived many months of those years in Hermione’s company. In the summers, he often slept in her room, curled up at her feet, especially since she was more comfortable with touch and closeness than Tom was. She would cast warming spells on him on chilly nights and spray down his scales with mist on hot days. Tom’s magic mate, and even her stupid, fluffy fur ball of a familiar, were precious to him.

The Queen Snake speaks true, Damballa wound around and through Tom’s ankles. Trying to ignore your mate will only hurt you.

Perhaps because he was not relaying his thoughts in English, Tom felt safer, but he still surprised himself when he abruptly hissed, She read my mind, my thoughts. Before, she could only sense my moods, not pluck the words from my head. This is unacceptable.

That is indeed grave, Apep finally spoke again.

Stupid snake-man, Damballa’s hisses were more like snarls, and if Apep had been flesh before him, it was clear the snake would have bitten him. You reek of fear. No wonder the humans hated you so. Weak things are disgusting. Master’s mate is not a threat; she is his strength.
I would make you into bindings for my books, Apep glared down. You know nothing of life for a Parselmouth. The young one is right to be concerned another is in his mind.

Enough! The sound of Tom’s voice carried through the room, bouncing off the tiled walls. IF I have need of your council, I will inform you.

Master, Heir of the Greatest Magical Bloodline, Astarte soothed, her deep, low hisses more of a song than speech. Know that your mate does not violate your mind. Over time, the soul mate bond naturally deepens to this point. Your ancestor, Salazar, shared thoughts with Godric, and even with the other founders in his elemental quartet. He was angry with it as well, and it was one of the reasons he left. Think of all he could have accomplished if he had stayed. Nothing should control one as powerful as you, especially not fear.

Tom didn’t respond. He left the room instead, slamming the door to the bedchamber, and throwing himself on the canopied bed. Snakes were considered lone animals by the world, not social. How surprised most people would be to learn just how nosy snakes were, Tom thought bitterly. As annoyed as he was at their interference, he knew at the level of logic and intellect that Damballa and Astarte were right. On the level of emotion, of his deeply ingrained need to protect himself, he was more aligned with Apep.

He didn’t look like a snake, didn’t have Apep’s clearly non-human features, but at the orphanage, in his early years in the muggle world, Tom had felt apart, clearly different, and the word ‘freak’ had been bandied about more than once, before he’d had enough control over his magic to defend himself. There had been older boys who had tormented him, and that feeling of being weak, of being the prey, not the predator, was not something he would ever allow again.

Hermione was not a tormentor, of course, but she had invaded his mind, whether it had been intentional or not. She’d heard the spell in Parseltongue he had been about to say, and had repeated it aloud. Tom had become used to sharing his magic, to telling Hermione and Abraxas and Patience that he valued them, to acknowledging that they were a part of him, indispensible. But his mind was the last bastion – the last place that was his alone, except for the occasional moments when Patience spoke in his mind.

Patience’s skills were different, though. She didn’t read his mind or share his thoughts regularly. Her abilities seemed clearly part of her Seer abilities, not those of a natural-born legilimens. She went into people’s minds when she was connecting with the stream of time, either past or future. And because that information was a weapon Tom wished to possess, he tolerated this sporadic talent of his pet.
In contrast, Hermione had simply entered his mind, or his had entered hers, with no prompting beyond their regular touch and passion for one another. As lovely and powerful as the sex had been, it hadn’t been unusual for them. Tom feared that meant what Astarte had mentioned – that sharing thoughts was a natural extension of a strong soul mate bond. Hermione struggled with his darkness so much already. What would happen if she could share all of his thoughts? Since the quartet had finalized their bonds, Tom’s violent urges had softened somewhat, but they had not disappeared, nor would they. He wasn’t ready for constant company inside his mind, and he didn’t believe his soul mate was either, both due to her love of ‘healthy boundaries’ and the stark reality of his darkness fully exposed to her.
Feelings Are Not Tom's Forte

Chapter Summary

More of Grindelwald's plans get foiled, people get saved, Hermione does research, Patience helps, Tom pouts and plots, Marguerite asks a favor, Tom gets in touch with his feelings, and Hermione gets in touch with her elemental magic. It's over 10K of plotty fun.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the well wishes. I popped a rib out of place and was confined to bed for a few days, so here's my gift to you, my lovely readers.

Early March, 1943

“You are safe now,” Narcissa’s calm tone was reassuring, and her French was impeccable. She was readjusting the wards on her cottage in Hogsmeade for the thirteen people who had just arrived from various areas across France.

These particular people, a wandmaker and her apprentice, a renowned healer, a master potion maker, and a natural born legilimens (along with spouses and children in some cases), had all been listed in the book Abraxas and Marguerite had ‘liberated’ over the break. Grindelwald wanted their talents, and the group, with the help of Galatea and Narcissa, had sent warnings of the danger coming their way, along with an invitation to Hogsmeade, where a safe house would be made available to any who chose to leave.

All five had responded immediately, and Narcissa, Hermione, and Galatea had spent last night and the early morning casting protective wards around the property, and had enlisted a bemused but supportive Professor Beery (who was outspoken on his opinion of Grindelwald, and the need to stop him) as the secret keeper for the safe house.

“Safe is relative at best,” Francine, the wandmaker, a woman who looked hale and hearty, even for someone in her magical nineties, frowned. “This country is under attack, too, you know. Muggle bullets and bombs can pierce magical wards. My apprentice, Jacques, came from a wizarding village in Northern France that was completely destroyed from being too close to a muggle village that is also rubble now.”
Jacques nodded quietly beside his mentor. He was thin and reedy, like the wands he was studying to create, and he’d brought his parents, a quiet middle-aged couple who looked as though they still hadn’t processed what was happening. “The English are bombed most of all. Between Grindelwald and the Nazis, I don’t know if there is such a thing as safe.”

“Hogsmeade has excellent village-wide protections in place, and this area hasn’t been the focus of muggle air raids,” Narcissa tried to soothe the clearly frazzled nerves of the people before her. “In addition, this property has been given fresh, extended wards from a Master of Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“But this is only temporary, isn’t it?” Henri, the healer, asked as he nervously stroked at his dark beard. His wife and their three children stood in a cluster just behind him.

“You are hoping your Ministry will help us, aren’t you?” Paul cut in. “They should. We are a talented group. I’d think they would offer us asylum and jobs. I am a Master at Potions,” he sniffed, adding in a level of sarcasm that could only be truly conveyed in the French language, “we don’t grow on trees, after all.”

His wife, who looked as smug as her husband, nodded in agreement, rubbing her pregnant belly, and holding the hand of a small child.

Alison, the youngest in the group, barely twenty, with a round, innocent face that belied her inherent ability to read other’s minds, gave a nervous giggle. Paul turned to glare at her. She quickly looked at the floor, clearly used to people being uncomfortable in her presence.

“Yes, I am certain that Galatea will be returning soon with news from the Ministry. After Fontaine de Puissance, the government has extended asylum to those fleeing from Grindelwald. There simply isn’t a good system in place for handling the process yet, and we wanted to get you out of danger as soon as possible. I’m confident that we’ll have permanent places for you to go within two weeks.”

Narcissa led the group into the sitting room, noting gratefully that Hermione had transfigured the coffee tables into additional settees. “I’m sure everyone could do with some coffee or tea. Make yourselves comfortable, and I’ll be right back.”

Though she could have called for one or more of the Merrythought elves, Narcissa welcomed the chance to be alone for a moment. She walked to the kitchen and set water to boiling magically,
levitating cups and small snacks onto a large tray.

When Hermione had come to her and Galatea two nights ago with the list of names, the three women had immediately sat down to create a sustainable plan. They all recognized the need to get Grindelwald’s targets out of France, both for their own safety and to keep their powers from being used, but they had to find a way to do so that wouldn’t identify themselves as specific threats that would draw Grindelwald’s attention. They decided on a plan of anonymous letters, signed 'your friends from England,' with instructions for meeting in the town square of Hogsmeade. Rented owls were used, along with common parchment and ink.

By themselves, the letters might have been dismissed as a hoax, or even a trap, but combined with the recent, well-publicized events in Fontaine de Puissance and Auge (whose population had decided to flee the village after all, leaving a deserted town with no healing waters or crystals for Grindelwald to find), the word had spread through occupied magical Europe that aid was arriving in mysterious ways.

“May I help?” Alison’s voice came from the doorway. She hovered there until Narcissa nodded.

“There isn’t a need, but if you’d like to,” Narcissa motioned to the cabinet with the small plates.

Alison deftly floated the plates to the serving tray, her magic contained and neat, the delicate china not making a single clink as it landed. “This room is so quiet,” she sighed softly. “It’s such a relief to be in the company of a natural occlumens.”

Narcissa raised a brow. She had worked hard her entire life to keep that secret about herself, had allowed certain thoughts to be at the surface of her mind for easy reading, to disguise her true skill. “I’m not,” she said flatly, hoping to shut down the conversation.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Alison assured her with a broad, innocent smile. “But you are. I know the difference between a thought and the projection of one. It’s like your mind is a fortress, with a moat of fake thoughts floating outside. Those fake thoughts don’t scream at me or crowd my mind like other people’s real thoughts.”

There wasn’t much to say to that, and Narcissa reminded herself that Voldemort didn’t exist in this timeline, nor did any of the other people who, in her old life, had constantly tried to invade her mind. “It is a very good thing you are here, safe from being used by Grindelwald,” Narcissa finally murmured.
“My talents are always in danger of being exploited,” Alison’s smooth brow creased into a frown. “It’s why I live alone, and try to keep my ‘gift’ a secret. I’m not even sure how Grindelwald found out.”

“How do you survive?” Narcissa allowed some of her curiosity out as she prepared the pots of coffee and tea.

Alison got out the sugar and creamer, putting them on the tray. “I’ve always had a talent for making and repairing clothes, and since I can usually tell exactly how a person wants an outfit to look, it isn’t hard to please customers. My parents both died fighting Grindelwald, and I’m an only child, so I had a little inheritance that I invested in nice sewing materials,” her face crumpled into a momentary look of despair. “I had to leave that all behind though.”

Over five years of living in a stable, terror-free environment, in the company of her soul mate and the new family she’d created, as well as many dear friends, had softened Narcissa, or more accurately, had allowed her nurturing instinct to flourish. In her past, all of her love and mothering had been channeled into Draco and only him. Now, she was no longer conservative with her affection, nor afraid to show that she cared.

Her arms embraced the younger woman, who gladly accepted the gesture. “I will be happy to replace anything you need to start over, Alison.”

There was a soft pop, announcing Galatea’s return. Alison drew back, glancing toward her. “You didn’t tell the Ministry about me,” she switched to heavily accented English.

Galatea shook her head, crossing over to kiss Narcissa’s cheek in greeting. “No, Alison. I admit I don’t fully trust any government, even my own, with access to your considerable abilities. If the whole point of getting you here was to keep you safe, I’d be doing a poor job if I exposed you.”

Alison looked at her for a long moment, her face wearing a shocked expression. “You really mean that. You truly want me to be safe, and you don’t want to use me for any advantage,” she spoke slowly, as though putting together a complex idea in her mind. “You are a very, very good person. One of the best I’ve ever met.”

Blushes didn’t often form on Galatea’s face, but she went positively scarlet at the praise. “Yes, well, thank you. That’s a kind thing to say,” she looked down at the tea tray and drew her wand from where she’d tucked it into the top of her high riding boots. “Let’s get back to the others.”
Narcissa smiled as her soul mate hurried out of the room, levitating the tray in front of her. Galatea struggled with receiving praise, and it was nice to have the things Narcissa told her frequently to little effect confirmed by an outside source. “Hogsmeade doesn’t have its own seamstress shop right now. You’re welcome to stay here and use the front rooms for your business. We’ll be at Hogwarts until the summer, and we can see if you’re ready for your own place by then.”

Alison’s eyes shone with moisture. “The last few years have been so hard, so terrifying. To have such help, such kind support all at once…I feel like I must be dreaming.”

“Well, let’s step back into the parlor and you’ll know you’re not by the barrage of thoughts,” Narcissa gently teased.

“I suppose we must,” Alison sighed, then gave a saucy grin. “Would you like to know how many people in that room had wicked thoughts about you?”

“No,” Narcissa’s eyebrows shot up as she took Alison’s arm. “I most decidedly would not.”

Hermione didn’t go back to the cottage after the group had arrived. She trusted both her mothers to handle the situation, and she was reluctant to be in Alison’s company. Hermione was fairly certain the woman was actually more of a telepath than a natural legilimens. Where most born legilimens could chose when and on whom to use their skill, Alison simply heard thoughts indiscriminately. Hermione had too many secrets to keep, and she didn’t have Narcissa’s natural defenses, nor Galatea’s magical ones.

More than once over the past five years, Hermione had considered using magical interventions to protect her knowledge of the future, to spell herself in some of the ways Galatea had, but had always decided against such actions. Those kinds of strong, deep spells would leave a mark on her, a mark Tom would notice in a heartbeat.

His rapidly increasing skill in legilimency was worrisome, and Hermione had correspondingly increased her evening occulumency training sessions with Narcissa. Though she was under no illusion that her shields would ever rival her mother’s, Hermione needed to make sure her ability to protect her mind stayed just beyond Tom’s ability to invade it.

Not that Tom was coming near her at the moment. All her hard work at learning the difficult art of
occultumency might have been wasted, she knew, if their soul mate bond strengthened to the point where their minds were open to one another. She hadn’t heard the barest whisper of Tom’s thoughts since that night in the Chamber, nor had she felt much from him. He had consciously pulled away from their bond, and even though that was probably for the best right now, the absence of his fiery magic, of his constant underlying appreciation and passion for her, left Hermione feeling like a part of her had been ripped away.

She had been drawing harder on her connection with Patience to fill the empty space, and she knew Tom was drawing on Abraxas. Their elemental bonds felt lop-sided and unpleasant. This was not a good time to be pulling away from one another, since Abraxas’s mother was pushing hard on the betrothal situation.

Hermione shook her head and concentrated on the stacks of Ministry documents in front of her. She’d gone to Narcissa’s quarters, since Galatea had sorted the documents there for privacy. Patience had accompanied her, but her ‘help’ seemed to be limited to changing the colors of the parchment and occasionally playing with Hermione’s hair. The papers were in neat groups by century, then in stacks by decade. Galatea had created several referencing and keyword spells to help expedite the process, but there was still the need to simply invest the time to thoroughly read large chunks of text.

Much of the paperwork pre-dated the Ministry, being merely copies of family betrothal and bonding agreements that had been filed later with the Ministry archives as proof in various legal disputes over the years involving everything from blood status to property claims to fights over magical patents. She’d even come across a twenty page document arguing that the Mirror of Erised belonged by marriage to the Nott family, and that if and when the Mirror surfaced, the Nott family’s claims to it would supersede any others. Hermione had shaken her head, thinking that if only one Nott in several generations had bothered to explore Hogwarts, they might have found it. In fact, it was in the castle right now, though Hermione knew from Harry’s experience that it was a dangerous object. The Notts were welcome to waste away in front of it, as far as she was concerned.

Much of the other paperwork was similarly unhelpful, and Hermione’s head was aching a few hours later. Though she loved research when it involved magic, these documents were positively mundane – all legal terms and claims, no interesting theories or spells. Also, she was enraged by the number of documents that presented witches as chattel to be traded between fathers, brothers, and husbands, with no reference to the power they possessed in their own right. This was not the way she would have preferred to spend her Saturday, and in the background of her mind, she amused herself by devising curses for Evangeline Malfoy.

“I made some tea, and fetched a headache potion from your mother’s cabinet,” Hermione looked up to see Patience standing above her, holding out a teacup and a small vial.
“Thanks,” Hermione murmured, drinking the potion quickly, then taking the cup, careful not to spill over the stacks of paper surrounding her.

Patience walked around the stacks, coming to sit behind Hermione, rubbing her shoulders and neck gently. She was humming and between the loving touch and the potion, Hermione felt herself relax.

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” she finally admitted what she’d been struggling against for two days.

Patience’s fingers moved up to make small circles at Hermione’s temples. “Oh, I don’t know. I have a good feeling about chartreuse.”

“What?” Hermione blinked, looking over to where Patience had been ‘sorting’ papers from the 1600’s. They were no longer in any kind of recognizable stack. Instead, they were a jumble of different colors and lengths – like Patience had thrown them up into the air, cast a rainbow spell, and let them fall as they may. As much as it pained Hermione to see messes, she had learned that Patience’s messes were always special.

She leaned forward, crawling past a few stacks to reach the pile, digging through violet, pink, brown, yellow and orange spotted, blue, and black and white striped papers to find a thick sheath of pages tied together that could only be described as chartreuse. The paper was actually vellum, likely deer or cow skin cured and scraped to be nearly transparent. The ink was a startling shade of bright blue, but whether that was original to the document or Patience’s work, Hermione didn’t know.

“I can feel these papers are a center point, connected to many others,” Patience had come to sit beside her again.

“Connected like other documents refer back to these ones?” Hermione asked absently, though she didn’t expect Patience to answer. Her best friend’s help was rarely straightforward.

Instead, she focused on the papers, reading intently while Patience braided her hair. On the surface, it was a civil complaint for a breach of contract. George and Marian Travers were suing Thomas and Jemima Fawley. The Travers’ son, Mathias, was betrothed to marry the Fawleys’ daughter, Sybilla. The match had been arranged when the children were five, with the understanding that permanent betrothal bonds would be performed when the children turned sixteen. During the ten years of ‘understanding,’ the Travers claimed they had spent much upon their daughter-in-law-to-be, paying for Sybilla to have language and music lessons, and sending her elaborate and expensive
gifts, including a pet phoenix for her thirteenth birthday. According to their account, Mathias was also quite in love with Sybilla, and gave her access to several Travers’ family magical secrets that were invaluable.

The love had turned sour when the families attempted to perform the betrothal spells and found that Sybilla’s magic rejected all bonds. When a specialist was brought in, he announced that the Fawleys’ daughter was already bound to not one other, but three other magical signatures. At this point, the Fawleys took their daughter home to question her themselves, but the damage was done. The Travers were enraged at the insult to their family honor, they sued, and the case eventually went before the Wizengamot.

The Fawleys made a response, of course. They claimed that the agreement was never binding, and that it only would have been if the official betrothal had taken place. Since it didn’t, they saw themselves in the clear. Sybilla, they said, had not purposely done any wrong. She and three of her cousins with whom she was raised quite closely had inadvertently and innocently formed a magical elemental quartet over the summer of their fourteenth years while practicing to make their magic stronger. The cousins were listed as Xandria Greengrass, Jonathan Abbott, and Henry Rowle, and the Travers’ next response pulled those families into the litigation, naming them as defendants as well.

As the case continued, the allegations became much nastier, especially since each of the three cousins, being Purebloods, was also involved in some kind of betrothal arrangement, and those families entered in complaints as well. Threats of duels and family curses were made. Both Sybilla and Xandria were required by the court to undergo examinations to prove they were still had their ‘maidenhoods,’ and all four cousins were given Veritaserum and questioned by the Wizengamot. They maintained that all spells used were from treatises on making their magic stronger, that they had had no inappropriate relations with one another, and that they had not intentionally created the permanent bonds.

These responses satisfied the Wizengamot as far as proving that no malice had been intended, nor had any of the cousins consciously tried to break their understanding with any other family. They did lecture the parents on not supervising the children’s magical efforts. Several of the families applied to the Wizengamot for help in breaking the elemental bonds that had been formed, but, though the court found no fault, they also maintained that the elemental bonds were prime and permanent, and could not be broken without harming those bonded. The final decision of the court was ten pages long, written in tiny, cramped script that warned of the dangers of homeschooling children, of allowing them unlimited access to magical texts, and of not performing ‘watching’ charms to ensure that children didn’t enter into any magical contracts or bonds without parents’ knowledge. The decision also lamented the decline of elemental bonds, labeling them as the ‘grandest of connections, capable of increasing an individual’s magic many times over,’ and ‘almost negating entirely the worry of low magic or squib offspring,’ and recommended that the parents betroth the bonded children.

There were a few appeals, but none went far. Hermione went over to the stack that held marriage
records from the 1600s and found that after the case was concluded, Xandria Greengrass was quietly married to Henry Rowle, and Sybilla was married to Jonathan Abbott. The two couples had side by side estates, and between the four of them, produced ten magical patents, five new charms, a salve that helped greatly with the pain of Dragon Pox scars, and several compositions on the fairy flute. They were clearly powerful and enlightened couples who used their elemental bonds throughout their lives.

Though neither of the couples was involved in any other cases, the Travers v/s Fawley case was referenced several times in the 17th and 18th centuries as proof that some bonds did supersede betrothal agreements. Hermione used Galatea’s spells to summon all documents that mentioned the case, and she found that it was never contested, and there was even a small exception clause added to the Ministry Laws on Marriage and Betrothal Contracts and Bindings that permanent elemental bonds held precedence over other bonds, if performed prior to any engagement contract. That footnote was added in 1758, and as far as Hermione could find, nothing ever changed or weakened that ruling.

Hermione smiled broadly, neatly placing all the pertinent papers in a magically expanding folder, then restacking and putting all the other documents on a bookshelf in the corner. She turned to Patience, who was now on her back, using her wand to make fire runes.

As she saw the flames cutting through the air, Hermione felt a pang of loss again. “How is Tom?” she asked quietly, putting her folder away in her satchel and lying down beside Patience. “Can you feel him at all? I’m cut off.”

“Lonely,” Patience responded, tracing the rune for ‘loss.’ “He doesn’t want to admit that he came to rely on us, on how our emotions feed him, help him to be more human. We’ve been slowly dismantling his defenses, and you breached the inner walls. If it had been anyone else, he would have attacked. But it was you, so he retreated.”

Without warning, tears streamed from Hermione’s eyes, running down her cheeks, pooling in the hair at her temples and sliding over her ears. “I didn’t do it on purpose. I respect the privacy of his mind – of everyone’s mind. Tom knows that.”

Patience put out her arm, and Hermione cuddled into her side. It was a comforting position, one that they used nearly every night. Hermione’s cheek seemed to fit perfectly in the place just below Patience’s collarbone, and her arm rested easily across the taller girl’s slender waist. “Tom knows a lot of things, but he isn’t thinking clearly right now. He’s obsessed with defending himself, cutting back connections that make him stronger. You need to go to him.”

“And say what, exactly?” Hermione huffed. “He’s impossible when he gets into this kind of mood.
I think I need to wait it out, that he’ll come around after his panic clears.”

Patience shook her head. “This is the kind of panic that settles in and takes root. You have to be the breath of fresh air that clears it away. Abraxas has been championing your cause, but you need to be your own champion right now.”

With a heavy sigh, Hermione twisted her face into Patience’s shirt. “Why do I always have to be the grown-up?” she mumbled.

“Because you’re the oldest and the smartest and the best,” Patience kissed the top of her head.

“Can we just pretend we didn’t have this conversation for at least another hour? Can we just stay here by the fire and cuddle?” Hermione pleaded.

Patience pulled out her wand and transfigured two large, fluffy pillows. She placed them under their heads, then pulled Hermione against her once more, a wide smile on her face.

“I love you,” Hermione breathed as she kissed the line of Patience’s jaw. “Thank you for all you do.”

“I’ll always be the respite you need, Hermione,” Patience answered. “Your care is both my duty and my privilege.”

Hermione laughed and shook her head. “That makes you sound like a vassal to a queen. We’re equals, Patience.”

“As people, yes,” Patience’s voice was grave now. “But as vital to the future of the world of magic? You are my Lady. I will always serve you.”

“A leader is only as strong as those who choose to follow her,” Hermione protested. “If it weren’t for your faith in me, for your strength added to mine, I sometimes think I’d have given up and run away years ago.”

Now Patience laughed. “There’s no version of time where you don’t face your fears, bravely.”
Dealing with Tom will be no different. But first, let me help you relax all that tension.”

Patience’s hands were wandering to delightful places, and Hermione wisely stopped talking.

After borrowing Patience’s bracelet and grabbing the small, charmed mirror Narcissa had given her shortly after they’d arrived in the past, Hermione went to the bathroom entrance to the Chamber and made her way down alone. The odds were at least ninety percent that Astarte would be curled up asleep in the outer chamber area since it was daylight, but Hermione still used the compact mirror to navigate corners until she was sure.

Patience had told her that she was meeting Abraxas on the quidditch pitch to go flying together, and that she was certain Tom would be in the chamber. Hermione needed to spend some time in the chamber library anyhow. She was working on a healing spell to counteract that cursed cut Tom had made on Marguerite’s cheek, and she was sure something in one of the ancient Celtic texts would help.

As she approached the library, she cleared her mind, testing her mental shields. She didn’t expect Tom to try legilimency on her, at least not today, but Tom was never predictable, especially when he was angry, and his cold anger was the worst.

When she entered, she was surprised to see Marguerite sitting at one of the long tables beside Tom, the two of them pouring over the copy of Grindelwald’s book. A flare of jealousy tried to catch fire inside of her at the sight of them together, but Hermione snuffed it out with brutal efficiency.

“Hermione,” Marguerite looked up and motioned her over. “There is a bunch of new information in the book. It showed up about two hours ago.”

Tom said nothing as she crossed over to Marguerite’s other side, leaning over her shoulder to look down at the book. “Two hours ago. That would have given Grindelwald’s people enough time to find out that the five people he listed last week have gone missing.”

“Yes,” Marguerite nodded excitedly, her dark braid bouncing against her back. “He’s accused his generals of harboring a saboteur. There’s a meeting called,” she turned the page to the map and stabbed her finger against a red dot in what looked like only forest in the border area between France and Germany.
Hermione squinted. “What is that place? It isn’t even labeled as a town or any kind of landmark,” she thought back to her muggle geography and history lessons. “It looks like the Ardennes mountain range.”

“That’s right, and after I pulled out a map,” Marguerite gestured to the paper under the book, “we saw that this part is actually in Luxembourg, an area completely controlled by Grindelwald at the moment.”

“But why have a meeting in the forest?” Hermione asked. “He has any number of towns under his control. He even has a huge prison he could summon his followers to.”

“There’s no mess to clean up out of doors,” Tom finally spoke, though he still didn’t look at Hermione. “And a forest is an excellent place to bury bodies.”

“The date he gave for the meeting is two weeks away, on Ostara. Grindelwald is known to revere the magical yearly cycles, and a Spring Equinox ceremony could be used to boost power,” Marguerite mused.

Hermione picked up her unspoken thought. “And a magical sacrifice of a traitor during that ceremony would let him absorb that person’s power.”

“But none of his generals have actually betrayed him. Well, at least not on this matter,” Marguerite’s mouth curved into a smirk. “How are the new arrivals?”

“Fine. My mother and Galatea are seeing to them. Hopefully, they’ll be moved on to other, spread out places within a few weeks. They are safe for now, and out of Grindelwald’s reach.”

Marguerite’s eyes flicked back to the writing in the book, which was scrawled, clearly written in an angry rush. “That’s going to be quite a party.”

“There’s a week break around this time,” Tom added. “So that will be the perfect cover for the group’s plans.”

“You want to try to go to the ceremony that Grindelwald is planning to use to punish his followers, and probably kill some of them?” Marguerite asked calmly.
Hermione had been thinking the same, but she didn’t want to open the floodgates of arguing with Tom until they were alone.

Tom glanced at her. “Is that a problem? You are supposed to be my lieutenant, the most trusted in the group after my elemental quartet. That position carries responsibilities.”

Watching the two Slytherins was like watching a play of masked performers. Both of them wore bland expressions, with no emotion exposed.

“There are many potential problems with going, but none of them involve my loyalty or willingness to put myself in danger to further our goals,” Marguerite answered smoothly. Not for the first time, Hermione thought she’d make an excellent politician.

“My mother is, however, planning my binding betrothal ceremony to Sebastian over the break, and most members of the group and their families will be invited. We’ll need to factor that into the timeline, or you’ll have to leave Sebastian and myself behind.”

“Fine,” Tom made a brushing motion with his hand, as if discussing a small substitution to a potion for class. “We have a few weeks to plan. Get me the details about the betrothal party as soon as possible.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Marguerite bowed her head slightly, taking care to reinforce her submission with the title she knew Tom craved, and rose from her chair with an easy smile that didn’t make it to her eyes.

She turned to Hermione. “It’s traditional to have a female relative close in age stand up for one in the betrothal ceremony, similar to a bride’s maid at an actual wedding. I know we are quite distant cousins, but the alternatives are Sagitta, who hates me, or Josephine, who also hates me.”

“Won’t your mother protest? I’m not pureblooded,” Hermione was oddly touched by Marguerite’s request.

“Your mother is, you come from a family even wealthier than mine, and you have a title,” Marguerite shrugged. “I’m not pledging to marry you, so I think we’ll be fine.”
“Then, yes, certainly, I will stand up with you.” Hermione wanted to smile, but knew Marguerite would take that as a display of pity.

“Excellent, I can cross that off the list of 101 tasks my mother is having me complete before the ceremony. You’ll have to wear a dress that matches mine in color and cut, but if you could make yourself look as plain as possible, it will exponentially decrease the likelihood that my mother will try to hex you,” Marguerite sighed. “I’ll get you the information tomorrow.”

She didn’t wait for any further reply, and Hermione was still processing the fact that Marguerite had asked her a favor, a favor one would only ask of close family, when she heard the door to the bedroom slam.

Tom had left while she’d been staring after Marguerite. That did not bode well. She considered Patience’s words about chasing after him, but decided she’d give him at least a few minutes. She crossed over to the shelves and found a few books that she was sure would help her heal Marguerite’s scar, a job that was vital to get finished before Orpha saw her daughter over the break.

It took about a half-hour to take down the notes she needed and gather a few of the more unusual salve ingredients from the magical stores the group kept stocked down in the Chamber. Everyone in the group had brought something rare, in addition to the common herbs and ingredients, and their shelves and drawers were starting to look like a collection that Professor Snape himself would be proud of.

Deciding that she’d delayed as long as she could or should, Hermione packed away her notes and supplies in her bag, then walked to the bedroom. She put her hand on the door and immediately yanked it back. The handle was burning hot, and it took three repetitions of a cooling, healing spell to ease the blisters on her hand.

Now, she was angry, and angry Hermione had a tendency to set aside logic, as well as all thoughts of consequences. He was being a childish bastard. If he wanted to fight with fire, she’d return the favor. She reached into their bond, aggressively. Up until now, she had let him retreat, had not tested or prodded at him. With the full force of her magic, she blasted through his walls, grabbed hold of her link to his elemental magic, and promptly set the door ablaze, reducing it to ash within seconds.

Tom was standing on the other side, watching her through the haze of smoke and floating embers. His eyes reflected the fire, seemed to be on fire themselves.
“Why is it so hard for you to know when you’re not wanted?” he hissed.

And just like that, Hermione’s anger deflated, replaced by a hurt so deep she felt raw, like all her faults and vulnerabilities were exposed. She turned and ran, thinking that she’d made Patience into a liar. She wasn’t brave. She ran up the ramp that came out near the greenhouses, blasting the entrance rock away and haphazardly floating it back into place even as she continued to run. It was early March, so dusk had already fallen, making the outline of Hogwarts many roof levels and towers only slightly less menacing than the jagged tree line of the Forbidden Forest. In her first version of Hogwarts, she would have gone directly to Hagrid’s, would have cried in his enormous, wet dog and other creature-smelling arms, while he patted her frizzy hair awkwardly and tried to give her weak tea and rocks disguised as biscuits.

One of her greatest fears, perhaps the oldest and most deeply rooted in her psyche, was that of being unwanted. Her parents loved her, gave her every advantage they could, and yet, she knew she’d been an accident. She’d overheard her mother speaking to a friend when she was little, and she’d never forget those words.

“Aren’t you going to have another child?” the friend asked. “It’s best to keep them close in age, and Hermione is already five.”

“No,” her mother laughed. “Hermione was an accident – a happy one – but definitely not planned. Neither of us had a burning desire for children, so one is plenty. And, she’s a little handful, all by herself. I’m glad she’s smart, but all the questions! That child could wear out an entire panel of experts.”

After that, Hermione had done everything in her power to be the best daughter who had ever lived. She did every chore without complaint. She kept her room in impeccable order. Her clothes were never dirty or torn, like other children. She excelled in every subject, won the praise of every adult she encountered. Her one weak spot was cultivating friendships with other children. They didn’t interest her much, and though she always took up for outcasts or those who were bullied, Hermione didn’t have friends. Her mother would ask about play dates or what she had done during recess, and Hermione felt the shame of having to give an unsatisfactory report. No, she hadn’t played with the others at recess, she’d been on the swing by herself.

As she got older, the problem worsened. Her maturity created a gap between her and other children that couldn’t be bridged. Add to that her growing incidences of odd events (which was how she categorized her spontaneous magic before she believed that magic existed), and she knew she functioned better alone, even if that disappointed her parents.

When she’d received her Hogwarts letter, she had been filled with a thrill that was practically electric. Hermione was sure that when she got to this new, magical school that she’d be surrounded
by exceptional children like herself, that she’d have so many friends to write home about that her parents would never doubt they wanted her, especially now, when they knew that was…not normal – more not normal than she’d been before.

The night after Professor McGonagall’s visit, Hermione had overheard another conversation. Her hearing was exceptional, and her parents’ door was ajar as she’d headed toward the bathroom.

“Is she…do you think,” her father’s voice had been low and serious and hesitant. “Do you think she’s fully human? Are these witches and wizards different genetically?”

She had hoped her mother would rebuke her father, scold him soundly for the question. That hadn’t happened, though.

“I don’t know. I…,” her hesitancy had matched her husband’s. “Do you think something happened when I was pregnant? Did I get too close to the x-ray machines at the dental office?”

Hermione had not stayed to hear the rest. She knew intellectually that her parents were working out a huge life change, a revelation that was world-altering, but the words hurt, still scraped a fresh layer of skin off the old wound of not feeling completely wanted. With that pain still smarting, she’d entered the world of magic, of Hogwarts, and had found not a place of love and acceptance, but exclusion and prejudice. Hermione learned quickly that a portion of her new world not only didn’t want her, it wanted to eradicate her. She’d found many enemies and only a few friends. Harry had been the first person to want her friendship, her love, fully. He was everything she imagined a brother would be and more. She would have done anything for him – she would have died for him, and she did give up her future for him.

And now? Her emotions were whipped into a frenzy, telling her that she was stuck in the past with a soul mate who didn’t want her unless he could control her, unless her power was muted just enough not to challenge him. Tom Riddle’s mind was sacred ground, and she’d violated it. Please. Her anger grew, stoked by all the years of not fitting in, all the instances of being rejected both explicitly and implicitly. Fuck Tom Riddle’s mind! Yes, it was dark, it was probably crazy, but she already knew that. She’d walked into his arms with knowledge that should have had her pulling her wand and screaming, “Avada kadava!” It was her mind that needed protected, for the future’s sake. She was taking care of the world, as usual, and he was being a selfish dick, as usual.

Her rational mind, which was trying to claw its way back to the dominant part of her thoughts, argued that Tom was damaged, too. If she, as a loved and cared for child, could have such deep pain, then how could she possibly argue that Tom’s pain wasn’t as bad, if not worse? He’d never known his parents, had been given no affection, had felt isolated from everyone around him. His issues were similar to Hermione’s own, with several complications that she did not have. He was also a sixteen-year-old, full of hormones and emotions, and he was also trying to save the world –
maybe not for purely selfless reasons, but he was not afraid to put himself in harm’s way, to risk his life to defeat Grindelwald. He owned nothing except his mind. And she had inadvertently come into it, uninvited. She needed to be the bigger person – the mature one, and help him. It wasn’t as if he was good at expressing an emotion other than anger – he needed her for that. What was it that Patience had said? That this panic would take root? She had to make sure that didn’t happen, even if her emotions were telling her to run away.

Hermione spun on her heel, taking stock of the landscape. She was in the front lawn, closer to the lake than she’d realized. She adjusted her course, heading for the main doors, since it wasn’t curfew yet, and that was the closest entrance. Maybe she could catch Tom on his way to the Slytherin dormitories or go back to the Chamber if she had to.

“There is a difference between not wanting a person’s presence at a particular point in time versus not wanting the person at all,” Tom’s silky voice slid through the darkness as his hand came out and closed around her wrist. “A person as intelligent as yourself should know that.”

At his touch, she felt relief. His walls were not completely gone, but they were greatly lowered, and his magic, dammed up for several days, rushed at hers, and she soaked it in.

“And I keep telling you that emotions aren’t often dictated by intelligence. A person as intelligent as yourself should remember that,” she replied, adding softly, “when your soul mate shuts you out and says you are unwanted, logic can be difficult to summon.”

“Hermione,” he tugged at her wrist, lifting her previously burned hand as he spoke several healing spells.

His magic felt so good, even though she’d already healed her hand. It also felt good that he wanted to heal her, because it meant he was sorry for what had happened in the Chamber. She’d long since learned that Tom’s actions were a much better indicator of his moods than his words, and that action was repentant.

He kissed her fingertips, then pulled her into his chest. Their bodies were touching in a solid line, and it was blissful, even despite the unresolved anger. “I don’t want you. Want implies a desire for something not yet attained. You are already mine. You are a part of me. Our magic is so entwined that not feeling yours these past days has been like missing a limb.”

In the near darkness, she could only see the barest hint of light reflected in his eyes, the suggestion of his sharp cheekbones, a warm puff of air from where his lips were. She could feel his struggle to express himself, and also how he was grateful for the darkness, a cover to help him feel less
exposed. The fact that he had come after her shocked and encouraged her. It would help, she thought, to admit her own vulnerability.

“I’ve felt the same way, Tom,” she whispered. “I’ve been hurting, too. But I never meant to,” she paused, not sure of the right words, afraid to trigger his defenses.

His fingers came up to her lips, silencing her. “I know that,” he said simply. “I could feel your sorrow, your regret over it.”

“Then why were you so angry?” she pressed on despite her fear, reminding herself not to give power to words by leaving them unspoken. “What if I read your mind again?”

“Patience has apparently been informing Abraxas on all the virtues and potential powers of soul mates this last week, which he has in turn related to me, and he mentioned such a thing is possible, that the soul mate bond can strengthen to telepathy over time,” Tom’s voice was matter of fact. “I don’t particularly like it, and I wouldn’t like you to do it on purpose, but if it spontaneously occurs due to the power of our connection, then it can’t be helped.”

“So, we’re...back to normal?” Hermione asked, not able to stop herself from wrapping her arms around his waist. The night air was cold, and she burrowed under his cloak.

“We are anything but normal, little bird,” Tom kissed her forehead. “But yes, we’ll go back to our usual arguments over morality and acceptable human behavior and feel all the glorious range of one another’s emotions.”

She glanced up at him, trying to see his expression in the dark. She could feel humor seeping from him, with just a hint of self-deprecation, which wasn’t like Tom at all. He was giving her something, admitting something. “You missed feeling my feelings, didn’t you?”

“Of course not,” he replied too quickly. “That’s ridiculous. I certainly did not miss the constant emotional whiplash of your daily highs and lows.”

“Of course not,” she echoed dryly, her hands finally finding the hem of his shirt and diving under.

He tried to pull away, hissing, “Woman! Your hands are blocks of ice!”
“Tell me you missed me,” she wheedled, digging her fingers into the skin at his waistband.

“This is extortion,” he grumbled, still trying to wiggle out of her grip.

Hermione laughed. “You’re the one with fire magic. Warm us up,” she taunted. “Or just admit that you missed me and my feelings.”

Tom went very still, suddenly pressing into her instead of pulling back. His body felt warmer under her hands, and she wondered if he was doing some type of non-verbal heating spell. “Even when I pulled my magic away, I could feel how hurt you were, and it made me angry at first. I thought of it as a weakness – your sadness. But then, as the days passed, sometimes it just felt awful, and the more I realized that I could stop it, that it was my pride making you hurt, the worse it felt, but then I would be angry again, and the anger would be greater. It was this horrible cycle of emotions – all negative and…not the way I have been used to feeling lately. I feel different with you and our quartet, and I like that way of feeling.”

He paused, but Hermione sensed he had more to say, so she simply kept her now-warm hands pressed at his waist, her gaze slightly down and away, to give him the space to say what didn’t come easily for him. “Clearly, when you came to the Chamber, I was in the anger part of the cycle, and when you pushed at my magic and incinerated the door, I was furious. But, then I spoke and your hurt was so great and even after you ran away, I could feel it, follow it like a trail. And Patience and Abraxas were both pushing anger at me for hurting you, and I realized that no matter how angry I am, I don’t want you to hurt, Hermione. Not from me.”

His honesty in admitting his anger and pride and fear (even if he didn’t name it as such) was astounding. Hermione could hardly believe he had spoken these words to her. It was such a human thing to do, such an evolved, self-reflective human thing to do – to share his hurt over having made her hurt. Her heart seemed unable to process the joy, just as her mind was having trouble processing the words.

Her joy spoke for itself though, filling their connection, sweeping through them. Hermione felt incredibly light, as if her worries were floating away, and her mouth widened into a smile that made her cheeks ache.

“Telling you I was angry makes you happy?” Tom laughed incredulously.

“You make me happy, Tom,” Hermione pulled him even closer, and the feeling of lightness
suffused her, surrounded them both. It was glorious, and Hermione wondered if it were another benefit of the soul mate connection – some kind of ‘make up’ buzz.

“Little bird?” Tom spoke softly into her hair.

“What?” Hermione smiled up at him, the lightness almost like a cloud buffeting her now.

“Don’t panic, or this might hurt,” he answered slowly, his arms circling tight around her waist. “Remember, this is your element. Own it.”

“What?” she repeated, confused.

“You’re making us float, Dearest,” he replied.

She willed herself to be calm, and it was good that she was still riding high on the wave of joy, because when Hermione looked down, she saw they were a good six feet off the ground, floating in the air. “Bloody hell,” she murmured.

“It isn’t as far as it looks, just about my body’s height,” Tom reassured her. “And we can cushion our fall with magic if we must, but wouldn’t you like to test this, to see what you can do with your air magic?”

“Not in the dark in the cold,” Hermione protested, her normal fear of heights somewhat muted by being unable to see very well beneath her. They wavered, dropping a few feet.

She gave a little yelp, and they dropped again. Now they couldn’t be more than two or three feet off the ground.

“You were happy,” he offered. “We started floating when you were happy. Perhaps think happy thoughts?”

She gave him a look of disbelief. “Did you read Peter Pan?”
He shrugged, “I read everything I could get my hands on. The orphanage was a boring place. But the point stands. I think elemental magic can be tied to strong emotions – my fire magic seems to be most powerful when I’m angry or aroused.”

“Aroused?” Hermione nearly choked. “What in the world are you and Abraxas doing with that? Because I know you didn’t do it with me or Patience!”

“Jealous, dearest?” he purred into her ear. “I like to give you each a little something of your own.”

She slapped playfully at his chest. “Now you think you’re Romeo,” she laughed.

“But it’s working,” he noted as they rose along with her laughter. “I wonder what effect arousal would have on you,” he mused as he wrapped his hands in her hair and kissed her.

Hermione had experienced many amazing and delightful magical events, as well as several that were terrifying. It was a curious to feel those things combined. Despite her air magic, she was still nervous about heights, but the sensation of weightlessness was fascinating, almost enough to quell the fear, and Tom’s kisses were distracting enough to do away with the rest of it. They continued to kiss and rise into the air.

“You were born to fly, little bird,” Tom breathed against her lips. “Look at what you’ve done. Look at how magnificent you are.”

She did look, and this time, they didn’t drop. They were as high as the treetops along the edge of the forest, old-growth trees that reached up far into the night sky. In her first time at Hogwarts, she hadn’t spent much time studying elemental magic. It just hadn’t been on her radar. There was so much basic information about magic to learn, and that was advanced. But, Tom was right. Her magical signature was aligned with air elements, and she was born to do this.

With a deep breath of cool air, Hermione centered herself, pulling on her magic to focus it, and borrowing some of Tom’s as well. He gave it willingly, and remained silent as she concentrated. Using Tom’s fire magic to set the door ablaze had been an act of anger, of sheer will, but making objects levitate, manipulating items in the air, that had always come easily to her. Much of her early spontaneous magic had been floating books or toys or treats that were out of her reach, or keeping her body from crashing too hard to the ground when she’d let go of the swing too early on the playground. This was her natural gift, an inherent part of her magic.
In seconds, she was moving them across the sky, and Hermione understood for the first time the delight Harry would express about soaring on his broom. She wasn’t at the mercy of a broom or an invisible thestral. She was in charge – her own magic was supporting her, and Hermione was nothing if not good at self-control.

Tom laughed delightedly in her ear, and he sounded boyish, innocently amused. As horrible as the evening had begun, that’s how wonderful it had become. Hermione held him as they flew, thinking what a miracle it was that they had found each other, that they had found Patience and Abraxas, and formed this connection that was transforming Tom from someone who cared only for power and nothing for others into a person who struggled to feel, and who had told her he didn’t want to hurt her. The progress was unbelievable.

Eventually, her nose and fingers and toes stopped having much feeling, and Hermione floated them back to the ground. Tom did warming spells on both of them and they walked to the castle, strangely exhausted and exhilarated all at once.

“I found the law,” Hermione spoke quickly as she remembered the earlier victory with Patience. “There’s a clause, an exception to betrothal contracts on the Ministry books that says elemental bonds supersede betrothals.”

Tom smiled, raising her hand to his lips. “Excellent, though that won’t stop the Malfoys from trying to kill us if they find out.”

“We still have some time, though Lady Malfoy is determined,” Hermione’s voice had turned bitter. “Too bad we can’t just kill her.”

“We can,” Tom replied quickly, though she could see in the lights from the main doors they were approaching that he was smiling.

“I am heartened by the fact that I think you are at least half-joking,” Hermione squeezed his hand.

“Am I?” Tom lifted a brow. “The list of people I don’t want to hurt is a very exclusive one. Evangeline Malfoy is not on it.”

Before she could reply, the door swung open and they were greeted by the sight of the scowling caretaker. “Cutting it close, you two. Curfew’s in ten minutes. Don’t linger.”
He made a shooing motion, and they headed to the main stair. Hermione stood on the steps to give Tom a proper good night kiss, which ate up another five minutes.

“Thank you for tonight,” Hermione smiled.

Tom frowned. “Why are you thanking me? You are the one who made us fly. I want you to teach me, by the way. I can’t not experience that again. It was fabulous.”

“I’m thanking you because, like in Peter Pan, I think I needed someone to believe in me to help me believe in myself. You’ve given me so much Tom.” As she spoke the words, she knew how true they were. Her magic had blossomed, had increased beyond her wildest dreams since meeting Tom, and her love…well, that, too, was incredible. She had never thought she’d be a person who loved so passionately. In her future/past, she had imagined a quite, stable life with Ron, but she knew now that would have never fulfilled her.

“I’ve given you heartache and pain,” he murmured, glancing away. “I am sorry about these past days, Hermione. I don’t say that easily, but I do want you to be happy, for our quartet to have a future together.”

She took his hand and slid it under her shirt, to rest on his words that glittered around her navel. Then, she undid his cuff and slid her hand over her words. Their magic immediately swirled around them, as if it were alive itself. “Life is complicated, Tom. I don’t expect a fairy tale, nor do I want one. We will spend our lives together, and we’ll hurt each other sometimes, through misunderstandings or disagreements. I think that’s unavoidable for humans. But I can feel the truth of your intention through our bond, that you don’t want to hurt me, that you...” she paused, because he’d never said I love you, even though she knew he felt them.

Tom jerked, like a frightened horse, but Hermione held tight to his arm, her fingers caressing the words in a soothing motion. “It doesn’t matter, Tom. That’s the point. The words are superfluous. I can feel you, and you can feel me. Don’t be scared. No matter if we speak out of anger or fear, we’ll always come back to this, to knowing that we are meant to be, that our souls and our magic have combined to the point that we will not flourish properly apart. We don’t want each other, we need each other.”

“But that’s the very definition of weakness,” he protested, his mouth set in a stubborn line. “To not be self-sufficient, to need someone else.”

Hermione decided it was time for brutal honesty, to address his fears head on. “Tom, you were not raised like a child should have been. You were placed in a situation with no affection and only the
barest of basic needs. I know that you went hungry sometimes, that you were cold and lonely and
that made you angry, and your anger was the only thing that sustained you. It fed your magic,
which fed your anger and created a loop that helped you survive a horrible situation. But all those
years of anger and nothing else warped your thoughts on human relationships and other emotions.
Humans are social creatures—we are meant to form relationships and bonds. It’s not weakness to
need others; it’s being human.”

“Even if that need fills you with the terror of what would happen if you ever lost that person?” He
slowly met her eyes, and she could see both fear and sorrow there, and his willingness to let that
show made her suck in her breath.

It was basic psychology that an orphan would have abandonment issues, but it still broke
Hermione’s heart. “Tom, everyone who loves others deeply worries about potentially losing them.
I worry about you and Patience and Abraxas. I worry about my mothers. I worry about the
nameless people dying and suffering in both the magical and muggle wars that are happening right
now. Caring brings worry, but the worrying is outweighed by all the benefits.”

“Until the person actually dies, either through accident or murder or old age,” Tom argued. “Then
what is left?”

Allowing Tom to obsess over death was not an option. “Tom, worry and fear are almost always
directed to the future, and if you are focused on the future, you are missing the now. Right now,
this instant, we are safe and sound, standing in a beautiful, magical castle, surrounded by our
magic. Don’t let abstract concerns over the future spoil the glory of the present.”

“Your future is going to be detention!” Pringle shouted as he came down the hall. “I warned you
two! Blatant disregard for my authority!”

“Let me obliviate him,” Tom murmured, not moving his hand from her stomach though she was
trying to wiggle away.

“Is his hand up your shirt?” Pringle sounded both scandalized and titillated. It was creepy,
Hermione decided.

“No,” she answered to both Tom and the caretaker, using a mild stinging hex to get Tom’s hands
off of her and turning to straighten her clothes.

“I’m not having detention,” Tom announced calmly as he shook his hand against the burning
sensation. “And you obliviated Myrtle earlier this year, so stop getting on your high horse.”
She really didn’t want to have detention either, and she knew Pringle used corporal punishment. The idea of him paddling her bottom was vaguely predatory and thoroughly disgusting. Also, if Tom witnessed that, he’d probably kill the man. Pringle had reached them, and Hermione sighed in acquiescence. “Fine.”

In seconds, Pringle was wondering toward the kitchens, suddenly ravenous for pudding, and Hermione had to give a little laugh.

“What?” Tom raised an eyebrow.

“It’s just exactly as you said earlier. We’re back to bickering over acceptable human behavior and morality. I don’t think we ever make it through a single day without an argument,” Hermione shook her head, trying to remember if they ever had.

Tom twirled his wand, using an entirely unnecessary summoning spell, and she was in his arms. He lifted her, his hands under her bottom, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. They were eye to eye, and she could see his smug, seductive grin. “I think you are sexiest when you are arguing with me. You get this little half-pout, and your curls stand up, and you voice gets all indignant, and I just want to kiss you and spank you and fuck you for hours.”

“So, the way to get what I want is to not give you what you want?” she teased, moaning a little as his hand groped her arse.

“Oooooh, the pervy pupils are going to get in trouble!” Peeves swooped by, cackling.

“Is there no privacy in this place?” Tom muttered angrily.

Hermione lowered herself to the floor and straightened her clothes, again. “We are in the main hall, Tom. We might be the ones at fault.”

“Never admit fault, Dearest,” he replied as a fiery lasso erupted from his wand and encircled Peeves, who immediately started yelling at the top of his...well, not lungs.

“We should go. We are out after curfew, and we can’t obliviate ghosts or the rest of the staff,” Hermione sighed.
It was Tom’s turn to wear a half-pout and Hermione had to admit it was adorable. She kissed the corner of his mouth and headed up the stairs. After three steps, she turned and called out, “I love you, Tom Riddle.”

He glanced up from the lower staircase he was descending, and met her eye with a brilliant smile, the full-on Tom Riddle charm that always left her breathless. “And you are the Queen of my world, Hermione Bonneau.”

The words were barely past his lips before he continued down the stairs, but Hermione felt what he’d truly meant. She wanted to linger and bask in the feeling of his love, no matter what he called, but she could hear Peeves screaming for help, and several of the portraits were making noise as well. She had an insane amount of stairs to climb without getting caught, and detention was looking to be in her future again until she remembered her newly acquired skill.

After a few moments of concentrating, she felt herself rise about a foot off the stairs, which was plenty for her, since she still needed to deal with her fear of heights. Instead, she focused on moving herself up and forward, and within minutes she was at the door to Ravenclaw Tower, answering the day’s logic puzzle. She came into the common room out of breath. Flying or levitating or whatever she was doing, wasn’t terribly taxing on her magic, but it did speed up her heart rate and leave her flooded with adrenaline. How much of that was from her residual fear of heights or from the excitement of learning a new magical skill, she didn’t know, but she was more than willing to find out. Tom was right; she was born to fly, and she planned on conquering her fear and mastering this skill.
**Have Fun Storming the Castle!**

Chapter Summary

Hermione convinces Tom of an alternate equinox plan. A full-out invasion ensues. Lots of action featuring our lovable gang of Ravenclaws and Slytherins and the first appearance of that other dark wizard.

Chapter Notes

Lovely readers, I'm sorry for the long absence. My grandfather was ill, in and out of hospitals and the nursing home for the last few months until he passed away a few weeks before Christmas (on the day after my grandmother's birthday). I've been helping her with social security, health insurance, and other issues. There has been very little time for writing, but I do promise I will finish this story, even if updates are sporadic.

I've also fallen far, far behind on responding to comments, but I will get those caught up today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Spring Equinox, 1943*

“It’s an excellent thing that your mother’s arithmancy consultant said the best day for the engagement was Sunday, and not the actual Spring Equinox,” Patience smiled dreamily at Marguerite. “Otherwise, our plans would have been spoiled.”

“Yes, let’s send her a thank-you card,” Marguerite snapped.

Hermione made a tutting noise. “Please hold still, Marguerite. This is a very delicate spell.”

“What does it matter if my face is blemish free? We’re all going to die tonight,” Marguerite groused, though she barely moved her lips as she did so, following Hermione’s instructions.

Patience laid a hand on Hermione’s, sending a boost of her magic as Hermione performed the
healing spell. The end of the sphinx-core wand glowed a lovely turquoise color, and warmth spread from the wand across Marguerite’s cheek.

“Well, on the off chance we don’t perish,” Hermione moved the wand in a small arc, covering the line of the cursed cut, watching with relief as Tom’s handiwork slowly disappeared, “You’ll be presentable for your betrothal ceremony.”

“I think it looks even better than before. The spell gives your skin a healthy flush. If you spent a little time in the sun, you wouldn’t be so deathly pale,” Patience noted with her trademark absence of tact.

Marguerite ignored Patience, as she usually did. She turned to face Hermione, who pushed her head forward again to inspect the skin around where the cut had been. Marguerite huffed, but kept her head still. “Can you please remind me why this is a better plan?”

“Because we aren’t ready to face Grindelwald directly,” Hermione sighed, running her finger lightly across Marguerite’s cheek. The cut was completely gone, and there was no remaining rough or uneven skin.

“Let’s go join the others,” Patience took Hermione’s hand. “They are having this same argument.”

The three witches walked from the sitting area of the Chamber back toward the center of the room, where Tom was indeed justifying the plan to the other group members.

Hermione herself was still a bit surprised she had managed to convince Tom to not go to the forest. For the last two weeks, Tom had been going over plans, researching spells, asking Abraxas to find another portkey for travel, as well as several rare ingredients for potions he was experimenting with in the Chamber. It wasn’t a stretch to say that Tom was bordering on obsession, going through newspapers, compiling lists of Grindelwald’s known strengths, spell usage, and recent movements.

Tom had also put the newly formed group bonds to the test, having the members practice dueling and borrowing one another’s magic. In general, the Slytherins had more trouble doing so than the Ravenclaws. They were not the sharing kind, but a few of them, Jacob, Corvus, and Vidhi, were making good progress. Marguerite was doing a great job solely due to her need to outperform others. All of them could locate a fellow group member, and they could all recognize when they were being called through the bond. That bond would be put to the test in this mission.

“Are you both insane?” Dolohov looked ready to bolt, his eyes darting around the room. “That place is Grindelwald’s stronghold, the best magically guarded building outside of Gringott’s.”
Tom gave the oldest member of their group a withering stare. “Going to Nurmenguard while Grindelwald and all his top generals are in the Ardennes forest is the best opportunity to strike a strong blow against his cause. If we can free his prisoners and destroy the prison, his base of power, his stronghold, will be gone. He’ll be on the defensive instead of the offensive.”

“I didn’t join this group to be suicidal!” Dolohov complained bitterly.

“No,” Tom replied with an icy tone. “You joined to be connected to the power I wield. The price for that connection is obedience.” Most of the group stepped back as Tom’s magic crackled in the air.

Dolohov did not reply, but the displeasure on his face was clear. The clock over the fireplace chimed, and all eyes turned toward Hermione and Tom.

Hermione summoned the map they’d created from the far table while Abraxas handed out the masks that had become their group’s signature. The information for this mission was time sensitive, based on knowledge from the new arrivals from France and Germany, as well as new notes in Grindelwald’s book about the security at Nurmenguard during his absence, knowledge that would become obsolete soon. “We need to leave in fifteen minutes. Let’s go over the plans once more. It is vital everyone does his or her job correctly, and at the right time.”

On paper and in her mind, the plan Hermione had convinced Tom to embrace had seemed downright sensible in comparison to the idea of ambushing Grindelwald and his generals in the forest. However, in person, the fortress prison of Nurmenguard was beyond imposing. The very walls seemed to spring from the rocky island, the water crashed in angry waves against the base cliffs, and sheets of icy rain poured down on them. Every few minutes, fierce cracks of lightening illuminated the walls looming high above the group, and Hermione could feel multiple versions of anxiety and fear through the bonds. As instructed, no one spoke, and they split into five groups, spreading along the base of the building.

Four of the groups were pairs: Hermione and Jacob, Tom and Patience, Felicity and Sebastian, and Vidhi and Corvus. Each of these pairs had one person with greater knowledge of muggle devices and science. Abraxas, Marguerite, Josephine, Dolohov, and Thad were the fifth group, and they were to head for the dungeon entrance, which was the least accessible, and the least guarded.

As Hermione knelt by the north corner, she focused on the delicate task at hand. She had practiced this procedure with dummy parts several times, though never in the pouring rain. Jacob handed her
various wires and parts as she motioned for them, and they worked in quick, efficient silence. The fortress would be rigged with all manner of magical protections, but no spell yet devised could withstand a powerful muggle bomb, and everyone was under strict instructions to avoid using any magic until the last possible moment. Their arrival by portkey in the small copse of trees on the far end of the island hadn’t raised any alarms, and so far things were going to plan. Hermione hoped that Tom, Felicity, and Vidhi had reviewed as much bomb-making as she had in the last week. Each of them was responsible for placing a device at a corner of the fortress, and then connecting smaller charges around the base.

She could feel Jacob’s concern for himself, and more strongly, his worry over Josephine. Their betrothal, though a Pureblood arrangement, was one of strong mutual affection, and Hermione had no doubt it would grow into love even though they were not soul mates. At her outstretched hand, he raised an eyebrow, unsure of what to do since all their charges were set. Hermione took his hand, which was cold and clammy since they weren’t using any warming charms, and the only water repellant spells they had were the ones embedded in their cloaks. She squeezed it reassuringly, and though he temporarily stiffened, he quickly relaxed and accepted the comfort she sent through the group bond.

A brief thrill of fear ran through her, at the reminder of how young and inexperienced the group was. This outing was more treacherous than trying to break into the Department of Mysteries, with less fighting experience for most of the group, not that Dumbledore’s Army had been prepared in the least for a battle against Death Eaters. She had taken a vow to protect these people, and even though over two-thirds of them were Slytherins, she had come to care for them. Except Dolohov. If she had to throw someone to the metaphorical wolves, it would be him, and it didn’t bother her in the least to admit that to herself. His sadistic streak was already firmly in place, and the way he sometimes looked at Felicity had Hermione rethinking her policy on the Cruciatus. She forced herself back into the present, and walked quickly with Jacob, meeting up with Patience and Tom, then continuing to the dungeons to meet the others. It was a sign of Tom’s emotional development and trust that he didn’t even raise an eyebrow over the fact Jacob was clutching her hand.

Upon arrival just outside the dungeon gates, it was clear that Abraxas and Marguerite had been successful in placing the ‘memory keepers’. These tiny silver orbs found in the Chamber operated on a similar principle to a pensieve, except they only held a single, short image from a memory, no more than a ten or fifteen second loop. Also, instead of needing to immerse oneself in the memory, the image was projected into the room at the push of a small button on the orb. The image selected was an incredibly fresh one of Tom, Abraxas, Thad, and Sebastian (the four largest members of the group) in their masks and dark clothes, pacing back and forth at the sparse tree line. The group of five was to place the keeper where it was visible from the dungeon gate. Once activated, this image, carefully planned to look like a natural back and forth movement, with no false jumps or starts like a taped loop, was designed to lure out the guards posted in the dungeon.

Hermione stared down at six unconscious, bound, and wandless guards. “Well, that was a success then,” she breathed in relief.
“Yes, it was surprisingly easy,” Josephine whispered from behind her mask, her voice as cheerful as always, as if she were discussing a project in Charms, adding, “And just a bit fun, I admit.”

Marguerite nodded her head. “We hardly had to work at all. Josephine knocked out all six with an impressive sleeping spell,” her voice was tight with grudging approval.

“No names,” Hermione reminded her softly. “We don’t know what spells are on the castle. There could be some kind of memory recording that Grindelwald can review later and we don’t want to give him any clues to our identity.”

