Six Pomegranate Seeds

by Seselt

Summary

At the end, something happened. Hermione clutches at one fraying thread, uncertain whether she is Arachne or Persephone. What she does know is that she will keep fighting to protect her friends even if she must walk a dark path.

*time travel*
Neville sliced off the snake's head.  
Harry caught the Elder wand.  
And then...  
then...  

Hermione felt only coldness beside her where Ron had been. They had run down the stairs chased by Nagini, turned to face her with their backs to rubble... She nodded to herself as the memories flashed. Neville bloodied with the Sword of Gryffindor. The last horcrux destroyed.

She had turned, scrambling up the debris to see Harry in the distance as the red/green glow flared to nothingness and he disarmed Voldemort. Slow motion, the wand sailing into his hand and then... the earth shook. The corpses in the courtyard tumbled, her friend and the Dark Lord bowled off their feet by the pressure wave before a thunderous shaking noise so loud she didn't even hear it before her eardrums burst and the...

The what? Hermione blinked, staring up at a pale sky washed almost colourless. Something had happened. She sat up slowly, expecting to feel pain but not. Blinking again she brushed hair off her face and stared at her hands. They were clean.

That was unexpected.

Hermione inspected herself. Same clothes, rumpled and torn but not dirty. Same self, it seemed, but not tired or hungry or frightened. She didn't feel anything.

Oh.

With a sense of resignation, Hermione looked around. She was in Hogwarts still. The steps, the debris, the ruined stonework. She was alone. It was quiet.

Well. The Muggle-born would have sighed if she had been breathing, which she belatedly noticed she was not. Well, then, now what? The stillness seemed sort of soft. Like the moment between breaths. If she had thought about what came after death at all, she had vaguely expected it to be brighter in that 'walking into the light' cliché.

All in all, Hermione mused as she tramped through the rubble of her school, this afterlife was rather underwhelming. Where were the ghosts? The other people? She knew she wasn't the only one who had... passed on. She went to the Great Hall expecting to meet regrettably dozens of fellow casualties. She'd quite like a hug from Tonks right now.

The Great Hall was empty. The tables and the ranked benches were bare. There were pennants, which made her frown. The colours were faded and the emblems morphed oddly through stylised shapes. Always the right ones; eagle for blue, lion for red but not the same symbol. She wasn't wearing her uniform otherwise she would have checked her badge to see if it was doing the same thing.

"It would be." The voice came from behind her. Of course it did because this wasn't creepy enough. Hermione froze. She didn't have a wand. Ron had been holding hers, she thought. Her recollection of the battle was still disjointed flashes, the memories ill-formed from stress and adrenaline. Was cortisol the hormone that inhibited memory? She thought it could be. Cortisone was an anti-inflammatory.
“You are drifting. Focus.” The voice spoke again. Hermione turned around. No one was there.

Then a bust in one of the alcoves nodded at her. She glared. Right, Hermione thought marshalling herself. Right. Right now, she was going to get some answers.

“Am I dead?” She demanded, wanting to know exactly her state of being or unbeing so she could get some direction back in her (un)life.

“Yes and no.” The stone head said placidly.

“I am not in the mood for any metaphysical nonsense.” Hermione replied, marching over to the abbreviated statue to poke it on the nose. It felt solid but the sensation from her finger was muted. Not numb exactly. More sluggish, perhaps. “Is this a time dilation effect?”

“Not entirely.” The head shrugged its truncated shoulders.

“Magic school or not, I'll bet Filch has a sledgehammer somewhere.” She informed the unhelpful noggin. “Or you and I could go find an intact tower I can drop you off. It's been a long year and I am sure I could find some irrational wrath to share.”

“But you do not feel angry, do you?” The voice was still pleasant though now with a hint of smug. Hermione frowned, anticipating feeling a spike of irritation at its response. She didn't. Didn't feel anything much beyond the exhaled aftermath of exertion. Like a popped balloon.

“Not entirely.” Hermione retorted. She might not have any lively emotions but she certainly had a wellspring of snark. “Look, I don’t want to play twenty questions. I would like to have an explanation of what is going on, how I can get back to where I should be, and generally life, the universe and everything.”

“There was an event.” The bust announced and primmed its lips at her glare. “We are sorry we cannot be more descriptive. We are the voice of Hogwarts not an oracle.” Hermione crossed her arms but forbore to comment. “The event disrupted the corporeality of the environs. The fabric of reality has been partially unwoven.”

“How do we fix it?” She asked, shoving aside a juvenile urge to stamp her feet and scream. She could have a tantrum after she escaped this weird limbo.

“We send you back to find out what happened and have you stop it. This thread of existence has unraveled. You can leave before you entered but not after. There is no coherent future from here.” Seeing this news was moderately well received, the stone head ventured into less amenable territory. “But you cannot be put back as yourself.”

“Why not?” Hermione inquired, imagining a tapestry. If someone had put a hole in the cloth and she was near one of the frayed edges, she could picture what 'Jocunda Sykes' or at least the statue depicting her was saying. Without any thread ahead of her, she couldn't follow it forward. She would have to backtrack and go sideways to divert around the gap.

“Because there is not space for two of you. There is already a 'you' in the 'you-shaped' place in reality. There are other gaps we could put you in but you, the Hermione you, would not fit properly.” Jocunda explained with an air of talking to the hard-of-thinking. “There are always lacunae in reality so we can find one that might suit but making one damages the whole cloth.”

“Anything that breaks the pattern hastens Ragnarok.” She quoted a runic edda. Hermione had never put much stock in predestination. The idea of just giving up and letting Fate sweep over her did not appeal. Going quietly was not for her. “So I leave here and pop up in the nearest suitable naturally
“It depends.” The bust weathered a gimlet stare from the young witch. “We are not doing this deliberately to vex you. All sorts of things can ease apart the threads. Reality breathes and in that motion, the parts comprising existence shift.” The stare continued along with the prevarication. “The sort of space we need for you comes from someone else's death, does that sate you? Every time the Killing Curse ends someone, the thread of their future disappears.”

“Dead man's boots, literally.” Hermione grimaced. “Couldn't I just go back as a ghost? If I didn't have a physical body, would I be able to fit better between the threads? If I were incorporeal, I could more easily pass through wards and barriers.”

“You would look like yourself. Ghosts are wholly made of soul-stuff. Eternal and immutable. There is no way to disguise you. Neither could you lie, except by silence.” Jocunda shook her head firmly enough to rock a little on her plinth. “We would not be killing someone so you could take their place. He or she is already dead. The Unforgivable Curses are not so-called because of their general unpleasantness. They linger on the weave. Once cast, their effects remain. Even if you used temporal magic to alter the threads, someone would still die at that moment.”

“I didn't know that.” She had tried to research the Unforgivables to find a way to resist them or mend their damage. Being a student limited her access. She couldn't complain about a secondary school not having books on death magic readily available but the theory behind the curses was as fascinating as the curses themselves. Hermione wanted to know everything about how magic worked. “Does a Time-Turner have the same effect? Does it make marks on the tapestry the same way?”

“No, though the supposition it would is not unreasonable. Temporal magic manipulates the threads but does not itself damage them. You can loop a thread, direct it elsewhere, unweave it so it hangs loose and seems cut, all manner of change. However, you are simply shifting the fabric not damaging it.” The bust paused, seeing a question bloom in the witch's eyes.

“Is that why I am the only one here? Because of the Time-Turner?” Hermione bit her lip. “I took Harry back with me when we saved Buckbeak and Sirius. He should be here too.”

“He was a passenger.” Jocunda went silent for a long moment and when it spoke again, the voice was slightly different. “Child, there is a reason you were given the temporal device. It was not simply to allow you to study yourself to exhaustion. You were being tested.”

“Did I pass?” She asked, biting her tongue before she inquired about the marking key and assessment parameters.

“You did, yes. Had matters been otherwise, you would have been approached after your OWLs to undertake special training. The Unspeakables had noticed your resonance and wished to recruit you.” The carved mouth sagged into a frown. “With Tom Riddle again embodied, bringing such attention to you would have been fatal. It is fortunate you were not an apprentice when you visited the Department of Mysteries. The Marked would have noticed.”

“And objected to a Mudblood being given the opportunity, I expect.” Hermione grimaced. If she ever got the chance to go into academia, she would write an idiot's guide to human genetics and make it compulsory reading for pure-bloods. Failing that, she'd refer them to the Spanish Habsburgs.

“Without a doubt. However any bar the hopelessly addled would also have seen you able to traverse the defences. The barriers simply would not have existed for you, including the prohibitions guarding the prophecies.” The bust said with emphasis. “You would have been able to pick up the orb Tom Riddle wanted so badly. You would have been an invaluable resource.”
Hermione had never envied Harry's status as the Chosen One. She had pitied him that so much of his life was bent around Trelawney's rambling and a madman's obsession. But now thinking about how close they had come to being captured and how very very pleased Voldemort would have been to have a way to pillage the Department of Mysteries at will, she felt true sympathy for her best friend. Being special could be a curse.

“Right, becoming a ghost is out and time magic won't save someone from being killed, but why do I have to go back into some else's life?” Hermione wasn't objecting per se she simply wanted to understand the extent of the crisis.

“Any temporal loop requires an intact thread. Here, in this place, we do not have one. The moment you leave, your thread would resume but without a place in the weave, you would be adrift in the ether.” The marble Jocunda had a distinctly pedantic tone now. “Hogwarts can sustain your transition from this non-place. However, until you are embedded within reality, the further you are physically from the school the more likely you are to come loose.”

“How long would it take me to become embedded?” She considered what she might have to do to discover the cause of the 'event'. If she could camp out in the Room of Requirement with the other students, there would be no need for her to enrol. She could sneak around the school more or less anonymously.

“That depends on how tightly you enmesh yourself with other threads. There are those who go their entire existences lightly woven and others who twine with many.” The bust didn't shrug this time, reinforcing the impression that regardless of the royal 'we' there was more than one voice. “There will be the difficulty of making a body for you. The flesh itself is easily copied but your magic will be unfamiliar with your new shell. You will need time to acclimate.”

“If I ask how long that will take, will I get another 'how long is a piece of string' reply?” Hermione asked with some asperity. The stone head nodded gravely. “Wonderful.” She wanted to hit the ground running. Unfortunately it seemed she would need the magical equivalent of physical therapy. “Dumbledore and Cedric were both killed by the Avada. Could we use the space left by them?”

“The Headmaster's lacuna will not give you enough opportunity to regain your strength. We have only this one chance.” The voice faded as it communed. “The young Badger is suitable. Have you confidence you can masquerade as him?”

Hermione blinked, startling herself with the realisation she hadn't been doing that either. She pinched herself for the sake of being able to say she had. Nothing dramatic happened. The bust of Jocunda Sykes continued to regard her patiently.

“I'm sorry. I seem to have made an assumption. Do you mean when I step into someone's threadspace that I become them? Not just me in some random disguise?” She asked carefully.

“That is the case, yes.” The head confirmed. “There are complex resonances necessary to maintain the substitution. You will be their doppelganger.”

“There's no way I can fake being Cedric. I barely knew him and he was very popular. Plus everyone saw him dead.” Hermione sat down to give the problem some serious thought. She didn't know any people who had died from the Killing Curse who she could also impersonate. That idea was simply a dead end. The older the person was she was replacing, the more likely someone would notice her make a mistake. So perhaps, if she replaced a child? The Death Eaters had not held themselves back from murdering kids. “Is there someone who would have gone to school in my year or thereabouts?”
“Alas, yes.” The voice was sorrowful. “Several.”

The silence lengthened as the head presumably consulted again, probably checking the Book of Admittance. Hermione would have liked to have seen the book herself but the tower in which it was kept was exceedingly locked. Professor McGonagall had told her no one had touched the Book or its paired Quill since the Founders. Given the age of the artefact, it could well be semi-sentient. Perhaps it was one of the voices.

“We call them the Lost Ones or the fosterlings of slipshod angels. Their loss diminishes us and angers us. They should not have been taken.” The sculpted teeth ground as the animus within the bust manifested intensely. “If you wish a life with little oversight, there is one. An orphan raising in hiding, fatherless since the war, motherless since their Secret Keeper died and they were discovered. Cathal Machtilda Rosier.”

“A Death Eater's child?” Hermione had done some research into her enemies, particularly those who had supported Voldemort from the beginning. A Rosier had gone to school with Tom Riddle, and his son had died resisting arrest. Had in fact taken a chunk off Alastor Moody.

“The legitimate daughter of Evan Hugh Rosier, of Slytherin House, and Derica Melusine Max, a Durmstrang alumna.” The bust could not comment on the political affiliation of the witch but given the child had been born at Rosier Hall, the marriage had almost certainly been acknowledged. “She was raised on the Isle of Man, and died there age ten. She would have been in your year.”

“How did she die?” The question was quiet and intent.

“We cannot say. We know only where she was when the Killing Curse ended her. We are aware of the Fidelius by supposition because her location was not revealed to the Book of Admittance until three weeks before her death.” Edging forward on its plinth, the bust looked down at Hermione pensive on the floor. “There are others.”

“Is Cathal the one where I would have the least scope of getting caught out? I can lie but I'm not good at making things up on the fly.” Hermione didn't like the prospect of wearing someone else's life like a flayed skin. Neither did she like sitting here for an arbitrary eternity.

“Her next-of-kin is listed as 'nearest blood relative', which indicates her immediate family are either dead, incapacitated, or incarcerated. After her death we received no queries about her from concerned individuals.” Here the voice paused to assess a declarative statement. “We believe she is the most suitable lacuna near the time you suggested. That is not to say she is the best positioned candidate to succeed in discovering the cause of the event.”

“Given we have no clue what the event is far less how to stop it, I doubt we could say who is 'best positioned'.” She weighed the pros and cons, ending with a great big bunch of inconclusive guesswork. “Hypothetically speaking, say I go back as Rosier, I find out what happened, I put the kibosh on it and then what?”

“We do not know.” The candid answer came promptly, which did not do much for Hermione's peace of mind.

“That's what I thought you'd say. So blindly into the unknown I go.” She stared at the desaturated masonry, at the dust motes hanging suspended as though she was looking at a photograph taken with a dirty camera. At her own hands, clean despite all she had done to bring herself to this point. “What do I need to do?”

“Consent is all that is required. We cannot tell you how we do what we will do to return you to the
world.” There was admantine in the voice now. However chatty the school might be on esoterica, there were secrets that would be kept. “You will find yourself as Miss C. Rosier, Hidden Cellar, Rose Cottage, The Cronk, Ballaugh, Isle of Man.”

“How much time will there be between her death and my return? Specifically, will I be stuck in a cellar with someone willing to use the Killing Curse on a ten year old?” Hermione got to her feet, dusting herself in a gesture that was more about mental preparation than cleanliness.

“Very little and yes.” The bust replied. “Once you are back in the world, we can send a house elf to help you. But you must go first for our servitor to find you as Cathal Rosier has no link to the school.” The stone eyes studied Hermione unblinking. “Her deathday is the nineteenth day of July. Her birthday is the third day of August. You now know as much of her as we do.”

“So the general plan is I rematerialise and don't get killed again then your elf arrives.” She had done more with less. “I have a link to the school. Can the elf bring me to Hogwarts early? You said I needed to stay close to avoid drifting away.”

“It would be better if you were close to us, though not essential.” A moment of consultation later, the head nodded. “Yes, you will come to the school. We can conceal you here then convey you to Platform Nine and Three Quarters to feign a more appropriate arrival.”

“Let's do this before I think of all the ways it could go wrong.” Hermione raised her chin and consciously took a deep breath. “I'd like a way to communicate with you. I'll need all the help I can get.”

“Such a way will be provided.” The voice reassured. “Close your eyes, Miss Granger.”

Hermione did as she was told and tried not to flinch as the darkness consumed her.
The smell of smoke roused her. Hermione coughed, instinctively covering her face. When she smacked herself on the nose she opened her eyes. Her hands were small. Her arms felt like noodles, impersonally unwilling to respond. Her mind at least was sharp. It told her in sequence: smoke, fire, and enclosed space.

She rolled, she couldn't make her legs bend to push herself off the floor, to a woman in a nightgown lying sprawled on the flagstones. Hermione struggled to lift a hand but her limbs flailed as though the messages between her brain and her nervous system weren't connecting properly. She could feel her body just not control it very well.

She put her face next to the woman's, her cheek against the slightly parted lips. No breath. Hermione gritted her teeth, biting her tongue accidentally, and thrashed onto her stomach. The smoke was getting thicker. She couldn't see more than a metre or two. The woman. Stone floors. A stick lying in the groove between two pavers.

On her belly, Hermione crawled swearing with frustration inch by inch closer to the wand that had rolled out of the woman's hand. She got to it, grabbing it in her teeth to shove it into her unresponsive fingers. Something simple, something she could almost will into effect.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Hermione choked out in between bouts of coughing. Her pyjamas lifted themselves. Clumsily, she directed her clothing to the left, picking the direction in which the smoke seemed thinnest. She dragged more than floated and bumped against a wooden wall. Sweating, Hermione tried to prop herself up. Spots of light danced in front of her eyes. She wasn't sure if it was oxygen deprivation or magical exertion.

"Spongify!" Pointing the wand at the wall behind her then jerking herself backwards, Hermione managed to bounce herself roughly sideways, ending up on her front on the floor. She cast the Softening Charm on the stone beneath her and threw her weight against it. The rubbery surface let her fling herself against the wall about a pace ahead. She repeated the process, bouncing herself back and forth along the wall.

Her rationalisation was that in a cellar, a wooden wall would be the most likely to have a door in it rather than the stone walls. She just had to bump along until she found something that rattled. Hermione kept going, coughing and gasping, drained by the effort of casting spells she'd learned in First Year. She was concentrating so hard on the Softening Charm that she missed the change in response from the wall behind her and ended up on the floor staring at the gap.

The witch screwed up her stinging eyes, realising what she was seeing was the undercut between the door and the flagstones. She shoved her face close to the gap, breathing the trickle of fresh air. Good progress. Hermione panted, trying to fill her lungs. Have to get out. She knocked her head against the door as lifting her arm was simply not happening.

No reaction to her touch. Gulping air, she tried an Unlocking Charm. Nothing happened. Hermione swore. She was not going to die of smoke inhalation in a stranger's cellar. Closing her eyes and gripping the wand as best she could, she gathered her magic. It felt familiar, all of it there though without a conduit through her body. The wand didn't help. It was old and poorly attuned. There wouldn't be any finesse.

"Bombarda!" Hermione cast, blasting through the door. The hail of splinters and the rush of air was as welcome as rain after drought. She could see more but the effort of the explosive charm made her
Jocunda had cautioned her about using magic, hadn't she? Right now, everything but getting away from the fire seemed irrelevant. Hermione couldn't bring herself to care if she had made a mistake.

Someone shouted. Something exploded. Boots thundered down wooden steps. A Disarming Charm snatched the wand from her. Bastard, Hermione thought. Soon as she could she was going to get some sort of lanyard to keep her wand, where was her wand, in her hand. Maybe just glue it to her palm, the point along her index finger. She thought that idea was hilarious. She could really give people the Finger that way.

Someone grabbed her. She bit them. It was an automatic reaction. Hermione was not at all in favour of being manhandled. Someone got a fist in her hair, which felt wrong but everything was going vague so she couldn't be sure why she was worried about her hair. Be more worried about the fist, she told herself, and lashed out at whoever was trying to carry her off.

“Stupefy.” He said and Hermione went dark.

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Hermione woke up with a headache. She winced as she opened her eyes. The light from the window was midday bright and left an imprint on her retina as she blinked. Well, she wasn't in the cellar any more. That was an improvement. Positive thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she didn't cough. Her lungs felt fine. A bit sort of pink like they had after some of the potions she had taken to recover from Dolohov's curse.

She had been healed with magic. That was a promising sign. Hermione sat up to inspect the room. It was small and beige. Off-white walls. Off-white carpet made darker with age and use. A single bed with an eggshell coloured eiderdown. Pale curtains in need of a wash or a cleaning charm. Certainly not a hovel. Possibly a not often used spare bedroom pressed into service for an unexpected guest.

Hermione pushed the blankets off, relieved to see her arms were now listening to her. She touched her fingertips to her thumbs to check her manual dexterity. It seemed in order. She stretched. Nothing twanged alarmingly though she was a bit stiff. Must have been put to sleep magically. Getting out of the bed cautiously, Hermione found her legs were cooperative too.

She padded over to the window and saw only her reflection. When she tried to open it, she found the latch stubbornly locked. Less guest and more prisoner. Hermione did a tour of the room to assess her situation. There was the bed, a chest of drawers, and three doors. She tried the doors. One was locked, one was a closet and the third was a small ensuite, which she used.

The pipes didn't groan and after a fairly short interval she had hot water to wash her hands, indicating the plumbing was modern. The mirror above the sink had been removed though the fittings remained. She checked the vanity. It was empty. So was the chest of drawers. Hermione returned to the window to look at herself and think.

Cathal Machtildre Rosier was about five foot, which was tall for a not quite eleven year old girl. She had straight sandy blonde hair and eyes that were a foggy greenish blue. In Hermione's opinion, she looked like she had faded in the wash. Her teeth were good and she had freckles, which were a novelty for the easily tanned reincarnate witch. She seemed healthy. A pity she had never got a chance to grow up.

Of course, considering her parentage, Cathal might have been a mini-Bellatrix burning to hex Mudbloods. Hermione smiled at her reflection. The expression didn't seem to get as far as her eyes. Staring at herself, she let her face relax. Cathal's resting, neutral expression was a steady look with a
downward curved mouth. Likely not the result of a happy childhood.

She was still peering at herself when the door opened without a knock. A witch in a house robe and a wizard in the uniform of an Auror stepped in. He had his wand out while his companion had a meal tray in her hands. Neither of them looked particularly friendly. The witch put the covered tray on the chest of drawers before taking two sharp steps backwards to keep out of the wizard's line of fire.

“That's your lunch, Rosier. Eat it and don't cause trouble, and we'll get on fine.” His tone was astringent, just shy of hostile. Hermione studied him. She might have seen him before, maybe as one of the Aurors sent to guard Hogwarts in Sixth Year.

“Where am I?” Hermione asked politely. Her courtesy earned her a sneer from the Auror.

“Never you bloody mind. You'll be staying here until we find someone to foist you onto.” He snapped, eyeing her in a way disquietingly familiar to the leer Fenrir Greyback had given her. It wasn't sexual, thank the gods, but it was hungry. The Auror wanted something from her.

“I don't think so.” She might have continued the effort at good manners except for that look. She wasn't safe here. Something was going on and it wasn't to the advantage of Cathal Rosier. “Unless I have been charged with a crime, you cannot hold me in custody. You are not my legal guardian, which makes this kidnapping.”

“Listen to me, you miserable little brat.” The Auror took a step towards her then stopped himself. He relaxed his arms, letting them hang by his sides in a deliberately non-threatening pose. Still with his wand out. “You're here for your own safety. So shut up and behave.”

“I will not.” Direct defiance was probably not the most effective way of getting information about her situation but Hermione was very interested in his change of demeanour. She didn't think that she, Cathal, was particularly important but she, Hermione, wondered why the Auror hadn't taken her to the Ministry. That would seem the sensible thing to do with an under-age child. “I want my solicitor.”

“For Merlin's sake!” The wizard's teeth actually ground. He evidently hadn't interacted much with children before. The witch was watching her with a frown though her gaze seemed to be sympathetic. “You're what nine? You don't have a bloody solicitor.”

“My grandfather does. I am his heir.” That was a calculated guess on her part. Hermione didn't think the elder Rosier had more than one child and the stone head hadn't mentioned any siblings for Cathal.

“Your grandfather is dead.” There was a righteous amount of glee in his statement. The Auror was damn near dancing a jig on Piers Rosier's grave. Hermione could not blame him. Rosier had stayed out of Azkaban by pleading the Imperius.

“His estate will certainly have solicitors. I wish to contact them immediately.” Her lack of reaction to the news of Cathal's grandfather's death deepened the quiet witch's frown. Hermione met her gaze calmly, mostly because she had never been able to fake tears. Her parents had not been amenable to emotional manipulation. A reasoned argument about why she needed another book or would prefer to visit the Natural History Museum rather than the V&A, now that had worked. A storm of weeping? Never.

The Auror opened his mouth to shout then stilled himself when his companion put her hand on his arm. He glared before nodding slowly. They left, shutting the door firmly behind them. Hermione
investigated the tray on the chest of drawers. A chicken salad sandwich, a banana, and a glass of pumpkin juice. Unlikely to be poisoned.

She was hungry. After some thought, Hermione replaced the cover on the tray. Breaking bread with her captors meant she accepted their hospitality, which she did not want to do. She needed to get to Hogwarts so she could consult with the voice of the school again. Finding out some more about Cathal’s home life would be useful otherwise she would be playing it very reticent.

On the theme of not doing what she was told, Hermione checked the exit. The door was again locked. She tried the handle and was relieved to discover no hexes. She was also pleased to note it was a Muggle style doorknob that screwed into place rather than the wizarding style which was bolted on. Unscrewing the knob, Hermione removed the central bar that turned the mechanism. Then she threw the knob at the window.

It bounced off rather than breaking the glass. She had expected that, though she tried again for the sake of thoroughness. Again the knob bounced, skittering away under the bed. The witch weighed the palm width long steel in her hand. She tried the window latch first, seeing if she could pry it open with her new tool.

The sash window was set in a wooden rather than modern aluminium frame and the latch looked of the same vintage. She could wedge the small bar under the rotating bit of the latch to get some leverage but it wasn't enough to pry it off. Hermione kept trying at different angles until her hands were sore then searched the room for another way out.

She moved the lunch tray aside and climbed onto the chest of drawers to have a look at the ceiling. It was smooth, plain and ordinary, leading her to assume it was plasterboard. Launching the door knob at it as hard as she could dented what was indeed plasterboard. Hermione pulled one of the drawers out and used it to smash a bigger hole in the ceiling between the joists. It wasn't possible to work quietly so she worked fast.

Standing precariously on the drawer on top of the chest of drawers gave her enough height to boost herself up through the gap into the attic above just as someone shouted at the door. They tried the knob but it turned uselessly. Hermione ran along the joists as best she could. Fortunately the attic had never been renovated so it was an empty space of insulation and wiring.

She couldn’t see well enough to find the crawl hole. Hermione flipped a mental coin. Either she searched methodically by feel or she took the fast way out. The noise of a door slamming open downstairs decided her. Fast it was.

Under the peak of the roof, Hermione jumped as high as she could, coming down onto the plasterboard between the joists. It cracked. Hastily she repeated the jump and crashed through the ceiling into the hallway below. She tried to roll on impact. Her various falls and spills hadn’t magically given her gymnastic ability though she did at least land on her hip and backside rather than ankle or wrist. Cathal wouldn’t thank her for breaking a bone the first day she had custody of her body.

Hermione got achingly to her feet then sprinted down the stairs, thankful she’d hit the landing not the steps. The front door was right there. She flicked the deadbolt, jerked it open then ran barefoot and in her pyjamas down the garden path. Quite a nice garden with cottage flowers and a wicker arbour. The street was nice too, with trees and a little park she dashed past with barely a glance.

The voice of Hogwarts had promised her an elf. If there was a Fidelius or non-detection ward on the house then no one not included in the ritual could sense her within. Hermione wasn’t trying to escape so much as distance herself from any shielding. She dodged into a laneway between two hedged
“Voice? Elf?” Hermione called, trying to stir her magic so her signature would be more obvious. Much easier with a wand. She brushed off her sore feet and regretted the absence of shoes too. “Some help please.”

A soft pop heralded the arrival of a scrawny little creature in a pillowcase with a Hogwarts badge sewn prominently on the chest. The house elf's ears stood proud of its head like sails and it leaped at Hermione, grabbing her hand impatiently. They disappeared with another pop.

Their arrival in the Shrieking Shack caused an upswell of dust. Hermione sneezed convulsively while the elf fidgeted, finally conjuring a handkerchief for her. She muttered her thanks into the cotton in between paroxysms.

“Miss was hiding!” The elf complained petulantly. “Moppet was looking all over and Miss was not to be found.”

“Miss apologises unreservedly.” Hermione replied, wiping her nose. “I think there must have been an Auror raid on the cottage. Or possibly some unauthorised spontaneous justice.” She hadn't had an opportunity to poke about the place. “A woman I believe is Mrs Rosier was in the cellar. I don't know what happened to her body. The least I can do for Cathal is to ensure her mother's decently buried.”

“Moppet will go to Manx land and see, after Miss follows Moppet to the Come and Go Room.” The house elf ordered imperiously, holding out her hand to Hermione as though she didn't trust her not to wander off. The witch took her hand and allowed herself to be escorted through the tunnel into the school itself and thence to the seventh floor.

The Room of Requirement modelled itself on Hermione's bedroom at her parents' house. She stood in the centre of the tidy little room and it hit her then that right now her mum and dad were at their dental practise. They were safe and aware of her existence. Eleven year old Hermione was rereading her textbooks or making a list for shopping in Diagon Alley. Naive and hopeful, an innocent little girl.

Hermione lay down on her bed, burying her face in the pillow and cried. Cried as she'd not had the chance to do for weeks. She let out the fear and anger and exhaustion. Harry and Ron were safe for another seven years, or as safe as the Chosen One and a blood traitor could be with the rise of bloody Tom Riddle and his Klu Klux Klods.

Hermione let herself be snottily, gaspingly miserable until her eyes stung and her chest ached. Then she imagined a lavish bathroom like the one the Prefects used. She soaked in the tub. Moppet found her washing Cathal's hair, popping in unannounced with a sack in her thin hands.

“Miss must be told there isn't a cottage any more. It was burned down. All the pretty roses singed.” The house elf upended the sack, spilling scorched books and ash-smeared personal possessions on the floor. “This was all Moppet could find. Moppet thinks the Rosier witch used Fiendfyre on her house. Only the downstairs room was not cinders.”

“She set fire to her own home?” Hermione ducked her head under the water to rinse off the shampoo then swam over to the edge of the expansive tub. “During a fight or as a pre-emptive?” The house elf shrugged at her question. “It wasn't Fiendfyre in the cellar. I never would've got out if it'd been.”

“Moppet thinks the Rosier witch was hurt. Her magic in the downstairs room was fading. Moppet could feel her spells all over the little house. Over and over spells, and fighting spells when the others
came.” She picked up one of the books. “These was in a big pile on a desk in the hidden room behind the wall. The Rosier witch used a burning spell but it wasn't enough. These didn't want to burn.”

“Are you saying Derica Rosier used her last dying strength to cast the Killing Curse on her daughter?” Hermione asked, horrified. The elf shrugged again.

“Moppet doesn't know. Moppet can only feel the magic. The Rosier witch was still there. Moppet put her in the garden under the roses.” Snapping her fingers, Moppet summoned a towel, handing it to the witch when she got out of the bath.

“They left her? They took Cathal but left her mother's body?” She wished now she'd asked more questions of her unwilling hosts. The Auror probably wouldn't have answered but the witch with the tray might have. Then again, they'd known who she was. He'd called Cathal by her surname. “What the hell were they thinking?”

“Moppet doesn't know. Moppet thinks witches and wizards don't do much thinking.” The house elf observed dryly.
Hermione had planned to use the time until the start of term to revise her First and Second Year spells to harmonise herself with her new body. What she mostly did instead was sleep. Physically, after the bruises faded, Cathal was fine. It was the spirit inside that was spent. Being the Chosen One’s stalwart companion had taken a lot out of her. She slept and ate the food Moppet smuggled in and recuperated.

It was her Hogwarts letter fluttering into existence that jolted Hermione out of her hibernation. Miss C. Rosier had things to do. She opened the envelope and read the list with a goofy little smile. The anticipation of returning even as someone else lit a candle of joy within her. The receipt of her own letter remained her Patronus memory. She loved the school.

The voice wasn't speaking to her yet, though. Hermione had asked Moppet and had received another of the house elf's resigned shrugs. Such things were beyond the ken of sensible folk. Moreover, such things were beyond the responsibility of sensible folk so no one was going to yell or complain if the aforementioned simply got on with their work.

The moment she touched the letter there was a faint buzz in her head like a poorly tuned radio. Hermione closed her eyes to concentrate. The noise became the school song, indicating she presumed a connection had been made. She tried to reach out to the source and jumped as something pinged off the back of her head. Opening her eyes, she picked up a badge. A Head Girl's badge.

“I missed out on that.” Rubbing a thumb over the tarnished silver, Hermione noticed the green enamel. “Slytherin? You want this for Rosier?” A bell like the one for end of class chimed in her head. “I was thinking of being an unremarkable Hufflepuff. Of not emphasising that her family were all apparently raving lunatics.”

She received no reply. Her inchoate plan was to keep to the tunnels as much as possible, to map them. Hermione had got the impression from the fleeting moment before she had woken up dead(ish) that the event had started underground. There had been an earthquake before the blast wave. No one would have had a chance to conduct a ritual above ground without someone else interfering belligerently.

“No one notices Hufflepuffs, and I'm loyal. Through good, bad, thick, thin, and bloody.” Hermione asserted. No one else had stuck with Harry just for Harry, to help the boy who had been dealt a shitty hand. Another badge appeared out of nothingness, dropping onto her shoulder. She fumbled then caught it. A prefect's badge. “Pansy was the female prefect for Slytherin. Though how she managed that with her grades, I don't know.”

A copy of Cantankerous Nott's Pure-Blood Directory thumped onto her bedside table. Somehow the unseen spirit of Hogwarts managed to convey dismissive disdain with a single thump. The cover of the book was foxed if not badgered. Hermione had read the book in hopes of better understanding the attitude of the 'elite of wizarding society'. It had strongly reminded her of a Crufts pedigree manual.

“The Parkinsons are in there, I know. So are the Greengrasses and I'm fairly sure Daphne had better marks.” Hermione watched as the book flopped open, the pages riffling to the entry for the Greengrass family. She read it again and noted an inclusion that had been edited out in the publicly available copy she had purchased. “An inherited curse?”

The book shut quietly, conveying the matter was closed. With Davis and Bulstrode half-bloods,
Hermione could understand why neither of them were selected. The Greengrasses only had the two daughters, if she recalled correctly. Courting a curse to endanger one of them just to be a Prefect wouldn't have been a risk she would have taken. Of course, had her family been subject to dangerous ancestral magic, she would have fixed it PDQ.

“I still think Hufflepuff would be more sensible. I don't want to spend years spouting blood purity nonsense and looking down my nose at people. Parkinson did that so often I'm amazed she could see where she was going.” Hermione dodged when the Pure-Blood Directory flung itself towards her. “Fine, alright. We need a better communication method than you throwing things at me.”

The Room of Requirement was silent. Hermione dusted off the book with a reproachful look at the walls. The Directory might be drivel but it was valuable. She had firm views on the respect due to the published word. Once a society started disdaining knowledge, the descent began. Burning books made her shudder. Which reminded her of the trove Moppet had brought from the Rosiers' cottage.

Hermione sat at her desk to make a list of everything she needed down to spare socks. She had no idea about Cathal's financial situation. She would have to go to Diagon Alley to Gringotts or, if she couldn't prove her identity to the goblins, to Knockturn Alley to sell some of the trinkets Moppet had found. Most of her supplies she could probably find in the Room of Hidden Things. She'd look like she'd dressed at a jumble sale but really all she needed was seven Galleons for a new wand.

“Moppet?” Hermione called, tapping her ratty quill against the scavenged parchment. The house elf had brought her basic school supplies so she could study. There was no point making notes if they disappeared when she left the Room.

“Miss is getting out of bed before noon today?” Her tone suggested this was a marvellous occurrence.

“Miss is getting off her arse, yes.” She couldn't call herself enthusiastic but she wasn't running on the smell of an oily rag any more. “Can you take me to Diagon Alley? Will anyone notice if you're gone for the day?”

“No one notices elves.” Moppet echoed the witch's words with rather more poignancy. “Headmaster could call Moppet if he needed Moppet but Headmaster is out. Deputy Headmistress doesn't bother elves. Moppet can take Miss, if Miss wears not her pyjamas.”

“They're clean. You clean them every day when I wash.” While Hermione was much obliged by her help, the suggestion she was slopping around in her own grot was a little offensive.

“Miss is a servitor of Hogwarts, near as. Miss finds some dignity. And some robes.” The house elf advised. The witch regarded her sourly. The castigation was mild. The sass was patent.

Hermione did what she was told. She gathered her scant belongings and stepped out of the Room of Requirement. She paced back and forth three times in front of the door then opened it, walking into the Room of Hidden Things. She could have asked Moppet to purloin some clothes from one of the Professors but that would get the house elf into trouble. Hermione would rather scavenge something than have her only ally punished.

All the unclaimed lost and found items in Hogwarts ended up eventually among the Hidden Things. She started systematically opening wardrobes and cupboards. The variety of objects misplaced in the school was astonishing. In the first minute, Hermione found a croquet mallet, hot pink leg warmers, a ball of elastic bands bigger than her head, and a nest of Glumbumbles, which she saw off with the mallet.
A black randoseru apparently misplaced by an exchange student from Mahoutokoro was a lucky find. She transferred Cathal's belongings from the burlap sack into the leather backpack and snapped the cover closed. With some persistence, she found a pair of Quidditch boots that fit and more left socks than she would need in a year. Trousers, an extremely paisley shirt, bloomers with a blue lace trim, and a grey robe with pewter buttons completed her ensemble. Everything fit well enough she didn't look like she'd stolen her clothes off a washing line. Hermione tied back her hair with one of the elastic bands then exited the Room.

Moppet smuggled her out of Hogwarts via the secret passage on the fifth floor behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. It led to a hidden door in a tree near the Black Lake, still within the Apparition boundary but inconspicuous enough they could cross the wards out of the sight of the Castle itself. Moppet took her hand and popped them away.

The first Saturday in August saw Diagon Alley busy with shoppers wanting to avoid the last minute rush before the school year began. Hermione and the house elf appeared in a nook behind the jellied eel shop in Carkitt Market rather than the Alley proper. She didn't mind the diversion as it meant they could slip down a lane around the back of Gringotts without having to traverse the heavily trafficked streets.

Moppet hung back out of sight as Hermione approached the high counters. The goblin glanced up from his ledger. He did not look impressed. She was not surprised neither was she daunted. Lifting Cathal's chin, she looked the teller directly in the eye and spoke confidently.

“I am Cathal Machtildé Rosier, daughter of Evan Rosier. I would like to inquire whether there is a vault in my name.” Hermione had debated strategy with herself before opting to be forthright rather than brash. She could have bluffed it out and demanded access to her family's funds but for all she knew the Ministry could have frozen the Rosier accounts. The Aurors had been at Rose Cottage for a reason.

“Do you have any proof of your name?” The goblin wrote something in the ledger. Hermione handed over her Hogwarts letter shy of its envelope as she didn't want to answer awkward questions about why her letter had been delivered to the Room of Requirement. “This confirms there is a Cathal Rosier, not that you are she.”

“I am prepared to swear a blood oath.” She asserted. A witch or wizard would likely have objected at this point, citing that under-age children couldn't swear oaths. The goblin did not object for he was doubtless aware children younger than seventeen could swear non-binding blood oaths. The legalism was a legacy from apprentice contacts, which Hermione had read up on when trying to find a way to get Harry out of having to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. No knowledge was ever wasted.

The teller placed a parchment sheet in front of her and handed her a long dark feather. Hermione recognised the writing implement for what it was; a blood quill. It wasn't a replica of the Black Quill Umbridge favoured. This one was lighter, its shaft less decorative. This was an utensil for a purpose other than torture.

She still hesitated.

Fucking Umbridge was alive and free and in a position of power and due to infest Hogwarts in five years. Hermione breathed in slowly, unclenching her fists. One of her selves would see that toad sent to Azkaban, she promised herself. And this quill was a different quill. This quill she could refuse to use. This quill was incidental.

Her signature on the parchment was far from an exemplar of penmanship. The stiff letters cut into the back of her hand healed instantly leaving only a stinging itch. Hermione returned the quill to the
goblin and did NOT touch her hand. She ignored the itch, tucking the memory away as a memento to keep her focused. She had a second chance to fight the forces of darkness. That was something to treasure.

The teller took the signed parchment away leaving Hermione to fret in the low-grade inevitable way everyone worried when waiting on the whim of bureaucracy. If she were shown the door, she'd try Borgin and Burkes. If she didn't have any luck there, she'd hunt about in Knockturn Alley for a pawn shop. If that didn't work then she'd shake sofa cushions in the Room of Hidden Things until she found enough loose change to buy a wand.

She could ask the school for help but putting her hand out for money cheapened her mission. Last resort, she could plead penury and ask the faculty for aid. Hogwarts did have a fund for indigent students. Hermione didn't want to use that option as it would take gold away from genuinely disadvantaged children. She could manage alone.

The teller returned and bade her follow him to a posh office with an enormous desk, behind which sat a stocky goblin in a three piece pinstripe suit. Hermione didn't need to look at the name plaque to know Harnak was a vault supervisor. His suit radiated 'manager' with the added suggestion of too many puddings.

“Miss Rosier, you present us with a conundrum.” He gestured for her to sit. Hermione complied and quietly waited for the banker to elaborate. Her expectant silence seemed to strike the right note with him. “You are who you say you are but the only record we have of any issue of Evan Hugh Rosier is a single entry eleven years ago acknowledging the birth of a daughter. No other correspondence has been lodged on your behalf since.”

“My mother raised me under the Fidelius. We did not entertain.” Hermione provided what could be termed an explanation. To her it sounded like she was basically saying she'd lived under a rock for a decade and shouldn't be trusted with cutlery.

“The executors of your paternal grandfather's Will have not submitted any documentation with us. It is our understanding that they cannot enter Rosier Hall until the Curse-Breakers finish deactivating a very extensive mesh of wards. The late Piers Rosier was extremely security conscious.” Not a twitch gave away Harnak's opinion of Cathal's grandfather. He could have been discussing what he had eaten for lunch.

“How did my grandfather die?” Hermione inquired.

“You may.” Harnak allowed.

“May I ask how my grandfather died?” Hermione inquired.

“You may.” Harnak allowed.

“How did my grandfather die?” She reiterated, having expected the pedantic use of language. Goblins were disinclined to give an inch in their dealings with wizarding folk.

“He died of a schism of the heart, the same malady that killed his father.” He provided the information blandly, watching her reaction. Hermione made a mental note to have herself examined in case Cathal had the same congenital condition. “His decease makes your guardianship problematic. In order for you to access your vault you require a blood relative who is a British national of good repute.”

He pulled a scroll out of the rack behind him and unrolling it on the desk pointed with a long finger to a lonely twig on a cross-grown bramble of a family tree. His talon traced up the branch to Evan Rosier (deceased) then Piers Rosier (deceased) and Siglinde Selwyn (Azkaban) then further up to Hugh Rosier (deceased) and Jacoba Shafiq (deceased). His finger slid down to another child of Hugh and Jacoba, Piers's twin sister Druella (incapacitated).
“Your great-aunt Madam Druella Black neé Rosier has been a permanent resident of the Janus Thickey ward for some years. She is not mentally fit to act as your guardian.” Harnak diverted back to Siglinde Selwyn. “Your grandmother was sentenced to life in prison. As was her late brother and his only son.” He slid up to Jacoba Shafiq. “Your patrilineal great-grandmother specified in her Will that none of her descendants unto the fifth generation be given into the custody of the family of her brother. She considered him a blood traitor. In any case, none of the living Shafiqs are currently resident in Britain.”

“Narcissa Malfoy neé Black.” Hermione was familiar with the Black family tree. Druella Rosier had married the thirteen year old Cygnus and had three daughters with him in quick succession. Bellatrix was in Azkaban, Andromeda was disowned, and O frabjous day that left Narcissa. “My first cousin once removed.”

“Correct.” Harnak tapped a name above Narcissa. “Madam Malfoy's father Cygnus is of poor health and has ceded much of his responsibilities to his youngest daughter. Including the duties of executor of your grandfather's considerable estate.”

“You said executors, plural.” She was trying to calculate how much money she actually needed to survive seven years of schooling and whether she could afford to blow off Cathal's family entirely. Hiding out in the Castle all year round was pretty appealing when juxtaposed against the Malfoys.

“Lucius Malfoy, husband of Narcissa, is also an executor. As is Sholto Selwyn, son of your grandmother's brother, though his incarceration precludes him from discharging the office.” The goblin regarded the witch child shrewdly. Harnak was adept at reading the faces of his clients. This young one was not a waif searching plaintively for sanctuary. “You could write to the Shafiqs to request they petition the Wizengamot to set aside the custody provision of Jacoba Rosier's Will.”

“That sounds expensive.” Hermione knew the Shafiqs only as one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families. They were politically neutral and had sensibly decamped to foreign shores during the First Wizarding War. She couldn't blame them.

“It would require significant campaigning.” Harnak felt no need to say outright the Shafiqs would need to resume their Wizengamot Seat and bribe several of their fellows to overcome the coercion the Malfoys would level to retain custody of the Rosier heiress. The chit was clever, and apparently disinclined to kick against the pricks. “You attain your age of majority in six years, at which time the Rosier vaults become yours unconditionally.”

“Could I emancipate myself? Or appoint my own guardian?” She asked the pragmatic questions and did not give into the urge to stick her middle finger up at the inbred knot of Cathal's ancestry before storming out of the bank.

“You could, if you had means to pay an advocate to petition the Wizengamot. However, the executors would still have control of your grandfather's estate. After his death, your father's vaults were returned to his father's control. Your mother emptied her dower vault the day after she was widowed. No vault was established in your name.” He studied her face as he spoke, noting the hardening set of her mouth. Not greed. Anger.

“What do you know of the Maxs?” Hermione wasn't going to skip the country. She might be able to play off Cathal's maternal relatives against her paternal kin. It wasn't about the money per se. She did not want to have the Malfoys as her legal guardians in any capacity.

“A once proud lineage sadly diminished. They never recovered from their involvement in Grindelwald's War. They have no vaults within the purview of the British branch of Gringotts. I cannot comment on their holdings within other branches of our bank.” Harnak could find out more if
requested. For a fee. He waited for Miss Rosier to ask him to contact her mother's family.

“Are you required to notify Narcissa Malfoy of my visit here?” She inquired as an idea formed in her mind. If she could find Mundungus Fletcher, she could sell some of Cathal's mother's jewellery to him. He was a shady opportunist and a coward but he wasn't as unscrupulous as Borgin.

“I am not.” He considered the child. “You are an orphan with no means of support. Where are you living?”

“With Muggles.” Hermione lied promptly. “They have shelters for homeless people.” She stood up and bowed politely. Magical folk did not shake hands, something no one had told her until Viktor had given her a few etiquette lessons. Every time she had stuck out her hand trying to be courteous she had come across as uncouth.

The banker dismissed her with a wave of his hand. Hermione headed out of Gringotts. Moppet waved to her from behind a wonky pillar, falling into step with the witch. They blended into the crowd not discussing their errands where they could be overheard. A shake of the head was all the house elf needed to understand the visit to the bank had not gone well.

Their excursion did not notably improve once they got to Knockturn Alley. Hermione scanned the grubby street for the thief without success. She weighed up the benefits of checking the bars for him then decided it wasn't worth trawling through the filth. Skirting a bevy of hags, Hermione shoved open the heavy door of Borgin and Burkes.

The shop smelled of mould with a waxy, organic undertone like rot. Keeping her arms tight against her sides, Hermione slid past displays of cured heads and ritual fetishes determined to touch nothing. The counter was unattended, giving her a moment to sort through the jewellery that had survived the fire at Rose Cottage. She shut her eyes and picked the piece that felt the most wrong, choosing a circular brooch inlaid with red gems.

Thirsty red gems. Hermione rubbed a thumb cautiously over one of the crimson stones. A draw, a pull, something that tugged through her. The jewel looked a little brighter and she felt tired. Ah, a reservoir. The Dark Arts didn't lend itself to healing magic but there were ways to put something away as insurance. A piggy bank for blood. Dark, because the donor did not have to be willing.

A useful object. Hermione considered keeping the brooch. Inevitably, she was going to get hurt this go around. She didn't need to wear the pin openly for it to function. Tucking it away on a singlet or similar would do. Who would know it for what it was? Snape would. McGonagall might. Dumbledore definitely would. She had guessed its purpose so any older Years might too.

When Borgin finally emerged from the backroom to oil his way to the desk, Hermione slid the brooch across to him. He barely glanced at it, making a shooing gesture to convey his disinterest in her and the gewgaw.

“I would like to sell it.” Hermione stated, her eyes on his hands. She didn't trust him. Fortunately she didn't have to deal with his partner Burke. Any man who would cheat a desperate, pregnant witch was beneath contempt.

“If I had a Galleon for every bit of tat a brat with sticky fingers tried to pawn off on me, I would be Croesus.” His fingers strayed near the brooch. Hermione covered the piece with her hand, keeping it from disappearing into his pocket.

“Perhaps.” She lifted her eyes to his and found a sneer to share. “But I am a Rosier and I have a very good memory.” The unctuous quotient of his demeanour increased markedly with her name-drop.
The brooch was worth more than a hundred Galleons on materials alone. Borgin gave her fifteen for it. Hermione didn't bargain. She took the money and left.

Ollivanders was empty, which was lucky as the shop was so tiny more than two people in it was a crowd. Moppet followed her in then poked about the shelves, her nose almost pressed to the boxes of wands. Hermione sat in the lone chair wondering whether the wizarding world had a problem with shop-stealing. There were Anti-Theft jinxes and hexes but a competent person could break those. She began counting quietly, estimating how long it would've taken her to tamper with the till.

A theoretically profitable interval later, the creaking stairs heralded Garrick Ollivander. He smiled at her in an abstracted way as though he had just forgotten why he had come downstairs. Whatever had been on his mind was discarded for the sake of uniting a magical child with her first wand; a delight that never palled.

The lustre was starting to come off the process fifty wands later. Ollivander muttered to himself as he pulled wands out of boxes, handed them over, watched them spit or sit dully in the young witch’s hand, then returned them to the shelves. Difficult matches were intriguing. He thought they might have some success with holly but despite matching the girl's birthday none of those wands worked for her. She was on the cusp between holly and hazel so he tried the diviners' wood too, and still nothing.

Ollivander mused on the dichotomy of what he had measured and what he had seen. Not one thing or the other. That was hawthorn, adept at both healing and cursing. He tried the three Supreme Cores, unicorn hair, phoenix feather, dragon heartstring, expecting something. What he got was every candle in the shop extinguishing itself. Staring at the wisps of smoke ghostly and ephemeral gave him an idea.

“My father made many wands with many different cores. Finicky, most of them. I don't use anything but the best though I think in your case something a bit different might be necessary.” Ollivander pulled a casket out from under the counter, kept there mostly as curiosities for collectors, and rummaged through the bundles of wands. He found a lone stick of hawthorn. “Ten and three quarters, with a core of banshee hair. For the unwelcome and the harbingers of ill fortune.”

Garrick Ollivander never rued selling a wand, not even when those wands did terrible things at the will of their wielders. He had put walnut in the hand of Bellatrix Lestrange and yew in the hand of Tom Riddle. When he saw the girl swish the wand to light a blown candle, he sighed. An unlucky wand for a troubled child.

“That will be seven Galleons, and my regrets, Miss Rosier.”
Cathal’s wand made all the difference. After sneaking back into Hogwarts and the Room of Requirement, Hermione tried a few spells and they just flowed. She snivelled a bit alone in her facsimile bedroom, shedding the creeping worry that her return had permanently affected her magic. Her struggles with Derica Max’s wand in the cellar had left a gnawing doubt. She had fought so hard to cast such simple charms.

She waited until after Moppet had brought her dinner and all the teachers were sitting down to their meal in the Great Hall to swap from Requirement to Hidden. Hermione sat on a spindle legged chair to eat steak and kidney pie while she cast Mending Charms on a battered trunk. She tried a few polishing charms, which took most of the tarnish off the brass fittings, then a shrinking charm. The latter worked but left her sweating. There was a limit to the amount of magic she could channel through Cathal.

Mindful of her body's parameters, Hermione cleared a small area by hand then tried a Summoning Charm. The spell was first taught in Fourth Year so casting it definitely would have been a challenge for an eleven year old. The rush of magic burned across her skin, making her hair stand on end and bright spots dance in front of her eyes.

‘Accio Hogwarts uniforms’ also caused a hailstorm of clothing. From every quadrant, misplaced garments rained down on her. Hermione dove for the shelter of a tallboy to fend off the storm. She emerged light-headed and knee deep in wool blends. Sorting out the largesse took about an hour. The evolution of the school uniform was fascinating though no one should be subjected to a box pleated serge pinafore.

Hermione chose items that were loose fitting and in good condition. She hit everything with a Scourgify, changed the name tags then folded the clothes into her trunk. Where she could, she picked five of each as there was sometimes a lag on the laundry. Shoes were a problem as people rarely lost both. Checking all the footwear got her one pair of mary janes. Well, she’d keep them for uniform hours and wear the boots at other times.

The clothes she didn’t pick got put away in three chests of drawers she coloured white. She’d need replacements when she outgrew what she had and once she was more used to Cathal, she would be able to Transfigure the garments. Hermione mulled over casting the Summoning Charm again for ordinary clothes but chose to add some more robes to her trunk instead. The Rosiers were pure-bloods. They wouldn’t go in for t-shirts and jeans.

As she didn't want to give herself a concussion with flying books, Hermione searched for her First Year reading list manually. She found a trove of text books scattered among a mountain of old fashioned desks. Some inelegant amateur parkour got her a supply of notebooks, quills, and ink, including a bottle of fancy self-correcting ink that if she had lost she definitely would've hunted down.

A suitable cauldron was an easy find. Hermione lucked across a set of glass phials with only one missing. Protective gloves had the same problem as shoes so she went with the first left and the first right she found that fit. A battered pointy hat joined her provender almost as an afterthought. She had worn her own dutifully purchased hat for a few weeks during her first term then afterwards only for each Sorting Ceremony.

Checking her personal list, Hermione caught herself biting her lip. She shook her head to loosen her facial muscles. She had to be careful not to fall into the same habits as her other self. Cathal did not...
bite her lips. Miss Rosier was going to be a taciturn loner who liked walking around the Castle and minding her own business.

Miss Rosier was going to need shampoo. Hermione scanned the mountains of furniture. There was self-sufficiency and then there was pigheadedness. She shrunk her trunk and crept out of the Room of Hidden Things. It was later than she realised, the hallway pitch dark. Hurrying into the Room of Requirement, she changed into her pyjamas then tucked herself into bed with the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1.

In the morning, Hermione had a conference with Moppet. The house elf could provide her with the miscellaneous necessary toiletries by decanting them from the Prefects' Bathroom. She volunteered to keep special track of all Cathal's belongings in case anyone thought it funny to do to Rosier what they had to Luna. Hermione gave Moppet half her remaining Galleons in case of emergencies. Then the witch threw herself into revising.

By the first day of September, Cathal was as prepared for Hogwarts as Hermione could make her. Very early in the morning to avoid the staff, Moppet popped them down to London so Cathal could catch the Hogwarts Express. The house elf dropped her off at the Leaky Cauldron before heading back to the school to help with the last minute rush. If there was ever a day Moppet would be missed, it would be the first day of term.

Hermione ordered a pot of tea and read the Daily Prophet. She was going to take the Knight Bus to Kings Cross station at about half past nine so she could find a compartment with a minimum of hassle. She also wanted to avoid seeing her parents drop off her other eleven year old self. Just thinking about it hurt.

The teapot was getting tepid and she was eyeing the clock wondering whether it would be better to go earlier to loiter on the Platform when a hand dropped onto her shoulder.

“You and I are going to have a word, Rosier.” The Auror said stonily.

She didn't think. Hermione was fairly sure she didn't engage brain at all. She grabbed the teapot and swung it, smashing him in the face. He probably didn't deserve that but years of war had removed her middle gears. She ran for the door as fast as Cathal's legs could take her and almost made it before being hit by a Full-Body Bind. The floor rushed up to meet her face with a crack.

“You will show us your accreditation.” The witch demanded, drawing her wand. “We'll not see a child hauled away by some random scruff.” Her gaze swept the man up and down. “Are those Muggle shoes you are wearing? The Ministry has let its standards go lax since my day.”

“I'm Jeffrey Williamson.” The Auror propped the girl against a table and dug out his warrant card with his DMLE badge. He'd hoped to talk privately to the little Houdini, chiefly to find out where the hell she had gone. She didn't look like she'd been living rough for weeks, which made him suspicious of who had helped her. There'd been no whisper about Rosier in the Department.

“Pray tell us, Mister Williamson, what crime this young witch has perpetrated.” The white haired wizard put just enough emphasis on his title to make the Auror feel like he was still in school, which was doubtless the intention.
“She's a runaway. I am taking her into custody for her own protection.” Williamson replied in his best talking-to-the-nosy voice. He pointedly dabbed the cuts on his cheek and was not surprised when the snobs did not deign to notice. The vicious little bitch could've got him in the eye but that apparently paled in comparison to her bumped beak.