“What are we chatting for?” Tom hissed. His magic was fidgeting, crackling to get out, and Hermione knew they needed to get the rest of the plan completed as soon as possible. Who knew how long Grindelwald would take to interrogate his generals? It could be hours of crucio or seconds of the killing curse.

“Let’s just review for ten seconds, Tom,” Hermione hissed back. He was so impatient, and impulse was not their friend on this mission. Sticking to the plan was vital.

The group gathered, forming a tight circle around Hermione. “Our goal is to enter through the dungeon, now unguarded, and move upward and outward, freeing prisoners and disabling guards. Once we have cleared the building, we will blow the charges we have set. Work as quickly as possible, moving in your assigned group in your assigned path. Though we have maps, we do not know what spells are on the castle itself or how many guards there are for sure, so once we enter, we do not know how much time we have. If you come across guards you cannot fight, a cell you cannot open, or if you are injured to the point you cannot move on your own, let us know through the group link. Speak as little as possible. If prisoners question you, identify yourself as the freedom fighters from France and move on. If Grindlewald returns, consider the mission aborted. Immediately leave the castle and go to the portkey point. Hide until everyone is assembled. We are starting with the upper hand and we want to keep it.”

She spoke rapidly, but everyone nodded. Reaching into the bond, she sent out a quick burst of reassurance, then turned toward the dungeon gate. The group followed silently, Tom at her side, Patience and Abraxas just behind her, with the others flanking outward. Hermione had a sense that this wasn’t quite real. She’d been in battles before, had fought for her life and the lives of those she loved, had broken into the Ministry and Gringotts, but this bold move felt like a step into the unknown. She had no experience of Grindelwald or his magic, but she knew he was at his prime, on the level of Dumbledore and Voldemort, and that was terrifying. She only hoped the guards were of more middling magical skill.

At the threshold, she paused for a second, wondering if there would be an ear-splitting caterwalling charm or an invisible barrier, but she could sense no additional magic, and she shook her head at
the arrogance of dark wizards who thought no one would dare challenge them in any significant way, though, in all fairness, who would be insane enough to break into Nurmenguard? She and Tom crossed over, and the others as well. The groups formed, heading up different staircases or down halls.

Hermione had carefully planned the groupings, making sure that each pair or trio had strong attack, defense, and someone with decent healing capabilities. Tom had wanted to blast through the halls with her at his side, she knew, but that was a waste of magical skill, and she’d put him with Vidhi, whose fire magic worked better with his than with anyone else’s in the group. She’d also worked hard to convince him that stealth and surprise were the best options until they got to a point where outright dueling was necessary. Hermione had put herself with Corvus, and she’d also taken Thad, who though he’d improved under her constant tutoring, was still the weakest member of the group.

To be as efficient as possible, Hermione had assigned her own trio to take the east staircase all the way to top of the fortress, and work down, with another pair, Marguerite and Abraxas, working from the middle floor up. This would hopefully maximize the chance of freeing all the prisoners in the fortress, not simply the ones on the lower floors.

“It certainly fits the stereotype of a dark wizard’s prison, doesn’t it?” Corvus whispered as they went up dimly lit spiral stairs that continued to be slimy and damp well above the dungeon level. “Bloke just needs to add chains to the wall, maybe a few rotting skeletons, and it would be perfect.”

“There probably are rotting skeletons in the cells,” Thad observed in his matter of fact way. “Maybe chains, too.”

“You two need to be quiet,” Hermione sighed, feeling the burn in her calves after several floors. “I know you haven’t done this before, but these guards will likely use seriously damaging if not killing spells. Keep silent and alert, and don’t hesitate to use the spell that will disable them the best.”

Hermione could feel strong magic on the tower door, locking spells that were far beyond the limits of a simple *alohomora*. She pointed to Thad, “Stay near me.” Then motioned to Corvus, “Get on the other side of the doorway.”

Since the night Tom had absorbed the power of the curse on her back into his own magic, Hermione had worked to be able to do the same. She was naturally competitive, but with Tom, there was no option of falling behind. It was imperative for the world’s survival that she could do everything he could, at the same rate of power. Galatea had provided her with several cursed objects, and Hermione had practiced unraveling the spells until they were what she liked to think of as neutral magical molecules, not light or dark magic, just the potential for magic. Once she had the
magic broken down, she could pull it into her own aura. However, the absorption of the neutral magic was time-consuming, since it required a slow, steady flow. Too much magic influx at once could upset the natural balance of her inherent magic, causing it to leak outward and be lost.

She worked quickly on the spells, but allowed the magic to dissipate rather than attempt to take it in. Once the door was disarmed, they entered silently, but there was no need. The top floor was clearly a living space, not a cell, and no one was currently there. It was a sumptuous open area with a marble fireplace, gleaming mahogany shelves full of ingredients and magical objects, several potions tables, and even a small library area, with leather bound books and invitingly overstuffed chairs. A door at the back probably led to a sleeping chamber, Hermione guessed. Magic permeated the air, thick and full of the element of earth. This was Grindelwald’s private space, and as much as Hermione was tempted to raid the shelves, that wasn’t the aim of this mission.

“Let’s go,” she began, but was cut off by Thad’s shocked cry.

Turning, she saw that he had tried to lift a cup from a pedestal in the corner near the door. The silver and gold chalice was still in his hand, but the floor beneath him had turned to quicksand, and he had already sunk up to his thighs. His arms and torso were flailing in a way that would have been comic if the situation weren’t so serious.

Corvus stood frozen in mid-step by the threshold, afraid to put his foot down on the floor. His balance and reflexes were honed by years of living and breathing Quidditch, and he was always calm under pressure. “You’ve got to stop moving. Be still,” he used a tone that a parent would with a panicked child.

Edging closer, Hermione saw the spell that transformed the floor was spreading concentrically, and it was already blocking her path to the door.

“I can’t! It stings! Help me!” Thad cried, now buried up to his ribcage.

“Incarcerous!” Corvus murmured, and Thad was now bound and not sinking as quickly. “Sorry, mate, but it will give us more time to figure this out.” He looked up to Hermione.

“That was an excellent idea,” she applauded Corvus. She weighed several options in her mind. The likeliest spell for success was one she never thought she would use, and one, that in using before its inventor was born, created the type of time paradox she used to sigh over in episodes of *Doctor Who*. Still, her pragmatism won out, and she flicked her wand and cast the nonverbal *levicorpus*, hoisting Thad out of the sand as well as turning him upside down.
Carefully, she floated Thad to the doorway, where Corvus had already taken a few steps back over the threshold. She set him down upright and discontinued the binding spell. He began to scratch and pull at every place the sand had touched his body, whimpering.

“Use all the cleaning spells you know on his skin and clothes. That substance could do lasting damage if we don’t get it off.”

Corvus immediately began to point his wand at Thad’s pants and arms.

“What about you?” Thad sounded just as terrified as he had been a minute ago. “That stuff is going to reach you soon.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Hermione replied tersely. She had no doubt she could fly over the quicksand, with plenty of time to spare, but now she was angry. Angry that Thad was being hurt, that Grindelwald hoarded knowledge, that she had spent what felt like her entire life fighting wizards who believed they were better than everyone else. Even though the plan was to blow up the entire fortress prison, now Hermione wanted to take things, Grindelwald’s prized things, and use them against him in any and every way she could.

Clipped to her belt under her robes was her trusty beaded bag, which she had magically reinforced over the years with spells suggested by her mothers and Tom. The bag was a part of her now, something she would never leave behind, even when heading to classes or a walk on the Merrythought estate. She took it out, floated it in front of her, widened the mouth, and began accio’ing every book and magical item in the room, even taking all the potion ingredients.

“Hermion-” Corvus stopped just short of saying her whole name. “The quicksand! What are you doing? You’re going to be trapped!”

She looked down, but was too focused to respond. The substance was only about an inch away. As she had emptied the room, she had backed toward the bedroom door. Now, she used the reducto technique she’d picked up from Ginny, bringing down the door and half the wall, exposing the inner room. It did have a bed, along with a few more bookshelves. She collected all the items, including a tattered scrapbook and a rather wicked-looking shaving razor.

“Should we get To-” Corvus’s elbow found its way to Thad’s rib, ending that question.
“I’m coming now,” Hermione surveyed the room one last time, then levitated herself across to the space beyond the threshold.

“Wow,” Thad’s jaw hung down. “I didn’t know you could fly! I thought you were scared of heights.”

Hermione cast a few more cleansing charms on Thad’s clothes and body, though it seemed like Corvus had done solid work. “I was, but I’ve faced that fear.”

“Nice trick,” Corvus grinned. “Can you teach me how to stop being afraid of my mother and sister?”

A vision of Sagitta’s angry face flashed through Hermione’s mind. “That might be beyond even my powers,” she admitted with a grin that mirrored his.

Noise on the spiral stairs below ruined the moment, and Hermione’s tension came back full force. The footsteps were approaching, and she barely had time to push her companions against the wall and disillusion all of them before two men barreled past them, straight into Grindelwald’s tower, and the quicksand.

“Expelliaramus!” she cried, wistful thoughts of Harry flitting through her mind as she collected the two spare wands. “Let’s get going.”

She led the way, staying close to the inside of the stairwell. As they descended, the smells of thick magic and the sounds of fighting met them. They had taken much longer in the tower than anticipated, and apparently Abraxas and Marguerite had started working upwards. As the stairs widened into the entrance to the next floor, they could see the two Slytherins shooting spells from behind an open cell door, three ragged prisoners huddled against the wall behind them. Four guards were advancing on them.

“We get one shot each by surprise,” Hermione whispered. “Make it count.”

Corvus took her words to heart, throwing a stunning spell so strong that it sent the closest man flying backwards into the far wall. Thad used a fairly simple second year spell. The petrification was still effective, though, and a second man fell over sideways, frozen in place. Hermione cast a variation of the incarceration spell, drawing gently on Tom’s magic to make the ropes fiery. Marguerite sent another stunner at the last man, and came out from behind the door.
“Disarm them all,” Hermione instructed as Abraxas and the prisoners joined them. She pulled on her magic to bring the bound guard to her, taking his wand, and then asking, “Sprechen Sie Englisch? Französisch?” That was the extent of her German.

The guard was silent until Hermione pulled the ropes tighter, and an audible sizzle of flesh was heard along with a sharp scream. “Yes, I speak English!”

“How many guards are there total in the building?” she inquired, trying not to think about the fact that she was torturing someone, even someone who probably deserved it.

“I don’t know! I didn’t count them!” his voice was sharp, and his face was red with sweat and contorted with pain. He looked at Hermione’s stern expression and added, “Maybe one hundred or so prison guards. Most are on the lower floors, where there are larger cells and more prisoners.”

She stopped the flames, and the guard’s face grew defiant. “He’ll kill you for this. Slowly.”

“He’ll have to catch me first, and I’m excellent at running,” Hermione replied grimly, sending a silent stunning spell directly into his chest, knocking him unconscious to the floor.

Abraxas had moved behind her, and she briefly leaned against him, drawing strength from his quiet support. He pressed a hand to her lower back, and she felt his love. It was a boost she desperately needed. She longed for a hug, but settled for squeezing his hand and sending her love back at him.

“Give the prisoners the wands we’ve confiscated. It’s their choice to disapparate or fight with us, but we need to get down to the lower levels as soon as possible. The others will need our help. They are seriously outnumbered.”

Marguerite handed wands to the three prisoners already freed, then opened the other cells on the floor. Thad passed out the rest of the wands. Some apparated away, but five prisoners followed them down the stairs, stolen wands clutched tightly.

On the next floor down, they found Felicity and Josephine, both with bloodied faces, sending curses furiously from the western stairwell towards a cluster of advancing guards in Grindelwald’s signature brown and gold uniforms. Three other guards were unconscious on the floor, and the Ravenclaws were putting up an excellent fight, but they were clearly in the retreat position. Hermione’s group came up behind the seven guards, disabled them quickly, then freed the
prisoners.

“Oh, thank God! I thought we were done for!” Felicity ran at Hermione and hugged her as she unlocked cells. Josephine joined them as well, throwing her arms around both of them.

“Me, too,” she sobbed. “I take back what I said about this being fun.”

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to my sisters,” Hermione allowed herself a few seconds to hug them back, then went back into command mode.

There were twenty prisoners on this floor, and not nearly enough wands to go around. Those who wished to disapparate were given one wand to share for side-along apparition. The others, fifteen of them, came along, the ones without wands picking up chains or breaking chairs to create makeshift weapons.

The fourth floor, which widened out substantially, was strangely quiet. It had over twice as many cells, about fifty, and they were arranged into inner and outer squares of cells - one flanking the sidewalls, and one in the middle. The guards were nowhere to be seen, but the central cells blocked the view of the entire floor. Splitting into two, the group went down the walkways cautiously.

Hermione crept slowly, nonverbally unlocking cells as she went. Prisoners from the previous floors spoke quietly with the newly freed, and by the time they had reached the corner, there were several more wizards and witches behind her. A low feeling of dread entered the group bond, and she felt for it, trying to identify which member it was coming from. The magic was heavily restrained, but she recognized Sebastian’s dark, earthy signature.

“Halt!” a deep voice rang out, rapidly followed by curses that grazed Hermione’s face, sheering a stray curl that had escaped from her braid. It fell to the flagstones at her feet. She pushed an intense wave of warning at Abraxas, Marguerite, and Josephine, who had gone down the other hall, willing them to use caution.

Conjuring a strong shield, Hermione stepped around the corner, and saw that the man speaking had Sebastian kneeling at his feet, a wand pointed at his temple, and another guard had Dolohov in a similar position. Five men flanked them, and the rest, about fifteen or so, were clustered defensively in the back stairwell, some with wands pointed upwards, others down.

She threw a blasting curse at the archway leading to the stairs, caving in the wall, and cutting off
the majority of the men.

The man spoke to her in German, then switched to French. “It matters not how many of us you take out. You were imbeciles to come here. Grindelwald will destroy you all. Your cause is lost, just as your lives will be, though that loss will not come painlessly.”

He cast a nonverbal spell on Sebastian, and even before the distress reached her through the bond, she knew it was the Cruciatus. She remembered all too well what it felt like, the way the curse ripped through the body, making it impossible to comprehend anything except the pain being inflicted.

A jet of light soared over Hermione’s shoulder, and the man holding Sebastian fell to the ground, twitching in the same way Sebastian was. She glanced back to see Marguerite, her wand outstretched, her face alight with vicious triumph.

“We’ll see who suffers most,” Marguerite muttered, coming to stand immediately beside Hermione, while Abraxas came to her other side.

The three of them moved forward as a single unit, casting stunning and blasting spells, along with Marguerite’s occasional much darker curses. Hermione cast a shield over Sebastian who was still shaking on the floor from the after effects of the curse. Josephine and Felicity ran forward and pulled him back behind the corner, where the prisoners with wands were providing cover. Now that they were seriously outnumbered, the guards were disabled and unconscious within seconds, and Dolohov rose to his feet, grabbing his and Sebastian’s wands back from the guard who had been holding him.

“Bastard,” Dolohov kicked angrily at the unconscious man’s ribs, and Hermione heard a sickening crunch.

“Come on,” she said sharply, taking Sebastian’s wand and giving it to Marguerite for safe-keeping. “We need to go back to the other stairs and get to the first floor. We’ve been here too long already. Every second we stay, the chances of Grindelwald returning increase.”

Speaking his name seemed to motivate all the prisoners to move rapidly, and they helped to free those still in cells on this floor. The group moved en masse down the stairs, now almost eighty people, though less than half had wands. A witch with a severely bruised face and a limp told them that their wands were in a locked cabinet on the first floor.
The third floor was empty of all guards, and it was only a few minutes’ work to release the prisoners. The second floor, on the other hand, was an active war zone. The guards who had been trapped in the stairwell had made their way to this floor, and were providing devastating cover for the remaining second floor guards, as well as the third floor guards who had come down to investigate the commotion.

Tom, Vidhi, and a small group of prisoners were in one corner, surrounded by a protective ring of fire that the guards couldn’t breach physically, though they were casting spells at them from all sides, and Tom and Vidhi were whirling back to back to deflect them, completely on the defensive. Jacob and Patience were close by, with another set of prisoners, defending from behind a guard’s desk, a group of guards steadily advancing on them. Both groups were outnumbered by at least ten to one.

Everyone with a wand streamed in from the stairwell, rushing forward with any spell or curse that came to mind. The guards fell back quickly, now at a disadvantage, and Tom dropped his ring of fire, striding across the room blasting guards off their feet five or six at a time, Vidhi close behind him, stunning anyone left standing. Hermione took a second to appreciate how well their magic worked together, pleased Tom was making further connections, and especially with the other half-blooded member of the group.

He came back to her side in less than five minutes, and the core group made a circle around them while the prisoners collected wands and freed others.

Tom’s hand came up to her cheek, gently fingering the spot where her hair had been shorn off, leaving a small, reddened patch of skin. The hand he raised was bleeding, and when Hermione surveyed the group, she saw several cuts, welts, and bruises, though all were minor except for Sebastian, who was being mostly supported by Abraxas, his body still wracked with spasms every few seconds.

“The first floor?” she asked breathlessly. The fighting had taken a lot out of her.

“Cleared. The top floors are taken care of?” His voice was firm, but she felt his hand tremble slightly against her temple.

Hermione nodded. “Done. We need to grab the prisoners’ wands on our way out, and get the hell out of here.”

“Agreed,” Tom took her free hand and they walked down the stairs. His touch brought a wild mix of rage and exhilaration, as well as a flood of their magic, already at high levels from the fighting.
She could feel Patience’s unflappable, cool magic as well, though most of the water magic was being channeled as support to Abraxas, to help him with carrying Sebastian.

Their combined magic blasted the cabinet doors to shreds, and the prisoners rushed forward, grabbing their rightful wands. From there, everyone went out into the stormy night. Most of the prisoners apparated away immediately, though five remained with the group. Hermione sent everyone except Tom to the portkey site. The pair backed up as far as their magic would still travel, then began to walk along the sides of the fortress, blasting the charges.

Hermione had experienced plenty of magical blasts, but never a muggle bomb. The sounds were deafening, and her ears rang painfully as she triggered the last charge. Tom came running toward her, and though she could see his mouth moving, she couldn’t make out his words. The walls were falling down, crashing in bone-jarring thuds against the rocky ground, and combined with the thunder and lightening, Hermione thought she might have a good handle on what the apocalypse was supposed to feel like. She was proud and ashamed all at once. Any guards inside would be dead, but they had dealt a devastating blow against Grindelwald - more than any organized government ever had - more than Dumbledore had done up to this point.

Grabbing Tom’s hand, she ran with him to the portkey point, where the others were carefully linking hands and arranging positions to fit everyone onto the rusted length of metal that was their only way off this island.

A loud cracking that wasn’t thunder filled the air. The lightening illuminated the trees and brush, and Hermione saw five figures apparate and advance toward the group. Other than Tom, Marguerite was the closest person to her.

“Use the portkey, now!” Hermione hissed to her. “Get everyone out.”

Marguerite usually bristled at any orders, but this time, she didn’t blink. She counted down from three, linked hands, and the group vanished as Hermione pulled Tom back.

“That was rather foolish,” a deep, silky voice rang out, magically magnified through the air. “You should have run while you were able…Hermione.”

She tamped down the fission of fear that went through her as he spoke her name. It had been a risk as soon as Corvus had spoken in the tower, but he only had her first name. “It would only be foolish if I were afraid of you,” she replied in French, using magic to bounce her voice as she pulled Tom further back into the trees. He followed her, though she could feel his anger and confusion.
“Ah,” the voice continued, closer now. “So brave. But that accent is fooling no one, dear. You’re probably a Gryffindor, aren’t you? Did Albus send one of his little disciples after me? It would be so like him. So terrified of getting his hands dirty.”

“I’m not,” Hermione still spoke in French, and continued to back them toward the cliff, using rocks and trees as cover. Tom seethed silently beside her, furious at being out of the loop.

He laughed, and it was a surprisingly pleasant sound, booming and full of life. “Clearly. After tonight, your paws are filthy with blood and dirt, little lioness. Care to reconsider and join me? I can sense you are powerful, but if you continue, you will die tonight. I’m starting to think that might be more of a waste than the loss of my fortress.”

Tom’s magic was buzzing, and Hermione hissed lowly, “Just stay with me to the cliff. We’ll be gone soon. I had to give them time to get away. With all of us in one cluster, it would have been a massacre.”

“My desire to kill this man is skyrocketing, Dearest,” Tom snarled back. “I don’t like the way he talks to you.”

“I’m more concerned with his desire to rule the world than his impertinent tone,” Hermione replied sourly, pushing her way through the underbrush, barely aware of the dozens of scratching thorns against her legs and arms. “Once we’re at the cliff, we need to jump off and I’ll fly us away.”

Tom stared at her, the whites of his widened eyes shining through the dark and the rain. “That’s a very big risk. You’ve only just acquired that skill, and a mistake would mean death.”

“How sweet,” the voice was right beside her ear, and arms wrapped around her out of nowhere, pulling her up and out of the thorns savagely, then hurling her to the ground. The impact with the earth along her neck and back stunned her as he causally accio’ed her mask. She managed to roll slightly, pushing her wand under her hip, casting a few nonverbal spells, and tucking her face into her shoulder to obscure his view. Tom was somewhere nearby, restrained and boiling with rage. She sent calm over their bond. They didn’t have the power to fight their way out of this. They would have to use their brains.
A finger was under her chin, lifting her face. “Let’s have a look at you,” his voice was calm, though Hermione was not fooled. She glanced up and met his eyes, though kept her mind tightly shielded. The history books, even with magical pictures, hadn’t done Gellert Grindelwald justice - he was simply too alive. Even though she knew sixty was basically forty for wizards, Grindelwald didn’t look older than mid-thirties. His pale blonde hair tumbled over his bright cornflower blue eyes, but it was his mischievous energy that was the most compelling, bordering on mesmerizing. He was smiling down at her, the grin on his face lively and genuine, as if he were truly delighted to meet her. It was incredibly unnerving, especially as his smile widened further.

“My, my, you are a little powerhouse, aren’t you?” he murmured. “That mind is a beautiful steel trap. I wager I could spend days trying to get in there, in horribly nasty ways, and you wouldn’t even crack. The raw magic on you, child!”

Using a body bind spell, he lifted her to her feet, coming behind her to take her wand. He grasped at it, but it wouldn’t budge from her hand. His laughter rang out louder than before. “Did you just use a nonverbal, permanent sticking charm to keep your wand? You are a delight! I am definitely going to keep you.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Tom’s voice was close by, and Hermione allowed herself an internal sigh of relief.

“Goodness, you and your boyfriend are such overachievers,” Grindelwald smiled, but this one didn’t reach his eyes. “I expect you are somehow responsible for the leak in my organization. I have a few generals who will be simply dying to take that out of your hides.”

He grabbed her by the braid, placing her body in front of his like a shield, his wand to her throat. It didn’t dig in like Bellatrix’s had, simply rested casually on her flesh. She wasn’t sure if that was better or not. “Alright, boyfriend, come out,” he sighed.

Tom emerged from the trees, and in the lightening, Hermione could see blood splattered over his face and clothes. He was heavily shielded, but made no attempt to attack.

Grindelwald’s jaw tightened, along with his grip on her braid. “I see boyfriend has no problem with bloody hands, either. Aren’t you two just a bit too dark to be freedom fighters?”

“Desperate times,” Hermione murmured.
“Oh, dear, you are preaching to the choir,” Grindelwald’s tone was light again. “I’ve been saying that for ages. I knew you were one of my mine at heart.”

Tom growled, “Hermione is mine.”

She felt Grindelwald shrug. “What do they say? Finders keepers? I’m going to need to replace those generals you just killed.”

“Hermione would never serve you,” Tom laughed coldly.

“That’s what the Imperius is for, dear boy. Shall we see how well it works?” Grindelwald’s wand pressed into the hollow of her throat, and she heard him whisper, “Imperio.”

Tom was yelling in the background, but her body and mind both felt deliciously light, as if she were flying, completely weightless. The body bind was gone, she was standing free in front of Grindelwald, and his voice was the whole world. “Protect me, Hermione,” he said. “Kill your boyfriend.”

Her wand was pointed at Tom before she realized she’d moved her hand. The light sensation was still there, but another, deeper, wave of energy was filling her. Something that was in her, that was part of her. Her hand began to make movements in the air, her wand drawing energy from the spell motions.

“Hermione!” Tom’s voice didn’t sound right. It wasn’t cold or calm or superior. It was raw, pleading, full of emotion. “Don’t let him control you!”

“Feel free to do it in a painful way,” Grindelwald continued, that silky voice buzzing in her mind, trying to take precedence over all other thought. “Perhaps a flesh-eating curse? I could show you a few, though I have this feeling that you have a whole library of dark spells committed to memory.”

“Tom, I love you, and I’m sorry,” her words carried on the wind, and she saw Tom’s face fall, his own wand raise to point at her. She opened her mind, and pushed a feeling of deep trust and the words run to me as hard as she could over their bond to him.
Grindelwald was chuckling. “I should write this down. You two are excellent melodrama.”

His laughter transformed to a shout of annoyance as Tom ran full pace at them. “This is getting tiresome. Ava-”

Something snapped inside her, like a tether breaking free, and Hermione thrust her hand behind her, stunning Grindelwald as hard as she could mid-syllable. Unprepared, he flew backwards and she yelled, “Accio Elder Wand!”

It sailed neatly into her palm, and instantly, she felt the power flow through it, old, dark, and intoxicating. Grindelwald, even stunned mostly unconscious, managed to lift his head and scowl darkly at her. “You are more like me than you know, dear.”

Tom wrapped his arms around her waist, and she quickly reconsidered flying them away, the Elder Wand giving her sense of deep confidence in performing a skill she hadn’t used in years. She loosened Tom’s grip, took his hand instead, and turned sharply on the spot.

Chapter End Notes

I have a conflict with the physical appearance of Johnny Depp as Grindelwald. In the books, Grindelwald is described as vivacious, with a twinkle in his eye - mischievous. The bleached, washed out coloring on Depp looks awful in my opinion. I thought about how I would cast Grindelwald if I had all of time and space at my disposal, and I decided the perfect fit (in my mind, anyhow) was a young Peter O'Toole. There's a link below that shows him looking how I imagine Grindelwald would.

https://cloudpix.co/photo-peter-o-toole-984388.html
Tom Simmers with Quiet Rage

Chapter Summary

Tom bides his time after the events at Nurmenguard. Hermione has a little PTSD and talks to Dumbledore. Patience has a vision. Abraxas charms some parents. Oh, and after such much plot, there's some porn, just in time for Valentine's Day.

Chapter Notes

Hello readers, thank for you all the kind condolences - they mean quite a bit to me. Here's some plot and some porn (it's been far too long since I wrote a steamy sex scene, especially for the pair in this chapter). I have to give credit for the 'reducto' idea to my fourteen year old, who watches way too much "Deadliest Warrior," and always supplies me with gruesome ideas for battles.

Also, on a funny side note, I finally made it over to the Pottermore website and took the House sorting and Patronus tests. My House result was Ravenclaw, which was completely expected, since I'm a nerd. However, my Patronus was a rattlesnake! I think writing from Tom's p.o.v. is permanently twisting me, lol.

Enjoy!

The feeling of side-along apparition had not improved since he’d first felt it at the age of ten. Tom despised the sensation, and though he managed to stay on his feet, his stomach seemed to be rolling over itself, probably a combination of the apparition and the magic masking potion they’d all taken before leaving. This time, he had brewed it stronger to make it longer lasting, but now the side effects were intensified as well. He hadn’t eaten in hours, but the nausea and spinning were almost enough to make him retch.

“It might help to sit down for a moment,” Hermione’s voice sounded from somewhere to his left, low and calm, and her hand slid in his, cool from the brisk night. She didn’t seem to be affected.

He followed her lead silently, his rage mounting at how helpless his body felt, and sat down on a stone bench. It was only then he realized they were in the small, walled garden of Narcissa’s Hogsmeade cottage. Hermione had apparated them across countries. She performed several spells, murmuring multiple protective wards and cancelling the permanent sticking charm she’d previously cast with ridiculous ease. Tom could have undone such a charm, but it would have been the work of several long minutes of concentration, of delving into the molecular magic. Hermione simply waved Grindelwald’s wand in her non-dominant hand, and her wand was free. Once she had done this, Tom noted she stowed the Elder wand in her tight inner sleeve, preferring to use her own wand. He had more than a few questions for his soul mate about tonight’s events, but he
could feel her frenzied energy, barely contained, along with the old, raw power of that wand, even when not in use, and Tom decided to bide his time.

They sat quietly, and the awful effects faded quickly, especially since Hermione was whispering rejuvenating charms and cleansing spells at him while rubbing his hand and back. He admitted to himself that this was pleasant. Her touch was always a balm, even when he was angry.

“We need to get to Hogwarts,” Hermione stood. “Are you better now?”

He nodded and rose. They walked to the side gate in the garden wall, but were stopped when a figure came out from the house.

“Hee? The words were spoken in a soft, deeply accented English. “Is someone out here?”

Hermione turned. “Allison, it’s just me, Hermione, and Tom. We’re leaving for Hogwarts now.”

The moon was not quite full, but the night was clear of clouds, and Tom could see the young Frenchwoman perfectly. He hadn’t met her, though he knew she was part of the group of people Grindelwald had been interested in. She didn’t look like a dark wizard’s choice of target - a young woman in simple but beautifully cut robes with a sweet expression and a plump figure, but Tom could feel that she had power of some kind.

Her gaze connected with his, and her dark eyes widened, her round mouth dropping open. “Oh, I see,” she murmured, looking into him, then stepping back immediately. “You’ve had a very rough night. You’re a lot like him, only much more sane. That might make you more dangerous.”

“Yes,” Hermione interrupted before Tom could question what the hell was going on. “And we need to go. Don’t tell anyone we were here, ok?”

Allison nodded and went back into the house. Tom’s patience snapped. “What was that? Did she read my mind? Did she compare me to Grindelwald?”

“Well, you can’t say you don’t have designs on ruling the magical world,” Hermione replied tartly, already walking through the gate and toward the path to Hogwarts. “And, yes, Allison can read minds. Most people with natural legilimens skill can choose when to use it, but she can’t help it. I think she’s closer to a telepath. She’s harmless, though; she only wants to be left alone.”
“In the future, keep her away from me,” Tom followed her closely. “I have enough women in my mind.”

“I doubt Allison will seek out your company. One peek into your thoughts clearly terrified her.”

Tom nodded in approval. “As it should.”

“I’m simply grateful I’d already cleaned you off. Imagine her reading your mind while you stood in front of her covered in blood,” Hermione paused on the path. “Do I want to know how you managed to get that much blood on yourself?”

He grinned, his mouth a wicked slash in the moonlight. “I used *reducto*.”

“On a *person*?” Hermione sounded horrified. Tom considered reminding her that she’d personally blown up several people with a muggle bomb only an hour earlier, but decided against it. She could be so touchy about her darker side.

“Why not? It’s an explosive spell, and it works wonderfully on soft tissue. The man went everywhere, and his flying viscera distracted and blinded the three others, giving me time to get rid of them as well.” Tom wasn’t ashamed, and he wasn’t afraid of Hermione’s rejection, not any longer. She’d broken through the *Imperius*, cast by one of the most powerful wizards in the world to protect him. He knew their bond superseded any and everything else.

There was a tense pause as they kept walking, and Tom knew Hermione was struggling with whether or not she wanted to voice the question in her mind. “I’ll save you the trouble of asking, Dearest. I *avada’d* them. It was the logical move. We were both in mortal peril, time was of the essence, and I wasn’t about to simply stun them. It was kill or be killed, and I have no intention of dying.”

He waited for the lecture to begin, was already preparing his caustic response, when she quietly asked, “What did it feel like? Using that spell? Did you enjoy it?”

That was the crux of the matter. His soul mate wasn’t necessarily opposed to violence, or even killing; she would kill to protect others and herself, had proven that tonight beyond a doubt, but it bothered her to think of reveling in death, of deriving pleasure from it. He found that it bothered him that she assumed he did.
“I know you love to think the worst of me,” his voice held a slight admonishment, “but I was honestly too busy fighting to survive to ‘enjoy’ using the spell. I was certainly relieved to be done with them, but my main concern was getting back to you. I had no idea what Grindelwald was doing to you.”

Her hand came out, and he took it. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That was unfair. There were just so many surprises tonight, so many boundaries crossed. This is more about me than you.”

Tom nodded. She had a tendency to project her darkness onto him, because it frightened her. “We’ll need to talk about it.” He was not going to be her emotional whipping boy.

“Yes,” Hermione promised. “But first I have to get to Dumbledore.”

They were practically running, and had made it to the edge of Hogwarts, with the greenhouses in view. Tom looked sideways at her in disbelief. “Dumbledore? Why?”

“Because I need to give him this wand,” Hermione answered, not breaking her stride.

“You can’t do that,” Tom protested, running faster to keep up. “He’ll know all the things we did; we’ll be expelled.”

Hermione shook her head. “Somehow I doubt that. You had enough faith in me to run toward me when I was under the Imperius with my wand pointed at your heart. Trust me on this.”

“I think you might be soaking in too much Patience,” Tom snapped. “And I’m really getting annoyed with only knowing half of the cosmic plan you ladies seem to be tuned into.”

“Tom,” Hermione snapped back. “Sometimes events unfold at lightening speed. It isn’t about willfully keeping you in the dark. I’ll explain everything, but time is truly of the essence. We don’t know how long it will take Grindelwald to regroup with his remaining followers - the ones stationed in villages he’s taken over scattered across France and Germany.”

“Fine,” Tom allowed, but he was seething, and he didn’t bother to hide his anger. He let it flood their bond, but she only ran faster, her feet now barely touching the ground. He wondered if she
knew she was half-floating.

They entered through the tunnel, going down into the Chamber, and found most of the group sitting quietly. Abraxas was missing, along with Sebastian and Marguerite. Tom saw the eyes light up as Hermione entered, watched as her roommates and even the standoffish Vidhi ran at her to embrace her. Thad did as well, hugging her back. She truly was the heart of this group.

“What happened?” Corvus asked.

“Was that Grindelwald who appeared as we left?” Jacob added.

“How did you get away?” This came simultaneously from Josephine and Felicity.

Tom was quiet, allowing Hermione to question them about the prisoners who’d portkeyed with them to the field outside Hogsmeade (they’d all apparated away from there) and give the answers to their questions, mostly because he wanted to hear what she left out of the account. She stayed close to the truth, but omitted the fact that she’d summoned Grindelwald’s wand. He’d expected that.

When they’d learned that Grindelwald’s password on the book was the Deathly Hallows, and after seeing Hermione’s reaction to the phrase, Tom had found the tale and read it over and over, searching for a deeper meaning. He’d also gone through the Chamber’s books and the Hogwarts library. To begin with, he’d dismissed the idea that these hallows existed in some form in the real world, but now he reconsidered. If the wand was real, why not the others? He’d also learned that supposed possession of that wand was steeped in blood, that no one could maintain mastery of it without being a target of others. Was that why she wanted to give it to Dumbledore? To protect herself? There were many answers his soul mate owed him, and he was keeping track of them all.

After the group had been reassured and looked over, Hermione told them to go to their rooms. “We’ll talk over breakfast,” she assured them. “Tom and I need to go check on Sebastian.”

Patience had come over to him as Hermione spoke to the others, standing so close her pale, fly-away hair brushed at his cheek, and she slid her arm through his, her height making their shoulders nearly level. There was a special kind of comfort in her deep, watery magic, a sense that he could simply let go and fall into her, that she was strong enough to hold him, keep him afloat. Not that he ever would let go like that. Never. But it was pleasant to think he could.
“Is,” Tom began softly, reluctant to ask a question that hinted at his doubt and vulnerability.

“Everything is happening the way it should,” Patience finished, her cool lips touching his earlobe as she whispered.

A rush of satisfaction filled him, and he wrapped his arm around Patience’s waist, turning her to face him and kissing her deeply, in full view of everyone. He didn’t give a damn. When the group had been bound magically, he’d announced his quartet’s elemental bond. Most of the group were Purebloods, and knew that often meant a sexual bond. They knew that he and Hermione were soul mates, and that Patience and Abraxas were as well. Tom was tired of hiding, and with the secrecy pact, he didn’t need to, at least not in the Chamber. To the group’s credit, Tom didn’t see a single raised eyebrow when he and Patience finally separated, though there were several smirks.

They went up through the girls’ bathroom, and dispersed. Patience, Hermione, and Tom went to the hospital wing, where they found Narcissa tending to Sebastian.

“What in the world did you do?” Narcissa hissed as Hermione and Tom approached her. She was gently spooning a bright orange potion between Sebastian’s lips, a process made difficult by the frequent seizing of his entire body, and after tremors and twitches.

“They wouldn’t tell me anything, other than Sebastian was a victim of the *Cruciatus*, which is obvious,” she glanced bitterly at Marguerite, who held a damp rag to Sebastian’s forehead. “You are lucky I have extensive experience treating this curse, or he wouldn’t be able to attend your betrothal ceremony tomorrow.”

Abraxas, who held the bottle of medicine Narcissa was using, came forward to pour more into the spoon. “Only Tom and Hermione can discuss the business of the group with people outside the group, Lady Bonneau. We told you that.”

“I am their mother! That comes with an exemption!” Narcissa insisted angrily, and Tom found that her distress made him uncomfortable. It had taken Tom years to adjust to how much Hermione confided in and depended upon Narcissa. And it had taken the events of this year for Tom to completely embrace her as part of his future plans, as an extension of the group, a mother figure - *his* mother figure.

“We destroyed Nurmenguard,” Hermione answered simply.

Narcissa’s dark brows shot upwards. She glanced down as Hermione pulled Grindelwald’s wand out of her sleeve. “Sweet Circe, what do you intend to do with that?” She stared at the wand with
loathing. Tom made a mental note of that as well.

“I need to see Professor Dumbledore as soon as possible,” Hermione tucked the wand back into her sleeve.

The look of distaste did not leave Narcissa’s face. Tom knew her general animosity toward the Deputy Headmaster rivaled his own. Still, she summoned a house elf and gave instructions for both Galatea and Dumbledore to be sent for. Then, she gave Sebastian a large draught of sleeping potion and shooed everyone except Marguerite to the side of the hospital wing with the desk and chairs, away from the patient area.

Galatea arrived first, and her anger was palpable. She wore her silky men’s pajamas, with a long velvet robe flowing behind her as she walked rapidly towards them, stopping directly in front of Tom. He knew she was recalling the agreement they’d made, that he would seek her counsel before acting. “I’ve had messages from several people I know in the Ministry in the last hour. I could hardly credit what I was hearing. They are saying the Freedom Fighters stormed Nurmenguard, freed all the prisoners, then blew up the building.”

She was looking at Tom, clearly waiting for a response. He truly respected Galatea - she was brilliant and powerful, but Tom’s sarcasm had been in check for far too long tonight. He said the first thing that came to mind. “I’d think we should come up with a better name for the group than the Freedom Fighters. That’s terribly boring. We rushed headlong into danger, defying death. We deserve something more stylish. What about,” he paused for a moment thinking of the way the ourboros swallowed its tail, “the Death Eaters?”

It really wasn’t possible to gauge his guardian’s reaction to that because as he spoke the words, every one of the hundreds of bottles and jars on the shelves around them exploded, glass shattering and raining down. None of the shards touched skin, though, because Dumbledore had walked in, and cast a wide shield over the group.

The Professor was not wearing his over robes for once, only simple trousers and a button down shirt. He managed to look both alert and exhausted, his eyes bright as always, but with a deep weariness. “Although I doubt I was summoned to help clean up the hospital wing, I am happy to offer my assistance.”

“I will gladly accept,” Narcissa answered, though her voice was strained and she looked more shaken than Tom could ever recall.

Hermione, though, was simply gone. Her magic and her mental presence in his bond had cut off
sharply. He glanced over at her, and saw that she looked worse than Narcissa. All her curls were on end, frizzing out in magical overload, her hand was clenching and unclenching on her wand, her face, usually so expressive, was completely blank, though there was no mistaking the terror in her eyes. She had been the one to explode the jars, he knew. Her magic was his as well, and he’d felt the swell of a magical tsunami about to hit.

The adults were already vanishing potions and glass at a rapid rate, and Tom went to Hermione. She was still to the point of catatonic. Abraxas and Patience had moved closer also, and all three of them touched her arms. She shook herself, smiled, and Tom felt their bond open back up, as if nothing had happened. He added this bizarre episode to the list of ‘Things We Need to Discuss Later.’

Had his cavalier attitude toward their life and death situation triggered her earlier fear and panic? He had heard of soldiers suffering from flashbacks to battles, had seen old, ragged, homeless men from the first Great War in the streets of London, around the poor area of the orphanage. They would be normal one instant, then ducking from invisible mortars or fighting phantom enemies. Had Hermione bottled up the intensity of the battle in a similar way, only for it to come out now? He wanted answers. From the moment Grindelwald had appeared, Tom had been on his back foot, struggling to catch up with events and whatever plans his soul mate had, but was not disclosing. He was very angry about this, but it was a cold anger, and he was in an oddly patient, ‘watch how this plays out’ mood.

“Now,” Dumbledore looked around at the clean walls and floors, “what was the original matter at hand?”

Tom rolled his eyes. Dumbledore loved to play stupid, annoyingly. The man was a genius. He knew exactly what was happening. His contacts at the Ministry were probably the same as Galatea’s, since the two were inexplicably close friends. If she knew, then he certainly did.

“Albus,” Galatea’s tone was testy. Apparently, she was done with the innocent act as well. “We need to discuss the night’s events.”

“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore’s eyes fell on Tom, Hermione, Abraxas, and Patience, who were standing in a cluster to the side, then flicked to Marguerite, sitting at Sebastian’s side across the room. “I thought, for the sake of certain school rules and Ministry laws, we were not going to be straightforward.”

“There isn’t time to play games,” Hermione stepped forward. “We need to ask you to keep our role in this matter confidential.”
Tom worked to hide his scowl. All the work they were doing, it was for an ultimate goal - to gain prestige in the magical world, to show all the blood purists that he and Hermione were just as powerful, more powerful, than any Pureblood, that designations by blood status were meaningless. Even if he knew logically now was not the time to make their role public, it still struck his ego a vicious blow to think that others would gain the credit for their group’s extraordinary magic and brilliant teamwork.

Dumbledore’s brow knitted. “I believe in… flexibility when dealing with impetuous, talented youth thinking with their hearts, but this evening included many deaths, from both muggle and magical means, veering close to murder.”

Narcissa made an angry scoffing sound. “Apparently, your level of flexibility also includes homicidal megalomaniacs. How is stopping a man like Grindelwald wrong, even if the means require hard choices?”

“Albus,” Galatea began softly, putting a hand on Narcissa’s shoulder. “We’ve talked about this. You are not blind. Since these ‘youth’ have started taking a stand, a more violent confrontation was inevitable. Grindelwald is no respecter of age or ability. We did not stop them. We let them carry the weight of what should have been our responsibility - now we must protect them.”

He didn’t immediately respond, though his face took on an incredibly sad expression. Tom felt impatient. If Dumbledore wouldn’t support them, there could be trouble. Hermione must have felt that as well, because her magic reached out toward him, soothing and strong.

“Let’s bypass the arguments about morality. I get plenty of those with Tom,” She stepped forward, and pulled Grindelwald’s wand from her sleeve, holding it out to Dumbledore.

Since meeting Dumbledore five years ago, Tom had watched him closely. The man was ridiculously smooth on the surface, always calm and kind, never ruffled by the oddest student pranks or finding older students in empty classrooms in compromising positions. He was implacable, and Tom grudgingly admitted he admired this. However, that didn’t stop him from reveling as that calm façade evaporated. He stared openly at the wand, as if it were an illusion, and made no move to take it from Hermione.

Finally, after a few seconds tense silence, he cleared his throat. “How did you get that wand?”

“I stunned Grindelwald and summoned it by its name, the Elder Wand,” Hermione answered.
He looked back up at Hermione’s face, catching and holding her gaze as if he had never seen her truly before. Perhaps he hadn’t. Tom’s soul mate was as rare a creature as he was, and maybe even better at keeping her full power hidden.

She met his eyes, defiantly. She knew, just as everyone else in the room did, that Dumbledore was attempting to use legilimency on her.

“He tried that, too,” Hermione’s smile was sharp, and she pushed the wand further toward him. “Said my mind was a beautiful steel trap. He also asked about you.”

“Did he?” The normal, detached Dumbledore was back, his tone cheerfully aloof. “And why do you want to give me the wand?”

“Because I can’t beat him in a duel. We are a nuisance, a distraction, but you are the main event. He has you in mind as his ‘test’ to prove his powers, his dominance. Luck and surprise were on my side,” Hermione still held out the wand, her arm steady.

Dumbledore shook his head. “I think carefully planning played a large part, Miss Bonneau.”

“Yes, but that won’t defeat him. I know you can. You don’t need the wand, but it needs someone with more control than I have to wield it. You are one of the few people I can imagine not being corrupted by its power.”

“That’s very high praise coming from someone who has clearly researched the history of this wand,” Dumbledore took the wand from her hand. “And my history as well, it seems,” he glanced over at Patience. “I suspect your Seer had something to do with that.”

Hermione gave him a true smile, warm and broad. “I believe in you.”

He twirled the wand gently between his fingers, his expression nearly as reverent as Narcissa’s had been loathing. “You also realize, of course, that by simply giving me the wand, you will retain mastery over it.”

She bit her lip. “There’s nothing wrong with hedging our bets, is there? Just in case something goes awry when you face him?”
Dumbledore hummed an absent assent, still examining the wand. He made an elegant swirling motion with his hand and a protective barrier enclosed the entire room. “It is all I imagined, even without ownership,” he said softly, and Tom wondered just how long Dumbledore had thought about controlling this wand.

As everyone’s attention was focused on Dumbledore and the wand, they almost missed when Patience suddenly swayed on her feet. Abraxas caught her as she fell sideways, his Keeper reflexes saving her a nasty bump on the head.

Her eyes were rolling upwards, her lashes fluttering rapidly. Her normal dreamy expression was replaced with one of concentration, which seemed entirely out of place with Patience’s countenance.

“She’s seeing something,” both Tom and Dumbledore spoke. Tom eyed him warily.

“That’s hardly news,” Narcissa murmured. “The girl is constantly making premonitions. She comes into the infirmary at least once a week to let me know some obscure potion or medicine I should stock up on, and within a day or two, a student is in, needing that exact remedy.”

Hermione shook her head. “I know, but I think this is a bigger one.”

Patience’s whole body shuddered, then she locked eyes with Dumbledore. “Your sister says you need to go back home, that your friend is on his way for a visit.”

Although Tom had supposed he would enjoy seeing Dumbledore knocked down, the sight of his professor’s ashen face and devastated expression was disturbing; the pain there was too deep, too private to be on display.

Dumbledore recovered quickly, though. “Galatea, if you would contact our likeminded friends and meet me at my home in Godric’s Hollow, I would be grateful.”

“You think he’s coming here, now? He’s hardly had a moment to regroup from a terrible blow to his forces,” Galatea argued.
“Gellwert is not a fan of defense. If it is ever an option, he will always choose taking the offensive,” Dumbledore replied, looking down at the Elder wand. “And he wants this back, badly. I believe Miss Foster has a direct line to forces that shape our actions, and I am ready to listen.”

Galatea pursed her lips, as though she were holding back a rebuttal. “Fine. I’ll meet you there as soon as I can, with reinforcements,” she looked over at Narcissa and her eyes softened. “I love you.”

“Stop that. This isn’t goodbye,” Narcissa’s eyes glistened. “I’m coming with you.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, “It would not be wise for all the adults who can help cover for our wayward students’ actions to leave Hogwarts, and there may be a separate offensive, by Grindelwald’s remaining generals. Lady Bonneau, it would be better for you to remain here.”

Narcissa’s fire magic was practically crackling around her as she glared in Dumbledore’s direction, but she glanced over at Hermione then gave a sharp nod of her chin. “I will expect to hear from you as soon as this matter is concluded,” she addressed this to Galatea.

Galatea kissed her wife’s cheek. “Of course.” Then, both she and Dumbledore left the room.

Tom was filled with the odd desire to stop the waves of sadness coming off of Narcissa, and he moved to her side before realizing it, putting an arm around her thin shoulders. She leaned into him, and he simply allowed it. Hermione came over as well, wrapping her arms around her mother’s waist and hugging her tightly. The emotion coming from them was overwhelming, and Tom took a step back. Narcissa caught and squeezed his hand briefly, then let him go. He appreciated that.

“Well, that’s enough of that,” Narcissa pulled back from Hermione and straightened her shoulders. “You four need to get to bed.”

“How can you possibly expect that we will sleep after tonight?” Tom scoffed.

Narcissa’s brow went up. “I expect that tonight was simply another evening at school, no different than any other. Therefore, you should be in your beds, sleeping.”
Tom felt his anger flare. He and Hermione had led a rescue, had fought a battle, and now they were being ordered to bed like children? He opened his mouth, but Hermione’s hand was on his arm.

“Mother will come and get us if anything happens,” her brown eyes were calm, as was her magic. It wrapped around him like a blanket. “And whether or not you admit it, you do need some sleep.”

“Tom,” Abraxas was at his other side. “You know she’s right. We accomplished all our goals and then some tonight, but we are depleted. We need rest, and we need to let people without restrictions on their magic finish this fight.”

Logically, he knew all this. His quartet could not go storming over to Godric’s Hollow and battle Grindelwald, for many reasons, but Hermione still owed him answers and he wasn’t at all interested in sleep.

“And you have the party tomorrow,” Patience added cheerily, her ‘not quite here’ look firmly back on her face. “That’s a place to be seen and make Ministry connections, and you want to be your best.”

Abraxas smiled broadly at his soul mate. “Yes, that’s true. The Rosiers and the Lestranges will have invited all the power players to witness the betrothal, Tom. It’s an excellent opportunity.”

“There,” Narcissa said firmly. “That’s settled. Everyone to bed. I have to go to that blasted betrothal, too, and I need to spend the rest of the night making sure that Sebastian will be able to walk and talk for the event. Out,” she shooed them with her hands, and the group left.

They walked quietly through the hall, having cast notice me not spells and disillusions to ward off the notice of Peeves. At the stairs, they split, as always, and Tom and Abraxas headed to the dungeons.

“Tomorrow will be a different kind of battle,” Abraxas’s voice was full of weary resignation as they passed through the Slytherin common room. “My parents throwing me at every pureblooded female present.”

Tom caught his wrist, pulling him back toward the settee in front of the fireplace. No matter what the group said, he wasn’t ready to rest. The room was empty and dark, only lit softly in the immediate glow of the dying fire. He put a hand to Abraxas’s face, cupping his cheek.
“I will never let them give you away. You are mine, and I will kill them before I allow them to touch our bonds,” all the unexplored anger from the evening made its way into Tom’s voice, infusing it with deadly intention.

Abraxas closed the short distance between them and kissed Tom’s neck, his head bowed submissively even as he made the first move. “I know,” he whispered, his lips brushing against the pulse at the base of Tom’s throat. “And I love you for that. My parents see me as a pawn, but you see me. I can’t explain how much that matters.”

“You don’t need to,” Tom ran his fingers through Abraxas’s pale hair. It was soft, though not as silky as Patience’s, and quite the opposite of Hermione’s tight curls. He adored the variety in his quartet, all the ways they were unique. The smell of strong magic lingered in his hair, on his skin, and Tom noticed a few flecks of blood at his temple. “I can see it for myself,” he murmured, using legilimency to enter Abraxas’s mind.

They had done this for months, and yet Tom never tired of it. Experiencing the love Abraxas felt for him inside his own mind was simply amazing. Abraxas was sure and steady in his affection, like an ancient oak, rooted in the earth so deeply and firmly nothing could shake him. Tom basked in this, coiled around him, kissing and biting and grabbing and holding. This was not a solution to all the anger that had built up this evening, but it was an outlet for some of it.

Half-falling, they spread over the settee, Abraxas muttering an enlarging spell so that it was big enough to hold them. He was as frantic as Tom, pulling at his shirt, buttons making soft clattering sounds as they flew off and landed on the stone floor.

“You are so beautiful,” Abraxas spoke reverently, his fingers and lips moving over Tom’s exposed chest.

Tom was feeling very generous, flush with Abraxas’s affection. “So are you,” he replied, vanishing their remaining clothes. “You remind me of a marble statue of Apollo,” he trailed his fingers down the defined muscles of Abraxas’s shoulders and arms. “Such strength and grace.”

Even in the firelight, he could see Abraxas blush before ducking his head further down. Tom appreciated the direction he was headed, but he still grabbed his chin and forced Abraxas to meet his eyes. “Take my compliments. I would not lie to you. As my bound earth magic mate, you are nothing less than exceptional. You must believe that about yourself. There is no room for self-doubt in the great magic we will do.”
His pale grey eyes glistened in the gleam of the fire. “You and Hermione and Patience are the only ones who have believed in me for who I am, not for the Malfoy name or bloodline. It’s hard to shrug away what I thought about myself for the first ten years of my life, Tom.”

Unbidden, Tom’s mind flashed to his own ten year old self, to the angry, lonely boy who knew in the marrow of his bones that no one loved him. That no one would ever love him, that the only path to acceptance was through violence and fear.

He threaded his hands through Abraxas’s hair, pulling him up the length of his body until they were face to face. Then, he kissed him. It was slow, gentle, and not at all their usual style. Tom didn’t actually want to be this affectionate, but it was as if he had been taken over by something close to the level of Hermione’s emotions (which was horrifying), and he simply couldn’t stop himself.

They kissed for several minutes, nothing more than lips and tongues and hands in hair and smoothing over faces. It was deeply erotic, and Tom could feel from the press of Abraxas’s hips against his own that they were both on the verge of orgasm only from this. He felt like he was unlocking something, removing an invisible barrier that he had placed between himself and his best friend, something that had kept him from completely connecting with Abraxas.

Tom felt wetness on his cheeks and lips, and tasted salt. Abraxas was crying, silent, slow tears. He didn’t ask what was wrong because he knew nothing was wrong. Abraxas was feeling what he was, their affection, their friendship, their bond, going to another level.

“I love you,” he spoke against Tom’s lips. “I love you.”

There was no possible reply to that, not in words, so Tom whispered a lubrication spell and pulled Abraxas astride him, sliding his cock inside what felt like a deliciously hot glove. “Ride me,” he commanded, anxious to reestablish control.

“Yes, my Lord,” Abraxas’s voice had gone deep with pleasure on the verge of pain at the stretch of his body. He was practiced at hip movements, from years of riding both brooms and horses. The muscles of his thighs flexed as he moved up and down at a slow pace, drawing out the sensation of Tom’s shaft catching along thousands of nerve endings inside of him.

His lover looked far too smug for Tom’s liking, so he grasped Abraxas’s cock, running his thumb over the wet tip, back and forth.
“Ahhh,” Abraxas cried out, his rhythm gone wild as he bucked into Tom’s hand.

“That’s it,” Tom hissed, gripping tighter, his forearm taut. “You come when I say, don’t you?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Abraxas whined, leaning into Tom’s touch.

Tom let go immediately, bringing both hands to Abraxas’s hips, forcing him down harder. “Mmm, but I didn’t say you could yet. Don’t you dare finish until I say.”

Sweat was beading on Abraxas’s brow, and his face was a lovely mix of tortured pleasure. Tom found it intoxicating. He was so close himself, but the control he was exerting over Abraxas, the anticipation they were both feeling, that was just as pleasurable as the orgasm in Tom’s mind. He wanted to delay it as much as possible, to draw it out.

He pushed Abraxas off of his hips quickly. The blonde fell back, disoriented. Tom used that moment of confusion to settle between his legs, and lowered his mouth to Abraxas’s cock. He gripped it firmly at the base, allowing his ring and pinky fingers to gently brush over the delicate sac below, and sucking roughly at the overly sensitive tip, tasting the salty fluid freely leaking out.

“I can’t, I can’t,” Abraxas was biting his lips, his pitch rising.

“Be quiet,” Tom lifted his head briefly. “We haven’t placed any silencing spells. Show me that you can listen to my orders, no matter the temptation. Not another sound from you.”

Blood welled against the surface of Abraxas’s lower lip as he bit harder. Tom chuckled lowly and licked along the length of his lover’s shaft, going so slowly that he could feel the pulse of the veins as his tongue moved over them. He considered the member. As he had noted in the Chamber, he and Abraxas were very similar in dimension, the blonde a fraction of inch shorter, perhaps, but a small bit wider. The difference was negligible, and the weight and feel of Abraxas in his hand was much like touching himself. He didn’t hold the mystery of touching Hermione or Patience, but the familiarity of Abraxas made him very, very easy to tease.

He rose up and kissed at the blood on Abraxas’s lip, his hand still moving up and down. Tom rarely allowed Abraxas to fuck him, but he decided he was in the mood for it, and it was yet another way to torture his dearest friend, something he loved to do.
“Remember you must be silent, or I will punish you, and not in a sexy way,” Tom looked directly into his eyes. Abraxas nodded and Tom gave him an evil grin. “Right then,” and he spoke the lubrication spell again, this time lowering himself slowly on Abraxas’s cock, his knees on the settee, his hands gripping Abraxas’s strong shoulders.

The stretch burned, but Tom liked that. He never used stretching spells with either of them because the pain enhanced the pleasure, kept it from being too pure, too saccharine. They were face to face, eye to eye, and Tom felt that increased intimacy. There was no escaping it in this position. He distracted himself by biting along Abraxas’s neck, sucking at the pale flesh until it bloomed in bruises. His hips canted faster and faster, and he could feel Abraxas shuddering beneath him, shaking through his entire body at the effort of holding back both sound and orgasm. There were nearly silent gasps of air as Abraxas threw back his head and dug his nails into Tom’s hips.

“You love this don’t you, being inside me?” Tom taunted. “I like it too, in moderation. Your cock feels amazing.”

Abraxas was crying again, though Tom knew these were tears of frustration. He kissed at his cheeks, licking up the moisture. “You’ve been so good. So good. Get on your knees.” Abraxas flipped over faster than Tom would have thought humanly possible. He laughed. “So eager to get fucked again, my, my.”

He didn’t immediately move, just enjoyed the view of Abraxas on his hands and knees. This was his favorite position; he loved the dominance of it, and he liked to use it with all of his quartet. Tom ran a light finger down Abraxas’s spine, starting at his neck and tracing down to his arse. “You are a beautiful creature. And you are mine.”

Abraxas nodded quickly. Tom spread his arse cheeks, holding him open. “Do you need me to fuck you?”

He nodded again, his shoulders shaking. Tom smiled, lining himself with Abraxas’s entrance, pushing forward just enough to cause a feeling of pressure. The anticipation was so great, Tom himself almost came. He took a deep breath, calming himself. Abraxas pushed back against, him. Tom smacked him, hard.

“I set the pace,” he snapped. The mark against Abraxas’s pale flesh was arousing, so he spent the next several minutes making both sides red and warm against Tom’s cock and hips, which he freely ground into Abraxas, knowing that was destroying his composure.

Carefully and silently, he entered Abraxas’s mind again, and his cock jumped, leaking fluid, at the
arousing thoughts swirling in his friend’s mind. It was all, ‘fuck, this feels so good,’ and ‘I can’t hold on,’ and ‘I love him,’ and ‘I’m going to die from this.’

Tom pushed his cock into Abraxas, with the force of his hips hard behind it. “Come, Abraxas. Come for your Lord.”

The response was immediate, though soundless. Tom felt Abraxas’s entire body shake, felt his arse clench around his cock. Tom couldn’t hold back either, and he came as well, spasms wracking both of them as their hips thrust mindlessly and their muscles twitched like they’d been _cruico’d_. They fell forward, and Tom pulled Abraxas’s limp body around, turning them face to face again.

“You may speak to express your gratitude,” he said, a bit breathlessly.

Abraxas kissed his jaw. “Thank you, my Lord.”

Tom allowed him to snuggle into his side. “Just a reminder of to whom you belong to get you through tomorrow,” he answered coolly, though he knew they both realized that tonight had been something much more.

Abraxas’s skin felt too tight, itchy. He wanted to run far away, but no one would have guessed his discomfort. Outwardly, he was near to perfect - a dazzlingly handsome young man garbed in expertly tailored dress robes, with a wide, winning smile and impeccable manners. The Malfoy heir moved through the banquet room of the Lestrange estate with careless grace and seeming ease, as if he didn’t know that more eyes were on him than on the betrothed couple this party was meant to celebrate.

Pureblooded parents with any daughters ranging in age from nine to twenty-six were watching him, calculating their chances. He couldn’t make it five steps in any direction without being stopped. The conversations went mostly like the one he’d just had with Harold and Charlene Slughorn, while their daughter Hortentia had done her best not to melt into the floor behind them.

“Abraxas, my boy!” Harold had caught his arm. “We haven’t seen you in ages.”

Charlene nodded vigorously, her overly tight brown curls bobbing around her face. “It’s been since…” she paused, searching. She was not an observant woman.
“My parents’ Solstice Ball,” Abraxas supplied, the smile he used for charming parents pasted across his face. “Though we didn’t get to speak much.”

“No, no,” Harold agreed affably. “But we hear of you so often from my brother, Horace. He sings the praises of the Slytherins in your year, always bragging that you are the most talented group of students he’s ever seen.”

Abraxas shook his head. “Professor Slughorn is an excellent instructor and Head of House. If we are doing so well, it is due to his tutelage.”

“Yes, we’d rather hoped our Hortentia would be in his House. She’s a great favorite of his, even named in his honor, but…” Charlene trailed off, her eyes darting to the twelve year old standing behind her.

“Well, our loss was Hufflepuff’s gain; Hortentia is a fine young witch,” Abraxas said smoothly.

He felt great sympathy for the shy girl. Though he hadn’t even known of her existence before this year, since his mother had sent the list including Hortentia’s name, Professor Slughorn had taken to mentioning his ‘lovely, clever’ niece in class, and had kept Abraxas after lessons a few times to chat, allowing time for the second years to arrive in the classroom, and then Slughorn would call Hortentia up and try to engage the two of them in awkward small talk.

All three Slughorns’ faces lit up at this compliment. Hortentia was still a child, her body lightly padded with baby fat, no hint of puberty in sight. Her round face was sweet and guileless, and from his limited interactions with her, Abraxas knew she had been properly sorted. The girl was kind and eager to please, though terribly shy. He didn’t have any desire to hurt her feelings, but if he gave any indication of interest, or even acquiescence, towards a match with this family, it would buy him at least three more years before any move toward a betrothal ceremony like the one that had just been performed for Marguerite and Sebastian.

“What a discerning young man you are, to see that,” Harold praised. “Our Hortentia is shy, though many young ladies are at that age.”

Abraxas nodded, though he thought of Hermione and Patience, and even Marguerite, Vidhi, and Felicity. At twelve, the only girl he’d known to be shy was Josephine, who had indeed grown out of her shyness. Most of the ladies of his acquaintance were nothing less than fierce.
“Well, she needs time to grow into herself,” Abraxas smiled directly at Hortentia, and the girl might have stopped breathing. “I’m sure the Rosiers made the right choice allowing Marguerite to turn sixteen before going through with betrothal.”

Charlene playfully tapped Abraxas’s arm. “Your sixteenth birthday has come and gone.”

He gave her an even broader smile, allowed a hint of seduction to come into his eyes. After all, like Tom, he was perfectly aware that a majority of witches, young and old, found him attractive. “Yes, but my father wasn’t engaged until his twenty-first birthday, and I’m interested in pursuing an advanced degree after Hogwarts, which will take at least a few years of apprenticeship. Marriage and apprenticeship don’t cooperate well.”

Charlene looked less than happy at this answer, but Harold considered Abraxas’s words carefully. “Yes, there’s time, isn’t there? Another, say, five years? That isn’t unmanageable, not at all.”

Hortentia’s eyes widened to the size of crystal balls when Abraxas bowed over her hand and took his leave.

His conscience, mostly in the form of, ‘what would Hermione say?’ was yelling at him for leading the poor child on, but he needed his mother off his back, and he had no doubt that Charlene Slughorn would run to Evangeline within minutes to recount the conversation they’d just had.

Seven steps later, he found himself in the grip of the Travers, who had the nine year old Olive in tow. Abraxas felt ill. If Hortentia was still a child, then Olive was practically a baby, a small, pale thing who seemed in desperate need of both sunshine and affection. Her expression was painfully dour, and Abraxas thought of himself at nine, not yet at Hogwarts, being ‘molded’ into the perfect Pureblooded child by his parents through magical means that were questionable at best and abuse at worst.

Thankfully, he’d hardly opened his mouth before Marguerite appeared at his side. “Mr. and Mrs. Travers, I’m so sorry, but I must steal Abraxas. He stood up for Sebastian, as you know, and there are a few documents still to sign.”

Once they were far enough away, Abraxas murmured his thanks. “Marguerite, I may owe you a life debt for that.”
“Yes, the Travers are simply awful. No one ever taught them that humans do occasionally smile,”
Marguerite grinned.

“Why, Marguerite,” Abraxas was shocked. “Are you actually happy?”

Marguerite’s smiled widened. “I’m one step closer to being out from under the rule of my mother,
engaged to someone who is in our group, and who understands that he is not nearly as powerful as I
am. What isn’t there to be happy about?”

Abraxas glanced at her cheek. “And Hermione healed your scar,” he paused. “I’m sorry we over-
reacted.” Hermione had thoroughly scolded him, and though he didn’t regret standing up for
Patience, he could see how he’d allowed his anger to overtake his reason.

She waved a hand dismissively. “That’s in the past. And your insane soul mate has grown on me a
bit. She’s…”

“Unique,” Abraxas laughed.

“Powerful, I was going to say,” Marguerite answered. “She can see into the future, and for what she
has shown me, I’m willing to forgive many things.”

“It would be nice if she’d see into the near future,” Abraxas allowed his voice to trail off as they
approached a long table where a Ministry official stood with Sebastian, the Rosier and Lestrange
parents, and Hermione. There had been no further news about Grindelwald, no Ministry
proclamations, nor even news in this morning’s *Daily Prophet*. It seemed the Ministry and others
in the know were keeping the events of last night under wraps for now.

“Ah, young Malfoy,” the Ministry official was a cousin of his father’s, Alwyn Rowle. “We need
your signature as witness, and then the paperwork will be concluded.”

“Of course,” Abraxas took the offered quill and signed his name in the perfect penmanship his
mother had taught him at wand point.

Rowle tapped the parchment, and it folded itself neatly. “We were afraid Miss Rosier wouldn’t be
able to extricate you from the marriage-minded mamas,” he smirked. “I expect it won’t be much
longer before I’m processing your own engagement.”
Abraxas gave him a non-committal smile, but said nothing. He could feel Hermione’s magic reaching out to soothe him, a warm breeze. It took a monumental effort not to look at her, but this was not the place. Too many Pureblooded eyes were glued to his every move. If he showed the slightest partiality or even attention to Hermione, the scrutiny would be unbearable. Already, Patience had been purposely left off the guest list, something he knew his mother had orchestrated, since Mr. Foster’s many powerful patents made him.

“You need to escort me into the dinner,” Hermione’s voice was soft at his side. Abraxas shook himself from his thoughts.

It had probably galled Evangeline that Marguerite’s ‘second’ was Hermione, not an eligible Pureblooded lady. “It will be my pleasure,” he offered his arm, and felt a sense of pleasure and relief at her touch.

“How about for a night?” Abraxas persisted. “It’s been too long since we’ve all been together, since I’ve touched you.” Last night with Tom had put his libido into full gear. He was still sore, and yet desperate to do it again, this time with Hermione and Patience there as well.

“You’re touching me right now,” she teased, though her smile didn’t last long. “I know. I feel the same, but we’ll have to wait. I saw you with poor Hortentia Slughorn. That girl was already mooning over you. Now, she’s going to be drawing your name in hearts on all her notes.”

“She’ll be fine. And my heart is already taken, three times over,” he replied, just managing to stop himself from turning to kiss her.

Hermione’s pleasure and desire filled their bond as he pulled out her chair then sat in the one beside her. Tom was seated across the table, and was watching the two of them with a smirk. Abraxas held back his own grin. This dinner was going to be a marathon of self-restraint. Luckily for Abraxas, he was used to resisting all kinds of torture.
Chapter Summary

Galatea and Dumbledore go to Godric's Hollow to face off against Grindelwald. Later, Galatea skips the creepy Pureblood betrothal and hangs with our favorite flighty lady, Patience.

Chapter Notes

I know. Trust me. But, I think this summer will be productive, with less time between updates. Love to you all, and thank you for your Patience (and this chapter has some Patience).

Twelve hours before the Rosier-Lestrange Betrothal

Galatea apparated into a dense, magical fog. She froze, listening intently for the subtle popping sounds that indicated her companions had arrived nearby. The group, mostly composed of Aurors and Unspeakables, was too seasoned to speak or light the ends of their wands, but Galatea sensed them moving quietly toward one another.

She felt a hand brush hers, and a face came into hazy view in the sparse moonlight. It was Rachel Shacklebolt, once Ravenclaw Head Girl and a favorite protégée of Galatea’s, now a junior Auror.

Rachel put her mouth close to Galatea’s ear, her voice hardly audible. “We have twelve, including you. Most of the Auror department is here, and the Minister has been informed. As long as Grindelwald is on British soil, we have authorization to act. Did Professor Dumbledore give you a course of action?”

“No,” Galatea murmured back. “His instructions were to meet him here, as he was sure Grindelwald would seek him out at this location. We don’t even know if Grindelwald’s bringing others, though from this fog, I would expect he has more than one follower surrounding the area, to keep anyone from interfering with his plans for Albus.”

“We reviewed a magical map of Godric’s Hollow before arriving, and apparated around the property like points on a clock. The goal is to move in slowly, tightening the circle. Once Grindelwald and any others are contained, we are to take them directly to Azkaban. I’m going to
move back to the five o’clock position. You can take six,” Rachel faded back into the fog before Galatea could do more than nod.

Galatea cast a compass spell on her wand, and began moving slowly due north. The whole area was oddly silent, without even the sounds of night animals or tree branches moving in the mild breeze. Her pulse felt loud in her ears and her heart thumped in her chest.

In the past, she had courted danger, spending her summer holidays traveling in search of strange and rare magic, usually volatile. She’d ended up in more than one foreign magical hospital, covered in smelly salve and bandages or forced to swallow foul potions. She’d lost nearly as much flesh as Professor Kettleburn, only she’d been fortunate enough to regrow most everything. There was still a bit of calf muscle on her left leg that hadn’t returned, and she used a magical insert in her riding boot to support that side, as well as a localized numbing lotion Narcissa prepared for her monthly.

All of those times had been adventures though. The last time Galatea had truly felt in danger had been in November of 1918 in the Argonnes Forest in northern France, during the last of Hundred Days Offensive. By that point, she had been breaking the International Statute of Secrecy for over four years, though she knew she was not the only one. Many half-blooded and muggle-born witches and wizards had quietly provided various kinds of assistance to the Allied troops. Galatea had polyjuiced herself and worked in nursing tents all over the continent in every spare moment she had, using muggle medicine when practical and safe, but sneaking in spells and potions when it was more effective. The sounds of artillery shells, of thousands of guns fired at once, of the screams of dying men - those were moments that would never leave her.

And now, her terror was encompassed in silence. The difference between muggle and magical danger never failed to leave Galatea breathless. She was terrified right now, though there wasn’t a single gun or hardly a chance of being bloodied. If she died tonight, it would likely be in an instant, at the end of the Killing Curse. Her fear was more for Narcissa, for Hermione and Tom, for the family she’d built. During World War I, she’d had little to lose beyond her life. She had accepted in her mind that if she was caught, her magic would be stripped at the least, but after a heart-wrenching letter from her sister about both her nephews joining the fight, Galatea hadn’t been able to turn away.

The fog was getting thicker, and Galatea debated what to do. She searched her mental library of helpful spells, settling on one that was a cross between transfiguration and an enchantment. “Oculi Strix,” she murmured, feeling her eyes shift shape and size, to take on the sharper night vision of an owl. The boost was three to four times her human sight capabilities, and though the fog was still present, shapes became visible in the distance. She cast disillusionment on herself and crept closer, still following the path inwards along the six o’clock line.

Within thirty seconds, she was able to see the nearest shape was not a friend. A quick sleeping
spell, followed by binding and silencing, took care of him. She repeated these actions on two others, though by that point, sounds were erupting around her. The others had started to engage Grindlewald’s forces as well. Galatea could smell the magic, the thick ozone scent that filled the air when heavy magic was present. Jets of light flew through the fog, like fireworks bursting through smoke. She dodged spells, veering to the left to find Rachel.

The junior Auror was holding her own, knocking out and securing anyone who came at her, though she had an odd bump on one side of her head. She pivoted, pointing her wand in Galatea’s direction before recognizing her mentor. “Professor,” she sighed in relief. “I got hit with some kind of disfiguring curse. It only glanced the side of my head, but it’s growing, pulling my balance sideways.”

Galatea spent a few precious moments going into the curse, disabling it, while Rachel covered their position, fighting off three separate attackers. “We need to get this fog lifted,” Galatea said as she ended the curse.

Rachel stretched her neck gingerly and grimaced. “I know, but how? I’ve cast everything I could think of, and I’m sure the others did too.”

Galatea’s mouth twisted into her lopsided grin. “Yes, but none of the others think of magic and science as the same. We need to heat up the fog - it’s magically transfixed in the air, but the fog is still composed of water molecules. Any strong heat or fire spell should cause it to evaporate.”

Fire erupted from the end of Rachel’s wand like a petrol-soaked torch set ablaze, immediately dissolving the fog around her.

Galatea arched her eyebrows. “Very nice.” She cast a wide-range sauna spell she often used to quickly heat the tiled bathroom at Hogwarts.

Rachel nodded, clearly happy to impress her former professor. “I’ve been working on my elemental magic. Ever since Tom and Hermione almost exploded the Malfoy ballroom with their fire and air magic, all the younger people at the Ministry have been pulling out old texts and learning the techniques. It’s all the rage to be able to do special tricks with your element.”

The two women walked forward, vanishing the fog together. “Don’t mention that to Tom,” Galatea warned. “His ego would burst if he knew he was a trendsetter.”
Their spells had not gone unnoticed, but most of Grindelwald’s followers had already been dealt with, so the others cast similar spells, and the fog was completely gone within minutes, the Dumbledore family cottage and back gardens revealed in the moonlight.

“There are some gaps,” Rachel noted as the circle closed tighter around the now visible men dueling in the garden. “Something happened to Tristan and Stella.”

“Hopefully, they’ve just fallen a little behind,” Galatea attempted to reassure her, though the missing Aurors were likely injured at the very least.

All attention quickly focused on the duel. No one moved to interfere; everyone present knew the slightest distraction could be fatal. And, honestly, they were transfixed at the sight of two of the most powerful living wizards locked in battle. There were no magical words spoken, though some rebounding or errant spells made small explosions as they connected with trees or the ground. Several of the viewers had cast shields around themselves.

If one of her dearest friend weren’t in mortal peril, Galatea would have appreciated the mastery the two men displayed. They circled each other, graceful and self-assured, sending spells so quickly back and forth that Galatea thought she was only recognizing every third or fourth one. Most of their actions were perfectly matched, with spells and counter-spells cancelling one another out mid-air. When something did make contact, it fizzled on shields or was instantly healed. Even though Galatea had known Albus for years, she doubted she could begin to anticipate his actions in the way Grindelwald was.

The longer she watched, the more Galatea was certain that Albus was holding back. She hadn’t researched the history of the Elder Wand, but when Hermione had handed the magical object to Albus in the Hospital Wing, Galatea had felt the power emanating from it. Albus was already a wizard powerful enough to defeat Grindelwald, but with the extra channeling capabilities of the wand, this duel should have been long over. He hadn’t seen Grindelwald in years, and Galatea suspected Albus was enjoying himself in some small way, enjoying seeing the man who had been his first love, his best friend, his magical foil, perhaps even his soul mate.

Grindelwald made no attempt to hide his own delight, alternately compliments and taunting Dumbledore while they fought. “You’re barely putting in any effort, Albus. Aren’t you desperate to see what that Hallow can do? I’d wager your two little minions would have already hit me a few times by now.”

“I don’t have minions, Gellert,” Albus chided, his voice and breathing no more rushed or strained than if he had been sitting, conversing over tea. “And I think your own efforts are muted.”
Giving a bark of laughter, Grindelwald threw a dark curse, one that would have twisted and crippled muscles if it had landed on its target. Dumbledore halted it with a spell of his own, a bright purple light flowering into sparks as the magic dissipated. “Ah, Albus, your magic was always so lovely. Won’t you join me? See the grand plans of our youth through to their fruition?”

“Our youth is long past,” Dumbledore sighed, easily blocking several rapid-fire spells and sending out stunning spells that would have felled any other target. “And I found the cost to be too great then. You’ve only made it worse.”

Grindelwald’s smile dropped briefly, a genuine look of sorrow on his face. “I am sorry about your sister. I haven’t many regrets, but she was one. She had already suffered at the hands of muggles - can’t you see that I’m trying to make the world safe for all the future Ariannas?”

“Don’t say her name,” Dumbledore spoke in an even tone, but his face was shuttered, and he sent a spell that came out in a wave, blasting Grindelwald off his feet, skidding backwards in the dirt. “Don’t invoke her memory as justification for your twisted desire to subjugate others.”

“There you are! There’s my friend, that raw power!” Grindelwald leapt up to his feet, only to be pushed down again with another swish of the Elder Wand, his hands and knees connecting instantly with the ground.

Dumbledore advanced, his hand moving the wand in a series of movements so quick they were a blur, disarming Grindelwald and binding him with glowing ropes of magic. “I’m sorry to say that we are no longer friends, Gellert. And I’m ashamed the remnants of my affection for you kept me from acting sooner.”

“This is far from over, Albus,” Grindelwald smiled broadly even as he was ostensibly defeated. “And our bond is something you can deny but never break.” He nodded his head graciously at the Aurors, who had come to stand closer now the duel was over. “I’m ready to see this Azkaban of yours. I doubt it’s as nice as my own prison was until a few hours ago.”

The Aurors quickly took over, producing manacles and leg irons, casting restraining and magical dampening spells on the most wanted criminal in the entire magical world. Rachel and three others collected Grindelwald’s followers who had been disabled earlier. They also found the bodies of Tristan and Stella. Galatea and Dumbledore watched quietly.

Lionel Isley, one of the more experienced Aurors, turned to them once Grindelwald had been silenced to help prevent any wandless magic. “We have orders from the Minister to transport him to Azkaban. The Minister is meeting us there. Do you want to come along?”
Grindelwald seemed to laugh soundlessly as Dumbledore shook his head. “No, I think not. Though please tell the Minister I am at his disposal for any information he needs.”

The Aurors disapparated as a group, the two Unspeakables went to report to the Minister, and Galatea and Dumbledore were left standing in the empty garden, the hint of dawn just beginning to creep over the sky.

“How are you, Albus?” Galatea asked softly. “I know that was difficult.”

“It was necessary,” Dumbledore replied, his calm demeanor firmly back in place. “Gellert was right. This isn’t over. There will be several countries fighting to extradite him, and likely more than one trial. He’ll be happy to plot and put on a show. That man was always excellent with charm when he wanted to be, and there are still his followers scattered about.”

Galatea gently put her arm through her friend’s. He leaned ever so slightly against her. The guilt he felt was written on his face, and her heart broke for him. “You aren’t alone, Albus. We’ve all put our trust in people who’ve let us down or betrayed us. You don’t need to atone for your past by not living in the present.”

“Presently,” his mouth turned up into the beginning of a smile, “I find I am quite hungry.”

“I really don’t know where you put all those sweets,” Galatea tutted affectionately, ready to embrace a lighter topic for just a little while. “Let’s get back to Hogwarts.”

The next hour found the two professors enjoying the selection of pastries the kitchen elves gleefully provided despite the early hour. An owl arrived from the Minister, asking Dumbledore to be present at Grindelwald’s interrogation, which was scheduled for later that day. He thanked Dumbledore for his assistance in capturing ‘this heinous international criminal,’ and added that officials from Germany, France, and Austria would also be there.

“Well, it looks like I’m in for a lovely afternoon,” Albus popped a lemon tart into his mouth, his expression of enjoyment only half-hearted.

“You know Grindelwald is going to tell them about Tom and Hermione and the other students,”
Galatea swallowed a piece of biscuit, the crumbly texture sticking uncomfortably in her throat, causing her to cough. If she had had an opportunity to obliterate the man before the Aurors had carted him away, she would have.

Dumbledore pushed her teacup towards her. “I’m not entirely sure of that. Gellert is a very vain man. Admitting that he was outwitted and had his precious fortress destroyed by a group of fifth years might be too much for him.”

“I’d rather not bet my daughter’s future on his vanity,” Galatea sipped the tea.

Glancing down at the Elder Wand, which rested on the kitchen table beside his plate, Dumbledore answered in a light tone, “Don’t worry about Hermione or the others. I owe them a debt. They forced me to deal with a situation I was ignoring to the detriment of humanity. I’ll make sure their secret is kept.”

“Thank you,” she said, relief in her voice. If Albus made a promise, she knew he would keep it.

“Though,” Dumbledore continued, “This rashness needs to end. They must restrain themselves a bit more. Most of that group could pass their N.E.W.T.S right now, and their magic is extraordinary for their age, perhaps the brightest collection of minds I’ve seen in Hogwarts all at once. Their ambitions, however, are beyond their current capabilities and the legalities of our world. Tom Riddle could easily become a Grindelwald.”

*You’ve no idea how right you are,* Galatea thought, but she said nothing.

“I’m trusting you and Lady Bonneau to keep them in check.”

“I’m not sure if there’s anyone who can keep Tom in check, besides Hermione,” Galatea muttered. “And she doesn’t so much keep him in check as she circles rapidly around him, performing instantaneous damage control.”

“If they keep taking such risks, it will soon be impossible for us to protect them,” Dumbledore warned.

Galatea put a hand to her temple, brushing back her hair wearily. “I know. I have a calendar in my office, counting down their days until graduation. I keep telling myself it’s only one more year until
they are seventeen, two more years until they finish school. Grindelwald’s in custody. Things must settle down now, right?”

Dumbledore’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he tried to hold back a rueful smile. “Whatever gets you through the day, dear friend.”

Shortly after their conversation, Galatea headed to the Hospital Wing, where she found her wife in a chair beside Sebastian LeStrange’s bedside, her eyes closed, but her hand still tightly gripping a bottle of bright orange potion. The patient appeared to be sleeping deeply, though his soon-to-be fiancée was turning fitfully in a chair on the other side of the bed.

Two sets of dark eyes opened as Galatea approached, and she noted both women also instinctively clutched their wands. Narcissa had told her more than once how Marguerite reminded her of her sister, Bellatrix, before she’d lost her mind, swallowed by dark magic and sadistic behavior. Galatea thought of her own sisters, how close they had been when they were young, and felt sad for all that Narcissa had lost. That was why she worked so hard to make sure that Narcissa’s present and future were filled with love.

“What happened in Godric’s Hollow?” Marguerite was fully awake in an instant, her small body bristling with energy. Galatea didn’t think she knew any other student so eager for a fight. She was not the calming influence Tom needed.

“Professor Dumbledore disarmed Grindelwald. The Aurors took him, along with his followers to Azkaban,” Galatea answered, though she was looking at Narcissa, who stood, a stern look on her face.

Marguerite smiled broadly, self-satisfied. “We did it then.”

Narcissa placed a hand on her arm. “What your group did certainly led to the events in Godric’s Hollow, but unless you want to end up in Azkaban beside Grindelwald, you must remember that everything you did was illegal, from start to finish. You may have saved innocent lives, but you also used magic outside of school, you operated on foreign soil, you committed arson, and you murdered dozens of Grindelwald’s followers, some of whom might have been pressed into service, there under duress.”
Marguerite’s mouth opened to protest, but Narcissa raised a pale hand. “Galatea and I will be speaking to the entire group. I am not denying that you made a difference, that you probably prevented more blood shed than you spilled, and helped bring down an evil man, but you cannot speak of this. You cannot brag or even hint of your actions. You must assiduously practice that undervalued Slytherin trait of discretion. Am I clear, Miss Rosier?”

“Perfectly, Lady Bonneau,” Marguerite bowed her head submissively.

“You really should get back to your room, and get a few hours rest in your own bed,” Narcissa gestured to Sebastian. “He’s going to be fine, and your mother will be here to collect you shortly after breakfast.”

As Marguerite left, Narcissa performed a few quick diagnostic spells on Sebastian, nodding in relief when all the results looked good. “It’s a miracle this boy will be standing at his betrothal ceremony. He had quite a lot of the _cruciatus._”

Galatea wrapped her arms around her wife’s waist, pulling her close and breathing in the smell of the floral perfume that always clung to her hair and skin. “I’m sorry for the life events that made you an expert on treating it, but grateful that you have that skill.”

“I’m grateful the children are relatively unharmed, grateful that you have returned unharmed,” Narcissa whispered against her neck, her own arms coming to squeeze tightly around Galatea’s back. “Though I’d be more grateful if you had returned with news Grindelwald was dead. Dark Lords never stop until they are dead. Sometimes, not even then.”

Galatea side-stepped the comment about Grindelwald. She didn’t disagree with Narcissa, but she also knew Albus would never be able to kill his former lover. A Ministry-sanctioned Dementor’s Kiss was probably the best option, though she was sure Albus would still find a way to feel guilty. “You told Marguerite exactly what I was going to say. Albus doesn’t think Grindelwald will name the group as students, but we can only protect them if they use more common sense. Marguerite took it better than I expected, though I’m sure her agreement was mostly for show. I dread that conversation with Tom.”

Narcissa kissed her cheek. “You dread every conversation with Tom, darling.”

“That isn’t true,” Galatea protested as she kissed her back. “We’ve had some excellent discussions. I believe he almost tolerates me.”
They both laughed, then Narcissa pulled back to look into Galatea’s eyes. “We’ve come so far. We won’t lose him. We can’t.”

Galatea nodded to comfort her wife, just as she had nodded to comfort Albus, but she had the uneasy feeling that Tom would only play by their rules for as long as it suited him.

Politely declining the invitation to the engagement party (which she strenuously disagreed with and was only begrudgingly invited to as Narcissa’s spouse), Galatea spent the afternoon replenishing some of the potions, salves, and ointments that had been destroyed by Hermione’s spontaneous magical outburst. Patience, uninvited due to reasons Galatea preferred not to think about (even Ravenclaws loved to gossip, especially about the juicy connection between Abraxas and Patience), joined her, and the two worked quietly in a small lab in the corner of one of the greenhouses, Professor Beery popping in and out to give them various herbs and other ingredients. The Herbology Professor was in an even more cheerful mood than usual, delighted with the news that Grindelwald had been caught, and pumping Galatea for information.

“The *Daily Prophet* has next to no information! How did Albus know that Grindelwald was coming? And what in the world happened with that prison? I heard it was exploded by muggle means!” Beery’s onion sprout of hair seemed to stand even taller with his excitement.

“I really don’t know. Perhaps the prison was somehow discovered by muggle armies fighting in that area, and they bombed it,” Galatea shrugged, giving the cover story she had decided upon with Albus and Narcissa. It would be disproved in the coming days, when the prisoners who were rescued came forward, but denial and misinformation was the play for now.

“Muggles got through protection spells created by Grindelwald?” Beery asked in a skeptical tone. “I would have thought that near impossible.”

Galatea knew that Beery was a great ally, that he believed in muggle-borns as equals, but she also realized he’d been born and raised in the magical world, with very little exposure to anything muggle beyond curiosities in a museum. “Their weapons technology is rapidly advancing, and there was heavy fighting in that area. I don’t find it that surprising at all.”

“I defer to your expertise,” Beery allowed graciously, “but why did Grindelwald think Albus was behind destroying his prison, if the means were muggle?”
“Grindelwald is mad, paranoid, and thinks so little of muggles that he can’t imagine they would breach his defenses. I think he latched onto a theory of Dumbledore’s involvement because he sees Albus as his only magical equal.”

“Yes, but how did Albus know that Grindelwald was going to go to Godric’s Hollow?” Beery persisted.

Patience drifted past him, her arms full of willow twigs to be ground into powder for headache relief potions. “His dead sister warned him in a vision.”

“Of course she did, dear,” Beery smiled tolerantly as Patience went by, then turned to Galatea again. “Seriously, Tea. How?”

“Albus had magical alarms set on his family’s property in Godric’s Hollow. They went off and he put two and two together,” Galatea answered, shaking her head at Patience, who had dropped the willow twigs on a table and was now absently picking pods off a small shrub.

“Oh, dear,” Beery followed Galatea’s gaze, his eyes widening. “Patience, those pods are extremely venomous. You need to wear dragon hide gloves to harvest them.”

“It’s ok,” Patience replied, continuing to pluck the seed coverings with her bare hands, supremely unbothered. “We have an understanding.”

Beery looked at Galatea. “That girl is both the strangest and the luckiest person I’ve ever met. Every other class, she does something that should kill her. I have mild heart attacks every time I see her.” He shook his head, watching Patience with mild worry mixed with gratitude. “I was running low on those pods though.”

Galatea grinned. She found Patience delightful, though she did her best to forget all Narcissa had told her about the elemental quartet, bonded through long-forgotten sex magic. Galatea was not naïve about the students’ love lives, but Hermione and Tom seemed to be, as in all categories, overachievers in this matter. Patience gave her more work than any other Ravenclaw, usually in the form of calming down other professors, but Galatea loved her. She was brilliant, though few people gave her that credit, and seemed to be connected directly to magic itself in a way Galatea had never witnessed. Patience was also funny, and easy company.

“Why don’t Patience and I run down to the lake to get some gilly weed and marsh toadstools?”
Galatea offered. “You can get the pods put away safely.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Beery replied, clearly happy at the idea of having his greenhouse back to himself.

Patience pulled off a final pod, dropped it into the jar on the table, and followed Galatea out of the back entrance of the greenhouse. It was still rather cold, and the air was brisk, the ground hard. Galatea cast a warming spell over both of them.

“You want to discuss the group,” Patience spoke in a statement, not a question. This was common for her, and disturbed many people.

Galatea had come to find it charming, though. “Yes, and I think you already know what I’m going to say.”

She nodded her white-blond head solemnly. “The group needs to be more cautious.”

“No, actually,” Galatea frowned. “The group needs to stop any activity outside of school grounds altogether. I know you meet in the Chamber, I know you break school rules as easily as breathing, and probably a dozen Ministry rules as well, but Grindelwald is in the hands of magical law enforcement. Tom must stand down, lay low, at least until he graduates. I know you quietly but strongly influence your entire group. Both Tom and Hermione listen to you.”

Patience glanced at Galatea as they came to the edge of the lake. “This isn’t over.”

Galatea narrowed her eyes as Patience repeated the words Grindelwald had spoken earlier that morning. “Do you know what’s coming?”

She didn’t answer, only spread her arm out over the edge of the lake. Instantly, a spout of water rose to touch Patience’s hand, bringing a large hunk of gilly weed right to her palm. She took it and patted the water like one would a dog. It dispersed in a gentle spray, coating Patience’s face in a mist like a kiss. Galatea marveled at the sight. More than one professor had expressed the belief that she was not quite human, that she had fey or veela blood. Galatea thought it must be closer to something like merfolk or a water sprite.

Patience placed the gilly weed in the jar Galatea was holding, then spoke softly. “The future isn’t
clear, which means it has many possibilities. Several of them are not…pleasant.”

Galatea had expected a response along those lines. If Patience knew something for a certainty, she usually wasn’t shy about stating it. Her hesitation was a cause for concern in and of itself. “Do you have a sense of how any of it will go? The trial with Grindelwald? What might happen?”

“I only know that Azkaban is the last place the Ministry should put him,” Patience’s voice was deeper for a moment, her eyes bright with borrowed light.

“I believe you,” The Head of Ravenclaw House assured her student. “And, I’ll tell Professor Dumbledore, but I don’t see the Ministry moving him. They don’t have many other options for holding him, and he’s escaped custody before.”

“He will again,” Patience said matter of factly. “And you can’t do anything to prevent it.”

Galatea felt a rush empathy and affection for her student. The slender young woman carried such weight on her shoulders, and though she didn’t seem burdened, it couldn’t be easy. She wrapped an arm around Patience’s shoulder, which was difficult because the blonde was taller than she was. Patience obligingly leaned down, leaning her head against the side of Galatea’s.

“Do you want to have lunch with my parents? They’re on their way. They like you very much,” Patience’s voice was dreamy again.

“It is a holiday weekend, isn’t it?” Galatea had forgotten. “I’d be delighted. Your father and I do love to discuss our latest inventions.”

They dropped off the potion ingredients, then walked arm and arm down to Hogsmeade, content to not borrow future trouble for the afternoon.
The Truth, or Something Like It

Chapter Summary

Hermione comes to a difficult decision. Narcissa isn't so sure. Neither is the Room of Requirement.

Chapter Notes

Trying to stay in the writing groove, and get an update out. This ride is a little bumpy, but a necessary part of the journey. Love to all the readers who keep me inspired.

Narcissa had a headache of epic proportions. Everything about this afternoon had triggered memories of her previous life. She’d recalled her own innocence and excitement when she’d been betrothed to Lucius, and the sight of Marguerite’s crown of flowers, looking so like Bellatrix had been before hatred and prison had destroyed her features, reminded her of how Bella had used a particularly sweet charm to weave roses into Narcissa’s hair before the ceremony.

At that point in her life, she’d convinced herself that she had everything she could want, that she was fulfilled. It had been a good few years into her marriage before she’d started to realize that she was in a gilded cage, and as the Dark Lord rose once, then again, those bars began to press inward. Still, she had loved Lucius, and she mourned his loss, along with Draco, whose memory was like a well-placed stunner to her heart. When she glanced at Abraxas, who was nothing like the dour, hateful father-in-law she had known, she tried not to think of her son. She knew Draco wouldn’t have had a future in that timeline - he would have died in battle, in prison, or wasted into a shell of himself under the rule of the Dark Lord, just as Lucius had done. But that knowledge didn’t assuage the pain of knowing he would never exist now.

And all through this cascade of memories, she’d been seated next to Horus Slughorn, who simply would not shut up. He was convinced his niece was going to become betrothed to Abraxas in ‘a few short years,’ nattering on about how Abraxas had spoken just moments ago to his brother and sister-in-law, and had hinted strongly at a future alliance, something she knew Tom would never let happen.

Narcissa was about to motion for a house elf to discreetly bring her something stronger than tea when Hermione came up to them.

“Mother, Marguerite told me that Mrs. Rosier recently imported several magical plants from the Amazon forest. Would you care to tour the greenhouse with me?” Hermione’s mouth was curved in a playful smile, and Narcissa knew she had easily read the situation and come over to rescue her mother.

Quickly, Narcissa stood, shaking the folds from her robes. “Yes, that sounds lovely. Perhaps she’ll let me take some cuttings back to Hogwarts.”

“The Amazon, you say?” Professor Slughorn began to hoist himself out of his chair, but the ladies
were already gone.

As they walked down the quiet hall to the conservatories, Narcissa let out a low sigh of relief. “Thank you, darling. I’ve been a bit…reminiscent this afternoon, and I was at the end of my patience with Horace.”

“I could tell,” Hermione took her hand as they walked.

Narcissa smiled. When they had first arrived back in time, Hermione had been hesitant to touch her, and Narcissa, being raised as she was, was not an overtly physical person. Within a few months, though, Hermione’s affectionate nature took over, and Narcissa found herself the recipient of more embraces than she’d ever experienced in her life. As she had grown closer to Galatea, she’d been overwhelmed by the romantic caresses as well. How much her life had changed. She wanted to keep those changes, to protect them.

“I hope I wasn’t too obvious,” Narcissa murmured. She prided herself on being able to hide her emotions, though she had much less need on a daily basis to do so than she had in her previous life.

Hermione pushed open the greenhouse door, holding it for Narcissa. “No, I just know you, and how hard this day has been, especially considering everything that unfolded last night.”

“Yes,” Narcissa walked toward a low table with several brightly flowering plants and vines. “We need to discuss those events.”

“I’m so sorry about your medicines,” Hermione said in a rush. “I’ll help you replace them all.”

Narcissa shook her head. “That was spontaneous magic, not under your control, and I had quite a shock when he said the phrase ‘Death Eater’ as well. Though, I suppose, if the name came into his mind previously, it isn’t such a surprise he thought of it again.”

“But he hasn’t been obsessed with death, with finding a way to live forever,” Hermione replied, absently stroking a rose leaf. “I thought we’d put him on another path.”

“Darling,” Narcissa sounded tired. “You are too smart to delude yourself. Death will always be the ultimate enemy for him to defeat, especially as you two grow older. Tom has been focused on different areas of magic, but that’s because you’ve been guiding him, and frankly, distracting him. I think the name shows he’s been thinking of immortality, at least in the back of his mind. And you must scale back these grand plans of his, at least until graduation.”

Hermione nodded glumly. “I know.”

Narcissa stroked her hair, wishing she had some magic that would make them feel better, permanently. She looked closely at her daughter and saw more than the exhaustion from last night’s battle, more than the shock of Tom’s use of the group name. Something was deeply bothering her, something Hermione had not yet shared.

“What is troubling you so?” she asked softly. “You’ve never kept back anything before. I’m here for you.”

Hermione was quiet for several seconds, her face down and away. Finally, she looked up at Narcissa, tears pooling in her eyes. “I’m afraid. Afraid like I haven’t been in years. Tom’s going to be able to read my mind eventually. No matter how much I practice Occlumency, our bond will continue to strengthen, and one day, he’ll be inside my thoughts. He’ll know what we’ve done. Then all we’ve worked for might be undone, and even though I know it’s selfish, what I fear most of all is that he’ll hate me,” she spoke in a rush, barely containing the on-coming sobs.
Narcissa held out her arms, pulling her daughter into her chest while the girl cried in body-wracking gulps. She had read the soul mate book Hermione had found in the Room of Requirement, had read any and every bit of material on the matter she was able to find. Occasionally, she heard soft echoes of Galatea’s thoughts. But she and Galatea didn’t have the soul mate writing which made the bonds more intense, nor did they have secrets from one another.

Ironically, Narcissa thought, much of what Hermione feared, she’d done to herself, or at least had sped up the process. That headstrong Gryffindor spirit had rushed into so many layers of magical binding with Tom that their magic was practically indistinguishable these days. True, the bonds with Hermione and the rest of the quartet and the larger group had wrought positive changes in Tom’s temperament and his ability to feel emotions, but Narcissa agreed Hermione was on a collision course with the end phase of the soul mate bond, which seemed to include the ability to read one another’s thoughts. As she and Tom gained more magical power and skill, both together and separately, as they shared life and death situations, their bond grew stronger, and there was no way to reverse it.

“He won’t hate you,” Narcissa spoke against the crown of Hermione’s hair. “You are a part of him now - part of his soul.”

“He fragmented his soul!” Hermione cried harder. “There’s no scenario where he doesn’t see this as a betrayal.”

“That was a different Tom, a different set of circumstances,” Narcissa tried to reassure Hermione, but also herself. Honestly, she was frightened as well. Things had gone so smoothly for so long, they’d both been feeling safe, smug even. Now, even though Grindelwald was in custody, she had the sick sensation that trouble was only just beginning.

Hermione tilted her head up, meeting Narcissa’s gaze. Her expression was grave, a haunted look in her eyes that Narcissa hadn’t seen since their first weeks together. “It will only get worse the longer we wait. We must tell him.”

Narcissa pulled back, her entire body flooded with shock. “Hermione, no! We can’t! We didn’t give up everything to recreate the Dark Lord in the past.”

“He won’t turn into Voldemort if we are honest with him,” Hermione’s tone was pleading. “I’ve been weighing all our options since I read his thoughts, going over every possible scenario. He’ll be angry, yes. Enraged, probably violent. I expect he will curse me, or at least try to. But the longer we wait to tell him, the worse it will be, and the greater the risk that we’ll never be able to re-win his trust.”

“I made a vow that I wouldn’t let him hurt you,” Narcissa felt tears beginning at the corners of her eyes. She blinked them back, trying to push the rising panic away as well. “There must be another way, a spell or potion to block your thoughts beyond Occlumency. I want to believe we’ve made enough of a difference in his life that he could handle his information, but I simply can’t trust him.”

Hermione entwined her fingers with her mother’s. “Then trust me. It’s going to be awful. Maybe for a long time, but I know it has to be done. I know it in my mind, in my heart, in my magic. We came to this time intending to take our secrets to the grave. But Galatea knows. Patience knows. We can’t control the fact that Tom will find out. We can control when he finds out.”

“Not in the Chamber,” Narcissa’s voice broke with emotion. “That’s his territory. If you are going to tell him, you need to be some place neutral, some place that gives him no advantage. And I want you to come to me as soon as you’ve told him. I want to know you are uninjured.”
“Completely uninjured is a bit optimistic,” Hermione said dryly, her brow creased in thought. As Narcissa watched, the lines smoothed and a smile came over Hermione’s face. “I know just what to do.”

“If he hurts you,” Narcissa began, though she left the threat unspoken.

“We should get back. The party will be over shortly,” Hermione wiped at the tears on her cheeks. “And I won’t let him hurt me. I think I’ll be the one hurting him, Mother.”

Narcissa murmured a few spells and righted both their appearances. It wouldn’t do to return with tear tracks and reddened eyes. At the door, she paused. “Are you sure? I’ve spent the day thinking of what I lost in the future. I couldn’t bear to lose the family I’ve gained here in the past.”

Hermione raised on her tip toes and kissed her mother’s cheek. “We’re good at making leaps of faith. We just need to make one more.”

As soon as they had returned from the betrothal ceremony, Tom had taken Hermione’s arm. His grip was light, but firm, and she knew he wanted to lead her to the Chamber.

“Come upstairs with me,” she pulled back, turning them toward the grand staircase.

Tom narrowed his eyes. “I’d prefer a place I know is private.”

“I know a place that is as secure as the Chamber,” Hermione replied.

His eyes became slits, and his fingers tightened on her arm. “Aren’t you the Queen of Secrets these days?”

Hermione kept her expression open and her mind closed. “I’d like to share some things with you, if you’ll come with me. I promise it will be worth your while.”

He nodded silently, following her up the stairs, through hallways, and up more stairs. When they had reached the seventh floor corridor, Tom frowned. “What’s here? I don’t think I’ve ever even seen this…” he stopped and stared at the tapestry, annoyance flitting across his face.

“Abraxas mentioned Patience bringing him this way. To a bath?” his lips thinned unpleasantly. “As much as I love a hot soak, I’m not in the mood for one right now.”

Hermione was pacing, doing the three turns, and praying to any and all powers that her faith in the Room of Requirement’s powers was justified. She silently asked, I need a safe space, a room where our magic will not work, where no one can be hurt, and from which we cannot be released until no one has murderous intent.

Tom was making an impatient huffing sound when the door appeared in the wall. He followed her in, complaining. “We need to have a serious talk, little bird,”

His voice trailed off as he took in the room. Hermione was also at a loss for words, even though she’d seen in the room in many incarnations. Now it was a circular room, perhaps only twelve feet in diameter, with several skylights in the vaulted ceiling, but no windows. Sconces about ten feet up the walls gave additional light. The pale blue walls themselves were not stone or plaster. They were padded, and the floor was also soft under their feet, like a thick rug. There was no furniture, and the door disappeared behind them. It looked like a friendlier version of a cell in a mental asylum, used to prevent self-harm. Hermione couldn’t decide if the room’s choices were reassuring
or not.

“What in the world?” Tom muttered, looking back toward the space where the door had been. He pulled out his wand. “Revealo.” Nothing happened.

Hermione had the urge to back up toward the wall, but resisted it. She stood still as Tom whipped around, his expression livid. “What have you done?”

“I have to talk to you about something serious, something that will upset you. I needed a place that would keep us both safe,” Hermione began.

“I think you have more than one thing to tell me,” Tom stalked toward her, pocketing his wand. “And I’m already upset. You are keeping secrets, little bird, and I want to know why.” He spoke softly, always a bad sign, and stared directly into her eyes.

“You can’t use Legilimency in here,” Hermione sighed, not surprised that he was trying, but still a little disappointed. “As long as we’re in here, we can’t use any magic.”

He lowered his face to hers, and she knew that if their magic had been present, it would have been pressing into her, surrounding her and squeezing like a tangle of snakes. “I’m almost hesitant to ask what secrets you’ve been keeping that could merit these precautions, Dearest,” he hissed, pushing away from her.

“Let me give you my list so far: Why didn’t you tell me the Deathly Hallows are real? Why do you trust Dumbledore with the Elder Wand? Where are the other Hallows, the ring and the cloak? How did you know how to disapparate? Why do you shield your mind as though your life depended upon it?” His voice rose with every question, until he was yelling, “How can you act so noble and righteous when you’ve been lying to me?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “I…” she tried to think of the words, then stopped as two small vials suddenly appeared in the air, hovering between them. The bottles were labeled, though Hermione recognized the potion instantly - veritaserum.

Tom’s anger seemed to slightly dissipate. He smirked. “Apparently the room doubts your veracity as well. I might like it after all.”

Hermione took one of the bottles, then gestured at the other. “There are two bottles. Perhaps I’m not the only one with secrets.”

He hesitated, his hand just beyond the vial. “I suspect my list barely scratches the surface. It could be you’ll need both vials to learn to be truly honest.”

“You’re afraid,” she said calmly. Now was no time to pull her punches, Hermione decided, especially when she was about to deliver a coup de grace.

Tom scowled, but took the other bottle. “I think not. You’re the one who is hesitating.”

She pulled the stopper from the vial, meeting Tom’s eyes completely. “What I’m about to tell you actually proves how very much I trust you, how much I love you.”

“The fact that you’ve dragged me into a room that blocks magic seems to suggest otherwise,” Tom said, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning up against the curved wall. “And padded? Are you expecting me to kill you? Because you know it would probably be harder for you to defend yourself without magic. I’m twice your size, Dearest.”
Silence reigned. He looked at her, his face as blank as the room, while she struggled to speak. She knew this was necessary, but that didn’t stop it from being painful, scary, and a task of such enormity it felt like trying to scale a mountain. She loved Tom, despite his faults, despite all she knew of his potential for evil. The thought alone of losing his love, his trust, made her chest ache physically. She took the potion, and saw him do so as well.

“Shall I simply start asking you questions now, or do you have a full confession prepared?” Tom asked, his voice low and dangerous.

“I have a confession,” the words came without hesitation. Hermione had never taken veritaserum before, but was impressed with its quick efficacy.

More silence. Tom rolled his eyes. “You need prompting? I thought this was a planned event. What is your secret?”

“I’m from the future. I travelled through time with Narcissa to change the past events in order to create a better world,” Hermione stated plainly, the words rolling easily off her tongue even as she worried she was on the verge of a panic attack.

Tom stood up straight, his face still betraying nothing. “What was your main objective? What specifically were you trying to change?”

“You. Your life,” she answered. “In my time, you were an evil sociopath who was trying take over the magical world.”

Tom felt numb. There were no clocks in the room, but he’d questioned Hermione for at least two hours, demanding details of her earlier life, of the future, of what she knew about his previous past, and what she knew about who he had been in the future. Though he had expected to be angry at whatever Hermione confessed, if only for the sheer fact that she had kept secrets from him, this level of deception was almost unfathomable.

His entire experience and understanding of the magical world had been shaped by two women with the express purpose of manipulating him, of molding him into something more pliable, more socially acceptable. There wasn’t enough combined rage in the world to cover this situation.

He felt sick. He never felt sick. She’d weakened him, with her incessant emotions and insistence on caring and suppressing his anger. She’d made him care about others, about her, and he wanted to punish her. If he’d had his magic, he would have cursed her, something painful and nasty.

“You never met me in your time?” Tom had already covered this material, but he needed to hear some things again. “How did you have my words if we’d never met?”

Without her magical aura, Hermione seemed even more petite than usual. She looked delicate, fragile. Part of him wanted to break her. “I was wearing your horcrux - it apparently had enough of your soul to activate the first part of the soul mate bond.”

“The locket, I made it a horcrux in the future,” Tom frowned, gesturing toward her neck. They hadn’t changed from the clothes they’d worn to the engagement party. She was in a pale cream dress, lacy and high-necked, and Slytherin’s locket, his locket, lay glittering on her chest. Earlier today, he’d been proud she was marked as his.

“Yes,” Hermione bit her lip, looking as though she was trying not to cry. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to see her tears or not. He stepped toward her suddenly, and she flinched.
“Are you afraid of me?” He asked, using the voice he knew gave her chills.

“Not of you, Tom,” she sighed. “But going over the memories of who you were in another time are difficult. I saw things, I…”

Tom glanced down at her arm, the scar tissue covered by her long sleeve. “That mark on your arm, was that done by my followers?”

“One of them, your lieutenant, Bellatrix, Narcissa’s sister,” Hermione nodded. “It happened right before we left. Things were very…bleak. I wouldn’t have even considered going anywhere with Mother at that point if it hadn’t seemed that there was no other hope.”

Tom laughed mirthlessly. “Mother? She isn’t your mother. She was even your enemy at one point. It was your hatred and fear of me that brought you together. How is that for familial bonding?”

“I consider her my mother now,” Hermione said quietly. “And I don’t hate or fear you - I love you.”

“Impressive - you make that claim under veritaserum, so it must be true,” Tom was horrified at how relieved he was that she had said those words, but he didn’t let that show. He was determined to let nothing show. Not ever again.

Hermione started toward him, her hand out to touch his arm, though she wisely stopped before contact, letting her arm fall by her side. “Of course I love you, Tom. I might have kept the secret of how I got here, but I didn’t, I couldn’t, make up the soul mate bond, our words, the connection of our magic. All of that is real. The pledges I’ve made, to help you rise in magical society, the group binding, our fight against Grindelwald - you know that isn’t fake. You were there, you felt my magic - our magic.”

Everything she said made sense. Tom was too smart not to see the logic in what Hermione and Narcissa had done. After all, he’d been fighting against a dark wizard, making plans, gathering a group. He smirked inwardly to think how much more effective he’d been than Grindelwald. It was clear from Hermione’s descriptions that his future self had been going insane, which he subscribed to the use of horcruxes, but his magical power hadn’t been diminished. There was no reason to suspect that he wouldn’t reach that height of magical ability in this timeline, especially with his soul mate and elemental quartet bonds. Sanity, however, was non-negotiable, so the horcruxes weren’t an option, not that he’d even been considering them.

The experiences Hermione related also made it clear that Tom had the power and the will to rule others, as he had always known. Hermione was invaluable, though, because she knew several of his missteps, and could help him avoid them. And she loved him, despite all that she knew. Tom could use that. As much as he wanted to punish her immediately, in a grand gesture, this situation was delicate. She’d confessed because of the soul mate bond, because of the inevitable linkage of their thoughts at some future point. They weren’t at that point yet, though, and perhaps he could find something in Slytherin’s journals about slowing or halting the bond. After all, he knew from Astarte that Salazar had not been pleased with the how deep his bond with Godric Gryffindor had grown. He never wanted her in his mind again.

But, he didn’t want to destroy their bond. Honestly, that was probably impossible. Besides, he’d grown used to having Hermione’s magic entangled with his own, as well as Abraxas’s and Patience’s. He wasn’t going to give up power, though he’d work to minimize the weaknesses, starting with all that feeling she’d encouraged in him.

“Tom?” Hermione’s voice was soft, soothing, like a person trying to approach a wild animal. He
had the overwhelming urge to bite her, hard enough to draw blood, but he pushed it back.

“Yes?” His own voice sounded mechanical and flat to his ears.

She had come closer to him, concern in her eyes. Why were her eyes as beautiful as ever? Why did he still want her after such a betrayal? How had she wormed her way inside of him and taken root? Some serious pruning was in order.

“You’ve been staring off into space for several minutes now. Are you alright?”

Tom nodded curtly. “I’m fine. Your story is simply a bit to take in.”

“How angry are you?” she asked, resignation in her tone.

He smiled, the charming smile he used on teachers and people who were attracted to him. “I’m not angry.”

“I don’t believe that,” she spluttered, her amber eyes wide, her mouth open in shock.

“I took the veritaserum, too,” Tom reminded her. He shrugged casually. “Your plan was smart, nothing less than I expected of my soul mate. It doesn’t truly impact our future. We’ll graduate, get powerful positions, and rise to the top of magical society without the need for any messy wars. Our quartet and our group will help us. Though,” his lips stretched into a smile of true amusement, “I suppose the name ‘Death Eaters’ is off the table.”

She didn’t laugh or even smile. He’d unnerved her, which was a good start. Hermione’s punishment, he decided, would be slow and infinitely more painful than a curse. The way to hurt his soul mate was through her heart.

“It’s ok to be angry at me,” she finally said, then added. “I’d prefer it. Bottling your feelings is a mistake.”

Tom sauntered to her, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her slowly, thoroughly, the way he knew she liked. He noted dispassionately that touching her without magic involved was still wonderfully pleasant. She was soft and sweet and smelled like the magical incense that had been burned during the betrothal ceremony, some kind of earthy resin.

This was his. She was his, and that couldn’t change, but she had to be taught the lesson that she could not control him. Ever.

When he felt the tension leave her body, he pulled back just enough to speak against her lips.

“I have no emotions, Hermione. You should know that. I’m, what was the term you used? A sociopath?” He smiled as her expression transitioned from relief to puzzlement to horror.

She yanked away from him, stared down at the empty vial of veritaserum by his feet. “I…don’t you….I know you…” no coherent phrases came out.

He knew what she wanted to say, though, and it was perfectly in line with hurting her. “I’ll save you the trouble of asking, little bird…or should I say little lying lion? No, I don’t love you. I never have. You are mine, not my equal. We can be partners, friends, if you like, though you should know I have the controlling interest. Our magical bonds insure our life-long connection, and I respect your power and intelligence, but I feel nothing for you. The sex is good,” he grinned. “But that’s all. And now that I know you’re just as much as of a liar as I am, I can stop this silly pretense at feeling. Now, can we please leave? I have research waiting in the Chamber.”

The door appeared in the wall, and Tom went out, whistling softly to himself, knowing his aim had been deep and true. There was no need to turn around to see her pain; he could feel it, even without
Hermione sat in the room, watched the door disappear after Tom, and then saw the room rearrange itself around her. A sofa rose from the floor under her, cushions forming around her like an embrace. In front of her, a fireplace roared to life, and a small table appeared with a stack of her favorite books, a pot of tea, and a plate of biscuits. It was the perfect place for licking one’s wounds, for retreat, but Hermione felt beyond any kind of comfort, and her thoughts were her enemies.

“Fifteen minutes,” she murmured. She’d give herself a quarter of an hour to wallow, then she needed to find her mother.

First, she focused on the positives. The mission, the entire reason for blowing up her future life, was intact. The room had let Tom leave, which meant he wasn’t currently murderously angry. He had taken the news with a shocking calm. If they had been in the Chamber, she would have thought he was simply silently plotting, but the Room of Requirement had provided the veritaserum.

Tears streamed down her face at that the memory of his response. She wanted to imagine that he hadn’t taken the serum, that he wasn’t void of emotion, that their relationship hadn’t solely been a pleasing magical and physical transaction to him, but they’d both drank, and without magic, there was no way he could have made the potion disappear. She’d even inspected the empty vial after he’d left the room. Which meant Tom was an even better actor than she’d suspected. And she wasn’t as brilliant as she’d always believed.

Hermione cursed and threw the vial against the now stone walls, along with several other bottles that appeared on the table, the smashing and crashing sounds somehow soothing her. How could she have been so foolish?

She had come into this time knowing exactly what he was. Maybe their early intervention in his life, their manipulation of his introduction to the magical world, had made him less actively vicious, but it hadn’t changed his nature. He was a sociopath, and they didn’t change. Their defining characteristics were the ability to mimic emotion, to be incredibly charming, to manipulate their prey. And hadn’t she been the perfect specimen to be devoured? She’d ignored all she knew to be true, walking right up to him and handing him her heart, just so he could snap it in half and crush the pieces under his heel, that beautiful smile on his face all the while.

When she had entered this room a few hours ago, she’d been scared, yes, but she’d trusted that Tom cared for her, that he loved her, in his way, even if he couldn’t admit it. She had trusted that those deep ties would get them through this anger, even if it took months to repair the relationship. After all, she had a lifetime, and she was here to make the world safe, and she accepted and even expected difficult times.

With Tom’s ‘confession,’ the ground had crumbled beneath her, and she was in a free fall. Her trust that she meant anything to him was eroded, and her belief that she’d made progress in her mission had evaporated like mist.

She replayed his words in her mind, trying to make sense of how much she had felt from him in the past months. How could she have been so wrong? Had she projected her own feelings onto him? Had she mistaken their intense magical and sexual bonds as love? She felt disgusted with herself. Her intelligence was her greatest point of pride, and it had failed her. She’d been swept off her feet by hormones and a pretty face, by a stupid, insane belief in a soul mate fairy tale.
There was a buzzing rush in her skin, and she realized her magic had come back to her, that the room was no longer suppressing it. She could feel Tom’s magic, darker than before, coiled at the edges of her own. As much as she wanted to reach out for it, she was not ready to confirm her worst fears - that stripped of his pretense at emotion, Tom’s magic would hold no affection for her.

She brushed her tears away and straightened her shoulders. Her fifteen minutes were up, and Hermione Granger was back. She would not be fooled again.
Two Sides of the Same Stubborn Coin

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Tom process the fall out from Hermione’s revelation. Tom schemes, Hermione questions her role in Tom’s life, Abraxas worries about the future, and Patience makes daisy chains.

Chapter Notes

Dearest, darling readers! Thank you so much for all the feedback on the story. I hope this chapter will answer some of the burning questions. You are all so smart, and you have half this plot figured out before I write it, lol.

This chapter is angsty, be forewarned. Remember, they are teenagers, dealing with heartbreak and big emotions. I wrote a good portion of this chapter with one song on repeat. This song has always been a favorite of mine, but when it played a few weeks ago on shuffle, I had a huge ‘Aha!’ moment because the lyrics could be coming from either Tom OR Hermione - it fits them both, and it mentions clouds (air) and souls and fire and spells! So, if you have a moment to spare, pop over to your favorite on-line song player and listen to “Shadowboxer” by Fiona Apple - it really will set the mood for the chapter. If you can’t, I’ve copied the lyrics below. Love to you all, and I hope you enjoy how I’ve tortured our favorite duo.

Once my lover, now my friend.
What a cruel thing to pretend.
What a cunning way to condescend.
Once my lover, and now my friend.

Oh, you creep up like the clouds,
And set my soul at ease.
Then you let your love abound,
And you bring me to my knees

Ooooh, it’s evil, babe,
The way you let your grace enrapture me.
But, well, you know, I’d be insane,
To ever let that dirty game recapture me.

Oh, your gaze is dangerous,
And fill your space so sweet.
If I let you get too close,
You’ll set your spell on me.
So darlin’, I just wanna say,
Just in case I don’t come through,
I was onto every play,
I just wanted you.

Ooooh, it’s so evil, my love,
The way you’ve no reverence to my concern.
So I’ll be sure to stay wary of you, love,
To save the pain of once my flame,
And twice my burn.

So, I’m a shadowboxer, baby.
I wanna be ready for what you do
And I’ve been swingin’ around at nothin’
I don’t know when you’re going to make your move

“Shadowboxer” Fiona Apple

June, 1943

Abraxas stared down at his dinner plate, taking special interest in the artfully puffed Yorkshire
pudding. He’d never liked the savory pastry, but pretending to enjoy it spared him the sight of his mother drooling over Tom. Unfortunately, he couldn’t tune out her incessant talk of his betrothal prospects. He’d only been home a few weeks, and she was already back to planning out his life.

“I know you boys have a busy summer planned with Gawain, interning with him at the Board of Directors at the Ministry, but I really must insist you allow some time for a few society luncheons and events. You will both be seventeen before long, after all,” Evangeline looked pointedly at Abraxas, who continued to avoid eye contact.

She turned her attention to Tom, her smile softening, “I’m surprised that Lady Bonneau hasn’t put more effort into securing you a match. Even with your half-blood status, I’m confident you could make a strong connection, perhaps with one of the older families that don’t adhere strictly to the pureblood traditions - perhaps the Smythes or the Davies,” she paused, tapping her finger on the base of her crystal goblet. “Unless you’ve made an official choice with Miss Bonneau?”

“No,” Tom answered coolly, giving her roguish wink. “Hermione is really more of a sister to me, I’ve decided. That was only a temporary infatuation. I’m happy to follow your guidance in society matters. After all, you are the expert.”

Abraxas almost choked on the breading, grabbing his water and drinking quickly to force it down his throat. He knew that Tom was harboring deep anger at Hermione, but this response seemed extreme. Last March, Tom had dragged him down to the Chamber, along with Patience, to reveal under the Unbreakable Vow that Hermione was from the future, that she’d traveled through time to prevent Tom’s rise as an evil dark lord, bent on taking over the magical world by force. Patience had already known, which didn’t surprise Abraxas.

What did surprise him was that he just wasn’t very upset over the situation. He loved Hermione, and when he had sat down with her in the Room of Requirement and discussed the matter, he had decided Hermione had changed all of their lives for the better. He was glad he wasn’t the person Narcissa described (he had spoken with her, too, when he’d learned she had been his daughter-in-law in the other timeline - so weird), that he had found friendship and love and belonging instead of being a bitter, angry pureblood elitist who made everyone around him miserable.

So, he’d gotten over it, since it really hadn’t bothered him much in the first place. Tom’s anger, on the other hand, seemed to only grow. In front of the school, and even the inner group, Tom had treated Hermione the same as always, perhaps had acted more affectionate. He held her hand in the halls, kissed her cheek at partings, asked her opinion on group decisions, but Abraxas could feel the difference in their bond, could sense how both of them had pulled back sharply, leaving the magical connection, but obliterating any emotional sharing.

Before March, Abraxas would have sworn on Merlin’s sacred texts that Tom had cared for them,
that he was feeling *something like love*, or at least his version of it, and that those feelings were part of their bond, flowing through one another, reinforcing their and strengthening their magic and affection. Now, there was nothing except magic on Tom’s end of the bond. It felt cold and clinical. He knew this was even harder on Hermione, who had the most intense bond with Tom. Abraxas’s bond to her and Patience was as strong as ever, and her pain, though she was too proud to show it, reverberated through their connection.

Despite the fact that Tom had frozen them out, Abraxas would never have expected Tom to tell his mother that he and Hermione were no longer together. Tom knew full well that Evangeline Malfoy loved to spread rumors, true or not, and by tomorrow afternoon, Orpha Rosier and the other pureblood wives who came to tea would know this, perhaps before Hermione. He had hoped, like he knew Hermione did, that Tom’s rage would burn itself out, that being apart from one another over the summer would help Tom forgive her, then they could make amends by the new school year. Maybe not back to the way they had been, but at least something other than icy fury.