“A laudable endeavour. We shall accompany you.” The witch declared as her husband settled their shot with the publican. She elected not to see the Auror's glare. His sort had ransacked their home and dragged their son away for questioning. Her boy had spent five weeks in Azkaban solely because some of his school friends had been political radicals. They had been powerless to help their son. Today was different.

Eustace and Beatrix Radnott would not be dissuaded from accompanying Auror Williamson to the Ministry. He gritted his teeth, dropped the Body Bind when the old baggages threatened to lodge a complaint, and marched Rosier to the Floo. They made a wondrous scene striding into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, two red faced from blood and two from righteousness.

Hermione stood scruffed like a kitten as the Radnotts took out years of suppressed resentment on Williamson then on his boss Proudfoot then on Gawain Robards, Deputy Head of the Auror Office. She tried to wriggle free once at ten thirty; as late as she could leave it and still get to the train on time. Williamson gripped the back of her shirt tighter, continuing to interject in the Radnotts' harangue.

It was twenty past eleven before anyone asked her a question. By then her chin was crusted with blood, her nose clogged with the same, and her capacity for tolerance much diminished. So when Robards inquired of her if she had anything to say, Hermione answered promptly.

“I want to bring charges of abduction against Auror Williamson.” She didn't really but she wanted some answers.

“This hardly counts as kidnapping.” The Deputy Head did not roll his eyes. The Radnotts had only stopped because of the necessity of letting someone else talk if they wanted the explanation they had demanded.

“Not this time.” Hermione agreed. “On the nineteenth of July, Auror Williamson broke into my mother's home and abducted me. I woke in a locked room in a Muggle house. Auror Williamson and a witch were there. When I requested to be released they refused. I asked to be put in contact with my grandfather's solicitor, which was also refused. After they left, locking me in again, I escaped.”

After that, paperwork happened. Both she and Williamson were photographed then healed, in separate rooms. She was asked to give a statement. Hermione kept to the facts except for where she had been during the interval. In line with what she had told Harnak, she said she had been staying at Muggle shelters. When asked for the addresses of the hostels, Hermione refused on the grounds she wanted to return there and didn't trust Williamson or his accomplice not to search for her.

Her stubbornness got her the hairy eyeball from the Auror interviewing her but he accepted it, continuing on to the events of the day and her reason for being in the Leaky Cauldron. Not wanting to mention Hogwarts at all, Hermione lied again, saying she had gone to the pub for the newspaper, wanting to see if the Curse-Breakers had got into Rosier Hall yet.

When the interview was over, she was put in a holding room with orders to remain there until called. The Radnotts had been hustled out of the building otherwise she would have thanked them for their concern. Hermione spent some of her time writing a letter to them in a suitably formal style. They knew her name and depending on what happened with the charges she might need friendly witnesses.
Williamson was sticking with the story that he had chanced across a burning building and on hearing a noise from the cellar had gone to the rescue of a disoriented child. His decision to take her to his house was because his wife was a Healer. He was on the point of bringing the confused girl to the Ministry when she became hysterical and smashed her way out of the guest room. Only an unstable person would bash a stranger in the face with a teapot.

Hermione got the impression the Auror was sore about the tea. His tale was plausible so for the sake of her reputation, she stayed put. If she legged it now, the DMLE would have it on record she was unreliable. It was extremely frustrating to watch the clock tick by while other people debated what to do with her.

A kindly witch with sharp eyes showed up to escort her to lunch at the Ministry canteen. Hermione noticed how much attention the woman was paying to the cutlery and at first was puzzled by the interest in her table manners until she realised the witch was making sure she didn't palm a knife. It put the idea in her head that a blade would be useful. Not for attacking people but because it was an option not many magical folk anticipated.

She was escorted back to the holding room and left there. Hermione pulled a book out of her backpack, settling down to read until her fate was decided. Mostly she thought about ways to get to Hogwarts and excuses she might give for her tardiness. If she could get to Hogsmeade in time to meet the train, she might be able to avoid questions. There were Scottish students who opted not to travel down to London at the start of each term. Really, all she needed was a Floo.

The book was one Moppet had found in Rose Cottage. The cover had been scorched so Hermione had replaced it with the anodyne volume two of the Encyclopaedia of Bat Eyes. What she was actually reading was an Occlumency primer with Cathal's mother's notes in German in the margins. She intended to make her mind a fortress.

Some hours later, Hermione was thinking about that Nietzsche quote about the abyss when Gawain Robards strode into the holding room and beckoned for her to follow him. The Deputy Head looked disgruntled, an expression he quickly smoothed when he showed her into a rather more comfortable interview room. The cause for the upgrade and the poker face gave the Auror a frosty look. Narcissa Malfoy was not pleased.

Cathal Rosier really could not get a break, Hermione thought as she sat down tidily with her book on her lap. Bolting now was out of the question. Perhaps she could persuade Mrs Malfoy to send her to Hogwarts. Hermione doubted the gilt witch would want a child under foot at Malfoy Manor. In any case, she was not going back to that place. She didn't have the word on her arm any more but she could still feel it.

“Madam Malfoy, this is Miss Rosier. Gringotts has informed us she is the daughter of Evan Rosier, and thus your ward.” While Robards's voice was bland enough to be mistaken for porridge, his eyes were avid.

“I was not aware of the existence of a child.” When Narcissa had been summoned abruptly to the Ministry, she had prepared for an interrogation. This was not at all what she had expected. She studied the girl, who with her fair colouring somewhat resembled Druella Rosier except for the Selwyn jaw. Evan's daughter would never be a gentle beauty but she might grow into something passable.

“Madam Rosier apparently raised her in secret. She came to our attention after the unexpected death of Piers Rosier.” The Auror remained audibly beige, shifting a file on his desk marked with the red stripe of an active investigation.
“Hardly unexpected given his temper.” Narcissa remarked, aware Robards thought he was directing this interview. Piers had been a good ally until the imprisonment of his wife had removed any moderating influence. Two bottles of Firewhiskey and a raging quarrel with Valentine Crabbe had seen him off before a Healer could reach him. Now the Aurors were trying to turn his death to their advantage to restart the household raids.

“Nonetheless, you are now responsible for his only living heir.” Robards glanced at Cathal Rosier, seeing for himself what the counsellor had termed ‘wilful detachment’. Williamson's brashness coloured his report so he’d sent in a more perceptive person in to get a feel for the child’s aura. He wasn’t convinced Rosier Senior had fallen off his perch naturally. The Auror suspected someone had given him a little nudge.

“Uncle Piers and I were always close.” She had thought so until this afternoon's revelation. Narcissa had attended Evan's small, private wedding to a witch of impeccable heritage. The match been arranged by the respective grandfathers, with the bride and groom meeting a week before the ceremony. Evan had died before his second anniversary.

“And yet he kept his granddaughter from you.” The wizard's gaze flicked from Malfoy to Rosier. Both witches were composed and silent. Robards considered sending the girl to an orphanage until the Malfoys could clear Rosier's probate. He could play the paperwork waiting game or charge the under-age witch with assault on an Auror. Something was rotten. He just couldn't tell what whiffed.

The Deputy Head might have pushed the issue except Williamson had lost a brother in the Wizarding War. He didn't make a big noise about his grudge but it was there, which made his presence on the Isle of Man suspect. Williamson hadn't been on duty on the island, hadn't had any better reason for being there than 'fancied spuds and herrin for lunch'. If Robards came down heavy on Rosier only to discover Williamson had been involved in her mother's death, it'd be him in the cauldron.

“It seems to me that while there are ongoing investigations into the death of Piers Rosier and disappearance of Derica Rosier neé Max, the safest place for Miss Rosier would be with her peers at Hogwarts.” Packing the girl off to school would keep her out of the claws of the Malfoys. Robards wasn't fond of how Dumbledore ran the castle as his own fiefdom but the old man was firmly not in Lucius's pocket.

“My mother went to Durmstrang.” Hermione made a token protest. Robards shot a stern look at her, dropping his gaze pointedly to her feet, to her Quidditch boots.

“I regret we must insist.” He'd noticed the girl was in trousers and flying boots, an unusual combination for an idle trip to read the newspaper. Robards suspected Rosier had a longer journey in mind. He would owl the Maxs, the family needed to be notified of Derica Rosier's possible crossing the Veil, and mention the daughter.

Gawain Robards's insistence ran to two Aurors accompanying them to Diagon Alley so Narcissa Malfoy could supervise the rapid purchase of supplies. Hermione did not mistake the shopping trip for generosity. The pure-blood witch insisted that she change into her new uniform, after which her old clothes mysteriously vanished. The message was clear; if she was going to be associated with the House of Malfoy, she would conform to their high social standards.

Her dispatch to Hogwarts was not suave. They had missed the arrival of the train at Hogsmeade and the boat trip so the Aurors marched her directly into the Front Entrance, handing her over to Professor McGonagall in front of the goggling First Years. The Scottish witch took in the mulish expression on the girl's recently healed face and crisply dismissed the guards. There had been quite enough drama already.
Enlightenment

The Hat was in on the conspiracy too. She'd barely sat down before it had proclaimed 'Slytherin'. Malfoy had been Sorted faster but only just. Hermione had marched to the green table with a straight back, ignoring the whispering her name had spawned. She had sat next to Parkinson as the First Year girls were all on the same bench with the boys opposite.

No one had said much beyond introductions during the meal. The Prefects escorted them to the dungeon to begin the induction of the new Snakes in privacy. It looked like the entire House had gathered for show and tell. Hermione wasn't sure if everyone was present as there were significantly fewer Slytherins than Gryffindors so the throng looked small. The Common Room was larger, adding to the impression of a select elite.

Gemma Farley had started lightly, talking of House pride and the respect due their traditions. She handed over to the Seventh Year Prefects Harlan Travers and Philida Bletchley, who took a much harder line. They informed the ten firsties that if they brought shame to Slytherin they would be dealt with unofficially with such thoroughness they would be posted home to their parents in a bucket.

Sitting on the bed nearest the door in the First Year dorm, Hermione couldn't help but contrast the welcome she had enjoyed her first night in Gryffindor. The Tower was much cosier and the company, well, considering her rough start during her first term, the company was about the same. The other Slytherin witches all knew each other so they chatted and jockeyed about who would get which bed. Interestingly, none of them challenged her for the one she'd picked.

Hermione took off her new pinchy shoes, setting them neatly on top of the trunk Narcissa Malfoy had bought her. She'd find an out of the way place to stow her scavenged supplies. Having a bolt-hole would be useful as she didn't want to overuse the Room of Requirement. She might have to spend summers in there depending on the attentions of the Malfoys.

Pulling out the Occlumency primer, Hermione reviewed the mental exercises and estimated how much time she would have to allot to be very, very good at not giving away her secrets. A year to be practised, she guessed, and several more to be proficient. Shielding the mind was not something learned in an afternoon. She recalled Harry's struggles with Snape as an instructor and not for the first time wondered at Dumbledore's motives for pairing the two. Had he set up Harry to fail?

That worry was the crux of the reason she had not gone to the Headmaster. Hermione had immense respect for Dumbledore's achievements. She couldn't though shake the impression he had feet of clay. The difficulty with being so adept was that without peers of your own power you have nothing to measure yourself against. No check or balance to prevent your focus from narrowing until you were blinkered. Dumbledore was too certain he was right, and Harry had suffered for it.

Perhaps she could help. She knew what Harry needed to know. She could just walk up to him and tell him. That would change everything. They had against all odds destroyed the Horcruxes and defeated Voldemort. Probably. Something had happened at the end of the battle. Had it been a contingency ritual? Had Riddle found some other way to ensure he survived?

Without knowing what had gone wrong, Hermione was loathe to mess up anything. If she changed something, who knew the effects at the other end of the thread? Trelawney might. The Seer had been right after all. Dropping back onto the bed, she groaned. Taking Divination in Third Year was not going to be fun.

“Something wrong, Rosier?” Parkinson demanded when the quiet girl made a noise.
“No.” Hermione replied, staring at the canopy above her. “I'm going for a walk.”

She left the dormitory without further comment, heading into the dungeons to find a deserted room. There were a great many. Most were kitted out as study halls or brewing labs for older students trusted to work without supervision. She paused at an intersection unsure which direction to take when a light flared under a door tucked into a flying buttress. Hermione knocked first, having walked in on her share of personal private moments during patrols as a Prefect.

When no one answered, she opened the door and stepped into a small sitting room with a cheery hearth. Taking one of the overstuffed chairs, Hermione put her feet on the tuffet and kicked off her shoes again. She regretted putting them back on but only the daft padded about a stone castle in their socks.

“Miss missed the train.” Moppet appeared with a tea tray, setting it down on a low table before putting her feet up too. “Miss isn't going to be allowed out without Moppet if Miss starts pub brawls.”

“You heard about that?” Hermione poured tea for the both of them. “Lemon or milk?”

“Moppet has never taken tea before. Put everything in the cup and Moppet will decide what she likes.” The house elf watched the witch mix her brew fascinated as the lemon juice made the milk curdle. “Professor the Deputy Headmistress was talking with the Headmaster about Miss. Moppet heard them. Then Moppet read the letter Robards the Auror sent to the Headmaster.”

“Do you often read other people's correspondence?” She handed Moppet the porcelain cup of ick before making her own tea white, no lumps. Without astonishment Hermione got a shrug from the house elf. “Well, for the sake of courtesy, you have permission to read mine. What did they say?”

“The Headmaster said many children did not want to go to school and that he hoped you would find your place at Hogwarts.” Moppet sipped, made a face and sipped again. She snapped her fingers, removing the milk from her tea. “Deputy Headmistress made a cat noise and said Evan your father was stubborn and vicious.”

“Lovely.” Hermione sighed. She trusted Professor McGonagall wouldn't tar the child like the father, unlike Snape, but as a Snake she couldn't rely on the Head of Gryffindor to think well of her. “Did you know Cathal's father? How long have you been at Hogwarts?”

“Moppet was born at Hogwarts. Moppet has always been of Hogwarts.” Moppet shuffled forward in her chair so her legs would reach the tuffet. She was having tea like proper tea having people. “Moppet knew Evan. Evan worked hard. Evan had trouble with Charms so he practised and practised. Evan was Professor Snape's friend.”

“Professor Snape is going to be a problem.” If she was in two minds about Dumbledore, she was in two dozen minds about Severus Snape. They'd seen him die and then Harry had gone to the Pensieve. They hadn't had a chance to discuss the memories in detail, busy fighting a battle, but Harry had been badly shaken. Snape had loved his mother. Snape had been ordered by Voldemort and Dumbledore to kill the Headmaster. Snape was a hero. Snape was also a snide arse who had been cruel to her for years. Spy or not, making little girls cry was not laudable.

“Moppet can poison his drinks on Samhain.” The house elf offered helpfully. “Professor Snape shuts himself in his room and drinks all the bottles on that night.”

“We're not going to poison people.” Hermione stated firmly. “Yet.” She had to concede that strategically dosing someone might be necessary at some point. “And not fatally. I came back to help
save people.” Memories ambushed her. Ranks of the dead in the Great Hall. “Fred and George have the Marauders’ Map. It'd be handy if I could copy it.”

“Miss will need special paper and ink. Moppet can tell you what to get but Moppet can't make the special things.” Moppet’s ears drooped. Hogwarts didn't keep a stock of the paper the four Lions had used and the ink had come all the way from the Rising Sun islands. “If Miss doesn't have the special things, the map won't move.”

“A static copy would still be useful. I can start familiarising myself with the underground parts of the school.” And avoiding anywhere near the Chamber of Secrets until Harry killed the basilisk. Hermione frowned at her tea. “If there are pipes big enough for a ruddy great snake, why don't they show up on the Marauder's Map?”

“Because wizards think when they flush poo just vanishes?” Moppet shrugged. Witches and wizards could be very clever but they overlooked small things. Small things like house elves.

“Well said.” Hermione leaned back, rolling her shoulders to try to relax. She had a lot to do and only so much time in which to do it. She needed to pace herself or she'd be a nervous wreck by the Battle of Hogwarts. Her Dad would say to use her Ps; Proper Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance. On that note, Hermione went to bed early to be ready for Potions with the Gryffindors.

It was as excruciating as she had anticipated. The work itself was fine, being introductory theory and how not to set yourself on fire. She sat between Theodore Nott, who didn't talk, and Daphne Greengrass, who spent the class writing down everything Snape said. As Cathal Rosier didn't give a damn about Harry Potter, Hermione refused to react when Snape had a go at him or to laugh or to look at herself. God, she had been so keen. And the bastard took five points from Gryffindor!

Slytherin had History of Magic with Ravenclaw. Hermione read her Occlumency primer as Professor Binns droned while her classmates learned it was not possible to die of boredom but you could certainly wish for it. Even the enthusiastic scholarship of the Eagles couldn't keep them from flagging under the unremitting reedy recitation.

Lunch happened. Hermione sat on the girls’ bench at the end and tried to commit to memory the exact image of her plate of sandwiches. One of the Occlumency exercises was conscious sight, refining your awareness of your surroundings to such a point that the mind could form detailed memories. Rich mental imagery helped create diversions to foil a Legilimens.

“I'll eat that if you don't want it, Rosier.” Vincent Crabbe reached for her plate when the witch had been staring at it for several minutes. She jabbed his hand with a fork.

“Don't touch what isn't yours.” Hermione snapped, losing concentration abruptly as the plate moved. She eased her grip on her cutlery as Crabbe glared at her, massaging his hand. He leaned forward using his bulk to loom and intimidate. That might have worked on Cathal. It didn't work on Hermione. She met his piggy little eyes, staring him down until he resumed his seat and pretended nothing had happened. She ate her sandwiches.

Charms was more introductory theory and Flitwick showing off. He was a Master Duellist, Hermione recalled. After the Duelling Club had folded in Second Year, there hadn't been any formalised training until the DA, to which Cathal would almost certainly not be invited. It might be possible to persuade Professor Flitwick to give private lessons, which would necessitate staying on his good side. Which meant not reading off topic books in his class or skiving off making notes about spell modification.

Hermione as Cathal tucked herself as far away from Hermione Hermione as she could. She couldn't
excel past her other self obviously in class or in submitted work. Given her youthful over-achieving that wouldn't be too difficult. Handing in work only as long as specified would help. She'd keep her extra credit work strictly private.

Her desk in Defence Against the Dark Arts class was fascinating. The textbook was also fascinating. Her notes ditto. Hermione did not once lift her gaze to Quirrell's face or look at the ridiculous purple turban. As he stuttered his way through the lesson, she wrote. What she wrote was a French translation of the first chapter of the Dark Forces: a Guide to Self-Protection, which was sufficiently challenging her mind was entirely occupied. No daydreaming in DADA.

After class, Hermione headed outside to the courtyard where everything had ended. She sat on a bench with her eyes shut and let herself remember. The destruction. The corpses. The fear almost tangible. Then the rumble of the earth and the force of the unknown something crashing over her like a tsunami. It felt like yesterday and a thousand years ago.

“Excuse me.” A boy cleared his throat.

“Yes?” Hermione opened her eyes. A Hufflepuff stood in front of her with shoulders squared. That was never a good sign. The Badgers were laissez-faire right up until they bit your face off.

“Are you Cathal Rosier?” He asked, his voice cracking a little so a Third or Fourth Year depending on his birthday. She nodded and he drew his wand. “Your father killed my dad.” His fingers tightened. “What do you have to say about that?”

“If you are calling me out for a duel, you will need a second.” She said calmly. “I'll wait here for you to find someone as I can see it's important.”

“You're not going to say you're sorry or that he deserved it?” The boy demanded, off put by the girl's demeanour but unwilling to back down.

“I never met your father. Offering my condolences seems crass, considering, and if you care enough for his memory to want to avenge him then he was probably a good man.” Hermione tried to hide her sympathy. She wanted to hug him and say that she was indeed sorry. Except Cathal wasn't.

“He was. I can sort of remember him and my mum told me about him. He worked in a shop just ordinary and your father came to burn it down because the owner was a Muggle-born. My dad died because he had the wrong job.” His words came out in a rush, stumbling over each other until he clamped his mouth shut and stood there shaking waiting for her to say something. To mock him for being the son of a Mudblood's assistant.

“What was his name?” She couldn't not ask.

“Robert Preece. I'm Malcolm.” He took a breath, not sure why he had told her that.

“An Auror called Alastor Moody killed my father. Moody is retired now but I'm sure if you write to him, he'll tell you about it.” Hermione suggested, aware of how little information the Ministry gave anyone. Knowing more about the death of his dad's murderer might help Malcolm get some closure. She glanced over his shoulder. “Gemma Farley is heading this way, and she has her wand out.”

Malcolm turned, saw the Prefect and decided not to hex a firstie. He crossed the courtyard without looking back. Seeing him go, Farley slowed her pace to an amble, taking a seat on the bench as though she happened to be passing. Definitely not going to the aid of a First Year being menaced by an older student from another House.

“Settling in?” Gemma asked, assessing the lack of tears, wobbling lip or angry flush. She wasn't very
good at mopping up hurt feelings but the Prefects kept an eye on the firsties until they found their footing.

“Yes, thank you.” Hermione appreciated the back-up. Malcolm might have been hot-tempered enough to curse her regardless of their chat. The presence of the Prefect had given him a face-saving excuse to leave.

“If anyone gives you grief, tell one of us and we'll sort them out.” Although a pure-blood family, the Farleys were not in the same league as the Rosiers. Gemma was happy about that. She didn't want to spend her school days with a target on her back.

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She probably should have taken Farley's advice, Hermione admitted to herself a fortnight later. If she had gone to a Prefect she might have looked like a sook but she wouldn't now be standing in Snape's office having to explain how she had got into a fight with two Fifth Years. And won. Your problem, she told herself as she stared at her shoes, was that you hate to back down even when you plausibly could.

“It is seldom I have to scold a student for being too adept at their work.” The Head of Slytherin had been informed by the Head of Gryffindor that the Meadowes sisters had been given detention for fighting with a Slytherin. This was not a novel occurrence as the twin witches often targeted members of his House for harassment. Nor were they subtle so there had been witnesses. “I have been reliably informed by several students not given to exaggeration that you cast a Stupefying Charm successfully twice with sufficient force you knocked both your opponents unconscious.”

“Yes, Professor.” Hermione had Stunned the girls automatically after the first Stinging Hex had hit her. An overreaction but seeing herself outnumbered had triggered her instincts. She had fired off so many Stunners during the course of the war it was the first thing she'd thought of after being struck. Had the strain of casting not made Cathal dizzy enough to nearly faint she might have made a discreet exit too.

“Dare I ask who taught you that spell, Miss Rosier?” Snape had made note of Evan's daughter in his House. She had not attracted his attention unlike Draco, who seemed determined to get up everyone's nose. The heirs of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families were always trouble in some way. Mostly arrogant little shites.

“My mother, sir.” She lied, eyes firmly on feet.

“I met your mother on several occasions. She was not given to duelling in hallways.” The last time he had seen Derica Rosier she had been walking a toddler around the garden of Rosier Hall reciting the Latin names of the plants. Severus could believe the studious widow obsessively cramming her daughter with spells.

“She preferred cellars.” Hermione didn’t stop herself in time to prevent the venom dripping. Derica had used the Killing Curse on her only child and might well have deliberately set fire to their home.

“Would you care to explain that remark, Miss Rosier?” The Potions Professor inquisited. The girl shook her head not lifting her gaze. Of course she knew. Derica would have warned her to guard her mind. “Three weeks detention for fighting in the halls. You may go.”

Hermione walked into the Slytherin Common Room and was greeted by a slow round of applause. The Meadowes had not endeared themselves to Salazar's Own. To see them taken down by a First Year was the sweetest justice. Pausing only a moment to acknowledge the adulation, she made a
She drew the curtains then hit herself over the head with her pillow. Stupid! All that work revising the basic spells, she should have used one of them. A second year spell wouldn't have been too out of the ordinary. Hermione buried herself in her blankets and called herself all the names she could think of then tried to remember some nasty ones in French or German.

She ended up falling asleep in her clothes drained from spell casting. Waking very early, Hermione tiptoed to the bathroom for a nice long hot shower. Emerging pink with Cathal's fine hair plastered down on her head, she got dressed and slipped out of the dungeons. She climbed up to the Turris Magnus to the Lost Wands room.

Cathal's wand was a rare enough combination that it wouldn't be easy to replace. If she were disarmed or Snatched, she would have to make do with what she could find. Using Bellatrix's wand had been horrible. Every spell had felt filthy. To keep her magic flexible, she practised with the misplaced wands. Mostly it was Lumos and Levitation as Cathal didn't have the potency yet to force a connection.

Hermione had started a game she played with herself, sequentially casting Wingardium Leviosa moving from wand to wand to see how long she could maintain the spell. Her best thus far was four wands floating at the same time. This morning she barely managed two. She picked up the fallen lengths of ash and put them back in the appropriate drawer. Pulling open the beech drawer, Hermione frowned. She inspected the wand.

It was Neville's or rather it was Frank Longbottom's. When had Neville lost his wand? She couldn't remember. Thinking back seven years, she had no idea. He can't have misplaced it for long. He might not have noticed its absence over the weekend. Feeling sorry for her unfortunate friend, Hermione tucked his wand into a pocket and headed for Gryffindor Tower.

It was too early to be considered late at night. No one stirred, not even Filch and Mrs Norris. Hermione climbed the stairs puffing. Cathal had long legs but she didn't have to scale the heights multiple times a day. When she got to the portrait of the Fat Lady she didn't have breath to speak, simply nodding to the painted woman, who swung open obligingly.

Hermione was a pace inside the Gryffindor Common Room when she realised that should not have happened. She pitched Neville's wand into the room and exited hastily. Finding a handy empty room nearby, she spent a couple of minutes taking deep breaths before calling for Moppet. The house elf looked freshly scrubbed and censorious.

“Miss should be in bed. Miss is all red on the face.” Moppet summoned a glass of water from the kitchen, handing it insistently to Hermione.

“The Fat Lady opened the portrait hole for me without a password.” She said in between gulps. Cathal was alright running on the flat but she was no good going uphill. She'd have to make time for some aerobic exercise. “Does she think of me as a Gryffindor?”

“Miss is a servitor of Hogwarts. All doors open for Miss.” This was so self-evident it didn't even merit a shrug.

“I wish the Castle had mentioned that. I was panicking thinking the portrait could see me as my other self.” Hermione wiped her face with her sleeve. “We need a better way to communicate than charades. Can Howgarts talk to me through the statues now I'm corporeal?”

“Hogwarts is shouting at Miss.” Moppet tugged her ears. “It's Miss who isn't hearing.”
“Cut Miss some slack. I've not been reincarnated before.” She gave herself a mental slap. Whine later, work now. “If I use the Protean charm to link an object between myself and the school, could the Castle talk to me that way?” Moppet's shrug was more lack of experience in advanced enchantment than fatalism. “I'll get right on that.”

“Miss needs to go back to bed. Get more sleep.” The house elf nagged.

“I can sleep in History of Magic.” Hermione said wryly. “Everyone else does.”
Hermione had cheerfully avoided any correspondence thus far. Every morning without an owl was a good morning. She sat at the end of the bench with her back to the other House tables eating coddled eggs with toast soldiers. Some of the older Slytherins gave her nods as they passed but no one in green was so vulgar as to high-five at the breakfast table.

“How did you curse those two?” Draco demanded, jerking his head in the direction of an embarrassed pair of brunettes enduring the mostly good natured teasing from their fellow Lions.

“Speed, accuracy, and determination.” Hermione replied tersely. She had kept to herself as much as possible and avoiding Malfoy's company was no penance. He was exactly as irritating as she remembered.

“Mother mentioned she didn't have to buy you a wand. Are you using a family one?” He managed to combine a dig at her dependence on his parents for her expenses and a suggestion she was cheating with a wand accustomed to combat. Some wands got aggressive with frequent use.

“No.” The reminder she was beholden to Narcissa Malfoy rankled. Hermione told herself she wasn't eleven years old and shouldn't let playground jibes irk her. She ignored Malfoy in favour of eating, distracting herself with reviewing what she knew of magical means of food preservation. Being able to stockpile supplies would be very handy.

Draco was in the middle of inquiring whether she'd like him to write to his mother to ask for anything when an owl landed on their table. The envelope it carried was addressed to Cathal Rosier. Hermione took it, frowned at the Ministry seal then gave the owl some bacon. While she was distracted, Pansy flicked the envelope to Draco.

“Since you are my mother's ward, your correspondence should go to my family.” The Malfoy heir said snidely as he waved the letter at her. He wasn't foolish enough to break the seal, only the recipient could do that, but he could deny her the message.

“Incendio.” Hermione flicked her wand at the envelope, which burst into flames. He hastily dropped the embers before his fingers burned. She upended a jug of pumpkin juice over the smouldering paper, which splashed across the table, dripping onto Malfoy and Parkinson before they should shift from their seats. “Tergeo.”

The little spat had happened fast enough no one from the other tables had noticed though several older Slytherins glared down at them. Hermione anticipated comments would be made later in the privacy of the Common Room. She would suffer their disapproval rather than bend to Malfoy. She had never caved to the blond git and Cathal wasn't going to either.

Of course, he wrote to his parents about the incident. Plenty of other people were willing to take a knee before Draco or rather before the influence of Lucius Malfoy. Other than Nott, the First Year Slytherins went out of their way to avoid her. Nott was already aloof so it was difficult to judge whether he put any extra effort into spurning Cathal. For her part, Hermione found being in Coventry a bit of a relief. It was a lot easier to be cold and insular if you were socially isolated.

After the spectacle of the Meadowes twins, the other Houses gave Cathal a cautious berth. Professor McGonagall had apparently bashed the ears of Gryffindor at length to remind them one of the qualities of their House was chivalry and it was very much not chivalrous to attack an eleven year old orphan. None of the Lions wanted to put a paw wrong so the tempting target of a lone Slytherin
was ignored even by Fred and George.

Hermione enjoyed unfettered research until the day before the Christmas break when Malfoy informed her in the Common Room in front of most of their House that she was expected to present herself for the holidays at his home. She had been dreading that announcement for days, alerted to the ultimatum by Moppet, who enthusiastically spied on the princeling and read all his letters.

The witch, via the house elf, and the Castle had debated strategy. Hermione dug in her heels about going to Malfoy Manor. Yes, she could see why starting a campaign of outright defiance so early would not be to their advantage. Yes, she might concede the Malfoys were unlikely to do her active harm and indeed they might even try to cultivate Cathal's allegiance. A canny person would try to use the connection. Hermione thought the Castle's advice very sound.

However, the Malfoys could burn in Hell and she would go ice skating in the same place before she willingly visited Malfoy Manor. Hermione doubted she could last the holidays without hexing the whole boiling lot of them. Nor would Moppet be there for back-up. She wasn't a Malfoy elf and would either set off the ward alarms or worse be captured by them. Hermione apologised to the Castle but she really couldn't, not to that place.

Which limited her options drastically and necessitated a confrontation. She had hoped he would inform her of the parental order somewhere private or simply assume she was aware of her obligations and that her defiance was more sulky than dogmatic. Dropping her in it with their Housemates was a nasty bit of scheming. Everyone would see her back down and go meekly. Lesson learned.

“I do not accept your offer of hospitality.” Hermione replied to the smirking Malfoy. “Please convey my regrets to your mother.”

“Rosier, I don't think you understand.” His eyes flicked around the room to make sure everyone was watching. He'd got some stick from the upper Years about the letter incident. Their House needed to present an united front. Draco had isolated the girl but she hadn't apparently noticed his quite clever, he thought, manoeuvring. Now it was time for bluntness. “This isn't an invitation. It's a command.”

“You'll have to Imperius me.” She mirrored his nasty little smirk. “Oh, sorry, that was your father.”

A collective indrawn breath was the only sound in the moment after Cathal flung down the metaphorical gauntlet. Lucius Malfoy had been unflatteringly quick to abandon the cause after the fall of the Dark Lord. Only his agility in avoiding naming names had kept him from becoming a despised exile like Karkaroff but many families who had not been so fortunate resented the Malfoys' high status.

Draco drew his wand. Hermione knew he would. He didn't have much choice other than to directly challenge her. She hadn't wanted to escalate their conflict. After he chose to involve their whole House as spectators, she had decided to take the direct route. Rubbing his nose in his father's perfidy then shaming him would hopefully sting his ego enough for him to leave her alone.

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione hissed as soon as he pointed his wand at her. There were some niceties to be observed. Everyone would have seen him prepare to cast. That she was faster would not be remarkable for someone who had taken down two Fifth Years. She caught the length of hawthorn and felt the subtle difference in it compared to her own. Unicorn hair was an odd choice for a toe-rag. Perhaps he had hidden qualities. Or perhaps he was just an elitist nob.

“I didn't want this to be public. You chose the arena, Malfoy.” Hermione ignored the crowd to talk directly to the blond. “I am sure you will go running to your father to tell tales. When you speak to
Lucius, please remind him my father died in the service of the Dark Lord.” She used that title deliberately. “I respect loyalty. I'll leave your wand with Professor Snape.”

Hermione turned and left, marching out of the Common Room mostly to avoid having to issue threats to a child or to engage in any verbal wrangling with the older Slytherins. She didn't want to succumb to the temptation to gloat either. She'd won. She had his wand, all Freudian implications of that aside, and could leave it there. Hopefully.

Professor Snape said nothing when she gave him Malfoy's wand. She was surprised he didn't ask any questions. Had she been herself, she would have asked why he didn't inquire but she wasn't herself. She was Cathal Rosier and what Cathal wanted right now was privacy. Spending the night in her bolt-hole might be a good idea. Most of Snakes were going home for the holidays so she should have some peace tomorrow.

The only dampener to Yule joy was the knowledge that Harry now had the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione didn't think he was particularly interested in Cathal but his quest for information about Nicolas Flamel was stymied until he noticed the chocolate frog card. A thwarted Harry was a restless Harry. Fortunately he had Ron to divert him. They looked terribly young and carefree. If she'd had a means of trapping Voldemort's soul, she would have beheaded Quirrell on the spot.

On the upside, she got into the Potions classroom where the Half-Blood Prince's book languished in a cupboard. Hermione copied every page with an amanuensis spell before replacing the battered textbook where Harry would eventually find it. She was tempted to burn the bloody thing. Her friend's cheating still rankled. However, Harry needed the Felix Felicis and she couldn't guarantee him getting it any other way.

Snape's innovations to Potion brewing were fascinating, which spurred her into possible refinements to the various healing potions that would become essential in the later years of their schooling. Which presented a significant problem. Multiple people had stolen ingredients from the potions stores, all of which Professor Snape had noticed. Nicking stuff in the volume she needed to research variant brews would be impossible to hide.

The Room of Hidden Things must have at least a rudimentary stasis effect otherwise the air would be unbreathable with years of cumulative decay. Hermione made a list of the most common ingredients used in what she considered 'first aid' potions then trialled her Summoning Charm. Cathal could sustain a couple of castings a day so she methodically worked down the list to see what she would get.

Mostly what she got was compost. Wealthier students studying NEWTs potions often supplied their own ingredients and sometimes they misplaced them. The quality of those substances after sitting neglected, poorly stored, and not infrequently chewed upon, was abysmal. Someone had lost an entire sack of nettles, which were now so dry they weren't even any use in a Herbicide Potion.

In a fit of frustration, Hermione tried Accio money. It was on her trial list as she would feel foolish if she didn't make the attempt. She jumped when somewhere in the gloomy recesses of the Room something crashed to the floor. She ached truly down to her bones to organise and systematise the lost and found. Magic didn't care much for efficiency. If a little spell couldn't do it, swish and flick harder.

A metallic clatter heralded her success. After the storm of clothes, Hermione was prepared for this. She had shifted, manually as Cathal couldn't levitate the weight yet, a wardrobe into the middle of her summoning circle. The oak box was roomy enough for two and it had a sturdy door. Loose coins battered against the wood with occasionally a louder thump.
As she waited out the rain of change, Hermione chided herself for 'money'. Surely 'British currency' or 'goblin made coins' might have been better. She didn't want her wooden sanctuary crushed by a rai stone or buried by bullion. Foolish wand waving, the witch used Snape's words against her. Throwing a tantrum because no one had misplaced a hermetically sealed jar of Dittany was stupid. Magic's instant gratification did not encourage patience.

When the metal hail had abated, Hermione emerged to inspect her trove. The floor glittered. She was honestly surprised at the number of coins littering the clearing. Her Summoning range was limited by Cathal and by the disinclination of people to casually misplace large denominations of lucre. There was still quite a bit, paper and coin.

She picked up an old style white fiver and a ten shilling note, neither any longer legal tender. There was some Monopoly money too, which made her laugh. A Muggle-born had evidently brought a board game to Hogwarts. Using cauldrons as sorting bins, Hermione had a fine collection of miscellaneous paper currency and pounds of Sickles and Knuts.

The star of the event was a silk purse stuffed with coins she had initially suspected of being leprechaun gold. She tested them with an anti-counterfeiting charm she had taught herself after the World Cup when Ron and Harry had been quarrelling. The coins were apparently genuine Galleons. Whoever had lost this would have been very upset indeed.

"Moppet?" Hermione called, weighing the pouch in her hand. It didn't feel that heavy but it dragged at her. The house elf appeared, looking around with obvious amusement at the witch's efforts to create order in chaos. "Sorry to interrupt but is there any way to tell who this originally belonged to? I can square my conscience with using someone else's spare change." She handed Moppet the purse. "Not this, though."

"Things in the Room of the Hidden are forgotten. Put out of mind. That's how them come here, Miss." She shook the bag of coins then shrugged absently. Money meant little to a house elf. You could buy service not loyalty. "If it is here, then them's it was thinks it gone. No tie between." She handed the purse back. "Moppet thinks Miss isn't stealing."

"Thanks." Sighing, Hermione upended the purse into the cauldron of coins. "This is a lot more than I was expecting. Some of the banknotes are old too. I could sell them to a collector, once I have a batch of Polyjuice to turn me into an adult." She stretched. Cathal was sore from spell casting, the strain a cross between the ache of a bruise and the sting of a burn. "Do you think anyone would notice if we snuck out to buy Potions supplies?"

"Yes, Miss. After the troll, all the teachers has eyes of beads." Moppet could feel the attention the staff were paying. They were putting their energy into Hogwarts. She couldn't describe it other than likening it to bubbles making the air fizz.

"Snape was oddly obliging when I surrendered Malfoy's wand. Maybe if I just ask, I shall receive." It was possible the Professor's attitude was solely because she wore green not red. He was horribly partisan. "I need an excuse. If I owl order everything I need, it'll be damn obvious I'm up to something."

When she went to the Head of Slytherin, it was apparent he already thought she was plotting. The interrogation began with an acid query whether Miss Rosier thought she was so advanced she need not simply pay attention in class. Because of 'their new celebrity' Snape was sensitised and bitter over any suggestion of special treatment.

Hermione explained that while she thought practical work was invaluable, the curriculum taught only one standardised approach. The difference between horned slugs and flobberworm mucus was not
discussed even though Zygmunt Budge made an excellent case for the variation. She thought both were used to provide a gel substrata to protect the active ingredients from the stomach acid for long enough to release the sympathetic magic of the quills and fangs. The Magical Drafts and Potions recipe was simpler. The Book of Potions recipe was more efficient.

She paused there, aware of her habit of lecturing. That was Hermione with her hand waving in the air. Cathal didn't need anyone's approval. She added in the spirit of Slytherin arrogance that she quite understood why duffers like Longbottom shouldn't be allowed near shrike spines. Her entirely genuine shudder at the idea of what Neville could accidentally do to overexcite the spines was probably what clinched her pitch.

Professor Snape would consider her for an extra-credit project if she could flawlessly brew a Sleeping Draught. Hermione didn't protest the potion was Second Year work. She silently prepped her workstation, making sure it was clean and the cauldron uncontaminated before fetching the ingredients. Measuring everything before she started, the witch worked in silence while Snape watched in silence.

The brewing took a bit more than an hour with the pewter cauldron running hot. Hermione extinguished the flame and decanted the mix carefully into bottles, which she labelled immediately. Then she tidied up, washed the cauldron, and wiped down the counter. This was how she preferred to brew rather than on the clock in class. Doing every step properly reassured her.

Pro forma, Professor Snape tested a few drops of the potion on a mouse. The little creature slumbered peacefully. He already knew it would. Watching the progress of her work, he was pleased to see how painstaking she was. Rushing simple potions because they were simple led to stupid mistakes. Years of teaching simpletons had burned away his tolerance for foolish errors.

Even to a Slytherin, he didn't commend. Cathal did receive a nod, which Hermione took as the sum of the accolade for her damn perfect potion. Snape put the bottles aside to go to the Hospital Wing then shooed her out with orders to write three feet on how every potion in the First Year curriculum might be refined further.

That sorted Potions. Herbology and Astronomy were practical, and Flying lessons unavoidable. History of Magic was dire second time round. Hermione's plan for the next term was to cycle through books disguised as the class text. No one would tattle on her. They were all united by tedium. Defence Against the Dark Arts would have to remain head down, eyes down until Harry defeated Quirrell. Which she could do very little to hasten.

That left Charms and Transfiguration. Hermione trooped back to her deserted dorm. She self-consciously did stretches then Transfigured a belt into a skipping rope. Cathal hadn't spent her summers bicycling or enjoying walking tours with her parents. Weekend yoga with her mother, mostly to counter the stress of miserable years at primary school, hadn't happened either.

Skip skip skip. She needed to learn German. Derica had written all her notes in her mother tongue interspersed with excellent Latin. Skip skip skip. She needed to keep herself busy in Transfiguration without showing off. Maybe trying the spells voiceless or wandless. That'd be a challenge for anyone. Skip skip skip. Copy the Marauder's Map now she had money for the materials. Maybe expand it if she could work out how to integrate the Unplottable areas. Skip skip pause.

The Map was connected to the school. If she could deepen the link, perhaps she could communicate with the Voice that way. Shades of possessed diary but it would be possible. If Hogwarts agreed. There were secrets to which she was not privy. More than once though Moppet had referred to her as a fellow servitor. That had to count for a little trust.
It was very awkward to negotiate with a composite being who spoke through ballistic knick-knacks. Hermione spent the whole day in the Room of Requirement with an improvised ouija board. The voice tried to speak with her but all she heard was a low mumbling buzz. While dropping blobs of wax onto letters was slow, it got the message across. The Castle had to do something with the remains of all those floating candles.

The ceromantic augury confirmed what Hermione had posited. She could expand on the Marauders' Map. The quartet had not linked their work deliberately to the Castle. They'd chanced across a way to harmonise their cartography charms with the aura of Hogwarts, meaning the map was tied to the school but the conduit only went one way and only where the Marauders had charted.

If she opened a reciprocal connection, with the consent of the Castle, her map would show all the currently materialised rooms. Which was not the same as all the rooms. Hogwarts existed in a phase space of its own with whole floors existing in potentia. Hermione's understanding of thaumaturgical principles and theoretical physics struggled when the Voice tried to explain more. She suspected you needed a Mastership, a Ph.D, and some psychotropics to follow all the permutations.

Short answer: yes, if she asked nicely. So Hermione asked nicely and Hogwarts agreed to allow her to expand the map into something more like GPS. Now it was her turn to explain esoterica. Muggles using enormous fireworks to shoot golems into the sky to fall endlessly around the terrestrial globe was news to the Voice.

Accord reached, all that remained was to send an owl order for the potion supplies and special parchment before the other students returned from holiday to avoid Malfoy nicking her post. Hermione bustled off to do that and to send a letter to the Ministry requesting they resend their previous correspondence due to accidental incineration.

The packages and letter arrived two days before term resumed, cutting it fine. Some students had returned early. Fortunately only Nott and Davis of the First Year Slytherins had come back sooner than they must. Neither remarked on the large brown paper wrapped boxes, which Hermione shrank and absconded with to her hidey-hole.

Periodic refurbishments to the currently physical parts of the school had made many odd nooks. The one Hermione had chosen was on the first floor, tucked behind a portrait door near the Hospital Wing. It had once been an apothecary when Hogwarts had more demand for potions than the Potions Professor could provide in their spare time. The brewing lab was small but well ventilated and the adjoining office was lined with bookshelves. A twisty little staircase linked the lab with a room in the basement probably for growing mushrooms, meaning she could slip into the dungeons relatively surreptitiously.

Once term started, Hermione was very tempted to wall herself up in her sanctuary. Malfoy was insufferable. Tempers flared over Quidditch and not just the Slytherins grumbled about a First Year being allowed on the Gryffindor team after Harry caught the Snitch in five minutes. Parkinson had taken to making catty remarks of a morning, usually about being a burden on the Malfoys' charity, in the dorm where she couldn't reasonably retaliate without witnesses.

Unfortunately for Pansy, Hermione had years of resentment, patience, and honed ruthlessness. She knew from experience the vicious witch would never let up once she had found a weakness she could exploit. Rising above the taunting had been her other self's tactic. The moral high ground worked well for a Lion. A Snake needed a different tack.

Hermione was in the Potions classroom with Professor Snape reviewing her essays when Parkinson's voice changed. All the girl could say was 'alms for a leper' due to a modified Babbling Curse cast on an ice cube slipped into her bag. When the ice melted, it released the magic. The effect lasted less
than half an hour but as Parkinson was a mouthy bitch, everyone in the Slytherin Common Room heard her begging.

Cathal Rosier did not have to say a thing. She didn't even have to smirk. Pansy pretended she did not exist, her eyes sliding over her. That suited Hermione fine. Draco continued to be an arse. He was easier to avoid, particularly after the fifty point loss he earned being caught out after curfew. The only salve to Slytherin was the sight of the spurned trio from Gryffindor. Hermione winced at the memory of the one hundred and fifty point penalty.

She kept herself very busy and very far away from the third floor corridor. When the time came, Hermione wanted to make absolutely sure Cathal was not involved. She studied, she sat exams, she worked on her projects, and she fretted about what to do over summer to distract herself from worrying about Harry, Ron, and the other Hermione.

And then suddenly the whole school knew Quirrell was dead. How he had died was a flurry of speculation. The Boy-Who-Lived had done something. A three-headed dog and flying keys. Hermione feigned disinterest though she was immeasurably relieved nothing had changed. She sat with Slytherin House at the Leaving Feast, her expression carefully blank when the green banners turned to red. Her friends were safe. That was all that mattered.
Hermione biddably boarded the Express to leave Hogwarts for the summer. The Slytherins sequestered themselves in several adjoining carriages, not mingling with the other students. The First Years divided themselves between two compartments; girls in one, boys in the other. She whiled the journey away reading one of the many books she had found in the Room of Hidden Things, a slightly tatty treatise on potion media. She had already tried the simple carrier medium formulated to hold a spell in suspension until drunk, which had worked, but the more complex bases looked horrendously fiddly or explosive or both.

When the train slowed to approach Kings Cross station, Hermione put her book away, picking up her randoseru by the straps as she headed out of the compartment. She shrugged her robe off as she went to convey her intention of changing belatedly out of her uniform. Parkinson glanced at the trunk with the initials CMR, which Hermione made no move to collect. The snub nosed girl made no protest at her departure, assuming she would return for her luggage.

Hermione headed to the toilet at the end of the carriage, stepped in and tossed back a potion she pulled from the pocket of her robes. Cathal's already pallid colouring washed out further as the Disillusionment Charm took effect. She promptly stepped back out into the corridor and shut the door as though someone was inside the cubicle. Functionally invisible, Hermione left the Express to merge anonymously with the Muggle crowd.

She headed directly onto another train. The half-hourly service to Leeds whooshed away a few minutes later, with the Disillusionment potion fading shortly thereafter. Hermione hadn't expected it to last particularly long so she had slunk low in her seat trying to keep out of the line of sight of the other passengers. When her skin was no longer the same pattern as the upholstery, Hermione sat up and pulled her book out of her bag.

The calculated loss of her trunk had bought her enough time to get away from Kings Cross. She doubted the Malfoys would expect her to get on a Muggle train and even if they did, the station was one of the busiest in England. Not quite an hour later, Hermione left the train at Peterborough. In the ladies loo, she summoned Moppet and the house elf conveyed her back to Hogwarts.

In the Room of Requirement, Hermione tacked up her work schedule for the summer. She had already started on the Polyjuice and several other potions that would be awkward to explain if she were caught brewing them during the school year. Mostly what she needed to do was research then experiment and not get caught.

Casting the spells needed to finish the Map Project taxed Cathal considerably. Hermione paced herself but still had to spend a day in bed between each stage. She gave herself a week off from magic after she had finished, switching to reading and note taking.

Her map was a single sheet of vellum as fine as onionskin. It could zoom and had a picture-in-picture function with which she was very pleased; it had been a tricky bit of magic. The map showed all the people, house elves, ghosts, and animals in the Castle. Right now Mrs Norris was in Filch's office on a filing cabinet. The GPS part came from the constant updating. She could see when the Room of Requirement was in use and when the Chamber of Secrets was open. Floo connections were bright spots of colour.

She could probably pass NEWT Charms with this project except she couldn't show it to anyone other than Moppet. Hermione sighed. Her need for affirmation would have to go unsated. She touched the lower right hand corner of the vellum and a dialogue box appeared. One of the limits of
the Map was that being so keyed to the Castle she couldn't communicate with anyone else. If anyone tried to duplicate the artefact, Hogwarts would instantly know. This map was truly school property.

“Voice, can you hear me?” Hermione asked, bracing herself to be disappointed. Casting through Cathal strained her control of complex charms. Even as her older self, she would have been prepared to have to repeat the spell to get it right.

“Can you hear me?” The Voice asked tartly, audibly frustrated at her previous lack of response. “We have many books we could throw.”

“Thank you, that will not be necessary.” Her reply was prim. “I'm testing my map. I won't be able to fix any bugs for a little while. Cathal's sturdy but there's only so much energy a child can channel.”

“It is enough we can speak. We must plan. Through our connection to you, we know of the serpent though alas when you depart from our demesne that knowledge fades. You must tell us so we have the learning for ourselves.” The Voice explained, patient now it was not straining to reach a tiny, ambulatory, and stubborn part of itself. “We wish to know all.”

Hermione spent hours talking to an enchanted sheet of calfskin. Doing so helped with the pernicious loneliness as well as giving her new appreciation for the monumental work of magic that was the founding of Hogwarts. The Castle was alive and kept within it psychic echoes of all who had crossed the threshold. A temporal hive mind.

A slightly possessive mind too. Hogwarts did not like Hermione's intention to spend the last week of August in Muggle London. Cathal's lie that she had been staying in shelters needed some physical evidence. It wouldn't be fun or indeed she conceded particularly safe but she would sleep rough if she had to. Hopefully there would be a place at a hostel without too many questions.

Hogwarts tried hard to persuade Hermione not to go. The bulk of the memories imbued into the school were from times where Muggle society was either hostile to witches or miserably abject for everyone. Dickensian workhouses and Jack the Ripper were within living wizarding memory. Welfare and outreach programs were recent enough the Castle had little understanding of them. Muggle-borns rarely stayed on to teach. Indeed, currently on staff the person with the most experience living as a modern Muggle was Severus Snape. Grinding poverty in Cokeworth did not paint a happy portrait.

Their compromise was Moppet accompanying Hermione everywhere. The house elf changed her liveried linen for a plain tablecloth so she could plausibly lie she was a Rosier elf. The face she made when she pretended to change allegiance would have curdled water. Moppet liked being a Hogwarts elf. She did not, not, not want to belong to a Dark family.

London in late August was warm and muggy, with car exhaust and that peculiarly urban grime that made sweating skin feel grubby after ten minutes. Courtesy of the Yellow Pages in a downmarket pub, Hermione had a list of numismatists and a few different hair samples for the Polyjuice Potion. She spent her post-decimalisation coinage and the day junketing on the Tube, strategically accumulating tickets for Moppet to alter the dates. If challenged, Cathal would be able to assert she had spent much of her summer shunting around the metropolis reading books. A safe enough pastime for a schoolgirl.

The older coins, a motley of pence, shillings, farthings, half-sovereigns, and a something she suspected was a groat, went to a dealer in Charing Cross. He was chatty with the old man who came to sell his collection and handed over the better part of eight hundred pounds. The groat was Maundy money from the reign of William IV and worth a bit though it was the gold in the half-sovereigns that buoyed her sale.
After the success of the spare change, the result from the paper money from a shop in Mayfair was disappointing. Being stuffed into pockets or randomly shoved into bookbags then lost did not preserve a note in mint condition. The middle aged man who brought in the collection he'd found in his great-uncle's loft shrugged his shoulders but took the offer of one hundred and thirty five pounds. Hermione used some of that money to buy a collecting guide in the event of future rains of money.

Once she was herself again, she and Moppet sat in Hyde Park under a shady tree to plot. With quite a bit of funds available, Hermione felt bad taking someone's place at a shelter. She would visit a few just to get an idea of where they were and whether an unaccompanied minor would be admitted without Child Protection being called. Then she'd take a train to Liverpool and the ferry to Douglas to make her way to Rose Cottage.

Of course, Moppet could have popped them there instantly but Hermione was building a mental sequence as per the Occlumency primer. She wanted to fill her mind with images of countryside speeding by. Long dull views of industrial towns and suburbia. Shifting seats varied her perspective, hopefully creating the impression of multiple journeys. She had a thumping headache by the time the train reached Liverpool Lime Street station.

The short walk to the Central Loop Line didn't do much to ease the pounding in her temples and she opted not to use the ride to Birkenhead to build further active memories. Taking her chances with a tinfoil helmet was starting to appeal. The ferry and the fresh sea air improved her mood as did Moppet's enthusiasm. Muggles couldn't see the house elf, which was just as well as she was dancing across the railing laughing at the speed of the ship.

Windblown and jaunty, Hermione hired a bicycle with a basket so Moppet could sit in the front to direct her with the IoM map. According to the tourist information, it was about 30km from Douglas to The Cronk. She estimated it would take her about two hours to ride to the cottage assuming Cathal's legs were up for the task. If she couldn't last the distance, Moppet could pop them the rest of the way. Mostly Hermione wanted to be outdoors after spending the summer shut up in the Room of Requirement.

She stopped for a rest and an ice lolly when she got to the seaside, feeling good if puffed. Moppet watched the little children clustered around the ice cream truck then chose a clown popsicle with a bubblegum nose. She proudly displayed her tongue when it turned blue from the food colouring. Of such things happy memories were made.

Rose Cottage was not a happy memory. It looked like a grim reminder. Hermione pedalled up to the burnt out footing. The local council had erected a fence around the site, the faded warning signs suggesting no one had visited for some time. Likely the Ministry of Magic had Confounded those involved in the investigation of the fire at the suddenly appearing house no one remembered being there.

There was nothing left on the ground floor other than the foundations. Even a year of weathering couldn't scour away the scorch marks from the Fiendfyre. Hermione wished she could thank Auror Williamson for braving the blaze to rescue Cathal. Whether or not he was involved in the death of Derica Max, he had got her daughter out. She would have to settle for not appealing against the dismissal of the kidnapping charges.

The Ministry letter had been a notice of the results of a preliminary inquiry into Williamson's conduct. Moving at speed of bureaucracy, the DMLE had assessed there were no charges to be levied. Which was conveyed to her at length along with a patronising assurance she would not need to pay the fees associated with bringing a failed legal suit against an Auror as the inquiry was not an inquest, which might have lead to a hearing that could have resulted in a trial.
Hermione went into the cellar. It had been locked but Moppet shrugged. She had been there before. Rose Cottage knew her, not in the sentient way of the Castle but in the way of all houses to all house elves; a place she was welcome. The Locking Charm only meant she couldn't open the cellar. There was nothing stopping her from appearing on the other side of it with Hermione.

The air smelled of stale smoke, of stillness. Turning on her flashlight, the bike hire company stocked basic camping essentials too, Hermione panned around the stone room that had nearly been her tomb. Cathal had died there. She hoped the girl's spirit had crossed the Veil and found some peace. There were no ghosts in the cellar, nothing at all of interest. Moppet had been thorough but Hermione had wanted to check in case of blood wards or similar magic.

Outside, she paced around the ruins thinking. Evidently Piers Rosier had been the Secret Keeper and had died suddenly. Had Derica been unaware the protection of the Fidelius was gone? Here and there near the cottage Hermione felt the brush of old defences. Most had collapsed with Cathal's mother's death. None reacted hostilely to her.

“Why did she hide? The war was over.” Hermione asked Moppet and the universe. Moppet shrugged. The universe continued blithely on towards a nice sunset. She sat down, idly rubbing her sore legs and brushed away tears. The war wasn't over. The war was never bloody over and she had to go back to face the bloody snake. And the bloody Snakes.

“Miss is tired.” Moppet offered a handkerchief with quiet sympathy.