Abraxas had always believed Tom’s promise that they would make their group bond public, perhaps a year or two after they graduated from Hogwarts, and that he wouldn’t be forced into a loveless marriage. Now, though, if Tom was seeking out possible connections for himself, that plan had clearly changed. And where would that leave him?

Tom’s coldness, his lack of any hint at interest in what Abraxas felt or wanted in the last several months, was disconcerting. He adored Tom, believed in his power, and had pledged himself to Tom’s cause. But now the price seemed like it was going up, exponentially.

“And, of course, Abraxas needs to make a firmer choice,” Evangeline was saying, her tone brittle.

“You worry too much, dear,” Gawain replied dismissively. “Tom, don’t let my wife get you in a rush to auction yourself off. A young man with such promise will have an even larger group of admirers once we’ve gotten you a plum position at the Ministry. And I think both you and Abraxas would benefit from living the young bachelor lifestyle for a year or two.”

Abraxas pushed his plate away and gathered his bravado. “I think father has the right idea. I don’t want to appear desperate - I’m a Malfoy, after all. Any woman would be happy to accept my offer when I’m ready to make it.”

Evangeline’s pale eyes narrowed, making her look more cat-like than usual. “Abraxas, a betrothal is not the marriage itself. You would still be free for the agreed time frame. The best young ladies are getting snatched up. You don’t want to be left with the dregs, surely?”

Tom nodded solemnly, as if hanging on Evangeline’s every word. It made Abraxas want to gag seeing his mother simper. “Yes, I don’t think Hortensia Slughorn is a good enough choice for you,
A cold chill went through Abraxas. He’d told Tom, had told the whole quartet, how he had warded off the worst of his mother’s badgering by pretending interest in their Potion Professor’s niece. If Tom dismissed it, he’d be back to square one.

“Her pedigree is impeccable, and her uncle is a Potions Master with a respected position at Hogwarts,” he replied, keeping his voice neutral. All of the other three people at this table would pounce on his fear if they noticed it.

“You need a smart, powerful wife. That girl is a Hufflepuff,” Tom gave a forced laugh.

Evangeline nodded. “I would like to know that my grandchildren will be powerful. Don’t Hufflepuffs have a higher incidence of squib births?”

Gawain shook his head, putting down his napkin and rising from the table. “That’s an old myth. My grandmother on my mother’s side was a Hufflepuff, and she was quite powerful. This is enough talk about matching making tonight, dear wife. The boys need to be up bright and early tomorrow to go to the Ministry.”

The house elves began clearing away dinner, and Abraxas followed Tom toward the wing were his rooms and the guest room were located. He kept his own thoughts and feelings tightly wrapped up, and was relieved when Tom didn’t ask him any questions, or try to read his mind. He’d never hidden anything from Tom before, and he wasn’t exactly hiding now, but he was concerned. Was Tom only going to use him for his connections and wealth, just like everyone else? The thought stung deeply, and Abraxas tried his best to push the hurt away.

*Summer Solstice, 1943*

Hermione laughed as Patience put another lopsided daisy chain over her head. “There won’t be any flowers left in the field,” she protested, but without much force. As a child, she’d loved making crowns and chains out of wildflowers. The task was lovely in a slightly sad, nostalgic way.

“It’s a family tradition to wear all you can find to the Solstice celebration,” Patience replied, tucking a purple coneflower behind Hermione’s ear.
“Yes, but let’s leave some for the younger cousins,” Hermione pointed to the dozen or so children running through the field, gathering flowers, giggling. They ranged in age from four to twelve, and included pureblood cousins like the Longbottoms (including Josephine’s younger sister and brother), as well as Patience’s muggle cousins on her father’s side.

The Fosters had an annual non-magical solstice celebration during the day, with a picnic, lawn games, and a scavenger hunt through the wooded estate, and in the late evening, after all the muggle relatives had gone, they performed magical solstice rituals that dated back to Druid ancestors with their Longbottom cousins. Hermione was staying several weeks of the summer with Patience’s family, who had come to love her as another daughter. Josephine was there for the week, along with Felicity.

“Your smile is good to see,” Patience reached out with a long finger, tapping gently at the side of Hermione’s mouth. “It’s been missing for months.”

Hermione lay down, rolling sideways to put her head in Patience’s lap. The blonde smelled of sunshine and sea salt that permeated the entire Mainland island in the Orkney chain where the Fosters had a summer home. “I know, I…,” she sighed, searching for words.

Patience’s hand found hers, and squeezed. The feeling she would start crying passed. Hermione gratefully squeezed back. Patience and Abraxas had helped her through the last few months, trying to fill the gaping hole Tom had left in her chest with all the love and kind gestures they could. She knew Abraxas was very upset by the ‘change’ in Tom, and their own closeness had cooled. Patience was her normal, unperturbed self, which was comforting in its own way - that she remained a steady constant in the upheaval.

What hurt the most was how little Tom had actually changed. No one else could see the difference in him, and Hermione caught herself wondering if she had been temporarily insane, infatuated from her first sexual experiences, with the rush of the magical bonding and soul mate levels. He was as charming as ever, with a bright, wide smile, and those icy blue eyes that left a trail of sighing admirers behind him. His touch, which he had restricted to chaste kisses on her cheek or temple and holding hands or light caresses of her back or neck, still filled her with desire, though self-loathing now accompanied her reaction. Their magic cooperated as beautifully as ever, though their classroom rivalry had become more heated toward the end of the school years. They had both wanted to finish first, but remained tied down to the decimal point.

It was the intangible things that were missing - the look in his eyes that warmed her heart, the amusement when she was being overly studious or stubborn, the exasperation when she lectured him on morality, the fierce protectiveness when he thought something was threatening her, the simply surety in the back of her mind that he cared for her. Now, his expression was nearly
always flat - he gave her the same bland handsome one he gave to everyone else. She wanted to smack it off his face.

Because she was angry - some nights, she dreamed of dueling him in the Chamber, of leaving him a lot less smug, and maybe even a little bloody. It was irrational, but there was no avoiding it. Sometimes, she played devil’s advocate in her internal debates, telling herself that she didn’t have a right to be angry - she had interfered in his life. She had manipulated him at every turn for half a decade. However, she always came back to the response that she had only done that to save the world. Excuse her for trying to save his soul - a soul that was, by fate’s markings, her mate. The final stage of this debate was usually tears and a quick silencio to cover her scream of hurt and rage.

She’d die before she let him know that, though. After leaving the Room of Requirement, it had been clear that they’d both pulled back from the bond. The magical component was there, but the rush of good feeling, the joy, the love, which Hermione could only assume was some kind of bio-feedback loop of only her emotions mixed with his desire, which was real enough, was gone.

“I guess I’m finally recognizing that the Tom I thought I knew was a fiction,” she murmured. “I deluded myself into thinking simply because fate tied us together that we were going to live some fairy tale, but now I think the powers that be probably made us soul mates just to have a person who would keep him from being what he became in the other timeline.”

“Yes, the timeline you were born in, and that led you to the past,” Patience pointed out, tracing Hermione’s jawline with a piece of clover. “Maybe the situation is more complicated than you think.”

Hermione squinted against the sun as she looked up into Patience’s pale eyes. “I know you see more, know more, but I can’t imagine this bond being repaired, at least not emotionally. I felt something from Abraxas the other night, an anxiety, that hasn’t been there in ages. The sooner we deal with the fact that Tom doesn’t really care about us, the easier it will be to negotiate with him for a better future, without pretending.”


“Well, we have lots of love, you, Abraxas, and I. More than enough to get us through,” Hermione smiled, kissing Patience’s fingers. Her brow furrowed, and her expression became dark. “I won’t let him hurt you or Abraxas.”

Their conversation was cut short by Felicity and Josephine, who walked over to them with glasses
of lemonade and a tray of sandwiches. “Enough about the bastard,” Felicity scowled as she spread out a tartan blanket on the grass.

“How did you know we were talking about -” Hermione began, sitting up.

“Tom?” Josephine shook her head, her own daisy crown slipping over one dark eyebrow. “We would need to be blind to miss the fact that you two had a falling out. You might fool the others, but we’ve lived with you for almost six years. And my mother heard from her second cousin Jessica Pruitt that Evangeline Malfoy offered to play matchmaker for Tom, and that he seemed interested. You must have known?”

Hermione nodded tightly. “Orpha Rosier couldn’t wait to tell my mother.”

“And I’d bet my entire savings of,” Felicity scrunched her nose in thought, “three galleons, ten sickles, and seven knuts that whatever happened was his fault. He’s so bossy and moody. Honestly, Hermione, I know he’s your soul mate, but…”

Josephine nudged the redhead with her elbow. “Felicity just means that we’re on your side, Hermione. We’ll follow Tom, but only as long as you do.

“If you could call what Hermione does following,” Felicity rolled her eyes. “No matter what he thinks, you are just as talented as he is, and you are the one who really has a vision for a better future, to make all magical beings equal under the law. He just wants power.”

“That’s not true,” Hermione protested weakly. She needed to keep the illusion that Tom cared at least a little for others. If the Ravenclaw ladies truly understood how Tom’s mind worked, with no emotion, they might not want to follow him at all. “But it is true that we aren’t together, not that way.”

“So, what does that mean for the group?” Josephine asked, handing her a glass of lemonade.

Hermione took a sip of the cool, tart drink, trying to collect her thoughts. She’d been shocked and hurt all over again when Narcissa had owled her three days ago to tell her that Tom had definitively, publically, ended their relationship. During the days, she’d tried to enjoy the summer vacation, exploring the island with Patience, but each night, she’d obsessed over the deeper meaning to Tom’s actions. He never did anything without a reason, and she knew the group integrity was vital to his plans. What was he up to?
“Nothing,” she smiled as she put the glass back down on the tray and took a cucumber sandwich. “The group will be the same. Our magical bonds don’t rely upon Tom and I having a romantic relationship. If anything, we’ll probably have a better connection without emotions mucking it up.”

“But,” Felicity paused, then added in a cautious tone, “do you really think it’s over? You two are so…intense together. It’s hard to imagine you apart. What will happen if you try to see other people? Remember the whole Marguerite thing?”

“I’m positive Marguerite outgrew her infatuation for Tom,” Hermione said, though she wasn’t completely sure that was true. “And it doesn’t matter anyway. Tom can do as he likes - he’s free. I’m more worried about getting through the last two years of school. We all need to lay the groundwork for our futures. I want all of us to have solid apprenticeship or further study offers in place by the middle of our seventh year. I brought some practice NEWT exams - I want to see where we are right now.”

Josephine grinned. “There’s the Hermione we know and love, discussing studies over summer break, on a beautiful summer’s day.”

Patience nodded, a serene smile on her face. “You can take Hermione out of the library, but you can’t take the library out of her mind.”

“Plus,” Hermione added with a touch of malice in her voice, “we need to make sure we start the year well a head of all the snakes. I found a fairy ring in the woods that will block our magical signatures - we can practice all we want there without triggering the underage restriction.”

“You know, that might be enough motivation for me to actually do school work over the summer,” Felicity laughed. “My goal is beat Corvus Black on and off the Quidditch pitch this year. And Dolohov, too. He’s such a knob.”

“Good to know I can count on your competitive spirit,” Hermione tossed a daisy at Felicity, who promptly caught it. “We’ll start tomorrow, after the celebration.”

Patience looked up from the chain of hedge roses she was working on. “Excellent, let’s get back to the flowers.”

Josephine tilted her head, a skeptical expression playing at her mouth. “Hermione’s hair already looks like it’s made of clover and daisies. Where in the world are you going to put that?”
“Oh, there’s always room for more flowers,” Patience replied. “They’re like love.”

*September, 1943*

“Happy Birthday, Hermione,” Tom’s voice, low, hissing, and still unbearably sexy, caressed her ear as he leaned down over her shoulder.

“Thank you, Tom,” she managed to keep her own voice void of emotion. That was part of the game they played now, had been playing for the last six months. He taunted and teased, and she refused to take the bait. Since the start of the new school year, they had taken passive aggression to extremes. “But you know my birthday isn’t until the weekend.”

“Oh, but I’ve been waiting a month to give it you. I simply couldn’t go another day,” his breath was hot on her neck, and she suppressed any reaction, though her desire was fully activated. How she could still want him was a mystery she couldn’t explain.

She turned carefully from the breakfast table full of Ravenclaws, sure not to touch him as she took the box he held out to her. It was small, but beautifully wrapped in gold and red paper. He loved needling the sore spots, little private painful jabs, like her previous sorting into Gryffindor.

“Best open that in private, Dearest,” he murmured, then walked away.

Hermione kept a smile on her face as her housemates cooed over how nice it was that she and Tom were still ‘friends’ after their breakup. To the eyes of most the staff and students at Hogwarts, Tom and Hermione were models of maturity. Prefects, tied for top of class, with a devoted circle of friends - they had it all. Though Tom no longer held her hand or kissed her cheek, he still walked with her to classes, sitting beside her in the ones they shared. It was as though their fifth year hadn’t happened, and they had reverted to the close friendship they had enjoyed previously. Hermione had heard a group of third years in the girls’ washroom, laying bets on when she and Tom would get back together. It had been a challenge not to hex them.

Breakfast was suddenly unappealing, and she was dreadfully curious about the gift. She rose, and Patience silently followed her to the Room of Requirement, watching as Hermione paced, asking for a safe place to open the gift. Heavens only knew if it was cursed. She wanted to believe it
wasn’t, but she no longer trusted that she knew Tom, or that she could accurately predict his behavior. When the door appeared, the room was empty except for a pensieve.

“The last thing I need right now is to see the world from Tom’s point of view,” Hermione groaned. She sat on the stone window ledge, opening the small box. There was a bottled memory inside, but that wasn’t all.

“They smell like misery,” Patience remarked, lifting the pair of earrings out of the box. They were small, brushed with gold leaf to reveal the intricately carved coat of arms on the jet surface, beautiful and old workmanship, clearly. And muggle.

Hermione smelled nothing, but she did feel a bit sick simply looking at the jewelry. With a shaking hand, she dumped the memory into the stone bowl.

“Don’t leave me?” she whispered, allowing her vulnerability to surface, a rare occurrence in the last six months. She had been on emotional lockdown, shutting most everything non-essential out of her mind. Emotions clouded her judgment and she had to be on her toes with Tom. It had been instinctive to pull back from Patience and Abraxas, to fear being hurt by them as well. Both the blondes had quickly chased after her, weathered her worries, giving her reassurances at every turn that what they felt for her was real.

“Never,” Patience answered, wrapping an arm around her waist, her fingers curling protectively over Hermione’s hipbone.

Hermione plunged her face into the liquid, and fell into the English countryside. A small village was in the distance, but before her was a manor house, and beside her was Tom. With his handsome face, height, and serious expression, he could easily have passed for his early twenties. He was dressed in the current muggle fashion: a dark suit, expertly tailored, with a smart hat and shiny leather shoes, the epitome of a young gentleman of quality.

“Oh, Tom,” she spoke even though he couldn’t hear her. “You found your father.”

Hermione watched as he knocked on the door, and was invited into a parlor. The room was well appointed, with an airy, welcoming appearance, but the three people inside were definitely not pleased with their company. The grey-haired man and woman wore matching expressions of disgust, their noses curled as if they had been exposed to the stench of a rotting corpse. The younger man, who was a cheap, aged version of Tom’s features, looked murderous.
Even though she had been angry for months, she quickly shifted to sadness. Harry had told her the basics of his dreams, of the memories Dumbledore had shared. She knew little of how the previous timeline’s actual confrontation had played out, but this time, the Riddles’ summary rejection of Tom, along with several slurs directed at his mother, was swift and brutal.

She honestly expected him to kill them all. He had in the previous timeline, according to Dumbledore’s suspicions. And Tom knew that. He’d been exhaustively thorough in his questioning her under the veritaserum, digging for all the details of his life, for anything he could use to his advantage.

Instead, Tom smiled at them. “I think there has been a mistake,” he said smoothly.

“I would say so,” his father replied, smug. “You should leave and never return.”

“Indeed,” his grandmother sniffed. She put her hand toward the small bell on the coffee table.

Tom made a tsking sound and her body froze in place. His grandfather started to rise from his chair. “No,” Tom waved his hand and the man sat back down.

“What are you doing? Are you a…Satanist like she was?” Tom’s father gaped in horror.

Hermione snorted. She couldn’t help it.

Tom was laughing, too. “A Satanist? Really? I clearly only inherited your looks, thankfully. Your imagination is abysmal.”

“Get out!” His father ran at him, and Tom sent him flying backwards into the mantel. The man slumped downwards like a doll, stunned and boneless.

“No, I am not a Satanist.” Tom continued, his tone chiding, like a professor lecturing an inattentive student. “I am not an adherent of any religious belief, but from your perspective, I am God.”

He strolled over to his frozen grandmother, leaned down to study her face. Only her eyes, the same color as his own, moved, widening in terror. “You seem to think I came here for some kind of
acceptance or reunion. I honestly don’t. Give. A. Fuck. What. You. Think. Of. Me,” he smiled broadly as he punctuated each word, as if he were giving her a compliment.

“I was simply curious as to one-half of my family. The other half was trash, and how disappointing to discover you are trash as well, with no manners at all.”

His grandfather made a choking sound, as though he were trying to speak. Tom turned his attention to the old man. “I’ll bet no one has ever spoken to you in this way, hmmm? You’ve been king of your little hill.”

Tom looked out the window toward the village. “It’s a quaint kingdom, I suppose. But I have my sights on the world. If any of you had been even marginally pleasant, you might have reaped some benefits. But, sadly, you are too moronic to recognize greatness.”

Hermione let out a breath. Was this it? Would he kill them now? What would she do about this? Was this a challenge to her, to see how far she would let him go into darkness? Her stomach fluttered, and her hand clenched instinctively, even though her wand wasn’t present in the memory.

Surprisingly, though, Tom came back to sofa, sat down and drank a cup of tea. He chatted about the Riddles’ landholdings and investments, as though he were having a proper tea, as if they were able to converse back. When his cup was empty, he rose.

“Since you were remiss in your duties as a parent for the last sixteen years, I think I require some recompense,” Tom waved his wand, and several papers appeared, along with a fountain pen. “I’ve taken the liberty of drawing up documents that recognize me as your son and legal heir, and allot me an annual salary, with instructions on which bank to deposit that money in. When you die, all this,” he laughed, gesturing at the room, “such as it is, will be mine.”

Though he didn’t speak the words, Hermione knew he was using the Imperius. All three Riddles became immediately compliant, signing forms and following all orders. Tom vanished the papers when they were complete, then headed for the door. At the entrance, he paused.

“Grandmother Riddle?” He looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

She was silent. He sighed. “The correct response is, ‘Yes, darling grandson,’”

“Yes, darling grandson?” She asked instantly.
“Are those earrings a family heirloom? They look old and expensive.”

The woman nodded. “They’ve been in the Riddle family since the 1700s.”

“Excellent,” Tom’s smile was unsettling. “That will save me the trouble of shopping for my little lion-bird. Objects of quality won’t be wasted on her as they are on you.”

His grandmother stared at him dumbly.

“Well!” Tom snapped. “Take them off,” he held out his hand, and she hastily put them in his palm. “Now, my obliviation is a bit rusty, but I think this will do. Let’s hope I never return, because not killing you is practically killing me.”

Hermione saw him obliviate the group, walk out the house, then she was back in Hogwarts, being held steady by Patience’s arm.

“He didn’t kill them,” Hermione exhaled her relief.

Patience nodded knowingly. “Maybe that was the birthday gift.”

Hermione pondered that possibility as she boxed up the earrings. There was no way she would wear those, but if Tom had stopped himself from killing his Riddle relatives as some kind of peace offering, she would gladly accept that as progress. Tom claimed he didn’t want her love, but he still wanted her magic, and that came with the price of cooperation and no innocent bloodshed, even of estranged family members who were total wankers. She would need to respond with an olive branch of her own.

“Did you see this?” Sebastian pointed at the copy of the Daily Prophet that had just been dropped on the Slytherin table.

It was Saturday, Hermione’s proper birthday. She hadn’t put on the earrings, which he’d expected, but she had told him yesterday that he was worth millions of any of his relatives, which he had not
expected. It had felt amazing, that tiny burst of affection. The woman was like a drug. He craved her approval, her praise, her emotion flowing through him. But that was unacceptable.

If he wasn’t careful, she’d figure out that he hadn’t taken the veritaserum, that he’d used an old sleight of hand from his orphanage days to avoid cod liver oil doses, and wound up with a wet back and neck. And if she discovered that, she’d know that she had power over him. Power he wasn’t willing to acknowledge. She had manipulated him since they’d met, had forced him to care about her, about a whole circle of people, had made him long for her smiles, but now he finally, truly, had the upper hand. He would not give it up. His Dearest had a long, slow revenge in store.

Sebastian’s words jolted him out of his thoughts. Abraxas was leaning in as well, and Marguerite had grabbed the paper from her fiancé’s hands. Tom noted the entire hall was suddenly very loud, students exclaiming, teachers as well.

*Grindelwald Escapes Azkaban With Over a Dozen Followers!* The headline screamed. The mugshot of Grindelwald was actually winking mischievously at the camera. The pictures of the followers were much more grim, with grave, angry expressions. If those were anything to go by, magical Britain had just become a war zone.

In retrospect, he did realize how much faith and trust Hermione had placed in him when she had swallowed that veritaserum. She’d bared everything, all the hopes she had for saving the world, and trusted he wouldn’t kill her. It was astonishing, really, and if Tom had even an ounce of humility in his bones, he would have been humbled by the gesture. Fortunately, he had none.

Part of him, the rawest part, formed in the grey walls of Wool’s Orphanage, had wanted nothing more than to strike her dead. But that savage core had been tempered by years of her love, of being part of Narcissa and Galatea’s family, of having formed his elemental quartet and his larger magical group. Hermione was simply too vital to him. Killing her would have crippled him, and he found the larger part of his mind had no desire to harm her, at least not physically. He had felt deep pain at her manipulation, and that had been alarming. The fact that she could hurt him was terrifying. She was his greatest weakness, but no one could ever know that.

Still, he had to get along with her. If he suddenly shook loose all his moral restraints, he wouldn’t put it past Narcissa to *Avada* him in his sleep. His mother figure had cooled remarkably toward him since he’d told Hermione he had no feelings for her. And, really, given her tendency to martyr herself, he didn’t doubt that Hermione would try to kill him if she thought he was turning into the monstrous version of himself that she had known in the future. That was fine, though. Tom didn’t need their affection, only their cooperation, and he would rule the world with a lot less open conflict.

“What’s the plan?” Vidhi was asking, a hint of fire in her eyes. She had clearly enjoyed the battle
last spring, as had most of the group. Nothing in their studies could top the rush of excitement and power they’d all felt while fighting at the prison.

Tom sighed internally. He had to stop these reveries. The last few weeks, he’d been much too preoccupied with thoughts of Hermione. Six months of minimal contact was wearing on him. “I don’t have one, at the moment,” he replied, picking up his glass of pumpkin juice, as if nothing on the page interested him at all.

The group sat back, their faces looking disappointed. Abraxas was already out of his seat, walking over to the Ravenclaw table. His best friend was not happy with him, either, not since he’d encouraged Evangeline over the summer. Tom watched as Abraxas sat down between Hermione and Patience. Their Seer was on his list, too. Patience had known about Hermione, had kept the secret as well. He would have found a way to punish his only true Ravenclaw if he hadn’t known that upsetting Hermione was the best way to upset Patience. Two birds, one stone, and all that.

The night of Hermione’s revelation, Abraxas had not come back to the Slytherin dorm, and Tom learned the next day that Abraxas and Patience had stayed up in the old fifth floor study room, comforting Hermione. They must have done a good job, because Hermione hadn’t shown any sign of being upset in the past six months, which annoyed him greatly. Of course, they’d spent most of the summer apart, and it was easy to avoid each other outside classes since they weren’t in the same house. He didn’t want to avoid her any longer, though. He wanted to actively punish her.

This prison break would complicate matters. The group would expect some kind of action, and he would need to discuss that with Hermione. Tom rose, his mind made up, and walked over to the Ravenclaw table.

He ignored Abraxas and Patience as he leaned over Hermione. “Can we speak privately, now?”

Hermione kept her face neutral as she felt him brush Tom mind, his magic reaching out to her, insinuating itself under her skin, pushing inward. He was attempting a very sophisticated casting of legimilens on her. It should have been invasive, but their magic was so entwined, it was more like a caress, oddly erotic at the edges of her thoughts, and how she longed for his attention. Despite that, she raised every type of mental shield she possessed, trying to do it as subtly as possible. Hermione was torn between calling him out on his behavior and pretending she didn’t notice. Just because she’d shared her greatest secret didn’t mean she would let go him poking around in her mind, kicking up pain like dust clouds.

“Of course, Tom,” she replied evenly, rising from the table. She gave looks of reassurance to Patience and Abraxas. Both blondes were frowning, but she had to try to repair things with Tom as much as possible, and that required risk. He wouldn’t hurt her, at least not physically, and the emotional damage was already done. What did she have to lose?
He led her to the Chamber, and she tried not to shiver when he spoke in Parseltongue at the entrance. Her locket shuddered gently at the sound, and Hermione reminded herself for what felt like the millionth time that the only thing that had changed was that she was no longer a sentimental fool. *Then why are you still wearing the locket*, a voice in her head asked.

Once they had entered the library space, he rounded on her, and she could feel his excitement. “You saw the headline, I take it?”

“I did,” Hermione replied. “But we’ve been told by all the adults willing to protect us to leave this matter be.”

“We still need to talk about precautions. We are pledged to protect one another, to protect our group. Grindelwald might not know everyone’s identities, but he knows we are students at Hogwarts. The entire group needs to be on alert, at the least,” Tom drummed his fingers on the tiled wall as he paced the room.

Hermione nodded. “We need to get the group together, have everyone brush up on more advanced defensive spells. The summer break makes spell work rusty.”

“Yes, thankfully most of us will be turning seventeen this year,” he arched a brow and added tartly, “though some of us are much older.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea to brew some of Slytherin’s recipes we’ve found that cloak magic and help heal, just to be on the safe side,” She said, ignoring his jab. “I doubt Grindelwald would try to storm Hogwarts, but we should absolutely be prepared for anything, especially on any weekend outings in Hogsmeade or when off the grounds.”

Tom frowned in annoyance. “The circumstances have clearly changed. You can’t imagine that the man broke out with a dozen others simply to run away. Grindelwald will want that wand.”

Hermione shrugged, as if she didn’t care. He wanted to shake her. “Dumbledore has the wand. He defeated Grindelwald before, he can do it again.”

“You are the now the Mistress of the Elder Wand. Dumbledore is only borrowing it. Don’t you think Grindelwald is clever enough to figure that out? It was a bit foolish to take the wand, really,” Tom remarked coolly, knowing that statement would raise her hackles. He did so love it when she was angry, the way her eyes blazed and her magic crackled. He had missed this.
“I saved our lives!” Hermione snapped, then took a deep breath, turning away from him. When she continued, her voice was calmer. “And I thought it better to remove the wand from Grindelwald’s possession. Giving it to Dumbledore made sense - he kept it for years in the previous timeline. According to legend, it has a long and bloody history, with all its owners dying violently, and I honestly didn’t know if you could resist the call of a wand that is considered the most powerful in the world. I wanted to keep you safe, to remove that temptation.”

“By risking yourself, my magical soul mate?” Tom scoffed, a flare of impatience and anger flooding their bond. He had no problem letting the negative feelings through to her.

“No, the wand is Dumbledore’s now. He’s already used it with no problems. I have no intention of taking it back unless something happens to him,” Hermione argued. “And you have little cause for complaint, Tom. Our magic is so bound that I suspect the Elder Wand would respond to you if needed. I simply don’t want us to use it unless have to. You know the phrase, ‘Power Corrupts; Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely’ - I believe that is true. It isn’t only you I was concerned about - I don’t trust myself, either.”

Tom’s mouth twisted into a sneer. “A wise choice, given what a liar you are.”

“I only lied to literally save the magical world!” Hermione shouted, her voice bouncing off the walls of the Chamber. “The world you want to rise to the top of, by the way, so you’re welcome, for helping it not to become a dystopian nightmare!”

“I am your soul mate!” Tom walked rapidly toward her, backing her against the wall. “Your first loyalty should have been to me.”

Hermione’s magic pushed outward, forcing him to keep his distance, like arms outstretched and pressing against his chest. “It was! If you could get past your ego for a single second, you’d see that I made your life better! You were a miserable, evil bastard with no real connections or joys beyond hurting others, going slowly insane from splitting your soul into tiny slivers! How can you not see the improvement? You are being a petulant child!”

“What a relief it must be for you to finally be able to voice your true opinion of me,” Tom scoffed. He was aware he was being petty, but was unable to stop himself. Impulse control had never been one of his strengths, especially where Hermione was concerned.

“I’ve never held back from telling you that you are a selfish arsehole,” she retorted, trying to duck
under his arm, which he’d extended to keep her against the wall.

He caught her, turning her back to be flush with his front, his arms wrapped around her waist, his face in her hair. Because she couldn’t see, he allowed himself to silently breathe in the smell of her curls, her magic, her. She was tense against him, as if braced for a blow. She had told him many times over the years that it was better to be loved than feared. He wasn’t sure whether or not he agreed, but he while he would settle for most people’s fear, he wanted her love.

Slowly, gently, he ran his hand up her arm, to the side of her neck, sweeping back her hair and then leaning to kiss the exposed skin near her collar, trailing up to her ear. “And I’ve never said that I don’t enjoy your company, Hermione. You are as close to equal as anything I have in this world, a gift from fate to me. I want you as much as I always have.”

“Are you joking?” She twisted away, roughly, her wand tapping rapidly against her leg, a nervous habit she’d picked up from watching Galatea. He could see small sparks coming from the tip, and her hair was getting wilder by the second. “After your announcement to Evangeline Malfoy that we were nothing more than friends? That you’d be interested in her future help in finding you a high-pedigreed half-blooded wife?”

Hermione’s anger rose as she continued. “What happened to the plan of making our elemental quartet public? That bond will supersede any betrothal. That’s what you said you wanted - the world to know.”

Tom cut her off. Discussing his previous plans was dangerous, because there was still part of him that wanted those things. “I’ve changed my mind. You three are a liability if the world knows the extent of how my magic is bound with yours. I’d prefer not to advertise my weaknesses. People used to think I was in love with you, and assumed that I was sleeping with Abraxas as well. The public ‘break-up’ between us and my agreement to look at possible engagements elsewhere should disabuse them of those notions.”

“So, you think that by pushing me away, by pushing Abraxas and Patience away, that you’ll be stronger?” Hermione shook her head, her eyes full of sadness. “You really don’t feel anything, do you? If you did, you’d know that our bonds are what give us strength.”

“Oh, I’m not intending to do anything to the bonds,” Tom corrected her. “Just putting some distance between us all in the public eye to prevent anyone from thinking you could be used as leverage against me.”

“Isolating yourself is not the way to rise, Tom,” Hermione’s tone was stern. “We’ve talked about
this. Why the change from wanting to proclaim yourself to the world, to suddenly wanting to be cautious?"

“I’m not planning on moving into a cave, Hermione,” Tom let the annoyance come out in the way he said her name. “And in all those earlier conversations, you were leaving out some important details. Yes, I understand that you know some of my ‘mistakes’ from the previous timeline. I’ve already been betrayed once, Dearest, so I can assure you that taking steps to protect myself is not a mistake.”

He’d moved as he spoke, backing her toward the tables already littered with new potions in the first week back at school. The tables were high, and the edge hit her in small of her back. Tom closed the distance between them, his hips pinning her in place as his hands slid lightly under the hem of her skirt, his fingers seeming to burn holes through her stockings as he ran them up the outsides of her thighs.

“But just because I don’t want to acknowledge a public connection doesn’t mean that we can’t privately fulfill the desires we both know are still there,” his mouth was almost on hers, those blue eyes as captivating as ever.

“You want me as a possession,” she turned her head away, but didn’t move out of his arms. “But I’m not a plaything. I am your magical partner, and for this to work, I think we need to keep things the way they’ve been - platonic.”

“Have things been platonic with Patience or Abraxas?” He asked, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice. He knew the three of them had met, more than once, without him.

For the first time since she’d stepped into the Chamber, Hermione smiled, broadly. “Only people who care get to be jealous, Tom.”

“Do you deny that you want me, that you still love me?” Tom needed to hear her say it; it was like a compulsion.

Her smile became a frown, her eyes cast downward. “I do love you, and I can’t seem to stop, even though it hurts,” she glanced up. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like you.”

“Honestly, I think I’m the injured party here,” he backed away, crossing his arms, his tone sarcastic. “I was the one betrayed and manipulated.”
“As much as you feel betrayed by my and Narcissa’s interventions in your life, those were all done to help the world, and help you. We didn’t fake our love for you, the family we made. But you betrayed me from a place of selfishness. You pretended to care for me, and gave me the reactions you knew I wanted to get me into bed, and into deeper magical bonds. I gave you everything and you gave me nothing,” Hermione sounded the bitterest he’d ever heard her, but he was almost too livid to recognize that.

“Nothing?” Tom was incredulous. “I gave you access to my magic-”

“No!” Hermione was shouting now, too. “The soul mate bond did that on its own. Your greed for my magic did that with the additional elemental bonds and sex magic. You never gave me anything freely, anything true - just pretense. I’m ashamed I fell for such a hollow illusion.”

Tom was conflicted, an uncommon and uncomfortable experience. Hermione was angry and on the verge of tears, clearly in pain. He wanted her to hurt, wanted her to feel how he had. His pride demanded that, and that part of him was pleased. She deserved nothing less for thinking she could control him. But...he also wanted her love, that incomparable sensation that flowed through him when she looked at him as though he were the most important person in the world, as though he completed her, and she couldn’t be without him.

“I modified my behavior for you,” Tom spoke softly. “That wasn’t an illusion. I didn’t kill those repugnant relatives of mine, and by the standards of the previous timeline, I’ve been a saint.”

“Yes, that’s true, but you did still use an Unforgiveable curse on them. The fact I’m not railing at you about that shows how much I’m compromising,” her anger seemed to deflate, but her golden brown eyes remained sad. “I...I’m sorry that you felt betrayed. And I’m truly sorry that you only feel negative emotions, Tom. It isn’t your fault that you don’t feel what I do, and I will get over this hurt - it will just take time. I am attracted to you, of course. And I want you, but having sex with you would only hurt me more. You’ve made it clear that you don’t care for me beyond our magical bonds. Some people can have sexual relationships that are casual or lacking in serious emotional connection, but I’m not one of them. I can’t give myself to you and receive nothing in return.”

“Intense pleasure surely isn’t nothing,” he lowered his tone, gave her a playful smile, one he knew attracted her. “Hermione, I want you. Doesn’t that mean something?”

She shook her head. “Not enough. I gave up my family, my friends, my life to come here. I think I deserve to be as happy as I can possibly be. And while I know our magic is extraordinary together, I won’t settle for a one-sided relationship.”
Tom gritted his teeth. This punishment of Hermione was turning into a punishment of himself. It was not what he had intended, and now he was backed into an impossible situation. Why was she so stubborn? She wanted his vulnerability, wanted control over him. He had given her those things, but he could not let her know. She could hurt him, again, or someone else could use her to hurt him. With Grindelwald on the loose, now seemed like a particularly bad time to disrupt the current status quo.

“Fine,” he put out his hands in a gesture of acquiescence. This matter would have to wait. “As you’ve said, the adults involved, besides you, who are technically an adult twice over, have made it clear they want us to scale back, to lay low.”

“And you are just going to agree to that?” she scoffed in disbelief.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking some time to finish school, to focus on my studies. And it will probably take all of this year and the next to find a place where we can house all the items from the Chamber, and a suitable home for Astarte as well.”

“You want to take the basilisk out of the school?” Hermione asked, astonished.

“Of course,” Tom smiled charmingly. “She’s mine. And you know I like to keep a short leash on all my things.”

Hermione didn’t respond to that, turning instead to examine the items on the long tables where they prepared potions and worked on cursed objects. With a glance, she catalogued the ingredients Tom had out, realizing he was working on the potion that gave the effects of the Imperius without a magical trail, the potion recipe he’d found last year, and thought she didn’t know about. She noted inwardly that she would need to start spelling all food and drink she consumed around him. Was it improvement that in this timeline, he was more obsessed with the Imperius than the Cruciatius? She couldn’t decide. She’d never experienced the Imperius, but she imagined she would prefer physical pain, even as horrible as it was. Pain was at least honest. It didn’t hijack one’s mind and will like the Imperius.

Tom’s obsession with control wasn’t going anywhere - she suspected her confession had even made it worse, though there was no helping that. The best she could do was what she and Narcissa had always suspected - damage control and as much containment of violence as possible. Which would be an even greater challenge indeed if he insisted on taking all the Chamber’s contents with him when he left Hogwarts.

“Who are you planning to control?” She pointed at the simmering pot of mint green liquid. “Not
me, I hope?”

His eyes narrowed at the knowledge she knew of the potion, but he recovered his smooth exterior quickly, placing a splayed hand over his heart. “Never you, little lion bird. I’m not sure of the long-term side effects, and that brain of yours is too fine to potentially compromise. Besides, I know how you value your free will.”

Her laughter was hollow sounding as she stirred the liquid. “Your charm might work on 99% of people, but I’ve gotten my inoculations against it, Tom. And I think we need to agree on a list of people on whom you will, under no circumstances, use any kind of mind control.”

Tom’s grin was thin and cruel, sharp as his words. “It’s too late to include your sweet Abraxas on that list. He loves it when I’m in his mind while I’m fucking him.”

“I’m not talking about legilimency,” she gave him a tight smile in return. “And what you do with Abraxas, that he willingly consents to, is between the two of you. This potion and the Imperius are a different matter, though I know you practiced on Abraxas and some of the other Slytherins. That needs to stop.”

“Really?” Tom came to the other side of the table, tapping his fingers along the wooden surface. “I thought we’d established I have no morals. What’s to stop me? Who’s to stop me?” He couldn’t resist pushing her. If she wouldn’t give him her physical passion, he’d settle for her anger.

Hermione pushed at him with her magic, hard enough to send him back several steps. He had always suspected she held back. She had six more years of magical practice than he did, and more experience with life and death battle situations. It was a rush, the feel of her power. He wanted to explore all the depths she had hidden from him. “I will, Tom. That’s why I’m here.”

“Ah, yes, to keep me in check,” he grinned, delighted this time. “I am going to have so much fun watching you try, Dearest.”

“I don’t want to fight with you, Tom, and you really, really don’t want to anger me,” she warned. “Even if you don’t feel any morals doesn’t mean you can’t abide by commonly held standards of humane conduct. If you want to gain power without war or bloody coups, then you need to reign in your sadistic impulses.”

Tom walked back to her, but kept the table between them. His mouth curved into a sexy smile.
“My sadistic impulses have pleased you in the past.”

“Well,” she remarked tartly, “Patience will have to be the one to spank me from now on.”

His hand clenched on his wand at the thought. He really didn’t like being denied what he wanted, especially Hermione, who was his by fate.

“The group, our family, and all people at Hogwarts are off limits,” she continued, smirking at his annoyance. “Those aligned with Grindelwald are fair game. Anyone who falls outside those categories requires further negotiation.”

“In a negotiation, both parties need to get something,” Tom noted, forcing himself to be calm. How did she manage to upset him so? He hated that. “If I promise,”

“Vow,” Hermione interrupted. “I’ll need a magical vow.”

“What?” Tom snapped.

She pushed her hair back, shrugging. “We’re both liars, isn’t that what you said? Best to be safe.”

“If I vow,” Tom gritted, “to not use any mind control, spell or potion, on your designated groups, what do I gain?”

“You gain me not trying to prevent you from using illegal spells and potions on our enemies,” Hermione replied with exasperation. “I am compromising by allowing you to use those methods at all, Tom.”

“What about Abraxas’s parents?” Tom asked. He’d been planning on using the potion on them, anyway, but his soul mate didn’t need to know that.

She looked at him, staring directly into his eyes. He found that brave, so attractive, and so annoyingly Gryffindor. He bit the inside of his cheek, drawing blood, to keep from reaching out to brush back a stray curl from her face. “I don’t care if you use it on them to protect Abraxas, but it would be incredibly suspicious if his parents suddenly gave up on getting him betrothed.”
“I am aware of that,” he replied, his tone acidic. “My plans are more along the lines of convincing them to accept a particular betrothal.”

Hermione couldn’t stop the shock from showing on her face, Tom was happy to see.

“But, Abraxas’s choice is -”

“You, yes I know,” Tom waved a hand dismissively, as if this plan were no big deal. “How flattering to you, Dearest, that Abraxas would choose you over his soul mate for a wife,” he put his finger to his chin in a gesture of mock-thoughtfulness. “Of course, Patience would choose you first, too.”

“They love each other deeply,” Hermione protested.

“I’m certain they do,” he nodded condescendingly. “They would probably die for each other and all the other typical soul mate insanity, but they are both in love with you. And since you love them both, you’re like the filling in their soul mate sandwich.”

She snorted. “That is a ridiculous metaphor.”

“We aren’t in muggle English class,” Tom wasn’t bothered by the criticism. “But Abraxas is in a position to give our private bonds more power by making a strategic alliance with another wealthy family.”

“We promised Abraxas that he wouldn’t have to marry someone he didn’t love!” Hermione sounded panicked. “I won’t let you go back on that.”

“Oh, little lion bird,” Tom twirled his wand between his fingers. “Are you still harping about love? I thought we’d moved past that tiresome topic. It isn’t as if you’ll have to stop being with him. I gave you some pretty pets to love you and shower you with emotion, but I get to decide on the matter of how we accumulate power.”

“You didn’t give Abraxas or Patience to me,” her own voice was cold, her eyes dark with anger. “That’s not how love works, though I understand that’s a subject where you get a ‘Troll’ rating. If you bring this up to Abraxas, he is going to”
Tom interrupted. “Do what I say? Of course he will. Because he, unlike you, understands loyalty.”

“You don’t own him, Tom,” Hermione yelled. “He’s not yours to give away or maneuver like a piece on a chessboard.”

“No?” Tom gave her an expression of faux surprise. “That’s what you did to me for the past five years. It’s only fair I get a chance to be chess master.”

“His life choices are not the table!” Hermione’s hair was wild around her face, and her magic crackled.

“But mine were?” Tom’s magic flared out, and Hermione had to conjure a shield to stay on her feet. Even still, the blast stung, like a hard slap over her entire body. “You crafted my choices to be what you wanted. Well, if you want me to continue to play your game, I require a sacrifice.”

She looked at him questioningly, failing to hide the hurt in her eyes. “Why? Are you doing this because I won’t sleep with you any more? Is this some twisted form of punishment?”

“I need to solidify my connection to the Malfoy fortune and add to it.”

“No,” she answered immediately. “You already have Abraxas’s love and loyalty. He would give you whatever you asked. And we have almost as much money as the Malfoys from Mother’s investments.”

“We can’t buy pureblood influence and connections; those must be cultivated,” Tom snapped. “You know that. His parents will not wait forever, and since I’ve decided against public knowledge of our bonds, I need to influence their choice. We need to act soon.”

She threw up her hands. “Fine! Fine. Whatever you want, my Lord,” she said sarcastically. “But I’ll have your promise on the no-mind control issue, and I’d like to establish consequences, as well.”

He raised his eyebrows. She had given up more easily than he’d anticipated. That would need further watching. “What type of consequences did you have in mind, Dearest?”

“You’ll have to stop calling me that,” she smirked. “We’ve broken up, remember?”
Tom had her back against the wall again in an instant. The fact that he was able to move her made him believe she had allowed it, that she wanted to feel his body against hers, no matter what she said about a ‘platonic’ relationship. “You’ll always be mine, first and foremost, Hermione, as will Abraxas and your little Pet,” he lowered his mouth to the soft spot behind her ear, his nose in her curls. “You know that. It simply isn’t a matter the public needs to know,” he leaned into kiss her, something he’d been longing to do for months.

She flew straight up, leaving his face to crash into the wall, then gracefully glided back to the ground. “We aren’t doing that anymore, Tom.” Her voice was a taunt, catching at his ego and scratching deeply.

Tom wanted to punch the tiles, to turn around and curse her, but he schooled his expression. Displays of desire were fine, he told himself. They were not a weakness, just a bodily urge.

Her skill with flying, an ability she had developed while he had held her, praised her, reminded him of all her lies, shoring up his desire to hurt her. “Alright, Dearest,” he emphasized the term.

She rolled her eyes at his obstinacy, then her expression hardened. “I want a vow that you won’t use mind control on the groups I listed. And I want you to stop getting in my personal space. If you don’t, I’ll hex you in the balls so hard you won’t walk for a week. This is your only warning. I might be your soul mate, but I am not anyone’s possession.”

“Funny how you demand freedom for yourself when what you secretly want from me is subservience, compliance to the rules of the universe as written by Hermione Bonneau, oh, I’m sorry, Granger,” he sneered.

“I never sought to control you, Tom,” she frowned. “You see it that way, I know, but I was trying to help you be the best version of yourself.”

“But you want to control the definition of what is my ‘best’ self!” Tom sent a wave of fire from his wand between them, scorching the mats they used to practice dueling. “I’m tired of this circular argument. I’ll give you the vow on not using mind control if you’ll vow not to interfere in the betrothal I arrange for Abraxas.”

Hermione took out her wand, going through the preliminary motions for a standard magical vow, being sure to cover any loopholes, though since she was giving him something he wanted, she didn’t think Tom would break the vow, at least not for a while.
She took the hand he offered, trying not to notice how good his touch felt.

“Who are you thinking of as a match?” she asked softly.

Tom put a look of faux empathy on his face. “I’m sure you find this upsetting. Don’t worry, there isn’t a single witch alive who could compete with you for Abraxas’s affection. You’ll just have to accept the role of the other woman,” he eyed her harshly, and added, “discreetly, of course. The whole idea is to keep our quartet out of the public eye.”

“What, exactly, is your plan to deal with the current Lord and Lady Malfoy?” she glanced toward the potion, biting her lip. He wanted to bite that lip.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Tom smiled. “I’ll be seeing them soon, over the long Halloween weekend. I have some excellent ideas for introducing the potion, and for the conversations we’ll be having.”

“That isn’t reassuring,” Hermione muttered, but she had some plans of her own that needed to be put into place, some now more pressing than ever, and she hated Gawain and Evangeline Malfoy, so what Tom might do to them, short of murder, was the least of her worries. Besides, she had a feeling Tom would be directing all his rage at her in only a short while.
Lesson #1: Don't Back Hermione Into a Corner

Chapter Summary

Hermione moves quickly to prevent breaking a vow and to keep an older promise made out of love.

Chapter Notes

Dear Readers, it's been a difficult month, but I wanted to get something out for you. I know there are many reasons to not share personal information, but I had a miscarriage, and I think too many women carry that pain in silence, feel like they're not supposed to talk about their loss. I believe that we only heal by sharing, so this is my small act of sharing, to let others know it's okay to take time to grieve, to speak out about one's pain. If you've been there, or know someone who has, I'm sending you a heartfelt hug.

Albus Dumbledore stared at Hermione Bonneau. She’d just informed him that she was sure Morfin Gaunt had the Resurrection Stone, and that the Potter family was in possession of the true Invisibility Cloak.

“Miss Bonneau,” he began, popping a lemon drop in his mouth, then offering the bowl to her. “I’ve found that someone so interested in the Hallows usually needs a close watch, but you gave up the most actively powerful Hallow willingly.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed, shaking her head at the lemon drops. “And I don’t want it back. I simply want to make sure you know where all the Hallows are. With Grindelwald loose, I wouldn’t want them to fall into the wrong hands.”

“I appreciate the information, Miss Bonneau, though I do wonder how you managed to best an extremely powerful wizard many years your age. You are certainly brilliant, but there’s more to it than that. Would you care to inform me how you’ve been several steps ahead of everyone else?” Dumbledore smiled pleasantly.

Hermione had long since stopped putting any stock into smiles, though she returned it with one of her own. “No, sir, I’m afraid I can’t. But the information is good, and the sooner you can collect these items, even if only temporarily while Grindelwald is loose, the better,” she said.
“I suspect that is true,” he allowed, his eyes narrowing slightly behind his spectacles. “Are you alright? You seem a trifle...agitated. I assure you, Grindelwald will not come to the school. The protections on the grounds and building are too great, and if he wants to face me again, I shall go out to meet him, far from here.”

Biting her tongue, Hermione did not inform him that Hogwarts was not nearly as impregnable as he thought. “Actually, sir, I do have a few questions for you, about a project I’ve been working on.”

Hermione left the Deputy Headmaster’s office twenty minutes later. She felt his eyes on her back as she went. It wouldn’t surprise her if he had figured out part or all of her and Narcissa’s story, but she trusted him with the unconfirmed information. He could suspect all he wanted. Besides, he was too interested in the Hallows, and too concerned about Grindelwald’s prison break to not follow up on what she’d told him.

She’d avoided telling Tom any details he didn’t explicitly ask for, wanting to disrupt the timeline as little as possible, though they’d already rewritten so much, it was probably a moot point. Surprisingly, he hadn’t asked about his Gaunt relatives, and since he’d asked her where the other Deathly Hallows currently were, instead of who had them, she’d been able to say, truthfully, that she didn’t know. Tom didn’t need to amass any more powerful objects at the moment. If he sought them out in the future, she’d deal with that problem when it arose.

The last six months had been a period of adjusting goals and expectations, as well as internal devastation. Tom might make pointed comments about her age, but the de-aging spell, combined with the potion Narcissa gave her, though now in greatly decreased strength, kept her in the body and mindset of a teenager. She had been so ready to grow up, to graduate, to explore a life beyond Hogwarts that was peaceful, normal. After handing the Elder Wand over to Dumbledore, she had been relieved. Someone else could take up the fight, while she would be allowed to worry about tests instead of life or death situations. Hermione had imagined that she and Tom and Patience and Abraxas would get a place, maybe a flat in London, work on advanced studies, begin careers in various fields. Sure, Tom would be scheming to get ahead and gather power, and she would be working to achieve equality for all blood statuses and magical creatures, but their lives wouldn’t have to be spent on a battlefield.

At least, that was what she had believed. So much of what she had thought had been predicated on her trust that Tom had changed. She was never naïve enough to believe that he felt the full range of human emotions, or that he wouldn’t use manipulation and violence to achieve his vision if he believed it necessary, but she had been convinced that he was felt something like love for her, for Abraxas and Patience, even for Narcissa and Galatea, to a lesser extent. And that, in turn, gave her
faith that Tom would be amenable to rising in magical society in a bloodless, more normal, rise through the ranks kind of way, that she wouldn’t have to be constantly on her guard, wondering what he was plotting and whom he might hurt.

How much of a fantasy that had been! Hermione was back to survival mode, keeping tabs on all Tom did and said, trying to predict and defuse any questionable or dangerous behavior. The summer break had been alternately relaxing and torturous. Walking along a rocky beach with Patience, swimming together, picking flowers for daisy chain crowns, spending their evenings telling stories by a campfire with Patience’s parents and Longbottom cousins (who were all lovely and fun and reminded her of a less chaotic Weasley family) had been beautiful. It was the type of life she aspired to - to create a world where everyone could have simple pleasures like beach vacations without worries. But, once she and Patience had gone to their tent for the night, she would lie awake, thinking of Tom, wondering what trouble he was getting up to in the company of Gawain Malfoy and his cronies. She also worried about Abraxas because she knew how he dreaded summer vacation, the time spent under his parents’ critical eyes, and she feared Tom would take out his anger on her on Abraxas.

Since the school year had started, Hermione had put up even more walls. If she had a destiny with Tom, then so be it, but it was going to be strictly business from here on out. Perhaps she couldn’t keep him in check by using love and affection, but she could by using magic. He was not more powerful than she was right now, he was not smarter than she was, and she would keep every advantage she had. When she had arrived back to the Merrythought Estate before he had in August, and she’d poured over Slytherin’s journals that Tom had translated from Parseltongue. She’d also cowed Apep into translating some of the other journals. He hated her, and he hated speaking in English, but he hated the thought of being in Dambala’s coils more, and the bright green snake was almost as much Hermione’s familiar as he was Tom’s.

Hermione was practicing the most advanced spells she’d ever seen, day and night. In just one week back, she’d fallen asleep three times in the Room of Requirement, where she asked for books and practical experience tests. The room conjured phantom foes for her to duel and gave her treatises. She was studying obscure theories and venturing into darker magic than she would have under other circumstances. However, Tom’s revelation that he felt nothing except a hunger for her magic and her body had woken her to the painful truth - she could never fully trust him, and she had to be prepared to fight him to the death, if necessary. Even though Patience said that Tom would never become Voldemort in this timeline, that didn’t mean he couldn’t become something just as dangerous - or worse. Protection spells and Expelliramus wouldn’t work here. It was vital that she get into the mind of the snake, that she anticipate his motivations and his plans.

Which brought her to the immediate concern of Tom putting Abraxas’s betrothal into motion. Why was Tom doing this? Maybe he had decided he didn’t want to expose his magical links to others, that knowledge was power, and Circe knew he liked to keep secrets, but there had to be more to this decision. He was punishing her through punishing Abraxas. Well, she wasn’t going to let him. He should have paid closer attention to the wording of the vow they’d made - she had agreed not to interfere with plans that he would make in the future, but there was nothing to stop her from acting now.
She reached out through her magical link and connected to Abraxas. She needed to get to him before Tom did. He was near the Quidditch pitch, so she headed that way.

He came out of the field locker rooms, hair still wet from a shower, his shirt untucked and haphazardly buttoned, no tie. His face was still flushed from the start of the year practice, and Hermione thought he looked absolutely delicious.

She felt herself flush as well. “Abraxas,” she wanted to reach out and take his arm, but others were watching, and she didn’t need anything getting back to Tom. Not yet.

“How’s wrong?”

“Does something have to be wrong for me to seek you out?” she teased, smelling his minty soap and the ever-present scent of chocolate. Oh, how she wanted to work out some of her angst with him.

He pushed back his wet hair, smoothing it off his forehead. “No, but I know you, and I also know you’ve just been in Tom’s company. That hasn’t been a happy place in quite a while.”

“So true,” she sighed. “Will you walk with me towards the forest? I need to talk to you with no one else around.”

His pale eyebrows went up. “I’d say that sounds lovely, but I have a feeling we won’t be cuddling.”

They walked past the far edge of the lake, the shady side that was closer to the tree line of the Forbidden Forest, then actually into the edges of the forest itself. Hermione cast notice me not spells and *muffilato*. Abraxas watched her with a serious expression.

“Honestly, after learning that you are from the future, and that Tom was lying to us about feeling anything besides lust and the desire for more power, I’m kind of afraid of what else you might tell me,” he grimaced dramatically and leaned toward her, whispering, “Am I part Veela? Is that the secret of why I’m so irresistible?”

As usual, he managed to make her laugh. She slapped his arm playfully. “No, you are actually part
Hippogriff. You sprouted wings and a beak when you turned twenty. It was a huge scandal. Your mother almost put you in a magical zoo.”

“Hmm,” he mused with wide grin, reaching out to touch her face, though he stopped himself, letting his hand fall. “This is torture, not touching you.”

“We haven’t had a chance to talk about the summer, about what Tom said and did,” Hermione changed the subject. Time was a serious concern.

“He encouraged my mother, ripped apart my pretense over Hortensia, and generally made me miserable,” he admitted with an uneasy expression. “I don’t think he’s going to honor the promise to let all four of us be together.”

Hermione rubbed at her temple, against the headache that was forming. Hearing those words out loud hurt more than she’d thought it would. “No, he won’t. Tom just told me that he plans to ‘help’ your parents choose your bride, using that potion he’s brewing in the Chamber that gives the Imperius effects.”

“What?” Abraxas flinched, as if she’d smacked him across the face. “I was worried, but I had hoped he’d get over this anger, that he wouldn’t actually just betray the promises he’d made…,” his voice trailed off as he stared into the tangled woods. She could sense his feelings rioting inside, much like her own. If Tom hadn’t shut down the emotional connection between himself and the rest of the quartet, he would have felt it, too. But the fact he had gave Hermione the head start she needed.

“We promised to support Tom, to help him make positive changes in the magical world,” Hermione put a hand on his elbow. He was warm to the touch, always the warmest one in the group. “But those promises were made with the understanding that we would be in this together, that we would be equals, and that he would support and protect us as well, not sacrifice our happiness so he can make a couple extra powerful connections.”

Abraxas looked over his shoulder. They had followed the curve of the tree line, coming to an angle where none of the Hogwarts’ lawn or lake could be seen. He pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly. “What are we going to do? Tom and my mother will have me engaged before Christmas.”

“Do you trust me? To keep you safe? Even from Tom?” Hermione lifted her head from his chest, her hands gripped tightly at his waist, her thumbs finding his hipbones, the small dips beside them. “Because we have to act now, and once we do, there’s no turning back.”
“I would follow you anywhere,” he spoke slowly, solemnly, his eyes locked with hers, “No matter the consequence.”

She took three more steps, just past the bounds of the Hogwarts grounds, then slipped her hand into his and turned on the spot.

They apparated into a small yard, the fall flowers of phlox, coneflowers, and dahlias bright in neatly tended beds under the September sunshine. A low, thatched roof cottage stood before them, the door open. An elderly woman with a mocha complexion and a pile of grey braids pinned around the crown of her head came out, robes of a deep purple flowing around her bare feet.

“That’s a very nice apparition you have,” she spoke with a Scottish brogue that had a hint of a Jamaican lilt as she pulled a long chain out of the neck of her robes, putting on the glasses that were hanging from the end. “Hardly a sound you made. Most witches and wizards never get softer than a firecracker.”

Abraxas was still bent forward, adjusting to the sensation of travel, but Hermione stepped closer, her hand out stretched. “Thank you, Madame Baptiste. I’m Hermione Bonneau, and this is Abraxas Malfoy.”

“Goodness! A Malfoy?” Madame Baptiste laughed, a rich, lovely chuckle. “I don’t usually get pureblooded kids asking for my services.” Her expression sobered. “I’ll need you both to come in, to take a simple age testing potion and some Veritaserum. Have to be sure you are fully seventeen, and that you are here of your free will, you understand?”

She turned and began walking back on the flagstone path into the cottage. Abraxas caught Hermione’s arm. “Who is she? Where are we? What are we doing?”

Hermione took a breath, exhaling with a shaky laugh. “We are eloping, Abraxas. We’re about one hundred miles from Hogwarts, but still in Scotland. This woman, Madame Baptiste, has been performing handfastings and magical weddings for almost sixty years.”

Abraxas’s jaw fell open in shock. “Really? Right now?”

“If we don’t do it now, right now, I’ll risk breaking my vow to Tom,” Hermione murmured, her eyes on the retreating figure of Madame Baptiste.
Abraxas pulled her shoulder, turning her to face him again. His grey eyes were full of concern. “What vow?”

“In order to keep Tom appeased, to give us some time, I vowed to not interfere with any betrothal plans he made on your behalf,” Hermione answered.

“That is insane! Risking your health, your magic? What kind of vow was it?” Abraxas’s voice was panicked.

“Don’t worry. I worded the vow; I cast the magic. I know exactly what I can do. Tom doesn’t have any betrothal plans in place at the moment, but as soon as he starts, my hands will be tied,” Hermione stroked his arm, trying to calm him. “Do you still want me to be Lady Malfoy? And not just to avoid someone picked by your mother or Tom?”

He caught her hand, brought it to his lips. “I want you to be my wife. You are the only woman I’ve ever imagined in that role,” he flipped her hand, placing a soft kiss at the inside of her wrist, right over the pulse. “And I know Patience feels the same. We can all be together. We will all be together, no matter what Tom says.”

Hermione shivered at the kiss and the thought of Tom. “There will be a price.”

Abraxas nodded. “I’m willing to pay it.”

“Dearies!” Madame Baptiste was standing in her doorway, staring at them with a grin on her face. “The declarations of love usually take place during the ceremony.”

They hurried to her, Abraxas ducking at the low clearance into the cottage. The room inside was dim, but once her eyes adjusted, Hermione could see it was a very clean version of a hoarder’s home. All surfaces were dusted and polished, but there were precarious stacks of books, bottles, and various items everywhere, clearly only still upright due to magic. Herbs, both sweet and spicy-smelling hung from the exposed rafters, filling the room with a pleasant combination of scents.

“Now, let’s get the preliminaries out of the way,” Madame Baptiste handed them both a small vial of pale teal potion. “This is the age verification. If you aren’t at least seventeen, your face will turn an alarming shade of green.”
They took the potion, and Madame Baptiste nodded approvingly after a minute had passed with no reaction. “Very good. On to the veritaserum,” she poured a tiny amount of the potion into what looked like shot glasses.

“Now, this is a diluted potion, and a small serving. I have no intention to pry into your private lives other than to assure myself that everyone is here of his or her free will and of good intentions.”

Hermione took the glass, thinking briefly of her experience with Tom last spring. Veritaserum had brought her more pain than the Cruciatus. She looked sideways, watched Abraxas swallow his, then downed the mouthful herself, trying not to cry.

“What is your name?” Madame Baptiste asked, a parchment and quill floating by her head, ready to transcribe.

“Hermione Jean Bonneau,” Hermione answered, grateful that the lower dosage and the full assumption of that identity allowed her to respond correctly.

“And are you here of your own free will?” Madame Baptiste’s eyes were large behind her spectacles, peering directly at Hermione in a way that suggested she had a touch of either empathic or telepathic abilities.

Hermione shook her head. “Yes, I am. I love Abraxas and wish to be married to him.”

Madame Baptiste made a light hum of approval and turned to Abraxas, repeating her questions. Once he had answered, she stared at them both for a long moment.

“I usually ask applicants so young to come back three times over the course of a year,” Madame Baptiste tapped her finger to her jaw in thought. “Being young means falling in love, which is wonderful, but it also means falling out of love. That’s just part of growing up. I know many, many people who’ve changed their minds, and come back later to tell me how grateful they are that I didn’t let them rush into a lifelong bond.”

Abraxas opened his mouth to reply, but Hermione squeezed his hand tightly in warning.

Madame Baptiste smiled, noting the silent communication. “However, I also pride myself on my intuition, and I know quite a bit about bonds. You two,” she pointed at them in turn, “already have
more than one bond. You have made a commitment that cannot be superseded magically. I suspect, given the Malfoy reputation, you simply want a bond that will not be superseded legally.”

“Yes,” Abraxas said simply, exhaling the word. “My parents are pushing an engagement on me, and once they make a betrothal.”

“I am familiar with the Pureblood betrothal process, and I have no illusions about the lengths some families will go to in order to keep themselves ‘pure,’” Madame Baptiste frowned. “You do realize, I hope, that taking this step will put you at odds, perhaps deadly odds, with your parents?”

“I am absolutely aware of how dangerous this is,” Abraxas’s grey eyes seemed to darken. “And I would give my life for Hermione.”

“My, I haven’t seen such depth of devotion in decades,” Madame Baptiste blinked, then glanced at Hermione. “And you, Miss? You’ll most likely be consigning yourself to a lifetime of looking over your shoulder. The Malfoys could wait years for revenge. They could target your friends, family, perhaps any children you might have.”

Hermione met her gaze. “I know the risks.”

Madame Baptiste was silent again for several seconds, just staring at the pair. Finally, she nodded, more to herself than to them. “I’m satisfied. Though after I submit your official documents to the Ministry, I’ll be making this location unplottable for the foreseeable future.”

Reaching into her pocket, Hermione pulled out her beaded bag. Madame Baptiste watched with a combination of amusement and amazement as Hermione rummaged through it.

“Here,” Hermione handed her a jar of a black sandy looking substance and a leather bag of galleons.

“This is far beyond what I charge,” Madame Baptiste hefted the bag, then unscrewed the jar and sniffed. “Is this Black Sea Salt?”

“Collected at midnight on the new moon, and enhanced with several other protection spells I added myself,” Hermione said. “I know the risks, but I’m not asking you to take the same ones.”
She crossed to the fireplace, setting the jar and the bag on the mantle. “That is more than kind of you. I’ve dealt with or avoided angry parents many times in my career, but I suspect the current Lord and Lady Malfoy will raise their fury to an art form.”

Abraxas gave a bitter laugh. “I’d suggest you go on a long vacation to someplace very, very far away.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Madame Baptiste took their hands and pulled them toward another low door. “Touch the lintel as you pass,” she instructed.

As soon as Hermione did, she felt the familiar pull of a portkey, and found they were now a grassy field, empty as far as the eye could see except for a semi-circle of massive slabs of sarsen, like the ones at Stonehenge. In front of the stones was a wooden altar, covered with flowers and ribbons. Madame Baptiste had gone behind the altar, and was gathering up a long white ribbon.

“Come forward, please,” she took a small knife from her pocket and cut the ribbon. “Face one another. Put your hands out, palms up.”

Hermione did so, smiling nervously at Abraxas. This was the only way, but the action of getting married was still a momentous one. It was ironic, how much time she invested in planning, in anticipating events, and yet they rarely played out in any predictable fashion. She didn’t consider her planning and research wasted, because learning was always valuable, but it did make her wonder if Patience wasn’t right about her being a bit too dependent on logic. Logic didn’t seem to be a defining feature of her life experience.

Madame Baptiste cut both their hands with light, shallow strokes, then pressed their palms together and bound them with the ribbon. She spoke in Gaelic, then in English, performing an ancient spell through blood magic, then several newer binding spells. Hermione recognized all of them from the research she’d done into marriage laws and other permanent bonding magic. Every one of the spells was legally binding as a marriage bond under Ministry law, and Hermione was reassured by the fact that Madame Baptiste had used more than one. This ceremony would be ironclad as a marriage.

Less than thirty minutes later, they were back in the cottage, their hands were healed, and they watched as Madame Baptiste wrote down the details of the ceremony in a book magically linked with the Ministry’s Betrothal and Marriage Department, affixing her personal seal at the bottom of the page.
“The marriage is on the record now,” Madame Baptiste signed her name with a flourish. “Though, honestly, the whole ‘department’ is one wizard, Mr. Chesterton, who is one hundred and twenty, as well as half-blind. Most of his day at the office is spent drinking tea and falling asleep in his chair. He doesn’t really check the books regularly, unless someone comes in to ask for a copy of a license or proof of a union. I imagine you have until your parents attempt a betrothal bond to break the news to them,” she looked at Abraxas over the top of her glasses. “I wish you luck.”

Hermione saw Abraxas swallow. The fear of his parents, not to mention Tom, flooded their bond, which was stronger now than ever. There was no doubt Patience knew, and if Tom had left open even the slightest sliver of their connection, he would suspect something had occurred as well.

“Thank you,” Hermione forced herself to smile. She was worried, too. Not about the Malfoys, though. Not yet. “Please take every possible precaution for your safety, Madame Baptiste.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she laughed, and plucked a sunflower from the vase on her mantle. “Here, press this - for the memory of the day. Smile, you’re newlyweds.”

They thanked her again and took their leave, Hermione disapparating them once more.

Abraxas had less nausea at the second landing. He was only bent over a few seconds before getting his bearings. The familiar line of the Forbidden Forest was in view, as were the towers of Hogwarts. Hermione was beside him, her hand on his back, gently rubbing.

He caught her hand. “These fingers are too bare,” he smiled, pulling off his signet ring, a monstrous thing of goblin made gold, with diamonds arranged in an ‘M’ set in a large, square cut emerald, and sliding it on her finger, where it promptly slid sideways.

“I know it’s big and gaudy. Personally, I think its ugly, but my father insisted I wear it,” he took out his wand and waved it over the ring, transfiguring it into a more traditional wedding band, a simple golden circle, studded with diamonds and emeralds.

She kissed him, a sweet peck on the lips, then sighed as she transfigured the ring to its original form and slipped it back onto his finger. “You know I can’t wear this yet, and everyone would notice it was missing.”
Abraxas knew she was right, but he felt like arguing. “I want you to have something, something of mine. You are my wife now, Hermione,” he leaned into her, kissing her longer, harder this time.

He and Patience had comforted Hermione more than once since Tom had revealed his true feelings, or lack thereof, but they had all been sad and not really in the mood for sex. There had been cuddling and kisses, but nothing more. Now, he was filled with desire for her, a longing that had been building for months. He and Tom had continued to have sex regularly over the summer visit and since school had started, but it didn’t feel the same. Tom was distant, the sex was empty and transactional, another way for Tom to show his dominance without giving much in return. Abraxas wondered if maybe Hermione didn’t have the better idea, keeping Tom at a distance, because every time seemed to hurt more, to feel like less. Now, he wanted to feel Hermione, to feel their bond explode with sensation and love.

Apparently, she felt the same way, because her legs were wrapped around his waist, her fingers combing through his hair. He held her bottom up with one arm, using the other to slide under her shirt, stroking the smooth skin of her back. She was so much smaller than Tom and Patience. Touching her always made him aware of his own size, of how his hand length almost spanned the width of her body. He didn’t understand how so much power, so much passion, so much love was contained in such a little package, but the gratitude he felt that she was in his life, that she loved him enough to defy the wrath of his parents, of Tom, was overwhelming.

He lowered them both to the ground, careful with her head as it came to the forest floor. The smell of leaves and pine needles rose to his nose, along with the scent of Hermione, fresh and sweet like the late summer breeze. She was unbuttoning his shirt, fumbling with buttons and tugging. He pulled it over his head, and blushed at the appreciative, lustful look she directed at his chest. As much as he knew he was handsome, Abraxas was always still shocked that someone like Hermione wanted him. Tom made sense. Marguerite made sense. Patience was his soul mate, so she didn’t have to make sense, but Hermione was…too good for him.

“Stop it,” she murmured, her fingers running up his chest to his shoulders, then pulling him down to her, her lips meeting his.

He returned the kiss, his hands working to undo her blouse. “Stop what?”

Hermione helped him, then removed her bra, throwing it over a nearby bush. “Stop second-guessing how I feel about you. Stop doubting yourself. I just married you, for Circe’s sake.”

“Why?” he could feel moisture at the corners of his eyes. With her half-naked before him, her curls wild and loose, she looked like a woodland goddess. She raised to her elbows, peppering tiny kisses all over his face, then moved to straddle him, pressing their bare chests together. “After all you know, all you saw about the Malfoys, about how evil–”
Hermione put a finger to his lips. “If there is one thing traveling to the past has taught me, it is that no one is evil at the core. We are the actions we take, the way we treat others. People can be influenced for the better or the worse. You are a good person, Abraxas Malfoy, and I love you. I have pledged to keep and protect you, and we’ll both keep and protect Patience. Be secure in my love. It will never waiver.”

He ran his mouth over her collarbones, threaded his fingers through her curls, though he didn’t get far in the tangles. As much as he wanted to lose himself, he couldn’t shake the most pressing concern from his mind. “What about Tom?”

“Do you still love him?” Hermione asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Abraxas closed his eyes and nodded. He couldn’t bear to see her disappointment. He felt her hand on his cheek. “I still love him, too, Abraxas. It’s okay. We will keep and protect him as well, as much as he will allow.”

A wave of relief swept through him, and he loved her even more. Somehow, they would get through this.
Tom learns the lesson of Patience

Chapter Summary

Tom stews in anger. Patience shows up to give him a push in the right direction. More than one kind of explosion ensues.

*Now Nominated for Best Story in the Rare Pair Category in the Beyond the Book Fanfiction Nook Summer 2018 Award!* 

Chapter Notes

So, to quote Aerosmith, "I'm back in the saddle again." Hopefully, lol. I have about twenty ideas for the next few chapters, and will try to get them out in a more timely fashion, but I don't want to make promises I can't keep (unlike my characters, wink, wink). On a more somber note, thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who sent me such loving thoughts. Even though it took me forever to respond, all that kindness meant the world to me, especially on my many low days over the past few months. I hope you all enjoy this wild ride with Tom and Patience - it was fun to write. Love to you all.

Tom watched as Hermione left the Chamber, his rage boiling, straining to escape his skin along with his magic. He waited five minutes, the amount of time it would take her to completely leave through the tunnel, then he began grabbing every scrap piece of parchment, quill, and disposable object on the tables, transfiguring them to glass bottles. The sound of fragile substances shattering against the stone wall wasn't soothing, but it was necessary. He was chaos inside, and he needed some way to get it out, to exorcise it, because his anger was becoming a liability.

Nothing had gone the way he wanted. When he’d asked Hermione to come down to the Chamber, he had felt magnanimous, a Lord offering a chance at redemption to his wayward vassal. He had given her the present of not killing his absolutely vile father and grandparents, had given her yet another piece of his ancestors’ jewelry, a muggle heirloom to go with the magical one. Today, he had expected a fight, a verbal sparring, but he was certain it would end in passion, that he’d feel her again from the inside, that she would give into the love she said she still had for him, accept that she needed to do penance for her behavior.

Instead, Hermione’s indifference, her rejection, had pushed him to taunt her, and make him question whether she truly loved him at all. He wanted to control the Malfoys, but he didn’t actually want to plan a Pureblooded marriage. His only motivation had been to make Hermione angry. The thought of Abraxas with anyone outside their quartet brought on another round of
smashing. The real purpose was to give himself a bargaining chip, and if he ‘changed’ his mind about it later, then he would hopefully have a grateful Hermione, a step toward reconciliation on his own terms.

His desire to delay letting anyone outside their group know about the group itself or the quartet bond wasn’t a lie, however. There were many reasons for Tom to keep his magic restrained on a daily basis. Before coming to Hogwarts, his power had been a tightly guarded secret. Even though he’d understood his magic made him special, he’d known that overt displays would have been a bad idea, so constraining and subduing his magic was a habit, something he’d done since he could remember. When he’d learned the truth about his heritage, he had pushed himself to learn everything. He was more than a prodigy, and while the teachers and other students might consider him gifted, most of them didn’t have a clue of how much magic he contained, of the encyclopedia of spells in his mind, of the power of cursed objects he’d neutralized and absorbed.

But Tom was also a student of history, both muggle and magical, and history had shown, time and again, that as soon as a rising leader was marked as powerful, as a force to be reckoned with, that leader became a target, an obstacle for others with ambition. Part of his desire to keep the quartet and the group secret was based on this understanding. He had been rash and naïve in his previous dealings with Grindelwald. After months of reflecting upon and breaking down his actions in France and at the prison fortress, Tom had realized what Hermione and Narcissa and Galatea had been trying to tell him all last year - that he and Hermione (and the rest of the group) had survived due more to luck and surprise than to skill, as well as knowledge Hermione possessed from the future timeline.

He was working to rectify this deficit, which he believed was only due to Grindelwald having more years of magical study and practice, not inherent talent. After all, who was Grindelwald? An upstart, from only an average magical lineage. He, Tom Riddle, was the fucking Heir of Slytherin with both a powerful elemental quartet and an extended magical group bond of loyal followers, a Founder’s Chamber full of magical knowledge, and even a goddamned Basilisk.

Over the summer, since he’d been away from the Chamber, he’d gone through the oldest, darkest books in the Malfoy library, and had even had to call Abraxas’s house elf to treat him at three in the morning for a serious burn on his hand one of the texts gave him because he was half-blooded. He’d used a charm to copy the book, then destroyed the original out of spite.

In the warded dungeon of the Malfoy house, he’d practiced the Imperius curse on Abraxas, and had Abraxas practice it on him. Tom was convinced there was a way to learn to resist it, and he and Abraxas took notes on how they felt, on any variance in casting that allowed them to fight back. He wanted to devise a series of steps, a way of training, to become impervious to the mind control, and once he had that, he could share the knowledge with a chosen few in his circle.

Tom had also continued to refine his skills as a Legilimens, slipping in and out of Abraxas’s mind
to see if he could do so unnoticed. He was getting better and better at it, and from his tours of Abraxas’s thoughts, he knew exactly how upset his best friend was. Abraxas might still love him, but he had pulled back, too. The Malfoy heir had been something like an inferi this summer, going through the motions of his life, but not truly engaged. Abraxas had done all Tom had asked, but his kisses weren’t the same, his smile wasn’t as wide, and Tom was aware he felt betrayed when Tom had mentioned finding a better bride than the Slughorn girl to his parents.

At this, Tom scoffed, though not to Abraxas’s face. His blond friend had no idea what betrayal really was. When Hermione had revealed her deception last spring, her manipulation, Tom had barely been able to breathe - he had felt flayed alive. In these last months, he’d built up armor around himself, stronger than anything he’d had previously. But it wasn’t working. He still hurt. The pain would not subside and lashing out at Hermione and Abraxas wasn’t helping. He wasn’t sure if it was actually possible to hurt Patience, but even if it was, Tom’s heart wasn’t in it. He was backed in a corner by his own words and actions, and it left him feeling more trapped than he had in Wool’s Orphanage. This situation was intolerable. Apologizing was not an option, but something had to change. His quartet needed to be his again, fully, but they all needed to understand and acknowledge he was the one in control.

The smashing and brooding did little to improve his mood, so Tom switched his focus instead on how easily Hermione had agreed to his demands about Abraxas. She was up to something, and that made him smile. His little lion-bird could plot all she wanted, but she couldn’t out-plot him. Let it never be said that his soul mate didn’t challenge him, didn’t push him to be more Slytherin every day.

There was movement at the door to the Chamber library. Tom’s head snapped up, and he stared at the tall blonde who probably frightened him more than anyone else. “How long have you been there?”

“I’ve always been here, Tom,” Patience responded in her infuriatingly nonsensical way, walking toward him as she transfigured the glass shards scattered over the floor into rose petals.

He was still angry, but also oddly relieved to see her. As annoying as she could be, Patience generally gave good advice when he deigned to listen to it. He was also still aroused by his argument with Hermione, and the hem of Patience’s skirt was high above the tops of her knee socks. There really was nothing like Patience’s long legs wrapped around his body, a rare treat that he suddenly had a great longing for.

“Did Hermione run to you, tell you how bad I’ve been?” Tom could hear the edge in his voice. He might want her company, but he wasn’t going to let it show. Fighting against any affection had become his default in these last months.
Patience shook her head. She was standing in front of him now, those beautiful, unnerving sea glass eyes intent on his face. “I don’t need anyone to tell me how bad you can be. I know.”

“Then why are you here? According to Hermione, I’m intent on becoming an evil despot ruling over a ‘post-apocalyptic’ world,” Tom scowled, turning away from her gaze. He could not, would not, admit how badly Hermione’s lack of faith in him stung. Why had she traveled back in time if she thought he was destined to turn evil? Did she secretly believe she would have to kill him? Was she willing to?

Her slim, long fingers were cupping his cheek, pulling him back. “I can see the good, too.”

“You are insane. There is no good,” he breathed, his eyes dropping to her full lips. “And any normal person would run screaming.”

She clearly wasn’t a normal person, and proved it by leaning in to kiss him, her mouth slanting over his, her fingers threading through his hair, pulling his face closer to hers. Tom’s hands went to her waist, smoothing down the sides of her hips until he came to the edge of her skirt. Merlin, how he loved that exposed skin. He hadn’t touched her in what seemed like forever, and it wasn’t until this moment that he realized he had missed her. The connection he had with Patience was the most tempestuous of his quartet, the most unpredictable, and yet, weirdly comforting. Patience required no pretense from him - nothing frightened her, not even his darkest thoughts. He ran his fingertips over the stitched silk edging on the tops of her stockings, tracing the flesh right above her kneecaps.

Less than an hour ago, he’d pushed Hermione against this table, had tried to use physical touch to fill the gaping pit left in his chest when he had walled himself off from her emotions, from Abraxas’s emotions, from Patience’s…whatever she felt. Now, Patience had him pressed against the wooden surface; she had leaned forward so far that he was forced to lean back, his upper body resting on the table. He definitely preferred to take the dominant position, but she was gorgeous, and he’d learned that following Patience’s intuition often led to incredible things. She pulled his legs onto the table as well, laying him flat, and he was expecting her to climb up and straddle him, but she didn’t.

“What are you doing?” he was genuinely bewildered and immediately cast *legilimens* on her. As usual, her mind was a free-floating, garbled mess, though he could feel her desire, as well as something deeper, older, darker…was it anger? It was simply too complex to make out clearly.

Tom attempted to sit up but discovered he couldn’t. He was somehow stuck to the table, so tightly he couldn’t even lift a single finger. “This is a very bad idea, Patience,” he warned, thankful his mouth still worked. He started pushing at the magic, using every undoing spell he could think of in rapid succession to no avail.
“Oh, I think this is a very good idea,” she was looking down at him, her long, pale hair tickling his face and neck as she peered over him. “You need to face your fears.”

“My fears?” He nearly choked on the word. “I’m not afraid of anything!”

She smiled, her teeth dragging across her lower lip in a way that seemed truly carnivorous. “Then free yourself,” she shrugged.

He tried. Every spell, every hex, deep pulling at his elemental magic, and he even reached for Hermione’s and Abraxas’s magic, but they were far away, not in the castle, not even on the grounds. That knowledge made him almost angry enough to open the emotional bonds so that he could feel where they were, but he stopped himself. Letting them in would mean letting them win.

“What did you do?” Tom snapped angrily, after several failed attempts to free himself.

At this question, she did straddle him, swinging one long leg over him, gracefully mounting him as though he were a horse. “It all has to do with intention, Tom,” her hips rolled as she settled over his waist, her bottom resting enticingly on his groin. Luckily, Tom’s paralysis prevented his own hips from bucking upward in an embarrassingly predictable response.

“My intention to help you is pure, and that makes this spell practically unbreakable – a leprechaun taught me that,” she added off-handedly, as if everyone had conversations with notoriously elusive magical creatures.

Looking up at her, Tom took a moment to appreciate how beautiful she was, like an ethereal fairy princess, never quite human. Perhaps that was what kept his rage slightly in check. The normal rules simply didn’t apply to Patience, and actions that would have earned a death sentence for most people seemed to suit her. Despite himself, Tom was aroused, and not only from her physical self. Patience’s magical signature, the depth and power of it, was intoxicating. He wanted to dive into her, in more than one way.

Tom decided to play along until another opportunity arose. He was only wasting magical energy fighting at the moment. “Just how do you intend to help me, Pet?”

She lowered herself down, stretching out her arms and legs until her body was flush with his, her length only slightly less than his own. Then, she hugged him, tightly. It caught him off guard, the
opposite of an attack. The embrace went on for several minutes, and even within the spell that kept him locked in place, Tom felt his muscles relaxing. Hermione would have embraced him like this, prior to this spring. Abraxas would have embraced him in this manner, too, though he hadn’t in months. And since his relationship with her was an entirely different experience than what he felt with Hermione or Abraxas, he let their connection open, just a bit. This was the feeling of...love. As much as he wanted to fight it, Tom was soaking it in, basking in it. Gods, how he had missed it, flowing like a drug through his veins.

“They still love you, Tom,” Patience’s dreamy voice was a whisper, her lips moving softly over the shell of his ear.

Tom’s mouth, the only part of him that could still move freely, twisted into a frown. “She betrayed me.”

“Did she?” Patience asked, still holding him firmly, her entire body covering his, her shoeless foot rubbing under the edge of his pant leg in a distracting pattern. “What did she do?”

“You know exactly what she did,” he scoffed. “You knew for years, probably.”

“I knew she travelled through time. I dreamed of her long before she arrived,” Patience somehow managed to snuggle closer to him than before. “And I saw all that you did, the other you, in that future.”

If he could have stiffened, his entire body would have become a board. Hermione had told him the actions of his future self, though it was obvious she had avoided going into the painful details of how much she and those she cared about had suffered. Narcissa had done the opposite, sparing nothing when she described scenes of violence and torture, of madness indulged to the most depraved extremes. It was in that long conversation with the woman who was the closest thing to a mother he’d ever known that Tom had realized Narcissa wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if she deemed it necessary. Even for his cold heart, it had been a chilling thought.

His words came out in a low, barely audible breath. “You saw...Him?” Tom knew his future self from Hermione’s time line had looked inhuman, had succumbed to madness, and the idea that yet another person close to him had seen the mess he had the potential to become felt humiliating.

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his chest. How was it possible that he could feel her warmth through his shirt? “You aren’t Him, Tom. You have never been Him, and you will never become Him.”
“Everything Hermione has done for the past five years has been to secretly manipulate and control me because she is afraid I will become Him,” the words escaped his lips, revealing more than he had intended. “She never loved me. How could she when she thinks of me as worse than any Pureblood elitist, worse than Grindelwald?”

Patience raised her head, rested her forearms along his ribs to look him directly in the eyes. “You are judging her too harshly because you are hurt. Hermione met you for the first time with full knowledge of the worst you could be. It was a terrible weight to bear, but she rose past it. That she is able at all to love you, despite all she has seen and knows, proves just how much she does love you.”

“I think you are confusing love with control,” Tom said tartly. “Hermione is a woman on a mission to save the world. Her control of me is the means to do that, and any emotion she feels for me is a side effect of our various magical bonds. If she truly loved me, she would have trusted me, she would have told me the truth.”

Patience’s stomach pressed outward against his as she laughed. “She should have told an emotionally damaged orphan who’d just discovered the magical world that she’d traveled through time to prevent him from becoming the darkest wizard in history? How well do you think you would have taken that news? You had no reason to trust her, to believe her. Hermione was in an impossible position – she couldn’t tell you the truth unless there was trust, but there could be no trust if she didn’t give you time to know her.”

“She waited five years!” Tom snapped. If he were free, his angry magic would have sent Patience flying off of him.

“But she did tell you,” Patience soothed, her long fingers tracing the line of his jaw. He hated how good it felt. “I know you have little to no experience with forgiveness, Tom, but you must stretch to learn. The love between our quartet, the affection you feel for Narcissa and Galatea, for the members of our group – that is the difference between the man you will become and the Dark Lord Hermione and Narcissa knew.”

He rolled his eyes with as much exaggeration as his frozen muscles would allow. “The power of love as my savior? How original. I thought we’d established that I don’t love anything, Pet.”

“Hmmm,” she nuzzled the space where his neck met his shoulder, her lips scorching his flesh. “You don’t really believe that. Remember, this spell is about telling the truth and letting go. No one else is here, Tom, and I can already feel everything. Just admit that nothing terrifies you more than the love you feel because it means you care about something. And if you care about
something, it can be taken from you.”

He was silent, but he could sense Patience in his mind, her magic seeping into his thoughts like water making its way through stone, beading up on its surface. He had a frantic urge to shake his head, to do something, anything, to dislodge her from thoughts and feelings so private he didn’t even acknowledge them to himself.

“Get out, Patience!” His voice sounded weak and plaintive to his ears, and he wanted to cringe, to sneer, to make some movement, but he was still frozen. He wasn’t sure that he had ever felt so vulnerable. Even in the Room of Requirement, he had been in control; he’d known he could obscure the truth, shut down his bond to Hermione, lie. Patience was impossible to elude, water slipping through his fingers, and he suddenly worried he might drown.

“Says the one who uses legilimency and the Imperius on a near daily basis?” She smiled sweetly, her expression and tone telling him that she actually didn’t care he cast those spells. Her mind was free of judgement.

Stripped of his ability to respond with angry magic, Tom screamed. It was not a voluntary sound, more a release of something long chained and caged, finally escaping. Or maybe it was the sound of a lonely child’s heart, never loved and always fearful that the reason was because he simply wasn’t worthy. The echo bouncing back from the tiled walls was pure, raw pain, magnified. Something wet was sliding along his cheeks, toward his temples and his ears. For fuck’s sake, was he crying?

Patience kissed away the wetness, then grazed her lips against his own. He tasted salt, like the ocean. Tom was aghast. He had never, not once, cried in his life. Not from frozen toes in threadbare socks and holey shoes, not from hunger in a stomach never more than half-full, not from the bullying he’d endured before he could control his powers, not from the pain he’d experienced in the battles with Grindelwald’s forces, not even from the night he was given the full sensation of being burned alive in the Slytherin dormitories. That his…feelings for Hermione, for Abraxas, for Patience, could do this to him was simply further proof that those feelings were a liability.

“Stop,” Patience spoke the command in a hushed, soothing tone, but it was a command regardless. “Those thoughts, that attitude, we are undoing, right here. Right now. If you don’t, you will lose what you hold dear. Already, Hermione has taken steps to protect Abraxas because your coldness to her convinced her that you don’t love her. I know this isn’t true. I know you’ve been pretending, licking your wounds, and I was giving you time to do so. But that time is over. You must stop pushing them away.”

“What steps?” Tom hissed, desperate to change the subject, anything to distract himself from the wetness on his face.
"That was all you heard?" Patience chided gently, kissing him again.

Tom made a growling sound. If she had leaned down any further, he would have tried to bite her lips. "What steps?" he repeated. "Where did she take Abraxas? I know they aren’t on the grounds."

"Open the bond and find out," her wide mouth stretched in a serene smile that struck Tom as the smuggest thing he’d ever seen. Now he really wanted to bite her, to spank her, to make her scream right on the line of pleasure and pain.

"I can’t," he murmured, telling himself that confessing this to Patience wasn’t a confession at all, since she was already in his mind. "If I do, then she’ll think she can control me completely, that there are no consequences for what she has done to me for the past six years! She will win!"

It was beyond unusual for Patience’s countenance to be anything other than serene. At his words, though, her expression transformed into one of profound sadness, conveying deep grief. Her hands came to either side of his face, cradling him, her hair a sweet-smelling curtain, her entire physical body and magical signature seeming to swell and surround him with protection. "This isn’t a game, Tom, and it isn’t a contest. If you try to make it one, you will lose. You must surrender."

Her last word was a catalyst, and he finally broke free, leaping off the table and retreating across the room. Patience was thrown up into the air, but came down as gently as Hermione had only a little while ago.

"I will never surrender," Tom yelled, his magic so explosive from being bottled up that his hand gestures sent flames flying right at Patience’s face. She met them with a wall of water, and the fire hissed and spat steam as it dissipated.

Patience shook her head, still looking forlorn. "Then you’ll never know true joy,"

"I don’t need joy in my life," he scoffed, clenching his hands at his sides. He hadn’t meant to attack her, and he didn’t trust himself at the moment.

She shrugged. "And you’ll never know true power, either. Hermione will never give herself completely unless she knows you love her. Your combined magic, as powerful as it is now, is still not at its highest level."
Tom schooled his features. “I’m satisfied for now.”

Patience smirked. “They just got married, you know. You think you can control her, but you only have the power over her that she allows you to have Tom. If she can’t trust you, that power will continue to diminish, and you’ll be left with an even paler shadow of what we all once had.”

The tiled floor actually combusted, a circle of fire surrounding Tom and spreading out toward the chairs and tables in the room. Patience extinguished the flames before any books or potion supplies exploded, though the long wooden table he’d just been stuck to bore scorch marks and part of the green leather on the nearest chair had heat bubbles blistered over its surface.

“She vowed not two hours ago that she wouldn’t interfere with my plans!” Tom took a deep breath, because he really didn’t want to lose all the valuable books and ingredients in the room. “This is exactly why I cannot trust her!”

“How can she trust you?” Patience countered, moving closer to him. “You told us last year that our quartet wouldn’t be parted. I stood with you and helped you keep Marguerite in line when she tried to press the issue of getting engaged to Abraxas. Hermione is only keeping that original promise.”

Tom felt so hot all over, he was concerned he might be in danger of catching fire himself. He wouldn’t have been surprised if when he spoke, flames came out with his words. “I wasn’t going to -”

“Actually have Abraxas marry anyone else?” Patience interrupted. “I know. But Hermione didn’t know that. Abraxas didn’t know that. She’s taking you at your word, Tom. While you might be pretending to be awful, she is accepting it is true because you lied. You didn’t take the Veritaserum-”

This time, he did mean to attack her, sending at stinging hex directly at her smile. Though he didn’t see her make any defensive movements, the spell bounced harmlessly, hitting some kind of shield. “What do you know?” he hissed angrily.

“Everything, Tom,” she sighed, as if explaining a simple concept to a small, confused child. “Everything. You can’t lie to me.”

She continued to walk toward him, his flurry of spells getting darker by the second, though none
connected. He found himself retreating, casting his own protective barrier, which she passed through as easily as air. “You might not feel much for most people, beyond what they can do for you, but I know the truth. You do love Hermione. You love her so much it hurts you. The feelings you have for her are like a burning sun locked in your chest. I know. It feels the same for me, except that instead of reveling in the warmth of it, basking in the light with which it could fill your soul, you try to dim it, to build a wall around, to cover it.”

“This is ridiculous,” Tom began, but his tongue locked to the top of his mouth as Patience waved a pale hand. She had him against the wall now, and part of him didn’t want to fight her. The feeling between them, the mix of their magic, the stroke of her love for him inside his mind, it simply felt better than the anger.

“You’re ridiculous for fighting against the best part of your life!” Patience’s tone was vehement, her face close to his. In that moment, her passion reminded him of Hermione. He didn’t turn away when she kissed his cheek, or when she began to whisper against his lips. “You do love Abraxas. You do love me. And you even love Narcissa and Galatea. You care for most of the group, in varying degrees, with Marguerite at the top and Dolohov considered completely expendable.”

He ended the tongue lock. “That’s because Dolohov is a fucking prat.”

Patience hummed in agreement, her fingers undoing the top few buttons on his shirt, then dancing along his collarbone. “I won’t tell her. Or Abraxas. That’s your secret to share.”

Tom let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“But the longer you wait, the more damage you will do to all of us, and my side is Hermione. Always,” her mouth followed her fingers, and even though he knew better, he leaned into her touch. “Don’t you want your things to be in pristine condition?”

He tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her mouth back up to his, staring at her beautiful, bright eyes. “You aren’t pristine, Pet. You are radiant.”

“It’s all that love I know I have, shining inside me,” Patience answered, then kissed him fiercely. They were silent for a long time, their lips and tongues otherwise occupied. Finally, she pulled back. “You have it too, Tom. Just be honest with her, with Abraxas, and all you want and more can be yours.”
“And you think what I want is to be loved?” Tom murmured as he undid the buttons on her very wrinkled Oxford.

She laughed softly, shrugging her open shirt to the floor and continuing to work on his buttons. “Everyone wants to be loved, Tom, but the people who want it the most cry the loudest against it.”

He gazed at her plain white cotton bra, finding it oddly and unbearably sexy. It took him a few seconds to remember to argue with her. “If you really knew my mind, Pet, you’d know my focus is on power.”

“Power is just your cover story,” Patience sighed, vanishing her bra and pressing their bare chests together. “Love is your true mission.”

The touch was electric, humming with their magic, and Tom nearly gasped at the sensation. “Cover story? Mission? Have you been reading more of Felicity’s trashy muggle spy novels?” he couldn’t stop the hint of a smile from appearing on his face.

“They are very Slytherin,” Patience nodded, her slender fingers now at his belt. “I think you’d like them.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, distracted by the task of unfastening Patience’s skirt, pushing it down along with her knickers. “Running headlong into danger to save the world? Sounds more like a Gryffindor. I’m not the hero, Pet. That’s Hermione.” He knelt and lifted her feet out of her clothes, one at a time. The stockings stayed, and he ran his hands up the length of her silk-covered legs, coming to grip at her thighs, pushing her legs apart.

Patience twined her fingers in his hair, twisting his short curls around her digits. She had a rather firm hold and tugged his face upwards sharply like the impudent Pet she was. “I’ve also had a soft spot for the villains,” she grinned.

Tom didn’t even try to keep back his chuckle. “Of course you do, Pet. Now, do try not to pull out my hair.” She relaxed her grip, and he buried his face between her legs, determined to regain the upper hand.

That wouldn’t be easy, of course. Sex with Patience was always like a game with no established rules. He could spank her, and she’d laugh. He could tie her up and conjure knives, and she’d be thrilled. Truly dominating her was impossible. For now, though, he’d settle for the rush of making
her come all over his tongue.

Tom put all his pent-up sexual energy into the task, sucking and licking and even biting, which he knew would put her on edge. She was incredibly wet, slick with the taste of the ocean, and his fingers slid into her with ease. He pumped his fingers in and out slowly, dragging along the ridges of sensitive flesh inside of her while his tongue and lips and teeth took care of the outside. Running his tongue up, under, and around the little nub of her clitoris, he smirked into her cunt as he felt her shaking against him, her fingers tightening in his hair, just enough to be painful, but he didn’t care. Tom kept up the onslaught until he felt her stiffen, then decided at the last minute to pull away. Some of his hair was in her hands, but the pout on her face was worth it.

“Was that villainous enough for you?” he quirked a brow as he slid himself up the length of her body, vanishing his pants along the way. Tom pressed tightly against her, their naked skin touching from groin to shoulder, the silk of her stockings caressing his legs.

Patience smiled, serenely beautiful and seemingly unbothered by having been denied her orgasm. Then, she raised her hand and Tom flew through the air, back to the table, unable to move. She was on top of him immediately. “What makes you think I’m not a villain, too?”

Reaching into the spell with his magic, Tom laughed. “Because this time, you’ve only used a simple sticking charm. I can undo it as easily as breathing.”

“Don’t,” Patience ran her fingers down the length of his cock, stroking it with grip of iron. “Show me how powerful you are by simply taking what I give.”

Even though he knew she was segueing back into the topic of love and submission, Tom didn’t really want to argue at the moment. Her palm felt nearly as silky as her stockings, and he had been aroused since he’d looked over at Hermione at breakfast. That extended longing, combined with having opened his emotional connection with Patience, made him want to let her do whatever was in that deliciously twisted brain of hers.

He didn’t say anything, but the smug smirk on her face told him she knew his mind. He found it actually took effort not to break the sticking charm, especially when she began to lick his cock like it was a lolly, long, slow strokes from root to tip that made his hips want to shoot off the table. His fingers itched to grab her hair, to wind it over his hands and pull her up to kiss him. But he stayed still, mostly because he knew that she didn’t think he could and he wanted to prove her wrong. Tom Riddle was nothing if not stubborn.

After several minutes of torture, in which the licking had become sucking, Patience released him
from her mouth with an audible pop and laid the length of her body over his, just as she had earlier. Once again, Tom felt her love and affection covering him like a blanket, and he was nearly overwhelmed.

“Can’t we just have sex?” the words came out unbidden, sounding whinging, even to his own ears.

“If you want to have the sex, you have to take my love as well,” Patience replied, and he was reminded of Hermione’s words from their earlier fight. “Just let me in,” she whispered, as she positioned herself over his cock and slid down on it.

And he did. Whether it was a moment of unthinking lustful impulse, he wasn’t sure. But he just stopped trying to fight her. What was the use? She was already in his mind, already knew all the things he was trying to hide, even from himself. Fighting her was a waste of time and energy, and letting their bond flow, completely unimpeded, was like...heaven.

Beyond the physical pleasure, there was the magical chemistry. At his internal acquiescence, something shifted, like her love was being permanently welded to him, a lining inside the armor that he had been building, a lining that might expand and destroy the armor altogether at some point. Tom started to panic, undoing the charm, but Patience placed a hand on the center of his chest.

“Shhh,” she soothed. “You’ll be the stronger for it, I promise.” Then, she was moving on him, sending a steady wave of pleasure to counteract the fear, and Tom was lost in it.

Patience had let her legs fall over either side of the table, and he was as deep inside her as he could be. Each rise of her hips brought a moan to the edge of Tom’s lips, and he finally sat up, unable to stop himself from pulling her closer and kissing her.

This kiss, the first after he’d let the bond have its way, was nothing like any previous one he’d shared with Patience. Magic was flowing between them, filling all the space between their lips and tongues, and enhancing every sensation. Was this what Hermione and Abraxas and Patience felt together? Was this what they felt with him? Why had he never experienced this? How could he get this with Hermione and Abraxas? All these thoughts ran through his mind, swirling along with the pleasure.

Let them know you love them, Patience spoke in his mind, And they will give it to you willingly. He pretended he didn’t hear her, just pulled her closer, lowering his mouth down her neck, past her collarbone, and kissing and biting at her breasts. His hips, finally free, thrust upwards, and Patience eagerly rocked into him, her nails making ribbons of his back. They both came within seconds, and Tom felt their magic burst outwards in a blast that knocked over several chairs and put out the fire in a great whooshing sound.
He collapsed backwards, more emotionally drained than physically, and didn’t make a single move to stop Patience from falling on top of him and snuggling into him, her arms and legs twining around his limbs like Damballa on a cold night.

“What are we going to do about Hermione and Abraxas?” he asked after several moments of what he considered an excessive amount of cuddling. “Never mind how annoyed I am. Once the Malfoys find out, their lives will be in danger.”

Patience continued to snuggle, her lips moving against his shoulder as she alternately kissed it and spoke, “We will,” kiss. “Keep them,” kiss. “Safe. No matter the cost,” sharp bite.

“That smarts, Pet!” Tom hissed, pushing her head away and gazing down at the mark that would surely bruise. He sat up, performed a few cleansing charms, then summoned his clothes. “No more skin to skin contact for you for a bit,” he added sourly.

“You mean for a bite?” Patience replied cheekily. She did the same charms and began to dress as well. “May I please have my bra back?”

Tom debated not giving it to her, but he really didn’t like the idea of his Pet parading through the halls with those perky nipples on display, so he summoned it from his vanishing place and tossed it to her across the table. He also debated burning the table to ash, given how she’d turned it into a weapon.

Patience had gone over to the brewing table and was staring at Salazar’s imperius-like potion. “You’ll need to get this to the Malfoys sooner rather than later.”

“Agreed,” Tom said. “I’ll send a letter to Evangeline asking about her promise to help me with marriage matches. I’m sure she’ll invite me to tea.”

Patience nodded solemnly. “She’ll probably invite you while her husband is away. She wants to sleep with you.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. “Well, perhaps you can distract Lord Malfoy. He wants to sleep with you. His display at the Solstice Ball was in rather poor taste. He practically fondled you in front of everyone, including his wife.”
She shrugged. “I’m very attractive. Many people lust after me.”

He laughed. Even after years of exposure to her unfiltered statements, Patience still managed to surprise him. “That is undeniably true. But just so we are clear, I don’t actually want you anywhere near Lord Malfoy,” he added. “He wouldn’t hesitate to hurt you.”

“He won’t hesitate to hurt you, either,” Patience reminded him. “We need to strike first and fast.”

Tom crossed over to her and kissed her forehead. “How are you not a Slytherin?”

“The Sorting Hat works in mysterious ways,” she kissed his cheek in return. “They are back on the grounds, you know.”

There had been a slight frisson in Tom’s magic, an acknowledgment from his bonds with Hermione and Abraxas, but without the emotional component, the sensation was one of their magic making curt nods at each other, nothing like the way his magic was now excitedly swirling with Patience’s. But it was one thing to want them back. It was quite another to emotionally expose himself to them. And Hermione had openly defied him. She had to be expecting some form of punishment, which, after all the lovey-dovey nonsense from Patience, Tom felt more than ready to give.

He strode toward the tunnel entrance. Patience followed behind him. “Punishment is not the answer. Maybe try honesty,” her voice carried, echoing off the rock.

He scoffed inside of his head, knowing full well Patience would hear it. He also added a few choice curses. All the vulnerability he had felt in the Chamber was locked away. She sighed but continued to follow him. Once they were out on the lawn, Tom concentrated on the bond and headed toward the lake and the tree line of the Forbidden Forest.

Only a few moments later, he saw Hermione and Abraxas emerge from the edge of the forest, their hands brushing one another as they walked closely together. The joy on their faces felt like a punch to Tom’s gut. They were clearly giving one another the affection they were denying to him. Hermione saw him, and he watched as her smile disappeared, her mouth setting into a hard line, while Abraxas’s entire face became a polite, expressionless mask.

He increased his pace, closing the gap between them. Even though Patience had already told him
what they’d done, he cast *legilmens* on Abraxas, mostly to upset Hermione. Making her angry was the only way he felt her emotions these days.

“If you want to know something, you could simply ask,” Hermione frowned as she watched Tom lock eyes with Abraxas.

“Some of us are perfecting unspoken bonds,” Tom gave her a broad smile, as though they hadn’t been fighting for months, then allowed the smile to twist into a much darker expression. “And some of us are apparently only interested in breaking vows as soon as they are made.” He tapped his finger to his chin in mock-thought. “Or did you break it even as you made it?”

Hermione’s cinnamon brown eyes seemed to become even darker with anger. “You have no standing on this point. You broke your promise to Abraxas first. I merely upheld it. I vowed individually, as a quartet, and as part of the larger group to protect him, and I will not see you treat him as a toy to be matched as you please for some imaginary Pureblooded benefit that we are too powerful to even need.”

“No,” Tom hissed, leaning so far towards her that their noses nearly touched. “What you have done is created a mess. You’ve vanished all the extra time we had to deal with the Malfoys their plans for Abraxas.”

“I AM a Malfoy now,” Hermione hissed back. “And don’t you think I can’t hold my own.”

Tom reared back at her vehemence. He was used to reveling in her anger, of needling her to create tiny bits of hurt that he hoped would somehow eventually make up for the blow she’d given him months ago. But this was different. He thought of what Patience had said, of how Hermione truly believed him when he’d told her that he didn’t care for her at all, and that he was damaging her by keeping the truth from her.

“Fine,” Tom bit out. He might recognize that Patience was right, but he was *not* ready to deal with this yet. He’d already had more emotion in one afternoon than he’d had in months. “Handle it yourself, Lady Malfoy,” he called over his shoulder, striding away from the other three without a backwards glance.
Gellert Grindelwald excelled at planning. In his teens, he had sketched out a vision for world domination, and had begun collecting valuable allies. Unfortunately, he also suffered from poor impulse control and a terrible temper. He had worked on these faults over the years, but the consequences haunted him. There wasn’t a day that passed when he didn’t think of how Albus could have still been by his side if only he had approached their disagreement differently, less rashly. The blow of losing his soul mate, of having their connection severed, had been a lesson in and of itself. After various forays into collecting power, including that debacle in America, Gellert redoubled his planning efforts. He dealt with set-backs in a mature manner, rearranging troops and timelines as difficulties arose, never discouraged from his ultimate goals. It seemed, for a while, that he had conquered his impulsive ways.

Rotting in Azkaban, however, had never been on his list of things to do, and he had no problem throwing his plans aside when the situation called for it. Facing Albus after all those years had been unexpectedly emotional. Albus had aged well, growing into that adorably crooked nose, his eyes twinkling even in anger (though his clothing choices had become lamentable). His magical power had grown too, exponentially. The man had always contained such promise, and it had been
on display in Godric’s Hollow that night. Gellert knew he hadn’t been at his best (or his worst, depending on how one looked at the matter); he had underestimated the impact of Albus’s presence. Not all hope was lost though. His former lover might have the Elder Wand, but Gellert knew he still had Albus’s heart, despite the man’s protestations. Albus would never kill him, would never truly harm him, and Gellert was more than happy to exploit that weakness.

After a few very lackluster interrogations by various members of the Ministry of Magic, as well as magical law enforcement officials from France, Germany, and Brussels, Gellert had been thrown into a cold, dank cell to await formal charges, but that didn’t bother him. There wasn’t a prison that could hold him, especially now his own was destroyed. He made the most of meal and exercise times, and it didn’t take long to find several potential followers. Their sanity and magical ability were quite variable, but they followed orders and would do well enough in the short-term. He orchestrated an escape, and the group headed to the unplottable home of Sariah Avery, one of the saner witches Gellert had encountered in the prison (though the bar was rather low, honestly).

This quite in-bred branch of the Avery family was extremely anti-muggle, anti-Ministry, and very happy to welcome Gellert and the others into their home. They spent several hours that first night clapping him on the back, telling him that he had ‘the right ideas’ about wizards taking their ‘rightful place’ at the top of society, eager to show their support and gain his favor. Gellert accepted the praise with outward smiles and inward sighs. Unplottable though it was, the house was not Gellert’s ideal for a base of operations. He was not usually a fan of toadies, preferring his followers to have a bit more brains and self-respect, even if he had to put them under the Imperius or make threats to their loved ones, but when needs must, well, he couldn’t be too choosy.

A few days of tolerable food (yes, it was better than prison fare, but it was still British) and a chance to rest on something other than stone without Dementors hovering about refreshed Gellert enough to begin planning in earnest. He contacted his faithful followers still on the continent. While the linked books might have been compromised, he had put other methods in place as well. Many had fled, but Gellert was pleasantly surprised to find he still had nearly two hundred wizards ready to come to England at his summons.

Before he could do that, though, he needed to rethink his plans and establish a base of operations more impressive than this leaky, drafty, poor imitation of a manor house. Gellert had no problem playing the long game when it came to achieving his goals, but right now he wanted action, and soon. He had been doing so well on the Continent, but in one night most of his gains had been destroyed. Albus’s little followers had ruined his plans. Hermione and the others. How like his hypocritical, self-hating soul mate to cling publicly to high ideas of law and order, then turn a blind (winking) eye to children running rampant, breaking all kinds of secrecy and underage magic usage restrictions. During the last few months, Gellert had replayed his swift downfall many times in his mind. That girl and her boyfriend had raw power that put Gellert in the mind of Albus and himself, as well as a dark streak that he would simply love to tap into.

Getting to Hermione was going to be key to his plans, since he was almost positive that the girl was still the true mistress of the Elder Wand. It was possible that she had allowed Albus to best
her to transfer ownership, but that scenario didn’t feel right, and Gellert trusted his gut instincts. He had avoided killing the previous owner of the wand so that he wouldn’t trigger what seemed like the curse of all the owners dying violently. And, he noted, Hermione had done the same. That girl knew more than she should, and he wanted to know how and why. Gellert could steal the wand from Albus, but unless he bested Hermione in a duel, he wouldn’t regain full mastery over the Elder Wand. To do all this, he needed to know her full identity and those of the rest of her little group. Such a promising bunch either needed to join him or be dispatched quickly.

Hogwarts was Albus’s territory, and he would no doubt ramp up the already impressive security. Gellert decided a change of tactics was in order. No more storming towns with large groups of followers as he had in France and Germany. No, he was going to make himself into the boogeyman that the British wizarding world already supposed him to be. It was time to institute a series of random attacks so unpredictable that even Albus would be on edge. And honestly, after so many years of careful planning, the idea of sowing chaos and wreaking havoc seemed positively delightful, harkening back to his mischievous youth.

There were just a few things he needed in order to begin. His first stop was the Avery library, which he was dismayed to find was actually a single nook in a dusty parlor half-filled with mediocre, moldy texts. He sighed. So few people understood how vital good research was to world domination and generally dastardly behavior. The only book that looked in decent condition was on the low table in front of the frayed couch. Gellert perked up and went to inspect it. He nearly threw the damn thing into the fire when he realized it was just a recording of the family lineage. Useless. The book fell open to the last few pages when he slammed it back down. He glanced at it and smiled. Alright, perhaps not entirely useless.

“We are a completely Pureblooded family, I assure you,” Sariah had entered the room, and looked somewhere between insulted and alarmed at the attention Gellert was giving the book.

“I’ve no doubt,” Gellert replied easily. He tapped the page in front of him. “I see you have a few cousins who recently graduated from Hogwarts.”

Sariah looked down at the vellum. “I haven’t been in the family loop, what with being in Azkaban, but there is quite a cluster of cousins about ten years younger than I am, who were all in Hogwarts together.”

“I need information on some Hogwarts students who I think may be doing Dumbledore’s bidding,” Gellert began.

“Ugh, that ponce? He is a damned muggle-lover and a-” Sariah didn’t finish the thought because Gellert had cursed her with sudden paper cuts all over her tongue. Blood trickled from the corners of her mouth.
Gellert continued to smile, his tone as even as if discussing the weather. “No insults to Dumbledore, please. He may be my opposition, but he is also a very old, very dear friend of mine. I’ll deal with him.”

She nodded fearfully. “If you want to hear about Hogwarts, you only need to go to one of Evangeline Malfoy’s High Teas. My mother complained about not being invited every time she came to visit me in Azkaban,” Sariah muttered bitterly, using a hankie to dab blood from around her mouth and chin. “If you could find a way to go in disguise, you’d likely find out what you want to know.”

Gellert’s plans began to coalesce at a rapid pace. “Clearly, your mother isn’t my ticket to entry. Who is usually invited?”

Sariah scoffed angrily. “Oh, her Highness Malfoy only invites the upper tier of Pureblooded families, the ones with estates the size of a wing of Hogwarts and Gringotts vaults overflowing with galleons. As if our blood status isn’t good enough for her!”

Wisely, Gellert refrained from telling his little jailbird friend that he planned on using similar criteria to trade up for some better followers as soon as possible. “Who would one of these ladies be?” He pointed to the magical drawings of the various family members beside their names, settling on a particularly unpleasant looking young woman with a pinched face and very pale skin. “What about her?”

“Morgan?” Sariah frowned. “I suppose she’d be invited. She married my cousin Ulfred while I was in prison. He’s from the wealthy branch of our family.”

“Mmm, yes, the book has her name amended and a line drawn to Ulfred Avery,” Gellert noted, choosing not to comment on how closely the married couple were related. “Sariah, dear, I think I’d like you to set up a meeting with your cousins.”

In a life defined by secrets, Evangeline Carrow Malfoy’s most guarded one was how little magic she possessed. Her family had a pureblood pedigree, but not a lot of talent and only middling wealth. Previous to her schooling, Evangeline had lived a charmed existence due to her outstanding beauty and clever wit. She was well aware she looked like a painting breathed into life, too symmetrical to be real, with a face that made everyone glance twice, if not more, and kept them interested with her charming banter. However, as soon as she entered Hogwarts, Evangeline promptly realized her magical abilities weren’t half those of her fellow classmates. Though she
wasn’t a squib, formal schooling was a serious struggle for her. Luckily, she also discovered that she had a hidden gift, one much rarer than her looks or her intelligence. Unlike most people, Evangeline was able to dispassionately recognize her own limitations.

Her inspired solution, being a true Slytherin, was to seek out others to bolster her status and cover her deficiencies. It wasn’t difficult to find shy girls who wanted a beautiful friend, or bookish boys who worshipped the ground she walked on. With a few well-placed smiles, Evangeline’s grades shot up, and she had learned the power of cultivating friends who were smarter and more talented than she was, but less cunning and much less confident. And what her looks couldn’t buy, a few galleons skimmed from her parents’ account did.

Once she became Lady Malfoy, with unlimited resources, Evangeline didn’t even attempt to make potions on her own, nor did she ever transfigure anything complex. In the areas she struggled, she didn’t hesitate to order her elves to do the work or purchase the time of an expert. This gave others around her the impression that she did everything well. She was happy to be a patron for many artists, designers, writers, and inventors, garnering the reputation that she was at the forefront of every trend, a wise and benevolent woman.

Nowhere was Evangeline more in her element in her own home, when playing the hostess. Her house elves prepared the most delicious food, her decorators and artists made the manor gorgeous inside and out, her musicians filled the halls with ethereal sounds, and Evangeline herself wore the latest fashions, her hair and neck glittering with jewels. The Sacred Ladies group meet twice monthly in addition to special holiday gatherings, such as Samhain and Solstice, and every Pureblooded wife wanted an invitation.

Evangeline had created an impeccable public persona of calm control, but in reality, she had little say in her life, and that galled her greatly. Gawain might allow her to throw parties and decorate the manor in whatever style she pleased, but she had to account for all spending and explain her choices during their Friday evening appointments in the library. Evangeline hated the library, hated the evening appointments, and most of all, she hated her husband.

It was bad enough that she had to stand naked in front of his desk while she did the weekly accounting, but the sadistic bastard always found several of her decisions ‘disappointing’ or ‘simply wrong for a Malfoy,’ and then he would punish her. When they were first married, the punishments were physically painful, yet rather mundane – strikes with a riding crop or burning candle wax – all marks vanished at the end of the session, of course. As the years passed, though, Gawain became more creative, and he employed all manner of mentally and emotionally humiliating spells, especially when he realized that Evangeline’s magic was rather weak on its own. He loved to remind his magically inferior wife that there was nothing she could do to please him any longer, nor could she prevent him from doing as he wished. Evangeline had fulfilled her one and only role – giving birth to a son. Now, she was simply a beautiful toy with no defenses. Well, he thought she was a toy, with stuffing for brains. But Evangeline, even if she struggled with her spell casting, was not unintelligent. She never trusted anyone, she had a good memory, and she knew when to seize a golden opportunity.
When she had attended the wedding of Sagitta Black and William Bulstrode three years ago, she had been seated at the same table as the rather ancient great grandmother of the bride, Maida Black, who was three-quarters dead as well as only capable of keeping about a minute’s worth of memories in her mind. Gawain had thought it amusing to order his wife to stay and entertain the old woman while he danced with all the young girls at the wedding. Really, he became more lecherous with each passing year; it was embarrassing. He’d take it out of her hide if she didn’t do what he said, though, so she’d steeled herself and turned to face the oldest living member of the most ancient House of Black.

“Ah, my great-granddaughter. Fortune is smiling on our house today! I’m proud of you for continuing our traditions!” The crone had cackled, the deep lines in her face giving the impression of desert mud, cracked under intense heat.

Since she had already reminded the woman twice that she was not her granddaughter, Evangeline gave that up as a lost cause, and there probably was some family connection between the Blacks and the Carrows a few generations ago. “Thank you, Great Grandmother Maida,” she had murmured, while quickly switching her empty wine glass with Maida’s full one.

The woman had started to twist and shake, her hands fumbling into her robes, and Evangeline had worried she was on the verge of a seizure. Gawain would surely punish her if the old woman died while in her company, even if she was already a walking skeleton. She had reached out awkwardly to pat Maida’s sharp shoulder blades, but the woman had finally stopped struggling.

“Here, dearie,” Maida had pressed a small but heavy bag into Evangeline’s hands. “I know how husbands are, always so disapproving of the little things that make us ladies happy. This is a little something to buy ribbons or silly novels or chocolate frogs with, just for you, dearie.”

It had been almost two decades since Evangeline had held any money of her own, money she was free to spend with no accounting to anyone. She hadn’t been about to give that up, so she’d thanked Maida and discreetly tucked the bag into her robes, knowing Maida would forget all she had said in just seconds.

After the party, Evangeline had discovered that not only was Maida senile, but she probably could no longer count. The bag, which had extension and weight charms, contained a small fortune in galleons, and Evangeline saw many possibilities reflected in the shiny gold coins. She purchased several charmed objects and potions from discrete sellers in Knockturn Alley, and her weekly accounting sessions were much less intense, or sometimes forgotten altogether.

This crisp fall week’s lunch was mostly meant to be a planning session for the Samhain Ball, but
Evangeline’s standards were as high as always, with a large guest list, and an extensive high tea selection. Most of the families were there, at least the wealthy branches, as well as a few weaker ones who were tolerated because they retained their pureblood status. Several eyebrows had raised when Morgan Nott, who had married Ulfred Avery, had shown up with a pale, silent woman whose robes had seen better days years ago. Though Morgan had claimed the woman was a cousin visiting from Albania, none of the sharp eyes of the Pureblooded matrons missed the resemblance she bore to Sariah Avery, so recently escaped from Azkaban. More than one old biddy had murmured the tale of Avery’s trial and imprisonment in Evangeline’s ear this afternoon, not that she’d needed reminding. The case had been sensational, full of violence and sex and scandal. Sariah had killed her fiancé’s muggle lover, then her fiancé as well. Given how many Pureblooded marriages were arranged, and that infidelity was common, many of the wives had secretly sympathized with Sariah. Not one of them was about to run off to tell the Ministry, though they still snubbed her, more for being poor than for being crazy.

As the event ended, and the others left by floo or disapparated, Evangeline noticed with annoyance that the mangy woman remained, sitting quietly in the window seat, looking out over the gardens. Even her cousin Morgan had gone, and Evangeline wanted nothing more than to get out of the stiff brocade she was wearing and take down the intricate braids pulling at her temples. What was this woman thinking?

Evangeline cleared her throat and walked toward the window seat. However, the closer she got to the Avery woman, the more Evangeline sensed great power, and she wondered at it. Her skin began to feel abuzz, in a way it rarely did. She might not have much magic of her own, but she was excellent at recognizing it in others. There had never been any indication that Sariah was anything more than a spoiled, jealous, impulsive girl with middling magical ability.

“You’re not Sariah,” Evangeline decided to skip the pleasantries.

The woman’s form shimmered and shifted, and a handsome older man with pale blonde hair and an instantly familiar smirk stood in her place. “Indeed. Do I need to introduce myself?”

“No,” she murmured, her hand drifting to her pocket, not for her wand, which would have been useless against him, but for a braid of unicorn hair imbued with other protective charms she’d purchased a few months ago. It had seen her through three visits with Gawain with minimal pain. “What do you want from me?”

His eyes were bright blue, and she met them without flinching. She knew it wouldn’t do any good to avoid a wizard this powerful, and her mental shields were so terrible, she had to cover her body from head to toe in a charmed barrier lotion every morning to keep Gawain out of her mind. But this man had more power in one hand than Gawain possessed in total.
“Well, that is an evolving answer,” his smile broadened as she felt him drift through her mind. He was surprisingly gentle, and she relaxed slightly. “I could use the Imperius, but I don’t think that’s necessary. Why don’t you have a seat so that we can discuss our options?

There was no doubt the man was charming, all smooth words and gestures. And, honestly, Evangeline would rather try her luck with him than Gawain. “May I go change first? My head is aching,” she murmured.

“You poor thing. You’ve hardly any magic at all.” His expression didn’t look particularly sympathetic, but faster than her eyes could track, he reached out and touched the tip of his wand to her temple. The contact was feather-light, almost more air than substance, and instantly her headache was gone.

Though the gesture was a small one, it was the first act of kindness Evangeline had received from a wizard in years, since her school days. Between that and his palpable magical presence, Evangeline was already well on her way to full conversion to Grindelwald’s cause, whatever it might be. There was nothing like the promise of connection to power to earn her devotion. Her only concern was Gawain, and how he might retaliate.

The man in front of her winked. “Don’t worry about your husband.”

And, just like that, Evangeline became a true believer.

Hermione was still riding high on adrenalin from the confrontation with Tom and endorphins from the ceremony with Abraxas when she walked into her mother’s sitting room. Narcissa was in her favorite spot, the left side of the window seat, her back against several puffy pillows. Galatea was on the opposite end, their feet and ankles tangled together. Both women were reading, presenting a perfect picture of relaxation on a lazy weekend.

Her quick entrance, with Abraxas and Patience trailing behind her, ruined the moment. Galatea sat bolt upright, a fleeting look of panic on her features. Narcissa put down her book and crossed to Hermione immediately.

“What’s happened?” She glanced at the threesome, then added, “is it Tom? Where is he?”
Hermione shook her head. “I don’t know, probably off pouting. That isn’t why we are here.”

Both of her mothers waited quietly, their faces expectant. Abraxas had caught up with her, and he took her hand. Patience laced her arm through Hermione’s. They were surrounding her with love and magic, but she felt guilty rather than grateful, and all the uplifting hormones fled, like air out of a balloon. Hermione wasn’t used to being impulsive, and she feared the fallout of what she had done, the danger she was bringing down on those she loved.

Galatea cleared her throat softly. “Darling, we’ve been through many difficult things together. Whatever you have to say can’t top the events of last spring, surely.”

Hermione gave her a nervous smile. For some reason, the words simply wouldn’t come out. Abraxas looked similarly frozen. He was probably in shock, the realization of what they had done crashing down on him.