“Miss has been fighting for a very long time.” She wiped her nose, letting the tears run. Having a good cry helped sometimes. The knowledge things were going to get worse did not. Hermione inhaled shakily. How could she make the future better without risking their success? Slitting Lucius Malfoy's throat would prevent him from giving the diary to Ginny, which would mean the basilisk would stay hidden, which deprived them of its fangs and the venom-imbued Sword of Gryffindor. So the whole Heir of Slytherin ordeal had to happen.

As the night cooled, Hermione considered the roses. They could do with some pruning, grown over-wild and shedding petals in a multicoloured carpet. The task could be done easily with magic except for the Trace. She frowned at that thought, wondering if she had made another assumption. Cathal was twelve but Hermione was eighteen by the calendar and older courtesy of the Time Turner and this loop back into the tapestry. So was the Trace physical, chronological, or thaumaturgical?

She asked Moppet but the house elf didn't know. The Ministry kept very mum about the Trace so it couldn't be suborned. Hermione stood and drew her wand to begin pruning the roses with controlled cutting hexes. She kept the rose hips for use in potions and the intact blooms she gathered in a great bunch heady with perfume.

No one came to interrupt her gardening. No officious letters arrived to chide.

Hardly a conclusive test. The residual wards could suppress detection. If the cottage was an old wizarding residence then the Ministry might assume the owner was the source of the magic. The Trace was enforced sporadically depending on the verve of those on duty. Harry, the Boy Who Lived among Muggles, couldn't sneeze without it being logged but Malfoy and his ilk scarcely registered.

Hermione bundled her harvest for easy transport. Until Cathal could cast an Undetectable Extension Charm, Moppet delivering bulky things to the secret lab was their best option. While she was at the school, the house elf would give Hogwarts a report on their excursion. The witch transfigured the prunings into a tent, took off her boots, and stretched out to rest.
She was still lying there staring at the leaf green cloth above when Moppet returned. Hermione shifted over to make room then resumed her listless contemplation. She was tired and fairly comfortable. This was a purely psychological remnant from her time on the run. This tent smelled much nicer. No one was hunting her. No one was trying to kill her. Indeed, as Cathal, she had a very good chance of not being targeted at all. A pure-blood from a Dark family would be not be Undesirable.

Bastards would probably try to recruit her. Hermione swore very inappropriately for a twelve year old. One of Moppet's lanteen ears perked. The witch apologised for her outburst but didn't trouble the house elf with the cause. It would be years yet before Cathal became useful to the Death Eaters. Even Malfoy, keen as mustard on blood purity, wasn't recruited before he was sixteen.

She must have dozed eventually as she was awoken by the dawn chorus. Hermione got up, found a private spot, dug a hole, transfigured leaves into toilet paper, did her business, Scourgified herself, buried everything, and was dressed again before she was fully awake. The routine was so ingrained even without muscle memory it had been automatic.

Breakfast happened in a café in Douglas. Her legs were sore from the previous day so Moppet popped them back to town. Hermione returned the hired bicycle and wandered around until the first ferry at eleven o'clock. She quaffed Polyjuice and bought a ticket to embark as a sprightly old woman. The senior citizen disappeared into the ladies once she reached the ferry terminus. Hermione collected a variety of pamphlets on what to do in Liverpool then braved public transport to get to a leisure centre. Because anywhere with a public pool had showers.

It was rather fun to trek about. She made notes on places Cathal could plausibly stay before heading to a military surplus store. Hermione bought the cheapest nylon tent they had because memories linked to the smell of damp, musty canvas made her heart race. She strolled into the quiet corner where Moppet had hidden herself. The house elf had been put off by the electronic security system and hadn't wanted to go into the shop.

"Let's try the Trace again." Hermione suggested. "If anyone shows up, pop us away. You can pick where we go this time."

No one showed up.

The witch frowned. She should be glad there was no response. Without a Trace, she could cast spells without Ministry oversight. Perhaps she was too suspicious. Her magic was of age thus it broke the Trace automatically. However she didn't know enough about the Ministry's leash to rest easy with the assumption no reply meant no one had detected her.

"We'll work with the proviso Cathal can be tracked. I don't want to get caught out doing something illicit because I got sloppy." Hermione put her wand away. "You still get to pick."

Moppet had ridden on the rail tube and the going-to-island boat and the pedal machine, all exciting things. She pondered what she would like to see of the Muggle world. She didn't know what there was to see. House elves always had work to do. It was good to work. Making sure nothing happened to Cathal was work. But it was work she could do in interesting places.

At Moppet's request to see flying machines, they took the train to London and the Underground to Heathrow. Hermione got them as far into the airport as she could go without a ticket looking for a good vantage so they could see the planes take off and land. The house elf didn't ask questions, she just stared at the contraptions flinging themselves into the air. The witch watched too, lamenting at a freedom to just leave she did not have.
“What are you doing here?” The educated voice was higher than she remembered it, which was as she discovered when she turned to face him because Justin Finch-Fletchley was six years younger than when they had last spoken.

“Marvelling at what man hath wrought.” Hermione replied mordantly. Her tone did not have the expected result on the well-dressed couple standing behind Justin. They seemed amused not offended.

“ Aren’t your lot supposed to be averse to technology? The candles are bad enough but quills and all that rot.” The hearty boy had been looking around for any tiny thing that would alleviate his boredom as his parents continued to debate the qualities of the vintages they had sampled during their trip. Wine he wasn’t allowed to drink didn’t interest him. Then he seen the house elf. Or thought he’d seen it. The creature was gone now, leaving the witch incongruously alone in the arrivals lounge.

“Simpler objects are easier to transfigure in bulk.” She answered instinctively. Justin wasn't academically brilliant but he did well at everything he undertook. A solid ally who had protested when she advised him to get himself and his family out of Britain. He had gone though, taking several other Muggle-born students with him, hosting them gratis at his grandfather's villa in Tuscany.

“I'd wondered at that.” Justin heard his mother's soft prompting cough and remembered his manners. “Father, Mother, this is Cathal Rosier. Miss Rosier, may I introduce my parents Andrew and June Finch-Fletchley.” He glanced at her warily, his gaze dropping to her wand hand in case she tried to hex. They weren't friends. “We have classes together.”

“Oh, are you a Hufflepuff?” June asked, smiling at the fair girl. After a summer of hearing Ernie this and Ernie that, it was a relief to see her son had other chums.

“I'm a Slytherin.” Hermione considered causing a scene. There didn't seem to be an easy way to start a ruckus to cover her escape. She doubted a child legging it through Terminal 4 would go unnoticed. “The Houses attend lessons together haphazardly.”

“Pairing us with the Ravenclaws so we all look like duffers.” Justin muttered, unaccustomed to mediocrity.

“They bog down in minutiae. Get a good understanding of the fundamentals first then worry about the exceptions.” She counselled. Behind the Finch-Fletchleys, out of sight of the Hufflepuff, Moppet was weaving about with her arms outstretched mimicking the airplanes.

“Is that what you did?” Justin had heard about the Meadowes twins, the whole school had, and he also knew that a very angry Fourth Year had suddenly stopped brooding about Rosier. Malcolm hadn't confided in him but he’d overheard the older boy talking to a Prefect about his father quite intensely. And then that angst had gone away. Rosier had said something, that much was obvious.

“I work hard and mind my own business.” Hermione said pointedly.

“Good advice for anyone.” Andrew Finch-Fletchley put a hand on his son's shoulder. “We shouldn't leave our driver waiting. You'll see your friend at school soon.” He felt Justin stiffen under his touch and hid a smile. A witch his son knew just happened to be waiting at the airport by pure coincidence at the same time as their flight landed. They'd have a little chat about girls when they got home. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Rosier. I'm sure we'll meet again.”

Hermione was the only one who understood how surreal that was.
Hermione sauntered into Kings Cross station at ten o'clock, fresh from a bed in an anonymous cheap hotel. She'd booked in under Polyjuice so the only complication to quite an affordable stay was the shared bathroom. Showering at five in the morning to avoid scrutiny had been a small sacrifice for 50 pounds a night.

She was one of the first students on the Hogwarts Express and found an empty compartment easily, changing into her uniform while she had privacy. Hermione made herself comfortable with a book most definitely not written by Gilderoy Lockhart. The charming fraud had fooled her the first time around. This time he would get not a Knut from her.

As the train gradually filled up several people peered in at her before moving on down the corridor she presumed because of the colour of her tie. She doubted Cathal's reputation was so dire no one wished to imperil themselves with her presence. The drawback of being a Slytherin in lone possession of a compartment was she couldn't protest when latecomers from her own House barged in.

Flint, Pucey, Bletchley, and Higgs proceeded to take up as much space as possible in the manner of teenage boys. Pucey in particular didn't seem to know what to do with his long legs, stretching out until his feet bumped hers. He apologised politely and they shifted around trying to sit decorously without playing footsie.

“Salazar's sake, Pucey, swap with Rosier. If she sits next to me, she'll have room to put her feet on the seat.” Flint barked when their shuffling irritated him. The lanky Chaser stood, made a bow, muttered something to his shoes then turned red. Hermione took pity on him and moved to the other side of the compartment.

Flint pulled the armrest down so the witch could brace against it rather than his leg, because touching an unchaperoned twelve year old was not on, then peered at the cover of the book she was reading. He puzzled out the Latin with a frown.

“Principles of Poisonous Water?” He looked to Pucey, who despite his inability to speak to any of Eve's daughters did know his potions. Adrian craned his neck to see the title of the book for himself. “I've read that one. It's about the interactions of antagonistic liquids, particularly the refinements of ingredients required to balance the humours of the potion.” He explained to a round of groaning at the prospect of NEWT prep this year from Kevin and Terence, and a non-committal grunt from Marcus, who had barely passed his Potions OWL.

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“Enough.” Hermione said shortly, catching herself before she began a discussion on the fascinating technical details. She would've liked to talk over some of the concepts of antagonism and antidote schema, the interrelationships between ingredients were fiendishly complicated, but she didn't want to present Cathal as a prodigy. “It's something to puzzle through during DADA. Have you seen the reading list?”

Their smirks indicated they had. Flint shook his head. He wanted a Defence NEWT and the drivel the Headmaster had chosen to inflict upon them from a prancing fool wouldn't help. They'd all bought the books of course. Pucey had even read them. His opinion was the collection would be best given to a slightly addled maiden aunt.
The journey passed in pleasant accord. They were joined by the two Beaters, beefy Seventh Year cousins who looked so similar they could be siblings. No one made any effort to dispossess Cathal of her seat or make inappropriate suggestions. Hermione easily tuned out the Quidditch talk and wondered if Higgs knew he would be replaced by dint of Lucius Malfoy's largesse.

She could see the Thestrals. Hermione gritted her teeth. She'd known the carriages were inevitable but she'd put them out of her mind. She hung back when the Quidditch boys piled on, shaking her head when Bletchley offered her a hand up. There really wasn't room so they didn't argue. Hermione stood there among the throng and fought down her anger into something socially acceptable.

“A nice bit of thoughtless cruelty.” Nott had appeared at her elbow so quietly she should've jumped in surprise. She was too numb to move.

“It's a test” Hermione remarked softly. This was not a conversation for others. “A little check to see who flinches.” She didn't look around. Three students, now four with Cathal, could see the skeletal equines. “Not for us.” He looked sharply at her, saying nothing, his face as carefully neutral as he could manage. “For the initiated.”

“Malfoy brought your trunk back full of things his mother bought. He plans to present it to you in the Common Room.” The warning was casual as though the spite of their classmates was a chore to be endured. Hermione sighed but said nothing. They got into the next carriage, both pulling out books they didn't read as an excuse not to look at the Thestrals.

The Sorting Feast was abuzz with speculation about the absence of Potter and Weasley. Malfoy played it cool when asked if his father had arranged their departure from Hogwarts. Hermione was more interested in the turnout. Her Year was small. This year's intake was noticeably smaller. There had been a dearth of births during the war. It would be interesting to see the number of students starting next year when the celebration babies were old enough to attend school.

All of Slytherin House were expected to attend the induction of the First Years, no exceptions. Hermione trooped into the Common Room with the other Second Years and took her place standing among the select while the Prefects did their spiel. She was mentally reviewing Transfiguration spells while trying to estimate the raw poundage Cathal could transform without having to rest afterwards.

Malfoy hadn't learned his lesson from their duel last year. The assembly had barely begun to drift away when he loudly mentioned her trunk had been delivered with his. Crabbe and Goyle fetched it, thumping the stylish piece of luggage onto the floor. The speech accompanying the delivery hinted at maternal influence; a little subtle twisting of the knife overladen with Malfoy's own thundering arrogance trying to cast Cathal as the poor relation.

“Oh bugger off, Malfoy.” Hermione interrupted when she thought he had garnered all the attention he could. She didn’t want to have a running feud with him. Enough scrutiny would be on the Snakes this year without having an obvious rift focussing interest on the participants. Flicking her wand in a complex volute, she transfigured the trunk into a wolverine.

The belligerent baggage went for the blond, chasing him growling around the common room. Crabbe and Goyle fired jinxes at the ornery carnivore with more malice than accuracy. They hit several other students, who retaliated. Hermione bunkered down behind a chaise, waiting for the lumpen pair to recall it was her fault and target Cathal.

Crabbe figured it out first. He spun around, dodging a Trip Jinx with surprising agility, and shot a Tempest Jinx at where the blonde witch was hiding. Miniature lightning bolts struck the chaise making the upholstery smoulder before arcing wildly. She would certainly have been hit had she still been hiding there.
The Disillusionment potion worked best when consumed out of the line of sight, buying the quaffer about five minutes of chameleon camouflage. She had to walk carefully and slowly to limit movement ripples, which was difficult in the heat of the moment, but she had traversed from the chaise to the door of the girls' dorm.

She had no qualms about shooting Crabbe in the back. He was a bastard and a bully, and from what Neville had told her of Seventh Year he'd be a significant threat. The Fiendfyre fiasco in the Room of Hidden Things had impressed upon her how dangerously vicious he could be. Cathal had no grudge against him but Hermione had enough vendetta for two.

A Full Body-Bind Curse hit him right between the shoulder blades. He went over with a crash. Goyle turned to look in the direction of his fellow minion's fall, presenting an ideal target. Hermione cursed him too. Malfoy had climbed up a bookcase to get away from the wolverine. The trunk creature snarled in an aggressive territorial response after it had 'treed' its prey.

"Finite Incantatem." Hermione countered her transfiguration. The luggage returned to docility. She Vanished the trunk, interested to see if it would rematerialise in the Room of Hidden Things. Normally an object under Evanesco discorporated into the ether becoming one with everything. She suspected Hogwarts bent that rule a bit otherwise the school would burst at the seams with the dissipated energy.

Malfoy's face twisted into something cruel but Hermione didn't let him speak. She put him under a Body-Bind too, stepping aside as he fell off the bookcase. Dragging him to his cronies for the sake of tidiness, she regarded the Common Room generally. The First Years had fled while the Prefects tried to restore a semblance of dignity. Most of the Snakes were leaving as they were keen to be elsewhere with an alibi.

"This is the second time." Hermione collected their wands and prodded Malfoy with his to reinforce her point. "House unity goes only so far. If you try to shame me again, I will post your wands back to your parents and let them attempt to beat some sense into you."

She went to Professor Snape to keep the disturbance in-house. Someone else in green was bound to tattle but she didn't trust any of the other teachers to be impartial. Hermione didn't trust Snape all that much. She would make good on her threat if Malfoy ventured into amateur dramatics again. He really was a spoiled brat.

Speaking of prima donnas, the first class of Lockhart's Defence Against the Dark Arts happened. With pixies and chaos. Hermione positioned herself right at the back. She bolted for the door when he flung open the cage and was the first in the hallway. She was probably the only one to see Professor Snape step back into a side passage with a smirk at sight of the shambles of the new Defence teacher's class.

Hermione trusted her other self to restore order to the classroom thus saw no need to linger. Lockhart had made no attempt to wrangle his students leaving them at leisure until History of Magic. She headed to her secret lab to check on the nettle decoctions she was experimenting with for the Swelling Solution. While that particular brew was more novelty than direct use, it was a precursor for many regenerative potions. Her end goal was to find or create one that worked against Dark curse injuries.

There were a great many species in the genus Urtica as well as other species called 'nettle' that were unrelated to the scientifically classified nettles. There was extensive totally unremarkable literature on the use of nettles in the Herbology section of the library so she didn't need to justify her interest. Explaining her research would become more tricky when she started testing her formulae on curse subjects.
Hermione kept Cathal's nose to the grindstone between start of term and Halloween, aware she would have far fewer opportunities to sneak off once the Heir began petrifying people. Even the Slytherins had taken to travelling in groups; a bit of hypocrisy she had noticed at the time. The Snakes weren't so confident they were the inviolable elect when faced with a direct threat.

After the Halloween Feast, Hermione sat up in the Slytherin Common Room in plain sight of three dozen people. The Seventh Years arrogated all the most comfortable seats. Flint took up an entire sofa for himself, sprawled with a Charms text over his face as though he could absorb the information by osmosis.

When Mrs Norris was discovered petrified, no one looked at Cathal sideways. There was quiet speculation among the Slytherins but they by nature played their cards close to their chests. Hermione spent her spare time in the greenhouses, seen there by Hufflepuffs and Neville Longbottom. Neville didn't speak to her or even look at her but Justin tentatively chatted during free periods though not in class.

It was that idle acquaintanceship witnessed by a set of badgers that shielded her from the accusations levelled against other pure-blood Slytherins. Malfoy was the front runner for the Heir with Nott a close second. Anyone in green from the Sacred Twenty-Eight was apparently pining to unleash an ancient monster on their schoolmates.

After Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, all suspicion turned on Harry. Hermione had to make herself avoid him completely as she feared she'd let something slip. She felt wretched. She wanted to give her friend some support but the importance of the confrontation with the basilisk was too great to risk. So she stuck to the dungeons like the rest of the Snakes and tried not to take her thwarted sympathy fuelled temper out on anyone.

It was her fault. True, Hermione could have put some of the blame on Violet Tripe as the Fifth Year Prefect had skirted the rules of the Slytherin Duelling Society with a fire curse. The spell was difficult to heal by any but the experienced. Tripe had asserted she had not violated the rule of 'only healable' as while she could not remedy the damage she had caused, a Healer could.

Hermione had been invited to join the exclusive club because of the wolverine incident and because, in Gemma Farley's words, they were short on people who knew which end of a wand to use. Goyle and Crabbe were arguably the stupidest of their House but they were not alone in being hard of thinking. Cathal Rosier however was a striving witch who deserved a chance to hone her skills with her superiors. That quote was also Tripe.

The Fifth Year hadn't duelled Hermione. She'd been paired with Adrian Pucey, who'd looked to be winning until the Prefect had lashed out with a whip made of flame. Pucey had tried Aguamenti with increasing desperation. Tripe had insisted he concede the duel before she had dismissed the spell, leaving the wizard with painful burns to his legs and arms.

It was the smell that took her back to the Fiendfyre. Crabbe's screams and the stink of burning flesh. Hermione had called out Tripe before she could stop herself. The Prefect's mocking bow hadn't mattered. The duel wasn't even personal. It was a heaven sent opportunity for her to fight the good fight, to do something to punish the wicked. Months of suppressed outrage released all at once at a dark haired witch laughing at her victim's pain.

The contest started innocuously enough with an exchange of jinxes. Violet wasn't threatened by a child. Until the Confringo hit her Shield blasting her backwards off her feet. The Prefect's mocking bow hadn't mattered. The duel wasn't even personal. It was a heaven sent opportunity for her to fight the good fight, to do something to punish the wicked. Months of suppressed outrage released all at once at a dark haired witch laughing at her victim's pain.

The contest started innocuously enough with an exchange of jinxes. Violet wasn't threatened by a child. Until the Confringo hit her Shield blasting her backwards off her feet. The Prefect hit the ground, rolled and stood to counter because if the chit wanted to play rough, she would. Except the little bitch didn't let up. Tripe couldn't get a curse off under a rain of cutting hexes, couldn't do anything except put her concentration into her Shield and try to dodge.
One of the other Prefects ran for Professor Snape when Rosier cornered the older witch and Tripe stubbornly refused to yield. Their Head of House intervened in the duel, protecting the Prefect from the fury of a Second Year with two well placed Disarming Charms. He gave the battered Fifth Year a week's detention then dragged the twelve year old bodily to the Hospital Wing.

“Idiot girl.” Snape hissed when Rosier collapsed onto the bed next to a bandaged Pucey. Her expression was neither contrition or defiance. She looked quietly satisfied with a job well done and thus at peace with the consequences. “You could have killed her with that fit of temper.”

“No, Professor.” Hermione answered quietly. Her hands trembled. Her voice didn't. “The rules say only what you can heal.” Spitting mad she may have been but she had kept within the duelling charter. “I have a vial of Essence of Dittany in my backpack.”

“Marry me, Rosier?” Pucey and a generous dose of pain potion asked.

“The foolishness is evidently contagious.” The Professor snapped. “Go to sleep, Pucey. You too, Rosier. You will both report to my office as soon as Madam Pomfrey discharges you.” He shot the matron a darkling look. He did not wish his charges released until they were entirely mended regardless of their personal opinions.

Hermione stayed in the Hospital Wing for three days, sleeping long enough for rumours to start she had been petrified too. She woke in the early morning to Moppet's concerned face peeking at her from the edge of the bed. She felt like she had been disassembled and screwed back too tightly. Everything ached.

“Miss is daft.” The house elf informed her. Hermione concurred with a soft groan. “Moppet brought Miss a big breakfast, which Miss will finish.” Her pugnacious tone coaxed a smile from the witch, who sat up gingerly to accept the laden tray. Although her friend's definition of 'big' would have fed two grown men, Hermione didn't object. She ate the lot then collapsed back into sleep.

On her return to the Slytherin dungeon, Hermione was greeted by a very awkward Adrian Pucey, whose flushed face matched his healed pink hands. He made three attempts to ask her something before looking beseechingly at Flint. The big Chaser threw down the book at which he had been glaring and stomped over.

“Right, you tosser.” He glared at his team-mate, who became more rubicund but stood his ground. “Miss Rosier, my friend Mr Pucey believes he may have spoken inappropriately to you. He wishes to apologise and clarify he meant no encroachment to your person or reputation.” Flint made a face, which with his teeth made him look very plausibly troll-blooded. “That about it, plonker?”

“Arse.” Pucey muttered.

“Mr Flint, please tell your friend Mr Pucey that he was insensate when I arrived in the Hospital Wing. Anything he thinks he may have said I didn't hear.” Hermione obliged, wondering how strict pure-blood courting customs were if a half-delirious proposal prompted this sort of public apology and denial. She'd have to find a critique on pure-blood society if such a thing existed. A diarist would do, again if extant. Wizarding culture vacillated between publishing everything and nothing. She could find a dozen books on the use of snails but had to quest for a tome documenting clinical trials on potions.

Hermione was still thinking about testing potions when she reported to her Head of House for what she presumed would be a bollocking. Professor Snape had never spared her the sharp side of his tongue in their first acquaintance. She doubted her green tie would save her now and envied the Hufflepuffs Professor Sprout's amiable warmth.
When bade enter, she entered. When told to sit, she sat. When told to explain herself, she lied. Hermione was not going to tell anyone that she had tried to cut a sixteen year old to pieces because she hadn't liked the way the girl had laughed. Or that Tripe's casual cruelty had reminded her of Bellatrix Lestrange and after that mental connection had been made, she had lashed out with all the suppurating rage the Death Eater had caused.

“She broke the rules.” Hermione said stoutly, eyes on Professor Snape's desk. “As a Prefect, Tripe should lead by example.”

“Am I to presume your outburst was a lesson for Miss Tripe on the values of law abiding?” The rich, dark voice made Hermione envy his diction. If he had been a Muggle, Snape would have triumphed on the stage.

“Yes, Professor.” She answered promptly while thinking of her full plate at the Slytherin table, picturing each boiled pea and spoonful of mashed potato. Hermione mentally aligned the cutlery and diverted into the memory of stabbing Crabbe with her fork. That had been satisfying. The urge to take cutlery to Tripe caused her attention on the active memory to waver, creeping too close to the cursed dagger. She derailed that train of thought by pinching the webbing between her thumb and forefinger. The pain sharpened her focus.

“You are lying, Miss Rosier.” He spoke quietly, certain of her prevarication if not the cause. A pathetic juvenile infatuation with Pucey would have been his first assumption except she had not reacted when the boy had suggested matrimony. Not a blush or a blink. Snape studied the girl. “There was a fire at the cottage, was there not? Before your mother disappeared.”

Surprise almost, almost made her look up. Hermione stopped herself before she met his eyes but she couldn't hide her reaction. He thought Derica Max had abandoned her daughter. Should she correct him? Moppet had buried Cathal's mother under the roses and that was all the thought Hermione had given to the matter. Surely the Max family should be told.

Angry resentful bitterness upswelled, the tide of darkness implacable. Derica Max tried to kill Cathal. Had killed. Whether the emotion came from Hermione's own traumatised subconscious or whether it was a legacy from Rosier herself, the witch kept silent.

“Certain standards of behaviour are expected of Slytherin House.” Professor Snape warned. Tripe had invited retaliation but if Rosier attacked with the same verve another student, she would face expulsion. She was not the Headmaster's darling allowed to prance about the school as he willed. “You are not alone, Miss Rosier.”

“I know, sir.” Hermione was immensely, shakingly relieved she wasn't alone. She had Moppet and Hogwarts. She would get through this. She would endure.
Norns

The first time around she hadn't realised how endemically hostile the other students were to the Slytherins. Hermione was used to ignoring whispers and snide comments. Being Potter's Mudblood had spared her little. But the other side was no cakewalk. After Hermione was petrified, public opinion swung back to the Snakes being at fault as many believed Harry couldn't be the Heir with his friend in the Hospital Wing.

In her second self, Hermione had hoped to have more peace of mind with her first self out of the way. Giving oneself hints on the sly was a terrible temptation. She'd caught herself making extra notes to help herself catch up when she woke and had then given herself a stern scolding. She was two people. Cathal and Hermione weren't friends. And she had work to do.

Work that was being stymied by other people's fear. Cathal Rosier and Theodore Nott had paired up to study, neither relishing the company but neither wishing to be caught alone and face accusations from paranoid students. Hermione was forced to stick to Herbology books as Nott would certainly notice her excursions into curse theory.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was particularly infuriating after Hagrid was arrested. Lockhart preened, regaling the class with his insights into the half-giant's schemes. Hermione kept her head down at the back of the room doing homework for other subjects and tried not to listen. She snapped rather a lot of quills in her effort not to wring the liar's neck.

On the fateful day, Hermione locked herself in her hidden lab. She made herself review her Potions notes and write up her experiment findings. When she ran out of observations to make on nettles, she started another batch of binding medium so she could test compatibility with defensive charms. Matching the right potion base to the right protection would mean she could prep before battle and not have to rely on keeping up her Shield. Plus the brewing process for the variant medium was complicated enough to keep her from fretting about Harry and Ron and Ginny.

The Leaving Feast was anticlimactic for Hermione. Gryffindor won the House Cup. The Slytherins didn't cheer. Hagrid and the first Hermione were back, which made Harry and Ron happy. Cathal Rosier ate a generous dinner as she had skipped lunch and was hungry. Her legs were aching, hinting at the beginning of a growth spurt. She had a second dessert before going to bed early spent from care.

Her bed was as warded as Cathal could cast, which was becoming increasingly adept as the girl's body adapted to Hermione's magic. Hermione knew she was as safe as she could make herself so when someone prodded her in the shoulder, she rolled fast, grabbing her wand from under her pillow but didn't curse the prodder.

“Moppet doesn't want to be hexed!” The house elf covered her eyes with her hands, not running but suffering compliantly as was the social norm for her kind. Hermione sat up and lowered her wand.

“Sorry, force of habit.” She rubbed her face feeling foggy from sudden awakening. “What is it?”

“Moppet must tell Miss that Professor Snape and Malfoy the Elder were talking about Miss.” Moppet informed her, peeking through her fingers. “Talking about secret things. Moppet nearly was cursed. Bad wizard Malfoy was very cross.”

“Harry just freed Dobby.” Hermione yawned. “I expect Lucius was fit to be tied.” She grinned, cheered by the bastard's travails. “What are they plotting?”
“The Professor is to take you to Hogsmeade then Malfoy will Apparate Miss to Malfoy Manor. They think Miss will be tricky again on the train.” The house elf looked forward to being disobliging to the wizards. “I hope Miss has a plan.”

“Miss is a bit short on cunning at the moment. Give me a minute.” She got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. Her dorm-mates were asleep. It would be very handy if they remained so. Hermione washed her face with icy water hoping to jolt her brain into gear. If Lucius Malfoy had involved Snape then clearly his patience with her antics was exhausted. If she went missing, he would likely rouse a search for her.

Hermione got dressed. She packed her books and secondhand clothes into her much-more-than secondhand trunk then shrank it. Closing the curtains on her bed, she padded out of the dorm carrying her boots. Moppet crept along with her ears perked for surveillance. They headed to the Slytherin Head suite, which had been empty for some years. Since Dumbledore became Headmaster, Hermione idly recalled.

The rooms were clean in that soulless, careless way that magic kept something tidy. Hermione went to the Head Girl's bathroom and fiddled about with the panels behind the tub before figuring out which one concealed the conjuring still that supplied the bath with various coloured bubbles. A holdover from the days when alchemy had been cutting edge, the intricate glasswork burbled quietly to itself as soothing as a lava lamp if one forgot its tendency to explode spontaneously.

The alcove behind the panelling led to a narrow access corridor to allow servicing of the still without disturbing the occupants of the suite. It led to a small room lined with shelves of more intricately curving glassware all carefully labelled with faded paper tags. A door and a short flight of stairs brought Hermione and Moppet into another larger room stacked with sacks of wood shavings, bales of straw under stasis, and boxes of wax. A strong anti-combustion charm tickled her skin. The witch consulted her map. There were endless forgotten rooms, hallways, and exits. You didn't need a secret tunnel to leave Hogwarts if you were prepared to do some walking.

An hour later, Hermione eased open a grate and slid down a sluice into Black Lake. She swam to the shore, drying herself with a charm. Certainly, Moppet could have taken her out of the school instantly. She could have used the known secret tunnels. However this was an excellent opportunity to field test the map and if asked she wouldn't have to lie.

The witch grinned at the house elf standing dry on the lake shore. Moppet grinned back before disappearing like the Cheshire cat. Hermione walked ostensibly alone to a slumbering Hogsmeade, where she sat on the step of the Post Office to compose a letter full of careful lies to Albus Dumbledore. Cathal allegedly planned to stay with the Maxs over the summer and was being picked up by means unspecified. She slid the letter with a covering note and the price of delivery under the door then strolled through the village heading west.

Magical folk often ended up with a skewed sense of geography. Apparating from place to place didn't situate the traveller in the Muggle landscape. Dufftown was within walking distance of Hogwarts. Hermione had breakfast in a converted railway carriage then did the tourist thing in the charming Speyside village until the first bus to Elgin thence to Aberdeen on the train.

The Granite City had dozens of public gardens and green spaces. She chose Hazlehead Park because it was forested, facilitating concealment of her unauthorised campsite. Hermione pitched her tent then began with the simplest of Repellent charms, casting until Cathal's flesh itched from the release of magic. She couldn't manage a Salvio Hexia yet without feeling dizzy enough for the spell to fail but she was confident she'd get it by the end of summer.

Maintaining the protective wards was much easier than actually casting them. Cathal had Hermione's
power reserve so sustaining a spell was not as taxing as forcing it out through an immature corpus. Wearing the damn horcrux and keeping their defences had been excellent training, the like of which she hoped never to have to endure again.

Hermione had a nap as she hadn't got much sleep before leaving Hogwarts. She woke ravenous from missed meals and the hike to Dufftown. The witch mentally crossed her fingers before she pulled out her food stores from her randoseru. If she'd been better at culinary charms the horcrux hunt would have been very much easier. That said, Ron should have been proficient given his mother's skill. Being separated from the boys had given Cathal a clearer perspective on how much she'd done for Harry and Ron. They could be ungrateful shites at times. She missed them terribly.

Complex edible foodstuffs did not like being repeatedly resized. Doubling once was acceptable but multiple multiplications tended to render the food into an unappetising mush. Still technically digestible in extremis. Hermione knew that from experience. Pottages of unidentifiable remains of spell damaged food had figured often in their hunt menu.

As much as she wanted to take her other self aside and give her a list of spells, Hermione feared changing anything before the Trio left Hogwarts. Once they were gone, Cathal could bolster the DA and try to mitigate the Carrows. And find out what disaster at the end of the battle had shunted her into this new life. Regardless of her personal ordeal, something intense enough to punch a hole in the fabric of reality shouldn't be allowed to happen on principle.

Dinner was carrot sticks, apples, and unleavened bread. The cheese she had packed with a traveller's preservation charm had dried into a stony lump, the butter had separated under another charm, and she wasn't sure what had happened to the cooked chicken but it smelled so bad she had to bury it. Fresh water was fortunately always available. Hermione crunched her way through her meal while making notes.

Ideally, she wanted to develop the magical equivalent of a MRE. Dehydrating food with charms was relatively simple. That would help with storage. The less complex a substance, the more it could be transfigured. She could compromise on the animal products by not shrinking them or using an Undetectable Extension Charm. A good preservation charm could keep meat fresh for years.

Maybe the solution wasn't to change the food but to move it. Adapting a Vanishing Cabinet to be a pantry was possible. There would be a lot of prep work involved with inventory control, which would have to be independent of the Hogwarts elves as they were subject to the oversight of the Headmaster. Hermione didn't know what orders Snape had issued during his tenure but given the verve with which Professor McGonagall had duelled him out of the castle, he had not ruled with a gentle hand.

When Moppet arrived two days later, Hermione asked her whether it would be possible for the other house elves to not tell a Headmaster about actions they had taken under the purview of his predecessor. She explained about the pantry idea and her hope that the elves could stock it during Professor McGonagall's second stint as Acting Headmistress.

“‘No, Miss. It really really isn't.’” Moppet answer emphatically. “Headmaster or Headmistress is part of Hogwarts. Hogwarts elves is like the hands of the school. Headmaster or Headmistress always knows what hands is doing.” She held out her fingers and wriggled them as though they were crawling in all directions of their own accord. “Moppet is special elf. Hogwarts gave Moppet to Miss so Moppet can hide behind Miss. Like the moon hides from the sun.”

“I see.” Hermione mentally pictured a lunar eclipse as herself casting her shadow on the house elf, and then conversely Moppet concealing her from the Headmaster's sun in a solar eclipse. Magic worked in rhythms and natural cycles. “How much food can you hide personally? Can we embezzle
meals from the kitchen? Or should I go to Tesco's and buy a lot of tinned soup?”

“Is Miss very hungry?” Moppet eyed the last carrot sticks forlorn in their glass jar.

“In Seventh Year about fifty students hide long-term in the Room of Requirement. They have to sneak out to get food or rely on Aberforth's cooking, which is dire.” She explained. “I can't load Harry and Ron with bushels of supplies. Ron saves Harry's life when he comes back. If he never leaves, we may never find the sword.” Hermione caught her words running out of her mouth and took a deep breath. “I'm so worried about changing anything the Trio do that I'll go mad if I don't help someone. Cathal will be at Hogwarts during the Carrows' occupation but trundling wheelbarrows of food out of the kitchen is bound to attract attention.”

“Oh.” The house elf shivered. People going hungry under her roof was bad. It was sickening bad. House elves lived to protect and serve their people.

“I'm sorry, Moppet. I didn't mean to upset you.” Hermione shifted closer to her and offered a hug. Moppet looked at the witch as though she had transfigured herself into a venomous tentacula. Hugs were not given to house elves. Kicks, in nasty homes yes. She edged forward and let herself be cuddled.

“Miss is getting bumpy.” The house elf said from the vicinity of Cathal's developing bosom.

“I'm not looking forward to going through puberty again. The first time was uncomfortable and embarrassing.” The forgotten aches and physical changes were not going to be any less awkward the second time around. Cathal's body was quite different from her own. “I stopped growing fairly early. I didn't do much, well, filling out either. Cathal's already bigger than I was at the same age. I think she's going to be tall.”

Hermione did feel less alien in Cathal than she had when she had first reincarnated. Her mental image of herself was strong though, and when she looked in a mirror she saw a stranger. It was unsettling to not be who you thought you should be. She always felt slightly reticent when bathing as though she was peeping. Hopefully growing with the body would anchor her more. She didn't like feeling a stranger in her own skin.

Lucius Malfoy evidently suspected Dumbledore of sheltering Cathal Rosier as he had gone to the Hogwarts Board of Governors to complain about the Headmaster overreaching his position. And to shore up his own influence after the diary, the bastard, Hermione fumed. The sooner she got Cathal out from under his thumb the better.

To this end, she packed up her tent and went with Moppet to Gringotts. Hermione didn't want to linger in Diagon Alley so they popped to the alcove near the jellied eels and slipped into the bank. The queue wasn't long. The teller had her write her name with a blood quill before registering her wand then escorted her to her vault manager's office.

Harnak was again in pinstripe though this suit was dark blue rather than the usual subfusc grey. Goblins apparently did not take sartorial risks. He invited her to sit. Hermione shrugged off her backpack and sat with it on her lap, composed and tidy. The banker inspected her, noting the faded trousers with rolled up cuffs and lack of robes. Not precisely a changeling but definitely dressed to blend in with Muggles.

“We have been sending your correspondence to your guardian as we are legally obliged to do.” Harnak informed her, having received no reply to various requests for several months. “Am I to presume from your unchaperoned presence that you have not been receiving said letters?”
“Correct.” Hermione confirmed. “I am not lodging with the Malfoys, and have no intention of doing so.”

“We will not be able to correspond with you directly until you are of age, Miss Rosier. We can make arrangements in person as we are not obliged to inform the executors of your grandfather's estate of any action on his vaults beyond withdrawals.” Harnak considered the young witch with the old eyes. “Our Curse-Breakers have only recently finished dismantling the wards around Rosier Hall. A very complex and dangerous enterprise.”

“What do I owe anyone compensation?” In searching for a way into the Lestrange vault, Hermione had read a brain meltingly large amount about goblin finance. Their banking prowess had evolved from an intricate debt system originally based on honour duels and then blood money. Goblins took social obligations very seriously.

“It has been paid.” His tone gave no hint of the quiet approval he felt for a wanded who understood the proper way of doing business. “As your vault manager, I ensure all debts are paid.”

Hermione was silent in the face of Harnak’s portentous statement. The goblin briefed her on the state of her finances and on the progress of her grandfather's probate. He could not give her an estimate of how long it would take to resolve Piers Rosier's estate as the Ministry was taking an interest in his assets with a view to taxing whatever they could. Harnak could not give her much beyond taking a statement of intent to come into effect the moment she turned seventeen.

Although the Hogwarts curriculum wasn't officially finalised, Hermione knew the books that would eventually be selected. After a polite leave-taking with the goblin banker, she and Moppet slipped into Flourish and Blotts to buy her third year texts. She had selected Divination and Muggle Studies for her electives to the sardonic eyebrow of Professor Snape. He had informed her he did not allow Slytherins to take that combination of classes as it was viewed as an easy option and insisted she either swap a subject or choose a third. Her pick of Care of Magical Creatures had earned her a frown but he had signed off on her schedule.

She didn't linger in the sparsely populated bookstore. Luck was not with her however. At the back of the shop among the divination drivel, where Hermione was already regretting her choice of subjects, Marcus Flint literally walked into her. He was frowning at the shelves, muttering to himself as he glared at the books and wasn't watching where he was going.

“Excuse me.” The big wizard snapped then seeing who it was he had nearly bowled over inclined his head in a more polite apology. “Rosier, Malfoy is looking for you.”

“So I presumed.” Hermione remarked. Flint chuckled, peering down at the books in her arms.

“Wouldn't have thought a clever witch like you would go for entrails and tea leaves.” He sighed, recalling his own futile attempt to parley shite into a Pass. No matter how much he blathered on as Trelawney required, the NEWT examiners had expected some actual understanding of the subject. “It's all dross.”

“I know. I picked classes that would allow me to concentrate on the core subjects.” That was technically correct though avoiding Granger was the biggest factor in her selection. “Why are you here?” The question was too blunt for courtesy but Flint didn't seem to mind. His glare didn't expand to include her. “Why Divination yourself?”

“Didn't graduate.” Marcus admitted quietly. “Walked out of my exams. You can resit if you don't fail.”
“Was it anxiety or surprise?” Hermione asked more kindly than she had intended. She had always assumed Flint was as dumb as a box of his namesake. His stance now wasn't bullying or aggressive, his usual posture at Hogwarts. Genuinely if abjectly determined was her best interpretation of his intentions.

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other.” He smirked, the sting of his dreadful showing having abated enough he could discuss it without swearing. “I might've scraped through on the practicals but some of the written questions were frankly boggling. What the Hell is the Thurkell Exception?”

“Thaddeus Thurkell transfigured his seven Squib sons into hedgehogs. Normally non-magical living subjects are stuck in their altered forms but the Thurkell sons had sufficient residual magic to spontaneously revert.” She explained, caught herself then continued rather than look embarrassed. “The Exception takes into account trace amounts of magic either in the subject or in the environment such as fairy rings. It's basically Sod's Law for Transfiguration.”

“McGonagall never bloody mentioned that.” Marcus had tried to look up the reference hoping he had simply forgotten it. He couldn't find anything about it in any of his Transfiguration books.

“It happened in the seventeenth century. Binns would cover it.” Hermione said shortly. She didn't need to expound. Flint's rolled eyes conveyed he was on the same page. Professor Binns was the unliving embodiment of ennui.

“How do you know about it?” He eyed the not-quite-yet Third Year. Rosiers had a reputation for bloodymindedness. It was the Notts who had made their name for learning. If you wanted stubborn persistence, you looked to his family.

“My mother insisted I be well read.” She had prepared that bland statement for exactly this situation. Hermione delivered her line shorn of emphasis, meeting Flint's gaze with a steady stare. His expression went wooden. He was not going to ask. Slytherins rarely did.

“Would you be willing to tutor me?” Marcus elbowed his pride aside. It was already battered. If he was going to repeat a year thus showing everyone he was as stupid as they thought then he could take it on the chin over being taught by a child. “I remember what I'm told much better than anything I read.”

“I'm years behind you.” Hermione pointed out, biting her tongue on her first response of 'yes'. She didn't know if Flint had ever taken the Dark Mark. Oliver and the Weasley twins were sure he would but they were both biased. Even if the snaggle-toothed wizard had spent the war under a rock, he knew the older students who had joined Voldemort.

“Pucey says if you can understand half the stuff he's seen you reading, you could easily take advanced classes.” He wasn't calling her out on any lack of ambition. Showing off, waving your hand in the air courting praise was a Gryffindor trick. Slytherins kept their strengths hidden. Marcus could guess why a Rosier would want to go unnoticed. She was clever. “I need someone who has time to explain. My friends have all buggered off to work or are doing NEWTs themselves.”

“I'll tutor you in exchange for you keeping Malfoy away from me. If he doesn't behave, I may have to do something permanent.” She had a long list of tasks around the castle, which would be difficult to undertake anonymously if Malfoy was taking an interest in tormenting her. He couldn't spend all his time being a bastard to Harry.

They shook on their deal. Flint offered to escort her during her errands as a young witch of her standing should not go unchaperoned. He didn't ask then either but his frown at her refusal conveyed the magnitude of her faux pas. She told him honestly that she was not alone. Whether he believed
her, Hermione couldn't tell. He let her leave the store without him however.

She had qualms. Ducking into a tight lane between two shops, Hermione took Moppet's hand and let the house elf pop them back to the Shrieking Shack. This would be one of the last times they could use the building as Professor Lupin would have to sequester himself in it. He'd smell anyone trespassing on his sanctuary.

Back in the safety of the Room of Requirement, Hermione had a hot bath. She aired her qualms, turning them over in her head to inspect them. Helping Flint was uncomfortable. He did repeat his Seventh Year so she hadn't affected that but tutoring him might. Maybe. It seemed plausible he would've got help from someone still in school. Not likely a Third Year witch, though. Then again, the Slytherin Quidditch team were all trolls and the upper years would be heads-down over their own NEWTs and OWLs. Maybe.

She didn't like maybe. Hermione had to admit to herself as she steeped that she simply didn't know enough about the machinations of the Snakes to judge how much she was changing. Her conscience prickled. Was it the temporal alterations or was it helping a potential Death Eater? She sank into the bath up to her chin and grimaced at the iridescent bubbles. Her problem was she wasn't nearly as callous as she needed to be. Feigning indifference while her friends struggled was eating away at her.

Hermione put herself to bed to sleep on the problem. In the morning, she hadn't miraculously shrugged off the unsettled feeling so she sat down to consider what she could do to balance her karma. Making some notes, she was suddenly struck with the solution. Penelope Clearwater wouldn't need her help but Justin and Colin certainly might, and she could even make it look official.

Moppet cheerfully purloined some parchment with the Hogwarts letterhead along with some of the colour changing wax that would alter hue to the House colours of the recipient. Hermione used a transcription spell that would partially disguise her writing then included her notes for the classes Justin had missed and her notes from last year for Colin. She sent off the bundles via Hogwarts owls. Not a Cathal thing to do, but sometimes she had to remind herself she was Hermione. Forgetting that would be suicide.
Graeae

Summer was lovely. Hermione spent July brewing and researching, expanding her hidden lab, and with the Castle's help warding it with forgetting charms. She wanted something subtle and non-lethal in case someone chanced across her bolt-hole. Hogwarts couldn't aid her with anything more forceful as the school could not harm its students.

Anyone determined to find her would probably have sufficient intent to keep from being distracted by the Qui Obliti so Hermione added alarms and impediment hexes. She wanted enough notice to leave rather than to fort up. Her escape routes snaked all over the school into the 'sleeping' parts of the Castle including to other bolt-holes. Once Dobby showed Harry the Room of Requirement in Fifth Year, her access to the Room would be greatly diminished therefore she needed other sanctuaries.

August saw her rummaging through the Room of Hidden Things. She'd compiled a list of everything she could think of that she might need and was determined to make a decent go of ransacking the Room. Hogwarts, when asked, admitted tartly that it did not know what was among the Hidden Things. Objects went there to quietly drift out of ken until they disintegrated entirely under the weight of unbeing.

Hermione hauled and levitated her provender to her lab while marvelling at the randomness of her finds. She ventured as far as she dared into the vastness of the magical lost property store, turning back when she was attacked by a set of nested tables. When the residual energy imbuing inanimate objects turned them aggressive it was a sign that energy was unstable. Definitely not the time or place to fling curses at the furniture.

It wasn't exactly guns and butter but she did have enough to get some serious work done. Hermione sorted, catalogued, and stored her supplies. She and Moppet worked out what the house elf could 'requisition' during the course of her duties then made a tally of what they needed for which project. Now the basilisk was dead, the witch planned to check the Chamber of Secrets for any booby-traps or magical devices capable of destroying the threads of reality. Presumably she'd know one when she saw one.

Two days before the start of school, Hermione headed to London. She had planned to camp out for longer to build more memories of Cathal roughing it but she'd got caught up in brewing and fabricating losing track of time. A night camping then a night at an impersonal hotel saved some Pounds. She took the Tube to Kings Cross early expecting to be the first one on Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

Justin Finch-Fletchley sat marooned on an islet of luggage while his parents argued. He waved as she approached then stood to walk over to her once she had waved back. Not wanting to presume on her acknowledging their acquaintance, Hermione guessed. They were unregarded however so she unbent from her Cathal inspired isolationism.

“Td like to thank you for the notes.” Justin said quickly as soon as they were at a decent conversational range. He edged slightly to the right, blocking her sight of the Finch-Fletchley dispute. From the way his shoulders hunched, Hermione judged the argument had been going on for a while.

“How did you know it was me?” She asked, not bothering to denying the fact. There were no other Slytherins around so she didn't have to save Cathal's face by feigning ignorance.
“I recognised your handwriting on the envelope.” He smiled wanly. “I’d already asked Professor Sprout for a crib sheet or something and she sent her lesson plans along with those for Charms, Astronomy, and Transfiguration.” Here he smirked. “Professor Snape and Professor Binns evidently don’t give a toss if I fail my remedial exams.”

“No surprise there.” Hermione remarked, House affiliation doing nothing to improve her opinion of the Potion Professor's teaching style. “I sent Colin a set too. Granger and Clearwater weren't petrified long enough for it to effect their schooling much.” She glanced over his shoulder at his parents. “They've noticed us.”

“Dad thinks you fancy me. For God's sake, please just play along.” Justin implored, painting a much more enthusiastic smile on his face as he turned to beckon his already approaching mother and father. “Mum, Dad, you met Cathal at Heathrow. She's why I wanted to be dropped off early.”

“Hello.” June Finch-Fletchley greeted the girl politely, noticing she didn't have any luggage or apparently anyone who cared enough to ensure she got safely onto the train. “How nice to meet you again. Did you have to come far?”

“Knightsbridge.” She lied promptly, choosing a very posh part of London.

“The Rosiers are pure-bloods. An old family.” Justin cut in quickly when he saw his mother's sceptical inspection of Cathal's shabby clothes. He hoped the Slytherin hadn't noticed.

“Good to know.” Andrew Finch-Fletchley faked a chuckle, determined not to allow any more of a scene. He knew his wife was proving a point. He couldn't actually make her leave it alone. She'd been badly offended by the Lockhart fraud, which had soured her against Hogwarts. It didn't help they couldn't tell any of their friends where Justin was going to school. Not to brag, exactly, but people did ask. Being vague had given June's sister the impression Justin was in rehab.

“Eton has some very old families.” June remarked, a poniard stare at her husband. Unseen by his mother, the Hufflepuff winced. He'd been very close with his parents before his letter had arrived. Now there was awkwardness and things he just couldn't explain. When he'd told them about the basilisk, they'd threatened to sue the school for negligence. It had not been a pleasant summer.

“Not as old as mine.” Hermione stepped in with arrogance. “One of my paternal ancestors was the magus of Charles Martel. One of my maternal ancestors was with King Alaric when the Visigoths sacked Rome.” She wasn't lying. She'd looked up the Rosiers and the Maxs. “Our society has an unbroken line of scholarship for millennia.” Here she reached out and held Justin's hand. “Your son is now irrevocably part of it.”

There really wasn't much the Finch-Fletchleys could say to that. Justin made his good-byes and hastened through the barrier to the Platform proper. Once on the magical side, he let his breath out. He'd have to write and smooth things over. His mother in particular would be ruffled. She was a snob but didn't like being made aware of how much social standing mattered to her.

“Is that how Slytherins play along?” Justin asked as the Hogwarts Express drew up glistening red and smoking.

“Pretty much. I could have sneered more, I suppose.” Hermione smirked because she thought Cathal probably would. Inside she was smacking herself athwart the ear hole. June and Andrew were a bit snooty but they were generous and would do a great deal to help Muggle-borns out of England when the Ministry started Registering. That little performance was unjustified.

“I think you got it about right.” He wasn't sure why he suddenly found the whole situation hilarious.
“No chance of my parents pulling me out of school where I can rub shoulders with someone descended from Frankish nobility.” Justin leaned against his trunk and breathed in between chuckles. “God, that was embarrassing. Ernie'll crack up when I tell him.”

“I'd prefer if you didn't.” She spoke after a moment of consideration. Hermione liked Justin. They had a lot in common and if she'd been a nicer person she probably would've been in Hufflepuff with him. But she hadn't been kind enough as an eleven year old and certainly wasn't now. War had seen to that. “The MacMillans are blood traitors.”

“He's my friend.” Justin said staunchly. “I thought we were friends, Cathal.”

“If things were otherwise, we might have been.” Hermione hated herself right now. Spewing the purist nonsense was not better than hearing it. “I have nothing against you because you have done nothing to me or my family. MacMillan's uncle was one of the Aurors who arrested my grandmother. Every word I say to him is an insult to her.”

“Why was your grandmother arrested?” In Justin's world, grandparents did not get in trouble with the law. Their worst infractions were drinking too much port and cheating merrily at golf. Cathal gave him a stony look. “I'm not being crass. I don't understand.”

“Death Eater.” She supplied baldly. “Like my father, my grandfather, my great-uncle, and sundry cousins.”

“Oh.” Justin stared at her as he fossicked for something to say. In the end, he couldn't find anything and the uncomfortable silence stretched. When the doors of the Express opened, Justin excused himself to load his luggage. Hermione let him go, as unsettled by their conversation as he was.

She found an empty carriage and frankly sulked in it. Her mood was not improved by the knowledge she had made a rod for her own back. There had been other choices than Cathal. She'd wanted someone with minimal oversight, which she had got. Bitching now she couldn't be friends with Hermione's friends was juvenile.

Kicking the seat in a fit of pique was juvenile too but she felt a bit better after doing so. Hermione pulled her trunk out of her backpack and put it in the luggage rack before unshrinking it. Then she got out a book and tried to cultivate some detachment. It was Third Year. There were going to be Dementors. Cathal couldn't cast a Patronus, yet, so there was nothing but five kilos of chocolate between her and soul-sucking despair.

Hermione found the repeat of last year's peek-and-go a relief as her fellow students moved on. She was hoping to have a carriage to herself to keep private any fainting/screaming/hysteria she did when faced with the Dementors. Draco had mocked Harry for months about his collapse. She didn't want to suffer the same.

Flint barrelled into the compartment in a Falmouth jersey and muddy Quidditch boots. He flopped onto the seat opposite, flushed and sweating. He looked like he had gone ten rounds with a wind turbine, which he proceeded to put right with a few charms. His boots took two goes with Tergeo before they were clean.

“Grovelling apologies, Miss Rosier.” Marcus grinned. “All night game. Pucey just caught the Snitch before we absolutely had to Apparate.” He was exhilarated, his blood singing from the close match. “The lads came over to cheer me up about having to repeat. I would have invited you, if I had any idea of where you were. I wrote to Draco but he didn't know either.”

“Staying with Muggles.” Hermione answered his pointed comment.
“Merlin’s balls.” The wizard sat up, squaring his shoulders. “Have the Malfoys put you out of their home?”

“I refuse to stay with them.” She said placidly, looking up from her book.

“You're cutting off your nose to spite your face!” Marcus shook his head. “Don’t be daft. The Muggles could do anything to you if they find out you're a witch. They're bloody dangerous.” He warned. To his surprise, his tone did not cow her. Her gaze met his and it was the wizard who looked away.

“Thank you for your concern but I'll manage.” Hermione papered some politeness over the cracks in their conversation. “Have you done your readings for first term?”

Flint accepted the offered change of subject. He dug his notes out of his trunk, hastily packed yesterday ten minutes before the Quidditch match started. Shuffling them into approximate order, he handed over the sheaf. The summer skies had been alluring but he had kept to his regimen of three hours of study a day. Whether it had done any damn good remained to be seen.

Hermione read through the smudged exercises. Flint was a plodding scholar. He’d made an attempt at answering every question though the phrase ‘no bloody idea’ recurred several times. He was taking Charms, Transfiguration, Divination, Defence against the Dark Arts, Herbology, and Care of Magical Creatures.

“Drop Transfiguration.” She advised some time later after slogging through his work. “You've put hours of effort into this, I can see that, but your grasp of the advanced theories is shaky. There's as much wrong here as there is right.”

“I got the fu... the Exceeds Expectations to get into the class.” Marcus protested. He'd all but hammered the books into his skull for his OWLs. He'd scraped into the 'E' and was proud of it.

“But it's eating time. Your Herbology work is good. It could be great with more polish. The same with your Creatures.” Hermione paused to frame a suitable argument seeing how the direct approach had him digging in his heels. “Would you rather have a Pass and two Exceeds Expectations, or two Outstandings?”

“I've never got an 'O' in my life.” He ground his teeth. Schoolwork had always been a chore. When it got more onerous, he simply kept working until he failed. Dropping out before he was kicked out seemed like he was giving up. “What about the other subjects?”

“For Divination you need a thesaurus and a glossary. Memorising terms should be enough to get you through. Defence weighs heavily on the practical. You can make up for a lack of flair with the application by being good at the execution.” She mulled over Charms. “Professor Flitwick offers remedial classes for Ravenclaws who are struggling. Ask him if you can sit in too.”

“The Birdies won't like me slithering in.” Marcus smirked. He hadn't approached any of the teachers for help. It had been an act of desperation to ask Rosier, who sounded like a school marm. She shrugged at his comment. “I'd rather have Flitwick than McGonagall.” There was no chance of the starchy Scot helping him revise. “Which electives are you taking?”

“Divination, Muggle Studies, and Care of Magical Creatures.” Hermione replied with her attention on his Care of Magical Creatures notes. Hagrid was a stalwart ally but he was not a good teacher. Professor Kettleburn had covered more of the curriculum in more depth. Even with Professor Grubbly-Plank subbing some of the lessons, she would have to do more reading than she had thought. Helping Flint would give her a good leg up for the NEWT level subject matter.
“Are you going to lie to me if I ask you why those subjects?” He arched an eyebrow in mimicry of their Head of House.

“I can't lie. My mother put a Truth-Telling Curse on me.” Hermione lied on a whim to see if he believed her. Flint’s eyes narrowed as he tried to gauge whether she was being honest.

“You're clever enough...” The big Chaser swore as the train jerked to a halt. He got up to open the compartment door to look out into the corridor. If someone was mucking about with charms or if it was the bloody Weasley twins trying on a new trick, he’d put the boot in.

Marcus stopped when Cathal tugged on his jumper. She had her wand out, a detail he noticed immediately. He took a step back into the middle of their compartment as a wave of something so cold it frosted the windows drifted by. The wizard felt a pain in his chest, misery rising as he recalled he would be returning to Hogwarts a failure. He wasn't good at anything except Quidditch and even then he wasn't skilled enough to go professional. A waster, destined for nothing more than taking up space in his father's house.

Marcus sat down as the aching chill eased. Cathal offered him some Muggle chocolate in a purple wrapper. He ate without hesitation, the melting sweetness chasing away the melancholy. The witch had a crinkly white bag laden with more purple slabs. She'd come prepared. That cheered him almost as much as the chocolate. Trust a Slytherin to know what was going on.

“What the fuck was that?” Flint demanded, hauling himself up when she opened the compartment door.

“Dementor.” Hermione checked up and down the corridor. The dark figure had gone. She'd felt almost nothing, just a breath of cool air. Not at all what she had expected. Shopping bag and wand in hand, she went compartment to compartment to check on the other students. Irresponsible bloody Ministry thinking those creatures were suitable for a school. They weren't even suitable for Azkaban. Exiling them to Pluto couldn't be cold and dark enough.

Ashen faces greeted her as she made her way down the corridor. Hermione doled out chocolate bars without prejudice and they were accepted without hesitation. Even the Lions were sufficiently shaken not to cavil at taking gifts from a Slytherin. Flint shadowed her, wand out and face set with grim purpose. If anything gloomy leaped out at them it'd get a face full of curses.

They met Remus Lupin as he returned from speaking with the driver. The Professor saw their wands and their green ties and hackled before he could stop himself. He covered the shift in stance with a cough but Hermione had seen it. She sighed inwardly. Yet another friend she didn't have. She felt her mouth tighten involuntarily.

“What are you?” Hermione asked sharply, shifting backwards so she was shoulder to shoulder with Flint to block the corridor. Not a kind thing to do but one eminently defensible when faced with an unknown adult on a train supposedly only for children. She felt worse when she saw the resignation in his face as he raised his hands slowly to show they were empty.

“Remus Lupin, the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.” He introduced himself in a voice that had been to Hermione endlessly reassuring. “And you are?”

“Flint.” Flint said bluntly.

“Rosier.” Hermione copied, and saw Remus stiffen. Of course he recognised the name. He might even have faced Cathal’s father during the first wizarding war. The Professor said nothing, just gave them a nod in a tacit suggestion they return to their compartment. As she was almost out of
chocolate, she complied.

Flint was silent for the rest of the trip, and disinclined to force a conversation. Hermione wrote study suggestions on his notes, adding a few references to books he might find useful. The Hogwarts library didn't have much of an index so unless you had plenty of time to trawl, you found useful books by asking people who had chanced across them previously. By OWL year, Hermione Hermione would be the go-to witch for questing scholars.

The Welcoming Feast was subdued. Hermione as Cathal occupied her time by counting the First Years. There were indeed a glut of them as the celebration babies had turned eleven. She wondered whether there would be a similar population boom after Voldemort. Probably not, as most of the combatants were barely more than children themselves.

Malfroy mocked Harry because some things were inevitable. Hermione watched Snape throttle a towering rage into a socially acceptable sneer. Yet another person who would not be having a good year. She ate quietly, psyching herself up for the company of Slytherins. Her recurse tour of Hogwarts would have been far more pleasant as a Hufflepuff.

At least this year Malfoy had found some restraint. He didn't bother her in the Common Room after the induction and Parkinson ignored her in the dorm. Hermione had a long shower then went to bed early, casting an alarm charm on her pillow for four am. A certain amount of skulduggery had taught her it was better to sneak about in the small hours than late at night. You could plausibly say you had woken early.

She combed Cathal's straight hair, tying it back in a ponytail from which it had yet to attempt escape. Cathal's hair was very well behaved unlike the girl sporting it. Hermione shrunk her shoes, slipping them into an inside pocket in her robes. She padded out of the dungeons in her sock feet heading for the Conical Crypt.

Significant sections of the subterranean parts of Hogwarts were 'sleeping'. Seldom visited therefore not particularly magically active, the rooms were in a peculiar sort of stasis. They woke up when someone passed by but were otherwise in a semi-corporeal state. The Chamber of Secrets had been one such area. The basilisk had survived due to that intermittent manifestation.

Figuring out exactly how the 'sleeping' worked was on Hermione's research list. She'd asked Hogwarts but the school was bound by the Founders not to divulge their secrets. The voice had sounded apologetic and implacable. It was possible the storm of spells in the last battle had woken parts of the Castle suddenly, destabilising the magical matrix. She had a lot of theories. Testing them would be tricky.

Hermione had selected the Conical Crypt as it was a derelict remnant from the fifteenth century when there had been a fad for interring deceased staff members within Hogwarts. The tradition had been a sign of esteem and quite popular until a cabal of Ravenclaws had been discovered using the preserved corpses in necromantic rituals. The scandal had prompted Headmistress Spore to ban further internments and cleanse the crypt.

Now the room was just a big circular chamber with an odd ceiling that appeared pointed because of the vaulting. Large and echoing, the Crypt was certainly atmospheric enough for a secret ritual. Hermione felt she should be in black lace with too much mascara to truly capture the ambience. Instead she had sensible shoes and thauma-luminescent chalk.

She'd found the recipe for the glowing powder in an heavily annotated alchemy tome. Professor Snape wasn't the only one to scrawl in their textbooks. The chalk had been used in rites where 'ye fires and candleless be unwise' prior to the development of the Bluebell Flames charm. It shone in the
presence of magic but was otherwise an anonymous slightly sticky dust.

Hermione drew a large circle with a nail and string line then limned the interior with a repeating series of runes. She stepped across and activated her Map. The chalk sparkled with a blue-green light in response. A bright spot showed in the Crypt. She stepped back out of the circle and the spot remained; a trace point she could use for reckoning distances and directions.

Pacing around the circular room, Hermione took measurements of the ambient magic, the resonances, and the fiddly Arithmantic coordinates designed to pin down the essential 'hereness' of a location. She wrote her results within the circle including all her mathematical working so she could check in case there was an error. Locus one complete. Lots more to go.

She managed one more site before people began wandering about in the undercrofts. Not Slytherins, of course. The Snakes did not like to bestir themselves until the day was well aired. Badgers got up early however and anxious firsties from the tower Houses had headed down early so as not to be late for breakfast.

Reckoning she had about an hour before she would need to grab breakfast herself, Hermione went upstairs towards the Library. She planned to get her reading for Divination over and done with before the frustration truly kicked in. Her attitude to the subject had mellowed somewhat. There were true Seers, including Trelawney. Most of the guff about the Inner Eye was still guff but the class wasn't as completely useless as she had thought originally in Third Year.

Her attention on research, she walked past Professor Lupin stepping out from behind a statue and unheeding her role as Cathal gave him a nod without breaking stride. His flinch jarred her from her wool-gathering. Hermione looked at him, realised where he must have come from as it was a full moon night then engaged mouth without engaging brain.

“I hope they cleaned up the Shack before they shut you in.” She meant it sympathetically having seen the state of the ramshackle building. Professor Lupin did not take it that way.
He took her directly to Professor Snape, all but grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. Gone was Lupin the kindly Professor. This was Lupin the Marauder taking a serpent to her master's lair. He did pause to knock perfunctorily before shoving open the door of the Slytherin Head's office, dragging Cathal with him. He thrust her into a seat in front of the desk then gripped the back of the chair in case the witch attempted to flee.

“We need to have a word, Severus.” Lupin tried to sound less alarmed than he was but to Hermione's ears he failed. He was tired and overwrought from the change. And she was an idiot.

“You may make an appointment, Lupin.” Snape's dark gaze flicked to Miss Rosier, who of all things looked sad. Her eyes were on her hands folded in her lap but that was no surprise as she had yet to look him directly in the face. Her mother no doubt had warned her. Glancing to the werewolf, Severus wondered briefly what else Derica Max had shared with her daughter.

“You told her.” The werewolf barely kept the accusation out of his voice.

“I did not.” A second, longer inspection of the Slytherin witch showed her to have disciplined her features into their usual composed mien. His charges soon looked to control their expressions but rarely so fiercely as Evan's child. She was stubborn and defiant though in a quiet way that rarely brought him trouble. Lucius had been furious at the girl's evasion at the end of term but Severus had not been surprised. Compliance was not a Rosier trait. “Miss Rosier is a witch of considerable enterprise. I would not be surprised if she deduced your little secret herself.”

“Yes, Professor.” Hermione heard her cue and took it. “On the train, Professor Lupin made a dominance display and the scars on his face are clearly from a Dark creature. I saw him sneaking back into the Castle via one of the secret tunnels just after moonset. He has a newly healed claw wound on his wrist.” She'd noticed that when he had fisted a hand in her robe. “The closest place outside Hogwarts to safely incarcerate a werewolf is the Shrieking Shack, which despite its reputation is not haunted.”

“And you know that how?” Lupin asked, surprised by her discourse. Evan Rosier had been brutal not clever. A thoroughgoing bastard, and one of Severus's close friends at school, which was why he had assumed conspiracy. If the Slytherins found out, he'd be fired before the end of the week.

“I checked.” She replied tersely, returning to Cathal's usual brevity. Hermione didn't want to lecture in their presence as her other self did. This was the year of the 'insufferable know-it-all' jibe. That still rankled.

“What are you going to do when she tells all her friends?” Remus turned his ire onto a more familiar target, who had the temerity to smile thinly.

“You are making an assumption, Lupin.” Snape said dryly. “Miss Rosier has put great effort into not having any friends.”

Lupin bit back an angry remark. Severus was going to do nothing to curb Rosier. He was pleased one of his own had figured it out even before the first day of class. The two Slytherins sat there quietly smug in a room so full of smells it made Remus's nose itch. The werewolf sighed. When in a pit of vipers, one should expect to be bitten.

“What do you want in exchange for keeping silent?” He asked the blonde witch, knowing there
would have to be some sort of payment.

“I will consider it and let you know.” Hermione stopped herself before she mentioned the Boggart class. That had been a special lesson after Remus had caught the creature not part of the scheduled curriculum. Once he announced it, she could barter to be excused. It was unlikely her greatest fear was still McGonagall saying she'd failed all her exams and any reference to Voldemort, Harry, Ron, or Hermione would be horrendously difficult to explain.

Professor Lupin left. She stayed in her chair. Professor Snape rested his elbows on his desk and studied her over his fingertips. Hermione stared at her own hands demurely in her lap. She hoped this silent contemplation was done before the start of class. She would quite like some breakfast. But she wasn't going to leave until bidden and she damn well wasn't going to ask.

“Professor Lupin is a Gryffindor. If you attempt to extort him, he will fall on his sword rather than submit.” Snape advised, sensing again not particularly much from Miss Rosier. Children of her age usually projected their thoughts and emotions at volume even when not nattering or giggling. Someone had taught her the rudiments of Occlumency. Very likely the same person who had told her about Lupin’s curse.

“Yes, Professor.” Hermione agreed placidly.

He dismissed her in time for her to grab a hasty round of toast and rush to History of Magic. She didn't actually need to hurry as Binns never took the roll but she wanted a seat at the back so she could read without looking too obvious about it. This year the Slytherins had the class with the Ravenclaws, meaning she wasn't the only one with a covert book. Anthony Goldstein gave her a subtle nod when she walked past. He'd been a recipient of the chocolate and had been too shaken to thank her. She ignored him. He was only a half-blood.

The first Divination class of the year gave Hermione an opportunity to test a charm she had found in the same book as the thauma-luminescent chalk. She rolled her wrist then tapped herself with her wand and murmured ‘anosmia’ as she walked into the incense fug of Trelawney's bastion. The overpowering funk of patchouli disappeared. The witch sighed with relief.

“Morgana!” Daphne Greengrass was a pace behind her and stifled a sneeze at the heady scents. “You would think a tower would have better ventilation. Surely she can clear this fog with a few breeze charms.”

“Ambience.” Blaise Zabini remarked as he sauntered into the room, arranging himself at a table in the front where he could stretch out his long legs and flirt with the teacher. His considerable charm ensured he got good marks in most classes taught by witches, a notable exception being Transfiguration.

“Miasma.” Daphne countered, heading to a table near a window in a vain hope of some air.

Hermione sat up the back, joined there by Millicent Bulstrode when she shifted tables to keep from sitting with one of the Ravenclaws. Neither House had enough students to fill a full class so they had been combined, an indication of their common sense as far as the reincarnate witch was concerned. She did believe there was something she could glean from Divination if not Trelawney's instruction.

The tea was terrible; stewed and lukewarm. Hermione poured out most of the pot onto a ratty cushion before cleaning it up with a Tergeo. No drips, no puddles, and no evidence. She filled their cups with the dregs. Bulstrode grimaced at the sepia liquid then gulped a few mouthfuls for the look of the thing. They downed the last, swirled, upended the cups, and cleared their minds of preconceived notions to allow the inchoate future to form within their third eyes.
When Hermione inspected the scattered blobs she saw exactly what was there. Tea leaves. She turned the cup so the handle was pointed towards her as she was the questioner and let her imagination make shapes. It helped that she had read the textbook and knew the meanings. Divination was so much easier when you could work backwards.

“What do you see, child?” Trelawney warbled as she did a circuit towards their table. She blinked owlishly through her glasses as Bulstrode and Rosier eyed each other. Neither wanted to go first. “Come now, reveal and understand.”

“Seven stars.” Hermione displayed her cup of anonymous blobs. “Grief.”

“You know the sign? Have you been beset by the ill tides of Fate?” The Seer's portentous voice raised in volume so the rest of the class could hear.

“Yes, Professor.” The bland reply did not seem to thwart Trelawney's ominous portents. She went on a long ramble about opening oneself to the currents of the unknown and stumbled her way down to her armchair. Behind her back, Bulstrode made a ‘drinky, drinky’ gesture. The Slytherins stifled laughter while the Ravenclaws looked censorious.

Her No Smell Charm thankfully lasted until the end of the lesson, fading as she climbed down the ladder out of the classroom allowing her to appreciate the comparatively fresh air of the stairwell. Behind her several students gulped or sneezed. Most of the Slytherins were occupied with complaining about Trelawney, allowing Hermione to slip away to Muggle Studies without comment.

Professor Burbage seemed surprised by the presence of a green tie among the throng of yellow and red but she didn't call particular attention to the lone Snake. Hermione came in late and did stare at Cathal, which caused the latter some existential discomfort. Fortunately her younger self was more intent on finding a seat than goggling at a Slytherin.

An Introduction to Muggle Life happened. Hermione made notes slowly in German. She had been practising sporadically with the aid of translation charms and had achieved a workable understanding of the written language. If she wanted to learn to speak properly she'd need to find a Muggle conversational club or an instructional spellbook. Magical folk preferred to learn languages from tutors.

The first day of school was pleasantly dull and Hermione sat through dinner with most of her attention on fractional distillation while wondering whether she should get a book on chemical reactions to better understand the process without magic. Her auto-pilot was abruptly switched off when Flint dropped onto the bench beside her, elbowing Nott aside.

The Third Years turned to watch the team Captain pour himself and Rosier a glass of pumpkin juice from the same carafe. He took a mouthful, set the goblet down, and levelled a hard look at Malfoy. Then Flint handed the young witch a crumpled piece of parchment before striding off. Message delivered without saying a word.

* 

Care of Magical Creatures was the same farce she remembered. Bloody Malfoy incapable of basic courtesy had badly shaken Hagrid. It was flobberworms for the Third Years. Fortunately for the NEWT students, they could opt for their own projects. Marcus had chosen to tend unicorns as they were a challenge for a wizard no longer a virgin. He invited Cathal along after dinner as further sign of his patronage.

They trekked out to the edge of the Forbidden Forest where Hagrid had penned a nursing mother
and her foal. The mare had a long infected wound on her flank likely from an acromantula. Because she was ill, her baby wasn't feeding well. They both needed tending but were restive if Hagrid or Marcus came too close. Hermione tried to coax the colt over to the fence with carrots but he shied away from her, which answered a conundrum she'd mused over.

Cathal was physically pure, as indeed had Hermione been before her reincarnation, but that wasn't enough. Innocence wasn't about a tiny piece of tissue. Innocence was a state of mind and Hermione thought she had lost hers the moment she had seen Harry reappear with Cedric's corpse. She had certainly understood what she was doing when she led Umbridge to the centaurs.

“They're both skittish.” Marcus watched the foal skip away on his ridiculously spindly legs and mentally kicked himself. He had assumed... and now it was awkward. He wasn't kin, he couldn't ask and if she'd been hurt, he was a bastard for rubbing it in her face.

“They can sense Dark Magic, and after Quirrell I don't blame them for keeping their distance.” Hermione saw a little of the conflict in Flint's head. He wasn't trying to be cruel to Cathal or test her. “Ritual purity is in the mind. You should cite that in your final report. Hagrid can pen unicorns and he's in his sixties.”

“Practising your Legilimency, Rosier?” Flint asked on a dry laugh, trying not to show how relieved he was to have dodged that conversational curse.

“People are a fascinating study.” She shrugged and went back to trying to show the unicorns she wasn't a threat. Marcus explained as he changed the water in their trough and added some Vitamix potion that patience was the key to building a rapport. With the previous injured unicorn, an older stallion, he had come out to the pen every day for five months before he could approach the creature. It would be years before the herd recovered from their losses, years more before they trusted a wizard again.

Trust was important. When she noticed a large black dog nosing around the groundskeeper's hut, Hermione smiled. She pointed him out to Flint and Hagrid, who hustled them out of his yard with all the subtlety of a cosh to the head. The Slytherins shared a conspiratorial grin. Both of them could competently identify a Grim when they saw one. Marcus smiled because he was amused by the half-giant's new pet. Hermione smiled because now she could sneak food to Padfoot.

Cathal Rosier had a sneaking rota. Hermione knew herself to be organisationally obsessive and had let herself devise a schedule as reassurance. She had potions, authorised and not, to check and acres of the dungeons to survey. On Astronomy nights, she had a plausible excuse for being out of bed. Unfortunately, Percy Weasley took his duties as Head Boy very seriously. The Prefect patrol roster dovetailed with Filch's student-hunting patterns, keeping Hermione on her toes.

Her Map helped but avoiding being caught sent her on time-consuming, frustrating detours. She spent an hour bailed up behind a display case because the Sixth Year female Ravenclaw Prefect had got into an argument with her Fifth Year male counterpart right in the middle of the Hieroglyphic Hall. The only thing keeping her from being seen was a collection of seventeenth dynasty papyri. By trial and error she plotted the usual haunts of her fellow students. Some of them she could even time as the Seventh Years regarded pretty much everything taking them away from their studies as a waste. Even the threat of an escaped murderer seemed distant compared to the NEWTs. Black wasn't out to get them so they hustled through their patrols and were not curious.

The teachers on the other hand were exasperating. Snape slept odd hours and stalked the corridors incessantly. Probably looking for Harry and Ron based on past experience. Lupin also prowled. Professor McGonagall checked periodically likely for her own peace of mind. Trelawney roamed
erratically. Various of the other teachers either left or returned to Hogwarts from extracurricular events. They were all watchful. They all remembered the last war and its toll.

Curfew extended from ten pm to six am, with interest sharply tailing off at about four thirty in the morning. Hermione used this to her advantage to be up and chalking in the early hours. This regrettably was also the Castle’s cats’ breakfast time. It was inevitable that eventually a squashed orange nose would intrude in her business. One morning when she was heading out to Hagrid's hut with a bag of sausages, Crookshanks sauntered up to her with a loud, accusatory meow.

“I am technically allowed out.” Hermione excused her excursion to not-her-cat. The half-kneazle blinked slowly at her, parking himself a pace from her feet in an unmistakable roadblock posture. “I don't need a chaperone.”

Crookshanks mewed at her plaintively. She crouched down and offered him her hand to sniff. He did then made a face with a low yowl. Hermione withdrew her hand, blinking away tears. Hermione's familiar could sense her magic. The Time-Turner was confusing enough for the marmalade but having two witches feeling the same but smelling different was worse. He was most seriously displeased and took himself off with his bottlebrush tail bristling.

Hermione cried there in the Entrance Hall. Alone. No one came to comfort her. No one mocked or cleared their throat or made a feeble joke. She cried until her throat hurt then pulled herself together. A quick Scourgify and a few sniffles saw her fit to be seen in public. Shouldering her way through the doors, she headed to Hagrid's hut telling herself all the way that it was a good thing Crookshanks didn't like Cathal's scent. She didn't want to be accused of trying to nick a Gryffindor's pet.

A large shaggy dog lay on the steps, concealed in plain sight. Most people were so accustomed to Fang and to random hairy beasties loitering around the groundskeeper's home they didn't look twice at a dog. He would have to make himself scarce during the day lest Professors Lupin or McGonagall see him but at least he had a safe place to sleep. Padfoot lifted his head as she approached, a low rumble of warning resonating in his thin chest.

“Don't take that tone with me.” Hermione said tartly. “I've come all this way to bring you breakfast because a dog cannot live on rockcakes alone.” She stopped about five paces away from the hut and held out the canvas bag Moppet had given her before rushing away to short laundry. Magic made people very picky about being given someone else's shirt by mistake. “Sausages. Some of them are even venison.”

That got Padfoot off the steps. He edged forward as though expecting to be kicked then bit into the bag, jerking it out of her hand to drag it away. He wolfed down half the contents while keeping an eye on her. Hermione stood still, her eyes on other things than the animagus himself so she wouldn't seem threatening. He'd spent so long in dog form the canine instincts were, well, instinctive. A direct stare was a challenge.

“There's probably not room enough for you, Hagrid, and Fang in that hut. I expect you all snore.” Hermione said to the pumpkins. “And he'll have to pen Buckbeak here now Malfoy is being a princess about getting scratched.” Padfoot growled, baring his teeth at mention of the Death Eater family. “I quite agree. Try sharing a Common Room with the prat.”

The animagus looked at her in surprise, yawing his head from side to side trying to get a better look at her tie or the trim on her jumper. Dogs could see blue and yellow but had trouble with red and green. She edged forward and dropped a shoulder towards him so he could see the snake on her House badge. He sneezed as though he had smelled something bad.

“Slobber, delightful.” Hermione brushed drool off her sleeve. “You may keep your criticism to
yourself, considering you are a hound of ill omen.” She took a stride backwards then sat down on the 
grass. “The Minister has Dementors all over the grounds. They’ll come closer in once the weather 
gets colder, and they’ll be hungry enough not to be choosy.”

Padfoot whined, shrinking down into the grass. The guards of Azkaban might not be able to as easily 
feed off an animal's mind as a human's but their aura enervated everything. Hermione made a mental 
note to order more chocolate. The combination of an underground dorm, long nights, and Dementors 
would send Slytherin House into a depth of angst to rival Zapffe.

“The new greenhouse has a shed that doesn't lock.” She remarked and when a full stomach gave 
Padfoot enough energy to remember to pretend he didn't understand every word she was saying, she 
pretended to be talking to the clouds. “I was thinking of moving some of my work in there. I should 
test from fresh leaves. I need permission from Professor Sprout, though.” Hermione got to her feet 
and dusted off her skirt. “I'll see if I can catch her after breakfast.”

She left the bag and the remaining sausages as Padfoot really did look half-starved. If she got out of 
this unmerry-go-round alive and sane, she'd campaign for judicial reform. No one should be locked 
up without trial. Hermione expected that stance might be unpopular coming from a Rosier. Perhaps 
she would have to suggest it to her other self, assuming they ended this war on speaking terms. 
Mumbling madly to each other in the Janus Thickey Ward didn't count.
Eumenides

By random accident that looked like conspiracy, the Slytherins who stayed behind at Hogwarts over the Yule break were all kin to Death Eaters. Rosier, Nott, the Carrow twins, Travers, Yaxley, and Harper, whose mother was a Rowle. This did not go unnoticed by the resident Gryffindors, mostly children of Aurors not given time off over the holidays, who made it their business to shadow the Snakes everywhere they went. Someone had let a murderer into Hogwarts and that someone probably wore green.

Hermione sat by the hearth wearing her pyjamas, a robe, and two pairs of socks because the dungeon stone devoured heat. Flora and Hestia had joined her as none of the girls' dorms had fireplaces and Warming Charms could only do so much. The twins' mother had sent an enormous box of fudge, which they shared with their similarly immured Housemates. Travers, a First Year and miserably homesick, lay on a sofa rugged up in all the blankets off his bed having a sulk.

Nott, Yaxley, and Harper had collectively gone to the Library as there was safety in numbers. None of the Lions had tried anything yet but that could be because none of the Snakes had gone anywhere alone. So when Harper burst into the Common Room white faced and shaking, the idle quartet had their wands out instantly.

“De... men...” The boy wheezed.

“Dementor?” Hermione demanded, shedding her robe to wrap it around him. His skin was icy. He nodded. “Where are Nott and Yaxley?”

“Dunno.” Harper mumbled, struggling with his own tongue to speak. The fight or flight instinct did not allow for eloquence. “Lost them at the old kitchens.”

“I'll get Professor Snape.” Hermione turned to the Carrows. “Feed him fudge until he stops shaking, light all the candles you can, and stay here.”

“You're going out?” Flora knew of no grudge between her family and the Notts or the Yaxleys, and she had nothing against Theo or Corwin. However, the only person for whom she would face Dementors was already in here with her.

“Someone has to, and I'm the eldest here. Accio shoes.” Hermione tried to sound pragmatic while stuffing her feet into her Mary Janes. She was going anyway, regardless of excuse and didn't stay long enough for either Carrow to object further. Neither did she blame them for locking the door behind her. Once out in the corridor, her breath misted. “Moppet!”

“Miss calls Moppet?” The house elf appeared and quickly wrapped her arms around herself. “This is bad magic, Miss, hungry bad.”

“Tell the Headmaster there's a Dementor in the dungeons, please.” She spoke rapidly. The witch then tore off down the hallway as fast as she could. Hermione felt a coward for not going to Nott and Yaxley's rescue herself but fended off that emotion with common sense. She couldn't cast a Patronus, and when she had asked Hogwarts about why she had reacted so little to the Dementor on the Express, the Castle's reply had been evasive.

Professor Snape answered the door immediately when she hammered on it. Slytherins were not given to beating their fists upon his dread portal. He took in Cathal Rosier's pyjamas, drawn wand, and purposeful expression, and did not pepper her with questions. The Potions Master merely raised
an eyebrow at the Third Year witch.

“Harper, Nott, and Yaxley saw a Dementor near the old kitchens. Harper is in the Common Room but Nott and Yaxley haven't returned.” Hermione spoke crisply, mimicking Alastor Moody's clipped diction. All the information, no gabble.

“I cannot spare the time to escort you back to your dormitory.” Snape drew his wand and stepped aside to admit Rosier into his office. “Stay here until I return. Touch nothing.” He ordered, aware of her interest in Potions. He did not want to return to find the Sorcerer's Apprentice re-enacted in his private chambers. The witch biddably took the supplicant's chair before the desk. The wizard chose to believe she would remain there.

As soon as he shut the door, Hermione pulled her Map out of a pocket in her robe to search for Nott and Yaxley. The Slytherin kitchens had been built during a time when older Years could dine privately in their Common Rooms. In passing through that area of the dungeons, the boys had taken an indirect route from the Library likely trying to throw off any harassment from the Gryffindors.

If the two had been thinking rationally, never an easy thing to do in the presence of a nightmare, they would've headed up back towards the first floor. She looked there hopefully. Unfortunately, the enchanted vellum showed two figures 'Nott, Theodore' and 'Yaxley, Corwin' running towards the Porticus Periculum. There was no sign of pursuit because she hadn't devised a way to include Dark Creatures in the artefact.

“Voice, can you sense the Dementor?” She asked the Map.

“There is an absence. It obfuscates the space around it. We can see only where it is not.” Hogwarts replied, a tint of outrage colouring the voice. Dementors were a threat to the students and threats were unwelcome. “How did such a wight enter our domain?”

“I don't know.” Hermione admitted. If she had to guess, she would've gone with one of the collapsed tunnels in the older sections of the Castle but that was entirely supposition. She didn't know enough about the physics of the Dementors to estimate how much they could compress themselves or whether they could become intangible. Everything she had read about them had said 'semi-corporeal'. They had a physical presence even if it was insubstantial. They weren't ghosts.

“You will find out.” The Voice ordered.

“How, precisely?” She asked more sharply than camaraderie allowed. “Cathal can't cast the Patronus yet and you were very dodgy on why I didn't feel much from the Dementor on the train. I'm not going to seek out a nest while armed only with Cheering Charms.”

“You do not feel the hunger of the fearful creatures because they cannot feed on you. That is enough for you to know.” An amelioration of the imperiousness in the Voice's tone suggested there had been a switch in control. Hermione didn't know if there were distinct personalities within the gestalt being but she suspected the imprints of very powerful people lingered. A thought occurred.

“Voice, can you speak Parseltongue?” Hermione inquired, wondering if the Castle's contact with Tom Riddle had left a recent trace of his inherited ability. Of course, given Salazar Slytherin was a Founder, Hogwarts might have the ability from him.

“We cannot.” A hint of ruefulness and a large serve of irritation. “When Slytherin left, he took many of his secrets with him. Nothing done with his fellow Founders could he undo but he could remove what was privy to him and his heirs.”
“Bugger.” She remarked. “I thought maybe the Chamber of Secrets has another exit or some
malignant seep the Dementors could use. They'd definitely like the place and I haven't been able to
get in, of course.” Hermione stopped herself before she petulantly kicked Snape's desk. He could
certainly notice a new scuff mark or a charm to remove. “I have a memory of Ron's impression
of Harry talking in his sleep. I could Pensieve that to try to imitate it myself.”

“In the house that Jack built.” Hogwarts said wryly.

“A bit like that.” Playing Chinese Whispers with herself wasn't the most reliable way of getting an
accurate result. “There's no chance Harry would tell Cathal personally.” She didn't want to draw
attention to the Chamber in case someone removed the basilisk. “There must be memory projection
charms or something similar for the enchantment of a Pensieve. I could adapt one of those.”

“You would need means of sensing the malevolences also.”

“I'll add it to the list.” Hermione pulled out a notebook from her robes. She always carried one as she
had learned, coincidentally in Third Year, that if she wanted to remember something she should write
it down. Trusting to her memory while under stress wasn't foolproof. “Do you remember what you
said to me when we were at the end of the thread? I'd call it stasis but it wasn't quite that.”

“There was a message from us to us sent back with you, woven in with the magic. We know it to be
true but it was brief.” The Voice paused and Hermione could almost hear it editing what it was going
to tell her. She wasn't going to stamp her foot to demand she be told all but one day she would find
out. Secrets were poisonous and secret magic doubly so.

“You said an Avada stains the fabric of reality, to paraphrase.” She prompted when the Castle's
silence lengthened. Talking to a disembodied voice gave her no visual cues to guess Hogwarts's
thoughts. The attenuating pause suggested more careful composition.

“Once there is a death, there will always be a death.” The words were heavy, adamantine. “We
comprehend you wish to be a Valkyrie but the Killing Curse is not deflected lightly. Choosing the
slain is not your remit. Perhaps you could sway the spell by inches.”

“Harry was nearest Sirius.” Hermione had stared, they'd all stared, as Sirius had almost drifted into
the archway. Remus had rushed to hold Harry back. She sighed. Diverting Bellatrix's curse might
well hit Harry, and on that possibility alone she couldn't risk it. “I should find the bloody rat and do
him in now before he brings back his Master.”

“Why have you not?”

“Because that bastard will find a way to resurrect himself. If I kill Pettigrew, I won't know when
Voldemort comes back. He could take years to piece himself together or someone more competent
might find him.” The simple truth was she had to wait, to bide her time until after the rite at the
cemetery. Once Voldemort was corporeal again, he could be slain. Harry would have allies then.
And the damned Prophecy would be fulfilled.

“He craves this place.” The Voice spoke with an echo of dread. “He has no right. A thin line of
blood does not grant him sovereignty.”

“Harry defeats him. I saw that much.” Hermione reassured. Her eyes caught movement on the Map
as 'Snape, Severus' returned to the Slytherin Common Room with 'Nott, Theodore' and 'Yaxley,
Corwin'. “The Professor will be back soon.” She watched the little figures move down the corridor.
“I feel a wuss for not going after them myself. Gryffindor urges.”
“You are no longer a Lion.” Hogwarts said with less gentleness than Hermione would have liked.

“I haven't forgotten.” Every day she dressed in green she was reminded she had left her old self behind. Hermione put the Map away and waited for Snape to return, not touching anything as commanded. She’d need to order more nettles and some Dittany. Their classwork on undetectable poisons, so named because the commonly used detection charms didn't register their presence, was fascinating. First time around she hadn't appreciated how the poisons could be integrated with so many other potions. This go, she had leisure to investigate in depth.

“Miss Rosier.” Snape flung the door open and found to his mixed pleasure and regret that the witch was in the chair he had indicated. He was so accustomed to defiance from his charges he was mistrustful. A flick of his wand confirmed none of the security charms had been breached. Severus kept the most dangerous ingredients in his private study to guard against pilferage. He could with five minutes and what was contained within the room brew a draught that could kill a dragon.

“Professor.” Hermione's gaze didn't rise above his chin. “How are Nott and Yaxley?”

“Shaken and exhausted. They ran laps while casting the strongest curses they knew.” His mouth thinned. If Hogwarts had a proper Dark Arts class the young wizards would have been significantly better prepared to face a Dementor. “The creature has been repelled.” Albus was reinforcing the wards of the Castle and sending his bitiest owl to the Ministry, not that Fudge would heed it. “I will return you to your House now.”

Hermione had expected an interrogation. She was suspicious Snape wasn't more suspicious, but even with ten years acquaintance she couldn't read him. So she went quietly and tucked herself into bed in her empty dorm. Staring at the green and silver canopy above her, Hermione wondered whether Cathal would've gone for help. How could she know? The girl was just a skin she carried around; a mask to hide behind.

* 

With the exception of the orphan Cathal, all the Slytherins who had stayed at Hogwarts over the Yule holidays wrote to their parents about the Dementor loose in the dungeons. Hermione knew this because her Housemates showed her the various replies, including the one from Hardrada Harper who had stabbed her quill into the parchment so vigorously she had torn the sheet in several places. Nett result: pabulum from Fudge.

When she told Marcus and the other older Slytherins who had invited themselves to their study sessions, he grimaced and said the response was typical. Fudge didn't move on an issue unless he feared for his job. Sirius Black running amok was a far more incendiary problem than a 'minor security incident' at Hogwarts, which the Minister blamed on Dumbledore's inattention.

The Snakes were ensconced in the library at one of the large tables near the Ancient Runes section, which was primarily the domain of older Years as the subject was a challenging elective. Bole was turning a book around in his hands looking at a Transfiguration diagram from several different angles hoping to figure out where to start. Flint had rocked back in his chair to read with his feet on the table because he hated knocking his shins on the stretcher beneath. Hearne, a Fifth Year desperate not to fail Charms, slid his essay across to Rosier and cradled his head in his hands.

Hermione felt an unexpected sense of comradeship with the fraught boy whose father demanded he get an OWL in a subject in which he, impartially, had little talent. The pure-blood emphasis on heritage rather than ability had left many of its scions struggling not to be relegated. A student doing sufficiently poorly in multiple subjects could be asked to leave the school before their OWLs, which was utter disgrace among the old families.
She was eighteen inches into Hearne's essay when she noticed how quiet the Library was. It struck her that Gryffindor was playing Ravenclaw, and that Flint wasn't dressed as a Dementor. Hermione paused trying to remember exactly when Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and the Seventh Year had pranked Harry. It had definitely been the Ravenclaw match.

“You're missing Quidditch.” She spoke before her underdeveloped cunning could stop her.

“Yeah.” Flint agreed, flicking a page irritably. “But I've nearly got a handle on Quintessence and if I take a break I'll lose the plot.” He scribbled a page number on a scrap bit of parchment he was using for his references. “Flitwick's remedial class is bloody useful. I'd be Stupefied without it.”

A little thing, barely a tweak. It could be nothing. From what she knew of temporal magic, not every change was significant. You could step on a flight of butterflies and not alter the future. She didn't know what Flint did during the war. She'd never heard him mentioned as a Death Eater. And she couldn't, short of locking herself in a cellar for years, not affect time.

So why was her heart racing?

“Are you planning to go professional?” Hermione asked to say something to fend off her burgeoning panic attack. Flint shrugged and returned to reading. She did the same then shifted next to Hearne so she could quietly discuss how he could refine his essay. If he noticed how tense she was, he didn't say. He was at least as taut, his hands fidgeting with his quill.

News of the Gryffindor victory percolated into the Library via smiles on the red ties and frowns on the blue. Oliver Wood sauntered in late, making sure to grin broadly at the table of Slytherins. Flint glared back, muttering about doing something very uncomfortable to the Gryffindor Captain with his own broomstick.

The joie de vivre was short lived. The presence of the Dementors sapped everyone. The younger Years cried in private nooks and the older Years slogged grimly onwards as though the exams were the Gotterdammerung. Hermione kept to her terse habit and hoped no one noticed she wasn't as wearily miserable as her fellows. Her confidence in her fakery was shaken by Professor Lupin's guarded expression when she asked to be excused from the Boggart lesson.

She had arrived early to the special group class and made a show of taking interest in the rattling wardrobe. Remus watched her while trying to pretend he wasn't. He was thinking, she recognised his contemplative expression. Regrettably, when she walked up to him to ask to be excused from the class, he blanked his face. He wasn't the accomplished liar Snape was but hiding his lycanthropy had taught him self-control.

Professor Lupin agreed without cavil. Hermione felt his gaze on her all the way out of the classroom. Something was bothering him about Cathal Rosier. She didn't know what. Tucking herself away in her hidden laboratory, Hermione fussed around with a distillation still and worried. There was something, wasn't there? Or was Remus just angry over the implied extortion?

“Moppet, if you're available, could you come here?” She asked the walls. “It's not urgent.”

The house elf appeared after a few minutes during which Hermione strained nettles to keep her hands busy. She was making progress with the testing and expected by the end of the year she would have some useful data. The next step would be finding whether any of the nettle species she had tested mixed well with any of the gel media she would like to use. Liquids were easier to brew but didn't last as long on the shelf.

“Miss wants Moppet not right away?” Moppet quirked her ears, interested in the not-summons. Her
witch friend didn't like to bother her and never asked her to pick up things so she was puzzled by the at whim call.

“I'm probably being paranoid. Walking around the dungeons alone has given me too much time to over-think.” Hermione explained in case she sounded daft for asking her question. “Has Professor Lupin talked about Cathal?”

“I heard Professor the Wolf talking to Professor the Cat over teacups.” After some thought, Moppet provided this titbit. “They wasn't talking about just you. They was talking about all the Slytherins. He said you reminded him of your father. She said yes.”

“I don't imagine they liked Evan Rosier much.” There was no special reason why Remus shouldn't talk to Professor McGonagall. “Is that all they said?”

“The Professors looked unhappy. Headmistress Professor was all pinch-mouth.” The house elf mimicked the Scottish witch's dour expression. “She said there were always some that went Dark. Then they talked about Malfoy. Professor the Wolf said he reminded him of his father too.”

“I am really starting to see the appeal of Legilimency. I'd feel a lot more assured about my lies if I could be certain people believed them.” Hermione heard herself whine and sighed. “Thanks, Moppet. I'm sorry to bother you. Professor Lupin looked at me oddly. I'm never sure I'm doing this Slytherin thing right.”

“Can Miss do less right than idiot Crabbe and idiot Goyle?” Moppet asked with another twitch of her ears. Hermione laughed.

“You make a good point.” She smiled for the first time in what felt like an eternity. “They do set the bar very low.”
Hesperides

For anyone not confronting a murderer in a shack, the end of term was a dull affair. Gryffindor won
the Quidditch Cup again. Gryffindor won the House Cup again. There was some smug exultation
among the Slytherins when word got around Professor Lupin had been fired. All the parents
thwarted over the Dementor incident insisted forcefully that Fudge do something about the werewolf,
and as the Minister could throw mud at Dumbledore, he did liberally.

It had been Hermione's bad luck that the final class of the year had been Potions and her Head of
House had marched her from the classroom to the apprentice's suite adjoining his quarters. He'd
disarmed her and locked her in with assurances that her belongings would be packed. She would be
conveyed to her guardian's home as soon as Narcissa Malfoy came to fetch her. He shut the door on
her protests.

“Moppet.” Hermione did not hesitate to call for reinforcements as she pulled the Map out of her
pocket. “Voice, now what?”

“Do you continue to be committed to refusing the hospitality of the Malfoys?” Hogwarts inquired,
evidently wishing her to reconsider her confrontational stance.

“I was tortured there. Cursed dagger. Screaming on the floor. Crucius Curse.” She bit the words. “I
will not play nice with people who watched and did nothing.”

“We understand.” The Voice altered, becoming more conciliatory. “Nor more shall we speak of it.”

“Moppet can get Miss's wand back then Miss can run away with Moppet.” The house elf suggested.
She'd enjoyed their trip to Man Island with the two wheels and the ice cream. “Moppet can go as far
as Hogwarts School allows.”

“If you can get a hawthorn wand from the Lost Wands and substitute it, hopefully Professor Snape
won't notice.” Hermione suggested. Moppet nodded and disappeared. “Voice, can you do anything
to keep someone out of the Castle? Delaying Mrs Malfoy will buy me time to get out of here.”

“Not in the way we believe you mean. Any may come to Hogwarts.” The Voice paused to test the
strictures of its being. “The Headmaster may close the school in time of need.”

“I'd rather not involve Dumbledore. If Cathal goes to him for protection, there will be a price.” While
Hermione respected the Headmaster for all he had done, she did not idolise him as she had when
younger. Doing something ‘for the greater good’ was too easy an excuse to abuse. “Peeves could be
helpful. I assume he's basically your id.”

“We shall persuade him.” The Voice did not sound enthusiastic but the speech box above the Map's
legend went blank, indicating it had left the conversation. Hermione put the Map away and upended
the bed in the small sleeping area. Apprentice accommodation was not lavish. She climbed onto the
oak frame to peer into the ventilation grille. Behind it was a niche containing a bulbous ceramic pot;
a jar of four winds to make fresh air. No escape that way.

The bathroom facilities were a chamber pot and a sink. Hermione paced the entirety of the suite. She
was done by the time Moppet reappeared with her wand. There was no secret door or cunningly
hidden exit. On the up side, she could now add the interior of the apprentice quarters more accurately
to the Map. She hadn't had the opportunity to poke around Professor Snape's private rooms.

“Via Speculo.” Hermione cast the Mirror Road Charm on the medicine cabinet above the sink. The
glass discoloured and she felt a weird rushing sensation before an upswell of nausea. She swallowed, breathing slowly. Nothing else happened. Disappointing but not surprising. The charm was a variant of the Vanishing Cabinet enchantment that used to be used to travel between one mirror and another. It had fallen out of fashion after Ignatia Wildsmith invented Floo powder.

“Was Miss supposed to go through the looking glass?” Moppet asked tentatively, not wanting to hurt her friend’s feelings by pointing out she was still there. Maybe she should’ve pretended she couldn’t see Miss.

“It would’ve been handy.” Hermione frowned. “But honestly, no. The charm’s fiddly and this is the first time I’ve actually cast it. But it does leave a characteristic residue on any mirror used so Cathal has a plausible exit.” She held her hand out to the house elf. “But I much prefer your way of travelling.”

With a grin, Moppet popped them away.

They ended up some place dark. Hermione lit her wand. They were in a room very similar to the one they had left except this one was lined with shelves slightly canted downwards. There was a very strong smell. She sniffed, identified camphor and rotten meat then hastily cast Nox. The scent grew more pungent as the fungus growing on the shelves began to fluoresce.

“Shit.” Hermione picked up Moppet, muffling the house elf under her robes and blindly cast an Unlocking Charm. She rushed out of the room before the Combustible Mushrooms did what the name suggested. “Scour... achoo.” The witch tried to cast as the paroxysm of sneezing started. Tears streamed as the spores stung the sensitive mucosa of her eyes and nose. “Sc... achoo...fy.”

She was on the floor sneezing convulsively when a door thudded open, flooding the workroom with light. Hermione saw a pair of sensible boots with dried mud on the uppers and heard a Cleaning Charm. The strong mothball scent dissipated, leaving her crouching with her face running with tears and snot. A handkerchief was pressed into her hand.

“Miss Rosier, I must say I didn’t expect you to be daft enough to sneak into my mushroom store.” Professor Sprout inspected the Slytherin as the younger witch mopped herself up.

“Not my intention, Professor.” Hermione said abjectly, rubbing her outraged nose.

“What was your intention then?” The Herbology Professor cast another Cleaning Charm on the girl's hair as the fruiting bodies of Calvatia cheirovomvida were effusive in their release. She never handled them without a Bubble-Head Charm and didn't allow anyone to work with them unsupervised.

“My spell went awry.” Hermione was very conscious of Moppet sniffling into the back of her legs trying not to sneeze.

“Come now, a little more explanation than that.” Pomona had not yet had any trouble with the taciturn girl, and had not seen any indication of the Rosier viciousness that had characterised Evan. She had taught Cathal's father through to his OWLs and had known him to be a diligent student. No trouble, unless crossed and then he became an implacable foe. The girl thus far hadn’t shown any tendency to be vindictive. Indeed, Pomona recalled what Malcolm Preece had confided to her about his confrontation with the daughter of his father's murderer. Rosier had been kind, in a cold, serpentine way. “It's not like you to indulge in pranks.”

“I was trying to cast the Mirror Road Charm.” The lie wasn't a whole untruth but Hermione didn't like the taste of it nonetheless. “I was locked in the apprentice chambers attached to the Slytherin
“Well, no harm done, I suppose.” Professor Sprout was aware of the venomous politics in Slytherin House. If someone had locked Rosier in, it was unlikely to have been a light-hearted jape. It was also unlikely that the girl would give her a straight answer. “Run along. You don't want to be late for the Feast.”

“Yes, Professor.” Hermione shuffled out, Moppet invisible under her cloak. Once in the hallway, she picked up the house elf and hurried to the nearest room to Scourgify her friend. The mushroom spores didn't have as debilitating effect on magical creatures as they did on humans but Moppet's nose was as red as a strawberry.

“Moppet does not like the puff sneezes.” Moppet complained as Hermione cleaned her thoroughly.

“They're not my favourite fungus either. All I can smell is camphor.” The witch Transfigured a desk into a wash basin and filled it via Aguamenti so they could wash their faces. Not strictly necessary as the Cleaning Charm was thorough but her nose and eyes felt raw. “What happened?”

“Moppet thinks the wards against the hungry darks keeps house elves in. Moppet hasn't left Hogwarts since the bad things came.” The house elf splashed herself with the water then dismissed it with a snap of her fingers. “Do we walk, Miss?”

“I think we'd best hide. Narcissa Malfoy is bound to be in the Castle by now. She never struck me as a woman with a sense of humour.” Hermione flicked up the hood of her robes and pulled off her tie. They were in Hufflepuff country so hopefully at first glance she'd pass for a Badger. “Stay invisible, and if I get caught, leave me. I don't want you dragged off to Malfoy Manor too.”

It shouldn't be possible to look petulant while invisible but Moppet managed it. Hermione walked casually into the corridor and turned the second corner, heading up a half-flight of stairs leading to a long arcade lined with benches that would've been crowded with students prior to exams. She took a left, slipped between the paired statues of Helixa and Syna Hyslop, inventors of the Doubling Charm, and through the arched passage into the Vestibule of Mischief.

Hermione had to pause there to orient herself as the portraits in the circular chamber shuffled themselves around, usually clustering in the 'Coign of Vantage' or the 'Three Wine Glasses and a Stuffed Partridge'. She needed the frame of Bridget Wenlock, noted Arithmancer. An art enthusiast in the sixteenth century had gilded all the frames near the Hufflepuff Common Room, meaning she had to count clockwise from the wide mouth of the Vestibule eleven portraits to find the one concealing the corridor she needed.

Once inside the uncommonly travelled but not exactly secret hallway, Hermione hurried to the third niche and tapped the hand of the statue of Mopsus Divining Defeat. The curved wall behind the marble figure slid open to reveal a spiral staircase. She headed down, ducking her head as the twist was tight. This wasn't the fastest way to her hidden laboratory and she felt like Maxwell Smart but this route kept her away from the Slytherin part of the dungeons.

A heavy, locked door hidden among wood panelling in a gloomy room led to her stewed mint scented workroom. Months of boiling nettles had left a strong lingering odour despite multiple freshening charms. Hermione sat down on a ratty chintz armchair and took stock. Moppet sat on the matching fainting couch, which was lower to the floor so she didn't have to clamber up.

“Right.” Hermione said, feeling she now had a moment to think. She didn't like making rushed decisions or flying by the seat of her pants. Or flying at all, if given the choice. “I wish I knew more about the wards. There was never time to ask during the battle.” She took a deep breath, dropping
her hand when she made to rub her sore eyes. “We should be able to just walk out but I’m concerned a lone exit will be obvious. The Headmaster might be able to detect us crossing the boundaries.”

“Does Miss really need to leave Hogwarts? Miss stays here most of most summers.” Moppet observed, putting her feet on the long chair because no one would punish her for doing so.

“I could just dig in. The staff will be very busy with the Triwizard Tournament preparation.” She didn't know why she felt so up-and-down. Hormones, probably. Could be approaching that time of the month for the first time, again. She had not missed menstruating. Puberty was awful. “But I need to be seen leaving or at least to have presumed to have left.”

Hermione told herself not to over think her plans. What was the easiest way out of any magical building? Floo, usually. Hogwarts wasn’t connected to the Floo Network. You could make fire calls but not full body translocation. Apparition was possible outside the boundary. Getting out of the Castle itself by Shank's pony was relatively easy. She shouldn't overcomplicate her exit.

“Moppet, can you fly a broom?” Hermione asked speculatively.

“Moppet will find out.” The house elf grinned.

They snuck circuitously to the Quidditch Pitch, able to get most of the way via a maintenance tunnel before emerging into the understorey of the stadium in a warren of beams. It was dusk as they crossed the grounds to the broomshed and fingers crossed no one would want a last minute night flight. The door to the shed was locked but a murmured Alohomora let them creep in.

To intrude on an intimate moment between two people naked on the floor.

As a Prefect, Hermione had chanced across more than a few couples snogging in discreet niches. She had never walked in on anyone in flagrante delicto before. She stood momentarily stunned, wand illuminating the two wizards as they scrambling for their robes. The witch recollected herself, hastily grabbed a broom, and left the shed.

“Rosier, wait!” Flint shoved himself into his trousers and gave chase. He hadn't a notion what he was going to say but he couldn't let her leave without some sort of lie.

“I can't hang about.” Hermione stopped as he caught her shoulder and pulled her around. Standing so close she noticed how much she had grown. The year before she'd been nose to sternum with him. Now she was eye level with his shoulders. Nice shoulders, albeit with the small red smudges of precursor bruises where someone had gripped them tightly.

“That wasn't what it looked like.” He said and got a very old fashioned look from a thirteen year old. “It looked like you were fucking Oliver Wood.” She said dryly. Wood hurried up behind Flint, pulling on a shirt with only three buttons left. The Gryffindor wasn't going to leave his lover to face calumny alone.

“I put a Love Potion in his drink.” Wood said, hoping to bluff the young witch. He'd face a suspension if she took the accusation to the Headmaster but as he was graduating, there wasn't much Dumbledore could do to him. It wasn't in his power to withhold his NEWTs results. Far better he kept Flint, whose family was very, very conservative, out of the whole mess.

“No, you didn't.” Hermione countered. “He's speaking coherently, his pupils aren't dilated, and you aren't a rapist.”

“Rosier, you don't understand.” Flint elbowed Wood to get him to shut up before he blurted out more
chivalrous nonsense. “If my father found out about this, he’d kill Oliver and I’d be married off to some miserable witch by his right as paterfamilias.”

“Just as well I have no intention of telling him or anyone.” She asserted firmly. “I have to go. Narcissa Malfoy is in the Castle.”

“Where the bloody Hell are you going at this time of night?” Wood had been distracted first by Marcus’s amazing hands and then by the shock of discovery but his wits caught up now. Rosier had broken into the broomshed to nick one of the Slytherin team’s Nimbuses. He’d never seen her on a broom. He wasn’t sure if she even watched her House’s Quidditch games.

“Aberdeen.” Hermione had planned for Moppet to fly across the ward boundaries towards a plausible destination then after a mile or so stash the broom somewhere and return by elf magic. “Not that it is any business of yours, Wood.”

“This feud of yours with the Malfoys has to stop.” Flint insisted. “I don't care how clever you think you are, Rosier. It's not safe for you to hide among Muggles. Spend the damn summer with Draco. You can set the furniture on him all you like.”

“What?” Oliver’s eyes narrowed. He and Marcus hadn't talked about their respective Houses. They hadn't talked about much, other than arguing about Quidditch. It was easier that way. “Are you running away from school?”

“No, I'll be back in September.” Hermione edged away from the boys. Flint had that determined expression that had seen him grind through mountains of coursework. He didn't like studying but he'd done it.

“That's not the bloody point.” The older Slytherin snapped.

“You've been dossing out every summer?” Wood asked, recalling vaguely that Rosier was an orphan. “How'd you avoid Children's Services?”

“Keep moving and look middle class.” She answered simply. “I'm articulate and clean. People might wonder why I'm out alone but if I look like I have somewhere to be, they generally don't ask.”

“I suppose they wouldn't, at that.” He frowned. “Look, I can't just let you leave. Why don't you come back to the Castle and we'll go to Professor McGonagall? She's not likely to hand you over to the Malfoys and maybe there's some place you can stay.”

“McGonagall is happy enough to send Potter back to his Muggles and they beat him.” Hermione met Wood’s eyes stolidly, daring him to refute her allegation. He couldn’t. Anyone who'd seen Harry get changed could see his scars. The Dursleys hadn't hit him anywhere someone would see but Vernon had been generous with his belt.

“You'll stay with me.” Flint announced. “My mother is at Flint Manor so you'll have a chaperone.” This statement got him sceptical looks from both Rosier and Wood. “It matters, Olly, and no, Rosier, I'm not going to leave this alone.”

“Why wouldn't your mother owl the Malfoys as soon as I show up?” She didn’t object to the suggestion. She just didn't think it would work.

“My mother doesn’t care for Lucius Malfoy or his wife, and she doesn't give a damn about the Ministry.” That part was an easy sell. As Sacred Twenty-Eight, there wasn't much the Flints had to bestir themselves to do except make more Flints. “If I tell her I wish to court you, she'll fall over herself to make you welcome.”
“Damn it, Marcus.” Oliver burst out, again thankful he was a half-blood. He'd had the awkward talk with his mum about not fancying girls last year. Her big concern had been him being bullied at school, not the dynastic continuation of the family name.

“She'd accept that explanation?” Hermione's knowledge of pure-blood social mores came from books, the Weasleys, and displays of Slytherin arrogance.

“Yes, indeed.” Marcus scowled. Eglantine Flint nee Bulstrode was not a particularly perceptive woman but she had noticed her only son's inclination towards wizards. If he'd had a brother, the matter wouldn't have been anything to trouble the mater. However, he was an only child and he absolutely had to marry a witch. “If I add the Malfoys want you for their son, she'd fend off dragons to keep you.”
Primordial

Flint Manor was an archaeologist’s fever-dream. The estate in the centre of Winchester had started as an Anglo-Saxon hall, which had been transfigured from wood to stone then expanded with paired Gothic wings. When the additions had proven insufficient or unfashionable, a Flint ancestor had tacked on another storey in Baroque style complete with a slate mansard roof. It was just as well the wards and Repelling Charms were thickly layered. No one could forget seeing the hotchpotch building.

Marcus Apparated them onto a gravel circle ringed with low marble benches. The spot gave an excellent view of the gargoyles and other grotesques guarding a huge oak door that wouldn't have looked out of place in Heorot. The weathered gouges and old scorch marks defacing the wood suggested the Flints had faced down worse than Grendel in defence of their home.

“What we have, we keep.” Marcus remarked as he escorted her to a much smaller door on the east wing. This was varnished and carved so intricately the surface looked like natural bark shaped and twisted into a rope of Celtic knots. That moved. Hermione had to look twice to be sure but the wood had definitely changed at second glance.