“For Merlin’s sake,” Narcissa frowned. “I’m starting to get worried. Please say something.”


Narcissa stepped backward, as if struck. Galatea’s face wore a stunned expression. “What?” they said in unison.

“We knew it was only a matter of time before my parents forced me to become betrothed,” Abraxas found his voice.

“And you thought getting married without your parents’ knowledge or consent was the solution?” Narcissa’s normally low voice had risen in pitch. She turned to Hermione, her hands thrown up in a gesture of disbelief. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“Declared war,” Hermione replied, her eyes downcast. “We didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t let Abraxas be bartered away. And we had already created bonds that would have interfered with the betrothal process. Now, we’ve made a formal legal bond that the Malfoys can’t contest and which keeps Tom and Patience out of the Malfoy’s wrath.”

Taking a deep breath, Narcissa was silent for a few moments. Gradually, the furrow on her brow cleared. “Fine. But we need to get ahead of this, to determine the best way for your union to
“Apparently, the Ministry doesn’t automatically announce the records,” Abraxas said, still clutching Hermione’s hand tightly. “Madame Baptiste said we’d have time.”

“You’re underestimating the resourcefulness and ambition of your mother to make you a suitable match,” Narcissa glanced at the clock above the mantle. “I need to talk with her as soon as possible, to get a feel for what her reaction will be.”

“Nuclear,” Hermione muttered, though only Narcissa fully got the reference. “You can’t go alone.”

Narcissa met Hermione’s eyes with a firm gaze. “Yes, I can and will. I would like to keep her suspicions to a minimum. Based on her conversations with Tom about finding him a potential match, I have reason to meet with her. Tom is my ward, after all.”

There was a knock on the door, and everyone except Patience startled at the sound.

“Lady Bonneau? May I come in?” It was the voice of Professor Dumbledore.

“Of course, Deputy Headmaster,” Narcissa called, formal as ever with the man she would never fully trust. She waved her hand at the door, and it opened.

As he entered, Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose at the gathering. “I would ask where young Mr. Riddle is, but I’ve come to inform you that he just used the floo in the Slytherin common room to go to Malfoy Manor.”

Narcissa let out a string of rather foul curses. The entire group now had raised eyebrows.

“I take it that I was correct in assuming that this was an unplanned visit, and not cleared with either you or Professor Slughorn?” Dumbledore continued calmly.

“Albus, would you be so good as to accompany me to the Ministry for a short visit?” Galatea pasted a smile on her face and took her friend’s arm. “Narcissa will deal with Tom.”
Dumbledore wisely said nothing, allowing Galatea to lead him away.

As soon as they were out of the room, Hermione turned back to her mother. “He’s going to use a potion on Lady Malfoy. One to control her.”

“That is a horrible idea. What does he think will happen when the potion wears off?” Narcissa snapped. “He can’t just keep popping over there and dosing her. And what of Gawain?”

“It’s a Sacred Ladies Luncheon weekend. My father will be far away from the Manor,” Abraxas shook his head, “probably visiting a mistress.”

Narcissa looked at the young man who so put her in the mind of all the good qualities of Lucius and Draco, then at her daughter, whom she had come to love more than she would have believed was possible. Her expression softened. “I’m not mad that you two are together. I know you love each other. The situation is dangerous, though. The Malfoys will not hesitate to kill Hermione once they learn of this marriage. And Circe knows what Tom is currently stirring up.”

“Tom won’t do anything to hurt Hermione or Abraxas,” Patience interjected.

“Really?” Narcissa scoffed. “I think the past few months are proof of the opposite.”

Patience’s mouth set in a stubborn line, a very rare look for her. “He won’t,” she repeated.

Narcissa had never quite understood Patience, and though she knew the girl had strong seer abilities, she preferred her own experiences as a guide over prophecies. “Well, pardon me if I do not take your word for it, Patience, dear.”

She walked toward the door, sliding her feet into her shoes and pulling on her outer robes. “I’ll be back shortly, with Tom. The three of you need to stay here, and please, attempt not to make any more life-threatening decisions while I’m gone.”

Hermione ran to her, embracing her tightly. “I’m sorry, Mother.”

Narcissa kissed the top of her curls. “I’ll make it right, darling. That’s what mothers are for.” She
returned the embrace, then left the room, her wand clutched tightly in her hand, and her mind reviewing spells she hadn’t needed to use in years. One never knew what to expect with Malfoys, after all.

Tom brushed the cinders from his white Oxford and pressed black pants as he stepped into the Malfoy library. He loved this room and spent much of his visits with the Malfoys here. It had been hardly difficult to have a Hogwarts elf ask a Malfoy elf to make the connection. Elves loved to please, and thanks to watching Hermione, Tom knew exactly how to make little elfin hearts burst with joy. Besides, Tom was a trusted friend of the young Master Malfoy, and always welcome at the Manor.

He knew that Evangeline’s luncheon would be over by now, and he also knew Gawain would have gone away for the weekend. Even though Tom had yelled at Hermione to handle the situation herself, Tom didn’t trust her to be ruthless enough to deal with the Malfoys. No, his soul mate would make the mistake of trying to reason with the Malfoys, and something horrible would happen. And if they hurt Hermione, well, they’d have to die. Well, they’d have to die sooner and more horrifically than Tom had originally planned. Which simply wouldn’t do.

“Tom?” Evangeline walked into the room, still dressed in a couture gown, her hair piled on her head and secured with a dazzling array of goblin-made hair pins, her neck dripping in diamonds and emeralds. Anyone else would have caught his breath at the sight of her. It was clear where Abraxas had gotten his incredibly good looks.

“Lady Malfoy,” he crossed quickly to her, knowing that even in his casual attire, he was as gorgeous as she was. Her eyes were lit with desire and...a touch of fear? He needed to figure that out. He kissed her hand, noting her slight shiver. “I apologize for the unannounced visit, but I had hoped we could discuss my future. I know you had a luncheon earlier today, and I thought all the latest society information would be fresh in your mind.”

She smiled and motioned for him to sit, but he could see the nervousness in her eyes. Abraxas had told him long ago that his mother hardly used magic in her daily life, preferring to call on the elves or use enchanted objects. Though his best friend thought that confirmed his mother as snobbish and lazy, Tom suspected a different reason. When he had first met Narcissa and Hermione, Tom had seen their magic, like an aura around them. Since then, he’d realized that not many people had that gift, and he’d sought to strengthen it with absorbed magic and various spells he’d found in Slytherin’s journals. If he concentrated, Tom could see a magical being or object’s power, and the brighter the aura, the stronger the magic. Evangeline barely glowed, giving only a weak sputter near her hands and face. If ever there was an adult to test his legilimency on with few consequences, she was one.
Evangeline desired him, and Tom needed to keep her distracted. He met her gaze, used his hand on the couch seat to lean closer to her. “I also thought we’d have…privacy.”

Her pale cheeks flushed prettily, and Tom entered her mind easily. She had no defenses, but he still kept his touch as light as possible, and continued speaking, complimenting her on her clothing and jewelry, telling her that he knew he would never attain a wife as beautiful as she was, but he hoped for someone whom Evangeline at least approved of.

She assured him that she would help him find a suitable match, and her own hand edged closer to his, the rings on her fingers shining like fire. “You don’t need to rush into anything, though,” she brushed against his knuckles.

He caught her hand in his, because the contact made the reading of her mind even clearer. It was a blessing that Tom was an excellent liar, and schooled in hiding his emotions, because Evangeline’s thoughts were raining down like a muggle air raid, hitting him with one explosive revelation after another.

Evangeline tried to pull back, but Tom followed her movement, keeping her close. “Tom! You know that I can’t,” her voice trailed off as she continued to gaze into his eyes.

Tom had always suspected that Evangeline was a frustrated woman, but once he could see all the levels of her frustration, he was stunned. She was full of anger in general and an immense hatred for her husband in particular, and in the deepest spaces of her mind, she hated herself for not having what she deemed a suitable amount of magic. She saw Abraxas as her legacy and the one place in her life where she was allowed and expected to exert control. And she was scared and excited about something new…Tom pushed gently towards those thoughts, the only ones she was actively trying not to think of.

To distract her, he spoke in a soothing, seductive tone. “Lady Malfoy,” he began, making his words seem like a plea.

“Evangeline, please, when we are alone,” she breathed, her grey eyes the same color and shape as Abraxas’s but lacking all his warmth.

Tom hadn’t been in many minds. He’d tried to enter Narcissa’s and Hermione’s, but both had been completely blocked to him. He’d practiced legilimency on Abraxas, Patience, and most of the members of the group, and had found love, affection, or at least respect in all the minds. Even
Dolohov respected Tom’s power and enjoyed being part of the group they’d created. In Evangeline’s mind, he found nothing but the desire to use others, himself included, and it bothered him. Then, it bothered him that he was bothered. Why should he care that Evangeline felt nothing? All the affection he received was warping his sensibilities. Lady Malfoy’s clear, cold mind should have been refreshing, but he was only repulsed.

She didn’t have a hint of that, though, because he was inching his grip up her wrist, sliding a cool finger beneath her loose emerald bracelet, tracing her pulse. Evangeline sucked in her breath, moved closer still.

Tom found the fresh thoughts, sequestered from her other ones, and saw Grindelwald in his own mind’s eye, wooing Evangeline with promises of power and permanent protection from her husband. He admitted to considering the Imperius, but told her that he trusted her enough not to use it. Grindelwald instinctively knew that little concession of power for her would be worth its weight in galleons. The wizard was suave, charming. But he wasn’t Tom Riddle. Tom was infinitely more charming and unwilling to leave anything to chance.

Standing, Tom walked leisurely to the mahogany bar, poured out two tumblers of Ogden’s Finest. It took mere seconds of a turned back to slip the potion into her drink. As expected, Evangeline had followed him. She left little space between them and took the glass with a broad smile, sipping at it without hesitation. Tom silently counted five seconds.

“You know that we must be discreet,” he brushed the side of her face, thumping at the space behind her ear. “Nothing I say to you today can ever be repeated.”

She nodded, turning her face into his palm, her breath warm on his skin. Tom trusted that Slytherin’s potion would work, but he needed to be sure, so he gave her an order. “I need you to tell me who visited you before I got here.”

“Grindelwald,” she answered immediately, then gasped, biting viciously at her own lips. “What in the world did you do?”

“Something not even Grindelwald knows of,” he put an arm around her shoulders, using his other hand to tip her glass toward her face. “Finish your drink.”

Evangeline upended the tumbler instantly, swallowing the liquid down with a wince. Her beautiful face twisted in anger. Apparently, this potion did not have the emotionally numbing effects of the Imperius, and that pleased Tom, that she wouldn’t be able to float away on a cloud of no responsibility. “What do you want from me?”
He squeezed her waist, turned her to face him directly. “Not so much, really,” Tom murmured, “I simply want you to do any and everything I say.”

“Is that all?” she scoffed.

“Well, I would have been substantially less eager to hurt you if I didn’t know how you tortured Abraxas as a child,” Tom smiled, a smile designed to instill grave fear.

Evangeline shuddered. “I don’t know what you’re -”

Tom grabbed her by the throat, ignoring how the sharp gems in her necklace cut the blade of his hand. “Don’t. Lie,” he warned, his tone matching his smile. “I’ve seen his memories. Now, I’d like you to admit just what a horrible mother you were.”

“I treated him no differently than I was as a child,” she protested. Tom noted that the potion allowed space for a person’s beliefs – if Evangeline truly believed that she hadn’t been a horrible mother, she wasn’t compelled to answer. He would need to adjust his orders accordingly.

“Then tell me what you did, how you punished him,” Tom amended, not letting go of her throat. “So that I will know exactly how to repay you.”

Evangeline began to cry, but Tom was in her mind, and he knew the tears were only for herself, not any regret over how she’d used dark magic and cursed objects on her child. She listed her sins, and Tom committed each one to his memory for the future, when he had more time.

When she had finished, Tom alternated between stroking and constricting her windpipe. He pressed hard enough to bring discomfort, but not outright pain. “I have a secret to share with you.”

“What?” she gasped as air came back in her lungs.

“We are related as of today. Abraxas, your dearest son, has married my cousin, Hermione Bonneau. You know she is as a sister to me, and her mother is like my own. That makes us practically in-laws.”
Her lovely eyes bulged from anger. “He couldn’t! He wouldn’t throw away over a thousand years of blood purity!”

“He did. And all it took was a remarkably fine pair of cinnamon brown eyes,” Tom laughed. “Well, and her incredible capacity to love, along with unmatched brilliance and magical power. You know, all the qualities you lack.”

Evangeline hissed, her teeth bared. Tom hissed back, switching to Parseltongue for a few choice threats, his lips pressed against her ear, his canines scraping against her flesh. She whimpered, clearly understanding his tone if not his words. Tom was unmoved.

“You will obey me,” he continued in English. “And if you are tempted to try to counteract my potion, I should warn you that any other potion interaction is fatal, and if you attempt to disobey, you will first suffer from a severely debilitating pain in your head. Then, I will come and kill you.”

“What do you want?” she repeated, her expression shifting to resignation, then coming alight with a bit of defiance. “You know Gawain will be enraged. How do you plan to handle him? And what of Grindelwald? He’ll be back.”

Tom nodded. “Yes, I saw that he wants to get rid of your husband, assume his identity, and use this place as a base of operations.”

She blanched. He smirked. “You didn’t realize I’d used legilimency on you? I am improving.”

“One of them will kill me before you have the chance,” she moaned.

“No, they won’t,” Tom switched back to a soft, soothing tone, gently massaging her clavicle. “Grindelwald won’t waste time replacing your husband, and I could care less about Gawain’s death. I’m not ready to interfere with his plans yet. All I’m asking you for today is to stop pushing any engagements. You will want to keep the news of the marriage secret for now, especially if you want to maintain your status at the Sacred Ladies Luncheon. Tell anyone who asks that Gawain insisted you give Abraxas more time and you agreed.”

“How will this help you? And don’t you think Grindelwald will know what we’ve done?” Evangeline was verging on hysteria.
“Don’t worry, I have a plan,” Tom smiled. “Please call your most trusted house elf. I need you to tell the elf to obey me as he or she would a Malfoy.” He released her and took a step back, allowing a respectable distance between them.

“Dabney?!” Evangeline sounded shrill, though she was clearly trying to calm herself with deep breaths.

An older female elf wearing a neat white towel toga with green trim appeared with a soft pop. “Mistress? What can Dabney be getting you?” she smiled at Tom. “Mr. Tom! Good to be seeing you.”

“Dabney, you know that Tom is a very special friend of our family,” Evangeline began.

“Yes, Mistress. Mr. Tom is best friend to young Master and very nice to all,” the elf grinned innocently at him.

Evangeline made a choked noise but pulled herself together. “I would like you to obey Tom, to take his orders as if he were the young Master himself.”

The elf looked shocked, glancing back and forth between the two. Tom knelt before her, and her already oversized eyes widened further. “Dabney, you know that your Mistress has been sorely mistreated by your Master. You take care of her personally. I need to remove some of her memories, and I need you to help me administer a potion to keep her safe. It has strong protections, and she will tell you that she is doing all of this willingly, aren’t you, Lady Malfoy?”

“Yes, I am,” Evangeline nodded.

Tom took the vial with the rest of the potion from his pocket and handed it to Dabney. “You will put two drops of this into Lady Malfoy’s tea every morning. You will not speak to anyone of this.” He looked directly into the elf’s eyes, his own expression serious and caring. “Together, we can keep your Mistress safe.”

The elf took the potion and burst into tears. “How kind, Mr. Tom!”
“You can go now, Dabney,” Evangeline’s words came out sharply, and the elf bowed and left.

“I’ve spent my whole life in the company of Slytherins, but I’ve never seen anything like your performance,” she snapped bitterly. “You must be the world’s best liar.”

Tom’s mouth curled smugly. “I am the direct heir of Salazar Slytherin, Evangeline. Now, I have a schedule to keep, so let’s get you obliviated. Have a seat on the couch, please.”

Narcissa apparated directly into the Malfoy sitting room, confirming her suspicion that the magical wards on the property would recognize her right of entry. Neither Tom nor Evangeline were in sight, so Narcissa went to the next location on her list, the library. As she opened the door, she saw Tom with his wand to Evangeline’s temple.

He glanced up at her, seemingly unworried by her presence. “Just a moment, Mother. This bit is tricky.”

She had seen many sessions of obliviation, and even some by Lord Voldemort himself, and she was well aware how dangerous interference could be. Quietly, she came to sit across from Evangeline and waited for Tom to finish. Once he had, he sat beside her.

Evangeline slowly blinked, staring at the two guests. “Pardon, what were you saying?”

Narcissa rose, taking Tom’s arm. “That we must head back to Hogwarts. We will have to meet again soon about Tom’s marriage prospects.”

“Yes,” she replied dazedly. “We all want Tom’s future to be bright.”

“Indeed,” Narcissa smiled tightly and steered Tom towards the door. “We will see ourselves out.”
Narcissa and Hermione Figure Out Tom's Foolery

Chapter Summary

Tom thinks he's so clever, but he underestimates the power of emotional intelligence and intuition. Narcissa and Hermione both sort out some truths, though Hermione is still not completely sold.

Chapter Notes

Slow season - apparently snow and frigid cold don't inspire me. It took forever to get this 6K out, but I'm sorting out plot points for the next chapter, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed for a burst of both spring air and inspiration.

As they walked toward the front entrance Tom grumbled, “Why don’t we simply use the floo?”

Narcissa continued out onto the long gravel path lined with yew trees intricately shaped as various magical creatures. She reached the unicorn, her favorite, before answering. “Because it is a beautiful fall afternoon, and we need to talk.”

Tom pulled his arm away from hers roughly. “So that you can tell me how disappointed you are in me?”

She glanced over at him, taking in his angry expression and how he kicked his toe at the gravel. Tom had avoided her all summer, and since the start of term, she’d only seen him in passing between classes or across the crowded Great Hall at mealtimes. Now that she was close to him, she could sense he wasn’t the cold, emotionless Tom she’d expected. He was hurt, wounded in some way, and wounded animals were always the most dangerous.

“I’m not disappointed in you, Tom. And I’m not here to scold you, though I would like to be informed on what you have done,” she answered truthfully.

Narcissa hadn’t been disappointed in Tom when Hermione had come to her after the revelation in the Room of Requirement. No, she’d been furious that her daughter was heartbroken, and disappointed in herself for thinking that she could truly change Tom.
When she’d originally cursed Hermione and herself, her expectations had been low. Narcissa had imagined finding Tom, giving him a better entrance to the magical world, a privileged footing that would keep some of his darker ambitions at bay, but her vision of the future had been simply a saner Dark Lord. As much as she had urged Hermione to treat Tom kindly, and had done so herself, she never thought Tom would come to truly care for them. Then his attachment to Hermione had blossomed and widened to what seemed like affection for a close group of others, and Narcissa had dared to dream that Tom would evolve into something completely different from the Dark Lord she had known.

The past six months had forced Narcissa to change her own approach, to reach inside and find her own Slytherin self to keep her original goal – the best possible version of Tom with the least amount of damage to anyone else. Yes, Tom’s soul and sanity were still intact, and he was as charming as ever, but the hope that he felt anything for others besides the desire to possess and manipulate was gone.

He’d utterly crushed Hermione when he’d admitted he felt nothing for her, and Hermione wasn’t the only one devastated. Perhaps it was her injured pride, but it hurt Narcissa deeply to think he had feigned all his affection, especially when she had felt they had come to have a mother/son relationship, but she had to accept that hurt and move on. Even if he couldn’t feel, he could still recognize her worth. She needed to remind him that she was his ally.

“You saw exactly what I was doing,” Tom’s tone was petulant.

“And you will note that I did not interfere,” Narcissa pointed out calmly. “Hermione said there was a potion, one that functioned like the Imperius, that you were planning on using it on Evangeline.”

“It was Hermione’s mess that I was cleaning up with that potion!” he snapped. “Do you know what she has done?”

Narcissa sighed and nodded. “She told me about the marriage. Galatea has gone to the Ministry to see if we can obscure the record for now in some way.”

“Well, I ordered Evangeline not to push any betrothals, so I’ve bought us some time,” Tom said.

“How have you bought us time? You just obliviated her.” Narcissa was genuinely confused, but she did notice his use of ‘us’ and ‘we’ – Tom was still thinking of them as a group, which was a good sign.
Tom’s lips curved into an arrogant smile. “You underestimate me, Mother. That potion is of Salazar Slytherin’s own design, enhanced with my experiments, and it takes root in a person’s very magic. Her compulsion to obey me when I give her an order cannot be wrenched away by a simple memory removal. It will lay dormant until I have need of it, and all previous orders will remain in effect.”

Silently, Narcissa agreed. She had underestimated him. She had been seeing him as a child, and that needed to stop. He still craved approval and praise, though, and she would use that as a way to defuse his temper. “Then you were wise to come here,” she shrugged.

He gave her a suspicious glance. “You aren’t angry?”

“Didn’t I play along?” Narcissa asked. “No, I have no problem with you controlling Evangeline to keep Hermione and Abraxas safe.”

Tom made a slight hissing sound. It was a low, calm noise, almost as if he were humming in thought to himself. He took Narcissa’s arm, and she allowed it, easily matching his slow pace as he began to walk again. She waited patiently for him to speak. Pushing Tom Riddle was not a good idea in any timeline.

“I’ve done more here today than you realize,” his tone was proud. He clearly wanted an audience for his brilliance.

“Really?” Narcissa asked coolly, though she was curious.

He faced her, looking directly in her eyes, but she felt no attempt at legilimency. She met his gaze, unblinking. “I know that you can keep secrets from me, but can you keep them with me?”

It was not lost on Narcissa that Tom was offering her an olive branch. In his mind, trust was always a weakness, and asking her to keep a secret for him was a risk. She needed to reward him for the effort, to show him she could be trusted, but she couldn’t appear too eager.

“So long as that secret will not endanger our family,” she answered cautiously.
“Define ‘our family,’” Tom countered.

She gave him an amused smile. Of course, Tom would want to lock down the terms. “Hermione, Galatea, Abraxas, and I suppose Patience.”

“Why don’t you like Patience?” he actually looked a bit upset. “She’s bound to us magically – she is part of us.”

Narcissa sighed. “I don’t dislike her, but she’s so flighty, I don’t understand her – she’s about as far from Slytherin as one could get.”

Tom laughed. “You’d be surprised,” he muttered with a wistful smile that seemed entirely out of character, then continued. “I accept that definition. None of them would be at risk.”

“Then I agree to keep your secret,” Narcissa replied. She arched a brow. “Will it require a vow?”

Tom’s expression was steely. “You tell me. Can I trust you without one?”

Narcissa mirrored his expression. He respected the truth, so she would give it to him. “I know you have felt angry and betrayed since last spring, but you have some distance from those events now, and I expect you of all people to be able to view them dispassionately, using your considerable intellect. Everything I have done for the past six years has been to either keep you and Hermione safe, to protect your secrets, or both. More than anyone else in the world, I know what you are capable of at the worst version of yourself, but I came to love you, as a son. And I am still standing beside you, holding your arm, telling you I accept you, and that I will continue to protect you and your secrets with only one caveat: Don’t hurt this family we have created.”

Something moved in Tom’s eyes, a brief flicker that Narcissa couldn’t quite read. He took a deep breath and said, “Grindelwald visited Evangeline earlier today. He believes he has control over her. He plans to return to Malfoy Manor in the near future, kill Gawain, assume his identity, and use the Manor as his base of operations to terrorize the British Wizarding World.”

Whatever she had been expecting, that was not it. Narcissa could only blink and respond with a faint, “Good Goddess.” Quickly, she collected herself, and took Tom’s arm again. “We need to apparate away from this property immediately. He would recognize you, Tom, from Nurmenguard.”
Tom followed her lead, and within a few seconds they were in Hogsmeade, at the edge of the property Narcissa owned. She allowed him a moment to recover, then asked, “Do you have a plan? Or even part of one?”

“I’ll be getting daily updates from the house elf, Dabney, and she will continue to dose Evangeline, which will keep my original magic today active,” Tom replied. “But I hadn’t counted on Grindelwald’s interference when I had made plans for the Malfoys.”

She put a hand on his shoulder without thinking, but he didn’t move away. “You did well improvising. Surveillance is a good starting point. But why keep this information from Hermione and the others? You must realize that I cannot lie to her about this if she asks me directly.”

“I don’t want to keep it from her indefinitely,” Tom frowned. “But Hermione has it in her mind that Dumbledore needs to be the one to defeat Grindelwald, that Dumbledore needs to keep the Elder Wand, as it would corrupt either one of us.”

“Dumbledore the great bastion of incorruptibility?” Narcissa scoffed. “I love my daughter, but her years as a Gryffindor under his rule as Headmaster blinded her in some ways.”

“I am aware of that and count it a blessing I will be graduated next year, long before Dumbledore takes on the role of Headmaster,” Tom ran a hand over the tall grass that lined the path towards Hogwarts, his fist crushing the tips.

His voice rose as he continued, “Why does Dumbledore have to be the one to defeat him simply because he did in the other timeline? After all, he just had a chance to end Grindelwald, and mucked it up royally. And yet, if we told Hermione this news, I guarantee she’d run to him to solve the problem. I simply want some time to think of alternative ways of handling him before Hermione decides for all of us that Dumbledore is the solution again.”

Narcissa considered the statement carefully. “I think Hermione is only focused on him because that scenario seems the most logical, even with changes to the timeline. Grindelwald is extremely powerful, with many followers, and the average or even above-average magical being wouldn’t be able to stop him. We know Dumbledore can, and has.”

“Well, I believe it’s time to stop relying so heavily on your and Hermione’s past, and create our own future,” Tom stared at the turrets of Hogwarts, coming into sight as they came around the corner.
“And what do you imagine that future to be?” Narcissa knew she was probably pressing her luck, but she hadn’t had an opportunity to talk alone with Tom in months, and she wanted to try to understand what he was thinking. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off with him, and she was determined to figure it out.

Tom glanced over at her quickly, then away again. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but beyond getting rid of Grindelwald, I don’t really know. I’ve no desire to work at some boring Ministry job. I want to continue to learn, to study all that Slytherin left behind, to unlock magical secrets, to become more powerful.”

“No, I don’t think you are cut out for a Ministry job,” Narcissa agreed. She was a bit puzzled at Tom’s lack of a specific ambition, but she was also relieved he wasn’t currently planning on taking over the world once Grindelwald was gone.

“Once Abraxas’s parents are out of the way, we can use Malfoy Manor as our own private Hogwarts. I intend to move all the items from the Chamber there eventually,” Tom continued.

Narcissa was now beyond puzzled and straying into shock – Tom voluntarily sharing his plans? And even though Narcissa had signed the document swearing to keep the Chamber secret, Tom rarely mentioned it so boldly to her. Perhaps he understood how he had alienated Abraxas and Hermione and wanted someone to confide in. Though, he clearly still expected to spend the majority of his time with the quartet he was currently pushing away. She was confused.

“I wonder if the Manor is the best choice,” Narcissa kept her expression neutral. She wanted to keep her tenuous peace with Tom.

Tom looked at her with surprise. “Why wouldn’t it be? The ancient wards, the library alone – it’s perfect.”

She sighed. “Both Hermione and Abraxas were tortured there,” she paused, then added softly, “As was I.”

“By me?” There was a flash across Tom’s face.

In any other person, Narcissa would have labeled that fleeting expression as evidence of emotion. In fact, she felt sure it was emotion – a combination of anger and sadness, tightly tangled. She was overwhelmed with a need to reassure him, as a mother would her child.
“No, Tom. *He* isn’t you,” her hand came out and stroked his arm, from the shoulder down to his hand. She noticed the furiously red scratches on the blade of his hand, and murmured spells of healing and closure. He remained still, his hand cool in her palm, though he did not meet her gaze. The way he looked into the distance, the set to his chin, the furrow of his brow, reminded her of how Draco had looked when he told the Dark Lord how proud he was to accept the task of killing Dumbledore. A boy on the verge of manhood, determined to be strong, to show no weakness when the world was crumbling around him. Narcissa thought her heart might burst.

A lifetime of dealing with people who had hidden any and all emotion, a lifetime of having done so herself, sent a wave of recognition over Narcissa, and she had an epiphany. Tom had to have lied to Hermione in the Chamber. Somehow, he had avoided taking the Veritaserum. He *did* feel, and no matter how much he wanted to obscure that fact, Narcissa’s trained eye saw it. She also recognized now was not the time to discuss this.

“We could get another estate, move everything there,” Tom said after a few moments silence, slipping his hand out of her grasp and resuming down the path.

“That’s a concern for the future, regardless,” Narcissa deftly turned the conversation to a safer topic. “We need to deal with Grindelwald in the here and now.”

Tom met her eyes, hesitating briefly before replying, “To be clear, when we say we will deal with Grindelwald,” his voice trailed off.

Narcissa didn’t hesitate. She needed Tom to know she trusted him, that she was all in. “I mean that we will kill him.”

He smiled at her, the first true smile she’d seen on his face in months. Narcissa returned his smile. Their bond was repairing itself, and if the glue was a plan to murder an evil megalomaniac, well, then, so be it. She was a Slytherin, and she knew to take her victories whence they came.

“He didn’t share much with Evangeline,” Tom frowned. “And I doubt he will lay out his plans in front of her. We’ll be able to infer some things from the orders he gives her, and he did mention bringing ‘friends’ over to stay. I suppose that would be any followers he has left.”

Narcissa thoughts leapt ahead. “He must know Hermione is the true Mistress of the Elder Wand, and he knows the group was comprised of Hogwarts students.”
Tom’s eyes narrowed as he followed her idea. “And he knows that Evangeline has a son who attends Hogwarts. It would be a simple matter for him to place Abraxas under the Imperius over a long weekend, to use him as his eyes and ears in Hogwarts, to collect information about Hermione and anyone she is close with.”

“What do you think he already knows about the group?” Narcissa asked.

“He knows my and Hermione’s names, and saw our faces, but he didn’t see anyone else. Abraxas and the others were still masked when they used the portkey. It was dark and rainy, and he was far away from them. He probably doesn’t even know the exact number of the group,” Tom answered. “Which is why he needs a student to control. He wouldn’t be able to get into Hogwarts himself.”

“Abraxas won’t be going home until the Samhain weekend, when Evangeline has her ball,” Narcissa lowered her voice as they came along the side of the far greenhouse. “We have a few weeks to think of a plan to keep Abraxas safe.”

Tom grinned, clearly delighted with the prospect of a challenge. “That will be more than enough for minds like ours.”

Hermione did not fail to notice the change between Tom and her mother. As they entered the healer’s living quarters, they were at ease with one another, no hint of tension apparent. This was the opposite of how their interactions had been for months, stiff and charged. Hermione knew Narcissa had been upset on her behalf, and also hurt personally by Tom’s rejection. Now, it was as though those wounds had been healed. Narcissa seemed to have forgiven him. Abraxas seemed to want to rush into his arms. Patience seemed to have never been upset with him in the first place. Why couldn’t she feel the same?

Hermione truly didn’t want to be petty. And she had forgiven Tom, in a way. She had accepted the reality that he had deceived her, that he didn’t have feelings for her, and her logical mind said that she couldn’t blame him for brain chemistry, for the way he was wired differently. He was her soul mate, after all. Not loving him was not an option. But that didn’t mean that she had to sacrifice herself by opening the emotional and mental bonds between them and pretending like five years of believing in and strengthening a connection until it was the strongest, most beautiful thing she had ever experienced, only to have it dashed away, crumbled to nothing, hadn’t felt like a well-place crucio to her heart.
No, opening those bonds was simply a step Hermione could not, would not, take. It was too dangerous. She feared if she gave herself unreservedly (because she did still love him, so much), she would be lost forever – she would become Tom’s prized possession, and nothing more. On such a path, how long would it be before she acquiesced to his every whim? How many years before he wore away her already tarnished morality? Her greatest fear was that she would become a Bellatrix, sadistic, raving, and fearful of disappointing him in any way, grateful for whatever scraps of approval he threw at her.

So, she did what she’d trained herself to do – she stood firm and resisted. It was a quiet, subtle resistance, but her inner shields had never been stronger. When she looked at Tom, at his handsome smile, she felt his magic, *their* magic sing. The power they created was thrilling, to be sure. But there were no shared thoughts, no feelings. Those, of course, would have been all on her side, if she didn’t have them entirely locked away.

“I’ve handled your little problem for now,” Tom began smoothly as he crossed to the sofa where she was sitting, one hand reaching out to take hers.

The sensation was electric, a reminder of how much she loved him and his touch, despite everything, and Hermione wanted to pull away. Instead, she gripped his palm in return. She would never make it through this if she didn’t learn to lean into discomfort, she told herself.

“And I’ll remind you that I didn’t ask for any assistance,” she said coolly.

“Consider dealing with your viper of a mother-in-law as a wedding present from me,” Tom smiled at her, and he looked so handsome and dangerous all at once, her brain wasn’t sure which fact to process first. “I’ll always be here to save you from yourself, my dear soul mate.”

His tone, low and sultry, and so seemingly *sincere*, both aroused and angered her. How could he continue to pretend like he cared when he knew that she knew it was all a lie? Why couldn’t he simply be honest and show his true face? She could become accustomed to his lack of feeling, if only he would stop all the pretense. His excellent acting skills had a habit of bypassing her brain and going straight for her very vulnerable heart.

She didn’t answer because she didn’t trust herself not to break down, right there in front of everyone. Instead, she gave him a sharp nod and rose. “I have homework. I’m heading back to Ravenclaw Tower.”

Without looking at anyone, she strode out of the room, walking so fast it was nearly a run. It wasn’t technically a lie – she did have homework, though it wasn’t anything due for a month since
she did all schoolwork well in advance. However, Hermione didn’t plan on heading to Ravenclaw Tower. She went straight to the seventh floor and paced back and forth outside the blank wall. Her thoughts were a whirlwind, and it was difficult to focus on a single theme. The magic of the room needed direction from a querent, so she was shocked when a door appeared almost immediately, before she’d been able to come up with a coherent request. She opened it quickly and slipped inside, not sure exactly what would greet her, but trusting that it would be what she needed to see.

Since coming to the past, The Room of Requirement had been Hermione’s refuge at Hogwarts. Yes, she had a room and roommates she loved in Ravenclaw Tower, and she felt at peace there in a way she’d never felt in the Gryffindor living spaces, which were wonderful, but always buzzing with energy and more than a little chaos, usually courtesy of the Weasley twins or even Harry and Ron. And there was the library, which always calmed her, and the classrooms that she could have walked through blindfolded, and even the Chamber, which had become a surprisingly pleasant place. But no place felt like it was hers in the way the Room of Requirement did. There was sentient magic at play in that section of stone and mortar, and even though it was probably a silly, fanciful thought, Hermione believed the room liked her and wanted to give her an area truly her own, just to be able to be, whether what she needed was a hot bath, a couch to cry on, a good book to read, or even a safe space to confront her deadly and deceptive soul mate.

What she saw this time was a large, high-ceilinged room empty except for four large bookcases, facing in toward one another, in a square arrangement, with enough space between them for a person to stand and turn. Hermione went over and stood in the center of the shelves. Each bookcase was made of a different material, with unique carvings along the tops and sides.

She started with the one in the northern position. It was an ancient oak, roughly hewn, with gently curving sides that mimicked the tree it had been made from, and deep shelves that looked like naturally occurring hollows in the wood. The symbols for earth were burned neatly into the grain over the top arch.

The eastern bookcase was, in a word, forbidding. It was shaped out of volcanic rock, a glossy obsidian. Though it appeared perfectly smooth, Hermione knew that obsidian could be sharpened to a razor’s edge, and the carved lines of the symbols for fire along the sides and top looked capable of reducing flesh to ribbons.

To the west stood a massive piece of coral that barely seemed sculpted at all. The sides and back were a pale pink lacy tree coral while the shelves were layered growths of rainbow-colored mushroom coral. It was delicate and substantial at the same time, with tiny blue finger coral growing to make the symbols for water on the front.

One more ninety-degree turn left her facing south, and the final bookcase. It was ethereal, formed mostly of clear blown glass, though tiny bubbles of blue, silver, and red seemed to float mid-air
along the sides and the shelves. Air symbols were created by the absence of glass, empty spaces in those shapes.

She nodded her head, murmuring to the room, “Yes, I understand. These shelves represent my elemental quartet. But what of us?”

At her words, the shelves went from empty to full, suddenly lined with books as well as various other items. Abraxas’s bookcase, for example, now had a quidditch broom hanging neatly from a hook on the side, a large leather-bound Malfoy family genealogy on the top shelf, and several volumes of muggle love poems, from Shakespeare to Elizabeth Barret Browning. Patience’s coral structure had few books, but the shelves over-flowed with magical plant and animal items, like unicorn hair, gillyweed, and dragon scales, as well as objects used for scrying and divination.

Her own shelves had so many books that they were stacked two or three deep, with smaller or thinner ones laid on top of the others. Taking out even a single book would probably cause the whole shelf to burst outwards since they were so tightly packed. She recognized the titles on several spines, and noted that the books were organized by content, then alphabetized by author. Every text was one that held special meaning to her, from toddler board books up to a well-worn copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. There was a thick book labeled ‘Happy Memories’ and it seemed to be a photo album. Hermione didn’t think she had the emotional strength to look it. Not at the moment.

Tom’s shelves appeared empty at first glance, but then she realized that the book bindings were carved of obsidian as well. How like him to obscure any bit of personality under a darkly attractive, smooth surface. Carefully, she pulled one out. The title page informed her it was *Oliver Twist*. Of course. There were several other novels about orphans rising from pain and obscurity to greatness, as well as many treatises on various subjects, from anatomy to chemistry to history, all dated and damaged. The shelf above was full of magical texts in every discipline Hermione had heard of. She inspected each one. The room was trying to give her insight into Tom, but she was having trouble finding it. It was common knowledge that Tom loved learning – it was probably the only thing he did love. Nothing felt new.

She sat cross-legged on the floor to look at the bottom shelf. There were only a few books down here, and they were all smaller, pushed back further, with darker spines that seemed to be physically attempting to disappear into the shadows. The first one was tattered inside, a child’s ABC primer, water-stained and possibly molding. Despite the strong musty smell, Hermione traced her fingers slowly over the embossed letters of what was probably Tom’s first book, likely stolen from a library or pulled out of the trash. She thought of her own first book, a tiny board book with a pop-up fluffy bunny in pristine condition even after years of being thumbed through.

If the room was trying to elicit her empathy for Tom’s past, it needn’t have tried so hard. She was keenly aware of how difficult his life had been, just as she had been aware of how awful it was for Harry to be anywhere near the Dursleys. The further she had delved into the past, the clearer the parallels between Tom and Harry had become. Those commonalities made her wish she could love
Tom in the way she loved Harry – deep and true, yes, but only as a brother. If she could manage that, maybe her heart wouldn’t ache so. But that was impossible, and she knew it.

There was an almost equally damaged copy of *The History of England* by Thomas Babbington Macauley. In Tom’s elegant script, notes filled the margins, making comments and sarcastic observations over disastrous battles or failed Parliamentary plans. Hermione couldn’t stop a small smile from forming – many of his thoughts were similar to ones she had in history classes. She sighed. He was so intelligent, and no one inspired and excited her mind the way Tom did. It would be more helpful if these shelves held a potion to dull her love so that she could get on with her life without all this pain. Surely this room could provide her with a manual to create such a concoction.

At that thought, two items appeared at her side on the tiled floor. One was a small paperback book, printed on cheap newsprint, titled *The Amazing World of Magic*. It was clearly muggle from the fact that the magician on the cover wore a tuxedo and was pulling a white rabbit from a hat. The book, which was really more a pamphlet, gave practical instructions, with crude illustrations, of how to use sleight of hand and misdirection to impress an audience. Tom Marvolo Riddle was printed neatly in dark ink across the inside cover, and several notations had been made on the pages. The second item was a vial of veritaserum, presented in the same fashion as the night she’d come with Tom.

She stared at the two objects. Hermione had always been excellent with solving mysteries and cracking codes. The room was giving her clues, and she needed to put them together. Tom’s hidden books, with no visible titles, the magic instructions, the serum….this room….had Tom not taken the veritaserum? Had he lied?

Since last spring, there had been a weight on Hermione’s heart, a great cement block pressing down on her chest, making every day feel like a struggle. The thought that Tom didn’t care for her, at all, that everything he’d said and done had been a lie to keep her magic close and available, had brought her more pain than the act of removing her parents’ memories, of leaving her whole world behind to travel to the past. Though at the time she’d believed she’d known what it was to be heartbroken when she’d seen Ron with Lavender, that had been only an annoying paper cut compared to the vivisection of having Tom carve out her still-beating heart.

A bit of that weight lifted as she considered the possibility of seeing Tom’s behavior in the Room that day and all he had done since in a different light. Could she dare to hope that he had only been doing what he did best – protecting himself from any hint of perceived betrayal and abandonment? A memory of Patience, insisting that Tom still loved them all flitted through her mind. Tom’s sparing of his father and grandparents and the gift of the earrings suddenly seemed less of a threat and more of a promise, a keeping of the bargain not to use unnecessary violence. His ‘plans’ for Abraxas were less about control and more a petty gesture of hitting back, of causing her pain for the blow she’d dealt him.
Hermione laid back on the floor, a pillow appearing to cushion her head. As she stared at the ceiling, it shifted, becoming a sky light. Sunlight poured in, and she closed her eyes, feeling the warmth on her face. This idea was not a certainty, and it was absolutely a risk. Maybe the Room was wrong, maybe she was crazy. Maybe she wanted Tom to love her so much that she was manifesting possible solutions that had no basis in reality. But if there was a chance the Room was right, that Tom had lied because he was hurting and mistrusting, then she owed it to them both to find out, to repair their bonds, both between them and the entire quartet.

“Proceed with caution, Hermione,” she murmured to herself, though her heart was already leaping ahead, and a smile so broad it hurt was forming on her face.

When Hermione came back to her mother’s quarters, only Narcissa was there. She looked up as Hermione entered and patted the seat beside her.

“You look like you’ve come to a more peaceful place,” her mother smiled.

Hermione sat down, nodding. “I’ve had a day full of realizations.”

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. “You, too? The stars must be aligned.”

“I think Tom lied about taking the veritaserum,” Hermione’s finger twisted at her curls, a nervous habit. Saying the thought out loud seemed dangerous.

She was relieved when her mother failed to scoff in disbelief. Instead, Narcissa met her eyes and said solemnly, “I agree. When I spoke to him on the return from Malfoy Manor, I had the same thought. He was struggling, because he was fighting his feelings. I don’t believe his actions today came only from anger. I think his main impulse, which he would never admit, was to keep you and Abraxas safe.”

Hermione laughed, somewhere between genuine and bitter. “So, I rushed headlong into a wedding for no reason. Tom was all talk. He was never going to allow Abraxas to marry someone else; he only wanted to torment me.”

Pulling her close, Narcissa hugged her. “The wedding wasn’t anymore binding than the elemental magic you performed almost two years ago. It simply feels bigger because of the increased risk of the Malfoys discovering what you’ve done. And, if I remember correctly from both of my
marriages, it is normal to feel a little overwhelmed right after the ceremony.”

“What exactly did Tom do to Evangeline? Do you know?” Hermione decided to side-step dealing with her bizarre post-wedding jitters and move to the more pressing concerns.

Narcissa recounted the scene in the Malfoy parlor, and Tom’s safeguards to keep tabs on Evangeline. “She won’t be pushing for Abraxas to be engaged for quite a while.”

Hermione watched her mother, a feeling of something unspoken hanging in the air. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“I promised him not to talk about it yet, Hermione, and we are trying to rebuild our trust,” Narcissa answered carefully.

“It’s fine,” Hermione shook her head. “I trust you, Mother, more than anyone else. If it comes to a point where I need to know, I have faith you’ll tell me.”

Narcissa tucked a curl behind Hermione’s ear, patting her cheek. “You know that I will. I was afraid this afternoon that all our plans were falling apart, but they aren’t. Tom is hurting, and he lashed out, but he is still planning a future with you, with our family, and your safety was his number one priority today, before any grasping of power, before concern for his own well-being. Tom may not be able to tell you that he loves you, but his actions are screaming it.”

“With Tom, there’s a fine line between love and possession,” Hermione’s fingers went to the locket under her shirt. She tapped it through the fabric. “I need to go slowly, to know this is real, not another trick. He’s already played sleight of hand with my heart once.”

“I know it isn’t easy to trust again after feeling betrayed,” Narcissa’s tone was serious. “It is so natural to build walls to protect yourself. But letting them down in the name of love, to give the chance to be loved in return, is worth the possibility of pain.”

Hermione stood and began pacing, full of nervous energy. “What do I say? I can’t just tell him that I know he lied. He’ll retreat further or get angry.”

“The two of you are soul mates,” her mother reminded her gently. “You don’t have to make a big speech – simply open up the bonds you’ve been keeping blocked. Let him feel your love. He’ll be
avoidant and skittish to begin with, but I’m confident he’ll come around eventually. Tom misses your love.”

“I want to believe that’s true, so much,” Hermione stared at the fireplace, the green stone reminding her of the Chamber. “Why does this feel more dangerous than traveling through time?”

Narcissa’s answer was given in a wistful tone, carrying wisdom clearly born of pain. “Because it’s easier to risk your life than your heart.”
Chapter Summary

A bunch of plots, explored from various points of view. It seems that everyone does want to rule the world - or, at least, two people. And they both have plenty of plans.

Chapter Notes

I know it has been forever, and I can only say that I struggled with inspiration, a busy work schedule, and depression. I have a bit of a break over the summer, so I'm hoping to advance this story significantly, and I have outlines for at least the next two chapters already in the works. I want to thank all the readers - every single one. Whether you comment or not, I feel a sense of love and loyalty to you all, and I will finish this story. Also, I'll have my very, very belated comments caught up by the end of the day.

Gawain Malfoy was in a remarkably good mood as he exited the floo in his study. His French mistress had been anxious to please him, and he did so love desperation. He was planning on chasing that lovely experience with Evangeline. There was nothing so delicious as his beautiful, powerless wife, stripped bare, trembling before him. As the head of one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Wizarding England, Gawain felt the rush of power on a daily basis, but Evangeline was special. Since the moment she had arrived at Hogwarts, everyone had wanted her. Evangeline Carrow was externally perfect, and Gawain had made sure to secure her as the mother of his child.

He had been terribly disappointed when he discovered her perfection was only skin-deep, her powers so weak she was almost useless as a witch, and Gawain was not a man who handled disappointment well. He had told her daily during her pregnancy that if she produced a squib that both she and the baby would disappear to make room for a second, improved Lady Malfoy and heir. When Abraxas had shown early spontaneous magic, Gawain had paid a fortune to have various powerful protective charms, as well as some extremely dark, sacrificial spells placed on his life and informed Evangeline that she would never carry another child – the risk of having a squib and tainting the Malfoy name was too great.

With his legacy secure, Gawain had turned to his mistresses for most physical pursuits. Mentally and physically torturing Evangeline was a special treat, usually two or three times a month, but never more than once a week. Over the years, he really had elevated the routine to an art. They didn’t have sex, hadn't for years, and the ancient Malfoy vows used in their wedding ceremony had
ensured that Evangeline would never stray without both pain and disfigurement. It amused him to see her look longingly at Tom Riddle, knowing that if she attempted to act on her desires, she’d be in for a nasty surprise.

Given that Evangeline rarely set foot in his study unless he had summoned her, Gawain momentarily froze at the sight of his wife sitting behind his desk, a beatific smile on her face. That smile was…dangerous, though he knew his wife was not.

“My dear Lady Malfoy,” his words were distracted by thoughts of how to remove that smile, of the sounds he would wring from her lovely throat. “You’ve anticipated my call, though you know the correct way to present yourself for accounting.”

Her lips curved upwards, widening the expression. “Gawain, I’ve come to the conclusion that your accounting skills are absolute rubbish, and I will no longer submit to them – or any other orders from you.”

The first feeling that flooded Gawain was not anger, but bewilderment. How in all of Merlin and Circe’s combined powers did his wife think this defiance would end? He didn’t need an excuse to punish her, but he would gladly accept one. He drew his wand from the custom loop on his dragonhide belt. “Well, it certainly seems that you are in dire need of a reminder of who controls every aspect of your life, including whether or not you live it.”

Evangeline stood, making no attempt to shield herself. “I’ve made the decision to put my trust in a higher power, Gawain.” She spread her arms wide, as if offering herself. “And I have great faith that HE, unlike you, will not disappoint me.”

His anger was in full force now, and Gawain had the perfect curse on the tip of his tongue, his hand already twisting in the movements needed to leave his wife screaming in that lovely way she had. But he suddenly couldn’t speak, his tongue and lips felt wrong – swollen and cottony. Evangeline hadn’t moved, but her eyes were fixed on a point beyond him. Gawain turned.

If having his wife defy him had been a shock, then the sight of Gellert Grindelwald leaning casually against his chaise was indescribable. The most wanted man in the wizarding world was sitting in his study – how bizarre. And that was the last thought Gawain had before everything went dark.

“This dungeon is a bit gauche, isn’t it?” A rich, soothing voice accented from a native German
tongue welcomed Gawain back to consciousness.

He opened his eyes, noting that even his eyelids ached. It took a few seconds of searching his very fuzzy mind and fighting to focus his eyes before he realized he was in the basement of Malfoy Manor, and that he was strapped to one of the antique muggle devices his grandfather had collected as curiosities.

“What self-respecting wizard even needs a torture chamber? I didn’t have one in my prison,” Grindelwald’s infectious smile, inviting and mischievous, was close to his face. “Do you know why? Because one can use the Imperious anywhere, or the Cruciatas, if truly necessary.”

Gawain tried to reply but encountered a gag in his mouth. It tasted of leather and sweat.

“Oh, don’t worry about answering. You are only here because I might need you in the near future, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up. I think your life expectancy has dropped dramatically, and I’ve gifted your lady wife with several ways to entertain you in the meantime,” one bright blue eye winked at him, and Grindelwald stepped back.

Evangeline’s beautiful face filled his vision and his other senses, too. She smelled of the French perfume he ordered for her, the perfume he’d commanded her to wear since they were betrothed. It was a finely tuned mix of spring flowers with base notes of sandalwood – fresh and light and tinged with sex. He had his mistress wear the same scent, and it was one he only associated with his own pleasure. Until now.

“Gellert is quite generous, and I think you’ll simply adore the magical modifications he’s made to your grandfather’s collection of torture implements,” she leaned in, and he thought for a confused moment that she was going to kiss him. Instead, he felt a tearing pain blossoming through his chest as her eyes filled with what he could only assume were tears of joy. In the reflection of her pupils, he saw himself and shuddered.

The Slytherin dungeon rooms had many secret passages and hidden alcoves. Though some snakes enjoyed sharing heat in a great tangle, many were solitary, requiring small, dark places to retreat to and think, and that was what Abraxas needed right now. He was flooded with the enormity of his actions, with the repercussions still to come, Tom’s private reaction not the least of them.

Even as he curled into the stone notch, the side of his flushed face pressed against the cool stone, he could feel Tom’s closeness, his impending arrival. Abraxas was a mix of anxious and angry.
He wanted more time with Hermione, a wedding night, with Patience there as well, with Tom how he had been before last spring, a joining that was joyous for the entire quartet, not simply a perfunctory exchange of power.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Tom’s voice was soft, sinuous, and his tone crept up Abraxas’s spine.

“I wasn’t hiding,” he replied, trying to keep any emotion out of his words.

“You’re angry,” now Tom sounded surprised.

Abraxas scoffed before he could stop himself. “You don’t own that emotion, even if you have perfected it.”

Tom’s long, slim fingers cupped Abraxas’s chin, angling his face away from the wall. Abraxas kept his eyes downcast, but Tom’s hiss, along with a sharp upward push, forced him to look into those icy blue eyes. “I’m wracking my brain to determine how it is that you believe you are the injured party in today’s events. By all measures, you’ve gotten exactly what you wanted.”

His anger prevented his survival instincts from kicking in. “You have no idea what I want,” he spat.

Rearing back as if struck, Tom was silent for at least twenty seconds. The moments ticked by, and Abraxas felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, along with Tom’s magic, which was pushing against his aggressively. The tension was making every muscle in his body clench, and he felt an unbearable need to do something, anything, to relieve it. He opened his mouth, no idea what he would say, when Tom pounced, both physically and magically, spinning Abraxas outwards so that his legs dangled over the alcove ledge and Tom was pressed snuggly between his thighs, Abraxas’s upper body pinned to the wall, Tom’s forehead against his own.

“Then allow me to correct my misconceptions. *Legilimens,*” Tom hissed lowly.

Abraxas didn’t fight him – there was no point, and he didn’t want to. Maybe it would do Tom some good to feel his hurt, to know how changed their relationship had become since Tom had stopped pretending to care, even in his limited way. He made himself as open as possible, let down any resistance and hid none of his anger.
To his shock, Tom kissed Abraxas’s brow, running a much gentler finger down the side of his cheekbone, along his jaw. “I’m not here to punish you.”

“That’s novel,” Abraxas muttered, his lips brushing Tom’s hand as it passed over his mouth.

Tom’s eyes darkened as he smiled. “Don’t pretend that you don’t enjoy it.”

Fighting a smile in return, Abraxas replied, “It depends on the context.” He marveled at how hard it was to be upset in Tom’s presence. He could nurse his hurts when alone, but as soon as Tom stepped into the same space, all Abraxas could feel was the rush of their combined power, of the desire between their bodies and minds, and that was an incredible feeling, even without any emotion from Tom.

“I have some important information,” Tom continued, though he didn’t pull back, and Abraxas felt Tom’s arousal along with his own. “About your parents.”

Cold fear swept through Abraxas. Neither Tom nor Lady Bonneau had shared the details of what had happened at Malfoy Manor other than to say that there was no immediate danger of discovery or retaliation over his marriage to Hermione. “What?”

“I know that you love me,” Tom pushed a pale strand of hair behind Abraxas’s ear. “Do you trust me to do what must be done to protect you, to protect Hermione, even if it means keeping something from her?”

“Something harmful?” Abraxas frowned. Trust was beside the point with Tom where his own safety was concerned – he’d already given himself fully to Tom. But he wouldn’t allow any more hurt to Hermione. He wondered if Tom truly understood how deeply she’d been wounded.

For the first time tonight, Tom’s eyes flashed with intense fury. “Why does everyone seem to think I would harm my soulmate?”

“Because you already have, irreparably,” Abraxas answered simply. “No matter how much love Patience and I give her, it will never fill the hole you’ve left in her.”

Tom drew a deep breath. As usual, his thoughts were shuttered from Abraxas, but his expression looked as close to pained regret as Abraxas had ever seen, which was extremely odd. “She will be
fine – I will see to it. But this is more pressing, and nothing that will hurt her.”

“Then why keep it secret at all?” Abraxas pushed back, more curious than ever as to what Tom was thinking.

“Many reasons, but mostly because she wouldn’t approve of outright assassination,” Tom drew out the last word with relish.

“My parents? Or Grindelwald?” Abraxas asked, not upset at either possible answer. Tom’s aggression was familiar, something he felt comfortable with.

“Why not all three?” Tom’s brow arched as his mouth curved. He leaned in and kissed Abraxas, his excitement spilling into action. Abraxas returned the gesture, opening his lips, his hands coming up to Tom’s neck, curling in slight depressions behind his ears, pulling him closer.

Tom broke away with a laugh. “I do love it when you are eager,” he grinned, “but this is a pressing matter. Magical plotting, then sex.”

“Plot away,” Abraxas replied breathlessly.

*Mid-October, 1943*

Abraxas stood in front of the fireplace in Lady Bonneau’s chamber, gathering his courage.

“It will be fine, Abraxas,” Narcissa’s calm voice and gentle hand on his shoulder did nothing to alleviate his worries. He wasn’t sure whether having Hermione’s mother on their side in this subterfuge was a good idea or not. “Chin up.”

“I’m not a damned Gryffindor,” he protested weakly. “I don’t do brave.”

Tom was on his other side, drawing his wand. “You are braver than you give yourself credit for, and much smarter than any Gryffindor,”
“Hermione was a Gryffindor once,” Abraxas muttered.

With exaggerated sigh, Tom snapped back, “She was the exception.”

“Abraxas, breathe,” Narcissa took his arms, turning him to face the two of them. “Tom and I have sorted this out. All you need to do is trust us.”

“Fine. Do it.” Abraxas closed his eyes. It went against his nature to trust, but Hermione and Patience, and, yes, even Tom, had changed him.

“You are being overly dramatic. It isn’t going to hurt, you know,” Tom put his wand to one side of Abraxas’s temple while Narcissa’s wand went to the other. “Neither of us will let anything happen to you, and you’ve already taken the potion, so if he casts the Imperius on you, I can override it.”

Abraxas felt a buzz of energy, a building pressure, but there was no pain, just an empty space as his thoughts seemed to drain away, replaced with cardboard cutouts of thoughts, silhouettes of emotions, constructed by the two brilliant minds before him from the strongest roots of both Occulmency and Legilimency. For a moment, he worried he would float away, unmoored with barely any content in his mind, but then the spell settled and Narcissa whispered, “Open your eyes.”

She handed him the floo powder. “You have an appointment to keep. Give your mother my regards,” her smile was predatory, but in a way that promised protection, an expression his own mother had never worn, and it was strangely reassuring in a way nothing else had been.

Abraxas straightened his back, threw the powder into the flames, stepping in as he clearly and strongly spoke the words, “Malfoy Manor.”

Grindelwald was finally on the verge of making headway in the Hogwarts direction. Over the last few weeks, he’d advanced his plans in several other ways. His loyal followers had been contacted, and some had already arrived, staying in the extensive guest quarters at Malfoy Manor, which was practically a palace. Gellert wasn’t dependent on luxury, but it was certainly nice to have it, especially after that hellhole Azkaban. He wore the face of Gawain most of the time, and though he found the man’s face unbearably smug, with that visage came nearly unlimited resources. It had amused him to walk the Ministry, chat with some of the very people who’d arrested him, and stroll
around Diagon Alley a free, respected man.

Evangeline was the perfect hostess and though they hadn’t known each other long, he did not doubt her loyalty. She was very intelligent, more so than her husband, and had only been hampered by her lack of magical ability and restricted access to finances. Grindelwald had given her everything she wanted – control of her own accounts, control of her household, and most importantly, control over her abusive husband. Evangeline was an evil little thing, and Gellert was quite amused by how inventively and viciously she was extracting vengeance from her husband on a daily basis. He had been forced to bring the man back to life twice before setting limits with her about the amount of damage she could do in a session.

She didn’t like the restrictions, but she accepted them, and gave Gellert anything and everything he wanted. The lack of physical attraction between them made her feel safe, he knew, and she considered him her Lord and Savior, her devotion bordering on religious. When he’d asked her about her son, she’d gladly told him all about the Malfoy heir and his circle of friends.

As soon as she’d mentioned the handsome and powerful Tom Riddle and the annoying Hermione Bonneau, Gellert had laughed internally at his excellent luck. Abraxas might very well be a member of their group, given his powerful social status. He’d requested that Evangeline order her son home for the weekend, so that he could meet him before the upcoming Samhain Ball at the end of the month. He had not shared the truth of what had happened at Nurmengard with anyone. As galling as it was for the wizarding world to assume that muggle bombs had destroyed his prison, the idea that he’d been bested by schoolchildren was still worse. Finding out more about them was at the top of his priorities, along with besting Hermione in order to regain mastery of the Elder Wand before confronting Albus. And if he could Imperius her properly this time, he’d take that little powerhouse, too. He had generals to replace, after all.

A brief session of legilimency with a barely conscious Gawain revealed that the father-son relationship was distant – very cordial on the surface, as with most Pureblooded families, but twisted by lack of connection and deep fear from extreme punishments at a young age. In Gawain’s mind, his son was all he should be – magically talented but not a prodigy, intelligent but not overly cunning, handsome, a star quidditch player, obedient, sexually knowledgeable, with a side piece that even Gawain lusted after – in other words, a son he was proud of but not threatened by.

Knowing that Gawain was not nearly as smart as he thought he was, Gellert took all this information with a grain of salt. Evangeline was suspicious of her son’s loyalty to the Pureblood traditions, and thought he was more devious than he let on, and Gellert was inclined to believe that her impressions were closer to the truth.

When the clock struck noon and Abraxas walked out of the fireplace, Gellert knew both parents had been fooled. The young man before him was an impressive physical specimen – an Apollo
come to life, tall, blonde and charismatic. But underneath that, he radiated a quiet magical power, a deeper well of magic than his parents gave him credit for.

“Father,” he nodded respectfully and gave a neutral smile, revealing a disarming dimple that added a boyish charm to his classically good looks. “To what do I owe the honor of a luncheon invitation outside a holiday?”

Though he spoke in a way that implied he was genuinely without a clue, Gellert saw intelligence and suspicion lurking behind his pale grey eyes. He’d learned his lesson about underestimating students.

“You know your mother,” he replied easily. “She must check and double check the guest list for the Samhain Ball. But I’ve convinced her to wait until after lunch. I believe she’s having it served in the solarium. Shall we?” He put out his arm, gesturing for Abraxas to lead the way.

He studied Abraxas from behind, silently casting to reveal any spells attached to the boy. As far as Gellert could tell, there were none other than the standard protections the Malfoy estate extended to its bloodline, and the dark, sacrificial spells that Gellert had discovered in Gawain’s memories. What that man had done to ensure his only son’s survival had made even Gellert flinch, and he was glad that he had no need to kill Abraxas, because doing so would be extremely difficult and messy, perhaps bordering on impossible. Torturing him was an option, though, if necessary, and Abraxas had no knowledge of the spells performed at his birth, as they left no detectable magical mark on him. Gellert intended to keep it that way – it would do no good for the boy to realize he was practically unkillable.

They settled down to a light luncheon, and Gellert was thankful once again that the Malfoy kitchens produced mostly French fare as he spread a bit of duck terrine on a slice of toast.

“How are your studies coming? Are you improving that grade in Arithmancy?” Gellert motioned for the house elf to pour more wine in his cup.

Abraxas nodded. “I’ve gotten some tutoring, and I think I’m already past an ‘A’.”

“Oh, is Marguerite helping you? Her mother told me she has an ‘E’ in most subjects,” Evangeline asked distractedly, not looking up from her many lists of party preparations.

“Yes,” Abraxas took a piece of cheese from the tray. “And Hermione helps as well. They both
make problems that require eighteen inches of parchment to calculate look simple.”

“How is Miss Bonneau? Still top of the class?” Gellert kept his tone level, but as soon as Abraxas met his gaze, he cast a silent *legilimens* and gently entered his mind.

Gellert had kept his expectations low, not knowing if Abraxas had any connection to the group of students who’d disrupted all his plans, not even sure how many there were in the group total. He was aware that there were at least five in the village in France, but likely many more at the prison.

The first thought he encountered in the Malfoy heir’s mind was one of Hermione, sitting at a table in the Hogwarts library, lecturing Abraxas on his lack of proper source citations. Gellert recognized the girl, pleased to know that he was right about the connection. There was nothing otherwise helpful. Abraxas’s brain was mostly occupied by either quidditch (a game Gellert had always thought asinine) or rolling around in multiple locations with a long-legged girl with waist-length pale hair matching his own shade. Ah, the half-blooded girlfriend Gawain wanted, too. Amusing, but not what Gellert had been hoping for. He dove a bit deeper and noted homoerotic tension with the handsome and dangerous Tom, which amused Gellert even more. Well, even if the boy wasn’t a participant, he was still a link to the two main members of the group and Gellert would exploit that.

“Of course. She’d never let her grades slip even by a fraction,” Abraxas shrugged, the perfect image of a teenager who only worried about grades when he absolutely had to.

“And your other friends?” Gellert kept the eye contact, delicately searching for anything he might have missed.

“Everyone is fine. Well, Marguerite and Sebastian are constantly getting sent owls about their wedding plans for the end of next year. Their parents want them married the week after graduation, which is awfully fast,” Abraxas said this lightly, but Gellert heard bitterness.

Evangeline looked up and pursed her lips. “Proper weddings between two ancient families take time and planning. I’m sure the Rosiers and the Lestranges are delighted to have the betrothal settled so far in advance. It simplifies matters.”

Abraxas smiled at his mother. Gellert noted it did not reach his eyes. He’d already realized the Malfoys were a family held together by blood and tradition, not any semblance of affection. “Once I’ve graduated and seen the world, I’ll be in a better position to choose a partner for life, Mother. I wouldn’t want to rush into anything.”
“You’ll be inviting your circle of friends to the Samhain ball, won’t you?” Gellert sensed this was a sore point, so he changed the subject.

“Yes, I gave Mother the list last week – all the usual names,” Abraxas frowned. “Even Patience. That won’t be a problem, will it?”

Evangeline opened her mouth to protest, but Gellert cut her off. “Patience is welcome.” He was determined to find out if that girl was the odd one his remaining soldiers had mentioned from France. None of the living ones had seen the girl, but if she was as brainless as rumored, perhaps she would simply give herself away. “I would hate to miss seeing her…outfit,” Gellert added, allowing his voice to dip into a lecherous tone. He was privy to Gawain’s unhealthy fantasies about his son’s mistress.

Abraxas didn’t bat an eye, but Gellert needn’t have been in his mind to note his flash of anger. “Excellent. Thank you, Father.”

“My pleasure, of course,” Gellert murmured honestly. It was a pleasure to know more than anyone else in the room, to be the one pulling the strings. And he never missed an opportunity to needle someone. It was simply too much fun.

The luncheon continued in a similar fashion, and when Gellert escorted Abraxas back to the study, he was quick and efficient in applying the Imperius. The curse was one of his specialties, and it always gave him a heady rush of power to cast it.

“You will watch your friends Tom, Hermione, and Patience carefully. You will keep a diary on what they say and do for the next few weeks. You will tell no one of this, and you will bring the diary to me when you come to the Samhain Ball,” Gellert ordered.

“Of course, Father,” Abraxas’s eyes had the far-away look so common in Imperious victims. It wouldn’t do to return the boy to Hogwarts like that. One never knew where Albus’s crooked nose was lurking.

“Excellent. Now, think of your little friend Patience and try not to earn detention with all those naughty things you two get up to,” Gellert smirked, imaging the trouble he’d have been in if he had gone to the same school as Albus.
Abraxas’s face flushed and his eyes cleared. Gellert poured floo powder in his hand. “Off you pop, son.”

As Abraxas disappeared into the flames, Gellert took a moment to congratulate himself on an afternoon well spent. His plans were coming together, and soon he’d have Wizarding society on its knees.
How Hermione Got Her Groove Back

Chapter Summary

Hermione's point of view as she sorts out her feelings after her realization in the Chamber of Secrets - she has a lot to process.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is slower, but necessary to understand what Hermione has been working through in her eventual acceptance of Tom. She has been hurting, and that can't be underestimated, but she's strong. I wanted to give her breathing room to feel doubt, and then come back to herself.

Hermione was old friends with Fear. She’d once read a study that found the more intelligent and creative a person, the more he or she was likely to imagine all possibilities, and therefore experience greater anxiousness, fear, and even madness than the general population. That had made perfect sense to her because she couldn’t remember a time before she had known a deep connection with the emotion. Hardly a day had gone by in her life without at least a few moments of racing pulse and thudding heart as she pondered how a particular situation might go tits up or worse. However, Hermione was rarely ruled by Fear because she had a strong sense of faith in her own abilities, a profound level of will power, and a complete identification with the role she had accepted – a person who would do anything to stop great evil and protect the innocent.

Fear, though, Hermione was learning, was crafty. Perhaps she could resist it or reason around it when she was afraid of a plan’s outcome, but since she’d visited the Room of Requirement and realized there was a chance Tom had been lying, that he did feel for her, Fear had taken up permanent residency in her heart. The only logical solution was to open up the floodgates of her emotional and mental connections with Tom, but Fear had her firmly in its grip. It was like a giant spider in her chest, spreading paralytic venom in the form of panicked questions: What if Tom hadn’t lied? What if she opened her heart again and got indifference in return? And even more hateful questions, rooted in self-loathing, supplied by her Inner Critic, who was happily collaborating with Fear: Why are you so stupid? Why are you so weak? Why do you even care if that monster loves you? Maybe it’s because you know you are a monster for loving him? What happened to your bright, shiny morals, Hermione GRANGER? You know the Weasley family would stone you to death at this point, don’t you? But it’s even worse to ponder just how much Harry would hate you now, isn’t it?

In the past, Hermione had been able to drown out doubts by coming up with brilliant plans, researching all the aspects, color-coding and indexing the notecards, then acting upon said plans.
Now, she was trapped by her own doubts, and her brain was hijacked by the Inner Critic, unwilling or unable to mount a rescue mission. She was so preoccupied, she’d actually left a question blank on her last Arithmancy quiz yesterday. She’d made no move to open the bonds with Tom; in fact, they were shut tighter than ever, Fear turning the vises in her mind to the point of pain.

She’d been avoiding Tom, avoiding Abraxas (your husband!, the nasty voice inside her head reminded her with sadistic glee), and even Patience. With the alarm on her wand, she was up before dawn every morning, taking a quick shower, then a walk to the one greenhouse Professor Beery always kept unlocked. It was much smaller than the other greenhouses, with the less favorable position of facing east. Professor Beery used it for mostly decorative, non-fussy plants, and the colors and smells reminded Hermione of the visits she had taken with her family to Kew Gardens. Hermione would sit on one of the stone benches, ask politely for a House elf to bring her a strong tea and a croissant, then quietly read until it was time for classes to begin. Once she’d made it through lessons, she would sit in the library through dinner, wait until about a half-hour before curfew, slip down to the kitchens for a small bite, then remain in the Ravenclaw common room until she was sure her roommates where asleep. Then, she’d repeat the cycle.

She was self-aware enough to recognize that she was struggling with depression. What was odd was that no one was calling her on this. Everyone had made a wide circle around her, and Hermione wasn’t sure why. She knew she was probably messing up, that she needed to take back control of her mind and heart, and she’d sort of expected that Patience would be there to prod and pull her, or that Abraxas would simply charm her out of her funk. Or maybe, if one believed in miracles, Tom would admit what he’d done and the fear would simply vanish, evaporate like mist in the sunlight. But none of those things happened, and Hermione was beginning to feel like a prisoner of her own making, with a clear view of the open cell door, but lacking the resolve to walk into freedom for fear it was yet another, more deadly, trap.

She stared at the beautiful purple crocus next to her face. If she didn’t face her fears and shake herself out of this, she would lose herself entirely. Maybe tomorrow she’d go to the normal breakfast in the Great Hall and reconnect. Baby steps.

On the Monday before the Samhain holiday weekend, three things happened at breakfast. Invitations etched in silver, green, and black dropped onto the plates of those lucky enough to be on the Malfoy family’s guest list, headlines in the Daily Prophet continued its reporting on the rash of robberies at several Diagon and Knockturn Alley stores, as well as a string of home invasions at wizarding villages all over Magical Britain that had been happening for weeks, and Hermione came into the Great Hall for the first time in over a fortnight.

Patience slid over to make room for her, humming gently, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Hermione sat down, staring at the Malfoy crest in front of her.
“I’m a bit surprised I got invited,” Felicity had already opened hers. “I thought Mama Malfoy was all about restricting Abraxas’s access to solely Pureblooded ladies in order to secure a match, especially now that he’s turned 17,” she glanced at Hermione and added, “though I’m just as surprised to see you at all. I’d thought my old friend Hermione had turned into a wraith that only haunts the classrooms these days.”

Josephine was on Hermione’s other side, and she placed a warm, soft hand over Hermione’s. “Don’t tease, Felicity. She’s clearly hurting,” she leaned in and whispered in Hermione’s ear, “Remember we love you, and we are here for you.”

“You’re probably hurting because you’ve lost nearly a bloody half-stone you didn’t have to spare, and you’re sitting on your arse bones,” Felicity muttered as she heaped a rasher of bacon and three slices of toast lathered in butter on Hermione’s plate. “You need to eat before you waste away. Tom is not worth your health!”

Patience added a ladle-full of scrambled eggs, then pulled a small vial out of her pocket and upended a green powder over them. “Powered kelp. It will replace all those vitamins you’ve been missing.”

Hermione fought back tears. Why in the world had she been avoiding those who clearly loved her? Why was she so afraid? She had never bowed to Fear before. She took a deep breath, resolving to get this under control, to work toward opening her heart to everyone again, including Tom.

As if he’d heard his name across the hall, Tom looked up, meeting her gaze. He frowned, deeply. She looked away and began quickly clearing her plate, to the delight of her worried roommates. She purposely did not try to find Abraxas. Hermione was filled with a growing sense of dread that she’d hurt him by not seeking him out after their vows, and she didn’t know how to make up for that. Honestly, she felt like she didn’t know anything anymore. Her innate sense of surety had vanished, buried in self-doubt. Reclaiming it would be a challenge.

Patience’s hand entwined in hers, and the edge of Hermione’s worry lessened. She leaned a tired head on Patience’s shoulder and let the conversation of what costumes to wear to the Malfoy ball flow around her.

On her way to Potions, just as she was passing the entrance to the Slytherin dorms, Hermione was pulled sideways, and found herself in the grip of her husband. He had brought her into the common room, but kept walking, and she followed silently, until they had reached a bedroom. She
had seen this room once before, in her first year, when Tom had been cursed. Little had changed, though six years of occupancy by four teenage boys had given it a more lived-in, slightly grungy patina. Quidditch gear, school books and parchment, a few assorted wizarding magazines of a salacious nature, as well as plenty of dirty laundry was thrown about, mostly on Corvus’s bed. She thought briefly of Sirius’s propensity for messiness and wondered if the trait were genetic.

Abraxas’s bed was clean and neatly made, and Hermione sat on it when he motioned to her. He didn’t join her, only paced back and forth, clearly working up the nerve to say something.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted, not willing to hurt him any further, especially not to his face. “I’ve been sad and scared and…. and not myself, but I love you. I love you so much, and I’m not sorry I married you,” her voice was fierce on those words. “Please don’t ever think that.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before he was kissing her. It wasn’t a kiss of lust or even longing – it was love, pure love, and she could never resist that. She returned the gesture with all the emotion she’d been tamping down for weeks, reaching out and finding her love enhanced and reflected back at it her – and it was beautiful.

“Hermione,” Abraxas pulled back just enough to breathe against her lips, his arms still holding her close. “I’ve pledged my everything to you. You don’t have to be sad or scared or not yourself alone. I’m here for you. Patience is here for you. Tom…” his voice trailed off.

Hermione closed her eyes and decided the blunt truth was best. All the pain with Tom had started with the keeping of secrets, no matter how good the reasons. Opening up to Abraxas was a start. “Tom is the problem. I….I think he lied, that he palmed the potion in the Room of Requirement. He does have feelings for me, I think,” she paused, clarifying, “As much as he can understand… but I’m not sure, and if I open up to him again, and he feels nothing… I don’t know if I can survive that.”

Abraxas lay back on the bed, bringing her with him. She snuggled into the side of him, warm, solid, smelling of oranges and chocolate. How she had missed this.

“If he could come close to loving anyone, it would be you, Hermione,” he kissed the top of her curls, his hands tight around her waist, turning to face her so that she was now partially on top of him. “There’s been something in his face lately, when you are mentioned, and it looks like pain. Like regret.”

“I’m so afraid of being wrong, though,” Hermione felt tears well up at the corners of her eyes, then spill out. “If I leap into this with no net…”
Abraxas looked up into her face, his grey eyes full of tender affection. He kissed the tracks of her tears, gently following the trails with his lips, his mouth moving over her cheekbones, and down to the hollow at her throat. “I will always be there to catch you, my Lady wife, if you’ll let me,” his voice was thick with a devotion that made her heart skip a beat.

Hermione knew they were married. She knew that she was in time different than the one she’d been raised in, and in a world that was, in many ways, still stuck somewhere between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But she’d also grown up reading Shakespeare and Austen and had a romantic heart, and when Abraxas called her his ‘Lady wife’ and pledged his loyalty, she thought she must be in a beautiful day dream, a lovely respite from the nightmare she’d been caught in lately.

She slid her hands up the sides of his face and brought their lips together in an enthusiastic reply which spread to their entire bodies at the rate of fiendfyre. It wasn’t long before they were fumbling with clothing and panting. Abraxas pulled her skirt up as she straddled him, his wide palms warm and calloused on the bare skin above her pants, his fingers dipping into the edge of the waistband, pushing downwards as her own fingers slid under his loosened shirt, gliding up his chest.

“As much as I hate to interrupt newlywed bliss,” a cold voice called from the doorway, “this is not the time nor place for a honeymoon.”

Hermione might as well have been thrown in the lake. She rolled off Abraxas and sat up, redoing the buttons on her cardigan with nervous fingers, trying not to think of Tom, trying not to feel his presence. Abraxas might have given her some reassurance, but she wasn’t ready to face the embodiment of her fear in the form of her soulmate, especially when she could tell he was already in a foul mood. She’d cast herself into the past, put her future at risk, everything she held dear, yet she was still scared of Tom’s rejection. A part of her hated herself for that, and another part wanted her to run into his arms, whether he felt anything or not. She couldn’t find any middle ground, and that left her paralyzed.

Abraxas smiled boldly, seemingly unbothered. “You could always join us.”

“I hardly think creating new memories is a good idea at the moment,” Tom replied cryptically, and Hermione narrowed her eyes as Abraxas’s smile fled his face, replaced with an attempt to hide worry.

They were keeping a secret, Hermione realized, and she felt lost all over again. How would they ever move forward into a place of trust if they were all keeping secrets? Yes, she was, too. And
she knew she was a hypocrite, but she right now, she was also a coward. She rose and left the
room without another word.

Tom stared at Abraxas, not speaking his anger. There was no need because the magic between
them was crackling, and Abraxas had never closed himself off from Tom. He knew exactly the
rage boiling below the surface.

“You really need to practice your restraint,” Tom hissed, crossing over to Abraxas and taking his
arm roughly. “If you cannot, I will be happy to give you some lessons.”

“And you said that you would fix things with Hermione, that she’d be fine,” Abraxas spat back,
pulling his arm away and running his hand over the place on the bed where Hermione had been
just a moment ago. “She doesn’t look fine! I could feel her hipbones beneath my fingers – she
looks ill!”

Tom agreed, but he wasn’t going to acknowledge that out loud. The first few days after
discovering Grindelwald’s plans had been spent making counterplans with Narcissa and Abraxas,
and the fact that Hermione was even more reserved than usual and avoided the whole extended
group had actually been helpful. There had been no need to lie to her, no need to actively hide
anything because she wasn’t around to see anything. Tom had been busy combing through daily
owls written by a semi-literate house elf, brewing more potions, and searching Slytherin’s journals
for any magical advantage he might use.

But the days turned into weeks, and he barely saw Hermione outside of class. She stopped coming
to meals and study group. Her magical aura contracted, along with her physical form. Tom had
noticed, of course, and he had been displeased, but he reasoned that if he could just handle the
situation with Grindelwald and remove the threat, then he could set about improving his
relationship with Hermione without any distractions.

“Abraxas, Narcissa and I have warned you that any interactions with Hermione or myself must be
limited. It is not easy to hide your memories when they are so entwined with emotion,” Tom
continued coolly, “and Grindelwald will be trying to sift through your thoughts in a week’s time.”

Tom could see that he wanted to argue but knew better. Abraxas’s worry for Hermione would
complicate matters. His soul mate was the ultimate complication - the one aspect of his existence
that Tom had never been able to control. That was probably why she terrified him so much.
He recognized the need to reassure his partner in crime (and so much more). “Look, if all goes to plan, we can kill Grindelwald after the party. It’s only a week’s time. Then we can sort out...” Tom hesitated, “everything else.”

“She’s suffering because of you,” Abraxas strode toward Tom, his expression grim. “And only you can make it better.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. What did Abraxas know? “Hermione’s suffering is mostly self-inflicted,” his voice took on the slow, hissing sounds of Parseltongue, a strange, deadly cadence. “But I already told you that I’d. Deal. With. It. I’d suggest you let the matter drop.”

Abraxas didn’t look nearly as intimidated as Tom would have liked. “Well, it’s a good thing you feel nothing, or that might frustrate you,” Abraxas said over his shoulder as he stormed out of the room, magically slamming the door behind him.

Tom took a deep breath and managed to keep his fire magic from setting all the bedding in the room alight. The destruction would have felt nice, but he didn’t have the time to fix it afterwards. He stood alone in the bedroom, pondering the last month. Patience knew he had lied, and there were signs that others around him, namely Narcissa and Abraxas, suspected. And yet, Hermione, the smartest of all, seemed to be lost, to have bought his lies completely.

Last Spring, he had wanted her to, and he had reveled in her pain, considering it justice. But now? She had looked like a shade, a wisp of herself. Tom had hardly even felt her magic. Her pain had twisted, turned to something deeper, more insidious. At Wool’s, there had been an older girl, on the verge of sixteen, who’d been in the place since birth. Tom had never bothered to learn her name, but she had become a cautionary tale and a ghost story when she’d gotten out of bed one night and thrown herself out the highest window. The look of despair, of sheer absence of hope, that had been on her face the last few days before she died, reminded Tom of the air around Hermione, and that was something that clearly needed to be dealt with.

The idea of weighing his pride against Hermione’s life or sanity was...troubling. Tom wanted her back, completely, wanted her the way she had been. He had to find a way to give in without giving in, a way to make her feel safe again without exposing his vulnerability. And didn’t that seem like an impossible task? Tom drew up and gritted his teeth. Impossible tasks were his specialty. He was brilliant, he was magical, and he would not let emotion defeat him – or his soul mate.

Hermione thought it was a good sign that she felt angry that Tom and Abraxas were keeping some
secret – she was feeling something. And it had been good to be with others at breakfast, to see their smiling faces and eat warm food. So, she swore off the greenhouse and spent the evening with her roommates, who were all pouring over costume catalogues and books on charmed disguises.

“The invitation said the theme is magical creatures,” Felicity floated a copy of Grimm’s Fairytales from the shelf by her bed. “Does that include muggle fairytales characters?”

Josephine’s dark eyebrows knit in confusion. “Fairy tails? I don’t think they have tails…or that muggles can see them.”

Hermione laughed, and it felt good, like she was settling back into a healthy place. “There’s some crossover, I think – just stick to the main categories.” She stroked a fine wisp of Patience’s hair that had fallen over her hand as Patience turned pages beside her. “I think Patience would make a fine mermaid.”

Patience smiled dreamily, entwining her fingers with Hermione’s, her hair still caught between their palms. “I’ll have to get some more kelp powder to dye my hair.”

“Don’t you dare actually dye your beautiful hair green!” Josephine gasped, knowing from six years’ experience that Patience would absolutely do such a thing. She dropped her book and rushed over to Hermione’s bed. “We can use a charm. I’ve been practicing.” She waved her wand, and Patience’s corn silk tresses were suddenly a lovely aqua and curled in wet-looking ringlets as well.

Felicity sat up quickly. “Oh, Josie! Amazing! Do me next! I want Veela hair,” she gestured excitedly at Patience. “So, basically what Patience’s hair normally looks like.”

Josephine narrowed her eyes at Felicity’s wild red curls and pursed her lips. “That could be more of a challenge.”

Hermione went over to Josephine and laid her hand over her friend’s wand hand, pushing extra magic at Josephine through the group bond. She rested her chin on Josephine’s shoulder. “Try now.”

“I felt that, too,” Felicity smiled, her eyes glittering. “We missed you, Hermione.”
Josephine’s voice was thick with emotion as she spoke the spell, and they all laughed delightedly when Felicity’s curls morphed into a straight, white blonde waterfall.

The proverbial dam had broken inside of Hermione, and she began to cry, huge, gulping sobs. Josephine turned to hold her, and Felicity and Patience joined them, all four witches lowering to the large rug in the center of the room. They sat, knees and elbows bumping, and held her as she let out months of heartbreak.

It was much later (along with the application of a few charms to reduce puffy eyes and runny noses) that Hermione collected herself, but she felt better than she had since last spring. Her three roommates supported her without judgment, and Hermione took a moment to recognize how rare that was. They had seen her in every possible mood, they had stood beside her in battle, had promised loyalty to her, to a greater cause. And she had taken on the responsibility to lead and protect them. Yes, Tom might be the leader of their group in name, but Hermione held everyone together. That had always been her job – to be the glue, the heart that pushed magic through the groups’ shared veins and arteries.

By pulling away in her pain, she had temporarily abdicated her responsibilities, and left the group disconnected, without focus. Without Hermione reminding him to delegate, Tom would remain secretive and try to do most tasks himself. And Grindelwald was still out there, doing Circe knew what. She thought of the headlines in that morning’s papers, suddenly revitalized.

“Grindelwald is behind these attacks,” she said loudly, sitting up straight. “I need copies of all the papers since he’s escaped. If he has gathered his followers here in England, it would make sense for him to do something at the night of the Malfoy ball, when so many powerful wizarding folk are gathered in one spot. We need a plan,” Hermione’s mind kicked into high gear. “We need at least three plans,” she corrected.

Josephine and Felicity shared knowing glances. “I think she’s back,” Felicity murmured, laughter in her voice.

“Good thing we’ve gotten our costumes sorted, because I have a feeling we won’t be doing much that isn’t research in the next few days,” Josephine replied dryly, accioing that day’s copy of The Daily Prophet from her bag and handing it to Hermione, who had already summoned a notebook and pen.

Patience twisted a lock of seaweed colored hair around her finger and sighed happily as she patted Hermione’s back. “There’s nothing like foiling evil, is there?”
Tom was surprised and annoyed when he learned that Hermione had called a group meeting in the Chamber for the Friday night before the Malfoy ball. He had wanted to use the main library room in the Chamber to prepare with Abraxas for their own plans for Grindelwald, but in the last week, Hermione had suddenly come back to life, metaphorically speaking, and was constantly calling group members over to her library table or passing notes in class (so unlike her that Tom could hardly believe his eyes), laying out plans and maps like a five star general.

If he weren’t so annoyed, Tom would have been proud. And, he had to admit, it was good to see her eyes alight with energy, her magic buzzing at the tips of her stray curls. Her spark, which had seemed extinguished, was back, stronger than ever. He could even feel her magic again, which was euphoric at any time she became excited with a new idea. Euphoric, but distracting. Most of Tom’s annoyance was because when he could feel Hermione, he couldn’t help but want her. Want to feel her completely again, want her emotions, want her love. He wondered if he had lost that love, and that thought chilled him in a way that felt too dangerous to fully explore. It was important to go to the meeting, though, because he needed to be aware of all her plans, of the places where her plans might complicate or interfere with his plans. Tom was tired of playing games, and he wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of ending Grindelwald tomorrow.

So, he led the Slytherins in the group to the Chamber entrance outside the greenhouses, and met the Ravenclaw ladies already in the library, having gained entry through the girls’ bathroom with Patience’s charmed bracelet. All the group was chattering with excitement, eager for the type of adventure they hadn’t experienced in so long. They had continued both their regular studies and those in the Chamber, and had gained proficiency with their elemental magic, helped and strengthened by the group bonding. From those bonds, Tom knew the majority of them were longing to do something about Grindelwald’s escape. Hermione’s declaration that Grindelwald was behind the recent attacks all over wizarding England had ratcheted that frustration unbearably. Tom wondered just how complicated Hermione’s plans would be, given that she only had partial information, with no knowledge yet where Grindelwald was, nor whose face he was currently wearing. The beauty of his plan with Narcissa and Abraxas was how simple it was. He would linger after the party, as he always did, being Abraxas’s best friend and frequent houseguest. Narcissa would remain just past the Malfoy ground boundaries, ready to apparate back if Tom sent her their shared signal for help. Abraxas would call his father into the study, where Tom would be hiding in the shadows. He would use the killing curse, then they would take Grindelwald’s body to the dungeons. Tom already had an idea of the scene he would stage there, using the bodies of Grindelwald, Gawain, and Evangeline, a way to permanently end the interference of the Malfoy parents and explain their deaths and Grindelwald’s in a neat little package.

Hermione had spelled a three-dimensional image of Malfoy Manor over the table and was explaining where she wanted various of members of the group to be during the celebrations. “Abraxas tells me that his mother has hired weather witches to extend a dome over the gardens and hedge mazes so that the main area of the party can take place under the full moon tomorrow, but
they will only have fairy lights and a central bonfire out there,” she pointed at the back of the map. “If Grindelwald does decide to show, his followers will likely try to enter through the gardens, where there will be more opportunity for blending into the shadows.”

“And if we do notice someone skulking in the hedges?” Vidhi asked. “What then? We can’t exactly say, ‘Pardon me, sir, are you secretly working for the most wanted man in the wizarding world?’”

Thad shook his head solemnly, sarcasm lost on him, as usual. “No, Vidhi. You definitely can’t do that.”

Marguerite snorted and muttered, “Pudding for brains” before speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear. “I’m sure Hermione has a better plan that, Thad. Don’t you?” she smiled at Hermione in that falsely sweet way she had.

Tom gritted his teeth and pushed back from the shelves he was leaning against, about to put a few snakes in their place, but Hermione did so first.

“I do,” Hermione confirmed, her tone strong and carrying, and Tom leaned back once more. He enjoyed watching her take charge over others. “We aren’t storming a castle this time, so fighting spells aren’t our focus. This time,” she added sternly, “we are gathering information and placing tracking devices. It isn’t as exciting, but it will lay the groundwork for hopefully catching Grindelwald, or at least finding out where he’s based in England.”

“Tracking devices?” Dolohov raised a brow in confusion, and his expression was mirrored by several others. Tom suspected Hermione was using a term out of time and place.

“Well, a combination of trace spells and other things,” Hermione corrected herself, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear as she spoke. Her magic was rising, and Tom drew a steady breath. She was so bloody beautiful when she got like this, her magic and intelligence on display.

“Since we’ll be off Hogwarts grounds and only some of us are of age, we can’t rely on trace spells performed at Malfoy Manor. Instead, I have pixie burrs combined with already bespelled crushed dragon egg shells. Both creatures have magical homing powers, and leave magical signatures wherever they go,” she explained, pointing to several vials of a fine powder speckled brown and white like sand on the table in front of her. “Once you’ve seen someone you suspect, just sprinkle this at their feet. It will absorb into their shoes, then into their feet, and we’ll be able to track where they go for about two weeks’ time.”
Corvus put his hand up. “How does that work?”

“What if we’re wrong? What if the person has nothing to do with Grindelwald?” Josephine asked at the same time.

“And what if they try to read our minds, or figure out our plans?” Sebastian frowned. “They could attack us right then and there.”

“Nothing. The powder isn’t harmful—it only gathers information,” Hermione reassured Josephine, then turned to Corvus. “And I’ve linked the spells on the powder to a map of England. We’ll be able to see where the people go, tracking their movements. If there is an attack in any of the places, especially with more than one signature there, we’ll know we are on the right path. Sebastian, that’s an excellent point, which is why we are having this conversation and all plans in the shared group space. Our secrets are protected by the privacy spells woven into our group bond. No one outside our group can pry these secrets from our minds.”

She looked at the group, and Tom saw her register their frustration. “I know it isn’t a perfect plan, but it’s a start, and it’s better than doing nothing,” she bit her lip, and Tom clenched his fists against his pants. Being so close was a challenge—he would give up several volumes of Slytherin’s diaries to bite those lips again himself. “We’ll find something to go on, I know it.”

The group murmured their agreement, and Hermione passed out the vials, along with notes she’d made on storing and using the powder, then drifted over to favorite spots in the library. Tom thought he should probably walk away. Hermione was no fool, and if he wasn’t careful, she would figure out he had plans of his own. She probably already knew that, or at least suspected. Yet, he remained rooted to the spot.

“Should I even give you one?” Hermione stood before him with an arched brow. “Or will that interfere with whatever secret agenda you and Abraxas are working on?”

Tom smiled, and it was genuine, a wide curve across his face. He appreciated her intelligence. She wouldn’t be his proper soul mate if she weren’t his match. But he really needed to keep one step ahead for just a day more. He put out a hand and took the vial from her, letting their fingers brush. It was...electric. “I’m happy to play my part,” he said without sarcasm. “Your plan is a solid one.”

Hermione didn’t pull away, as she had been doing for the last several months. She was looking
down at where their hands remained touching, staring as if caught in a trance. After a few seconds, she gave a slight shake of her head and dropped her hand. “Thank you,” she replied, also without sarcasm. “There’s not much to go on, but it’s something.”

It was the politest exchange they’d had since last spring, Tom realized, and it left him hungry for more. He wanted to pull her close, to smell her hair, and feel her form pressed against his, but he made no move. Not yet. “We’ll see how it plays out tomorrow. Do you have a costume?”

“It’s a surprise,” Hermione said slowly, obviously shocked he was making small talk. “You?”

Tom smirked and rolled his eyes. “Never. I don’t need to be any one other than myself. Dress robes will be sufficient.”

She didn’t hesitate to answer. “You will certainly be dashing in them, I’ve no doubt.”

At her words, there was something like a hairline crack along the wall in their bond keeping her feelings back, a warmth seeping through his entire body that hadn’t been there in much, much too long. He couldn’t stop himself from replying, “Save me a dance?”

“Of course,” Hermione smiled, and the warmth became a glow, spreading over him, bringing his magic to the surface like a rambunctious puppy, eager to play.

Tom needed to get away before he became positively giddy. This was ridiculous, and his reaction needed to be shut down immediately. He gave her a brief nod and strode out of the room. In the next twenty-four hours, he’d handle Grindelwald and the Malfoy parents. But the thought of then dealing with his feelings for Hermione was infinitely more terrifying.
The Past, Present, and Future Ladies Malfoy Have a Fatal Encounter.

Chapter Summary

Everyone has a plan for the Samhain Ball at Malfoy Manor, but no one knows the whole story. A chapter from several viewpoints, loaded with action and adventure. Spoiler: Not a single plan goes the way it should.

Chapter Notes

Dear Readers,
I've been working on this chapter for too long, and I made myself a little crazy over it. At one point, I had over 20K words of various plot twists, but I couldn't decide on which direction the story needed to go in order to come to a satisfying end. There are still a few more chapters to write, but this chapter clears the way for final stage of the story. I hope that will be able to pull it together in a timely fashion, but I can't make any promises, as Fall is a busy time for me. Please enjoy, and thank you so much for all the feedback, as well as your continued patience with my slow, slow writing process.

October 31, 1943 – Samhain

Albus Dumbledore had visited Malfoy Manor several times over the years, but he had never felt comfortable on its grounds. He was aware that he was in line to be Headmaster after Dippet retired, and it was his duty to attend social events and maintain cordial relationships with all the ‘important’ wizarding families who had members on the school board and in Ministry offices, so he never declined an invitation. Still, Malfoy Manor was one of the least pleasant places, topped only by Grimmauld Place and the Lestrange estate. Superficially, it was beautiful – practically a royal palace, but there was a deep reservoir of pain under the property, an energy that set him on edge.

He generally avoided interaction with the hosts, who seemed perfectly happy to return the favor. Gawain Malfoy hadn’t even been in the reception line when Albus had arrived, and Evangeline had given him a brief nod and a murmured, “So glad you could make it, Deputy Headmaster,” before turning to the next guest.

As he made his way to one of the many tables scattered throughout the garden, Albus sensed something off, something more than usual, but he couldn’t identify what exactly it was. The knowledge was just out of reach, and he instinctively gripped the Elder Wand just a bit tighter.
Hermione wouldn’t have thought it possible for a garden to become overheated on Halloween night, but the throng of guests, combined with the weather witches’ dome, had been quite effective in creating a humid, practically tropical atmosphere. She was regretting her elaborate, multi-layered costume after applying a third cooling charm. Apparently, the weather witches’ work rendered any other temperature spells useless. Though Felicity had braided her hair in an intricate style forming a net pattern over her entire head, several tendrils had escaped and plastered themselves in the fine sweat at her temples and the back of her neck.

A flutter in her stomach alerted her that Tom was nearby. She turned from the corner of the hedge maze and saw him striding toward her, his dress robes billowing behind him like the hero (or perhaps villain) from a gothic romance novel, too handsome to be real. Her reaction of anticipation and pleasure at the sight of him was like champagne bubbles in her stomach, warm, fizzy, and intoxicating. They had left Hogwarts separately, he with Abraxas, she with her mother and Galatea, so he hadn’t seen her costume until now, and she was pleased to note the mirroring look of pleasure in his eyes as he took her in.

“A phoenix, Dearest?” he drew out the words softly, one hand reaching to brush the bright gold, red, and orange feathers that covered her dress and formed two large, glowing wings behind her, a smirk on his face.

“Too much?” she asked lightly, trying to keep her heart from her throat. He hadn’t called her Dearest for so long.

“No,” Tom’s eyes darkened, his pupils widening as his fingers came down from the feathers and found the edge of her collarbone. “No,” he repeated. “A glorious, victorious bird in flaming Gryffindor colors? That suits you perfectly. Air and Fire – that’s us. Perhaps after this party, we’ll fly away together,” his voice trailed off softly, full of sensual promise.

“Flying while on fire sounds dangerous,” she teased, her collarbone reaching up to his fingers with each deep breath as though there were a magnet under it, pulling her toward his touch. A shift had occurred in their bond in the last day, and the buried desire they had been avoiding lay exposed between them. Even though he was keeping secrets, Hermione was gathering every bit of Gryffindor courage inside her and opening up despite the Fear. Letting herself feel was such a welcome relief, and if Tom felt something, too, then there was room for Hope to counter her Fear.

Tom moved quickly, one arm now wrapped around her waist, bringing their bodies flush. Even through their clothes, the extended contact might as well have been fire, flaring bright and fierce between them. “Come now, Dearest,” he whispered in her ear, his lips and breath sending a thousand ripples of sensation across her face and neck, “we both know that danger excites you
almost as much as I do.’”

It only took a slight turn of her face to catch him in a kiss. Fortune favored the bold, after all, and she was all about her Gryffindor nature tonight. The world dropped away, the party, the music – there was nothing except Tom, the feel of his lips, his hands, and his magic flowing right through her skin and into the deepest parts of her. No weather witch could have created such a perfectly sealed micro-environment. Hermione reveled in the embrace longer than she should have, but finally pulled back. Tom did so almost at the same time.

They stared at one another, breathing heavily, casting glances around. They did not need to attract attention tonight. “I need to get back on task,” Hermione was happy to note that no one seemed to have noticed them, half in the shadows of the hedge maze. “I’ve already put the powder on three men, but we need to cast a wide net if we are going to see results of any kind.”

“You’re right,” he agreed quickly, and Hermione knew he was as shaken as she was. Too much of the bond too quickly was a recipe for Tom to retreat, and she needed the space to collect her thoughts as well.

“I think I’ll try the courtyard,” he went to leave, then suddenly lifted her hand, flipped it, and kissed the inside of her wrist. “We will continue this conversation later, Dearest.”

She watched him walk away, going through every technique she knew for mental focus. “Get a grip on yourself, Hermione,” she hissed under her breath. None of them were successful, so she decided a change of scenery was needed, and maybe a small glass of fire whiskey.

Heading to one of the many refreshment tables, she saw Gawain Malfoy, holding a conversation with Patience. Her hackles were up instantly, knowing that the current Lord Malfoy was lascivious wretch with a sadistic streak a mile wide. Patience could hold her own, of course, but Hermione was annoyed at the obvious lust on his face. Not that she didn’t see the appeal. Her water mate was as ethereal as ever, with a long, tight gown charmed to look like glimmering scales, her skin tinged a pale grey-green and sprinkled with tiny specks of glitter that shone in the fairy lights, her kelp green hair falling in ringlets down to her waist, magically retaining the look of having just stepped out of the ocean.

She was on a course to intercept that pair when her elbow met with an urgent tug, the unexpected pull sending her backwards against the side of the house. Looking down, her gaze found a house elf with an expression more nervous and self-loathing than she had ever seen on Dobby’s face. Every instinct in Hermione’s body told her something was clearly terribly wrong.
Crouching to try to meet the elf’s eyes, which were darting about furiously, she asked in a low voice, “What is it? How can I help?”

“Not here,” the elf said lowly. “Please, Mistress, comes inside.”

Hermione nodded her agreement and followed the elf, staying close to the line of the house, and ducking into the glass door the elf opened with a wave of its long, spindly fingers. It was only after Hermione had stepped into an otherwise empty solarium that she registered what the elf had said.

“Why did you call me Mistress?” she whispered, trying to keep the horror from her voice.

The elf’s large eyes reflected the sparse light filtering in from the garden. “You is the newest Lady Malfoy, and the Master needs you. Only you cans help.”

Gellert liked to find amusement in life. What good was being alive and full of magic if one didn’t enjoy himself? His followers were enjoying themselves, too. Letting them run wild over England not only inspired terror, it also allowed his men to vent their frustrations at losing ground in Europe and being cooped up in the countryside. The past month had been an extended joy ride, but now it was time to get serious. Evangeline’s elegant party preparations were the perfect cover for the first phase of his new plan. Abraxas’s friends were coming straight to him for questioning, and the manor grounds were crawling with Ministry officials, Hogwarts teachers, and the heads of wealthy wizarding families, ready to become a part of his future designs, whether they were willing or not.

He had avoided Albus, naturally. The man had shown up in the ridiculous costume of a puffskein, his robes full and fluffy, even his beard transfigured to look like a ball of tan fur. It was a wonder the man could move in that get up. But even if his soul mate loved to play the fool as far as outward appearance was concerned, Gellert knew better than to get too close. Albus might very well see through him. He stayed away from Hermione Bonneau and Tom Riddle for the same reasons. He doubted they would recognize him beneath his excellent disguise (he was perhaps the best in the world at transfiguration), but he wasn’t going to take that chance. Those two were powerful, and he was on his guard.

Instead, he casually strolled through the gardens, finding all the friends on Abraxas’s list, talking with them briefly, dipping into their minds for secrets. Disappointingly, there seemed nothing to find. They were typical teenagers, sneaking glasses of forbidden drinks, disappearing into dark corners of the gardens and hedge maze in pairs. He’d felt the rising magic from Hermione and Tom a few moments ago, but they’d since split apart, and he was inclined to believe that was more
a flare of lust than any formal plotting.

Gellert’s current focus was on the fascinating object of Abraxas’s (and the real Gawain’s) lust, Miss Patience Foster, with the goal of determining whether she was part of Hermione and Tom’s little gang of freedom fighters. Of all the elaborate costumes he’d seen tonight, hers was the most convincing as far as portraying an actual creature. Other than her height and the fact she was out of water, Gellert would have believed he was staring at a mermaid. When he first greeted her, the girl had replied in honest-to-Merlin *Mermish*, a screeching sound that, though brief, had rung in his ears for a full ten seconds.

“I didn’t know you spoke Mermish,” he said, after his ears cleared. Despite the temporary discomfort, he was amused. There was a depth about this girl that held his attention, something below the surface that he was determined to lure out.

Her sea-green eyes looked through him, and for a moment, Gellert thought she was seeing more than she should, but then her expression took on a far-away, glazed air. “I’ve always known it,” she smiled vacantly. “It sounds better underwater.”

“Well, your water magic alignment makes that easier, I’m sure, but it is still a rare talent,” he praised. Gellert was good at putting people at ease by telling them exactly what they wanted to hear.

“Are there any eclairs here?” she asked, and Gellert was lost for a moment at the abrupt change of topic. His eyes swept the table of food.

“No, I don’t think so,” he picked up a small platter of chocolates, molded into the shapes of all sorts of magical creatures like unicorns, dragons, and hippogriffs. “Try one of these. Lady Malfoy had them imported from Switzerland.”

Patience’s teeth, transfigured to be thin and sharp like those of merfolk, tugged at her full, grey lower lip. “No thestrals?” Her hand hovered over the tray, then chose a hippogriff.

“Probably not the best creature for a party. And not many people would recognize one, either,” Gellert arched a brow. “I take it you’ve seen Death?”

“Death is very misunderstood,” she took another chocolate, her teeth biting into it with a feral relish, her eyes locked on his, as if daring him to read her mind.
Gellert’s ego was prickling at the edges as he accepted the challenge. But once he had silently entered her thoughts, he wasn’t sure if that had been the right choice. If he had tried performing legilimency on a true mermaid, he doubted the results would have been any less garbled. The girl’s mind didn’t feel entirely human and was only fragments of nonsensical images floating just out of reach or understanding. He did sense that, like Hermione, Tom, and perhaps Abraxas, this girl was special and contained more magic than most wizarding folk channeled in their entire lives. Even if he couldn’t prove it, Gellert simply knew that those four were connected. He pulled back from her mind as a fascinating thought hit him.

In Nurmenguard, Hermione had used air magic, while Tom had displayed fire magic. He knew Abraxas had earth-based magic even if he hadn’t seen it in action, and Patience was undoubtedly the strongest water magic he’d ever felt. There were soul mate ties between Hermione and Tom, and at least an established relationship between Abraxas and Patience, with friendship between all of them. What if these precocious students had formed an elemental quartet bond?

He laughed out loud at the thought of their audacity, and Patience joined in. Gellert really wasn’t sure what to make of her, but he thought collecting and controlling all four of them would be immensely enjoyable. He already had Abraxas under the Imperius, and as long as he didn’t order Tom or Hermione to hurt one another, he thought he could hold them under that spell as well. This one, though, with her unique mind, might be the wild card. Gellert was going to need to keep an eye on her.

Evangeline watched the crowd from the terrace balcony. The party was successful, as expected, but Evangeline was having a truly good time for once. Her husband was three-quarters dead and chained in the dungeons, her guests were lining up to compliment her, she had a powerful wizard as protector, and she’d noticed her son hadn’t come close to either of those annoying Ravenclaw girls the entire night. He had been chatting with mostly adults, making contacts for a future at the Ministry, she assumed, and she was happy to see he was thinking of his future.

Even if Gawain would soon be gone, Evangeline still had plans for Abraxas, and at the top of that list was helping him make a proper match. She was pondering which of the mothers of prospective brides to have to tea next week when she saw movement along the side of the house, beyond the bounds of where the party was being held. Someone had just snuck into her solarium, past the wards of the house, set for all areas that had not been made public for the party. Years of not being able to deal with slights had made her extremely sensitive to them, and now, she could do something. Without Gawain’s constant oversight, she was free to do so many things.

If it was one of Gellert’s men, she’d refer him to his boss for punishment. If it were a wayward
guest, she’d send them back to the garden and call the house elves to double-check the wards. Was it possible they were weakening due to Gawain’s poor health? But a part of her hoped that shadowy figure had been Tom Riddle. As a frequent guest who stayed for weeks at a time, he was allowed in the wards, and would be able to go almost anywhere in the house.

Evangeline had not found pleasure in her marriage, and did not generally desire men, but she wanted Tom Riddle with a hunger she could hardly stand. With Gawain safely in chains, she thought it might be time to finally act on her impulses. Only a month past, Tom had come to her home and indicated how much he wanted her, and though her memory of that afternoon was hazy (probably from Gellert’s prolonged legilimency that same day), she knew he had touched her, stroked her neck and hands. Tonight, when he’d arrived, he had kissed her hand, holding it longer than was strictly polite. Her entire body had buzzed with the thought that she might finally be able to take what she wanted. And, if the opportunity came, she would seize him.

Narcissa had a talent for hiding her nerves as well as she obscured her thoughts. She wore a calm, non-committal smile as she walked the edges of the party in her simple (though quite costly and custom-molded) dragon mask and dress transfigured to be form-fitting layers of the overlapping, multi-colored scales of a Hungarian Horntail. She’d also included gauntlets of scales that extended over the tips of her fingers in blunted, black claws. Galatea had barely let her leave her apartment at Hogwarts.

“Promise me you’ll keep this costume,” Galatea had insisted, sighing as her eyes swept Narcissa’s form from the delicate horns over her temples to the pointed tip of the tail that formed the train of her dress. “I’ve always wanted to tame a dragon.”

“Oh, you think you can tame me?” Narcissa had laughed in return, uncharacteristically playful for a moment, Galatea’s lighthearted affection infectious.

“Not in a million years,” Galatea shook her head, her gaze becoming reverent. “But I’d love every second of the attempt,” she had begun maneuvering Narcissa back to the bedroom, her hands a warm, insistent push at her wife’s leather-covered hips.

After several breathless kisses and promises to wear the costume for the duration of an upcoming holiday weekend, Narcissa had managed to coax her wife to head to the party. Honestly, if she didn’t need to keep an eye on Tom and Abraxas, she wouldn’t have attended. The days of feeling pressure to put on a show for society were gone for Narcissa, and she had discovered that she preferred quiet nights in or small gatherings of fellow co-workers and friends at The Three Broomsticks, rather than the stiff, formal functions that passed as Pureblood parties.
Once they’d arrived, Galatea had settled at a table with several friends from Hogwarts and the Ministry, content to sit and talk with friends. Narcissa knew her wife could feel her nervous energy through their soul mate bond, but she hadn’t asked any questions. Galatea trusted her to ask for help if she needed it. Tom might know about the time travel, but Hermione and Narcissa’s foreknowledge was still dangerous and open to legal punishment, and Galatea kept away from any conversations or plans that dealt with purposely affecting the timeline.

Tonight, that was for the best, especially when she was planning an execution. Galatea was too good-hearted to sanction such an action. Like her best friend (and Narcissa still couldn’t believe that her soul mate’s best friend was Albus Dumbledore – what were the odds?), Galatea would believe in arresting him, imprisoning him, having a trial – even if that was precisely where everything had gone wrong before. And killing Gellert quickly was a mercy far greater than the eventual Dementor’s Kiss that awaited him. Narcissa had spent too much of her life trying to manage the fallout from the whims of dark wizards who thought they deserved to rule the world.

She agreed with Aristotle that nature abhorred a vacuum, and she had no illusions that ridding the world of one dark wizard would bring anything but a temporary peace, but she needed that respite. There would be time to relax, to replenish, maybe even a full decade or two, and when the next threat arose, she would have the family she’d built at her side.

Narcissa made the rounds, mentally mapping the gardens and the guests. The layout of the physical manor was the same, but the design of the gardens and hedge mazes were quite different, her mother-in-law having made extensive changes during her tenure as the Lady Malfoy. There was Gellert, wearing the face she’d known as her grandfather-in-law, in the central area, talking to Patience. That was a disaster waiting to happen, but he wasn’t going to do anything in the middle of the party.

She witnessed the subtle applications of powder from Tom and Hermione’s group members on several guests she’d guessed were likely Grindelwald’s followers. Hermione’s plan was very clever and would still be useful in tracking down any of those followers who didn’t immediately scatter after the death of their leader, but Narcissa had no need to keep an eye on those actions. Abraxas was doing exactly what they’d planned – being the perfect son of the hosts, raising no suspicions. He danced with female guests young and old, circulated through the crowds, smiling and laughing. Evangeline, in her golden lacquered Sphinx costume and heavily khol-lined eyes, smiled at him from the balcony where she was holding court with her many admirers.

Narcissa maintained a line of sight on the current Lady Malfoy as well, and she’d noted how often Evangeline’s gaze strayed across the gardens to wherever Tom happened to be. It was a relief to know that Tom’s skills at obliviation and his Imperius-like potion had kept Evangeline besotted, unaware of that he knew all her secrets. Tom hadn’t said so explicitly, but Narcissa doubted the woman would survive the night. She’d aligned herself with Grindelwald and was a danger to Abraxas’s future, so Narcissa couldn’t really bring herself to feel too badly about that possibility.
Evangeline’s striped headdress turned, watching something along the house. In a moment, she had descended the stairs and headed into the manor. Narcissa didn’t know what she’d seen, but something told her to follow. She skirted the foliage draped over the hedges and into the darker areas where the fairy lights offered little illumination, along the curved barrier of the weather witch dome to a side entrance Evangeline had entered. Quietly, murmuring spells of sound suppression, she turned the handle of the double-paned French door of the solarium and slid inside, thankful once again that the Malfoy wards instinctively knew her, even out of time.

The room was dark, though the floor to ceiling windows let in enough of the party’s light to see a dim path to the hallway. Evangeline was hurrying toward it, already turning the corner down toward the main part of the house. Narcissa drew her wand, keeping it ready, and followed silently.

Gellert heard the chiming of his charmed pocket watch, announcing that midnight was only a few minutes away. He looked around for Evangeline, but she was nowhere to be seen. That was fine, since this was part of his plan he hadn’t shared with her anyways. It was time to bring the English Wizarding community a bit more under control. Strengthening a standard sleeping potion had been simple, and once the entire party was unconscious, it would be the work of less than an hour to sort the guests according to their positions and usefulness, then either put them under the Imperius, incarcerate them in the Malfoy dungeons, or Avada them. He signaled to his men who were disguised as waiters to begin preparations and mounted the stairs overlooking the gardens, a glass in his hand. Performing the sonorous charm, he tapped his wand to his glass as well to gather everyone’s attention.

“My dear guests,” he smiled, glancing over the crowd, which moved closer in a semi-circle at the base of the terrace stairs. “As you know, Samhain was a sacred night for our ancestors, for all magical folk. On this night, all boundaries are loosened. Past, present, and future co-exist, as do the living and the dead, and even the yet to be born. In honor of our superior magical lineage, I offer a private mead made from apple blossom honey, harvested in a fairy grove in Ireland, aged perfectly in my own cellars. Apples are traditionally offered to spirits who have lost their way on Samhain. Please, take a glass from the trays coming around now, and on the stroke of midnight, we will toast to the beauty of magical transcendence, and perhaps lead home some friendly ghosts.”

Tom watched Gellert’s speech with a rising sense of foreboding. The man was too clever, too smooth, and Tom was sure there was a hidden meaning to this speech. Despite keeping tabs on Grindelwald through Evangeline, it appeared he hadn’t shared all his plans for this gathering with her. Evangeline herself was not around, nor was Hermione or Narcissa, which was another cause for concern. Tom hated the idea he had missed something, and likely something vital, at that.
He felt a cool, calming presence and knew Patience was by his side. “I don’t think we should drink this,” she sniffed at the glass of mead. “It smells like subjugation.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Tom replied, distracted as he looked around the garden, using the group bond to reach out to the others, making a mental map of where they were. Hermione was not in the gardens, so she wasn’t of immediate concern. “We need to tell the others not to join the toast.”

Patience nodded. “And the Hogwarts staff.”

“Fine,” Tom sighed, knowing she was right. He wasn’t normally a team player, but whatever Grindelwald had planned couldn’t be in anyone’s best interests other than his own. Random adults or Ministry officials wouldn’t listen to them, but the Hogwarts staff might. “You start with Galatea, and I’ll find Abraxas and the rest of the group,” he put out a hand, gripping her greenish-grey wrist. “Don’t call attention to yourself. We don’t want him to know we are on to his plan.”

“I love you, too, Tom,” she smiled as she turned away.

Years of friendship had given Galatea and Albus the ability to sense one another’s moods, and both of them knew the other was uneasy, though neither was speaking of it.

Galatea stared down at the amber liquid, thicker than wine, its deep, sweet perfume filling her nose. She silently performed a revealing spell over the surface, watching it turn a noticeably different yellow. “This wine is spelled,” she began, but saw that Albus’s glass was the same color as her own.

He nodded gravely. “Yes, it is.”

“I don’t think it’s poisoned, but it will definitely do something,” Galatea went through a mental list of spells to more specifically reveal the contents, but knew that without a potion’s lab, that was probably a lost cause.

“Oh, so you both know,” Patience had appeared at Galatea’s side, a wide, pointy grin on her face. “Excellent.”
The professors raised their eyebrows and turned their focus to the student in front of them. “Patience, dear, what do you know?” Galatea’s tone was quiet but insistent.

She opened her mouth and produced a shrieking sound that almost made Galatea drop her glass. Albus didn’t wince at all, but listened carefully, giving her a short answer in the same shrill tones. Patience nodded and left.

“Miss Foster informs me that Gawain Malfoy is actually Gellert Grindelwald, though she has no idea what is in the mead besides the fact that it is debilitating, but not deadly,” Albus’s expression was weary, that of a man with a long fight behind him, and an even longer one ahead.

Galatea pieced together the recent quietness of her wife, a subtle reticence. “Narcissa knows, too.”

“I imagine Mr. Riddle and Miss Bonneau know as well,” Albus watched the waiters moving through the crowd.

“No, I don’t think Hermione knows,” Galatea shook her head. “Something’s off…I don’t see Hermione or Narcissa.”

“Lady Malfoy is missing also,” he noted. “I sent Patience to fetch the rest of her group.”

“And here they are,” Galatea motioned at the collection of Slytherins and her three Ravenclaws who had come to stand before them. She met Tom’s eyes. He stood, his magical energy palpably coiled around him, reminding her of a wild animal about to strike.

Albus put a hand on his shoulder. Galatea marveled at his bravery. “We aren’t interested in your secrets right now, Mr. Riddle. There are about three hundred lives at stake, and time is short. For a young man with his eye on glory, now is a perfect time to be a hero.”

Tom’s initial glare was murderous, but he quickly calmed as he assessed the situation. “Do you have a plan?”

“I think a mass evaporation spell should do the trick. Professor Merrythought and I will get the other professors to assist, but the more spellcasters, the stronger the spell. As soon as Lord Malfoy,” he said the name with a tartness that was not lost on Tom, “raises his glass, we will all perform the spell. For maximum effectiveness, the casters should be spread out evenly throughout
the garden. Take spots at the perimeter and simply wait for the signal.”

“And then?” Tom narrowed his eyes.

“Then, I and my fellow professors, along with the Ministry officials we’ve informed will arrest Gellert Grindelwald, and your plans will have been spoiled, but you won’t be in Azkaban, so I imagine you should consider yourself quite fortunate,” the Deputy Headmaster answered dryly.

Tom began to speak, but Galatea frowned, putting her hand out in a silencing gesture. “Now is not the time. Disperse around the garden, quickly and quietly.”

It was difficult to remain squeamish after having seen deadly and bloody battle, been a nurse to war wounds, and especially after having been tortured. Hermione had always had a strong stomach and had never skipped the pages in her parents’ dentistry books that detailed extractions, root canals, and surgery with the jaw or nasal bone involved. She’d had blood on her hands – her own blood, blood of those she was trying to save, and blood of those she’d been fighting to defeat. But even with all those experiences, she still felt nausea rise at the sight of what remained of Gawain Malfoy hanging from rusted chains in the dungeon.

“See, Mistress? You must helps,” Rupple, the elf who’d apparated her straight to the dungeon, was crying in the background, which didn’t help Hermione’s focus.

Rupple hadn’t paused for an instant before bringing her here, and apparating with an elf was more disorienting than apparating alone. Her thoughts were coming so fast, she leaned against the stone wall beside her, light-headed. There was too much to process, so many possibilities for various dangers, and she needed to compartmentalize immediately. She felt a gentle pull from Tom on the group bond, but she ignored it.

“Triage, Hermione,” she told herself, grabbing her beaded purse from her side. “Accio…” she paused. What to use first? The man was closer to death than life by a significant margin, and she was only a passable healer at best. “Dreamless sleep,” she finished, and carefully poured the liquid from the vial down Gawain’s bloodied and torn lips, then released the chains and lowered him gently to the ground.

His chest, which resembled raw hamburger gone bad in some places and was filled with infected
sores reminiscent of a plague victim in others, stopped struggling to breathe quite so much and his entire body seemed to relax. Hermione knew what it meant to be the focus of rage-filled hatred, but Gawain’s tormentor had gone further, aiming for obliteration.

Gawain’s pale hair was caked onto his face in red and white streaks, and his entire body was covered in blood and Circe knew what else. She cast several cleansing spells, and the results made the damage to his body clearer, including significant amounts of missing tissue. Even if she had been the best magical healer with every rare potion on hand, or a world-class surgeon in her own time with a fully equipped hospital at her disposal, Gawain Malfoy was beyond any help – magical or muggle. Her quick scan of spells on him showed him under a type of stasis, and that was likely the only thing keeping him alive, a type of magical life support, though it did nothing to dull his pain.

“Rupple,” she touched the crying elf’s arm gently. “I can’t save him. No one can. We can only try to make him comfortable. Who did this?”

The elf began banging her head into the wall with great force. “Stop!” Hermione yelled desperately, pulling the elf back from the jagged stone.

At her words, Rupple immediately stopped and straightened. Hermione realized her marriage bond had been recognized by all of the Malfoy magic, including its estate wards and its connection to family house elves. As much as she hated to use power over a house elf, she could only deal with so many distractions at a time. “I forbid you to hurt yourself, Rupple,” she ordered.

The only reason the elf would try to hurt herself would be because someone in the family either hurt Gawain or personally sanctioned the torture. And anyone entering the dungeon would have needed a Malfoy to accompany him or her or seriously advanced magic well beyond the average capability. Evangeline was the only other family member at the manor. She could have been under the Imperius, but Hermione didn’t think so. Someone who hated Gawain had taken great pleasure in hurting him, and even in Grindelwald’s prison, Hermione hadn’t seen evidence of torture like this.

Because it was undoubtedly Gellert Grindelwald who was wearing Gawain’s unblemished face and charming the partygoers upstairs, she realized. He had moved more quickly and decisively than Hermione had guessed, and he had Evangeline at his side, most likely willingly. Dealing with him was vital, but Hermione could hardly leave Gawain in his current condition. He was a horrible person, but he was still a person in an extreme amount of suffering. She wouldn’t be able to look at herself in the mirror if she didn’t at least try to help him have a few final moments of peace.

“I’m going to apparate him directly to St. Mungo’s,” Hermione told the elf. “I need you to go to Abraxas and tell him-”
Her words were stopped by a sudden, blinding pain. Someone was holding her by the waist with one hand and pushing a thin knife into the side of her neck with the other. Hermione felt the blade, then the warmth of her blood flowing outwards. The blood came out rapidly, drenching the front of her costume. She gathered her magic, silently sending the knife out of her skin and her assailant’s hand, then attempted a healing spell to superficially close the wound. The blood flow slowed but didn’t stop.

She fell to the floor, dizzy with the loss of blood, and looked up at Evangeline Malfoy, her beautiful face was contorted with rage.

“What are you doing here?” her mother-in-law demanded. “How did you even get in?” she turned to Rupple and smacked the elf viciously across the head, pushing her against the wall. “Stay there or I will flay you alive!”

When Hermione tried to speak, blood gurgled in her throat. Swallowing against the damaged tissue felt like ingesting glass shards. “Incarcerous,” she gasped weakly, pointing her wand.

Restraints from a table behind Evangeline flew at her, but she stepped out of their path and picked up the dagger, then rushed at Hermione, kicking her in the side of the head, then repeatedly in the stomach and ribs.

Hermione crumpled backwards, her mind hazy. She knew she was on the verge of passing out, so she gripped her wand tightly and cast the strongest defensive shield she could muster. It glowed around her, but it wouldn’t last for long if only her magic was sustaining it. Taking a deep breath, she lowered every remaining internal defense, letting every bit of her being, every tiny corner she’d been keeping to herself, including her pain and distress, flood her bonds, then she felt nothing.