“Is the knotwork an illusion or is it tied to the wards?” She asked as Flint swept his wand over the door in a complex runic pattern.

“Buggered if I know. Mother made it.” He didn't question what his maternal parent did with her time any more than he inquired what his father did rattling around in his wing of the house. “If you ask her, she'll tell you. For days.”

Madam Flint was in a large, airy workroom carpeted with wood shavings. She was built like Millicent Bulstrode; broad and stolid. The witch strode around an ornate chair on a plinth, frowning at it from several angles almost menacing the inanimate wood with her wand. The creative process evidently had hit a snag.

“Mother.” Marcus shouted. The room was quiet but neither of his parents paid any attention to him unless he yelled. He shifted in front of Rosier as his mother whirled around, wand up. She didn't like being interrupted.

“You're not supposed to be home until tomorrow.” Eglantine snapped, irritated by the change of plans. She'd have to send an elf to find her husband so Gerard could open his part of the house to his son. Marcus was of age and thus she no longer had to make room for him in her wing.

“I'm not staying.” He'd had a speech half-planned in his head, something formal to show his understanding of his responsibilities. What he actually said was more blunt. “This is Cathal Rosier. The Malfoys want her.”

“Where have your wits gone begging?” Eglantine demanded. She had mentioned often to her son about the need for him to find a wife. She had not expected him to take her commands so literally. Fates knew she wasn't the next Morgana but at least she had more sense than to grab the first Miss who could be persuaded not to scream. “How old are you, girl?”

“Thirteen.” Hermione replied, discovering where Flint had inherited his manners.

“That's four years you'll have to wait, Marcus. I assume you can count that high.” Madam Flint put her wand away. She'd been trying to find the right harmonies with the carving for hours and the
piece just wouldn't balance. Working with yew always left her moody. “I expect you think that will suit you.” Her son had the temerity to smirk. “That's four years for her to find out how much of a disappointment you are.”

“Yes, mother.” Marcus didn't mention how well he'd thought he'd gone on his NEWTs this time around or that he'd been scouted by Falmouth. He'd long ago developed a thick skin when it came to parental criticism. His mother disliked him because he reminded her of his father and vice versa. There was nothing he could do to change that.

“The Malfoys usually pick for beauty.” Eglantine surveyed the unlovely girl. Thirteen was an awkward age and the pallid slip in front of her looked made of knees and elbows. “You don't sound French.”

“I'm not.” The Rosiers had a cadet branch of the family in Avignon, which was as much as Hermione knew about them. “I'm Evan Rosier's daughter. Piers Rosier's granddaughter.”

That got her a hard look from Madam Flint. The older witch glared at her son, who inclined his head once in a crisp nod. The inquisitorial stare returned to Hermione. She had to look up to meet the gimlet but she did. This was not the moment to a delicate, bashful maiden. Unlike the Malfoys, the Bulstrodes and the Flints selected for endurance.

“You may stay.” Eglantine said steadily. “I liked your father. Didn't think much of his bride. Bookish and quiet. Her family was respectable however.” She kept to herself her opinions on Evan's death. The Rosiers had always been political. Piers had been shrewd. If Evan had had more sense, he might not have died. But at least he wasn't a crawler like Malfoy.

Hermione said her thanks and said good-bye to Marcus, who pretended he was hurrying back to celebrate with their fellow Snakes not a lone Lion waiting for him in the broomshed. Madam Flint snapped her fingers for a house elf to show her guest to a suitable suite then returned to exert her will on yew.

The bedrooms were all on the Baroque floor of the Manor. Hermione slept in a room that looked like it had escaped from Versailles. An incautious Lumos reflecting off the gilt could blind someone. She slept well in a borrowed nightgown with her wand under her pillow. Cathal Machtilde Rosier would take oblivion where she could find it.

Morning happened with a knock on the door. She muttered drowsy permission and the door flung open wide but Marcus Flint remained in the hallway. Hermione got out of bed. The nightgown ran from chin to ankle. An ogler would get more of a show from a curtain. She raised an eyebrow at the shadows under his eyes and the half-healed bruise on his neck.

“You Apparated tired?” Hermione started to scold, heard her other self in her voice then literally bit her tongue to stop herself. Flint shrugged, handing over her battered trunk. Narcissa's purchase had eventually reappeared in the Room of Hidden Things. She'd left it there in case it was charmed to reveal its location.

“Did the boat thing but couldn't be arsed with the train.” Mentally exhausted after NEWTs, he'd wanted to be done with Hogwarts. Marcus was looking forward to weeks and weeks of not doing
anything much before the Quidditch Cup and beginning training with the Falcons. “Some of the lads are coming around tonight to get ratted.” He rubbed the side of his neck where the love bite had been. “He can't come here. Need to find a way to sneak over to his place.”

“Use Polyjuice.” The solution seemed obvious, not least because she wasn't going to share any of her specialised charm-bonding potion mediums. Hermione intended to keep that ace well up her sleeve.

“Pucey once stuck my hands to the table to keep me from interfering in our Girding Potion.” Marcus grinned at the memory. He'd got even by filling Adrian's bed with beetle eyes though Snape had given them an E for the potion. “It takes a month to brew and I'd probably poison myself.”

“I have some.” Hermione usually kept her finished potions in her caches but she'd begun collecting the ones she'd need for the summer, carrying them shrunken in her randoseru in case she had to leave suddenly. Although she had her trunk locked magically, she didn't trust her dorm-mates not to pry. Professor Snape commanding someone to gather her unmentionables hadn't occurred to her.

“Brew it yourself?” He asked, not being the responsible adult and asking why she had a controlled potion readily to hand. At Cathal's nod, he quashed a pang of conscience. Marcus took the view that his life was vastly improved by not prying into the business of others. If no one looked likely to die or be carried off by ravening Muggles, he could totter on blithely. “I'll buy all you have. He's got try-outs with Puddlemere. That's more than local enough for someone to recognise me.”

They negotiated price and supply. The Flints had their own brewing laboratory, which no one much used, and the prospect of spending proper time with his secret sort-of-maybe boyfriend made Marcus generous. He couldn't decently just hand her family money without a betrothal contract but he could start an account for himself at Slug & Jiggers Apothecary. If Cathal ordered by owl in his name and the money came out of Marcus's personal vault then she wouldn't look kept.

Madam Flint could spend money on Cathal, and did after the house elves informed her of the paltry state of her guest's wardrobe. Eglantine despised fripperies and would hex anyone who accused her of being modish. She bought the best, made it last, and ignored all criticism. Being seen shopping for a young witch in Diagon Alley would cause far more comment than she wanted to hear so she summoned her seamstress to the Manor. In short order, by brisk order, Hermione got a dragonhide work robe, a summer weight gown in white, and a Nile green linen kirtle. Excepting the fair hair, she looked like a cut-down version of Madam Flint herself.

Hostess duties done, her nominal chaperone largely ignored her. Hermione wasn't sure how to behave until she noticed Marcus was barely acknowledged either. Gerard Flint had emerged once from his wing of the house, eyed both teenagers dyspeptically then barked questions at her. She gave her name, her antecedents, her Hogwarts House, and a brief oration on the uses of henbane. He left with a terse nod.

Days later over Firewhiskey, him, and butterbeer, her, Marcus explained his father was a Master Herbologist. Gerard and Eglantine had been matched because of their lack of consanguinity and their mutual interest in flora. Unfortunately his mother cut things down while his father preferred to grow them; a good metaphor for their marriage. After they'd had the requisite heir, they'd moved to separate wings and barely spoke.

Pure-blood chaperonage was not the Georgette Heyer whimsy Hermione had vaguely expected. Madam Flint wasn't there to guard her virtue but her allegiance. Cathal could parade about Flint Manor skyclad and so long as she didn't become pregnant, all was well. Marcus told her this then politely asked her to refrain. But if she took money from the family or appeared with them at a public event or was seen alone with him touching or a hundred other things that gave away something
improper was happening, then she'd look like she was selling herself or he'd look like he was poaching.

“Poaching?” Hermione gave him a cool stare over her glass.

“That's not what it's called legally. There's a lot of blather and it all gets tied up in jus sanguinis and inheritance law.” Marcus had to know about that guff because he was the only son. His father's brother had died young during the first wizarding war and his grandfather's brother had only had daughters. Unless he dug for Squibs, and that was too desperate for his pride, he was the only Flint name heir. “Didn't your mother tell you about this? She should've.”

“She was more focussed on magic and theory, and the Rosiers have other heirs.” She lied, recalling the pedigree Harnak had shown her. More a tumbleweed than a tree.

“Lucky you.” He grumbled into his drink. Marcus was sitting across the table from her in a pub in wizarding Glasgow. They'd both drunk Polyjuice with hair got from two random Muggles. He'd Apparated to Scotland mostly as practice. Oliver lived in the 'green hollow' of the city's Brythonic name, a little walled remnant of Celtic times.

Marcus had sent an owl to the Wood residence with their location and how long they'd be there. Unsure of what the Gryffindor was doing, the Slytherin was content enough to lean back in a chair not in his family home. Every year he forgot how much he disliked being stuck between his parents and every summer he learned anew.

“Why couldn't your father chaperone me?” Hermione asked, shifting in her seat. She'd picked a middle aged man from out of the crowd of commuters and certain biological differences were making it difficult for her to sit comfortably. She tried to lounge like Flint but felt slightly ridiculous with the amount of space she was occupying.

“He'd be seen as biased towards the family. He'd let me get away with wooing you without a formal courtship. That's the poaching part. You aren't supposed to chat up a girl without her family's permission. Stealing her heart makes her magic incline towards you. That's what's supposed to happen at the bonding ceremony.” Marcus shrugged, more comfortable in a borrowed body near his height and build. He wasn't sure about the beard but he could put up with it for an hour. “Mothers marry into the family so they know how to get the best bargain for their loyalty.”

“So I should be surly and expensive.” She smirked.

“You're expensive already. Sacred Twenty-Eight and with enough new blood your kids won't be their own cousins.” He sighed. “I really should want to marry you.”

“But you don't.” Hermione didn't take offence at his lack of interest. Whether or not his relationship with Oliver lasted, she hadn't been aware of any connection between the two previously, she and Flint didn't have much in common. “You could adopt or use a surrogate if you need a biological child.”

“Surrogate?” Marcus reckoned if given the choice between a childless marriage or an illegitimate blood heir, his parents would go for the heir. He'd never hear the end of it but if his son's mother was pure-blood then maybe that'd be enough to avoid having to make a witch permanently miserable as his wife.

“Muggles have them to help infertile or homosexual couples. Some are donors too, so the child they carry is biologically theirs but not always.” She paused to parley human biology into green magic. “You take seed from a wizard and a witch, combine the essences but plant the energy in a second
“Witch’s sacred cradle.”

“Muggles can do that?” He didn't laugh in her face because Rosier was clever and Rosiers were vengeful. “I'm not saying I don't believe you but I don't want any child of mine touched by a Mudblood.”

Hermione stopped short of saying a Muggle-born Healer would probably understand the process of in-vitro fertilisation and might have the skills to do the procedure either medically or magically. Flint wasn't going to like that he'd have to talk to someone who didn't refer to sperm as 'generative fluid', and her sympathy for him had withered at his casual slur.

They drank in silence, with Flint trying to pretend he wasn't watching the door. He'd told Wood to look for two people wearing blue pointed hats. They couldn't be more descriptive as they hadn't known whose hair they'd use for the Polyjuice. Once they'd got to the pub, he'd booked a room and Rosier had said she'd run errands. Disguised no one was likely to bother her.

Oliver Wood sauntered in not quite half an hour after they'd arrived, looking flushed and grass-stained. He ordered a beer at the bar so he could linger in scanning the crowd then brought his drink to the table of two wizards he'd never met before. One shifted over quickly so he could share the bench. He inspected the two but couldn't find any flaws in the change. No melted waxen skin or odd lumps of flesh.

“Where'd you get the potion?” Oliver hadn't taken NEWT Potions and knew Marcus hadn't either. He wasn't keen on them using a bodgy brew whipped up by one of Marcus's Quidditch cronies, most of whom were complete duffers.

“Rosier made it. She's a young Circe.” Marcus meant it as a compliment as well as an endorsement. He'd heard the doubt in Wood's tone and didn't like the suggestion that he'd quaff any old philtre. “She's willing to keep making it so unless you want to beg off meeting, keep civil.”

“I don't want to stop seeing you.” The Scottish wizard said, stung. He would've shot back with something cutting about the Flints being the cause of all this skulking about but he caught his tongue. Something in the way Marcus was holding himself, too tense, too wary, made him wonder if the Slytherin expected him to break it off. “I wasn't just using you to scratch an itch, Marcus.”

“Yeah.” Flint said into his Firewhiskey. Hermione looked at him. He shot her a glare. “Why don't you go do whatever until we have to head back for dinner?” He was defensive now, uncomfortable that his feelings had been bloody obvious. All Wood's fault for looking so good. His mouth was so damn kissable.

Hermione made her exit hiding a smile. He might be a thuggish jock but Flint had such a crush. She couldn't remember Oliver ever mentioning his boyfriend, though they hadn't spoken much first time around. The age difference and the Quidditch obsession meant they hadn't been friends. He'd come back for the Battle but Flint hadn't. A lot could happen in four years.

Once she was out of the pub, she removed the distinctive hat and strolled until she found an deserted alley. It smelled of impromptu pissoir. Hermione grimaced, checked to see she was unobserved then cast a scouring charm. With the source gone the smell abated somewhat. Magic was wonderful.

“Moppet, can you hear me?” She asked the brickwork, interested to see if the Polyjuice interfered with the house elf's ability to find her.

“Miss is all beary.” The little creature remarked after appearing barely a minute later.
“In several senses, yes.” Hermione agreed, making note that the link between her and her friend seemed to be based off her magical signature not appearance. “Can you feel Hermione Granger? Crookshanks felt something, I'm sure. He didn't like it.”

“You isn't the other Miss, Miss.” Moppet answered after staring at nothing for a moment. “Like twins. Like but not like.”

“I don't envy her what she has yet to face.” She rubbed her left hip as it gave a twinge. The Muggle seeming she had borrowed had terrible posture. Possibly an office worker or cab driver. “Do you think it's safe to go to Hogwarts? I have a few hours while Flint and Oliver... talk.”

“Hogwarts is very busy. All sorts of changing going on.” The house elf considered then shook her head. “There is wards to keep away the reporter people. We don't have enough sneaky.”

“Pity.” Hermione didn't argue. She and Moppet had snuck in and out of the Castle enough she was perfectly willing to accept her judgement call. “Well, let's go to Diagon Alley. I want to see if I can find a wand of the same type as the one I got from Ollivander. I want to be prepared if Professor Snape or anyone else disarms me.”

Although she had practised with other wands from the Lost Wands, the more advanced the spells became the more she needed to have an attuned wand. Using someone else's was frustrating and exhausting. Sometimes the wand cooperated but you could never rely on compliance. Bellatrix's walnut had been a filthy, hateful thing to use.

Moppet popped them to the familiar alcove behind the bank though this time Hermione didn't bother with Gringotts. She'd deal with that problem when she came of age. She'd have to deal with a lot of problems once she was legally adult but considering she turned seventeen only a few weeks before she had to endure the Carrows at Hogwarts, Hermione wasn't courting trouble. It seemed intent on wooing her regardless.

Jimmy Kiddell's Wonderful Wands was lacklustre. He had polished shelves and white velvet cushions and a plethora of wands. The majority were in fashionable woods such as apple or cypress; wands for the charismatic or for heroes. Popular accessories for the witch or wizard who liked the esteem over function. He didn't carry any examples in hawthorn, which while good for Healers was difficult to master and often contradictory.

The Wand Showroom wasn't a store per se. Various examples of wands from foreign wandmakers were displayed to allow the connoisseur to make inquiries. There were no prices shown and when Hermione asked about the cost, the well-dressed clerk suggested she take her custom elsewhere as his establishment was for specialists and collectors. Who were presumably wealthy enough not to have to ask.

Wands by Gregorovitch was in Carkitt Market though around the corner and along a bit from the jellied eels shop where Moppet had opted to remain as walking around invisible got you stepped on. Hermione jostled her way through the crowd, thankful for the Polyjuice. Many of the shops had sales on to clear old stock before new shipments came in for the start of the school year. She picked up a good deal on a set of cold forged iron knives for potion making on her way.

The purple fronted shop lacked the shabby genteel aura of Ollivander's. The wands were ranked vertically by wood and horizontally by core. Hermione found hawthorn then worked along until she found hair, banshee. She took the box to the counter, the bored clerk watched her try the wand then charged her according to the wood and core. He didn't ask any questions and she left feeling as though she had bought a pair of shoes or a toaster. Disappointingly mundane.
Moppet took them back to Glasgow for more shopping. Hermione had quite a list, which involved trekking around the small market poking in stalls for what she wanted. She could have got everything in Diagon Alley except Flint was bound to ask how she had got to London. There was a lot she could order by owl but she wasn't going to make a bird haul a silver cauldron all the way to Winchester.

Certainly they could have gone together disguised though she was betting Flint would be less interested in checking her receipts item by item after the fact than he would standing in an apothecary as she bought scorpion venom by the firkin.

“Will Miss be coming back to the Castle before term?” Moppet asked, loitering on a bench as the witch shrunk or lightened her purchases. Hermione planned to try casting an Extension Charm this summer, hopeful that Cathal had matured enough to sustain the fiddly spell. She was getting tired of having to shuffle and re-shrink objects. Some potion ingredients didn't react well to having their form changed so she was still left with enough bags to look overburdened.

“Fingers crossed, I won't need to.” Hermione rolled her shoulders. A day spent as someone else was making her itch. “Flint's going to all the matches of the World Cup. He invited me. His family booked boxes for the semis and finals years ago.” She had politely declined and would be left in the custody of Madam Bulstrode, who was chaperoning the nonconformists. Leaving their guest at home in the care of the house elves was apparently simply not done.

“Moppet misses Miss.” Moppet confessed, hopping up to take the bags Hermione passed her. To the house elf's delight, they had enough sneaky for Moppet to take the dangerous secret special supplies to Miss's laboratory.

“I miss you too.” She sighed. “If we weren't friends, I think I'd go mad. No one else understands, except the Voice and I get the impression it thinks I'm a bit of a whinger.”

“When we are over and done, Moppet would like to be Miss's elf.” The statement was quiet and it would be so easy to just give a flippant 'of course'. Hermione didn't because she was conscious of having badly bungled her efforts with SPEW, of being well-intentioned but clueless.

“I don't know what is going to happen and I can't make promises for my other self.” Hermione wished she could be sure about something. The future was a nebulous mass of conjecture and threat. “If I am me as I am now, then absolutely yes. We're partners.”

The house elf hugged the witch then disappeared back to Hogwarts with the most suspicious of Hermione's stockpile. For her part, the witch stared at the space where Moppet had been. An aching loneliness gnawed at her. It was worse in the Polyjuice where she couldn't even be her ersatz self. At least she was fed, warm, and relatively safe, she reminded herself doggedly. The tent in the Forest of Dean was still worse. Though even then at the most wretched, she hadn't been as alone as she was now.
Hermione went back to the pub because that was what they had arranged. She put on her blue pointy hat and ordered a gillywater then sat at a table near the stairs so Flint and Wood would see her. Pulling out her notebook, she stared at it for five minutes before putting it away again. Constructive thought wasn't going to happen for a while. She wanted to knee the world in the groin.

The Gryffindor trooped downstairs about twenty minutes later,scrubbed up to make a good show of not having just been ravished. He swung himself onto the bench opposite her and signalled to the barmaid for a drink. He propped his elbows on the table, looking at Rosier over his laced fingers. Oliver didn't want to spoil his good mood but there was question he'd like answered.

“How did you know about Harry? About his Muggles?” Her remark traducing Professor McGonagall had niggled at him. He hadn't noticed anything wrong until he'd seen his Seeker with his shirt off and when he'd asked, Harry had shut him down. Asking Fred and George to ask Ron hadn't got very far either.

“Little tells. He flinches at loud voices, and he doesn't like the attention. It makes him defensive.” Hermione made up what she thought was a reasonable explanation. Oliver's expression softened unexpectedly but he didn't say anything, just nodded. The barmaid arrived with his drink. He thanked her and took a long pull of his butterbeer.

“I appreciate you helping us.” Wood glanced to the stairs where Marcus was now making his appearance freshly Polyjuiced again. They'd talked until the first dose had worn off. About the World Cup because serious talk about relationships meant both of them having to discuss more obstacles than they wanted to acknowledge.

“I'm being paid.” She said crisply, not wanting Oliver to be grateful she wasn't a blackmailing prat. He gave her an amused look, hiding his smile in his drink. Hermione held her tongue rather than defend herself further. Whatever he had expected of a Slytherin, there was no way she would have used their relationship against them.

She continued to facilitate the wizards' clandestine meetings through the summer. Neither elder Flint commented upon her occupation of the potions laboratory though Gerard did grill her on the sources and varietals of the flora she was using. He warned her brusquely not to take any samples from his greenhouses then resumed ignoring her. The Head of the House of Flint put an elf permanently on watch in the gardens lest his houseguest indulge in unauthorised pruning.

Marcus invited various of his friends over to play Quidditch or loaf about the extensive lawns. His parents didn't take much interest in his socialising so long as his guests were quality. Gerard gave his son a public telling off for allowing Pericles Smethwyck to bring his half-blood fiancee. Pericles's father had not consented to the match as the girl was the daughter of two Muggle-borns, and the Flints were obliged to support the Smethwycks' disapproval. Marcus didn't give a damn about the witch but he did resent being scolded like a child in front of his friends. There was a lot of shouting over the next week.

During the pandemonium, Hermione kept to her room or the lab. She practised casting with two wands, at which she was mortifyingly bad. Partly the problem was hand-eye coordination akin to patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. Partly it was the speed at which Cathal's reserves depleted when doubling the energy expenditure. Mostly it was simply very difficult to concentrate on two things at once. Her aim was atrocious and she hexed her own shoes so often one of them growled at her.
She wrote her essay on the Via Speculo for Professor Snape and practised the spell until the mirrors she'd bought in Glasgow were opaque, just in case he called on her to demonstrate. Stepping sideways through the looking glass wasn't as unpleasant as travelling by Portkey but left a metallic taste in the mouth that persisted for hours. The main problem was the range and the awkwardness of climbing out of a mounted mirror. Not an elegant way to travel if one had to clamber over the bathroom sink.

The days of the Cup qualifying matches were the dullest. Morphia Bulstrode née Hobday was the second wife of the much older Baldwin, who had divorced his first wife after their only son had proved to be a Squib. The Hobdays were an old family but very much half-blooded and Morphia was touchy about her lack of a pedigree. She reminded Hermione of Hyacinth Bucket. Pronounced 'Bouquet', dear.

Madam Bulstrode had volunteered to mind the Quidditch disinterested children of her social betters so she could use the occasions to demonstrate how refined she was. She had invited her neighbours and peers to join her in elegant tea parties while her charges did genteel things within view. Adding lustre to Morphia Bulstrode's reputation kept Hermione from anything more constructive than reading, which her hostess periodically but frequently interrupted with idle inquiries. Only habit of not being outright rude stopped Hermione from Disillusioning herself to hide in the orangery.

The day of the second semi-final, Ireland versus Peru, was enlivened by a spectacular argument between Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, which caused the latter's embarrassed mother to banish the girls to the nursery as they were behaving like children. Hermione took advantage of the disruption to slip away into the library. She wasn't the only one.

“Rosier.” Theodore Nott greeted her tersely as she entered the reading room. He had hoped he could pass his seclusion uninterrupted.

“Nott.” Hermione gave him a nod, sat down in one of the velvet armchairs and opened her book, willing to ignore him if he reciprocated. They read in companionable silence until a bell chimed for dinner, at which Nott made a derisive noise. When she glanced up at him, he shook his head.

“If we were family, she could be so impersonal as to summon us with a bell. The point being for us all to dine together rather than to dine.” He clarified solely because like him Rosier didn't have a mother to arbit etiquette. His father rarely remembered to eat at a civilised hour so standing custom at Nott Hall was to take dinner when the elves delivered it. “Otherwise she should send an elf or gather us herself before the meal begins.”

“Maybe the elves haven't shifted allegiance to her?” Hermione suggested. Divorce in the wizarding world was incredibly complicated as bonding magic was intricate even before adding property, elves, blood rituals, trust vaults, dowers and dowries, and emotions.

“Perhaps.” Theo considered it. Millicent was their age but her little brother Amalric, the Bulstrode name heir, was only nine. The Squib son had been disinherited and quietly pensioned off somewhere but as he was of age it was possible the house elves still considered his mother the lady of the manor. “Best not to ask.”

“Wasn't planning to.” She didn't have much against Bulstrode this time around and holding a grudge about a Second Year headlock was petty. Hermione sympathised more with the girl now she'd experienced the machinations of Slytherin House herself. As a half-blood, Millicent was well down the pecking order. “Speaking of asking.” He began as they left the library to answer the bell. Walking gave him more opportunity for a hasty exit in case of awkwardness. “There's to be a Yule Ball this year at
Hogwarts. Draco told me. His father has the Minister's ear and there will be some sort of event at the school. Hence the dance.”

“Would you like to go with me?” Hermione asked after Nott paused to gulp a breath. He had the same habit as she did of babbling when nervous.

“I thought it would be suitable.” Theo said then grimaced at himself. “We can't not go, not as Sacred Twenty-Eight.” Showing up to parties because not attending would give the entirety of magical Britain the impression they were snubbing the event was one of his least liked social obligations. “Draco's mother will expect him to ask you, which would be unpleasant for all involved.”

“I'd dislike him much less if he didn't assume he'll get his own way in absolutely everything.” She said acidly, feeling she should give some sort of explanation for loathing the Ferret. From Theo's speedily quashed smile, Hermione got the impression he agreed with her. “Will you asking me get him in trouble with his parents? I can live without more excitement from that quarter.”

“If you went with someone of lower standing, there would be so many owls of disapproval.” Narcissa Malfoy would never be so gauche as to send a Howler but Draco would be left in no doubt he was in the dungeons. “I'm an acceptable substitute.”

“There's no need to offer yourself as sacrifice.” Hermione had planned to skip the Ball to continue surveying the depths of Hogwarts. She’d have to ask Flint to confirm if not going would be a massive political statement. “If you'd rather go with someone else, I can go alone.”

“No.” Theo assured hastily. “I'd be honoured. I'm not asking as a sop.” He stopped, horrified he might cause her to burst into tears like Daphne or have a snit like Pansy. To his relief, Cathal showed no sign of hurt feelings. She was looking at him patiently. He relaxed a little. “I really couldn't bear to go with anyone else. I don't like crowds or loud noises or emotional scenes.”

“It's a Ball. There'll be all three.” She pointed out.

“I know.” He said glumly.

“Cheer up, young man. It can't be as bad as all that.” The voice came from an elderly witch Hermione was surprised to recognise. She couldn't recall her name until a white haired wizard in crisp navy blue robes spoke. He had been admiring a portrait then hastened to catch up to his wife and the youngsters.

“Though I expect the claret rather will be.” The cut glass accent and round vowels, first heard in the Leaky Cauldron then at length in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement brought their names back to Hermione; Beatrix and Eustace Radnott.

“Sir, ma'am, I believe we've met before.” Hermione ventured. She'd sent a thank you letter but she hadn't heard anything further. “You helped me when I was taken into custody.”

“Ah, yes, Miss Rosier.” Eustace blinked at the girl for a moment. She'd certainly grown, and looked much better outfitted in a nice gown in that bluish-green seamstresses insisted on calling ridiculous names. “Bad business. We sent a very stern owl to the Ministry, not that it did any good.”

“Never does.” Theo observed, Auror raids having been a feature of his home life. As a child, he had hidden under his bed while strangers searched his rooms for Dark artefacts. Now he followed them as they rummaged, studying their spells and asking questions until they invariably escorted him back to his father.

“You are too young to be cynical, Theodore.” Beatrix chided. She looked from gangling teenage
wizard to gangling teenage witch, both of whom moved as though arguing with their bodies. Such a
difficult age. When she had been that young, a century ago, her mother had made her carry tiny cups
of tea endlessly around their home until she could walk without spilling them. Thankfully there were
better ways now. “I trust you have been keeping up with your dance lessons.”

Silence met her comment.

Which was how Hermione found herself in a white gown in the long gallery of a Jacobean grange
waltzing with a Death Eater’s son. Nott could be compelled to ‘one, two, three’ because the Radnotts
were a cadet branch of his family, Beatrix had been a confidante of both his grandmothers, and his
father had belatedly discovered Theo had been paying off his Italian dancing tutor to give him
language lessons instead.

Eustace played the piano while Beatrix instructed in between breaks to reminisce about the Grand
Balls of their youth in Trier and Cadiz, bastions of the oldest pure-blood families in Western Europe.
There had been weather change spells for endless halcyon days, dancing under the night sky lit with
fireflies, Abraxan races, and sailing on the rivers in boats made of conjured ice. It had been an idyll
until the Muggle Great War.

Hermione listened fascinated as the Radnotts talked about Zeppelin raids, of exhausted sleepless
nights maintaining wards as bombs dropped on neighbouring houses, of the fear of discovery in a
world gone mad. She had read about wizarding history but hadn't heard anything of this period first
hand. For most of the parents of her friends, it had been Grindelwald who had begun the descent.
Before him, magical life had stretched unaltered all the way back to the Statute of Secrecy.

Hermione badly wanted to ask the Radnotts' opinion of Voldemort but held back given her present
company. Nott hadn't been Marked. Malfoy was the only one selected from their class before
graduation. The Slytherin boys, minus the suave and elusive Zabini, would have inevitably been
recruited had the war dragged on. Parkinson and Greengrass might well have joined, though it took
particular fanaticism for a young witch to rise though the ranks instead of doing their duty by
providing heirs.

Summer passed in fits and starts. The dancing lessons continued until she and Nott could swirl each
other across the parquetry without treading on feet, skirts, or Beatrix’s crup Florence as the puppy
tried to eat their shoelaces. Astaire and Rogers they were not but they would at least look competent
for the formal dance part of the Yule Ball.

The laboratory in Flint Manor was more than large enough for all the projects Hermione wanted to
attempt and Marcus kept throwing Galleons at her. She saw him at odd hours, in between World
Cup matches or training with Falmouth, whereat they would swap empty potion vials for full, chat,
then go about their separate concerns. As a prelude to prospective married life, it was dully
comfortable.

Hermione received her book list, opened, from Madam Flint and encountered another quirk of pure-
blood etiquette. While she could receive mail at Flint Manor, her chaperone had right to read it.
Outgoing letters were not similarly scrutinised as a witch was presumed to be able to police her own
conduct. It was the responsibility of the chaperone or the head of the house to ensure their charge
was not troubled by the scandalous blandishments of the unworthy, according to a book on
comportment Hermione had dug up to prime her for further encounters with the ridiculous.

Pure-blood society was an odd amalgam of old pagan traditions, egalitarian gender views due to the
emancipating power of magic, cosmopolitan internationalism, and the worst sort of elitist eugenics.
Hermione could rejoice that as a witch she could achieve a Mistressship in any field and become
Supreme Mugwump irrespective of her sex. At least Cathal Rosier could. Hermione Granger would
find that success far harder to achieve.

“You'll need some foolish robes.” Eglantine Flint had attended exactly four balls during her lifetime and considered that three too many. As a Sacred Twenty-Eight family, the Flints were invited to all manner of ridiculous frivolity. Gerard went as an unescorted wizard could spend his time drinking brandy or playing cards after one obligatory turn on the dance floor. If she went, she would be forced to endure the nattering of her peers, be seen in the ballroom for hours, and make inane conversation with people she disliked.

“It's one night. I'll wear the white gown you bought me.” Hermione liked the soft dress though she looked a bit Princess Leia in it. The scant thought she had given the Yule Ball had been to braid Cathal's long hair and transfigure her shoes. Done.

“Would that you could.” Eglantine found herself reluctantly approving of Miss Rosier's good sense, her friendship with the difficult Marcus notwithstanding. “But you've gone to lessons and dined at the Bulstrodes in that gown. A ball requires dress robes that have not been shown in society before. You can wear them again at lesser events but Morgana forfend anyone not be astonished by your trumpery frock.”

“May I borrow one of yours?” She had enjoyed shopping with her mother for her Yule ballgown. They'd made a day of it and had afternoon tea at the Georgian like Edwardian ladies. Hermione didn't want to revisit that experience.

“You are in Slytherin House.” Madam Flint remarked sourly. “How likely is it one of your dorm-mates will cast a counter-spell on your gown?”

“Quite.” Hermione conceded. There had been several incidents since her Year had been taught Finite Incantatem. No one had thus far managed to alter her secondhand clothes but there had been some disquieting ripplings. Parkinson would certainly assume she had transfigured her dress robes and probably try something.

She had expected Madam Flint to call upon her seamstress again. She was wrong. Getting a posh frock morphed from a simple fitting into a major expedition. Firstly they went to Gringotts to draw a lien against Cathal's trust vault to establish the fiction she was paying for the purchase herself as dress robes could also be interpreted as a wedding gown. Then Millicent Bulstrode, Daphne Greengrass, and Pansy Parkinson were invited to join them. Tracey Davis didn't merit an owl as she as a half-blood unconnected to a Sacred Twenty-Eight family.

The three Slytherins, their mothers and in Daphne's case her younger sister Astoria because Madam Greengrass never let her daughters out of her sight, joined them at Flint Manor for luncheon. Marcus, forewarned of the invasion by Hermione, had snuck out early lest he be press-ganged as an escort. After her guests finished their meal, Eglantine found a convenient headache and with barely feigned regret withdrew from the excursion. Thus Hermione could spend Flint money without any suggestion of an understanding between herself and the heir of the House.

This trip was nothing like the one she had enjoyed with her mother. Madam Flint had booked a private robing room at Twilfitt and Tattings and sent along several Flint elves as attendants. The couturiers fell over themselves to show the young witches the finest fabrics and trimmings, all very jeune fille and appropriate of course. It took hours.

The worst of Pansy's viper tongue was curtailed by the presence of her mother, whose critical eye picked flaw with everything. Second Year Astoria wasn't going to the Yule Ball and sulked the entire afternoon despite Daphne's efforts to involve her in choosing a gown. Millicent stoically endured her mother's insistence on her wearing the very latest in fashions, none of which suited her.
Hermione picked a gunmetal satin for a simple silhouette with a drop shoulder and long sleeves, mostly so she could carry her wands in wrist sheaths. She wasn't paranormically anticipating trouble at the Ball but with three Death Eaters in attendance she wasn't going unarmed. Nor was she willing to hike her skirt to retrieve her wand from a thigh sheath. Though the idea of it did keep her amused through Parkinson et fille arguing about sequins.

While Daphne was being fitted in lovely sky blue chiffon, Hermione ducked out to the powder room for a much needed break. She walked in on Millicent downing a potion. The old-socks-in-a-sewer scent of valerian was strong enough to overpower the pot-pourri. Bulstrode glared and dropped the vial into the charmed waste basket, which vanished its contents instantly. She shouldered her way passed Hermione, who wondered how strong that Calming Draught was and how much she had taken.

“Moppet, are you listening?” The witch asked in the privacy of a cubicle after casting a Muffliato. She had to sit down from the rush of dizziness but the white noise murmur in the background indicated the charm was functional. The house elf appeared on the other side of the door, visible by her tiny feet. Hermione let her into the stall. “So you can hear me even with the anti-eavesdropping spell?”

“Moppet doesn't know the charm Miss used but yes.” Moppet tugged her left ear pensively wondering what words to use to help her friend understand. “Miss is Moppet's Miss. I can always hear you when you call.” That was right and reassuring. A big, solid always. “Sometimes Miss sounds far away or underwatery or other words so sometimes it's slow for Moppet to find Miss.”

“I don't know enough about house elves.” Hermione added that research to a very long list. “I just wanted to check in.” She gestured at the tiled shrine to hygiene. “Apparently pure-blood witches really don't get out much.”

“If Miss is outside wards today, Moppet could follow Miss.” Moppet suggested. She liked going errands with her witch.

“I've been roped into spending the afternoon dress shopping with my Housemates. I'd like to spare you that delight.” She heard herself complain and shook her head. “I don't know why I'm bitching. I've had much worse from Parkinson at school. I actually feel sorry for her and Bulstrode. Their mothers are harpies.”

“Is that why Miss is hiding in the lavatory?” The house elf inquired with an air of tact as though she wished to avoid suggesting her friend was being a bit odd.

“Either here or in the changing room and that has mirrors.” Looking at herself as Cathal Rosier had become ordinary if not easier, at least until the significant changes of puberty. Quite significant in Cathal's case. She was already several inches taller than Hermione, enough for Hermione to notice the ease of high shelves. It was very disconcerting to have her body not change as she had remembered it changing. Her mental image of herself was growing more and more dismorphic. “I'm just having a bad day, Moppet. It's alright.”

When the house elf gave her a hug, Hermione felt wretched self-pitying tears well up. She berated herself. There were many, many people enduring miserable lives because their bodies did not match their minds. She at least had a reason and a continuum; she had been reborn. This was a marvellous experience she should treasure or at the very least regard as an unique educational opportunity. Having a fit of the vapours because a seamstress had made an off-hand remark about her figure was foolish and immature.

Some snivelling happened before the effects of a cuddle and a stern mental monologue got Hermione
back to a state of equanimity. All she was doing was buying a damn dress with no one interfering, pouting, or insisting on bling. It'd all be done in a couple of hours then she could go back to Flint Manor and pestle the daylights out of some potion ingredients.
Hermione spent three days together at the end of August cleaning up the potion laboratory at Flint Manor. She bottled all her projects then scoured everything, by hand if necessary. The work helped her get into the proper frame of mind for another year of school. Her first go at Fourth Year had been fraught with worry for Harry and being Piggy in the Middle during his discord with Ron. This time around she could ignore all that and concentrate on her own work. The prospect did not particularly cheer her.

On the first of September, Madam Flint with Hermione took the Floo to the upper floor of a well-appointed house in London. The rooms had been opened up, making one large space around the staircase for arrivals. Eglantine levitated her guest's luggage downstairs into a large parlour to add to a mountainous but neat pile in the corner of the room.

“Well, that's that.” A grandfather clock with an ornate silver face began to chime ten and Madam Flint nodded at it. She didn't hold with being fashionably or any other sort of late. “Gambol and her obsession with Muggle knick-knackery means we have to run the gauntlet.” Her thin mouth compressed further. “Far better to take a carpet. No trouble with baggage that way and you could picnic en route.”

“Wouldn't Flooing to Hogsmeade be more efficient? Everyone could be assigned a time and a hearth to stagger arrivals.” Hermione liked the train ride to Hogwarts. It was almost a transitive ritual rather than transport. But she was Muggle-born and steam engines were antiquated. Some mental gymnastics were required for her to reverse perspective to see the Express as an inconvenient modern intrusion.

“That would require people to be punctual, which alas they never are.” Eglantine was quite happy to shut the doors on guests who failed to arrive within a reasonable degree of her invitation. If she wrote 'dine at eight' she meant eight. She did not mean 'straggle in at quarter past nine'. “Come along. I will walk you to the platform. It's not far.”

“No need to trouble yourself.” Narcissa Malfoy, very New Look Dior in a tailored cream coat and dark skirt, descended the stairs. Draco in a black turtleneck and suit followed like a smirking shadow.

“Miss Rosier can accompany us. She is my ward as I am sure you are aware.”

“I don't give a fig.” Madam Flint looked down her nose at the shorter, slighter, younger witch. “As you seem incapable of providing the child a decent welcome, I thought it best I should intervene.”

“Tradition and loyalty, Narcissa.” Madam Flint didn't smile. She didn't need to pretend to be affable with the Malfoys, who were Norman blow-ins. The Blacks were an Ancient family like the Flints and the Bulstrodes, so long established in the British Isles that their exact origin was lost to history, but given their collapse Eglantine felt unfettered with any need for courtesy.

“You hid.” Narcissa did not specify to what she was referring for it was an old, well-trodden
“You grovelled.” Eglantine retorted. She had known her duty, and had been vindicated after the end of the Prewetts and the functional extinction of the Blacks as well as the English branches of the Rosiers, Lestranges, and Averys. “Come along, Miss Rosier. You do not want to be late for the train.”

Hermione walked out of the house with Madam Flint, heading down the street lined on one side with buff brick Georgian terrace houses and on the other with a modern storage warehouse. They crossed Euston Road to join the throng entering Kings Cross St Pancras station, amidst the crowd but apart due to the Muggle-Repelling charms Eglantine cast. She strode to the entrance of Platform 9 ¾, walking through without a pause.

Several other pure-bloodes, all unencumbered by luggage, were being bade farewell by their parents or chaperones. Anyone who was quality used the Belgrove House Floo and the resident house elves as their porters. Madam Flint exchanged nods of acknowledgement as she walked Cathal to the end of the train where the Slytherins traditionally sat away from the smuts and noise.

“You may visit Flint Manor over the summer if you wish. Merlin knows my son will probably forget to invite you so I will do so now.” Madam Flint said brusquely. The Rosier girl had been no trouble and had kept Marcus from sulking or brooding. Privately Eglantine doubted he could keep in the young witch's good books long enough to secure a betrothal when she came of age. However for as long as the girl wanted to spite the Malfoys, she was delighted to assist.

Madam Flint waved away Hermione's thanks and marched off, leaving her to board alone. The last few carriages in the Express were open booths good for chatting or last minute school work but not privacy. She moved further up the train, slipping into the first empty compartment. Sitting down, Hermione took a deep breath.

The Triwizard Tournament would be much easier to ignore knowing Harry wasn't going to die in front of her. She could put the actual Tasks out of her mind and probably wouldn't even attend if she could avoid it. The Yule Ball was settled. She didn't know Nott well other than as the unfortunate fourth Death Eater son after the Department of Mysteries. He was a quiet loner, who seemed to have no more plans for her person than as a caste-worthy dance partner.

Which left the faux Moody as her only serious hurdle this year. Hermione had to pretend she didn't know he was the bastard behind putting Harry's name in the Goblet or that he wasn't the callous, murderous arsehole who helped torture Neville's parents. Cathal had to go to lessons with the man who had murdered her father.

The magical world didn't have a concept for judicial homicide. When Aurors were given leave to use Unforgivables, it was assumed the people they used them on were deserving of it. The same miscarriage of justice that saw Sirius Black incarcerated without trial also whitewashed deaths in custody and deaths while resisting arrest. The presumption of innocence was not something over which the Ministry greatly troubled itself.

Hermione pulled out Unfogging the Future, a journal, and a fountain pen to give herself something else to stew about. Divination thus far was as dire as she had expected it to be. There were glimmerings of potential in the large scale predictive rites, if applied methodically and scientifically. Crystal gazing did in fact work, again with caveats. You needed to be in a trance state with an orb attuned to you. The best results happened when the gazer then used a Pensieve to view the visions more critically. Staring at a foggy glass ball in a stuffy classroom was not likely to garner anything more than a crick in the neck.
She wasn't a Seer. Hermione was entirely okay with that. There were genuine precognitives in the world and despite her initial disdain for the discipline, she had to admit it wasn't all fakery and cold reading. However, the only thing anyone could predict from her dream diary was an over indulgence in television assuming any readers realised she was plagiarising vintage Star Trek and Doctor Who episodes half remembered from summer re-runs.

Hermione was debating with herself whether she could work in the quote ‘400 quatloos on the newcomer’ so she could include some interesting references to nonsense doggerel she'd found in medieval ritual casting, when Tracey Davis slid open the door inviting herself into the compartment. The brunette witch sat down tidily opposite her, tucking her skirt under her knees.

“We don't talk much.” The precise girl began quickly. “You don't talk much to anyone so I won't take up your time.” She took a breath, which was when Hermione realised how upset Davis was. Her hazel eyes glittered from more than the ocular correction charms bought for her for over the summer. “Did you invite everyone but me to a lavish outing to buy dress robes?”

“Technically, no.” Hermione put her journal down so she'd look like she was paying attention. She was, actually, but mostly on how neat Davis was. Every hair in place, collar starched, and socks pull up to the knee. Obsessive perhaps. She'd not noticed the first time around. “Madam Flint invited Parkinson, Bulstrode, and Greengrass, with their mothers.”

“And the lavish outing?” Davis asked, spine very straight.

“Tea in a private suite in Twilfitt and Tattings. The cucumber sandwiches were dry.” She added the last bit to see if she could crack her dorm-mate's indurate face. There was a little twitch of her mouth, more an easing of tension than a smile. Hermione reopened her notebook and guessed that Parkinson had been boasting about the excursion. The pug-faced bitch liked to twist the knife. “It was a long, dull day I am not anxious to repeat.”

“Thank you, Rosier.” The half-blood tugged her cuffs down in a gesture very like their Head of House and took her leave, shutting the door quietly behind her. Hermione didn't look up until she was sure Davis was gone. She sympathised with the girl. Having to endure the sneers of the pure-bloods without any august lineage to hide behind would be Hell. The exclusion of Muggle-borns from Slytherin turned the ordinary half-bloods, the bulk of the population, into the underclass ensuring an elitist hegemony.

In short, Slytherin devolved into a collection of inbred snobs selected for their ancestors almost as much as their innate traits. Crabbe and Goyle had less cunning and ambition than piglets. Hermione pulled out a different journal, her notes for Muggle Studies, and jotted down some thoughts on population dynamics and the role of the pariah. She'd leave out the endorsement of exogamy as Cathal was Sacred Twenty-Eight, the purest of the pure.

* 

The Sorting happened. The arrival of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrangs happened. The introduction of the Goblet of Fire happened. Alastor Moody's late-coming caused a low-grade stir among the green ranks hastily quelled. Back in the Slytherin Common Room, more than one of the older Years swore. Their Head of House did not leave them long to stew.

Snape's speech was well-crafted. Hermione was tempted to take notes. He began with an innocuous ‘as you are aware’ then segued smoothly into the lowering of the boom. He never raised his voice but he left the Slytherins in no doubt as to the severity of the punishments they would face if they attempted private vengeance on the Auror who had sent so many of their relatives to Azkaban. He looked directly at her when he said there would be no collection of blood debts.
The first day of term was fortunately a Friday, giving her a week before double Defence Against the Dark Arts. Very little study was actually done in between gossip and introductions. After class, the Library was chock-full of students looking up language charms. Madam Pince did not seem amused at the unusual popularity of her dominion. Hermione opted to read outdoors.

It was after dinner when she was heading up to the Astronomy Tower to get some early star sights when she was stopped by a tall Durmstrang boy. He bowed in that stiff-backed away that made them look hinged at the hip. The furred uniform turned him into a well tailored Viking, though Hermione corrected herself with a reminder there were no such people as Vikings. Miscellaneous restless Norse would be Vikings, someone who goes on a sea journey, but that wasn't their ethnicity or culture.

“You are Miss Cathal Rosier?” He asked once he had again reached the vertical.

“Yes.” Hermione was reassured she still felt like she was lying.

“I am Bastian Reinhard Max.” He introduced himself then stood there as she stared at him. Hermione was frantically rummaging through what she could recall of the Max family tree. Cathal's mother Derica was one of three, the eldest child ahead of a brother and sister. There were some cousins too. Shite, what was her uncle's name?

“Gustav's son?” She held back a sigh of relief when he gave her a crisp nod. Hermione hadn't given the distaff side of Cathal's pedigree much investigation. It was in the Big Box of Later, put off until she came of age.

“Können wir uns auf Deutsch unterhalten?” Bastian asked and she did a rough bit of translation in her head.

“I'm sorry. I have some German but Mother preferred I spoke English.” Hopefully that would cover her less-than-fluent command of the language. She'd been working on it but she'd been working on so many other things too.

“Oh, I am sorry.” He paused, obviously formulating a question. Hermione waited without impatience. Viktor had told her all the candidates selected to spend the school year at Hogwarts spoke some English though the degree of fluency varied greatly. “Our family sends letters but has no reply. My father has worries of you.”

“I expect your owls go to the Malfoys. They don't forward my post.” Hermione blithely passed the blame. “I am well, though, and pleased to meet you.”

Bastian grinned and they got to chatting in the diffident way relatives have when they unexpectedly meet; shades of awkward family reunions with the Muggle cousins making Hermione smile. They walked together through Hogwarts with her giving him a tour and heads-up about trick steps on the staircases, Peeves, and the idiosyncrasies of a millennium old castle. It was almost curfew when he escorted her to the Slytherin dungeon, bowed, and marched away looking the epitome of a seidrmann.

“Didn't take you long.” Parkinson snidely remarked later in their dorm. “You think if you grab one early he'll be obliged to take you to the Ball?”

“No.” Hermione answered shortly, employing the tried taciturn method. She got changed in the bathroom, washed up then tucked herself into bed with a book. Parkinson and Greengrass were having a poniard conversation about their dresses and the jewellery their mothers were sending from home for them to wear. Davis was ignoring them grimly and Bulstrode, who hated her dress robes, had already drawn her curtains.
“Don't you think it best to use family pieces, Rosier? Bought jewellery is so common.” Parkinson smirked, well aware the Rosier dowry jewels were out of Cathal's reach in Gringotts and that Davis's family didn't have any heirlooms sparkles.

“Did you know old jewellery is more receptive to magic?” She inquired. “There are half a dozen different curses that cause goblin-made metal to constrict or burn the wearer.” Hermione knew that because of endless fraught research to find a way to destroy Horcruxes. “There's even a Chinese one, baoshi baozha, that causes mounted gems to shatter. Imagine what a necklace worth of high velocity shards could do to your face.”

“Sneaking into the Restricted Section will get you in trouble.” Pansy cautioned, quite willing to snitch on her fellow Slytherins if it evened the score. Rosier was hardly the only one who delved into banned magic. The trick was catching them at it so she could use it to her advantage.

“It isn't in the Restricted Section. Very few spells are, by percentage.” That had surprised Hermione but it was true. The Ministry did not have a systematic structure for regulating spell creation. There were so many curses and hexes a creative person could use to cause serious damage that were readily available. “You just need to know where to look.”

That shut up Parkinson nicely.

The first weekend of term was a whirl of introductions in the codified pure-blood manner. Both foreign contingents were more formal in their manners so it took a while for everyone to disperse and connect with relatives or family friends, who in turn could show the newcomers around. The Seventh Years had the easiest time of it with their shared classes, meaning the Library was the hub for socialising. Madam Pince was more than usually shrewish as a result.

Third period on Monday was the advent of Blast-Ended Skrewts in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid was chuffed at the numbers of pasty denuded crustaceans crawling about propelled by buttock pyrotechnics. The Fourth Years were less sold on the delights of the creatures, which were aggressive to everything including clods of grass and random rocks. The lingering piscine smell that clung to their uniforms after class didn't endear the elective students to the rest of the Hogwarts population.

After Divination the same afternoon, the cadre of Slytherins who had taken both classes were firmly requested by the Sixth Year Prefect Cassius Warrington to use deodorising charms before entering the Common Room. They didn't protest as the combination of eau de poisson and Trelawney's incense was astoundingly penetrative. Even with the spells, Parkinson complained about the smell in her hair and monopolised the bathroom. Hermione left for her lab, reckoning the scent of nettles would mask any remnant aroma.

She worked late, nearly missing curfew then lay awake in bed staring at the canopy reviewing her experiments. They were progressing. She had journals full of notes. But she didn't feel like she was achieving anything. There was so much to do. Hermione rolled over and nestled her head into her pillow, tugging her braid out of the way. At least once she had the assignment sheets for this term she could work ahead, freeing up time for more research. To fill more journals full of notes. The witch groaned into the down, got up, and went to the Common Room. If she couldn't sleep, she might as well read.

She wasn't the only one who Hypnos was ignoring. Blaise Zabini was elegantly draped over one of the settees staring out the window at the lake neglected by the sickle moon. Silver fish lit by tiny internal flares of magic drifted like fallen stars. He turned when he heard the door from the girls' dorm but didn't speak, deigning only a nod before returning to his contemplation.
Hermione made herself comfortable on a duchessebrisée upholstered in green tussah silk because Slytherins were too posh for a ratty squashy couch patched any old how. She cast Bluebell Flames into a decorative vase, giving her enough light to read without brightening the room too much for Zabini to see the fish. They sat for almost an hour in silence before he spoke.

“Are you going to do anything about Moody?” His tone of voice was as casual as his posture, one leg hanging indolently over the arm of his seat. Hermione wondered how long it had taken him to refine his technique of languor. No one was naturally that artistically relaxed.

“Not this year.” She would've answered with a flat ‘no’ but who could be that blasé about their father's killer?

“Do you think it's a calculated insult? I can't decide.” He mused and Hermione remembered he'd taken Arithmancy in Sixth Year. Zabini liked having an edge over the competition. Given his arrogance, he probably viewed everyone as rivals.

“We're not a priority unless we're useful.” She couldn't help sounding bitter. More than once she'd seen Dumbledore string Harry along to manipulate him. The Greater Good didn't give a damn about her friend’s mental health or well-being.

“Galling but likely true.” He steepled his fingers in a gesture crafted to bring attention to his sinuous hands. Hermione put her eyes on her book. Zabini was very handsome and knew it. However she knew he had left Hogwarts with the youngest children in the first wave of evacuation. Nothing could make him attractive to her after that.
Double Potions with the Gryffindors was itchy, full of many little irritations too petty to complain about but too irksome not to scratch. Malfoy buttonholed Nott as his partner for the tricky potion, throwing out the pairings. The Slytherins had to shuffle themselves without looking like they were jockeying in front of the Lions. After Zabini slid in beside Greengrass, Hermione grabbed Davis to avoid being paired with Goyle or Crabbe.

She and the orderly witch worked well together but their table was nearest the supply cupboard, meaning a trembling cauldron and a flickering flame from the traffic. The Sourd Potion, a cure for ringing in the ears, was tetchy about temperature so they had to keep fiddling with the burner while their classmates constantly dashed back and forth to obey the instruction 'if the potion coagulates, add more bumblebee wings'.

Having made the potion before, Hermione knew 'fine powder of purple mullein flower' should have been 'very fine', which Professor Snape would take delight in telling them at the end of the class. Anyone who didn't grind the petals sufficiently ended up with a thickened potion, which could not be corrected with more bumblebee wings. Davis was precise about ingredients and pissed off that her usual partner Bulstrode had elbowed her aside to pair with Parkinson. Under her hand, the mullein flowers were powdered very very finely indeed.

Professor Snape tore a strip off the several pairs whose potions had solidified in their cauldrons and harangued the rest of the class for not following the instructions diligently enough to get a bright violet potion. Hermione met Davis's eyes. Their potion was the required colour. By mutual assent they said nothing. Whatever was annoying their Head of House, neither of them wanted to be a sop for his temper.

“Miss Rosier, if you would be so good as to remain.” The words were almost silky and stopped Hermione in her tracks as she headed for the door at the end of class. She turned on her heel to present herself at his desk. None of the other students looked in her direction. They were quite happy the Professor had chosen someone else as oblation.

“Sir?” Hermione spoke after the room had emptied, eyes on the ranked potion vials not his face.

“Your essay.” It was less a request than an order. She produced the required scroll. He checked it for length then put it aside. “Is it your intention to continue to refuse to stay with your guardian?”

“Yes, sir.” She answered promptly.

“Why?” The single word was carefully enunciated.

“Lucius Malfoy is a cockroach.” Hermione could have called the blond pillock far worse. He was on her Azkaban List. She’d do her utmost to see him pilloried with the rest of his chums particularly as he had escaped justice after the first war.

“Is that the sum of your reasons for your extraordinary continued defiance?” His words were crisp again, the consonants well-formed hiding whatever childhood accent he'd once had. A parvenu, she realised, and wished Harry had had more time to tell them about Snape's memories.

“No, sir. The rest is politics.” She tried to keep her face expressionless. A wry grimace would require explanation and the fiery rant she wanted to give would not be received well.

“Your father was good friends with Malfoy Senior, both in Hogwarts and after. Your grandfather
was also close with the family. Do you think either of them would wish you to play the vagrant?’’ Snape asked the rangy girl, the least penitent penitent he had seen in many years.

“They’re dead, sir. Unless they appear before me with specific instructions, I will continue to associate with those I deem fit.’’ If her paternal ancestors did show themselves to her with orders, she’d tell them to go back to Hell.

“And your mother?’’ He had made inquiries about Derica Rosier, whom no one had seen since the fire at her Manx cottage. Lucius had managed to obtain a copy of the report of the investigation now in abeyance. The Auror who had rescued Cathal had said the smoke and the flames were too dangerous for a second foray into the cellar. Whatever irregularities in his holding the child, Williamson had provided a detailed statement. Sedulously detailed, which made Snape exceedingly suspicious.

“The same, sir.’’ Hermione had heard nothing about Cathal's mother. She presumed the consensus was Madam Rosier had died in the Fiendfyre that had devoured her cottage but until Cathal was of age, Hermione doubted she would get any answers.

“Miss Rosier.’’ The Professor began then paused. The child was no trouble. She had been attacked by other students but she had never instigated any conflict. She was attentive in class but didn't raise her hand to pester. She did her work. Whatever precocious studies she undertook in her own time did not bite, explode, or run amok. He had to admit to himself he did not need to waste his time minding her. “Dismissed.”

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Lessons continued. The first week rush of reading lists and assignment due dates and project allocations swept Hermione along. She had it far easier her second time around though Muggle Studies and Divination were now unfamiliar, necessitating some effort. Though not much for Divination, she admitted to herself. Most of the first term was balls.

And then there was Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Hermione took a seat in the middle of the centre line of desks, sitting beside Nott and behind Ron. The mixed class filled every bench with the back rows taken first. She'd hoped to be able to stay anonymous at the rear but she wasn't the only one who wanted to keep their distance from the vocal 'Ministry malcontent'.

The lesson on the Unforgivables was surreal. Hermione sat silently as Cathal watching her other self answer Moody's questions and marvelled that she had not seen his enjoyment in the curses. He was a good actor but his enthusiasm was blatant. That tongue thing. Like he was licking blood off his lips. She couldn't get out of there fast enough.

The Gryffindors were clustered on the stairs talking volubly among themselves. Granger was trying to console Longbottom as the Slytherins shouldered past. Moody followed them, coaxing the whey-faced boy back into the classroom to talk. Hermione made herself think of the Lions as Other to keep her expression cool and steady as she marched by them.

She probably would have made it to the anonymity of the lower corridor if Malfoy hadn't made a point of barging into Weasley. Then Ron, who was worried about Neville and didn't know how to deal with his feelings, took the easy route of lashing out at the Snakes.

“I reckon Moody's the best Defence teacher we've ever had. I'm going to be an Auror so I want to know all this stuff.” He curled his lip at the Slytherins. “Then I can send you lot to Azkaban for a big
family reunion.”

It was Crabbe who had just the right combination of foolishness and viciousness to draw his wand. Then the Gryffindors all drew theirs, forcing the Slytherins to draw to back up their idiot compatriot. The groups eyed each other, edging closer to hexes as neither side was willing to back down. Teenage males defending their pack; though Bulstrode and Parkinson were there for the green and Granger for the red.

“Ronald Billius Weasley, I challenge you to a duel.” Hermione said loudly. She could thank Malfoy in First Year and Lockhart in the Second for the incentive to look up duelling etiquette. “Your conduct is offensive and your words are insulting. Name the time and place.”

“Right here and now.” Ron stepped forward, ready to answer the challenge. Particularly from a Rosier. There were scores to settle. “Name your second.”

“I name Harry James Potter.” She gave the intent boy a nod. That surprised everyone.

“Can I refuse?” Harry asked, mostly in an aside to Granger. His eyes flicked to the Slytherin witch, lone among them who hadn't drawn her wand.

“Yes, you can.” Hermione cut in before her other self could reply. “But that would mean you agree it's a good thing that we're being taught by an insane fanatic who is willing to murder his enemies rather than bring them to justice.” She scanned the faces of the Gryffindors, hoping they would remember this and keep themselves from crossing the line when it came to a real fight. “The Ministry uses Aurors as enforcers, turning a blind eye when it suits them.”

“To arrest Death Eaters.” Harry lowered his wand, remembering Fudge spitting mad ready to have Sirius Kissed on the spot.

“Like your godfather.” She felt terribly as though she were twisting the knife. It was worse because she knew Harry would never get the family life with Black that he desperately wanted.

“Sirius isn't a Death Eater!” His shout rang through the hallway.

“And I'm sure they'll check before they Avada him.” Her mouth contorted into a smirk almost of its own accord. “But it's so much easier to shoot first and ask questions later. Or not at all.”

“What is going on here?” Professor Flitwick didn't bellow but years of teaching and choir had given him excellent vocal projection. “Wands away, thank you.” He didn't draw. He didn't need to. The first recalcitrant twitch from any of the children and he'd have his wand in his hand and them disarmed. “I suggest you disperse about your business, ladies and gentlemen.”

A chorus of 'yes, professor' in varying volumes and pitches greeted his order. Flitwick watched them go to be certain they didn't resume the stand-off in a quiet byway. As much as he would like to believe Hogwarts was a neutral bastion of education, it was patently not. Defusing quarrels had become increasingly difficult. He hoped the Tournament would distract the students from the simmering politics.

Professor Flitwick was in for disappointment.

Hermione wasn't there for the Choosing of the Champions. She didn't want to see Harry racked again. She took advantage of the empty halls to plot more chalk points and take more measurements of the ambient magic. Thus far she hadn't discovered anything seething in the dark corners waiting to explode during the final battle. She was getting some odd looks from the portraits however.
When she returned to the Slytherin Common Room that evening, she received an anthology of tales about What Potter Did. Warrington and the few other Slytherins who had submitted their names were conspiring in a corner; agreeing a public position on how insulted to seem. The rest of the House was split between ranting about the favouritism given to the Boy-Who-Lived or betting on how long he was likely to last.

Heading to her bed, she hoped to avoid the worst of the anti-Potter diatribes. With rare exceptions, Harry never got any apologies from his schoolmates who pilloried him. She could forgive the ones who joined the DA and anyone who defended Hogwarts but the majority of the students spat on Harry then happily forgot they had done so once he was fighting for their lives.

And she couldn't do anything to remedy that situation.

Hermione gritted her teeth through the sneers of the Slytherins, and kept her temper through the cold shoulders from the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Her mouth stayed firmly shut through classes with the Gryffindors where it was painfully obvious most of the Lions had sent Harry to Coventry. Then the bloody badges happened.

When Malfoy presented her with one, with that smug little smirk, Hermione nearly punched him. Her refusal was hissed more than spoken and her perceived support of Potter put her in the doghouse as far as the other Fourth Years were concerned. No thundering denouncements but she was avoided and ignored. Which suited Hermione just fine. She got more duelling practise done that way.

She was in an empty classroom just finishing some targeting drills while sustaining her Shield with her second wand when she heard an argument in the corridor. Harry and some Hufflepuffs making a point of their loyalty. Hermione dropped her spells and stuck her head out the door to see her friend storm away. Stuffing her wands up her sleeves, she hurried after him.

He didn't go far. Certainly not back to Gryffindor Tower or to the Library or the Great Hall or anywhere else the disdain would be thick. She found him in an alcove lined with battered benches turfed out of one of the Potions labs judging from the stains. Probably stuck here to air before being put away in the Room of Hidden Things, just in case they were prone to explode or dissolve.

Harry was staring out the narrow window but he spun around wand ready when he heard her approach. He was already defensive, she couldn't take that personally, though the snarl on his face when he saw her green tie was a body blow. Hermione stood there with her empty hands in plain sight until he lowered his arm.

“You're not wearing a badge.” Harry said to say something when Rosier didn't snipe at him. He'd had enough of the damn things shoved in his face to notice the absence.

“Professor Flitwick should give you points for motivating Malfoy. I've never seen him work so hard.” Hermione tried to sound cool but her essential nerdiness could not be masked by another body or another life. He did at least make a little noise of amusement at her feeble joke.

“I didn't put my name in.” He was tired of saying it.

“I believe you.” She said simply.

“You're the only one.” Harry snapped, bitter and betrayed.

“Granger believes you.” That was cheating but it wasn't a lie. First time around, she had been sure Harry hadn't entered the Tournament willingly. “The rest of your House will come around when you start winning.”
“Assuming I don't die first.” His shoulders sagged the same time his knees did, dropping him onto a bench with a groan. “I don't want to do this.”

“Do you think for an instant that Dumbledore will let the Boy-Who-Lived die?” Hermione inquired softly. He looked up sharply at that, chary and wary again. “Simple logic, Potter. He has plans for you. You're his favourite little pawn.”

“I'd forgotten you were Slytherin there for a moment, Rosier.” Harry shook his head at her. Not because he disagreed but because he wasn't willing to push his luck. Relying on people had never worked out well for him.

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The First Task saw Hermione trekking up and down stairs from the dungeons to check where they ended. Her legs were aching by the time she confirmed the blasted things sometimes switched destinations. She would have to factor them as 'live' in her Arithmantic calculations to get a good idea of the background magic of the lower levels of Hogwarts, which added another layer of complexity to her formulae.

She was resting in one of the reading nooks in the Library when Bastian Max and another Durmstrang boy marched past heading towards the History of Magic section. Her cousin paused to greet her, introducing his friend as Konstantin Dolohov. She stared at the dark haired, pale boy in his unflattering buzz cut and saw his kinsman.

“Small world.” She said before she could think of something commonplace to say. Max glanced between the two of them while Dolohov scowled.

“You English are all mad.” He had thought his command of the language very good until he had come to the Scottish castle, where half the students spoke in strange accents and the other half in strange references. “Why is the world small?”

“I recognise your surname. A wizard called Antonin Dolohov was a crony of my father and grandfather.” It would have been better if she had just smiled and nodded. Surely it wasn't that difficult, she chided herself.

“My grandfather.” Konstantin knew the name but had never met the man that he could recall. “He is detained in this country. My father does not speak of him. Karkaroff said it should not be mentioned.”

“I suggest you avoid the red-haired Gryffindors. Your grandfather killed their uncles.” Hermione didn't know what to think of Igor Karkaroff. She couldn't sympathise with him because he was a Death Eater but he had broken in Azkaban so perhaps he could be pitied. Despising him as a traitor and a coward seemed sanctimonious. As an enemy, she should rejoice he had ratted out his comrades.

“Is there a blood debt owed?” Dolohov asked. His father had not wanted him to attend the Tournament. There had been several arguments. Only his mother's intervention had allowed him to go, mostly he suspected because she wished him to be separated from his girlfriend Aleksandra, whom she did not like.

“I couldn't say.” Which was not the same as lying. “I am in much the same position with the Weasleys as you. I do know the Ministry was not generous with compensation after the war.”

“Was it a war?” Bastian asked. All he knew of British politics was they had a Minister named after a
confection. His parents had tasked him with finding his missing cousin, who was apparently allowed to run wild after the disappearance of her mother. Derica had married with the permission of her father but it was an open secret in the family he had agreed because of the substantial bride price the Rosiers had offered.

“Oh yes. Never doubt it.” Hermione answered staunchly. “It suits the Ministry now to say otherwise but the wounds haven't healed.”

“This is well known?” Konstantin didn't know this witch as anything other than a sudden relative of a school friend. The other students of good families, who were also mostly in green, had not impressed him. Though if what Bastian's kinswoman had said was correct then the attitudes and posturing of her Housemates became explicable. They were presuming his opinions solely from his surname.

“Official policy varies between panem et circenses and scapegoating but the fear is there under the surface.” She stopped before she cited Harry's treatment as proof of the mercurial desperation of the Ministry. As a Slytherin, she couldn't champion the Chosen One's cause. That didn't mean she had to be mute in all things. “The Tournament is a perfect example. Two hundred years dormant then up it pops just when questions are being asked about the Dark Lord's return.”

Dolohov said something to Max that she didn't catch. Neither boy looked happy, the high of Krum's tie for first in the Task had evaporated. They bowed and excused themselves, leaving Hermione feeling like a killjoy. An honest one, at least. That thought did not particularly salve her. She returned to her book and serious contemplation of whether she needed some calculus textbooks to help with her Arithmancy matrices. Asking Professor Vector for assistance would result in more questions than answers.

So onwards she slogged, ticking things off an ever-growing To Do List. She read Restricted books in History of Magic, taxed her imagination in Divination, dodged bouncing bulbs in Herbology, and stared into space in Astronomy. She even managed twelve inches of parchment on the significance of toasters for Muggle Studies. Stale bread and circuits.

When Professor Snape announced the Yule Ball to his House, Hermione studied the reactions as indicators of who was in the loop and who was out. Anyone with connections to the Ministry or friends with connections already knew about the dance. The skirmishing for acceptable partners had happened over summer. The elect didn't have to awkwardly scramble to pair off. Nott gave her a confirmatory nod and that was that.

Later, staring into a mirror in the Fourth Year girls' bathroom, Hermione allowed herself to detest Cathal's hair. Doing hers had taken hours and ridiculous amounts of Sleekeazy's. It was Christmas. She was going to the Ball, again. She didn't know what she expected to feel. Maybe a kinship with Cinderella. What she was mostly experiencing right now was ennui.

Cathal's hair was well-behaved, combed and falling in an ashen cascade to her hips. Then just staying there inert. It was long enough to get in her way so she braided it, and it remained demurely where it was put. No curls writhing to escape, snapping any tie or elastic that dared to restrain them. Hermione missed her hair. She gave up on waiting for inspiration and coiled Cathal's tresses with a long pin and a few Sticking Charms.

Dress robes turned the boys into clones. She had to look twice for Nott in the penguin throng. He offered her his arm and they marched in cohort arranged by Year. Professor Snape was there at the door to the Great Hall for final inspection. He waved them in silently; the Head of House lecture on decorum already given that afternoon in the Common Room.
Hermione drifted with the rest of the Slytherins into the ballroom to await the promenade of the Champions. Nott stood close, fidgeting with his cuffs. She raised an eyebrow at him, wondering if there was something wrong and got a minute shake of his head. Just nerves, then. When Viktor and her other self swept past, she smiled remembering her own butterflies.

Nott's hand was clammy in hers when they took to the dance floor in the wake of the Champions. Madam Radnott's lessons held them in good stead however. They waltzed together competently enough to avoid bumping into anyone, a feat not shared by everyone. Her partner didn't relax at seeing they weren't the worst pair and they only had two dances before he suggested they find something to drink.

She agreed rather than put him on the spot and they headed to one of the refreshment tables. Decorated with a ice sculpture miniature of Beauxbatons, the drinks were the same blue hue as the French school's uniforms. Nott clutched his in both hands, visibly taking deep breaths. Hermione edged him away near one of the sconces so they could talk.

“You really aren't enjoying yourself, are you?” She observed, sipping her drink. It tasted of mint and melon, cool on her tongue. Hermione couldn't recall if she'd had one previously. She had spent most of the evening dancing.

“No.” Theo admitted, wretchedly. “I apologise. I thought I could manage the crowd but this isn't like the lessons at all.”

“I'm not upset.” Hermione reassured, prepared to spend the night squirrelling around the deserted towers if Nott wanted to quit early. “How long do you think we need to stay?”

“Until after the meal at least.” He straightened and scanned the Hall for a suitable activity to be seen doing. “Look, there's Trinh and Petersham. They went stag.” Theo nodded his head towards two Sixth Years stationed near a table stacked with pastries. The two of them joined their Housemates, who readily shifted over so they could all appear to be socialising rather than apathetically loitering.

The quartet chatted, joined periodically by fellow Slytherins who were escaping the crush on the dance floor or whose partners were otherwise occupied. Hermione was rather enjoying the discussion of Charms Theory specifically the adaptation of sonic charms for concussive effects when her cousin presented himself to the group. He bowed, asked for her arm, and after her acquiescence led her out onto the floor.

The Hogwarts musicians were still playing so she and Max circled decorously. He was much bulkier than Nott thus had no difficulty in picking her up to spin, which made her smile in spite of herself. Viktor had twirled her about seemingly without effort. She'd fought the urge to giggle for most of that evening. The Yule Ball redux didn't make her as giddy but she let herself unbend a little. Which was why her cousin's statement blind-sided her.

“My father asked of me to tell you he has put a suit of custody for you to the British Ministry.” Bastian had received the owl that morning along with customary seasonal felicitations. He had been informed very emphatically to convey the news to Miss Rosier as soon as possible. “We are your nearest kin. You should be with us, not with those tainted by Dark Magic.”

“Wish your father good luck with that. The Malfoys seem keen to keep me.” Hermione warned. She didn't find it flattering to be argued over like the last canapé, not believing for a moment Gustav Max's motivations were familial or altruistic. With so many of her relatives in Azkaban, Cathal was one of the few legal heirs to the Rosier and Selwyn fortunes. “It must be my scintillating personality.”
Harvest

Hermione and Theo slipped away from the Ball in the tumult as Professor Flitwick announced the Weird Sisters. They could have left banging a kettle drum and no one would have noticed. The Common Room was deserted with the younger Years already in bed. Nott bowed over her hand then cloistered himself in the boys' dormitory. She ducked into her dorm to change before leaving again with a parcel under her arm.

There was no one in the halls she traversed to get to her lab but she still checked for surveillance in case she was being followed. Nothing. Hermione shut the hidden door behind her, locking it before flopping down into her armchair with a sigh. She could sympathise with Madam Flint's attitude to balls. They were a chore if you didn't want to go.

While she was waiting for Moppet, Hermione wrote a quick note to her summer hostess to let her know how the dance had gone. She didn't think Marcus's mother would care but it seemed the polite thing to do after Madam Flint had organised the dress excursion. She mentioned Nott so he'd have corroboration of his attendance but left out Cathal's cousin as she didn't want his presence to get back to the Malfoys through her.

It was almost midnight before the house elf popped into the laboratory, flushed and ears drooping. The Hogwarts staff had been run off their feet with the Yule preparations on top of the dance. Moppet collapsed onto her chaise, exhausted but still careful of the garishly wrapped present stuffed into her pillowcase dress.

“I have some peppermint rub if you'd like.” Hermione offered, seeing her friend's prostration. Moppet sat up but she waved her back down and got the salve. Sitting on the floor, the witch worked the cooling gel into the house elf's bare soles. Moppet wriggled her toes. Even with magic, they had been running like clocks.

“Is Miss's feets all flat too?” The house elf asked, eyeing the unfancy sweater and slacks. She had seen her witch shiny like pewter with the piebald wizards. Moppet had thought she looked very nice.

“Not really. I didn't dance that much and I was wearing sensible shoes.” She'd seen Parkinson buy dangerous heels and didn't envy the girl her blisters. Even with cushioning charms, those perilous shoes couldn't have been comfortable. Perhaps she was just self-conscious about her height. Malfoy had shot up like a weed. “Nott didn't like the crush so we mingled.”

“The other you danced all the dances.” Moppet probed gently in case her Miss was sad.

“The other me is welcome to it.” Hermione sighed. “I missed having Christmas morning with you. I'd rather be here than at the Ball.” She paused to contemplate her own statement. “It's different when you know it's all down hill from here. I couldn't shake the feeling of the band playing while the Titanic sank.”

Moppet's obvious non-comprehension prompted Hermione to explain about Muggle shipping and industrialisation. She chatted as she massaged the house elf's sore feet, giving a light discourse on non-magical travel before the Great War. Mostly it was commentary on the hats and the various documentaries, and the resonance she felt with the passengers trapped below decks as the icy water flooded in.

“Miss will float.” Moppet spoke into the attenuating silence as the witch washed her hands. Hermione nodded wearily. She wouldn't go down with the ship but that didn't mean she couldn't feel
the sea rising.

“Miss will.” She dried her hands on a scrap of towelling. “Miss will find a way.” Hermione took a deep breath and changed topics with a grinding of mental gears. “I wasn't sure what to get you. I want you to be able to choose not to get involved. Sovereignty being the greatest gift.” She handed Moppet the narrow red wrapped box. “If this one doesn't work, I can get you another. It's literally the thought that counts until you find your match.”

Moppet undid the paper carefully, folding it aside to be kept. There wasn't a label on the box. She pulled off the lid and stared at the wand inside. She didn't touch it. Wands were for witches and wizards only. The goblins rattled their sabres, the Veela tried to persuade, and the centaurs refused to ask out of pride. All for the wands the Ministry guarded jealously.

“I thought beech for wisdom and understanding, to start with. I think that one has a unicorn core.” Hermione explained, sitting down so she didn't feel daft shifting from foot to foot. “It's from the Lost Wands. I can bring you different sorts to try then once you've found one that suits you, I'll buy you that same make.”

House elves couldn't use their magic against their masters, not even in extremis, and their wandless magic was poor in combat. Their talents had been domesticated solely to serve. She couldn't do anything yet to change that and knew to her chagrin that her efforts to free the Hogwarts elves had not been appreciated. They were safe in the castle. Not free, but freedom should always be a choice. What she wanted to give Moppet was the power to defend herself.

“Moppet has magic.” Moppet picked up the stick between two fingers, unsure whether it would bite.

“Clause Three of the Code of Wand Use.” Hermione confirmed. “Part-Humans are an exception courtesy of some particularly paternalistic language. Reading that part of the law was like reading an eugenics pamphlet. Charming cultural clue.”

“Miss breaks the rules for Moppet?” The house elf's hand closed around the wand. She gave it a flick then dropped it in surprise when sparks shot out. Hermione picked up the eleven inches of beech and offered it back to her.

“If Dobby had been able to cast a Shield Charm, he wouldn't have died. Bellatrix's damned knife would've bounced right off.” She gritted her teeth as tears welled. “He did so much to help us but he couldn't do anything to protect himself. Bloody Lucius Malfoy got away with beating him. I know Hogwarts doesn't abuse you but if anyone finds out we're working together, they'll target you.”

“Moppet has magic.” Moppet took the wand back. “Moppet isn't helpless.”

“I don't mean to insult you.” Hermione hastily apologised. The house elf waved away her words with a swish of the wand. More sparks, this time dripping into the floor in a shimmering cascade.

“Moppet understands.” Her gaze sharpened on her witch. “But Miss is still Moppet's Miss.”

“As soon as I turn seventeen. I'll check with the Castle to find the exact time of her birth, if that's recorded. I mean it. The minute I'm of age.” She didn't like the idea of magical bondage but her partnership with Moppet would be one of explicit consent. They were in this together.

“The minute.” Moppet nodded her head once in sharp accord then nudged her all-colours wrapped box towards her witch. “Moppet thought so many thoughts about what to get Miss for Yule. Miss has all the things Miss needs, mostly. So Moppet thought that Miss should have something to keep
the things from being taken away.”

Hermione opened her present and stared at the disconcertingly fleshy patch of leather about twenty centimetres square. Picking it up, the surface rippled to match her skin tone exactly even down the vellus hair and ink stains. The underside was sticky in a not pleasant at all organic way. Slowly a smile brightened her face as she realised what this was; a marsupium.

She pulled up her shirt, cast a cleansing charm on her skin then stuck the patch low on her stomach so it covered her belly button. There was a moment of intensely visceral heat as the false pouch secured itself to her then it cooled to her body temperature. Hermione rubbed a hand across the magical leather. It was exactly like normal skin. She couldn't feel any seam or transition.

“Wow.” Now for the test run. She stuck her finger in her belly button, the fake one that had formed in the centre of the marsupium, and wiggled it about. The small hidden space made by the patch didn't have any sensation. She couldn't feel her finger against her skin. Balling up the scrap of towelling she'd used to dry her hands, Hermione touched the fabric to the pouch. It disappeared into the marsupium. There was no give away bulge on the outside. She poked her belly button then pulled out the cloth. “It feels a little odd.”

“Miss can't stuff all the stuff inside.” Moppet cautioned. The magic pouch couldn't hold anything that wouldn't fit into its mundane dimensions. It worked by making the objects very very flat. “But no one but Miss can get the stuff out. So no stealings.”

They shared a grin over their gifts, anticipating much use of them. The two friends broke bread together in a Yule feast of liberated cake and hot chocolate before they both had to sneak back to where they should be. Moppet hid her wand so no one would take it from her. Hermione went to bed thinking of useful things she could fit in a 20 by 20 square that wouldn't go off bang by being made functionally two-dimensional.

The Christmas holidays were irksome. Other students kept turning the corner just as she was going to slide through a portrait or step behind a statue. There were just enough people populating the Castle that she had to use her Map to avoid them while feeling unduly paranoid for doing so. Hermione put her brews in stasis after walking in on a kissing couple on the stairwell near her lab. If the amorous had decided the twisty staircase was suitable, she'd let them have it until term resumed.

To keep herself occupied, Hermione worked on her duelling. She was getting better slowly. She could maintain a Shield charm with her left wand while casting with her right. No flickers or fade-outs. However her aim remained terrible and her magical reserves emptied quickly. She could simply cast the Shield and leave it, which was the usual procedure, except recasting the charm after it collapsed cost more than maintaining it. In a long running skirmish, every thaum counted.

So she persisted. She had set up targets at what she considered 'close' distance. Most people fired at about five metres. Any nearer and you were vulnerable to being charged and grappled. Many combat spells had longer range, particularly for the adept and powerful, but if she couldn't hit reliably at five then she wasn't going to hit at ten or twenty.

When she cast without the second wand, she could hit the body of the target every time. With the second wand, only the wall behind the targets was vulnerable. Hermione tried all the jinxes she knew. The ones that affected multiple targets were the most successful as with a scattergun approach her lack of accuracy was less obvious.

She was taking a break and cleaning up the pumpkin remains from the Melofors Jinx when the door opened. Hermione hadn't locked it because locked doors inevitably aroused suspicion in the roaming teachers. They rattled doorknobs as a matter of course, often passing by those that turned without
investigation but always taking a look behind those that were spelled shut.

“Malfoy is looking for you.” Millicent Bulstrode informed her, leaning bulwark against the door jamb. “He's pining for your company.” She laughed mockingly. “Or possibly Madam Malfoy has taxed him with some courtesy to inflict upon you.”

“Disappointment is good for the soul.” Hermione vanished the last of the gourd. She was feeling drained. It was probably time for a rest. Maybe a bit of fresh air. Malfoy could scurry over the castle all day. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” The Slytherin witch took the prompt as an invitation and stepped into the room, shutting the door firmly behind her. She leaned against that side too.

“How much Calming Draught are you taking?” Acute valerian poisoning caused liver symptoms. Hermione lit her wand to have a proper look at Bulstrode, who screwed up her dilated eyes and shuffled aside clumsily. How much of her heavy tread was due to chronic overuse of the potion?

“How much did you let Flint do to you to persuade him to take you home?” Millicent countered. Lots of witches had thrown themselves at the Slytherin Captain. He wasn’t handsome but he was fit and his family was very old. He never showed much interest. Pansy had waspishly speculated how Rosier had caught his attention.

“I'm an heiress.” Hermione sneered. It wasn’t very mature of her but she was tired and frustrated, and trying to help the ungrateful cow. “Madam Flint very kindly asked me to stay over the summer. The invitation came from her.” The outright lie fit better with the pure-blood courting etiquette. “How much potion, Bulstrode?”

“None of your damned concern.” She snapped, hands balling into fists. “You don't know what it's like to have someone at you all the time. Peck, peck, peck. Mother never lets anything go.” The words spilled out, a torrent under years of pressure. “Why can't you be pretty like Daphne? Witty like Pansy? I've had that for as long as I can remember. Now it's 'why can't you be clever like the Rosier girl'? Mother was so impressed you're playing Flint and Theo and Draco against each other.”

“Because that's a laudable skill.” To her own ears she sounded so much like her other self that Hermione expected Bulstrode to suspect her of using Polyjuice. Taking a slow, deep breath, she reminded herself that despite appearances she was mentally in her twenties and all hormone induced histrionics aside, she knew better. “Your mother will never be happy because she'll never feel secure in her position. She's the replacement wife, one picked to provide heirs. How long do you think your father will keep her once she's past childbearing?”

Bulstrode blinked. She shuddered as she gathered her self-control to force the churning acid emotion back down. Rosier stood there waiting for a reply to a question Millicent had never considered. Her mother couldn't speak without finding fault. Even precious Amalric wasn’t immune. He had to be perfect and he wasn't. He was just an ordinary boy. Magical, at least.

“Father can't divorce her without returning her dowry. The Hobdays made sure she'd be well provided for.” That wasn't something to be discussed with someone outside the family but Rosier was a pure-blood. She'd know about betrothal contracts.

“How much would you pay to be permanently rid of your mother?” Hermione inquired mildly. If there was a kitty going round, she'd gladly chip in and she didn't have to live with Morphia Bulstrode.

“So much. Oh so much.” Bulstrode breathed fervently. She unclenched her hands as she slowly
straightened. “I'm supposed to invite you to stay over the Easter break.”

“Thank you, no.” She’d had more than enough of Madam Bulstrode's hospitality over the summer. “I want to be here to observe the precursor syzygy of the lunar eclipse. It's a partial visible in the Pacific, so Professor Sinistra is hopeful we may get a sighting of the liminal selenian magic.”

“Mother isn't going to believe that.” Rosier was always reading but she seemed hardly fussed about her schoolwork. Millicent was sure she did her Charms homework in History of Magic class. “I'll tell her you danced with a cute Durmstrang boy. The tall fair one. They're all from old families, and your mother was foreign. She'll think you're inviting another courtship.”

Bulstrode left her contemplating that Germany was hardly the dark side of the moon. Hermione didn't think of herself as particularly cosmopolitan. She'd travelled to Europe several times with her parents. They'd backpacked around the Continent in their youth and wanted their daughter to have the same experiences. Most citizens of wizarding Britain didn't travel much. They could, easily, but they didn't. Anything beyond Dover was another world.

Some of that parochialism was an innate tie to the magic of the earth. Many witches and wizards felt a strong kinship to their ancestral land. The pure-blood families didn't keep their estates solely for the grandeur. They belonged where they were. There was some holdover of 'Fortress Britain' from Grindelwald's war. And then there was some good old fashioned British islander mentality with it's very distinct 'them and us'.

It was the half-bloods who were the internationalists. They travelled. They studied for their Masteries in exotic locales. They built trade networks and kept everyone in Potions supplies. They had the best of both worlds, even if the speed of Muggle technological advancement was leaving them behind. Hannah had been a fan of the Smashing Pumpkins but hadn't known what a satellite was.

Hermione went for a walk to clear her head. As the people around her grew older and began to look more and more like she remembered them, keeping focus on where she was and what she was doing became harder. She couldn't anchor herself properly in her own life. Cathal was an angry, rebellious, violent witch. Hermione felt like she was letting her id off the chain.

The walk didn't do much. The holidays dragged then finally classes resumed. Hermione found herself leaning against a fence in Care of Magical Creatures as Professor Grubbly-Plank introduced them to unicorns. Everyone in the class saw the goodly, pure creatures edge away from her. They wouldn't take food from Nott's hand either.

* 

The Second Task had very nearly everyone out on the lake. Hermione checked her Map before climbing to Ravenclaw Tower. Fortunately she didn't have to go inside in order to take a reading and make another thaumic waypoint. One of the Eagles would certainly notice phosphorescent chalk in their eyrie. She was careful with her runes as she wouldn't get many chances to plot out positions in the towers unobserved.

After cleaning up and checking her Map again, she risked Gryffindor Tower. She had to stun the Fat Lady, which she regretted, but the garrulous portrait would have told the entire House of Lions that a Slytherin had been scuffing about drawing patterns on the floor outside their dormitory. The rest of the portraits were either disinclined to tattle or had dismissed her as yet another tricksome student. They had seen thousands.

After she took readings in the Bell Towers, Hermione hiked up to the Astronomy Tower. She was getting her cardio today. The view was magnificent; a chocolate box winter scene with a burnished
silver sky. She cast a Warming Charm against the biting breeze and a Muffliato for peace of mind before sitting with her back to the railing to check her Map again.

“Voice, is there any way I can tunnel into the Chamber of Secrets?” Hermione asked. She needed to get in to check reasonably surreptitiously. “Or could Moppet get in if I show her where the entrance is?”

“Slytherin forbade the house elves admission to his private rooms. He did not approve of their bondage.” The voice of the Castle sounded especially tactful. It was aware of her general opinion of the fenland Founder.

“Really?” She tried not to sound cynical. Given Salazar Slytherin's views of blood purity, Hermione had supposed him to be bang onside the enslavement of his lessers.

“He believed the gift of magic set the magical apart, that they were above the petty squabbles of governance.” Hogwarts mused over its lost progenitor. “He took much from us when he departed but we are certain he considered himself judged by the company he kept and by his vassals. Being the lord of the bound was no compliment to him.”

“So still an elitist snob, but an elitist snob with principles.” Hermione mulled over whether she liked him any better for wanting a higher quality of lackey. “And the tunnelling?”

“Perhaps. Slytherin's Chamber has been awake since young Potter opened it. He did not seal the rooms to return them to slumber as the Heir did after the previous visit.” There was a pause for consultation. “Excavation may be possible.”

“Rooms?” She scrolled the Map to Myrtle’s bathroom then inwards to the tunnel just visible. Her awareness of the Chamber had allowed her to put the rough outlines of it into the Map. She and Ron hadn't lingered so there were no details beyond a blobby, dashed outline. Here be Basilisks. “Is there more to the place than creepy snake statuary?”

“There is also store rooms, the Basilisk's nest and egg chamber, and the formal entrance.” The Voice provided, more brisk now. “The entire complex was originally Slytherin's private retreat. He converted his chambers to support the guardian before leaving Hogwarts.”

“I'm going to have to check it.” Hermione assessed what a teenage Dark Lord could have left behind and the phrase 'death trap' came to mind. Harry had got out, as had she and Ron, but none of them had poked about. “How much of the interior can you sense with the Chamber awake?”

“We are aware of the entirety though should it be sealed again that awareness will leave us. Slytherin wished to ensure none but his heirs could wield the guardian. He did not trust his fellows to be ruthless enough in defence of the school.” The tone of the Voice suggested it agreed with this view. As the gestalt consciousness of the Castle, it had no wish to be made ruin by under-zealous defenders.

“Assuming I have no access to Parseltongue, how best could I get into the Chamber with minimal danger to myself and the Castle?” Being buried under tons of rubble was not how she wanted to go. Not that she honestly thought she would be given much option in her demise. Hermione tried not to think about her inevitable gruesome end. “I could use the pipes but crawling through a millennia of filth does not appeal.”

“The Chamber has no wards against Animagi. In Slytherin's time, the talent was far rarer than now and thought to allow only transformation into birds.” Hogwarts did not wish to forbid a tunnel, having got a reasonable inkling of the witch's personality. Outright command did not garner results.
If it wished her obedience, it needed to curry favour. “A small animal within the pipes would be far more subtle than excavation.”

Hermione sat quietly thinking. She didn't want to agree immediately as an excuse to put off going into the Chamber. She would very much like to put it off but wasn't going to allow herself to shirk the task without a proper reason. A tunnel would be straightforward, and easily found by the inquisitive. She was a Snake now. They moved in twists and turns.

“I'll give it a go.” Hermione announced. “I have no idea of my animal form. I never had the chance to do the meditations. There was always something more urgent.” She had time now and her magic was mature. “Of course, if I turn into something big we're right back where we started.”
A ferret.

All the malicious jibes she'd ever directed against Malfoy after Fourth Year had come back to roost. Hermione stared at herself in the mirror she'd installed in her lab in anticipation of her first successful transformation into her Animagus form. The meditations, chanting, mandrake leaf, and brewing had all gone well. The month long process had been exhaustive but she had done it.

Well, technically a stoat not a ferret. Still a mustelid, though.

God, this was embarrassing.

Hermione twisted her head to inspect her lithe body and shortish bushy tail. Her coat was winter white, commonly called ermine, rather than the brown with white underbelly she would have during the warmer months. Assuming her fur changed with the season. Her coat might only lighten to the sandy blonde of her natural hair colour.

She had a ridiculously cute little pink nose. Hermione bared her teeth at her reflection, twitching the black tuft tip of her tail. It was just as well Cathal wasn't friends with Harry or Ron because she would never hear the end of this. She had assumed from her meditations that she would be an otter. One dreamy vision of a sleek tubular furry critter was much like another.

She shivered when she touched her whiskers to the cold glass of the mirror. Her face tingled with the nerve response. Smells! It was a shock to realise how poor the human sense of smell was now she could sniff properly. The lab was a cornucopia of odours with the scent of nettles almost overpowering. She needed to get some better ventilation.

Hermione investigated her domain, climbing inelegantly over everything, squirming into tight spaces and under cushions. She stuck her nose in one of her dehydrated food experiments wondering if she could use her bestial senses to refine the spells. What she got was a snoot full of desiccated potato, which itched and had her in paroxysms of sneezes that made her jump about as though doing the weasel war dance.

She sneezed herself right out of her stoat body ending sprawled on the floor dusty and disorientated. Hermione pushed up into a sitting position to wait out the dizziness and the strobing visual distortions as her brain processed the return of the colour red. The witch was immeasurably pleased with herself if rueful that her animal form was ideal for investigating the pipes and conduits of the castle.

Heading back to the Slytherin dorm for an early night, Hermione was thankful Malfoy was not in evidence. She didn't think she could hide her grimace at the pasty ferret boy. She put herself to bed deliberately not thinking about the Chamber of Secrets. Had to be done, no question, but the excursion would be better left for the Easter holidays.

That night she dreamed chaotically and woke sweating despite the sluggard spring not yet touching the dungeons. Rolling out of bed to shower hoping to rouse herself, Hermione swore when her feet touched the icy floor. There was plenty of hot water in the bathroom. She stuck herself under the spray. Today would be an outdoor day. The weather was still grey, the snow not yet melted. Bleak and miserable, but she needed to air out her head.

A Tempus Charm after she had dressed made her swear again. It was just past six o'clock. The sun wasn't up yet. Hermione considered returning to her bed before stubbornly packing for a trek, taking herself out of the dungeons to the Great Hall and thence out the front entrance. Her breath misted in
the frigid morn. Shrugging on her randoseru, the witch ran down the steps, scrunching through the
slushy snow.

There was no one to see her hike towards Hogsmeade. Hermione set herself a brisk pace to keep
warm, striding with Cathal's long legs. She needed to get more exercise. Cathal was taller and
broader. She could carry more muscle, something few witches or wizards bothered about. Magic
consumed a lot of calories, particularly complex charms and transfigurations. It took quite a bit of
over-indulgence to achieve a Slughorn-style paunch.

She needed to be strong. Had she known going into the hunt for the Horcruxes how flesh-eating,
depleting, draining it would be she would've spent Sixth Year eating like Ron. Magic consumed.

Next year when she was a Prefect, if Hogwarts got its way, she would be busy. She needed to
increase her training. Likely she would receive an invitation to rejoin the Slytherin Duelling Club,
which would sharpen her skills significantly. This year she had not been asked. That was entirely
due to Violet Tripe, who was now a Seventh Year and not the forgiving type. The baleful witch had
kept her distance, sating herself with cutting Cathal out of the influential social cliques.

Hermione could have protested but honestly no one cared about the feelings of a Slytherin, least of
all her own House. Their own bloodlines and the Hat self-selected for sociopathic tendencies.
Empathy was never going to abound in a group where Occlumency was seen as essential. Closing
oneself off from emotions and emotional attachments was habit-forming. Being numb was a relief.

She skirted a slumbering Hogsmeade towards the forested uplands to test a hypothesis. Once she was
definitely out of sight of the village, Hermione shrunk her randoseru and stowed it in her pocket. She
wasn't sure whether it would transform with her. Her clothes would if she took her time to integrate
them. A rushed shift caused the Animagus to shed their belongings. A fast escape with an awkward
explanation on the return to a naked human.

With a moment of concentration, her body shrank down and down into her stoat form. Hermione
gave herself an examinatorial sniff. Her backpack had changed with her. She could sort of feel it as a
weight on her hip. Something itchy that shouldn't really be there. With a clawed hindfoot, she
scratched the area. Nothing changed and the randoseru didn't reappear. She could transform with
luggage. It was irritating but doable.

Jumping through the snow like a spring-loaded toy, Hermione made her way up the slope. She trilled
as she leaped, twisting and kicking up her heels. Amazing! Bounce, bounce, bounce, splat into the
snow. Her lack of coordination in her new body didn't remind her of waking up as Cathal. This was
easier. Her limbs were responsive. She could move. She could climb right up a stump then stand on
her hind feet to survey the terrain in front of her.

She had binocular vision though the definition wasn't as good as in her human form. Movement,
however. That she could notice quickly. Like the gorse bush over there stirring with something
behind it. Hermione smelled wet dog and human male and was throwing herself backwards towards
a tree as the Grim lunged out of the shrubbery.

He snapped at the stump but she was already scrabbling up onto a branch beyond his reach. She
climbed much better than he did and when he tried to follow he fell off, landing in the snow with a
bark that sounded very like 'bugger'. The big shaggy dog paced around the trunk yapping at her. The
stoat scrambled clumsily further out of reach.

The Grim became a man, made a snowball and threw it at her. She dodged. He threw another one,
which caught her on the back. Hermione hunkered down trying to present as low a profile as she
could while cursing herself. She had forgotten Sirius had hidden out in a cave to be close to Harry
during the Tournament. They'd visited him once to talk and bring food. She hadn't remembered!

Fourth Year had been so much about arguing with Harry, adjudicating between him and Ron, frankly nagging, and frantically trying to do her schoolwork in between crises that Sirius had slipped her mind when recalling what she had done that year. Harry had exchanged letters with him and that was as far as she had bothered. Hermione hissed as she swore. Unbelievably thick!

Now she had to do something. She could either stay here waiting out the wizard getting bored, make a run for it, or reveal herself as human. Hermione edged through the tree, creeping towards the trunk as snowballs sporadically hit the branches. She gritted her teeth.

Sirius wasn't reliable. He went off half-cocked and he told Harry everything. If he found out Cathal was an Animagus then his godson would know within hours. And the more she talked to him, the more she would be tempted to try to save him. Hermione knew her own weaknesses. She hated, hated down her to core, that she had to let him die to preserve the timeline. If she changed form and they got chatting, she would let something slip.

She ran.

The ermine jumped and clawed and clambered from tree to tree, concerned only with putting as much distance between herself and the Animagus as quickly as possible. Sirius Black grew bored of pursuit and turned back to his cave. She kept going until she ran out of trees, tumbling off a pine branch in a cascade of snow before half-buried changing into her human form to run full pelt into Hogsmeade.

Hermione ducked under the eaves of Madam Puddifoot's, cast a Disillusionment Charm then smacked herself on the forehead. She had been distracted, over-focussed on the Animagus ritual, but she couldn't, absolutely could not afford to forget. Details had already been changed, she knew, and simply by her presence the future was skewed. But not too much, if she were careful. She needed to keep her wits about her.

As her heart-rate slowed and adrenaline ebbed, Hermione rationalised the encounter. Sirius had met Cathal before. He probably hadn't paid much mind to her last year as finding Pettigrew would have been far more important. It probably wasn't a disaster that she had chanced across him. She had been surprised and dismayed at that surprise. He might not have even realised she was an Animagus.

There was no need to panic.

What she did need was a hot drink and a rest. Hermione took a deep breath then slowly exhaled. The strain was starting to show, she had to admit. Best to head back closer to the Hogwarts grounds. Maybe a walk around the lake would calm her. She didn't have classes today so she could have a nap in the afternoon. A day of doing nothing very much. Calmly. That was the ticket. She'd find some fucking serenity and not freak out over a small mistake.

She took a walk around the lake, in human then in stoat. Maybe it was the animal's instincts that had made her jumpy. Any sensible critter would run on seeing a huge dog leaping towards them. She'd treed herself without thinking. Hermione mused on this as she poked around the frozen edges of Black Lake. Her nose scented the fading winter, the fish coy beneath the ice, the lichen between the stones while her brain ran mazes.

If there was instinctual bleed-over between forms under stressful conditions, which she rather thought there was, then she would have to be careful in the pipes. It would be easy to become alarmed, do something animal and panicky then get herself into trouble. Into more trouble than sneaking into the Chamber of Secrets alone aged fourteen.
Moppet would go with her if she asked. Hermione was reluctant to test how forbidding Slytherin's wards were. Old magic settled into idiosyncratic grooves and ruts. They might be able to weasel, ha ha, their way through but if they got stuck she wasn't confident of her ability to get them unstuck. She wasn't a Curse-Breaker.

They needed a means of communicating. A two-way mirror would be useful. A headset radio would be better as it left her hands free. A Protean Charm with audio rather than text might do. There was also the difficulty in hiding such a device. She'd chosen coins because they were plausible pocket debris. Matching jewellery would be noticed.

Hermione changed into human to do another circuit of the lake. The sun was well up now though most of the students would still be snuggled in bed. Early Saturday morning in March in Scotland was not alluring. How did you wear something or carry something without in being noticed or removed? It had to be a physical object, she wasn't going to touch magical tattoos, though it didn't have to be large or complex.

“Rosier!” The petulant voice intruded. She turned to see Malfoy striding through the slush unencumbered by Crabbe or Goyle. He was wearing his silly fur hat that was probably very expensive. Ron had said it made him look like a ponce. She had to agree. “I want a word with you.”

“No.” Hermione said placidly once he was within conversational range. “That's a good word.”

“You can't avoid me forever.” He huffed, cheeks pink from his rush to intercept her. He looked rather cute in a china doll sort of way; painted finely and coolly. “We need to talk.”

“I haven't been avoiding you.” She said, being contrary for the hell of it. “I simply don't care for your company.”

“Rosier.” Malfoy gritted his teeth. Hermione smiled at him and his clenched fists. “This is important.”

“To you or to me?” Hermione asked, interested but not expecting much.

“To us.” He ground the words out. Continuing to be difficult about the conversation was unlikely to get him to bugger off if he hadn't stormed away already. Young Malfoy ran easily. It wasn't until Sixth Year when he stuck to something. To the great detriment of the school.

“I'm listening.” She conceded.

“Father finally got your grandfather's papers.” Getting into Rosier Hall had been arduous but that was apparently nothing to breaching the old man's study. Draco didn't know the details, which he resented. He wasn't a child! “Mother told me there's a betrothal contact between you and me.”

“So?” Hermione made a mental note to contact Gringotts for confirmation of any documents lodged. The goblins couldn't tell her much until she was of age but Harnak probably would give her the nod if the Malfoys were trying anything.

“You can't shrug off a binding concord.” Malfoy spoke sharply. Rosier seemed intent on ghosting through her obligations as though she wasn't webbed like the rest of them. “Father has lodged the contract with the Ministry. It'll be found to be legal.” He was sure of that. His father's influence would make certain. “Mother thinks the match suitable.”

“Again, so?” She took a breath. If he was actually trying to talk rather than dictate terms, she should at least try to parley. “We're not of age.”
“Don’t pretend to be obtuse. As the Head of the family, my father can marry me to whomever he likes. I’m not going to risk being disowned. As your guardian, Mother can endorse the contract.” He paused to watch her expression. Rosier was good. Her face was mostly blank all the time. Someone might mistake her for being as thick as Goyle if she wasn’t so precise in her retaliation when riled. “All she needs is your consent, and believe me, she’ll get it.”

“No, she won’t.” Hermione was adamant.

“Don’t brush this off!” Malfoy snapped then flinched back when she leaned towards him. Her breath on his ear when she whispered sent lightning down his spine. His hair prickled, standing on end in what he hoped was arousal not fear.

“Not even under Crucio.” She said implacably. “Trust me.”

He didn't but he was convinced and left quickly, absolutely not asking why she sounded so completely certain. His father was strict with discipline, though he had never used an Unforgivable on his heir. Mother wouldn't have allowed it despite her own parents being very traditional in their control of their children. Rosier's mother was missing. That detail sparked in his mind. He didn't think it unrelated to her certainty.

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The Muggle expression 'wearing a wire' had given her the idea. Magical objects didn't need to be functional. A pen could literally be mightier than a sword. All that mattered was whether the substance of the object could sustain the charms on it. You could enchant anything but the spells only lasted for as long as the physicality of the thing could sustain the energy. Paper decayed rapidly, diamonds were forever.

She chose gold because one of the pieces of Cathal's mother's jewellery Moppet had saved from the fire was a gold necklace. The circular chain links had melted and fused, which suited her purposes well. The metal was ductile enough for her to make wire without transfiguring it. Hermione wanted to limit the magical manipulation so the object was more resistant to a counter-spell.

The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths was unlikely to offer her an endorsement for her work. She did her best to smooth and shape the metal before imbuing it with magic in a series of 'shells'. Someone would have to pick apart the spells within the matrix rather than hitting the wire with a Finite. There would probably be some disruption but the communication device wouldn't fail totally as the counter-spell would hit the shell first. In theory.

On one end, Hermione used the Twins’ Extendible Ear Charm couched in a Muffliato, choking down the range of the first to millimetres and the radius of the second to three centimetres. On the other end went an Amplifying Charm. She then used a Protean charm at the maximum distance she could sustain a strong casting through Cathal. After that, she had a lie down. While pushing her spells was becoming easier, she could really understand now why Hogwarts had insisted on her needing time to master her magic in a new body.

She still had a headache on Monday, which made the clatter of repotting in Herbology especially painful. The Nifflers in Care of Magical Creatures kept trying to nibble on her hands and climb into her pockets. Before she left class, Professor Grubbly-Plank had to pat her down to make sure one of the little platypus creatures hadn't hitched a ride in her robes.

Double Divination hosted yet another dire prediction of doom for Harry Potter though this time from Ron throwing the bones. Hermione listened to him read his oculary tertia marvelling at how much he had got right. His Sibylline book was a ratty scroll that had obviously been squashed down the
bottom of his bookbag. Parvati and Lavender had tuatara skin journals they wrote in with silver ink and kept wrapped in bullock hide to protect against 'influences'.

It was with a great sense of relief that Hermione immured herself in her lab. Moppet popped in a few minutes later excited to try their new communication device. The witch braided the gold wire into the house elf's hair just behind her right ear, anchoring it tightly with a double sheet bend so it wouldn't slip. Moppet did the same for Hermione. The metal was cold against their skin and a noticeable weight but not otherwise irritating.

They went to opposite sides of the room and whispered to the wall before returning to exchange messages. The pair repeated this process so Hermione could fine-tune the volume and clarity. Once the transmission was good, they separated to walk around Hogwarts for an hour trying not to look daft as they talked to themselves.

“Success, I think.” Hermione observed when they were back in the laboratory. “Now let's see if the wire works in stoat form.”

Moppet watched fascinated as her friend changed into a white furry snake with whiskers. The tube critter skittered off into the corner and made noise. Moppet didn't know what she said though she did hear the chitters.

“Can Miss understand Moppet?” The house elf asked from her corner of the lab. There was high pitched happy sound in response. They returned to their chairs and Hermione changed back.

“I can understand you.” She combed her fingers through her hair, rumpled now from the morphing. “There's bound to be a spell for talking with animals. I'll try to find one that works for mustelids. I don't want to be stuck somewhere having to communicate with 'one squeak for no, two squeaks for yes'.”

“Miss is putting off going into the pipes.” Moppet observed.

“Yes.” Hermione confirmed on a long sigh. “I am really not keen on this plan.” She would do it though. However grotty, claustrophobic, or unsanitary the journey was, she needed to get into the Chamber of Secrets. “I'll go first day of the Easter Break, no quibbles. With luck, I'll be able to find a fairly dry pipe that leads directly there.”

Fortuna did not smile on Hermione.

She found an entire book on animal speech charms in the Care of Magical Creatures section. There was a spell specifically for stoats and martens, which worked and meshed reasonably well with the other charms on Moppet's wire. They put their heads together so Hermione could listen to a plummy voice translate her vocalisations and laughed at the ye olde phrasing. However, it was intelligible so her last excuse was gone.

True to her promise, on the first night of the holidays Hermione was in the corridor outside Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Her Map showed a rat's nest of pipes and conduits, intertwined like Medusa's hair. It stood to reason that the Basilisk would have used the most direct route available to it to respond to the Heir's call. Finding that route was the trick.

She scurried into the bathroom and used her claws to pry off the cover of a fairly clean smelling drain then wriggled her way into it. Hermione dropped down into a few centimetres of stagnant water and headed north. All the outflow pipes joined the large one the giant snake had evidently used, which was brick lined like a Victorian sewer with the addition of a narrow ledge on each side for the use of house elves when they did the mucking out.
According to Moppet, before a nineteenth century upgrade the plumbing of Hogwarts had been a hodgepodge of cess drains and water conjuration charms serviced by sluices that were perpetually prone to blockage. Headmaster Walter Aragon, a wizard obsessed with cleanliness, had overseen a refurbishment of the effluvia of Hogwarts. It was by his command that the main pipes were lit with safety lanterns to burn off the noxious gases, allowing Hermione to navigate by eerie bluish glow.

Down, around, in, out, and through she went following the large pipe. She didn’t expect to get to the Chamber on her first foray. This was a surveying expedition to add definition to her Map. There were bound to be defences and wards in Slytherin's bolt-hole. If she were trapped, she wanted to be able to give Moppet clear directions as to where she was.

Hermione changed back into human at every major junction to chalk coordinate runes on the brickwork. In the fullness of time, clinging to obstinate optimism, she would be able to use this cartography process as part of her Runes Mistressship. She had an idea to expand the system to allow point-to-point Apparition through magical barriers and shields. Which she would be keeping to herself until the defeat of Tom Riddle.

When the pipe took a sudden sharp bend upwards before doubling over on itself, Hermione paused. Her fur pricked and there was a odour in the air that overcame the rankness. She sniffed, which was not something she particularly wanted to do, to get a better scent. Ozone and burned metal with an undertone of hot terracotta tile. Retreating to what she hoped was a safe distance, the witch became human again.

St Elmo’s Fire danced from her fingertips.
Oracle

Her Muggle education gave her two vital pieces of information. Firstly, St Elmo's fire was ionised air, electrically supercharged into plasma. Secondly, electricity conducted better through water than air. Her common sense provided her with an additional nugget of data; after crawling through the sewer pipes she was quite damp.

“Tergeo!” Hermione cast quickly, siphoning the noisome liquid from her just before the static in the warped tunnel discharged spectacularly.

She came to on the ceiling with the after-image of the lightning vivid in her retina.

Hermione blinked as the world yawed and she slowly unstuck, peeling off like a soaked label to drop into the fetid water in the bottom of the pipe. It evaporated the instant she contacted as the residual magic in her clothes and skin caused a rapid change of state. The witch lay amidst what she charitably decided to call fertiliser to await the restoration of mental equilibrium.

“Ow.” Pain returned first, as it always did. The several times she had regained awareness after something exciting had all been accompanied by pain. Petrification? Muscles aching from being stiff. Dolohov's curse? Visceral agony worse than a thousand periods all at once with nausea for garnish. Bellatrix's tender attentions? Acid in her veins and fire in her nerves. Her first moments as Cathal? Panicked choking for breath.

Hermione got to her feet, cleaned herself, and mused that the only time she had suddenly returned to herself without it being heralded by discomfort was when she was in the unwoven moment just after the Battle. She'd felt nothing, which at the time had been just as bad as feeling something. Right now, with her hair standing on end and her skull full of fireworks Hermione would've happily opted for numbness.

“Moppet?” She touched the metal behind her ear. That wasn’t necessary for the communicator to work and she regretted it the moment her fingers brushed the gold, which sparked against her skin like a Stinging Jinx.

“Moppet hears the talky ear, Miss.” Moppet responded, a little tinny though perfectly audible.

“Did you just feel a magical release?” Hermione wanted to ask if the house elf had felt a disturbance in the Force except Moppet wouldn't get the reference.

“Moppet is cleaning windows. Moppet didn't feel anything but soapy.” After centuries of exposure to ambient magic even the dirt in Hogwarts was enchanted. A surprising amount of cleaning was done with mundane elbow grease.

“Can you come get me? I'm feeling a bit boggled.” She asked, leaning against the grubby brickwork as lights sparkled behind her eyelids. Hermione jumped when Moppet appeared a blink later. The house elf took her hand and popped them to the laboratory before cleaning them both with a snap of her fingers.

“What did Miss do? That place was all tingly.” Moppet peered at her suspiciously, noticing how very very shiny her witch was after only simple get-rid-of-dirt magic. She pulled out her wand and poked her friend with it. Sparkles danced around the end of the stick. “Miss is too magical.”

“I think I absorbed rather a lot of that discharge.” Hermione agreed, not sure whether she was up or down. “Best if I head back to my dorm and sleep it off.”
It was her suggestion but it was Moppet who towed her to the dungeons, patiently waiting for her to remember the password then escorting her to the currently empty Fourth Year girls' dormitory. Davis had stayed for the holidays while the other girls had returned home to join their families' Eostre ceremonies. Hermione was happy to be rid of them. In typically catty fashion, Pansy had said she wouldn't have invited her except the behaviour of the unicorns had made it obvious her presence wasn't appropriate for a vernal festival.

Moppet helped her off with her shoes then when she flopped filleted onto her bed the house elf snapped her fingers to strip her before inserting her into pyjamas. Tucking her witch under the covers, Moppet pulled the blankets up and drew the curtains. She walked three times widdershins around the bed so Hermione would be safe from mares while she slept.

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Hermione woke two days later thirsty. She went to the bathroom then put herself under the shower. She felt moderately alright. Not particularly well rested and the result of the Tempus Charm surprised her but nothing alarming. Studying herself scrubbed pink in the mirror she couldn't see anything odd. The plasma release didn't seem to have done anything to her other than discombobulate her. Nothing to stop her from returning to the tunnels.

Except she really didn't want to.

The idea made her sweat. Standing in front of the mirror, Hermione watched perspiration bead on her skin as she thought about traversing the tunnels again to find the Basilisk's route out of the Chamber. Her heart raced at the memory of the magical anomaly. She did not want to encounter it again. She wanted to stay far away from it.