In the gardens of Malfoy Manor, Tom Riddle had just cast the evaporation spell. Group magic was always powerful, but joining in a spell with several Hogwarts professors and Ministry officials was an entirely different level. So many kinds of magic, coming together to focus on one spell was fascinating. He looked around, watching as the strands of strong magic wrapped around the glasses, vanishing the liquid from within. He glanced up to Grindelwald, about to smirk at the man’s colossal failure, but Grindelwald had disapparated, and Tom’s knees suddenly gave out, along with the rest of his body.
The world around him spun like the one time he’d managed to sneak without a ticket onto the whip ride at the carnival in Hyde Park. The metal car had swung outwards at a dizzying pace, and more than one rider had heaved over the edge. That had been nothing compared to what was happening to him now. His mind and magic felt blown open, but worse was how he felt. Everything he had longed to have back from Hermione was there, all at once, plus more. Her love, totally unreserved and unabashed, seemed to fill every part of him, removing any doubt that she still cared for him. Along with her love was full access to her brilliant mind, so beautifully brilliant, and her magic, deep and powerful, but all of this was clouded by fear and pain, too. She was currently being hurt. Tom put his hand to his stinging neck. He would have sworn his fingers came away wet with blood for a moment.

Tom pulled himself up, stumbling as he tried to get his bearings. Hermione’s pain increased, and immediately after, there was a sharp tug on his magic. She was trying to pull power from him, from Abraxas and Patience, from the entire group. He pushed his own at her willingly, feeling the others do so as well. The connection between them was so clear now, he could even tell which spell she was attempting. Though he’d never tried such a thing, he chanted the spell for the defensive net along with her in his mind and heard Patience’s and Abraxas’s voices join them. The shield was formed – there was actually a phantom warmth of its glow over his skin, but even as he was assured of the spell’s success, Hermione slipped away. It wasn’t a closing of their connection, though. It was more of a muting. She was…unconscious, he realized.

He was gripped with a cold worse than winter in the orphanage at the idea he might lose Hermione after finally having her again. Running toward the house, he was met by all the group members at the edge of the open ballroom doors.

“What the hell just happened?” Corvus was panting, as were most the rest of the group. “Where is Hermione?”

Josephine and Jacob glanced at one another. “She isn’t in the hedge maze, and she was calling on everyone’s magic for a protection spell.”

“She’s not in the garden,” Marguerite frowned, pushing her owl mask to the top of her head. “Sebastian and I looked as soon as we felt her. Something is very wrong.”

Abraxas came running up, the last one to arrive. “Grindelwald just disappeared, and I can’t find my mother,” he gave Tom a significant look. “My best bet is the dungeons.”

“Why would Hermione be in the dungeon?” Felicity snapped, her concern shared by everyone else in the bond.
Tom shook his head. “Questions later. Abraxas, lead the way.”

They had only gone about ten steps when Galatea rushed by and stopped, blocking their path. “Something’s happened to Narcissa, and we couldn’t get to Grindelwald before he disapparated. What do you know?”

“If you want to know, help us,” Tom hissed, “But either way, move!”

Galatea said nothing, but stepped to Tom’s side, and they followed Abraxas together, the others close behind them.

Narcissa entered the Malfoy dungeons quietly but abandoned all attempt at surprise when she heard the sounds of fighting. The cell-lined hall opened out, and as Narcissa came into the wide space, fear like she hadn’t felt in years filled her. Her eyes swept the room, taking in several distressing details. Hermione was on the floor, unconscious and bleeding. A bright yellow protective barrier formed a dome over her, but Evangeline Malfoy was waiting beside her, an already dripping dagger in her hand. Gawain Malfoy was in another bloody pile across the room, but Narcissa’s healer’s intuition told her he was already dead.

All her life, Narcissa had been surrounded by dark magic. Though she’d seen every variety and had used more than one spell that crossed the line of what was socially accepted or even strictly legal, she had never tortured another person, had never killed another person. Yet, if she hadn’t been keenly aware of all the Ministry officials upstairs, as well as the need to keep what she could of Tom’s plan in place, she would have killed Evangeline on the spot. She decided to settle for pain.

“Seco!” The cutting curse was directed at Evangeline’s face, but she ducked, and it slashed at her sphinx headdress, one striped side falling away from her pale blonde hair. She followed that with a burning curse, “Combustio!”

Evangeline’s dress hem caught fire as she ran behind the open iron maiden in the corner and grabbed a bottle from the table beside it, lobbing the glass toward Narcissa’s feet. She jumped back as it shattered, the liquid hitting the stone, then splashing upwards, like a reverse waterfall, creating a transparent wall for Evangeline to hide behind. Evangeline stomped at her dress, putting out the fire, then fumbled with her necklace, a small golden ankh, rubbing at the charm obsessively, but making no move to defend herself. “You and your half-blood slut of a daughter are both going to die tonight,” she smiled as if her words were a foregone conclusion, already
“Funny,” Narcissa allowed herself a smug smile in return. “Threats from a squib desperately attempting to masquerade as a witch don’t really concern me.” She sent several blasting spells at the barrier, watching with satisfaction as holes began to appear.

Her eyes widening in fear, Evangeline snapped back, “It isn’t me you need to be concerned with.”

“You have no idea of my tolerance for fear. If you did, you’d know Grindelwald’s antics are a stroll through Honeyduke’s for me,” Narcissa aimed a curse through one of the holes, and Evangeline’s hands, legs and neck began to twitch uncontrollably. Her knife dropped to paving stone at her feet as she crumpled against the wall. The curse made every muscle in her body twist, and Evangeline was already screaming, khol and tears leaving black streaks down her face.

“Ripple! Apparate me out!” Evangeline screeched, twisting toward the elf who was standing silently against the wall, tears filling her large eyes.

The elf made a move toward her mistress, but Narcissa held up a hand. “Don’t. Move. I command you,” her voice was a call to her past, and she drew on the power of the Malfoy wards, from the very stones, as Lucius had shown her to do when she needed an emergency burst of magic. She glanced at Hermione, still unconscious, knowing the window for healing her was shrinking.

“How are you doing that?” Evangeline’s words came out as half-yell, half-groan when she saw the loyal Malfoy elf freeze in place.

“You won’t live to find out,” Narcissa said, cold fury in her voice as she flicked her wand, using a modified blasting spell that banged the woman’s head against the wall with an audible smack, then a second, echoing thud as she fell to the floor, red on the stones behind her. Narcissa waited a beat, but Evangeline didn’t stir. She hurried to Hermione.

“Darling, it’s Mother,” she ran her fingers over the air above the protective barrier, which was glowing brightly and incredibly strong, willing her non-aggressive magic to reach Hermione in her barely conscious state. “Lower this. Let me help you.”

Nothing happened, even with the extra magic borrowed from the manor running through her. Narcissa used her wand to probe the shield, looking for weak spots as she simultaneously examined
the wound on Hermione’s neck. Clearly, her daughter had tried to heal it herself, but the job was patchy, with blood still trickling out fast enough to be a concern, especially given the amount of blood already on the floor and soaked into the bodice of Hermione’s costume.

Her heart racing, Narcissa called to the elf. “Help me open the floor below her! I need to get under the protective barrier so that I can heal her.”

They both worked at shifting the stones, and Narcissa made a cushion of air to prevent Hermione from dropping down. The barrier didn’t extend underneath her, so Narcissa laid flat against the floor, casting healing spells from the awkward angle of the small gap, mending the neck wound as best she could and lowering the swelling of a nasty bruise on her daughter’s left temple, though she could do nothing about the blood loss without access to potions. “I need proper medicines,” Narcissa mumbled.

“Mistress?” Rupple approached slowly, timidly holding out Hermione’s beaded bag. “The young Mistress hads the potions in her pretty sack.”

Narcissa blinked and smiled, “Yes, she is always prepared, isn’t she?” She took the deceptively lightweight purse and found the potion, using a siphoning spell to push the liquid through the air and into Hermione’s mouth. There was a passive swallow and Narcissa’s shoulders sagged in relief. “Thank you, Rupple. That was very quick thinking.”

“Of course, Mistress,” the elf straightened at the praise. “I ams proud to serve the noble house of Malfoy.”

“How many Mistresses does this manor need?” A bemused voice asked. Narcissa’s eyes darted to the hall, where a perfectly intact Gawain leaned against the wall, smirking at her. “How exactly does that work, a house elf taking orders from someone not of Malfoy blood?”

Instinctively, Narcissa cast up a shield from the shifted floor stones, crouching down by Hermione and sending several curses from behind them. “I could ask you something similar, since you are not a Malfoy either, but I assume you helped Evangeline circumvent the wards, since the real Gawain is here, and she clearly summoned you past Malfoy blood spells with her necklace.”

He deflected three of the spells, but the fourth sliced his arm. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of an introduction, though I have a feeling neither of us is who we pretend to be,” he winced briefly.
“I know exactly who you are, Gellert Grindelwald,” she returned, “and what you are capable of is evident in this room. The man whose face you are wearing is dead. You can drop the disguise.”

“Oh, I didn’t do any of that to poor Gawain, though you had no compunction killing the practically defenseless Evangeline, did you?” Gellert shifted back to his own form, giving a small bow, then glancing briefly at her body. “I came when she called, hoping we could make a barricade with Malfoy magic, but somehow my plans to use Malfoy Manor as my base of operations have been destroyed. I imagine Miss Bonneau had a hand in that, too.”

Narcissa slowly pulled Rupple closer to her, motioning behind the stone at Hermione and then upwards. The elf nodded furiously. Narcissa signaled a countdown with her fingers. Upon reaching three, she sent another flurry of offensive spells at Grindelwald, while the elf dove toward the barrier.

“No, no, no,” Grindelwald sang, blocking Narcissa’s spells and sending Rupple across the room to land in a heap against Evangeline’s crumpled form. He glanced at Hermione, still under the protective barrier and smiled with something that could have been affection. “If I have to go, I’ll be taking the Mistress of the Elder Wand with me.”

“You will not be doing any such thing.” Narcissa raised her hands and several stones came loose from the walls, flying at Grindelwald from all sides of the dungeon. He was knocked back, surprise on his face, though he quickly recovered and began casting curses at a rapid rate as Narcissa did her best to evade them while returning fire.

Abraxas led them through the house, down to a hallway behind the kitchens, waving his wand over the solid stone. The passage opened, and everyone filed downwards, wands illuminating a thousand shadows in the narrow, curved staircase. There was a sound of crashing, exploding, and they all broke into a run, shoulders rubbing the walls.

Tom still felt very little from Hermione, but her magic was close, along with other power, so much concentrated in this place that he could see waves of magical energy spilling down the hall. As he rounded the corner and came into the open space, he saw Gellert in one corner, fighting from behind broken stone, and Narcissa across the room, sending spells from around a shield of floating stone, her body protectively in front of Hermione, who was hovering a few inches above the floor, the golden protective dome still over her.

Every member of the group sent attack spells at Grindelwald, except for Patience, who cast a defensive barrier. Though he was a powerful wizard, it was difficult to dodge over a dozen spells coming from various directions, and he winced at the connections as he redoubled his own shields.
Tom glanced at his soul mate, covered in blood, her body hanging limply, and a rage unlike any he’d ever felt filled him. He’d believed the idea of Hermione’s betrayal was the worst pain he could have experienced, but this was infinitely worse. He could lose her, forever, and the idea of a world without Hermione was an endless abyss that, into which, if he fell, Tom was sure he’d never make it out.

He didn’t actually use a spell, or even direct his magic in any fashion. Tom simply thrust out his arms, palms upwards, and his rage poured out of his body, so powerful and bright that it was a visible extension of his hands. The glowing fingers rapidly snaked through the air, wound themselves around Grindelwald’s neck, and began constricting.

“Tom! Stop! You must stop!” He registered Galatea’s voice raised in panic, but only as a background noise. His anger was stronger than he’d ever felt it, and it had never been an emotion he’d been afraid to embrace. He squeezed tighter, watching with satisfaction as Grindelwald clawed wildly at the magical hands.

*Dumbledore’s coming down the stairs. Let go, my love,* Hermione’s voice was suddenly in his mind.

He looked over, but she was still motionless. *All that’s holy and powerful, please don’t let her be a ghost,* he prayed for the first time in his life, not loosening his grip.

*I’m not,* she assured him, her voice as clear in his mind as if she had been whispering in his ear. *Our connection is final. Heart and soul. I’m a part of your mind now, whether or not I’m awake. And you must let go. Please. I’m not asking because I think you are evil or wrong to want to kill him; I’m asking because I love you and I can’t have you in Azkaban. Make sure we have a future together, Tom.*

There were hands on his arms, Abraxas on one side, Patience on the other. Neither of them pulled at him. Instead, they were sending calm at him, reassurance, through the bond. Combined with Hermione’s words, Tom took a deep breath and pulled back on his magic. It snapped back toward him, almost knocking him over as it dove back into his body. Abraxas’s strong form kept him upright, and Patience’s magic formed a protective boundary around them.

It wasn’t a second too soon, because his magic had just retracted when Professor Dumbledore, followed by several other teachers and Ministry officials, entered the dungeon, a Malfoy elf cowering amid the folds of Dumbledore’s fluffy puffskein costume.
Tom had never seen Dumbledore duel, let alone face a wizard who was at his stellar level, but he had to admit that it was a once-in-a-lifetime show, heavy and beautiful magic flying through the air. Narcissa must have done something to the wards because though Grindelwald tried to disapparate, he failed. The bottleneck of wizards and witches at the dungeon entrance left him without any place to go, but no one sent any spells at Grindelwald besides Dumbledore. The two men made tight circles around each other in the cramped space, and the teachers and Ministry officials created a shared shield around everyone else except Narcissa, Hermione, and Rupple, who were still behind the floating stones in the far corner.

He could no longer hear Hermione, and the limp way she was suspended inside the golden dome was killing him. As impressive as the two men’s spell and footwork were, Tom wished Dumbledore’s morals were a bit more flexible. Nothing he was casting was damaging enough, even when he had an opening. Silently, when an opportunity arose, Tom sent a wandless curse he’d found in the Chamber, a nasty one that shattered the bones of one’s opponent. Grindelwald gave a shout of pain as his entire form crumpled, limbs bending at unnatural angles, his wand dropping to the floor along with his body.

Tom was pleasantly surprised that Dumbledore pressed his advantage, summoning the wand and placing a binding field around Grindelwald.

“He needs medical attention,” Dumbledore spoke, ruining Tom’s temporary good will toward the man.

The Minister of Magic scoffed loudly. “Surely you aren’t serious? He needs to go straight to Azkaban. If we are feeling generous, we could summon a healer to meet us, but the man is a mass murderer. I don’t know that he deserves our help.”

Dumbledore straightened his shoulders, a placid smile on his face that did nothing to hide his anger. “How we treat our enemies and prisoners defines our society. Besides that, he escaped from Azkaban last time, and I will personally see to the wards in the secure wing of St. Mungo’s. I’m taking him there now.” He was gone with Grindelwald in the next instant, leaving the Minister’s mouth gaping like a fish.

Tom began to move toward Narcissa, but she only gave him a quick, “I’m going there, too,” and vanished with Hermione. Though he knew taking Hermione to the hospital was the best course, it chaffed that she was gone before he could feel her again, before he could reassure himself that she was going to be alright. Patience stroked his arm, a soft, subtle movement that no one else noticed, but he felt her touch through his entire body. Abraxas was still flush with his back as well, and Tom allowed himself five seconds of leaning into the comfort they provided him. It was an indulgence, but, oddly, it didn’t feel like a weakness. Five seconds, and then they would have to deal with the crimes of Grindelwald while simultaneously covering up their own.
Chapter Summary

Abraxas steps fully in the role of Lord Malfoy, Patience helps connect everyone, Tom is shockingly chill, and Hermione...is decidedly not.

Chapter Notes

So, I made my own deadline for once and am getting this chapter up on time. It's almost 10,000 words, so there is a lot packed in it. I hope it tides everyone over while I spend the next few weeks drowning in grading papers (cue deep sobbing sounds). I found out I have a vitamin D deficiency (which is awful, but also hysterical because it seems my body is living in the 1800s). So, public service announcement - if you are feeling terribly tired, full of brain fog, and depressed, it could be that you have vitamin D levels so low you are only a few steps above having rickets. The solution is simple and inexpensive, and only requires taking vitamin D in capsules that are 50,000 units at a time (yes, 50,000). I have to laugh at this absurdity. I hope you are all well and as always, love to you all.

P.S. I've taken liberties with canon on Salazar Slytherin's wand as far as its location and being destroyed because it is cool and it suited my plot.

November 1, 1943 – early hours of the morning

Abraxas had no memory of having ever felt distraught before. He thought he had felt most emotions in his life, but right now, he could hardly remember how to breathe. In the space of an hour, every aspect of his world had upended. Both of his parents were dead. Yes, he’d expected that would happen, sooner or later (sooner if Tom was involved), and he’d been okay with the idea of it. But the reality was different. There was a background sense of loss, the enormity of assuming sole responsibility for everything Malfoy, and...Freedom. He was the Lord Malfoy now, able to fashion a future for himself and those he loved with no impediments, but instead of joy, he was drowning in the tsunami of change that had instantly flooded his life. Of all that had occurred, though, the truly overwhelming experience had not been when he’d seen the battered corpse of his father, nor the lifeless form of his mother, but the sight of Hermione, unconscious and covered in blood, helpless.

Everything inside of him screamed for him to go after Narcissa, to be beside Hermione, and it was clear the whole group felt the same. Not one of them had blinked when Tom had nearly killed Grindelwald, nor when he had cast the bone-breaking curse (and they had felt that it was Tom’s
magic that had done that). But they had no chance to do anything except glance at one another before Ministry officials began firing questions.

“How did you children even come to be here?” Minister Spencer-Moon frowned at them, motioning for the Head Auror to come forward. Abraxas saw his former Head Girl Rachel Shacklebolt in the background, as well as several other high-ranking officials he knew from visits with his father to the Ministry. Rachel was the only one who wore a neutral, bordering on friendly expression.

Galatea stepped in front of the students, and though Abraxas could sense Tom’s annoyance at being called children, they were all grateful for the presence of the Head of Ravenclaw House. Right now, she was their sole protection against expulsion or even prison. “My students are minors and shouldn’t be questioned without the permission of their guardians.”

“Mr. Malfoy here is of age – I was at his birthday party at the end of summer,” Head Auror Robinson insisted, his gaze darting at the now discreetly sheet-covered forms of Gawain and Evangeline Malfoy. “His guardians are deceased. And the questions we need to ask are of vital importance. Grindelwald wasn’t working alone.”

“Lord Malfoy has just witnessed the death of both of his parents, Ian,” Galatea’s default expression was an innocuous smile, but there was no trace of kindness on her face at the moment, only fierce determination. “I truly hope you are not suggesting that he had anything to do with it?”

“I did not imply that,” the Minister huffed angrily. “Everyone knows Grindelwald uses the Imperius, Merrythought, and we need to round up any followers immediately. These students might have information that could be help. You Hogwarts professors provide more obstruction to law enforcement than the actual villains!”

“It’s alright, Professor Merrythought. I can speak for myself,” Abraxas put his hand on Galatea’s arm. He had spent his life being groomed (even occasionally tortured) to step into the role of Lord Malfoy. And no self-respecting Lord Malfoy would allow himself to be anything less than in control of an interrogation (no matter how supposedly friendly) in his own home. It was time to assume what his birthright gave him, to shape this narrative, even if the exposure might upset Tom.

“I led my friends down here because I knew something had happened to Hermione,” his tone was calm, matter of fact, and very self-assured, a man who was King in his castle.

“How did you know that? And how did Miss Bonneau gain entrance to these dungeons without you?” Robinson’s attention focused on him rapidly.
There was a warning in Abraxas’s head, a sharp tug from Tom, but he ignored it. After feeling the bonds solidify completely just this evening, after experiencing what was truly at stake, Abraxas wouldn’t let it go. The threat of his parents was gone, he was so tired of hiding, and there was a warm buoyancy coming from Patience, pulling him safely to shore, along with the desire to end this quickly and get to Hermione. He stood tall, allowed the centuries old magic of the Malfoy wards to flow through him, projecting his power and status without hesitating.

“I knew Hermione was in danger because we share multiple magical bonds. Along with Tom and Patience,” he moved closer to Tom and took Patience’s hand, claspig it tightly in full view of everyone, “we form a bonded elemental quartet, and Hermione is also my wife. We were married a month ago. The house wards and elves recognized her as a Malfoy, and I’m sure Rupple can attest to that,” he motioned off-handedly, in a gesture his father would have used, a casual yet total self-assurance.

The elf, still half-hiding behind the pile of stones that had fallen back down when Narcissa had apparated away, nodded furiously, interjecting, “Yes, Master tells the truths. Lady Hermione is the now the only Mistress Malfoy. I calls on her for help for my poor, dead Master.”

If Abraxas had announced to the room that he’d Avada’d both of his parents, the looks on the faces of the officials couldn’t have been more shocked.

“You’re married? And…bonded…?” the Minister’s tone was aghast, lost for words, as he glanced from Abraxas’s and Patience’s linked fingers to Tom’s shoulder, which was pressed against that of Abraxas in a way that was clearly more than friendly. To Tom’s credit, he didn’t show any anger – he was going to keep a united front, at least to the Ministry.

Spencer-Moon gave Galatea a look between bewildered and furious. “Is there any oversight at that school? Students running off and forming permanent magical bonds? Getting married?”

“I would say that is a matter for the families, not the Ministry of Magic,” Galatea dropped all pretense at politeness. “Neither our country nor our school is a police-state, Minister. And though elemental bonds are archaic and rare, they are not illegal spells nor forbidden knowledge. As for the marriage, both Hermione and Abraxas were of age and able to go outside of school grounds during free weekends. Their relationship is not connected to Grindelwald – it’s simply a matter of young, star-crossed love.”

“That depends on how the marriage intersects with the events of tonight,” Robinson gestured at the wreckage of the dungeon. “Lord Malfoy,” he emphasized the title with a sharp tone, “and his new bride kept their bond a secret. They were clearly aware of how a marriage not with a Pureblooded
family and not approved by his parents would be received, and now of the four Malfoys, two are dead and one is seriously wounded. To say nothing of the other members of this illicit elemental quartet business – one of whom is still underage!” He looked pointedly at Tom.

Two sounds vied for prominence in the dungeon. One was a sinuous, dangerous hissing that made every member of Tom’s group take several steps back. The other was a low, rumbling growl that no one could immediately place. Then, they noticed Patience gently patting Rupple’s bald head in a soothing motion.

“It’s very sweet of you to defend us, Rupple, but they are Fizzing Whizbees, filled with hot air,” Patience murmured, though her voice carried well enough for everyone to hear. “They don’t even understand how silly it is to upset an elf.”

“Abraxas had nothing to do with his parents’ deaths,” Galatea repeated firmly, eyeing the elf cautiously, knowing full well that elves would defend to the death anyone they considered family. “And neither do any of the other students. I’m sure you have procedures to follow down here, but I’m taking my students upstairs, where I will either contact their guardians or find a teacher to be with them during any questioning,”

“And where I will be providing them with full access to the Malfoy family solicitors,” Abraxas’s smile was all ease and charm, but his meaning was clear. “The firm of Irving and Warren are on retainer, and they never miss a party,” he paused, then added, “And please stop insulting my family and our bonds. The Malfoy house elves take our honor quite seriously, especially in our own home.”

Head Auror Robinson’s face turned an ugly shade of red, and Minister Spencer-Moon looked like he wanted to throttle the newest member of the peerage. Galatea cleared her throat against the building tension in the room. “I suggest you focus your attention where it belongs – on the megalomaniacal Dark wizard currently in St. Mungo’s. Perhaps you lot can actually keep him in custody this time around. Students, up to the library.”

Abraxas and the others followed their professor quickly and quietly. It wasn’t until they had reached the upstairs hallway that the murmuring started. The bond was alive with curiosity and fear. None of them had known Abraxas had married Hermione, and they were all concerned that Tom would lose his mind over the situation. There was definitely anger thrumming in the background, but Tom said nothing until the group was entering the library, when he pulled Abraxas aside into a shadowy alcove.

“Power looks excellent on you, my dear Lord Malfoy, and I applaud any display that puts the Ministry on their back feet, but that was quite the bold unilateral action you just made,” Tom hissed, his jaw tight with annoyance, though Abraxas thought there was pride in his gaze.
“It was necessary,” Abraxas faced him, uncowed. “But more trilateral. Patience agrees with me, and I’m certain Hermione would, too. You are the only one who wanted to hide.”

Before Tom could respond, Abraxas placed his palm flat on his chest, resting it over Tom’s heart. He shuddered, and Abraxas could feel the rapid beat. Through the bond, he could sense much more – Tom’s anger was only the top layer. Under it was fear for Hermione, and deeper still was the swirling, raw tangle of Tom’s undying affection – what anyone else would call love. Abraxas reveled in it for a moment before continuing. “I didn’t give away any knowledge covered by our vows – my loyalty to you is unbreakable, but my parents are gone now. Grindelwald is in custody. I had to seize this opportunity. We can be together, Tom, all of us. I don’t want to keep our love a secret.”

Tom’s pupils widened, narrowing the icy blue rings of his irises. “Our love?” His voice stumbled over the word. He grasped Abraxas’s wrist tightly, his fingers curled punishingly into the pulse point while his thumb pressed roughly into the back of Abraxas’s hand. The physical action implied anger, which Tom certainly had, but it was restrained, tinged with something like amusement. “What happens between us is our own business, not fodder for gossip at the Ministry.”

Abraxas was emboldened by his tempered response. He leaned into Tom, his hair falling against his cheek, his lips brushing across Tom’s ear. “They will always talk about us, because we are powerful, brilliant, beautiful. And now? We are the Malfoys, the most powerful and wealthiest Wizarding family in Great Britain, no matter your last name. I’m not married only to Hermione. I proclaimed the permanent bond between the four of us to the Minister of Magic himself, and those spells are as binding as any marriage. Hermione showed me the legal precedent she found. No one will ever come between us.”

“Did you imagine for an instant that I ever would have allowed such a thing to happen?” Tom whispered, his tone fierce. “That I wouldn’t have obliterated any barrier to our continued relationship?”

“You did your damnedest to make us believe you felt nothing for us for months,” Abraxas challenged softly, not ready to let the matter drop. “You’re a very convincing person. Doubt crept in.”

Tom nipped at the edge of his jawline, teeth sharp, his fingers digging into Abraxas’s hips. “Careful with that pride, my good sir. You are developing quite the mouth on you.”

“I’m only giving you the truth, Tom,” he sighed, his own hands resting at Tom’s waist, bunching
up the fabric of his dress robes, pulling him closer. “I want nothing between us, including the past. When Hermione has recovered, we will all have a fresh start.”

At the mention of Hermione’s name, Tom tensed. “We need to get to her.”

Abraxas briefly let his forehead drop against Tom’s, a smug smile appearing on his face. “Why do you think I invoked the attorneys?”

Tom’s brow furrowed in question, but then smoothed when Patience appeared, holding the hand of Rupple, who looked positively smitten by the gesture.

“Shall we go to Hermione?” Patience asked, her tone a cheerful sing-song. “Rupple’s ready to apparate us, and our Lady awaits.”

Hermione’s return to consciousness was slow. She was dreaming of flying through clouds, no longer afraid of heights. There were light and shadows all around, but nothing she could sort into recognizable shapes. Gradually, she began to sense her body. It was difficult to feel anything other than temperature. She was warm on her front, cooler along her back, and apparently weightless. Stretching into her fingers, she wriggled them, noting that her wand was still gripped in her right hand. Pain came into her awareness, especially in her neck, though her entire body ached.

With effort, she opened her eyes, blinking at the brightness. Gold lines were glowing in front of her, dazzling her. A moment later, she realized she was inside a shield, floating inside a magical, netted semi-sphere, which covered most of her body, with the exception of a small part of her back. It created its own light, but she could see beyond it.

She was in a large room, a hospital. Her mother was standing over her, along with three uniformed Healers. All were waving their wands, sending spells at her from below the edges of the barrier.

“She’s waking,” Narcissa murmured, a line of worry disappearing from her forehead.

Hermione tried to smile, but her facial muscles didn’t cooperate. A commotion sounded from the other side of the room, and though she wasn’t able to turn her head, she was quickly filled with joy. In the next instant, the faces of Tom, Abraxas, and Patience were over her, looking down with expressions of intense relief, total adoration, and sheer bliss, respectively.
“They can’t simply barge in here!” One of the Healers was protesting.

“They are her family, and they can help lower the shield, which will make it easier to treat her,” Narcissa responded in an authoritative tone.

While those idiots argue with your mother, let’s undo this gorgeous piece of magic we wrought, shall we? Tom’s voice was in her mind, and Hermione felt tears sliding down her face at how clearly and completely they were connected.

Tears, Dearest? The words were a gentle whisper along the edges of her thoughts, an emotional caress.

How close to death am I if you are in my mind? If the question had been out loud, it would have been followed by weak, worried laughter.

Don’t worry about Death, Patience smiled down at her. He and I have an understanding.

No one will take you from us, Abraxas added, full of an alluring level of new confidence, not after I just proclaimed our relationship to the world.

Hermione’s eyebrows twitched at that, the first movement she’d made beyond opening her eyes. And you are still alive?

That’s a story for later, Tom was firm. Relax, Dearest, and let us unwind this protection.

Her trust in them was absolute, and she was still desperately tired and weak. She allowed her eyes to flutter shut, and felt the room become gradually cooler as the shield was undone. It had been compromised of all their magics, and those of the larger group as well, but the magical signature had been so tightly bound to her that it would not leave. Gently, as the three worked, the combined energy began seeping back into Hermione as if it were water and her body was a sponge. She felt full to bursting, her magical boundaries close to overflowing. Tom’s magic settled in her chest, curling under Slytherin’s locket like a coiled snake. Abraxas’s wrapped itself around her ribs, like a warm, protective bandage, and Patience’s draped over her aching neck and shoulders, cool and soothing. More subtle connections with Felicity, Josephine, and even Marguerite tingled at the edges of her skin. If she hadn’t been so depleted physically, she would have marveled at how their bonds had increased, how magic was able to flow so freely between them.
Sleep now, she could feel Patience’s hand on her shoulder, smell the sea salt of her hair.

We’ll be here when you wake, Abraxas’s lips were brushing her knuckles in a courtly kiss, warm with love.

She waited, at the edge of submitting to sleep. It was five long seconds before Tom’s voice joined, softer than she would have expected, even being in his mind. We have you, Dearest. We will always have you.

Almost as soon as Hermione had fallen asleep again, the three Healers were half-pushing, half-coaxing Tom, Patience, and Abraxas out of the room. Narcissa accompanied them to a small waiting room.

“She’s out of danger now and needs rest more than anything else,” Narcissa tiredly tucked a stay lock of hair behind her ear. “All the injuries are in the process of being healed, and she has been given potions for blood replenishment and for the pain. The blade was poisoned, but we’ve identified the type and given her an antidote. It’s actually easier to fix the physical damage than it would have been to deal with curses.”

“My mother had no talent for curses, thankfully,” Abraxas murmured, his eyes downcast, the mantle of strength he’d been wearing momentarily cast off. “And we needn’t worry about her harming any of us in the future.”

Narcissa put her arms around him. The urge to comfort the boy who reminded her of Draco was too much to resist. No matter how justified, she was the person responsible for making him an orphan. She could have used dozens of incapacitating spells that would have left little permanent damage, but she caused severe head trauma instead. Still, she wouldn’t do Abraxas the disservice of lying. “I can’t say that I’m sorry about her death, but I’m sorry for all that you must be feeling, that you must deal with now.”

Abraxas leaned into her embrace, and she felt relieved. It was one thing to hate one’s family. It was another to see them in danger or dead. Narcissa knew this lesson intimately. How many times had she told herself that Bella needed to die? And yet, she’d never been able to act. Killing her sister, even knowing that Bella was mad, and leading their family straight into Hell itself, had been impossible.
“I’ve complicated what we must deal with,” he sighed into her shoulder.

She glanced questioningly over to Tom, who was remarkably calm for all that had occurred this evening. “Don’t fret too much, Mother. We covered our tracks in the dungeon without any problems. He is only upset because he made the rather impulsive decision to announce our elemental bond and his and Hermione’s marriage to the entire Ministry.”

“Oh,” she was at a momentary loss, pondering the potential ramifications. Gawain and Evangeline might be deceased, but there were plenty of related families in the Sacred Twenty-Eight who would consider Abraxas’s decision tantamount to open warfare on their beliefs. “Perhaps,” she said, “they will keep that to themselves for now. They do have a rather large investigation to handle, and Grindelwald’s followers to track down, which Hermione’s plan can help them do. That might incline them to keep quiet.”

“It isn’t the Ministry that is the problem,” Patience pointed to the owl in the window of the waiting room. She went over and cooed at it, taking the early morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* from its talons. The front page was dominated by four candid photos from the party arranged in a row: Hermione flashing a dazzling smile, Abraxas wearing a charming grin, Tom sexily smirking, and Patience’s deceptively guileless expression, her mouth opened in a perfect “O,” lined with sharp, transfigured teeth. Over the photos was a boldly blinking headline:

*Murder and Intrigue at Malfoy Manor!*

*By Callisto Skeeter*

If you weren’t fortunate enough to be a guest at the Malfoy Samhain Ball last evening, fear not. The following is a faithful account as gathered by this reporter from multiple witnesses. At the stroke of midnight, it was discovered that our esteemed host, Lord Gawain Malfoy, was none other than the infamous Dark Wizard wanted world-wide, Gellert Grindelwald. One moment, everyone was having a perfectly normal time, ready to toast the Samhain holiday, and the next, bodies were dropping, the host had disappeared, and the Minister of Magic himself (a bit flushed from firewhiskey) stood on the balcony and announced there had been an ‘incident’ and that the grounds were being sealed.

According to my sources in the Ministry, Grindelwald had used the Unforgiveable Imperius Curse on Lady Evangeline Malfoy over a month ago and chained up the true Lord Malfoy in his own dungeons. The Malfoy heir, Abraxas, may have also been placed under the Imperius. It seems that Grindelwald’s plan was to incapacitate the guests with a sleeping potion, and then do Circe knows what.
And how was this plot uncovered? You will never guess, loyal readers! A house elf informed the new wife of the Malfoy Heir of Lord Malfoy’s imprisonment, and she went to the dungeon to offer assistance to her father-in-law. Yes, you read correctly: England’s most eligible Pureblooded heir, Abraxas Malfoy, was married (as this reporter has independently verified with the Department of Marriage in the Ministry) almost two months ago in a secret, though legally-binding, ceremony to the decidedly Half-blooded Lady Hermione Bonneau (Viscountess).

In the dungeon, there was an attack involving several parties, not all of whom have been named, though it has been confirmed to this reporter that all of the Malfoy family were present, as were Gellert Grindelwald and Lady Narcissa Bonneau. Although extreme measures were used, this reporter was unable to learn the exact details of what transpired in the dungeons, but it is known that Albus Dumbledore, Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts faced off with Grindelwald once again and was victorious. Whatever else occurred, there must have been fierce fighting, as both Lord Gawain and Lady Evangeline Malfoy passed away before they could be transported to St. Mungo’s, and both Lady Hermione Malfoy and Grindelwald are currently receiving care at the hospital.

However, the drama does not end there. During the Auror interviews, Lord Abraxas Malfoy announced that he and his wife had formed a bonded elemental quartet (if you are fuzzy on the details of elemental quartets, see the box on page 2) with Tom Riddle (who is descended from Salazar Slytherin through the Gaunt family and widely believed to be THE Heir of Slytherin from Hogwarts’ lore) and Patience Foster (daughter of known inventor John Foster and Kitty Foster nee Longbottom). It seems several centuries of Pureblooded family values have been thrown to the wind by the newest lord. You can be assured that this reporter will be watching this non-traditional ‘family’ quite closely.

Though Grindelwald had apparently laced the Samhain mead with a powerful sleeping potion, only those who drank early have been affected. Twenty-five guests have been admitted to St. Mungo’s, where they remain in a stable sleeping condition (see list of those names on page 3). Lord Abraxas Malfoy, now ascended to the head of his family at the tender age of seventeen, has pledged his vast resources for the capture of any of Grindelwald’s followers. And by the fierce expression on his face (see picture below), I, Dear Readers, would not wish to be Grindelwald.

“Perhaps I will murder someone tonight, after all,” Tom spoke through gritted teeth as he scanned the story over Patience’s shoulder.

“That’s what libel laws are for,” Abraxas had regained his composure, and shrugged as if not bothered at all, “and I’m sure the Malfoy attorneys will be earning their retainers keeping you out of Azkaban.”

“He wouldn’t be in danger of Azkaban if he isn’t caught,” Patience said in a dreamy sigh that implied she was currently working out such a plan.
“Keeping you both out of Azkaban,” Abraxas corrected.

Narcissa tsked softly at Patience. “Don’t encourage him, please. We have enough damage to be getting on with.”

Further conversation was prevented by the opening waiting room door. Dumbledore, his face lined with exhaustion, entered, his hands in his trouser pockets, his silly costume gone. “I thought I would find you here, Lady Bonneau,” he was always formal with Narcissa, perhaps because he could sense she did not like him very much, despite his status as her superior at work and her wife’s best friend. “I was hoping to get your opinion on the ratio of ingredients in the most effective bone re-growth potion.”

At the mention of the bone potion, Dumbledore’s gaze slid sharply toward Tom, who didn’t so much as blink.

Narcissa’s lovely mouth twisted into a frown. “This is the premiere magical hospital in all of Great Britain. I’m sure the healers here have the best treatments already underway.”

“And yet, I greatly value your opinion,” Dumbledore persisted.

“Since Hermione is stable, I need to get Tom, Abraxas, and Patience back to Hogwarts,” she returned. “Once I see them safely off, I’ll find Grindelwald’s main Healer and consult on the situation.”

The Deputy Headmaster looked from Tom to Abraxas to Patience. “I don’t believe there’s any situation that these three couldn’t get the better of,” he said blandly, though his eyes were watching them carefully.

Tom stepped forward, causing Narcissa to sigh inwardly. “The spell was done wandlessly. Will the Ministry review your wand usage for the duel?”

“Ah,” Dumbledore’s mouth smiled, but the lines around his eyes didn’t crinkle. “We are going to honest.”

“Slytherins can speak plainly,” Tom smirked. “We simply prefer not to.”
Dumbledore glanced at Narcissa, then back to the students. “That spell was not illegal, though it should be. I suspect it is of your own invention, or something you discovered in the deepest recesses of the Slytherin House libraries. It is certainly dark magic, and there will be questions asked of me about why I would use such a spell, though I doubt anyone at the Ministry would propose the spell came from anyone else.”

Narcissa gave a polite snort, looking from Tom to Dumbledore and sighing aloud this time. “For all of your allusions to plain speech, you are both being remarkably circuitous. Deputy Headmaster, will you claim the bone-breaking spell as your own if asked and keep Tom out of the matter?”

He blinked, surprised. “Ahhh,” he drew out his exhalation. “I will, yes, if you will oversee Gellert’s healing process.”

“Why in the world would you want him healed?” Abraxas interjected angrily. “He is a danger to everyone. Now is the time to administer a Dementor’s Kiss or some other permanent measure to disable him and end this before he hurts anyone else.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “He can’t hurt anyone at the moment – most of his bones are broken, and I’ve personally created specific wards around his hospital room that will keep him in the bed – he is not able to go anywhere.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that the man is dangerous in general, and is guilty of war crimes,” Narcissa said quietly.

“Though his hands are far from clean, Gellert didn’t kill anyone tonight,” Dumbledore gave Narcissa a meaningful glance, indicating he suspected her role in Evangeline’s death. “In fact, he didn’t personally hurt anyone, though the blame for the murders of both your parents and the severe injury of your…wife have been assigned to him. Did you know his wand is missing? I suppose it is quite a good thing that no one can check which spells he used this evening,” sarcasm was odd to hear from Dumbledore, but there was no mistaking the bitter tone. “I don’t believe in torture, but I do believe in redemption. If you want my silence, I want him healed.”

A cold grin stretched horribly across Tom’s beautiful face. “Fine. I’m sure Mother is the best person for the job.”

“Mother can answer for herself,” Narcissa murmured, trying to ascertain what it was that pleased
Tom so much. It couldn’t be good. “But, yes, I’ll help. Grindelwald is unconscious and in stasis for the moment. Give me time to see my children safely settled. There are Ministry officials here who want to talk to you anyway, so we’ll meet in the secure ward in an hour?”

Dumbledore gave Tom a long, penetrating look, which Tom returned unabashedly. If Narcissa had ever wondered what simultaneously cast, incredibly powerful legilimency spells looked like, she wondered no longer. She couldn’t help but gently roll her eyes. They would not be able to read one another – their respective shields were too strong, but they both had giant egos and were men, so she supposed they couldn’t help themselves.

They had sent Rupple back to oversee the other elves at Malfoy Manor, so Narcissa cast her patronus to send a message, then took them back to Hogwarts, apparating them to the edge of the grounds and walking them to the front door, where Galatea was waiting in the main hall.

Galatea embraced them all in turn, even Tom, who was wooden in her grasp for a few seconds, then awkwardly returned the hug. “How is Hermione?” she asked her wife.

“She’s healing and will likely be in the hospital for at least a week, but she’ll be fine. All the damage is repairable,” Narcissa wiped gently at a stray tear on Galatea’s cheek, then kissed the spot. “You need to talk with Tom’s group and have them see to the map that was part of Hermione’s plan and pass any information they gathered on to the Ministry in a discreet way. I have to get back and see to Grindelwald. Your best friend will have no one else treat him.”

The venom in the words ‘best friend’ was not lost on anyone. Patience began to hum softly, a bit off-key. Tom rolled his eyes when Abraxas took her hand, and they all looked anywhere but at the tension between the couple.

Narcissa shook her head after a few seconds. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. It’s been an exhausting…I don’t even know how long I’ve been exhausted for, but I need to go. I love you.”

“And I love you,” Galatea returned, stroking her cheek. “I know it’s difficult. I’ll take care of any information from the map without involving the students. But promise you will get a little rest sometime today.”

Narcissa nodded and hurried out. She was back at St. Mungo’s before she was mentally prepared to be, and she was fairly sure she had figured out the reason for Tom’s cool acceptance of ‘healing’ Grindelwald. The curse he had used had likely been from one of Slytherin’s journals, modified by Tom to be even darker and more deadly. Only she and Hermione knew first-hand just how much power Tom truly had. The Heir of Slytherin was respected by students and teachers, but the level
of talent he displayed in public was only a fraction of his capabilities when it came to creating and enhancing spells. He was keeping a lower profile, just as he had done in the early years of Narcissa’s original timeline, but his raw magical ability was immense, especially now that it was bound with and bolstered by Hermione and the others’ magic as well.

The curse, she suspected, was an uncurable one, something akin to the magic Bella had used to mark Hermione’s arm. Though Galatea had eventually extracted that curse, it had taken years of research, and that hadn’t been Tom’s magic. Narcissa wondered just how the curse was functioning – would it keep rebreaking the bones after they were repaired? Would it simply weaken them so that they would break under the natural pressure of gravity and weight? Regardless, she doubted she would be able to do much other than make the man comfortable. He would likely be painfully bedridden for the rest of his life, until the curse consumed him, and she had no idea how Dumbledore would take this knowledge. He had his own angry depths that were rarely seen, and Narcissa did not want to experience them.

A voice was calling Hermione. It was disembodied, as if in a faraway dream. She sat up slowly, not sure if she was entirely awake, and saw the room was empty, only lit by a few small lanterns floating high above. As she turned to take her wand from the bedside table, she saw herself, sleeping deeply in the hospital bed. She was either in a dream state or projecting astrally, or some combination. Even though she was a magical being, the idea of astral projection had never sat well with her logical mind, though the casting of a patronus was a form. She looked down at her body, reassured by the magical chart hovered by the bed, continuously recording her vital signs.

Low and haunting, the voice continued to call her. She thought it was human, though it wasn’t speaking in words. The sound was more of a vocalization, a siren’s song. Those rarely ended well. Hermione tried to pick up her wand, but her hand went through the bedside table. She made an angry huff and was pleased that she could still make noises, though she doubted others could see or hear her. The pull was becoming difficult to resist, and she gave in, walking through the wall into the hallway.

The floor was fairly quiet, with night shift healers mostly at the centralized station or briefly checking on sleeping patients. Hermione peeked into several rooms as she passed and overheard the healers discussing the sleeping potion Grindelwald had used. They hadn’t been able to reverse it yet, but no one who had drank it seemed to be in any danger.

She followed the voice, heading up three flights of stairs to the top floor, which was completely deserted except for one bored looking security guard reading a copy of the Daily Prophet. Hermione stopped to read the front page, annoyed at the sight of her own face smiling at her. Callisto Skeeter? It seemed abrasive overconfidence and snooping behavior ran in that family.
At the end of a long, dingy hall, the voice was strongest. She walked to the room and through the door, feeling the magic of wards, but sliding easily through them. Like hers, the room contained only one bed and low lighting. Unlike hers, the bed itself was warded, as were the windows, along with any and every object in the room that could be transfigured. Lounging on the crisp white sheets beside his unconscious body was a smiling Gellert Grindelwald.

“Forgive me for not standing,” he joked as he looked down at himself. His native German was more pronounced at the edges of his words. “I’m happy to see that you are looking better. A bit peaky, but on the mend.”

“What did you do to me?” Hermione knew that something was wrong. In her right mind, of her own volition, she wouldn’t be here, listening to a madman, even in astral form.

His smile widened. “I might have angled a silent spell at you while I was dueling your mother, bouncing it off the floor – a very skillful casting, if I do say so myself. Of course, I didn’t imagine I’d be bedridden when I sent the spell.”

Hermione wasn’t sure how, but she knew he wasn’t a threat at the moment. “And what exactly did this spell do?” She moved closer to the bed, looking down at his body in favor of ignoring his smiling face. A wave of dark magic rose to meet her, and her own magic recognized it was kin. This was Tom’s work, and it was beautifully done and horribly vicious. She realized that whatever Grindelwald had done, he couldn’t hurt her now. Tom had aimed to kill, slowly, and he had hit the mark.

“I had the Elder wand for many years, a long time to think over how to keep it under various scenarios. Since I had taken the wand without killing anyone, I imagined it possible that someone might do the same to me, though I must admit I didn’t think it probable.”

“Dark Lords pretend they don’t believe they are vulnerable, but their paranoia screams otherwise,” she replied without any judgement.

Grindelwald’s bright blue eyes darkened for a moment, and then cleared as he chuckled. “You are so wise beyond your years. Much like that little group you’ve formed. All so talented, though the mermaid girl is a bit feral, isn’t she?”

“Patience is…Patience,” Hermione shrugged. She had no desire to share any details of her life with this man. He had taken an interest in her, but the feeling was not mutual. “What did you do to the wand? To me?”
“The spell was simple, though attaching it to an ancient magical object with a mind of its own was not,” he began to turn his head, then winced briefly. “I linked myself to any future Masters of the wand, so that I would be able to call them to me, and hopefully regain the wand. I would have loved to embed an Imperius into the wood itself, but that wasn’t an option. I activated the connection in the Malfoy dungeon, and now it is working. I’m truly disappointed that it is only an astral connection, though not terribly surprised, since the wand didn’t want to hold any spell I put on it. This spell is a much softer suggestion, honestly, and it is likely only functioning at all because you are weakened right now – or because a part of you wanted to see me, to hear what I had to say.”

“I’m not nearly as weak as you are,” she gestured at the magical splints surrounding his physical body. “And if you knew me you would realize I’d never be so foolish as to want to see you. How do you imagine this playing out? What is it that you want from me?”

He waved his hands in a wide, grand arc. “Not a lot really, just the wizards at the top of the world, not in hiding.”

“And you at the very top?” Hermione raised her eyebrows. Dark Lords were so predictable.

“Myself and a select few others,” Grindelwald continued in a chatty, friendly voice. “Your group could be a part of it, if you were to learn to behave. I adore powerful witches and wizards, and your little quartet has great promise. And, despite the flashy shows from your Tom, and the outward wealth and power of Abraxas, I have a feeling you are the one to negotiate with.”

Hermione had to admit she was surprised that the madman was the progressive one when it came to the power of witches. “I know the things you’ve done, and I disagree with all that you stand for,” she sighed. “How could I possibly join you, let alone trust you?”

He shrugged his eyebrows in lieu of his shoulders. “There’s a difference between trust and self-preservation.”

“But I don’t need your protection,” Hermione frowned, beginning to lose her patience with this conversation. “Don’t you understand? You’ve been defeated. You’ve lost the Elder Wand, you are facing charges for war crimes and murder, as well as the use of Unforgivable curses – any one of which is worth a Dementor’s Kiss,” she felt a twinge of regret at that thought. She honestly wasn’t sure she believed anyone deserved that fate.
“And, what’s more, you are critically and permanently injured. Can’t you feel the dark magic twining around your bones? That will never heal. You are badly damaged physically, and the fighting off of the dark magic will substantially weaken your own magic over time.” She watched his face closely.

He tried to keep his expression impassive, but she saw the flash of surprise, the tamping down of anger and shock. “It is dark, certainly,” he frowned, glancing at his prone form. “But permanent? You are giving your little soul mate too much credit, surely. The arrogance of the youth these days,” he made a tsking noise.

“With both of your husband’s parents dead, there isn’t much to stand in the way of your tangled romantic lives, is there? I’m all for tradition, and an elemental quartet is going well back in the magical archives, but do you really think it will boost your abilities so much that I wouldn’t be able to easily dispatch you?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied simply. “You are the one who is practically dispatched. I’m sorry to inform you that your days of terrorizing the Wizarding World are over.”

“Is that so?” Grindelwald sneered, so much rage in his eyes that Hermione had to stop herself from instinctively stepping backwards. “This is only a minor set-back, child. And you are earning a place on the list of people I’ll be dealing with shortly.”

Hermione laughed, and there was a hint of malice in the sound. “Apparently, I need to add ‘delusional’ to my list – the list of weaknesses of self-styled Dark Lords.”

“It won’t be a delusion when I testify to what you and your little group have done in open court. Underage travel, magic, and, at least in the case of Mr. Riddle, the use of an Unforgiveable,” Grindelwald’s grin was wolf-like. “Perhaps we can get adjoining cells, and I can show him just how much I appreciate all his meddling.”

As she had experienced in the village of Fontaine de Puissance when Grindelwald’s general had threatened Patience, and at Nurmengard when she had been fighting for her life, a coldness overtook Hermione at his threat. She loved Tom. It might have taken all of two years for her to come fully to terms with that, but that struggle was behind her. Despite this, she had many fears for Tom’s future, concerns that were born out of the deep knowledge of what he was capable of becoming if he lost the connections with humanity Hermione, Abraxas, Patience had spent six years forging. Tom was constantly pushing the edge of dark magic, and the fear that he might get caught, that he might be sent to Azkaban, was one of Hermione’s reoccurring nightmares. If he ended up in such an environment, she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to save him from the darkest of paths. To have Grindelwald mock that fear, to know that he was actually in a position to hurt Tom at what would be an incredibly publicized trial, was unacceptable, and Hermione had learned
almost ten years ago that when fighting evil, sometimes one’s moral beliefs had to be bent – or outright broken.

“I strive to be the best version of myself,” Hermione walked right up to his astral form, almost to the point of going through him. “I avoid violence and work toward a just society. I love others and try to believe the best of them. However, I am not naïve. I have seen evil – evil greater than yours, and I will not stand by and let it happen. Not to someone I love. Not when I can stop it. There is too much at stake, too many sacrifices already made. You’ve made a fatal error, sir.”

Before he could respond, Hermione concentrated as hard as she could, willing herself back into her physical body. Her eyes snapped open, and she felt cold, then pain. The discomfort wouldn’t stop her, though. There was something that had to be done, and done immediately. She reached out and took her wand, casting revealing spells. No alarms had been placed on her bed, though there was one on the door. Gingerly, she stood, finding that her throat felt on fire, the lining raw and aching, her stomach felt queasy, and her muscles quivered with the effort of holding her upright. The extra magic and the dosage of several blood and tissue healing spells had made the task doable, but still a terrific challenge.

She performed a charm on the bed to continue to read stable, sleeping vital signs, disarmed the rather simple alarm on the door, cast a disillusionment spell, then, using the wall as support, made her way down the hall, following the path she had taken earlier. Without the seductive call, full of the promise of great things, the trip felt much longer. Hermione pulled herself up three flights of stairs, stopping outside the door of the secure ward, which was spelled, but the guard was still engrossed in his paper, laughing at the moving comics. Panting with the effort, she leaned against the tapestries covering the wall, thinking of solutions.

It took her about three minutes to decide on a plan, then she loosened some of her new magic and slowly unwound the spells on the door. That was another fifteen minutes, and when she finally heard the small click of the doorknob, Hermione was near to collapsing. She paused for a few deep breaths, then entered. The hall appeared even dingier to her real eyes, and though she was exhausted, Hermione gathered her magic to undo the spells on Grindelwald’s door. They must have been focused on keeping him inside rather than keeping staff and visitors out, because the protections were not especially powerful.

As she quietly entered, she saw that Grindelwald’s eyes were open, though he couldn’t move.

“Paying me a visit? What was that pretty speech about?” Grindelwald’s mouth formed the words sloppily and slowly, his jaw barely moving, though his face did look puzzled, and his eyes widened further as she cast a wandless silencing spell and eased the pillow out from behind his head.

“I’m going to kill you,” she whispered sadly down at him. “I would have seen you rot in prison,
but you’ve made it clear that isn’t an option. I know you thought you were going to rule the world, but you didn’t know that I’m protecting it. I won’t let you void my sacrifices. No Dark Lord will ever reign on my watch.”

He was protesting, and Hermione was thankful she couldn’t hear his words. She methodically checked off a mental list of what she needed to do to prevent anyone from ever discovering her actions. First, she cast a revealing spell to check for any kind of recording device or security system. It seemed the only spells were the ones on the door and the room. Then, she pointed her wand at Grindelwald’s face and obliterated his memories, in case Dumbledore attempted to retrieve them after death. She went as deeply as she could, deeper than she had with her parents.

Next, she placed the pillow over his head and pushed down. Her body didn’t have much strength, but his had none. Once, she had read in a mystery novel that it took anywhere from three to six minutes to smother a person, with six minutes being the scientific threshold a person could survive without oxygen. However, Grindelwald wasn’t struggling, and after she had counted to one hundred eighty in her head, she put the pillow back and took his pulse. It was gone. She stared down at his strangely youthful face, the impishly boyish quality it still possessed. What a waste of a brilliant wizard. How sad that his soul mate, an undeniably great wizard, had never gone back in time to save him.

Slowly, she made her way back across the room, pushing the enormity of what she had done away for the moment. Once she was in the hall, under a disillusionment spell, she recast the protections on the door, using her perfect memory and the new group magic still clinging to her own aura. She limped down the stairs and back into her room, then, once sitting on the edge of her bed, she did the hardest thing of all. Tears streaming down her face, Hermione snapped her wand in half and vanished the pieces. No one would ever be able to trace her spell work, but losing a wand was very emotional, and on top of having committed deliberate, cold-blooded murder? It was too much to hold back her emotions any longer. Hermione collapsed into the bed, sobbing.

Tom, Patience, and Abraxas had gone to the Chamber as soon as Narcissa had left and had summoned a Hogwarts elf to take Hermione’s spelled map and list of those being tracked to Galatea. After that task was complete, they had lingered in the main room, none of them able to unwind from the night’s events.

Tom and Abraxas sat in chairs by the fire opposite one another, silently overwhelmed. Patience was sitting on top of one of the potion tables, her long legs folded across each other, and her hands on her knees, fingers meeting with her thumbs in a meditative pose, her eyes closed.

“We can talk to Hermione if we concentrate,” she announced to the room without opening her eyes, patting either side of the table. “She’s upset and needs our support.”
The two Slytherins had felt Hermione’s distress at the same moment, and they came over to the table and sat beside Patience. She took their hands, then they joined hands as well, creating a triangle of hands and touching knees. As they did, Tom felt the last of the barriers he had been using to hold back his fear and pain give way. Patience was a silent witness, no judgement, her soothing presence letting him simply feel. Abraxas was still processing sorrow and responsibility at the moment, but underneath that, Tom could sense his love. Hermione was there, but harder to read because of her distance and what Tom recognized as a devil’s snare of emotions.

Patience cleared her throat softly. “Yes, we all love each other, even Tom, but we need to focus on Hermione.”

Tom grumbled something in Parseltongue under his breath, but didn’t argue, which Abraxas counted as a miracle. He only wished that it hadn’t taken this crisis to get them to this point, with Hermione’s life in danger.

“Everyone breathe,” Patience ordered, “and relax.”

Tom sucked in his breath to protest, but Patience was already speaking in both of their minds. *We must be calm for this to work. We are strongly bonded, but she is far away. Just try, Tom.*

Abraxas felt Tom’s breathing change, a small bit of tension leave his hand. *Good, Patience praised, and Abraxas tried not to laugh.*

*Do you find this amusing?* Tom was speaking in his head, and Abraxas rapidly replied, *Of course not.*

*I don’t believe you,* they could all hear the hiss in Tom’s words.

Shortly after that, they connected to Hermione, and Abraxas nearly wept in relief at the sound of her voice, even though she was clearly tired and in pain.

*What is wrong, Dearest?* Tom’s mental tone was an odd mixture of a demand and an attempt to soothe her.
Patience answered before Hermione could, *Ah, you met with Death.*

Panic flooded the bond from both Tom and Abraxas. *Hermione, are you ok? What does Patience mean?* Abraxas had borrowed Tom’s tone.

*She means that I’ve… solved our problem with Grindelwald,* Hermione’s words came out slowly, and the pain behind them was palpable.

*I thought I had solved it with that curse,* Tom replied. *There was no cure for it, and it would have only strengthened with time, weakening him more each day.*

*We didn’t have that much time,* they all felt Hermione put a hand to her chest, clutching the locket as a pain went through her ribs. *He threatened you, Tom, and there is no doubt that there would have been an expedited and very public trial. Every law we broke we did in the name of stopping him, but that wouldn’t matter in the eyes of the Wizengamot.*

*No, they are a bloodless lot,* Abraxas agreed. *Some of them would convict their own mothers.*

A sense of lightness and mild euphoria came over the bond. Hermione was laughing in their minds.

*What’s going on?* Tom asked.

*The healers realized I was awake and brought me a fresh dose of pain relieving potion,* Hermione answered.

*But why were you laughing?* Abraxas added.

*Because I was thinking that the stupid, stuffy old Wizengamot probably have nargle infestations in their robes,* Hermione’s internal laughter was near hysterical now, completely and utterly pleased with herself, with not a care in the world.

Patience joined her. *Oh, you can see them, too? Excellent.*
Hermione, we love you, but we should probably let you rest. Tomorrow is Sunday. We’ll get Galatea to bring us to visit, Abraxas’s tone was commanding.

Hermione gave a sexy cooing noise. Oh, Lord Malfoy. I like it when you’re bossy.

Dearest, I’d advise you to sleep now, Tom interrupted, annoyance in his tone. And remember who the boss is.

Yes, Hermione laughed. Me. I’m the boss. I’m not bossy, I’m the BOSS! You’re too young to get that joke. Give it like sixty or seventy years. She laughed again.

That’s it. Go to sleep, Dearest. Conversation over. Tom broke the link, staring at Patience and Abraxas across the table. “What kind of medicine are they using at St. Mungo’s?”

“The medicine was only an excuse for her to let go for a moment,” Abraxas frowned. “Hermione just killed someone. She’s hurt, exhausted, and now full of guilt.”

Tom stood and began pacing in front of the fire. “I don’t know why she is feeling guilty. She just did the whole world a great service. She should get a bloody medal.”

Patience stretched, her back arching like a cat’s. “Hermione will need a new wand. One transfigured to look like her old wand.”

“Why?” Abraxas glanced at Tom, whose eyes were narrowed in confusion as well.

“She’s broken her wand so that nothing can be traced to it,” Patience pulled a long, pale wand from her shirt shelve. “I have Grindelwald’s wand, but I don’t think she’ll want this one.”

Tom rushed forward and grabbed Patience’s cheeks, kissing her soundly. “You such a sneaky thing. I adore it, Pet.”

Patience smiled happily and nodded toward the back area. “Wasn’t there a wand we stored last
The three headed to the bedroom, over to the warded cabinet containing the magical items, mostly cursed, that the group had found when first opening the Chamber. Tom carefully began going through them. He had absorbed the magic from several of the smaller, weaker cursed objects, but a wand was full of extremely powerful and temperamental magic. Opening the long, ivory box, he stared down at the snakewood wand of Slytherin himself. The wand wasn’t exactly cursed, but it did have a sleeping spell on it that needed to be activated. Slytherin had alluded to the process in his journals but had not actually described it. When he wanted a challenge, Tom tried to figure it out, but had had no luck so far.

“If we take this wand to Hermione, and use our combined magic, in the presence of the locket, then we might get it to work. Hermione could use it until we get her another wand,” Abraxas tapped at the ivory box.

“Oh,” Patience grinned. “You could ask Astarte Salazar’s secret. I’m sure she knows.”

“Pet,” Tom grabbed Patience by the waist, nipping lightly at her lips. “I’m beginning to think there isn’t much you don’t know, which is rather annoying, since you know I’ve been working on this problem for several months now.”

Patience leaned in despite Tom’s glare and bit at his neck, which got her hastily thrown into Abraxas’s waiting arms. “Timing is everything, Tom. I can only tell you things when it is cosmically correct to do so.”

“I have a few choice words for the cosmos,” Tom muttered as he strode off with the wand toward Astarte’s nest.

Abraxas couldn’t keep back a laugh as Patience snuggled into his chest. “I’m sure the cosmos feels the same about him.”

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