Hermione got dressed, mulling over her psychological response. There was a distinct mental aversion to the idea of attempting to get to Slytherin's cellar. The notion was trying to stick itself in her head as something home-grown but after wearing a horcrux for months she knew the difference between her own instincts and a compulsion.

She went to breakfast, sitting at the denuded green table able to pick out the gaps in the red, blue, and yellow where pure-bloods were not. The traditional families insisted on their children returning home for the equinox, pegging the Easter holidays to the end of March regardless of the Paschal season in the Christian calendar. It would've been more convenient for the Muggle-borns and many half-bloods for the break to sync with the Muggle school holidays but the Hogwarts governors would never agree to that change.

Owls swooped in largely ignoring the Slytherin table. Hermione noticed Errol nearly clean up a bowl of yoghurt and remembered with a surprisingly searing burn the Snub of the Egg. Her other self made a good show of not minding the tiny offering from Molly but years later and secondhand it still rankled. She'd never really forgiven Ron's mother for believing the drivel written about her. Honestly, would it have been so difficult to send a letter asking for confirmation? Instead she got a passive-aggressive token gift to reinforce her pariah status.

Hermione, the headachy serpentine one, flinched when an owl landed heavily at her elbow. The bird ruffled its feathers importantly as she stared at the unfamiliar animal and the large parcel it had carried. She unfastened the strings then swapped the package for a plate of sausages, which the tired messenger tucked into greedily.

Due to past misfortune and present paranoia, Hermione swept her wand repeatedly over the wrapped box. No curses, hexes, jinxes, or suspicious liquids. Her fingers itched at the memory of the bubotuber pus. She untied the knots, pulling the paper away to reveal a letter and an enormous box
of Belgian haute chocolaterie.

The letter was from Flint and the Muggle chocolates, carefully not a suitable courting gift, were a thank you for his wonderful equinox. He had enjoyed a long walk in the woods celebrating the delights of spring. Hermione could see his wicked grin as she read. She'd forgive him his coy phrasing because he was so obviously happy. They weren't friends exactly but it was nice to know someone was having fun. And the chocolates were delicious.

Tracey Davis, austerely crisp as always, sat down on the same side of the table a few places down. Hermione watched her fill her plate with control, every gesture considered. She slid the chocolate box towards her. The Slytherin witch looked at her face not the offered dainties then took one with a nod. Hermione left the box where it was between them as she finished her own breakfast.

She had reached a blithe state of empty-headedness and toast consumption when Cathal's cousin Bastian joined her on the opposite bench. He paused before he sat to nod politely to the two witches within speaking distance before he settled himself. Hermione, disinclined to converse with the magical aversion to tunnels still rattling around in her skull, nudged the box of chocolates towards him in a silent welcome.

The Durmstrang wizard took a praline cautiously evidently not wanting to be so gauche as to query their origin or edibility. The 'Established 1857' under the maker's logo seemed to reassure him and he popped the sweet morsel into his mouth. Hermione gave him a few points for trying. Most of her Housemates would've turned their noses up at the Muggle chocolates.

"Tracey, this is my cousin Bastian Max." She wasn't sure if Davis had been introduced to any of the guests. For as much as she had been paying attention, the Slytherin older Years had seemed to have monopolised the company of the Durmstrangs. Networking, she presumed. "Bastian, this is my friend Tracey Davis."

They both looked at her speculatively as though she had committed a faux pas upon which they were too polite to call her out. Hermione had no idea what point of etiquette she had bent and opted to keep eating toast. That seemed to be about par with her mental functions at the moment. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself to return to the sewers, her mind kept sliding away from the intention.

Davis and Max returned to their own breakfasting after a perfunctory exchange to acknowledge the introduction. Hermione left them to the scrambled eggs, taking herself off to her laboratory to test the extent of her mental fog. When she got there an idea ambushed her and she pulled out the Map to ask for some advice.

"Voice, what can you tell me about the tunnel I was scouting?" She spread the vellum over her lap, zooming in on the section she had been exploring. The nest of conduits ended abruptly in a smudge.

"We see it now." The reply was quick, the tone meditative. "We believe the anomaly marks the border of the Founder Slytherin's wards. Our awareness of the conduit stops abruptly then resumes obliquely further on. We could see more if you explored more of the nebulous places."

"I think I've been cursed. It feels like a Repellent or Aversion effect." Hermione rolled her head. The tendons in her neck twanged. "It's like I'm concussed."

"Hogwarts provides its students with the services of a Matron. We understand the incumbent is a licensed Healer." The Voice said tartly as though it considered her delay in seeking medical attention a slight against the school.
“Believe me, I know.” She retorted as citric as it had been. Her association with Harry had eroded her tendency to give at the knee to authority but she still respected competence. While Pomfrey had never inquired too closely as to the origin of her patients' injuries, quite possibly inured to fibs, she unstintingly provided care. “I liked you better when you were Jocunda Sykes's head.”

“You threatened us with a sledgehammer.” The gestalt spirit reminded her.

“If I had a sledgehammer, you would be well down the list.” Hermione reassured then considered who would be at the head of the queue for a bludgeoning. Voldemort, after the horcruxes, then Bellatrix, Dolohov. Maybe Umbridge before him. Settling with the pink bitch was personal, and she doubted the curse in the Department of Mysteries had been anything more than generic malice. Who would round out the top five? Dumbledore, for sheer bitter frustration.

“Your silence does not bolster us.” The verbal prod jarred her out of contemplation of violence.

“I'm crawling through your bowels. I think I can be as sulky as I like.” She probably shouldn't put that remark down to pubescent hormones. Her own ingrained rancour more likely. However, as she wasn't actually fourteen and moody, Hermione apologised. “Sorry. My head is really bothering me.”

“There is... likely to be... dissonance.” The Voice spoke hesitantly, fading before the pauses then going completely silent for a long moment. “Pardon, we have been reminded that you are not entirely yourself.” There was another lacuna, which gave Hermione the impression Hogwarts was arguing with itself. “If a charm to repel Muggle-born magi set by Founder Slytherin lingered, the working would be erratic from long quiescence.”

“Erratic.” She mulled over that careful word. “Do you mean in trigger or in effect?”

“Your mentis is Muggle, your corpus is pure. The spell can affect your mind but it cannot anchor itself in your body.” This incarnation of the Voice was more conciliatory. It didn't say what Hermione was thinking so she did.

“Because you put me in Cathal, I'm not really me.” She took a sharp breath in. “Am I even human any more? Or am I some Inferius shambling around?”

“You are as green and vital as any other living being.” Hogwarts hastened to assure her. “The magics used to imbue your spirit within Cathal Rosier were Dark but not necromantic.”

“I'm going back to bed.” Hermione said on a groan. “I haven't an earthly chance of explaining this to Madam Pomfrey.” The hospital matron would either call for a Mind Healer or an exorcism.

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It took her the rest of the holidays to sleep off the effects of the Repellent ward. She slumbered fitfully, rousing at distant noises before rolling over and dropping off again. Her mind drifted through vignettes of not quite dreams, not quite memories. Arguing with Ron. Nagging Harry. Stirring endless potions. Riding bicycles that turned into Thestrals. Staring at shadows between winter-bare trees as the darkness convulsed into floating, hungry shapes. Walking through a silent, Escher castle with staircases twisting around her to constrict like pythons.

The only constructive thing she did during the rest of the break was to begin Moppet's lessons in wand use. House elf magic was different enough from the magic of witches and wizards that it seemed more efficient to teach her friend how to cast the foreign rather than the familiar. Jinxes instead of domestic charms, which Moppet could do with far more facility without her wand than with.
Hermione started with the Stinging Jinx, a useful deterrent spell that if done properly was quick to cast. It hurt enough on face or hand to cause someone to recoil if they were attempting to grab. Moppet quickly mastered the gesture and incantation but the borrowed wand was sluggish. They snuck into the Lost Wands room, where the house elf tested different magic sticks by trying to pop the brightly coloured balloons the witch created.

Hermione made a chart to log Moppet's relative success with wood and core. Most of the wands misplaced in the school had one of the three 'supreme' cores used by Garrick Ollivander as the majority of Hogwarts students bought their wands from the master wandmaker. Unicorn hair seemed to work the best for the house elf, particularly when paired with fir, oak, or mahogany. The balloons weren't much troubled yet by Moppet's jinxes however both of them were pleased with the progress of the lessons.

The witch's lessons when classes resumed were less heartening. In her other life, the final assignments for the year had always brought a sense of anticipation and trepidation. Her last chance to show her teachers how much she understood of their subjects before exams. That was Hermione. For Cathal, she spent three weeks quill to parchment to complete what was required of her. Even finding unusual sources to cite only padded the process by a week or so. It was astounding how much time she had when not towing Ron and Harry along scholastically.

There was still some dragging of the intellectually reluctant. Bole, Derrick, and Hearne continued to barter for tutoring services. Peregrine was a Seventh Year but he had been scouted by the Tutshill Tornados so he was only exerting himself sufficiently not to fail. Lucian's father was happy enough for his son to play Quidditch at school but did not consider a sporting career worthy of the heir of the oldest wizarding family in Hampshire.

Facing ambitious paternal expectations, Lucian was desperate to find any edge in his NEWTs he could and outright paid Cathal to partner him in the practicals for DADA, Charms, and Transfiguration. Those exams were most likely to have contested spell-casting, where the student had to undo a working set by the invigilator.

Hermione stood one arm raised with wand in hand and the other tucked behind her, hand resting at her waist with fingers curled around her second wand. She thought of this as her 'defensive' pose. She could hold her Shield Charm without being obvious she was sustaining it. The occasional hex kept Bole back at about ten metres so he had to actively target her not just cast wildly.

He was dogged, working through his repertoire to get a feel of the recoil when a spell deflected. Cursing wasn't like shooting a gun. Most curses sustained after release, attenuating but not breaking until they successfully hit their target. The more energy put into a spell, the more the caster felt it when the spell didn’t connect. A straight out miss dissipated. Hitting someone's Shield or a ward gave feedback. Being taken by surprise by that little jolt could interrupt the necessary concentration for the next spell.

“Nimue's tree.” Bole huffed, wiping sweat off his face with his sleeve like a grubby Muggle. He was tired and frustrated from trying to figure out a sequence of curses that would look good in the exam that he could chain cast without stumbling. Being able to cast multiple spells in quick succession was not one of his talents. He wasn't built for speed. One big hammer blow then a bit of a breather was more his style.

“Try something simpler in between the power.” Hermione suggested, keeping her Shield up in case he tried to be cunning. He shot a Disarming Charm at her, which bounced off the shimmer in front of her. Bole huffed again then put his wand away. She didn't drop her defence until he bowed to signal their sparring match was over. Protocol was important.
“Don’t let Flint hear you say that. He’s full arm all the time.” Lucian cleaned himself up with a quick charm done sloppily. He’d need a wash but he wasn’t clammy any more. The witch’s flat look made him clarify. “Quidditch, Rosier.” His former team-mate had been careful not to say anything formal, romantic, or lustful about his house guest. “Not a personal remark.”

“There’s nothing between Flint and me.” Hermione felt she should say that in view of the hemi-contract between her and Malfoy.

“Of course. Never thought it.” Bole said automatically. It didn’t need to be uttered that there’d be a queue for Rosier once she passed her OWLs and could be legally called a witch. There weren’t that many decent witches from the Sacred Twenty-Eight families. The Carrows and the Greengrasses had a couple each and then there was Parkinson. Everyone else was either a half-blood or worse a blood traitor. He was quite glad his family didn’t have to keep to the gentry. An ordinary pure-blood girl would be fine for him.

Hermione resolved to talk to Harnak her vault manager to see if the goblins could run interference for her over any betrothal contracts. She wasn’t sure if they could and they certainly wouldn’t do it out of kindness. She didn’t trust anyone else to help. Once she was seventeen, she could transfer some of Cathal’s money into a Muggle account or even out of the country so she and Moppet could bolt. That was the worst case however. She’d sooner fort up in the depths of the castle to wait out the Battle.

On that theme, Hermione used some of her spare time and the seasonal addition of fresh fruit to the meals to continue to experiment with food preservation spells. Thus far no one spell worked for everything so her hope to sneak servings from the kitchen seemed a pipe dream. She could can, dehydrate, freeze, pickle, or salt just about anything; one type of food at a time. Preserving a ham and salad sandwich involved disassembling it first.

Magic had its limits. Stasis spells were notoriously fiddly and the sort of magical sleep spell Dumbledore had used on the hostages for the Second Task only worked on sapient. Keeping sixty kilos of hamburger in suspended animation was technically possible and would prevent spoilage, and likely put the person sustaining the spell into a coma.

Hermione was frustrated. She was far from the only one. The Seventh and Fifth Years were snappish, the First Years fretful, and the rest were bored and restless. Ludo Bagman had briefed the Champions on the Third Task but the actual details were being kept very hush-hush. Everyone not anxious over their exams was scheming and talking about the Tournament.

More than once, Hermione noticed her fellow Slytherins talking to their hands. It was an open secret in the dungeons that Salazar’s Own had a direct line to the Daily Prophet. All the most succulent gossip splashed onto the tabloid courtesy of Rita fucking Skeeter. More than once Hermione found herself contemplating how many newtons of force she would need to crush a beetle.

She kept herself busy to keep her mind off what was coming. In between classes and tutoring, Hermione spent a lot of time in the greenhouses generally helping out. That garnered her some clippings she carefully re-potted and stashed in a neglected colonnade between the Bell Towers where there was plenty of light. Moppet promised to water the plants over summer.

June crawled by. Hermione tried not to flinch every time she saw Cedric Diggory. She was going to let him die. Intellectually, she knew the events in the graveyard were out of her hands. The Killing Curse had happened. Without Cedric there, it could be Harry who died. If she stole the Cup or sneaked into the maze to take the Portkey herself or told the Headmaster or any of the dozens of ‘what if’ plans she could devise, she could make it worse.

That didn’t mean she had to watch.
While the staff and students of Hogwarts, the contingents from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, the media, the families of the Champions, and select Ministry bigwigs ogled a hedge maze, Hermione got a little revenge.

Harry had told her what happened when Moody-Crouch had confronted him. How the Death Eater had rummaged ineffectually through his potion stores trying to find more Polyjuice. He'd run out, which had surprised her friend when he'd had later considered it. Barty's whole plan hinged on passing for Moody. He should've had hogsheads of the brew.

When Hermione let herself into the DADA Professor's office, she was careful. Crouch wasn't quite as paranoid as the pukka Auror but he was no slouch. The presence of students curtailed the lethality of the defences though there were still some nasty hexes. She went slowly, suspending what she could. She only needed a short time. The imposter would probably be agitated enough not to notice the precise details of his wards. She didn't want to chance it though.

Hermione crossed the room methodically Vanishing every liquid she could find. Maybe she would have been better off purloining Crouch's stash. That would certainly have been more efficient. She didn't have a pressing need to pretend to be Moody or trust a Death Eater not to have something really toxic creatively mislabelled. So away into non-being everything went.

She was tempted to free Moody from the locked chest. He needed medical attention. It wouldn't come from her however. He wouldn't trust a Slytherin and if she was going to condemn Diggory salving her conscience with first aid seemed self-indulgent. There would be no feeling better about letting people die because she wanted to be right about the future. Hermione wasn't going to absolve herself of anything until she stopped the unravelling of the tapestry. Then, only then, could she explain and hope she wasn't damned.
Snape's absence kissing the hem of his master made Hermione's exit from Hogwarts at the end of term effortless. She boarded the train with all the other students, avoided Harry like all the other students bar her other self and Ron, and sat in a carriage with a load of very silent Slytherins. Owls had been flying laps between Hogwarts and the homes of the prominent families since the end of the Tournament. Hermione would've bet pounds of Galleons most of her Housemates had been instructed to keep mum.

Madam Flint was on the platform when the train pulled in. She shouldered her way through the scrum like a rugby forward, shook her head when Hermione opened her mouth to ask why the rush and took her arm firmly to escort her out of the crowd. A contingent of Slytherins with their parents or guardians marched to the Georgian terrace house, all in silence.

Once inside out of sight of the Muggle throng, Eglantine Apparated them to Flint Manor. The wards hit Hermione like a bucket of cold water. Her hostess towed her through the invisible defences thence into the lady's wing of the house. The younger witch had a brief moment to notice the carvings on the front door were writhing before the dread portal slammed shut.

“My son is about somewhere, probably playing with his broom.” Madam Flint sneered, shedding her outer robe to leave herself in a kirtle with a knife at her belt. She looked very Anglo-Saxon lacking only a wimple over her braided hair. “I would have sent him to fetch you but that would be too much, too soon.” She bit back a curse as she eyed the still girl. “Much has changed as I expect you know.”

“Potter said the Dark Lord was back.” Hermione wasn't sure what to say so she went with the obvious. Madam Flint nodded crisply. She didn't look best pleased.

“You'll do as your family compels, of course, but the Flints are neutral.” Her pinched mouth twisted further as she struggled to keep a cold mien. They had been informed of the renaissance. It had been couched as an invitation on green trimmed Malfoy stationary. An amnesty for the callow. “My brother will play the coquette. Baldwin's nothing if not pragmatic.”

“His heir is a child.” She thought about how many of the pure families had only one male to inherit the name and how easily Atropos could cut that thread.

“Amalric be at Hogwarts next year, far from the protections of home.” Eglantine wasn't a fool. She knew she could be chatting with a chit who might betray her. When the Rosiers committed, they went all in. There were certain obligations that even the fanatics acknowledged however. The laws of hospitality should be sacrosanct. “I expect my own son will also be far from home.”

There was a declaration there. Hermione heard it. She didn't know what to do. This sort of hinting wordplay wasn't her forte. Ravenclaw egotism with their riddles didn't appeal. Cathal might be a Slytherin by blood but as Slytherin's ward had painfully demonstrated, she was a Mudblood inside. There was never any doubt which side she would be on. She didn't want to face Flint behind a mask on the other.

“Marcus is certainly good enough to play internationally.” Hermione wished to convey her endorsement of him decamping for distant shores without outright saying he should run and hide. She received a stolid look from his mother then a nod.

The matter was not discussed again.
This summer was noticeably more subdued. Marcus was on compulsory rest after a head injury and was grumpy with it. The Falmouth team Medi-witch had put a velocity limiting curse on him so no broom he flew could go faster than twenty kilometres an hour or make sharp turns. He drifted around the grounds of the Manor bored enough to offer to teach her how to fly.

“I really don't enjoy it.” Hermione objected, feeling a bit of a wuss at refusing to join him on a flying object slower than a bicycle.

“Is it heights or control?” Marcus asked, legs dangling to brush the turf as they strolled around the north lawn.

“Control.” She answered promptly. Having flown on brooms, Thestrals, dragons, and airplanes, Hermione was sure which aspect of hurtling through the air distressed her most. “Everything’s happening too fast and I’d have to take a hand off the broom to use my wand.”

“Climb on in front.” He offered. “An arthritic crup could outpace us. I've a height cap curse on me too.” His unlovely face twisted into a wry smirk. “I miss Madam Pomfrey dosing us and kicking us out. The team Healers all fuss.”

“How long were you unconscious exactly?” Hermione inquired tartly as she straddled Flint's Cleansweep. It was his childhood broom, the one he kept for tooling around. There was no point getting out his Nimbus as it was built for speed and had a tendency to stall when throttled down.

“Olly already scolded me like a fishwife.” The smirk turned subtly into a smile. He didn't mind getting the rough side of his boyfriend's tongue particularly when that tongue was used next to kiss him.

“You're spending too much time with Muggles.” He chastised, leaning forward to correct her grip. “We don't leave home until marriage. It's just not done. People would think I've been disowned.”

“If you got married, where would you live? Being in no man's land between your parents can't be fun.” Although the elder Flints didn't quarrel, their conversations were as warm as a slap across the face. Most of the time they communicated via house elves but when the unavoidable family meals occurred it felt like hostage negotiations.

“The Manor's large enough. I’d have the top floor of the central wing as the private family area. A suite for me and one for my wife, the big room at the front with the windows as the nursery then clear out the storage rooms for bedrooms as needed.” Flint shrugged, careful not to make the broom buck. “My grandparents lived up there while their sons were small. Once my father received his Hogwarts letter, they dissolved their marriage and grandfather moved to the dower house.”
“Why the dower house?” Hermione had got the impression Gerard was the younger son, meaning once he started school the Manor would’ve been empty three-quarters of the year.

“Half-blood mistress. She couldn't cross the wards.” He leaned into a slow turn to skirt a hedge then positioned them side on to the hazel so he could show Rosier how to turn with the weight of her body rather than trying to push the handle.

“Is that why your father is so against anything but a traditional marriage?” The question ended in a stifled curse as the broom tipped them towards the hedge. She grabbed tightly with her legs, accidentally smacking Flint in the shin with her heel.

“Ouch, Rosier.” He complained, guiding them over until they were at forty-five degrees to the shrubbery. “Trust yourself.” He put a hand out to brush the leaves, shifting them over further. “The broom wants to work with you.”

“Lies.” Hermione huffed. Flint chuckled, a much softer sound when it wasn't directed against her.

“You're not playing competitively. Wear a balancing charm and a Featherfall. Then if you come off, you'll drift down like a leaf. Conscious or not.” If they were to marry, there wasn't another witch in his pitch, he'd like to fly with her. He wouldn't drag her to Quidditch matches but some token interest in a huge part of his life would be nice. “Probably, yes. Father took his mother's dismissal quite personally.”

“Which is why he stays with your mother.” Her question received an affirmative grunt. He tilted them slowly back to upright then away from the hedge to turn a full languid circle. “Do you think he would, truly, kill over it?”

“Not a pure-blood but yes.” Flint sighed. His father had made a Herculean effort to impress upon him the standards of behaviour expected of the heir. Along with his morals, ethics, opinions, interests, and friends. “He'd convince himself he's doing it for the good of the family. He wouldn't muck about.”

“See if you can wangle a transfer to an overseas team. The States or Australia. Out of sight, out of mind.” She urged. His arms tightened against her and suddenly they weren't talking about his love life.

“I'm not a coward.” He steered the broom into the centre of the lawn where he could do feint drills. Marcus needed something to keep busy while he thought unquiet thoughts. “I should stay. We all should stand up to defend the old ways.”

“He's a half-blood.” Hermione said quietly despising herself for playing the race card. Flint might be screwing Oliver but she doubted he considered him a social equal. “Muggle raised. Mother told me. Grandfather told her. All the Old Guard know.”

“Fuck.” Marcus drew out the word into a groan. They drifted about on the broom as Flint processed what she had told him. Hermione tried a few turns herself, trusting him to be too distracted to surprise her with any stunt tricks like Ron always did trying to show off. Riding a broom was not at all like riding a horse or a bicycle. It responded far faster and posture affected altitude. She spun out over-correcting a climb, sending them whipping across the lawn at head height.

“Here, like this.” Flint steadied them with his knees, leaning his weight back to brake. “You fly like a German. Too much throttle.”
“I’m half Max.” Hermione reminded him. He made an amused noise as he dropped them back onto the grass. She hopped off the Cleansweep and rubbed her legs. They ached as did her lower back. She needed a long soak.

“You going to find sanctuary with them?” He shouldn’t ask. The less he knew, the less he could tell. But she was young. He forgot sometimes. Looking at her now windblown and pink, Marcus recalled she wasn't fifteen yet.

“No.” The flat absolute got her a raised eyebrow. All the Slytherins tried to mimic Snape's cynical quirk. “I thought about it and they're trying for custody but I'm a poisoned chalice.”

A terse jerk of his chin was all the answer Flint gave. As the product of a hundred generations of British magi, he understood the weight of legacy. There were certain things you did because the inertia of history was impossible to resist. He could shelter behind his parents’ neutrality, citing his stance as filial duty. Anyone fostering Cathal also got the full serve of toxic blood superiority personified by her paternal Death Eater relatives. Some stains didn't wash off.

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There was a noticeable increase of invitations to Cathal via Madam Flint. They were brought, opened, to the morning room after her chaperone had inspected them. Hermione flicked through the requests then added them to the tally; she had a little spreadsheet to track the source, frequency, and activity of her post. She didn't go to many, just to the Radnotts where she faux-coincidentally saw Theo and to the Ministry, where she was informed of the confirmation of her status as Narcissa Malfoy's ward. A large contingent of Maxs stood like aspens as their petition for her custody failed.

Hermione hadn't wanted to attend but the official summons could not be ignored. The hearing room at the Ministry brought back unpleasant memories of stealing the locket from Umbridge, recollections that led inexorably to Ron lying Splinched and bleeding. She kept herself focussed by reviewing the results of her Potions experiments. Four years of stewing nettles had paid some dividends.

“Miss Rosier.” A voice rose above the droning of the clerks to interrupt her thoughts. A stocky, hard faced blond wizard took a seat beside her. There must be a factory somewhere, Hermione thought disjointedly. Or inbreeding was starting to show. She hadn't noticed before how similar Yaxley and Lucius Malfoy looked. The former was craggier and less of a dandy but the likeness was there. It was possible they shared ancestors with the Max family too.

“Sir.” Hermione acknowledged his arrival politely, not cursing him mostly because there were too many witnesses. He was on her Lock Up and Throw Away the Key List. Anyone within spitting distance of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission would be tried. She'd make it a linchpin of her career to see justice done. Or rather Hermione Granger would. Cathal Rosier would be lucky to get a job sweeping the streets after the war was over.

Yaxley didn't speak to her as the hearing wound down. He just sat there between her and the exit as Gustav Max was refused custody of his niece on the grounds he wasn't a British citizen. His advocate objected, citing Cathal's dual nationality in jus sanguinis. The Malfoys' advocate then trotted out her heiress status, stating that while Narcissa was Sacred Twenty-Eight and could be presumed to be unmoved by Cathal's exalted position, the Max family was not. Thus might be tempted to use the young witch for political gain instead of guiding her gently through the shoals of society.

Hermione's poorly suppressed laugh at the pompous phrasing caused everyone to look at her. Mostly out of boredom, she presumed. They'd been at it for more than an hour moving paper back and forth between their desks and the desk of the magistrate, a wizard with a beard like a thorn bush. She was
almost sure he'd nodded off at one point during a particularly droning speech.

“Do you wish to make a submission, Miss Rosier?” One of the clerks inquired. He wore a narrow cylindrical hat like a shako denoting he was the Notary of Letters, the person who adjudicated in matters of references and case law. He also acted as stenographer as this was a familial hearing not a civil one. Before a ruling changed anything from the established traditional procedure, it was his responsibility to cross-check it with previous edicts.

“May I inquire as to the legal standing of my mother's guardianship?” Hermione asked, hoping she had phrased it correctly. She'd read a lot about Ministry procedures when helping Hagrid defend Buckbeak but Byzantine did not begin to describe the complexity of the British magical legal system.

Her question caused some diffident parchment shuffling. She hadn't heard anything from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. That could be due to the Malfoy post embargo, her status as a minor or because the Aurors had nothing conclusive to say. No one had asked her any official questions. From the inhibited glances exchanged by the advocates, no one was going to fetch the thumbscrews.

“Due to the circumstances of your mother's...” The magistrate spoke up with a disdainful look at the court. He had the air of a man keen to call a spade a tool with a metal blade and a long handle used for digging or cutting earth, turf etc. “Departure.” He settled on an acceptable euphemism. “Madam Rosier has been listed as insensate for the purposes of your governance. It falls to her blood kin to petition for clarification of her mortal status.”

That was probably the most about the bush beating description of 'missing presumed dead' Hermione had heard. There had been a lot of variations on that theme during the war. Absent was the usual one. Or 'haven't heard from' with a stilted pause because no one had wanted to say dead. They'd all tried not to think about it.

“In that case, I wish to petition for emancipation.” She probably didn't have the Galleons to sustain a legal challenge. This ploy was mostly to put the cat among the pigeons, which was a slightly more genteel way of giving the Ministry the Finger.

Some more shuffling happened, this time purposeful. The Maxs were dismissed but the case remained open, which had the unexpected benefit of temporarily suspending Narcissa Malfoy's guardianship pending resolution. Hermione tried not to grin at that. She hadn't realised all custody arrangements were on hold otherwise she would've challenged sooner.

The downside to having no guardian was she became a ward of the Ministry. This entailed being packed off to a poky cottage among rolling grassy hills with a matron and a house elf. The witch tasked with ensuring she didn't run amok was a middle-aged, Muggle-born ex-Auror disinclined to give a pure-blood heiress a millimetre far less an inch.

Hermione wondered if the choice of accommodation and supervision was calculated to make her regret her petition. Probably. Her wand was confiscated. Her belongings, sent from Flint Manor, were inspected for contraband. She was forbidden to leave the cottage although she was allowed to sit in the garden so long as she remained within view of the kitchen window. A needless prohibition as she was fairly sure she had a Tracking Charm on her.

Several things were missing from her belongings. Madam Flint or possibly Marcus had kept back the more esoteric of her books as well as her randoseru with the Undetectable Extension Charm. Nothing had been sent that would raise an Auror's eyebrow although the knives that came with her Potions kit had also been seized.
She was allowed private visits with her Ministry appointed Advocate but no one else. He was constrained by client confidentiality, which he affirmed with a wand oath. Hermione asked him his fee rate then handed over most of what Bole had paid her to secure his services until the beginning of term. He didn't ask where she had got the money. He did tell her the address of the cottage.

If she concentrated on thinking positively about spending a year on the run from Snatchers, Hermione could list her extensive knowledge of British geography in the 'pro' column. She knew now roughly where she was; in the north-western part of the Cotswolds. Heading west, in a few kilometres she'd reach the vicinity of Cheltenham.

Sitting in the garden under a lime tree, Hermione contemplated doing a runner. She could call Moppet and they could hide themselves in the horsey crowd within minutes, giving her enough of a head start to cast concealment wards with her spare wand. The standard Tracking Charm was good to about five metres. More than enough to find her in a field but not as helpful on a crowded Muggle street.

They could do it.

Or she could grit her teeth and sit out the few weeks remaining until term being a good girl doing what she was told. That rankled more than it should. Hermione had run through what felt like a lifetime supply of compliance already. She should have rebelled more, defied more and now she was constrained by the unwritten future she badly didn't want to blot.

If she legged it, hid among the ordinary folk of Gloucestershire then popped up at Kings Cross in time for the Express, what would she gain? Hermione frowned at the book on her lap. A surfeit of smug self-satisfaction at escaping house arrest. Some more time to do illicit things before school. Not much more than that, honestly.

She still needed to get her books for Fifth Year. Hermione asked her warder Mrs Leeson if she could go shopping in Diagon Alley. No, she could not. Could she go accompanied by her Advocate? No. Could she go escorted by Mrs Leeson herself? No. Could she have an owl to shop by postal order? No.

What she could do was wait patiently for the approved Book List, which would be then be forwarded to the Department of Magical Education, where from someone would purchase the necessary supplies on her behalf. There was no need for her to buy anything else or go anywhere. Miss Rosier was to stay in the cottage and mind her manners.

Neither Hermione Granger nor Cathal Rosier took that tone from anyone.

But both witches were patient.

Hermione sat in the garden reading and slogging through Occlumency exercises. She had found one that worked particularly well in compartmentalising emotion. It crystallised, for want of a better analogy, the feeling. That cohesion made the associated memory easier to extract with the Memoria Charm used in tandem with a Pensieve.

MACUSA had an intriguing range of memory potions they used in law enforcement. Some had been superseded by more refined charms but the brewing processes were well documented and had been released to the public. She had researched memory magic extensively, obsessively, before Obliviating her parents.

One of the variant potion media she had been tinkering with since First Year made potions into candy-like hard lozenges. She'd spent a fair amount of time brewing that base as it showed promise
for portability and disguise. If she overheated the potion it bubbled, forming hollow glassy spheres instead of solid lumps. Hermione had dropped one of the congealed bubbles and it had shattered impressively, releasing the potions effects. Her laboratory floor had not been in need of healing so the magic had dissipated ineffectually. She'd made note of it, though.

Mrs Leeson allowed Miss Rosier to do her summer homework for Potions. All wand and knife use was carefully supervised and the weapons surrendered afterwards but for the actual fiddly brewing bit the matron left her alone. She had inspected Cathal's supplies and found nothing beyond the expected. Hermione kept all her semi-legal or dangerous ingredients in her lab. She didn't want to explain to anyone why she had enough aconite to kill a giant.

The process was relatively straightforward. Hermione used the Occlumency trick to isolate a memory with an intense emotion. She put the silvery thread into the most banal of the MACUSA potions, having brewed it with the variant base. Then she left it on the heat to boil. Carefully, she scooped out the blown glass bubbles and let them harden in the air.

At an opportune moment when Mrs Leeson's back was turned, Hermione threw one at her to see what happened.

The glimmering sphere shattered on impact leaving an iridescent residue. The contact was a bit more than a soap bubble popping, a bit less than a water balloon. Enough to notice if you weren't distracted. The ex-Auror spun around with her wand up then recoiled as the emotion, fear in this case, took effect. Hermione stood there with her hands empty and arms at her sides as non-threatening as she could project.

Mrs Leeson was suspicious after that and more watchful but she couldn't prove her charge had done anything other than startle her. Miss Rosier was allowed to continue her brewing. Hermione opted to do her actual homework as the matron now watched her from start to finish. The rest of the fearful bubbles she scattered around the cottage to observe their reaction to temperature and humidity.

Her experiment yielded some interesting results. The little spheres were hygroscopic like sugar glass, softening after a few hours into a syrup. The residue could be reheated and reformed with minimal alteration of effect though there was quite a bit of wastage doing so. If chilled with a Freezing Charm, the bubbles lasted significantly longer. And by the end of the summer, Mrs Leeson loathed the sight of her.
High bright early on September 1st Hermione made herself breakfast. There was a house elf at the cottage. Mrs Leeson had informed her of the third occupant as soon as she had arrived. She had also told her charge that other than dinner, which was by Ministry mandate a hot meal, there would be no catering. Cathal Rosier presumably had never prepared her own food and thus would find feeding herself an onerous chore.

Hermione made French toast for one, drank the last of the orange juice, and told herself she was a petty bitch. She had at the beginning of her stay made scrambled eggs for two, thinking the consideration would demonstrate to the matron that she was behaving herself. Mrs Leeson had let her plate of eggs get cold while eating toast she had prepared herself. The ex-Auror refused to eat anything her charge made.

Her books, all second-hand, had been delivered the day before. No thrift had been spared with the school supplies, which made Hermione smile as she had bought herself the same brand of thin ink the previous year. It smudged easily but it also cleaned up well with a Tergeo. Once she got to Hogwarts, she could owl order any extras though Cathal went through far less stationary than Hermione 'Extra Foot of Parchment' Granger.

Probably because of 'Constant Vigilance' Mrs Leeson and an Auror frogmarched her to Platform 9¾. They didn't release their grip or hand over her wand until she was installed in an open compartment. The two of them stayed on the platform as the Express pulled out of the station just in case she tried to sneak off the train.

“What did you do, Rosier?” Justin Finch-Fletchley hadn't spoken when the stern guards had deposited the Slytherin among the Fourth and Fifth Year Hufflepuffs, no doubt assuming the Badgers would raise the alarm if the Snake tried to escape. He asked now as the train chugged along and Rosier tucked her wand away up her sleeve.

“Petition for emancipation from my guardian.” Hermione replied. She could try to find a compartment but she expected they were all full. There had been a swarm of First Years on the platform. This year's intake looked to be the largest she'd seen.

“You can do that?” Justin thought the Americans had some way to divorce your parents but that was very Hollywood and he didn't think the British legal system had the same provision. After the summer he'd had, the idea of distancing himself from his vituperative mater and pater was alluring. Only the dire legal consequences of not finishing his OWLs had kept his parents from hauling him out of Hogwarts.

“In theory.” She expected to receive a custody notice as soon as her payment to her Advocate ran out. “Most of the legislation exists so half-bloods can be adopted by magical families and shed any inconveniently Muggle relatives.”

“None of that talk, Rosier.” A slightly pompous if sincere Ernie Macmillan told her off, his chest puffed up to display his Prefect badge as a silent dare for her to object at his castigation. Hermione reached into her pocket, the Hufflepuffs noticeably tensed, and pulled out her own badge. Hogwarts had got its wish that Rosier not Parkinson became a Prefect in Fifth Year. She pinned on the green and silver shield.

“Meeting in the Prefects' Carriage, Macmillan?” Hermione asked mildly.
“I see Slytherin House continues its fine tradition of selecting its Prefects based on lineage rather than ability.” Ernie had worked damn hard to keep his marks up in Third and Fourth Year, to demonstrate dedication and put him in contention for Prefect. Hannah had worked hard too and been unflaggingly helpful to her fellow Hufflepuffs. Rosier wasn’t a bad student but she was hardly a frontrunner.

“I'm sure your nine generations of witches and warlocks are very proud of you.” She retorted, quoting him from Second Year when he thought Harry was the Heir of Slytherin. Macmillan's face tightened but he visible restrained himself from starting a spat in front of the younger students. They walked in silence to the front carriage.

Granger was already there bustling about with parchment while Weasley looked bored. They smiled at Macmillan. Hermione had to watch their expressions change to dismay when they noticed her a pace behind. Ron scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. After momentary hesitation, the other Hermione straightened. Conscientious to a fault.

“Macmillan, Rosier, good to see you. The older Prefects are still doing the rounds. I'd hoped we could get a framework for the roster sorted before we got into the meeting proper.” She paused to take a breath, spine very straight as she braced for a comment from the Slytherin.

“Most of us are taking Astronomy. There will be a shortage of people who can fill the late patrol on those nights.” Hermione considered not talking to herself but a little bit of willing before Malfoy showed might set her up as reasonable. She planned to let Granger do all the organising. She had the first time when the Slytherins thought it beneath their dignity. Keeping her identities straight was starting to give her a headache.

“The NEWT students have their classes on different nights to the Fifth Years so we'll be able to stagger it somewhat.” Hermione began making notes on a roster. Hermione watched herself block out what she knew of the older Years' timetable, which was fairly static year to year. Then she sat down and stared out of the window until the urge to scream passed.

When the first train patrol was done, Patricia Stimpson and Roger Davies, the Head Girl and Head Boy, swept in to be crisp and dictatorial. They'd both done their time as Prefects pulling the weight of slackers from the Lions and the Snakes. They'd seen how Percy Weasley had to crack the whip with his own House so they were keen to assert their authority.

Hermione listened quietly thinking that Davies had quite a bit of literary conceit; he was fond of dropping quotes. Stimpson was more to the point like a newsreader. Hermione vaguely recalled her Muggle father was someone in broadcast journalism. Her style didn't seem to sit well with the Slytherins. Warrington muttered 'pushy cow' when she'd finished. A bit of culture shock there probably.

The rest of the train journey was routine, with some badge flaunting from the Fifth Years. When she got to the green carriages, Hermione noticed Parkinson was sulking. Greengrass looked serene. Bulstrode and Davis looked relieved. None of them were ostentatious with their expressions but long suspicion gave her an edge in deciphering their feelings. They at least trusted her not to be a martinet.

The Sorting Feast took ages with the large intake of First Years and Umbridge's interruption. Hermione sat very straight with her back to the Hall, grinding through Occlumency exercises while trying not to envision her hands around the pink bitch's throat. She repeated the mantra 'she lives so we can find the real amulet' until the words ceased to have meaning and she lost her appetite to a sick headache.

The induction of the new students took precedence over her migraine. Hermione had two years of
practise at the Prefect spiel so she breezed through the 'pointing and warning' part of the orientation. Professor Snape took over the 'dire punishment' aspect then sent the little Snakes to bed. He called a meeting for the Prefects in a posh parlour down the hall from his office. The wing chairs were covered in serpentine chintz.

Their Head of House spoke with heavy emphasis about decorum and the high standard to which they were held, his expectations of them thrown down like a gauntlet. Hermione's precognition gave her a wondrous understanding of his double meanings that she wouldn't have picked up if she hadn't known how miserable this year was going to be. When Snape warned them not to be too inquisitive, she had to fight down a bitter laugh.

Hermione slunk off to her laboratory as soon as she had a moment. Moppet was there hexing old cushions. Downy feathers covered the floor. She shuffled her feet as she traversed the fluffy debris; kicking clouds. They hugged before getting down to conspiracy.

“If Umbridge can torture children, she'll do the same or worse to house elves.” Hermione warned, knocking back a glass of pumpkin juice to wash away the metallic taste in her mouth. She’d bitten her tongue every time Madam Inquisitor had done that irritating little cough. “She's a sadist. Warn all the elves. She becomes acting Headmistress.”

“Moppet will hex the bad witch.” Moppet flourished her wand to disembowel a pillow.

“You'll have to join the queue.” She rubbed her temples. She'd crystallise her anger and store it for later. That emotion would probably work just as well as fear in the bubbles but flinging rage around would not keep the peace. Getting it out of her head would be enough. “When I get my schedule tomorrow, we'll organise when we can meet. I didn't get as much work done this summer as I'd hoped. Bloody Ministry oversight. I'll need to get some letters out before Umbridge starts reading the mail.”

“Moppet can take messages out of Hogwarts for Miss.” The house elf offered. She had missed her witch over the holidays and wanted to help.

“Thanks but I'd rather you keep your head down. I don't want anyone tattling on you.” Hermione shook her head. “I think the best thing we can do for now is meet regularly to practice.” She paused as a thought occurred. “Could you sneak into the Room of Requirement while the DA are inside? You could get lessons from them.”

“Moppet wants Miss to teach Moppet.” Moppet said stiffly, pointing her wand at her witch. “You not be so rude. Moppet knows hexes.”

“I apologise for hurting your feelings.” She hadn't meant to seem like she was fobbing off her friend. “Of course I'll keep teaching you. What I mean is watching Dumbledore's Army train will help you with your spells too. I learned a lot.” Time to grasp the nettle. Hermione had put off trying to cast the Patronus Charm for sensible reasons. Still, she had to acknowledge to herself that she had been putting it off. “Expecto Patronum!”

A silvery stoat appeared then jumped startled and began whiskering everything in sight, sniffing around and peering at both of them with bright, wary eyes. Hermione let her breath out. First time. Same memory. She hadn't lost it. Her otter had changed but she had rather expected that given her Animagus form. The sleek mustelid dove into the mess of feathers and disappeared.

“Umbridge is useless as a DADA teacher. We worked really hard to make sure we could pass our OWLs.” She spoke quietly as she stared at the spot where the spectral animal had been. When the dark things came for her, she'd have one more weapon to fight them with. “I can't spend the time
with you I'd like. If you can, spectating on Harry's tutoring would be great. I'd go again if I could.”

“Moppet says sorry too.” The house elf put her wand away. She'd never spell Miss. She had been hurt that her witch had sounded like she didn't want to spend time with her. “Moppet will try to get into the Come and Go Room all quiet.”

They chatted for a bit longer before tiredness and unpacking duties called them away. Hermione forewent a shower for a cleaning charm, crawled into her pyjamas thence into her bed, pulling the curtains shut against the chatter of her dorm-mates. She slept heavily, waking with a cotton mouth as the alarm spell on her pillow buzzed.

It was early. She showered extra thoroughly feeling a bit fetid from not bathing the night before. Hermione stared at herself in the mirror, making faces as she braided her hair into a long rope. Clean if not bushy-tailed, she dressed and warded her trunk. After writing several letters in the Common Room, she trekked up to the Owlery before heading into breakfast.

When the post came, it was like Christmas. The expected letter from her Advocate informing her regretfully et cetera of the dismissal of her petition. Madam Flint had sent her randoseru, her dodgy potions ingredients in brown paper parcels, and a set of Hogwarts textbooks. Someone had sent her anonymously a novelty fountain pen with the Stonewall Stormers logo on it. She hoped that meant Flint had arranged to be traded to the Canadian team.

She put on her backpack and walked out of the Hall with her packages levitating behind her. No vigilant witch or wizard went about with both arms full. Hermione headed into the dungeons before ducking into a switchback tangle of side corridors to an old Potions storeroom near one of her caches. She checked her Map then cast a proximity ward before unpacking the potion ingredients.

Most were legal but limited to adults. They would've been confiscated and if she had revealed where she had got them, the person who sold them to her would've been fined. The dried angel's trumpets, oleander leaves, spurge sap and the like were all restricted to licensed Healers, such as Gerard Flint. Marcus had used his father's suppliers. The Ministry would have levelled far more than a fine if she had been found in possession.

Hermione carefully matched the labels on the new bottles and containers with those on the few remaining, long desiccated, ingredients. She arranged everything according to Helga Hufflepuff's cataloguing convention then cleaned the room. With house elves around, nothing got dusty. She left the ward so she'd know if someone tampered with her supplies.

First class of the day was Muggle Studies. Professor Burbage handed out project schedules, giving her students the option of a three foot essay per term from a list of subjects or one ten foot essay for the year on a subject of their choosing. Most did the arithmetic and opted for the three essays, thinking that getting work done early was better than leaving a big project for the OWLs rush at the end of the year.

Hermione thought about all the hours she'd spent with her parents at conferences and workshops, and signed herself up for a long essay on Muggle Medicine. Professor Burbage did no more than nod when she submitted her preference though she did ask her to stay after class. Hermione wasn't sure why. Burbage had treated her with kid gloves since Third Year. But she did as asked, tucking her notes away in the binder they'd been asked to use for classwork.

“Miss Rosier.” Charity began her careful speech, well, carefully. It wasn't unheard of for a Slytherin to take Muggle Studies when first given the opportunity, particularly those not gifted academically, but they soon dropped it when they realised it wasn't the 'soft option' they thought. She tried to engage the pure-bloods, who often struggled with the basic concepts of non-magical life. Cathal
Rosier had done neither. “I'd like to talk to you about your plans after OWLs.”

“It's the first day of term, Professor.” Hermione kept her tone reserved. She didn't chat with this teacher. They weren't chums. She wanted desperately to find a way to get Professor Burbage to leave the country before Voldemort killed her.

“Yes, I know it's a bit precipitate.” Despite a chat with Severus, who she'd thought surely would know the quiet girl well enough to give advice, Charity still wasn't sure why Rosier was in her class. And in the top ten. She'd be ranked higher if she did any of the optional extra-credit assignments, possibly even rivalling Ernie Macmillan for top spot. “But I am curious why you're sitting an OWL in a subject that, if I'm honest, you don't really seem to need.”

“Intellectual curiosity.” The reply happened after a pause during which Hermione mentally discarded sarcasm, elitism, and slackness as insufficiently credible responses.

“Miss Rosier.” Charity began again then tried for something more casual. “Cathal, it's not that I don't want you in my lessons.” That sounded a little forced, a little too suspicious. “I endorsed you for the Prefect position. I've seen you sharing notes with your classmates and you get along well in group work even with...” She stopped here because the girl's expression had hardened from bland politeness to a grim sort of proto-frown. “Please tell me you aren't taking this subject as an alibi or pretext.”

The worry in the Professor's voice was palpable. Hermione opened her mouth to lie or spit some racist snark, only to find she just couldn't. Charity Burbage had died for her beliefs. She was a political moderate and she suffered the fate of so many middle-of-the-road people; she got flattened when the tanks rolled in.

“I am genuinely interested in Muggle science, particularly their Healing.” Hermione said honestly. She planned to hybridise potions by refining ingredients via scientific methods wherever possible. She could fine tune the magic with Arithmancy and Charms. Most magical folk were happy with 'close enough'. It was only really at Master or Mistress level where precision happened.

“Do you want to be a Medi-Witch?” Charity asked, swallowing all comments on Rosier's likely hadal bedside manner.

“I haven't decided yet.” If she survived the war and got the NEWTs for it, the prospect was reasonably appealing. What felt like a thousand years ago before the advent of magic, she'd discussed careers with her parents. Her mum had suggested she consider becoming a surgeon while her dad had thought research science might suit her better.

“Well, if you need to discuss your future or anything really...” Professor Burbage offered, expecting a verbal slap in the face for her presumption. She got instead a tensely blank look. They both knew Cathal Rosier wouldn't be coming to her for guidance. She let the girl go and thought dejectedly of what Severus had said; that you could not enlighten those intent on walking into the dark.

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Educational Decree No.24 caused the first murmurs of discontent from the Snakes over the new regime. Hermione had been keeping her temper through judicious use of Occlumency and by demolishing dummies with the Duelling Club. The disbanding of all student organisations coupled with the neutering of the Defence Against the Dark Arts curriculum prompted a meeting of the OWLs and NEWTs students in the Slytherin Common Room.

“We will comply with the decree.” Cassius Warrington stated unequivocally, which his audience
heard as 'we will be seen to comply with the decree'. The collective nodded. No one wanted to be hauled into the High Inquisitor's office for tea. Rumours were already rife about Umbridge's Black Quill. “I have lodged a request for an exemption for the Duelling Club.”

“However, as Professor Umbridge's novel educational methodology favours theory over practical, tutoring partnerships must be arranged.” Ona Parangyo spoke with the careful diction of a scion of a renowned political dynasty. She was not going to sacrifice her potential standing in the Ministry by criticising the spiteful ailuromaniac. Several of her relatives had warned her of Umbridge's habit of sabotaging the careers of those who crossed her.

“The Seventh and Fifth Years take priority as we have the shortest time before this inanity comes due.” Warrington weathered the cold looks from the Sixth Years. “You lot have a summer to get instruction. We're being tested at the end of the year.”

“Should the High Inquisitor continue in her post next year, I am sure the current Fifth Years will oblige their Housemates taking NEWTs with their assistance.” Parangyo placated, her hands folded neatly in front of her. She was the very picture of civic-minded tolerance. When Hearne opened his mouth to object to the relegation, she fixed her agate eyes on him. His complaint atrophied.

“How are you going to arrange the pairs? I don't want to be stuck with a duffer.” Parkinson didn't care if the Seventh Year witch glared at her. She wasn't going into the Ministry. She was going to marry well and live a life of ridiculous leisure never having to look at a Mudblood or essay again. Unfortunately, making a good match necessitated having better than Acceptable OWLs and NEWTs. No one wanted a squib wife.

“By process of elimination.” Ona's wand, concealed in her folded hands, whipped out as she cast the charm the Duelling Club used for grand melee. The spell tagged everyone in the room and kept record of who incapacitated whom. By prior arrangement, Warrington warded the room to keep the younger Years from intruding. He didn't expect this tourney to take long.

She'd send Moody a fruit basket. He'd probably explode it suspecting it was cursed but Hermione felt she should give him a token of appreciation for the edge he'd given her. She'd wondered idly at Parangyo's stance, too tidy for a casual meeting. She hadn't expected the duelling charm though she already had her shield up when the savvier Snakes started hexing.

Holding one arm behind her back, hand gripping her spare wand in its holster under her sweater, Hermione dodged sharply behind one of the leather sofas. She transfigured it into a barricade and ducked to let the more aggressive students pick each other off. Bulstrode and Davis dove behind the deep buttoned bulwark.

“What do we do?” Millicent hissed, keeping her head down as the duellists lashed out with curses she didn't recognise. She was fairly sure they weren't on any Hogwarts curriculum.

“Use the Smokescreen spell. Fill the room.” Hermione advised, pulling a vial out of one of the many extra pockets she had sewn into her robe during her dull cottage stay. Mrs Leeson hadn't objected to needlework though she had confiscated the scissors. “I'll try to pick a few off.”

Bulstrode and Davis shared a sceptical glance but as they weren't the one leaving the safety of the barricade, they did as Rosier suggested. The three witches weren't alone in trying to control the battlefield. Multicoloured mists and iridescent fog swirled through the chamber with anguine tendrils. Hermione gulped down the Disillusionment potion.

She wouldn't have tried this in an actual battle. If anyone had been flinging Killing Curses, she would've hunkered behind cover being very conservative. Or run away. Legging it wasn't very
Gryffindor but it had saved her life several times. That was unfortunately not an option. Maybe she could've taken down Warrington's ward. Possibly. However doing so would endanger the younger students in their dorms or anyone passing by the dungeon entrance. This wasn't a real fight, and if she were candid, she was spoiling to hex someone.

Hermione took out Crabbe with a Stunner, ducking away when Malfoy spun around to see who had downed his bodyguard. She got Ichijoh with a Ferula, binding her legs with bandages, then Stupefied the Sixth Year when she hit the floor. The standard Protego let through many healing spells to allow first aid on the fly. An important detail to remember was that strategy only worked with textbook Shield Spells. Which Rothley wasn't using, causing her to retaliate against her unseen attacker.

The Tongue-Tying Curse bounced off her shield as Hermione scrambled away, taking temporary refuge behind an epergne someone had enlarged. She animated it and sent the multi-limbed silver construct barrelling forward to clear the way. Something inorganic went crunch. Hermione hoped it was one of the ghastlier bits of furniture.

She ambushed someone covered in hot pink fur then was bowled off her feet by someone else with a too lavish use of concussive hexes. She landed awkwardly on her elbow, her left arm pinned behind her, the impact causing her hand to go numb. Her Shield dropped. A shadowy figure approached, using minor scorching jinxes as tracer fire to try to spot her. Hermione lay there teeth gritted against the pain. Whoever it was walked by her unseeing. She cursed them in the back with nary a twinge of conscience.
She used to tell Ron off for letting his temper override his brain. Hermione sat on the restored leather sofa, a cloth with a chilling charm wrapped around her elbow and told herself that raging at the storm got her nowhere good. She should have stayed bunkered down with Bulstrode and Davis and kept her nose clean. Zabini had got to the middle rankings by hiding behind a bookcase as his fellows dropped. Parangyo and Warrington had set a timer on the Duelling Charm so lasting the full duration of the melee gained the survivors a fair number of points. Plus no one got the bragging rights for having taken you down.

She could have played it safe and not indulged her Umbridge-fuelled bloodlust. She didn't have a specific grudge against most of the people she'd defeated. At least Rosier didn't. Granger would probably have been quite satisfied to wipe the smirks off the faces of the older Slytherins. So, she could have kept a cool head.

But she didn't. She'd lashed out and now everyone with a green tie could see her name on the scroll pinned to the noticeboard. In second place behind Warrington who'd beaten her on style points. Ichijoh was still griping about being eliminated with a healing charm. If she'd been flashier with her spell choices she might've come out on top.

Now she sat on a sofa beside Parangyo, who would've been Head Girl if she hadn't been a Slytherin, and Belvina Burke, who had ranked third from a willingness to hex anyone with anything. The others in the tourney top ten had arranged themselves on the sofas around a low table spread with class schedules.

“Ideally we'll pair with someone who has the most similar schedule.” Warrington picked up Rosier's and looked it over with an expanding scowl. Divination and Muggle Studies? “Snape signed off on this? Did he owe your family money?”

“Professor Snape and my late father were friends.” Hermione was happy enough to confirm the suggestion of favouritism. They'd all think it.

“I'll take Rothley. Neither of us are doing Herbology.” He nodded to the Sixth Year, a Charms specialist ranked ninth. They picked their schedules out of the pile, copied and swapped them.

“Thursday fourth and fifth period suit you?”

“It'll do. There was vocal practice on then but that's off by decree.” Muriel grumbled. She'd brought a toad to Hogwarts especially to join the choir. The magic in music had always resonated with her. Her parents were negotiating an apprenticeship for her with a Master bard. “I can't believe that ruddy bitch measured Professor Flitwick.”

Hermione gritted her teeth to keep herself from commenting, reminding herself most of the things that infuriated her about Umbridge hadn't happened yet. The day the High Inquisitor had inspected Care of Magical Creatures had not been good. Her ruthless mockery of Hagrid had all the Slytherins laughing. Not this time, though. Cathal would not be joining in.

She covered herself now by shuffling through the schedules. The first time around she hadn't heard anything about the Slytherin Duelling Club. She wasn't sure if she'd even been aware of its existence. Thus she was uncertain whether it would be reinstated. Umbridge had been a Snake so perhaps she'd indulge her House. Then again, if she hadn't been invited to join, she might deny them.

“Was Umbridge a Duellist?” Hermione asked Parangyo, who kept the records for the Club mostly as
a networking opportunity.

“She was not.” Ona had looked it up hoping for a route to appeal to the High Inquisitor's scant supply of fellow feeling. “Professor Umbridge is a half-blood. During her time in our House she was not influential.”

“Bet that hurt you to say.” Warrington chuckled. Parangyo wasn't a bootlicker but she was unfailingly obsessively polite and she wrote dutiful letters home several times a week. In her lexicon 'not influential' was damning. He made a mock bow when she glared at him. “No offence intended. She's a crawler, we can all smell it.”

“An elegant turn of phrase.” Her grandfather, mother, two uncles, and her elder sister had all warned her not to attract the ire of Madam Umbridge. Ona contemplated Rosier's pithy little question. Without the Duelling Club, paired training bouts just wouldn't be up to snuff. “If the High Inquisitor hasn't approved our exemption by the Yule break, we'll arrange minor tourneys of eight. We can pass those off as study groups. Meeting sporadically it will be difficult to allege they're clubs.”

“Assign everyone a number.” Hermione suggested, thinking of Marietta Edgecombe. “Then keep records disguised as Arithmancy homework. Even if it's discovered, the significance of the paperwork won't be obvious.”

“Good idea.” Warrington endorsed. No names meant no repercussions. “A secrecy oath as well. Let's be tidy. The High Inquisitor is fond of veritaserum.” A blunt hammer in a position of power over minors, not a good combination. “Pick your pair, Rosier. We'll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

Hermione chose Vang Trinh because he'd been restful company at the Yule Ball, though when the Seventh Year asked surprised why she'd said it was for their matching subjects. He wasn't taking Muggle Studies but he was one of the few Slytherins in advanced Care of Magical Creatures. Reading through Flint's notes had shown her how little consistency Hagrid had in covering the subjects unless dealing with large, bitey critters.

Trinh wasn't ranked in the top ten so there was some genteel surprise at her selection. No one made any overt comments however. Pointed remarks of any kind were noticeably absent for several days after the tourney. Even Parkinson kept her mouth shut, which was a feat unrivalled in previous experience. The truce with the viper-tongued witch lasted until Rosier took points from her for inappropriate language over her mockery of Justin Finch-Fletchley's sore hand.

Parkinson stormed off and Hermione knew she'd be in for it later. Justin stood there with his books awkwardly tucked under his left arm as he rubbed his right hand. He unsure what to say and mutely showed her the red scrawl cut into his skin. 'I will know my place' hadn't scarred yet but from the sharp edges she could see the Hufflepuff was a repeat offender.

“I had a nanny like her once. Believed in discipline.” Justin said as he saw something unreadable cross Rosier's face. “I know what Umbridge is.”

“So do I.” Hermione pulled a vial from a pocket. Hell knew she had a good supply. She'd been anticipating this for years. “Dittany.” She handed over the small tube. “Use a few drops then soak your hand in salt water. If it still stings, the epidermal substrate hasn't healed completely. Apply more and repeat. The quill she's using is Dark Magic. You want to make sure all the damage is gone or the wound could reopen under stress.”

“How can I share this?” It wasn't that Madam Pomfrey was denying them medical care but plodding all the way to the Hospital Wing over and over when all you got was a small soaked pad and no
questions was disheartening.

“To whoever needs it. I have plenty.” Hermione said grimly.

Justin thanked her and went on his way. She headed up to her secret greenhouse to check on the plants. They’d thrived over the summer under Moppet's care. Hermione repotted two and expanded the shelves, shuffling greenery around until she was satisfied everything was basking where it liked. She'd scout out another sunny place as a back-up in case this one was raided. Unlike her caches, it was difficult to stash a metre high shrub behind a cupboard.

Pansy's inevitable retaliation was insidious. Hermione didn't notice anything beyond an uptick in gossip, which she ignored. No one mentioned anything to her and if the smirks were of greater frequency from the younger Years then, well, they were kids. She couldn't remember being that young but she didn't begrudge a bit of juvenile amusement in her peers.

It was Hearne who explained the joke. He slipped her a note when they met to study in the library. One of the Decrees proscribed girls and boys being within whispering distance. His neat, round script made the message quite clear.

“Parkinson says I'm snogging Finch-Fletchley?” Hermione murmured. Hearne nodded, glumly turning a page in his Potions text. He was good, very good, at changing things into other things. His Transfiguration OWL had been one of the top five of his year across all Houses. But making new things was a slog. He hoped to work at Gringotts mint. He needed Potions for assaying. The goblins offered a scant few apprenticeships in metallurgy to those they deemed worthy, and they were very against making something from nothing.

“She made some bon mot on studying Muggles.” He hadn't laughed. He would prefer not to get involved in a squabble between Sacred Twenty-Eight heirs though if he had to choose between Parkinson and Rosier, he'd go with the witch who'd got him through his Charms OWL. His father had been almost pleasant over the summer.

“She's pissy about not being made Prefect.” From what she knew of the pug-nosed witch, she envied what other people had, bitched and conspired until she got whatever it was then got bored with it. Repeat ad nauseam. By halfway through Fifth Year, Parkinson had been disinterested in her Prefect duties except where they gave her opportunity to lord it over the hoi polloi.

“With the attention you're getting from the upper Years, too.” Hearne guessed, thinking of how his little sister pouted when the big kids ignored her. “You'll have to do something to shut her up.”

Hermione made a non-committal noise. She would do something but she wanted it to be subtle. Exactly what suitably Slytherin machination that would silence Parkinson hadn't yet occurred to her. Throwing someone else into the cow's sights might work. The idea was distasteful though and she didn't care all that much about the gossip. Worse had been said of Hermione.

No flash of cunning brilliance had vouchsafed itself to her by Saturday. She'd spent most of the week ducking back and forth to her lab to brew in between studying, training, and frankly hanging on Professor Grubbly-Plank's sleeve. Hermione felt disloyal to Hagrid but the witch honestly was a better teacher and a font of knowledge on a subject she had previously relegated.

Striding into the Common Room, she noticed Parkinson holding court among a throng of Third and Fourth Years. Hermione would've ignored the no doubt lurid tale had the Carrow twins not directed a puzzled look at her as though they were surprised to see her. She paused mid-transit, which gave Parkinson the opening she wanted.
“He mustn't be very good if you got out of that closet so quickly. Don't Muggles have any stamina?” She simpered, feigning a concerned best friend tone of voice. “Maybe you've tired him out sneaking off so often.”

“What are you babbling about?” Hermione asked, a frisson of alarm shooting down her spine. Had she been seen entering her lab? Not a disaster, not unless her workspace was raided, but shifting everything to avoid discovery while term was on would be extremely difficult.

“You and that Mudblood ‘Puff. I saw him slipping away on the Seventh Floor, and given how you like hiding, well, I rather expected you were enjoying a little assignation.” Pansy smirked, delighting in the furious look on Rosier's pallid face. She was always so composed. Not so much now.

“Cura Cruris.” Hermione muttered the first word and emphasised the first syllable of the second as she slashed her wand at Parkinson. The ‘critical care’ was a fairly obscure spell she’d found in a Renaissance era Healer's libram. The Latin was clumsy as the inventor had been a battlefield medic with one of the private armies that had thrived in the employ of the warring Italian city states. He hadn’t had time for polish, as some of the stains on his journal had viscerally shown.

The spell sent an electrical charge through the nervous system of a patient hopefully to restart their heart or shake off the enervation of a Dark Creature. On an insensate person, the effect would be a twitch or two. On a conscious person, it caused tremors, dizziness, and if maintained serious muscle spasms. The Neapolitan magus had included a story he had thought amusing about his apprentices using the Cura Cruris on each other until one of them had wet himself.

Parkinson shuddered and cried out as her limbs flailed. She toppled over, the younger Years jumping back to clear the space around her as she thrashed. Hermione held the spell for a count of ten, not wanting to deprive the stupid bitch of her dignity by having her soil herself. If Parkinson had seen Justin entering the Room of Requirement then the DA could be over before it started. She had to do something fast to divert the Slytherin's interest.

“You're a vicious, petty, foolish, little busybody.” Hermione announced to the Common Room. She had complete silence. The younger students didn't know enough about the Dark Arts to realise she hadn't cast the Cruciatus. Parkinson might not realise the pain she'd experienced wasn't the soul-searing agony of the Torture Curse. “You have ceased to be amusing. Mind your tongue, Parkinson.”

She cast a medically safe version of the Full Body-Bind to keep the girl from injuring herself further, levitating her off the carpet. No one said a word as she floated Parkinson out of the Common Room. Whether that was the Bystander Effect or the Snakelets were simply shocked by the curse she had supposedly used, Hermione couldn't guess. She towed her victim up to the Hospital Wing.

There was quite a queue for Madam Pomfrey's attention. The arrival of two Slytherins was not welcome. It wasn't long into term but Umbridge's seeming blind spot for anyone wearing green had been noticed. A tall Ravenclaw Hermione didn't recognise squared his shoulders to say something cutting but the Hufflepuff beside him grabbed his arm, murmuring into his ear. Whatever he said worked as she was waved forward to the head of the line.

The matron listened to Hermione's heavily redacted explanation. She tucked a mute Parkinson into bed with a Calming Draught then sent for Professor Snape. On hearing this, the waiting students made themselves scarce. He had caught two Sixth Year Badgers sneaking into the Potions store to 'liberate' ingredients for a pain potion. They had detentions well into the new year.

Snape strode into the Hospital Wing, pausing for only a blink when he saw the two Slytherin witches. Evidently not who he expected. While he spoke to Parkinson, Madam Pomfrey took Rosier
aside to read her the riot act over using unregulated spells not approved by St Mungo's. She had her demonstrate the Cura Crucis on a bedpan transfigured into a rabbit. The sight of little creature thrashing on the ground turned the matron solemn.

“It is not in my remit to punish students but I will give your Head of House a very stern complaint over your use of healing magic for japes.” The matron's dressing down drifted over Hermione like the chattering of starlings. She made polite noises of acceptance in return. She did not scream at Madam Pomfrey that of all the staff of Hogwarts the matron should've been the first manning the barricades over Umbridge's excesses.

Snape received the threatened complaint with nary a twitch. He used what sounded like doublespeak to Hermione to assure Madam Pomfrey he would ensure this occurrence did not trouble her again. Not that it wouldn't happen but that she wouldn't be bothered with it. The Head of Slytherin escorted his charge out of the Hospital Wing all the way to his office scuffed like an errant cat.

“Miss Rosier, I have received no less than six anonymous reports you used an Unforgivable on Miss Parkinson.” The long tradition of nameless denouncements enabled Slytherins plausible deniability if called out on any conspiracy of silence. They had protested, they could say, but with a sensible precaution against reprisal.

Hermione stared stolidly at the desk in front of Professor Snape. Of all the people in the Castle, he would know best how to identify the after-effects of a Cruciatus. So he was inviting her to proclaim her innocence in instinctive self-defence. She stayed mute, plodding through an Occlumency exercise that involved her visualising blocks and stacking them. Rather like imagining playing with Lego. Easy enough for a Muggle-born though she wasn't convinced it would be particularly effective against mental intrusion.

“Am I to take your silence as admission?” If she had used an Unforgivable, he would have to inform the Headmaster and there would not be any indulgent rule bending for a Slytherin. Rosier would be expelled. Of course, she had not actually used the Cruciatus, just something that looked similar to a layman. What interested him now was her reaction.

“No, Professor.” Hermione provided an answer, constructing a spaceship in her mind. She had to stop when her thoughts drifted to rockets thence to rocket launches and thence to fiery infernos as air ignited into a billowing, surging, inescapable, devouring, flame dragon. She'd need to remove some more of her anger soon.

“Miss Parkinson assured me your contretemps was minor. A girlish spat.” He'd needed only a cursory brush of her mind to confirm the girl believed she had suffered a Cruciatus. Self-preservation had won over political manoeuvring. She would keep silent rather than provoke her volatile Housemate. “She might change her mind, leaving you open to extortion.”

“Possibly.” Hermione agreed, putting her Occlumency aside to engage more in the conversation. “If she kicked up a fuss, would you give her my Prefect's badge?” Hogwarts wouldn't like that but it was a proportionate response.

“That badge is a privilege.” Snape reminded her. Rosier wasn't defiant, not obviously. There was something, though. What did she know that he didn't? Or perhaps the question should be 'what did she know that he did too'? “The Dark Lord does not welcome petulant displays of temper.”

Hermione stiffened. Between her precognition and her unfamiliarity with Cathal's body, she usually managed a nonchalant posture or a worst stillness. Not this time. Snape's unexpected candour nearly, dangerously, made her look him in the face. She got as far as his chin before she caught herself. By then it was too late. He'd noticed her reaction.
“You are too young to follow in your father's footsteps.” He warned. Evan wouldn't have listened to a nay-sayer. Severus doubted whether his sullen daughter would heed restraint either.

“That will change.” By next year, Malfoy would be press-ganged. The Professor didn't know that so he took her words upfront as a remark on the inevitable march of time. Snape didn't harangue her. He let her off with a run of the mill warning. She was fairly sure she'd heard the like from Professor McGonagall.

Dismissed, Hermione headed to her lab to clear her head. She was intercepted near the kitchens by Justin Finch-Fletchley, who on seeing her bolted towards her then hesitated. He made a too-casual gesture towards an alcove where they could have a somewhat private conversation without looking overly romantic.

“I just wanted to say that I didn't start the rumour about the two of us.” His Received Pronunciation was even plummier than usual. “I haven't been encouraging it.” He took a breath after making his announcement. Justin had been worried she'd think he was trying to big note himself. Some of the gossip had been racy. “I don't know who started it.”

“Parkinson.” Hermione supplied, suppressing her urge to reassure him she didn't think him a cad. She appreciated the effort.

“She's a bloody snoop.” Finch-Fletchley groused.

“Muffliato.” She cast the charm, noting he trusted her enough not to flinch when she drew her wand. “You need to be more discreet.” There was no danger meeting his eyes and she gave him a steady stare. “Might want to pass that along generally.”

“How much do you know?” Justin demanded, worried someone had been telling tales. Granger had said something about a jinx on the parchment but he wasn't willing to rest his future at Hogwarts on a scribbled list.

“I treasure my ignorance.” Hermione cut him off. “Umbridge will come down hard on any rebellion.” Meline determination radiated from him. “You could always not antagonise her.” She echoed what she had said to Harry. That advice received the same disfavour as it had the first time. Defiance in the face of helplessness seemed the only route for the proud.

“Not going to happen.” The Badger said stolidly. “Do you have any more Dittany? I shared around what you gave me. It's already gone.”

“I'll set up a dead-drop in the girls' bathroom on the third floor, last stall. There's a loose brick.” She'd discovered the little niche for contraband by accident in Sixth Year while trying to enforce the restrictions on Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. “I'll charm it with a password.” Hermione pondered then smirked. “Sredni Vashtar.”

“Conradin.” Justin grinned, identifying the reference. Umbridge would make a very appropriate Mrs De Ropp. “I'm surprised you covered Saki in Muggle Studies.”

“We haven't even covered Shakespeare. Professor Burbage tries her best but the course is woeful.” Hermione had read forward as much as she could, which was easy given the curriculum hadn't changed in thirty years. Burbage could at least update the text, with the Governors' approval. She'd been able to get a book that had been printed in the Eighties, which considering the previous one had been published in the Fifties, was a triumph.

“I don't understand you, Rosier.” He inspected her as though an epiphany might descend upon him.
“You're just like the other purist Snakes but you know what's going on in the real world, and you're helping us with Umbridge. What's your angle?”

Hermione's inspiration stalled. She needed a lie. It didn't need to be particularly plausible as she was sure Justin would shelve his misgivings for the sake of getting Dittany for his friends. She sought frantically for something that sounded both snobbish and cosmopolitan. A dearth of creativity compelled her to default to ambition.

“I want to be Head Girl.” Hermione provided. “That means working with the other Houses, building goodwill.” Justin's expression showed only momentary surprise and maybe a little disappointment. He nodded.

“Politics. I guess that explains it.” Well, he should've known no one in Slytherin would be motivated by altruism. “How much do you want for the Dittany? If this is going to be pro quo then you'll need quid.”

“Nice one.” She quelled a chuckle at his pun. Hermione mulled over the payment issue. “This isn't a business venture.” That made her feel a little better. “I'll settle for your parents arranging a bank account for me. That'll be fiddly enough without photographic ID.”

“I think I can wangle that.” Justin said slowly, guessing it was possible. His father had several businesses, opening a general account under one of them with Rosier as a signatory might do. “It'll take some time, and we can't wait on the Dittany. The pink menace is on a power trip.”

“I'll get you two vials a week until the end of the school year in exchange for having an account solely in my name by the same time.” Hermione offered, extending her hand. They shook on it, well pleased with their illicit trade.
Eleusinian

As though responding pettishly to the collective yearning of the student body, the Christmas holidays crawled closer sluggishly. Umbridge instituted inspections of all incoming mail. She couldn't yet censor outgoing letters but Filch spent a lot of time lurking around the Owlery spying on who was corresponding with whom.

Even the most relentlessly chipper Hufflepuffs were looking a bit abraded as end of term neared. Everyone needed a break. It was hard not to resent everything. Hermione wanted to keep a clear head not amble around in a mellow daze so she had rationed her use of the emotion extraction. She'd managed fairly well until Umbridge inspected Hagrid's class.

The Thestrals had already put Hermione on edge and she'd been hanging back with Nott at the fringe of the group as the lesson progressed. Trying to remind herself the sepulchral animals were not at fault for the associations put upon them by magical folk, she was making an effort to see them as Luna did; gentle and solemn.

Then fucking Umbridge showed up to do that baby-talk to Hagrid as though he were subhuman. Hermione thought seeing red was a literary convention. She wasn't prepared for her vision to tunnel, going crimson at the edges as her pulse thundered in her ears. How fucking dare she! Racist, fascist, despotic bitch!

“Rosier.” Nott hissed, watching colour suffuse her face in an angry flush. It was shitty they had to participate in this lesson but the overgrown buffoon had brushed off his request to be excused with the hearty promise that he'd enjoy the treat. “Rosier!”

“I feel ill.” Hermione ground out the words, abruptly aware she had drawn her wand.

“Professor, I'm escorting Rosier to the Hospital Wing.” Theo said proforma to thin air as Umbridge taunted the half-giant. He tugged on the blonde's sleeve, towing her away across the grass before she did something unwise.

They were back in the Castle, at the base of the stairs to the second floor waiting for the steps to swing back towards them when Nott risked letting go. He appreciated her restraint in not cursing him. She still had her wand out. He considered nudging Rosier into a classroom so they could have a private chat but after what she'd done to Parkinson, he didn't want to offend her sensibilities.

“Better?” He asked generally, eyes on the staircase.

“Somewhat.” Hermione put her wand away and flexed her tense hand. “I think I need a little time by myself. Thanks for getting me out of there.”

Theo nodded, taking the dismissal without rancour. He'd cared enough not to want a scene but faced now with a personal conversation that would probably be about feelings, he shied. He wasn't good with other people's emotions. He wasn't even good with his own. So he took her request as a face-saving excuse to avoid talking about what had just happened.

Hermione went to her lab to spend the rest of the afternoon hardening and removing her anger. There seemed an endless font of it as though the memory of Umbridge's mockery had tapped into a wellspring from her hindbrain. The bitch would live because if Mundungus Fletcher sold the locket to someone else, the horcrux could end up absolutely anywhere. Also because she was such a control freak, while Umbridge recuperated from her contact with the Dementors the Muggle-born
Registration Committee had paused trials, giving people more time to flee the country.

So it was important that she not run amok and render Umbridge into her component molecules. Self-restraint was a virtue. Hermione tried to remember all the sensible, kind things her mother had taught her about turning the other cheek after she’d come home from primary school crying. Again. Bullies were the same no matter their age.

Of course, if it were easy she wouldn't be sitting on the floor in a forgotten storeroom with her wand to her temple. After a while the fire in her blood banked and she could be philosophical about the soon-to-be Headmistress. From what she recalled of Fifth Year, Umbridge didn't stay at Hogwarts for the entire holiday break. She wasn't sure about details, vaguely recalling she'd assumed the pink menace had gone to infest the Ministry.

Hermione secured her emotions in glass vials in a lead-lined box then took a walk. Extracting the anger left her temporarily numb to irritation like Millicent with her Calming Draughts. The difference in her demeanour might be noticed so she took herself off to the girls' loo on the third floor to check the loose brick.

Someone had collected the Dittany, which was expected, but had left a scrap of parchment, which was new. Justin had taken her advice about discretion and had kept communication between them to commonplace remarks in the classroom. Hermione checked the message for curses then when it came up clean extracted it from the hidey-hole.

Hannah Abbott's writing with a request for burn paste. She frowned at the careful round letters. There had been a few injuries in DA with hexes going awry but there'd been no burns. They'd deliberately not used fire curses as they were too difficult to control in stressful situations. Anyone hurting themselves with a burner in Potions would've been sent directly to Madam Pomfrey.

Fireworks. Hermione laughed out loud when she realised who needed first aid on the quiet. Fred and George must be manufacturing their pyrotechnics at Hogwarts since the inspection of incoming post. Their Occupation Health and Safety policy was 'duck and cover'. They weren't as naturally gifted with explosions as Seamus 'No Eyebrows' Finnegan but they tried harder. Cheered, she went back to her lab to start on something that would help with chemical burns.

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Hermione lay in Cathal's bed on the first day of Christmas holidays. The dorm was silent. Anyone who could find or whine for an excuse to leave the Castle had left either to their family home or to a friend's. Madam Flint had sent an apology for not being able to host her for Yule as she and her husband were going overseas for a private holiday. Hermione had written back with a polite response taken directly from an etiquette book. She hoped the Flints stayed out of the country until the end of the hostilities.

She'd been half expecting Malfoy to invite her home but he'd scurried off mumpack. While Lucius Malfoy hadn't likely shared with him the plans for the Department of Mysteries, he would've told his son something. Crabbe and Goyle had been similarly mute though neither of them were conversationalists at the best of times. She wasn't sure and couldn't ask.

“Miss, the horrid pink witch has gone.” Moppet whispered, appearing in the middle of the curtained bed. Hermione sat up, fully dressed, to take the house elf's hand. She popped them out of the dorm to the statue of Gregory the Smarmy on the fifth floor. They could have taken one of the long routes navigating through the slumbering parts of the Castle but Hermione wanted to use the official secret passages while she could. Mostly in this case because with so few students remaining for the holidays, the chance of her getting caught sneaking about was high.
The passageway was noticeably well-aired, suggesting frequent use this year. Moppet led the way, checking for alarm spells with elf magic. She was a bit put out she couldn't yet cast the detection charm with her very own wand but Miss said any showing-other-people's-magic magic was fiddly. Wizards and witches were tricky.

“The not-seen walls are holey here.” Moppet waved her hand at the end of the tunnel. She could feel the openness of the defences, which Miss had asked Hogwarts about but the Voice had said it couldn't say because Miss wasn't Headmaster. Moppet thought the Castle was cross and itchy about the nasty pink witch, who was like a rash.

“Dumbledore still has control of the wards. I don't think Umbridge ever gets her hands on them. She's shut out of his office.” Hermione closed her eyes, trying to feel the absence of magic. While she was in the Castle, she could tell she was inside and when she was beyond the wards she could tell she was outside but the border was fluid. “I can't sense either way.”

“Miss is good at other things.” Moppet consoled, not grinning at all. Her ears twitched in amusement though.

“Thanks.” She chuckled. Hermione took a deep breath. She'd snuck out plenty of times before. Her hesitation now was solely a wish to avoid a confrontation with Umbridge, who was exactly the sort to leave nasty little surprises for anyone trying to get out from under her thumb. “I'll saunter nonchalantly to the edge of the Apparition boundary. Meet me by the big mossy rock.”

Moppet nodded then went invisible. She wanted to stay close to her witch. She didn't like having to pretend they weren't going-to-be-bonded. Not getting caught and being made to punish herself was good so Moppet did as her witch asked. It'd be soon, she liked to think of a year and more than a half as soon so it didn't seem so long, that she and Miss would be bonded. Then no one could punish either of them.

Hermione flipped up the hood of her cloak and strolled through the egress. There was a brush of something that tasted like salt; a quiescent ward perhaps. She could pull out her Map and ask the Voice but it was beholden to the Headmaster. She'd spent years avoiding awkward questions. Her curiosity could wait a little longer.

No one and nothing leaped out at her. Crossing the Apparition line with its slight crackling shiver and reaching the old wayfaring stone didn't bring any sprung traps either. Best not to hang about though. Moppet reappeared, took her hand, and popped them to Diagon Alley. The jellied eel shop was closed for the holidays. Its odour of fish and aspic lingered staley meaty.

A mouthful of Polyjuice later and some Transfigured clothes, Hermione headed to Wands by Gregorovitch. The clerk was still disinterested in customers. All his attention was on the Daily Prophet, on the jobs ads she noticed when she approached the counter. Moppet had trialled all the lost wands in the Castle and had sneaked goes on the wands of the First Years, which would be less attuned than those of older students. Alder with unicorn hair had been the most friendly.

“Boutique wands one third off.” The twenty-something wizard spoke to the newspaper, tapping a listing with his wand to highlight it. He flicked a finger at a sign propped up next to the cash register. The simple piece of card doubled in width and unrolled to display a list of woods.

“Cumaru?” Hermione inquired. Jarrah, she recognised, and hickory. Wenge she though was a tropical hardwood. There were dozens of others.

“Muggles call it Brazilian teak.” The clerk mumbled. “Used to be fashionable. Not so much now.” He looked at her; a middle-aged brunet with a five o'clock shadow at nine o'clock in the morning.
“The shop's closing down. The talk about You-Know-Who put the wind up the Gregorovitchs.” He grumbled more than sneered. “This store was only here to annoy Ollivander anyway.”

“Why just the boutique wands?” She touched the list, watching as script appeared listing cores under each wood. There didn't seem to be any pattern to the materials and some were obscure enough she'd only heard of them as references.

“They want all the odds and sods sold. No sense shipping them back to Liechtenstein to gather dust.” That seemed to be the extent of his interest in conversation. He turned back to the employment section, leaving Hermione to her conundrum.

She had some money put by. She'd been careful with what she had scrounged, building up a nest egg. Barring doom, Cathal would get access to her vaults just before the beginning of Seventh Year. Two summers. Staying at Hogwarts meant she didn't have many expenses.

There would shortly be a choke on wand production in the United Kingdom after the abduction of Garrick Ollivander. The other wand shops closed when their proprietors fled, taking their stock with them. Hermione didn't know much about any black market in wands during the war. She assumed there'd been one as there hadn't been enough to go around.

There would definitely be a shortage if she bought up all Gregorovitch's discount merchandise. How would it affect the timeline? She had no damn idea and no way of finding out. If she grabbed all the wands she could, how would she get them to people who would need them? Would the purchase be logged at the Ministry? Would anyone take an interest in why some random bloke had a bushel of wands?

She compromised to stop dithering and to provide the excuse that she was a collector on a budget. She bought one of every combination of wood and core on the list but no doubles. The clerk didn't ask. He did give her a discount on the bulk purchase, wanting to spare himself the effort of having to box the remainders. Wands couldn't be shrunk or Transfigured and were temperamental if shipped incorrectly.

Hermione paid and faux sauntered out of the shop. She couldn't pretend to be casual for very long. In her bag, in the right hands she had enough firepower to level London. Moppet accepted her wand then popped them to a seemingly random field in Norfolk, following the ley lines nearest the location her witch suggested. Like other magical folk, house elves couldn't travel directly to places they hadn't been but they could iterate close to an unknown destination by following the flow of magic that criss-crossed their native land.

“Point me.” Hermione used her very own spell to have her wand point north, still chuffed she'd crafted the working. It was her first real proof that her magic wasn't all books and cleverness. “Right, if we're inland north-west of Norwich about halfway east of King's Lynn then hopefully that big road over there is the A148.”

They tramped across the snowy field to the two lane strip of asphalt. Moppet popped them along the road until they found a sign, confirming they were indeed where Hermione hoped they would be. She hugged her friend. As a blind jump went, they were well within walking distance. The trick now would be to avoid RAF Sculthorpe, where questions would be asked if they suddenly appeared, and not to land in any of the many rivers in the area.

“There's an Iron Age hill fort near the village. Can you sense its magical signature?” Hermione could possibly have Apparated. They were within five kilometres of where she wanted to go and mentally she was more than capable of the focus required. Whether Cathal could sustain a jump was another matter. She thought it sensible to wait until she was sixteen, take the lessons, and ensure her corpus
was ready for the strain.

“It’s all plowy.” Moppet held out her hands as she turned in a slow circle. “There's a big, burned, oily place that way. It's eaten all the magic around. Moppet can't see well with it there all dirty.”

“That'd be the airfield. We want to be due north of it about halfway between here and the sea.” She did some dead reckoning. “We could walk. It's a nice enough area. With a Warming Charm, it'll be a pleasant stroll.”

“Moppet might be for walking if Miss carried Moppet.” The house elf made her eyes big like kittens. She didn't want to walk in the snowy outsides. She didn't want to jump around all over the places either. Once they got where they were going, she could bring them back there but until they were where is, it'd be hopping about.

“Sounds fair.” Hermione loosened her cloak and kneeled down so Moppet could climb underneath for a piggyback. She wriggled a bit getting comfortable but the house elf's weight was less than a laden bookbag. Once they’d settled themselves, the witch cast a Disillusionment Charm and headed up the road to find a route heading north.

The hike along frosted hedgerows through the flat East Anglian countryside was soothing. There wasn't much traffic once she turned off onto a lane bisecting fields and the quiet gave Hermione a chance to wind down. The echoing halls of Hogwarts full of hundreds of students, the background hum of the wards, the sub-harmonics of active magic, had filled her head with noise. Crunching along through ankle deep snow, she sighed, well aware she was putting off going back.

This errand wasn't idle just unsure. Getting a supply of spare wands to the Order of the Phoenix without dealing with Snape or Dumbledore wasn't easy. The Weasleys had a lot on their plate right now with Nagini's attack on Arthur. And she had to admit to herself that she couldn't ask anyone she knew was going to die or disappear presumed dead, which were several.

Her destination was a cottage on the eastern side of South Creake village. It peeked out from under a thick thatched roof, dormer windows shaded by the straw mop-top. The house had been a mellow cream when she'd first seen it now years earlier the paint was bright yellow and she could see why Mrs Tonks had rued allowing her daughter to pick the colour.

The boundary wards were dense. Hermione stopped at the gate as the defensive magic bumped against her. Not forbidding exactly but she wasn't welcome. A tingle ran under her skin that hinted at blood magic. Andromeda's mother was a Rosier so it stood to reason she had used her own essence to protect her home from her relatives, which was inconvenient as it meant she'd recognise Cathal as kin if Hermione crossed the wards.

“Why has Miss stopped?” Moppet asked, peeking forward past the cloak's hood.

“I was going to pretend to be some random courier. I can't do that now with the blood wards.” She stepped back until she couldn't feel the shiver of magic any more then cast a detection charm. A shimmery red-purple curtain glittered a few paces in front of her. The bright colour told her the ward was active though the blurriness indicated it was not currently being monitored.

It was difficult to maintain attunement with a ward as clarity of mentis and purity of corpus meant you could do little else other than quietly commune with the magic. Depending on the layering and components of the defensive spells, even smelling something taboo could disrupt the connection. Muggle technology was notorious for ‘clouding’ ward-tenders.

“I'm not getting through that quietly.” Hermione fell back further down the lane to lurk by a
neighbour’s dustbins. “Shit.” She commented, doubting Mrs Tonks would venture into the lane at the behest of a stranger. “Can you cross the wards?”

“Moppet thinks so.” The house elf didn't feel anything that wanted to keep her out of the little house with the shaggy roof. “Does Miss want Moppet to be sneaky feet?”

“Quite the opposite, actually.” She picked twenty wands out of the shopping bag then Transfigured a handkerchief into a wooden box with a Hogwarts crest on the top. “Pop in, ask for Mr Ted Tonks or Mrs Andromeda Tonks then hand them the wands with Dumbledore's compliments. Pretend to be an ordinary Hogwarts elf delivering a package for safe-keeping.”

The deed was done so simply Hermione regretted not sending the wands by owl. Moppet reported she'd given the box to a wizard with a big tummy who'd said he was Ted and hadn't asked any questions. He had seemed unhappy, his mouth going down at the corners the way it did when people were trying not to frown, but he'd taken the wands without question. No skulduggery required.

They popped into Muggle London so Hermione could do some shopping mostly in camping stores for preprepared food. In the spirit of scientific experimentation, they also went to a low-end grocery store and bought the most processed of processed food in colours not found in nature. Hermione was interested to see if preservation spells recognised marshmallow fluff as edible.

Afterwards, they went to Rose Cottage, where Hermione cached her remaining supply except for the four ivy wands, which were quick to adapt to new owners and thus would be the most useful for emergency spares. Once Umbridge was out of Hogwarts, she'd retrieve the others but she didn't want to get caught with so many. The excuse of Intellectual curiosity would stretch only so far.

She and Moppet pruned the roses as something to do while they waited for the Polyjuice to wear off. Hermione readjusted her clothes once she was back in what was still difficult to think of as her own body. They cleaned up and headed back to Hogwarts in good time to pretend to have slept in.

Rematerialising by the mossy rock, the house elf immediately vanished and the witch Disillusioned herself to walk back to the secret tunnel.

Hermione got exactly four paces out from behind Gregory the Smarmy before Professor Snape cleared his throat. She stopped. At least it wasn't Umbridge's puerile little cough. She turned to face her Head of House. He said nothing, indicating sharply that she should follow him. Which she did without protest all the way to his office. They sat, so civilised, as he regarded her over steepled fingers.

“Where did you go, Miss Rosier?” Snape asked, anticipating a lie. Likely a reasonable one given the girl wasn't an idiot. Given where he thought she had gone, any sort of passable fib would be acceptable.

“I went home, Professor.” Hermione rapidly partitioned her memories. She could hide some but not all. The jaunt to Rose Cottage was the least suspicious so she concentrated on the roses, the bitter bare stems and frost-blighted hips.

“To the Isle of Man?” It was a question, though not one of location. Her address was a matter of record. What Severus queried was her means of transport. She nodded, eyes on his desk. “This is not the moment for a stilted dialogue. How, why, and with whom?”

“Portkey, nostalgia, and alone.” She answered tersely. That should annoy him. When riled he was far more instinctively vindictive and less shrewd. Hermione didn't want to answer any sharp questions. The silence that followed her reply attenuated. Wordlessly Snape opened a drawer, retrieved a vial and set it on the desk between them.
“Veritaserum.” The Potions Professor confirmed, seeing the recognition in Rosier's face. Some of his charges could lie as fluently and glibly as birds sang. This girl took the stubborn road of silence. “A blunt weapon used by those lacking finesse or patience.” He could dose her and she'd never know was the unspoken threat. But that too was the method of simpletons. “The Dark Lord is gathering followers. Did you meet with any of his representatives?”

“No.” Hermione said plainly. She couldn't tell if he relaxed. Snape had been playing a double game for decades. She wasn't even in the same league. “I plan to finish my schooling before I involve myself in politics.”

“What you plan is irrelevant. You are a prize, Miss Rosier.” Severus returned the truth potion to the drawer, shutting and locking it. “When you come of age, you will be the Head of the House of Rosier as well as the presumptive heir to the House of Selwyn and the British holdings of the House of Shafiq.” He saw she wasn't surprised. The goblins would have briefed her on her expectations. “The wealth is a factor but more important is your blood.” He paused. There was no way of saying the next without sounding prurient. “Your virginity.”

“I'm not innocent. The unicorns avoid me.” There were Dark rituals, dozens of them, that used a ritually pure witch or wizard. The older the family, the more intense the blood magic. Hermione had read a fraction of the works on the subject in her hunt for information on horcruxes. She knew more than she wanted. Snape wasn't being creepy. He was warning her of a significant risk.

“Good.” He was relieved. Out of duty to his House, he gave a lecture on biological responsibilities to the Sixth and Seventh Years and trusted their parents to nag them into behaving. There were few accidents in Slytherin. Too much was at stake. “In your own time, at your own whim, I suggest your divest yourself of any physical purity. Not being untouched won't be an impediment for your eventual marriage. If you wish to remain free, you will need to take steps to avoid any state that could bind you to someone.”

“There's a betrothal concord between Draco Malfoy and I.” Hermione recalled the chat she’d had with the blond tosser. She couldn't be forced to marry him, the Imperius invalidated contracts, but coercion came in many forms.

“Lucius will sell that contract to the highest bidder if he thinks it to his advantage.” An engagement wouldn't protect her. “You should give serious consideration to leaving Britain. Ultimately, that won't shield you but out of sight is out of mind.”

“I can't do that, Professor.” She watched him fold his hands on the desk, a gesture of throttled frustration. He had wondrously expressive hands. A pity they were attached to such a pillock. “But thank you for the good counsel.”
Hermione kept her nose clean during the rest of the holidays. She was careful to be seen blamelessly in the library or in the study halls. There were six other students unfortunate enough not to have an excuse to return home. The three Hufflepuffs stuck together despite their differences in Years and the two Gryffindors mostly hung out in their Common Room, leaving the lone Ravenclaw to his own devices.

By democracy of heating, they sat together at the large table nearest Madam Pince's desk, where the Warming Charms worked best. The Fourth Year introduced himself as Jatin Agarkar but didn't otherwise seem inclined to conversation. He did sit with her every day of the holidays in companionable silence, occasionally swapping books. He was a Charms prodigy judging from the extra credit work he was doing for Professor Flitwick. No one troubled them.

Hermione got into the habit of going to bed early, alone in the Slytherin dorm. She was tempted to dance around in her pyjamas solely for the novelty of having done so. She restrained herself in favour of chalking more anchor points and running Moppet through hexes. The house elf had suggested practising in the Common Room as the furniture responded well to her magic so there would be no trouble mending any accidents. No one except Professor Snape was likely to intrude and he was out of the Castle on personal, read Death Eater, business.

“People get fancy in duels, refining spell sequences and polishing their gestures.” Hermione flourished her wand to demonstrate, shaping a slicing hex into a scything curve to bisect a leather ottoman while leaving the cushion on top untouched. “That's great for precision but in a fight you need to keep your wand 'live' for as short an interval as possible to minimise wasted energy. You can't afford to hold a spell a moment longer than necessary.”

Hermione slashed her hawthorn in an abrupt jerk, cutting across the footstool again along with the cushion and a bit of the rug. The same spell but a much faster casting and recovery. Moppet watched intently, trying different gestures with her own wand to get a feel for what the stick wanted to do. It wanted to help. The house elf hopped up and down with glee when she cut a swathe through an armchair.

“Moppet can slices things.” She felt how the magic wanted to leave her through the wizard wood. She could do it. “Moppet feels a bit less after.”

“That's normal.” Hermione reassured. “Wands act as conduits for our magic, focussing the release. It's like narrowing the gauge on a pipe to increase the pressure. But that means we feel the flow more than if we were just letting our magic radiate out.”

They sparred a little, with Hermione showing her friend how to maintain a Shield Charm, which Moppet could do far more easily than the witch. The house elf's innate magic allowed her to sustain a spell without having to channel it through her wand though she needed the alder to cast it. Afterwards, they tidied up the Common Room, reassembled the furnishings and loafed on the hearthrug roasting marshmallows.

The idyll didn't last. Come the new year, Umbridge returned to Hogwarts. The few students in the castle made themselves scarce in their dorms rather than risk encountering the DADA Professor prowling the halls. Hermione used the old passages to navigate from the dungeons to her laboratory and didn't see daylight for a fortnight.

The resumption of classes brought no respite. News of the escape of ten Death Eaters swept through
the school like a blizzard. Anyone with any familial connection to the prisoners was suspect, with mistrust falling heavily on Slytherin House. Snape cautioned his charges to be watchful and sensible to avoid confrontations. He tasked the older Years, especially the Prefects, with minding the younger students.

Parangyo knew all the blood ties. In a hasty briefing in the chintzy parlour, she outlined the 'high value targets' though she didn't use that Muggle phrase. Neither Dolohov or Mulciber had any English relatives. The Lestranges were childless but prominently linked to the Malfoy, Black, and Avery families. The Rookwoods had intermarried with half a dozen pure-blood families, mostly neutral, unlike the Jugsons, who had left the United Kingdom entirely after the disgrace of their eldest son going to Azkaban. Travers, Rosier, and Selwyn had heirs at Hogwarts however.

“Ingram Travers is the only one of the name at Hogwarts since his brother graduated. No legitimate girls in that family for a couple of generations.” That ruled out any distaff side complications. They'd be stretched keeping an eye on the Rookwood cousins. Ona shifted her gaze to the Fifth Year Prefects. “That leaves the two of you as the scapegoats.”

“They wouldn't dare.” Malfoy sneered, resolute with the expectation of standing behind his father, Crabbe, and Goyle.

“Possibly, possibly not.” The Seventh Year said coolly. “However, Umbridge hasn't done us any favours, and we do not want to draw attention to ourselves.” During the holidays, Ona had sketched out a roster for secret tournaments so they could hone their Dark Arts skills. She didn't want that work to be for nought because Malfoy couldn't stop courting notice. “We are all going to be especially circumspect. Is that understood?”

Hermione understood. She, Trinh, and Hearne swapped escort duties so Travers was never in the halls alone. The Third Years had heeded their elders and travelled in packs but the presence of an older Slytherin kept any impromptu demonstrations from the other Houses to a minimum. So many Death Eaters had wormed their way out of punishment, leaving only the fanatics and the blatantly murderous to go to Azkaban. The escapees had left a swathe of victims. No one could do anything about Umbridge but they could lash out at those they perceived were making their world worse.

Muggle Studies became excruciating. No one would talk to her or acknowledge her existence. They pointedly crowded tables so she would have to sit by herself. No one was violent, Burbage wouldn't have stood for that, but there was little the Professor could do to make anyone socialise with her and forcing groupwork led to sullen silent protests. Hermione made note of the most ostentatious avoiders. Not for revenge, she could endure being a pariah, but because they were the most likely to retaliate in other ways.

Another unfortunate consequence of the embargo on cooperation was she had to patrol with herself. To avoid conflict among the Prefects, Granger had volunteered to patrol with the Slytherins. Pairing herself with Malfoy was a non-starter so he went to Ernie, who could withstand the blood purist's jibes, leaving the Gryffindor golden girl paired with Rosier.

They didn't speak. Hermione didn't trust herself not to blurt out everything. She could do so much good by warning Granger. And risk so much. So they patrolled in grim silence, doing their duty but not socialising. Given the tension between Houses, she expected her other self considered non-communication to be a non-loss.

Umbridge was in Divination. Umbridge was in Care of Magical Creatures. Umbridge was of course in Defence against the Dark Arts, which had turned into a reading comprehension class. No lectures, just rote learning of the text. Hermione sat with Nott at the back of the room, with a series of tomes disguised as Dark Arts Defence: Basics for Beginners.
Staving off wrath in Creatures was more difficult. Umbridge had put Hagrid on probation and had neutered the class to the Ministry approved material only. One Wednesday afternoon, Hermione bit her tongue so hard keeping silent her mouth she tasted blood. Afterwards in her lab eyeing the ranked vials of extracted anger, she resolved to do something spectacular with them. Just what, she wasn't sure. But something. Something loud.

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Parangyo and Warrington ran the secret tournaments with clockwork efficiency. Three times a week, participants received a sparring number and a location. The Prefects made sure all the designated training rooms were unoccupied and unregarded. The increase in pranks meant an increase in the frequency of patrols, allowing the Slytherins to more effectively guard the privacy of their duelling. Umbridge, unaware of the irony, commended them for their diligence.

Hermione helped Ichijoh to her feet after the timer had chimed. She’d learned that habit after smashing Burke through a desk only to have the witch curse her when she went to her aid. Belvina was not a gracious loser and had learned much of her repertoire from Violet Tripe. After she’d regained consciousness, Hermione hadn't protested the loss. She had warned Trinh and Hearne, who had in turn circulated the tale of poor sportsmanship to their peers. While Slytherins were ambitious, they liked to be seen to be observing the niceties.

Manami Ichijoh bowed once she was upright, sheathing her wand. Her pride was somewhat salved after a second defeat at Rosier's hands. The younger girl hadn't felled her as a fluke in the tourney and although her fighting style could use some polish, she'd never list on the International Duelling circuit, Cathal was very good.

“Should I bow too?” Hermione asked, feeling uncouth.

“A cultural affectation.” Ichijoh waved away the faux pas. It would have mattered in Mahoutokoro. It didn't at Hogwarts. “May I ask, why the randoseru?”

“I liked the style.” That was a non-answer but socially it would maybe pass. The older girl favoured her with a conservative smile and didn't press the issue. Hermione wondered whether the backpack had originally been Ichijoh's as she'd transferred from the Japanese magical school in Third Year after her father was exiled for violations of the wizard's code. The actual transgressions had never been publicised and for her part Manami had never mentioned them.

“You value the traditional.” The Sixth Year wasn't talking about Rosier's choice of rucksack any more. “But you are not orthodox.”

“Walking the same path risks falling in the same potholes.” Hermione wasn't sure where this conversation was headed. Slytherins had minds like corkscrews.

“Do you know where you are going?” Manami had had a lengthy and enigmatic conference with her parents during the holidays. She was still puzzling out all the implications. Her father never said what he meant, not after he had been betrayed and denounced by his closest friends. Her mother was more forthright as she had more to lose.

“To the bitter end.” Was this a sideways discussion about politics? It felt like it. Hermione straightened, unintentionally looking down on the petite witch. She was still growing, which irrationally irritated her. By the end of the year none of her skirts would be regulation. Granger had it easy. She'd hit her adult height in Third Year. “There's no other choice for me.”

“That isn't very persuasive recruitment.” Ichijoh had expected an exultation or rant. Some of the
Seventh Years would adroitly sound one out on one's commitment to tradition or willingness to risk oneself. She knew who the extremists were among her peers. The Fifth Years had an unusually high concentration of Sacred Twenty-Eight, the supposed beautiful people. Malfoy carried his blood status on his sleeve. Rosier was less overt.

“I'm not trying to win anyone over. This isn't a personality contest, it's an ideological war. You either believe or you don't. There's no sell.” The words came out under pressure, in a rush, fuelled by her ability to count. The Order and the DA had tried for years to spread the word, to inspire the populace to defend their rights. Nett result? A paltry showing at the Final Battle, where they'd been outnumbered at least five to one.

“You'll keep the coming war for the elite?” Even in this, the exclusivity of the powered class flaunted itself. Manami could trace her ancestors back three thousand years in an unbroken pure line, which mattered little as none of those antecedents were British. She could be a respected witch and successful but she couldn't rule.

“It's our birthright.” Voldemort had used giants and werewolves as shock troops but with a very imperialist attitude; all the officers were pure-bloods and all, with the notable exception of Dolohov, local born. She wondered about the Russian wizard. What had made him throw in his lot with Tom Riddle? Hatred of Muggles? Perhaps. He was of age to have seen the worst of the Communist pogroms.

“You are short-sighted fools.” Ichijoh wanted back the security and esteem her family had enjoyed in Japan. Her mother had picked England, where she had friends who could vouch for them in good company, but it was becoming increasingly apparent to Manami that without the blood of Albion in her veins she wouldn't be able to achieve all she wanted.

“My hand isn't on the tiller.” Hermione shrugged, abrogating all responsibility for the collective rabid idiocy of the Death Eaters. How so many clever people could be so stupid eluded her. It must be the inbreeding.

“Would you steer otherwise?” Now this was more interesting. Rosier was an enigma. Smarter and more powerful than she let on, when she wasn't fuming or distracted. If she had a plan to improve the country, the Sixth Year was prepared to listen.

“Oh yes, but I have debts to pay first.” Whatever the older girl wanted to change, Hermione couldn't help her. Not until the war was over.

Ichijoh didn't press her. She seemed to have a lot on her mind, a common affliction among older Slytherins. There was still time to leave Britain without looking like you were fleeing. Quietly disengaging then removing to distant shores before being called upon to commit or laying oneself open to allegations of cowardice.

After the bout, Hermione did her usual trick of losing herself in the warrens of corridors in the dungeons so she could slip away to her laboratory. In her previous incarnation, the DA had made do without treatment for the minor injuries sustained during meetings or had fibbed to Madam Pomfrey. This time around, the provision of surreptitious remedies fell to her. As well as a burgeoning grey market in anti-prank charms, reverse-engineered from what she knew of the Weasley Wheezes.

She brewed and refined alchemical products while keeping an eye on the clock. This year she could've done with a Time-Turner, though the metaphysics of temporal magic and reincarnation would probably cause something Lovecraftian to occur. Hermione scheduled naps for herself during the evenings so she could sneak around after curfew without being sleep deprived. It worked although the days were blurring into each other.
Valentine's Day happened to other people. Slytherins mostly took the opportunity to deride the masses observing a Muggle holiday. That didn't stop them from going to Hogsmeade. What stopped Hermione from going was a tricky potion batch and homework. She had a schedule for that too so she could concentrate on a subject rather than flitting from one to another winding herself up. Her mental weaknesses hadn't changed. Slow and steady.

When Bulstrode asked her for help in making a Calming Draught, she was suspicious. She'd been getting out of bed at one o'clock in the morning and had almost jumped when her dorm-mate had whispered to her. Hermione padded over to the other girl's bed and cast a Muffliato so they wouldn't wake anyone. Millicent didn't look like she'd slept. The soft shadows of a Lumos made her skin seem waxy.

“Has Madam Pomfrey cut you off?” Hermione eyed her. She hadn't noticed Millicent looking unwell, granted she hadn't particularly been looking.. By Fifth Year most of the girls had mastered cosmetic charms and glamours, especially the Slytherins. Appearance was another competition among Salazar's Own.

“I'm not stupid enough to go to Pomfrey.” Bulstrode would've snapped if she hadn't been asking for a favour. “I didn't get as much as I hoped from home. I think my mother's been drinking it too. My parents...”

“Are fighting.” She guessed and got a jerky nod. “You're going to poison yourself. Have you been taking liver tonics to ease the side effects?”

“Milk thistle tea.” The reply was tart. Millicent didn't like the suggestion she was stupid or couldn't manage her own problems. “I just need someone to check I'm doing it right, and who'll keep their mouth shut.”

“You can't keep quaffing the stuff.” Hermione tried to think of a weaning potion or something she could make half-strength to help ease Bulstrode off what she feared was becoming a serious psychological crutch.

“That's rich coming from you.” Millicent snarled. “Don't think I haven't noticed you've been oh so serene after ducking off. I bet you've got your own private stash.”

“Occlumency.” She snapped back. “I practise every bloody day. I don't go for the instant fix. Potions linger in the body, Bulstrode. I'd bet if I did a detection charm for the Draught you'd damn well glow.”

“Can you teach me?” It was the flip of a knut between screaming at Rosier and asking for lessons. If this had been Greengrass, she wouldn't have risked it as Daphne would keep cranking up the price. If it'd been Parkinson, Millicent never would've asked.

“That depends on when you're available.” Hermione went to her trunk, unwarded it and unlocked it, pulling out her randoseru. She kept everything secured while she slept. Her demonstration of the 'Cruciatus' had left her with little room for escalation if someone challenged her. So she limited opportunities. “I can do Tuesdays after Herbology from five thirty to six fifteen or Sundays eight to nine thirty in the morning.”

“You've planned everything that tightly?” Millicent craned her neck to peek at Rosier's notebook. It didn't look like much. The blonde didn't bother with appearances. Lucky bitch, the over-mothered witch thought enviously.

“It's OWL year.” That was a robust excuse much in use. She'd even heard it from a Ravenclaw she'd
found wandering the halls in his underwear chanting Arithmancy formulae.

“Tuesdays, then. I'd like one day at least to sleep in.” Bulstrode didn't expect to get very far with Occlumency but she was willing to try. She was good at learning things by rote and if Rosier was patient enough then maybe. She knew she couldn't keep going like she was. Rich food was starting to make her feel bilious. She'd rather have ice cream than a potion that tasted like ditch-water strained through gym shorts.

“Cut your Draughts with gillywater. Three to one at first then half and half. Don't try to go cold turkey.” Hermione advised, willing to help the girl solely because her parents would want her to make the effort. Both elder Grangers had done courses in Addiction Studies as part of their professional development. One of their university friends had ended the high-flying '80s with a cocaine habit that had cost him his marriage, career, and then life. They hadn't been able to help him.

“Why would I need to go to Turkey?” Millicent didn't think she had misheard.

“I mean don't stop taken the potion suddenly all at once. Ease off gently.” Hermione hadn't realised the expression wasn't common parlance among magicals. She didn't clarify to Bulstrode that the idiom was Muggle. That would require more explanation and she was already late to check on her brewing.

As part of the debt for the favour, Millicent didn't ask where Rosier was going fully dressed in the small hours. She watched the tall girl slip out of the dorm with the confident quiet of long habit. There was no excitement or hidden glee so it wasn't an assignation, and she was going further afield than the Common Room otherwise she wouldn't have dressed. Letting a suitable boy catch sight of you in your nightie was an unspoken tradition among the unpromised girls. With her luck, Millicent grimaced at the bed curtains, it'd be Crabbe. She lay down and pulled the blankets up to her chin to spend several more hours staring dispiritedly at the damask.

For her part, Hermione ducked into the Head Girl's suite, through the alchemical niche and via storerooms got to her laboratory. She had Transfigured whiteboards to hang behind each brewing station, markers being less of a risk around potions than chalk dust, so she could tell at a glance the progress of each. Not trying to keep things in her head made her work much easier. She didn't trust herself not to wake up suddenly entirely Cathal and perplexed as Hell why she had six batches of empty potion media on the go.

She chatted to Moppet through their wires as they both worked. The Hogwarts staff did most of their chores while the students slumbered. The house elf popped in with an inverse-afternoon tea around 3am and they enjoyed scones with cherry jam.

That morning was their last little bit of peace. Once the Quibbler published Harry's interview, Umbridge redoubled her efforts to smoke out conspiracies. The High Inquisitor threatened expulsion for the tiniest infraction of her Decrees. The trade in contraband copies of the oddball newspaper scuttled her attempt to muzzle discourse. So Umbridge tightened the screws.

Hermione wasn't in the courtyard to see the dramatic scene of Trelawney's dismissal. She was on the fourth floor near Binns's office unsticking two First Years Gryfffindors whose feet were glued to the ceiling. They'd been left there by their assailant and were on the point of fainting when she'd heard their plaintive calls for help. She detached them and lowered them gently to the floor, sitting with them until they'd recovered enough to stand.

Neither wanted to go to Madam Pomfrey or to report the incident as Umbridge was taking an interest in all disciplinary complaints. She had a knack for showing up just in time to hear the embarrassing details then making the victim squirm. The two little wizards thanked her clumsily after noticing her
tie then scurried off to coddle their pride in their Common Room. If they'd had a competent DADA teacher they would've known the counter-charm to free themselves.

*

Professor Firenze did not shift his eyes from the liar as she strode early into his classroom. Dumbledore had given him trees and a transfigured ceiling and with the scent of the forest from the open windows the centaur could almost pretend he was not an exile. The stars had guided him to teach the young humans despite the objections of his colony. Mars was rising brighter and brighter, a harbinger he must heed.

“There are no stars for you.” He spoke as soon as the witch, if the creature was truly a witch, crossed his threshold. Firenze had shared with the Headmaster what he had seen in the heavens; a student for whom nothing was written. The old wizard had nodded sagely. He had said not to fret as he was watching the boy.

The centaur had not corrected him for Dumbledore was on a fixed path and would not allow himself to be swayed. Such commitment could lead one to great deeds or it could leave one exhausted and lost, adrift at the end of a vanishing path. Thus it fell to Firenze to be mindful of the detached being. He hadn't been sure of whom until he had put the names of his students into the fire to read the smoke. Most were honest foals and fillies with simple journeys ahead of them. Others took darker trails. One he could not see.

“And that's for you to decide?” Hermione snapped. She hadn't got much sleep between experimenting and a late Prefect patrol, and she'd had her in-class brewing ruined when Finnegan's mistake had caused the evacuation of Potions. She and Nott had been nearest the door so they'd escaped with minimal exposure to the noxious smoke but she'd been trying to refine her understanding of the Draught of Peace and all that work would have to be redone.

“In this place, at this time, it is.” Firenze paced to the right so he could catch her scent. Hellebore and nettles, sweat and anger, female near her moon, and magic. Usually he could not smell so much power on a human. Their bodies came from the earth not the ether. A clay vessel could hold only so much. This creature was bound around with energy, not quite wards keeping something inside but close enough he would think of her as danger caged.

“Then I'll need a note excusing me from class.” The terse request was met with a slow tilt of his head, more or less a nod. Hermione stood there mute as Professor Firenze found parchment and pen to compose a plausible ejection. She could have protested though arguing with a rarefied centaur seldom got anyone anywhere. Whatever he saw in her was evidently disconcerting enough for him to want to be rid of her. She'd go quietly and use the time for her own ends.

Firenze didn't hand her the pass. He set it on a desk then back away guardedly watching her take it and go. Hermione read the slip as she headed to the dungeons. 'Private contemplations' might be the first convenient excuse he found or it could be a pointed suggestion to rethink her life choices. She'd write a report on meditation techniques, which would be useful for her to learn more about, and submit it at the end of term to cover herself. Meanwhile, Hypnos beckoned.

Subsequent Divination classes found her in the Room of Doom, so named for the old meaning of the word as 'law or judgement'. Originally for disciplinary inquiries too serious for a single Head of House to adjudicate, it was a circular chamber with a high domed ceiling that reminded Hermione of the Hagia Sophia. A beautiful place to curse someone, specifically the someones drawn by Ona Parangyo for the mini-tournaments.

Relatively few Slytherins took NEWT Divination, Ancient Runes, or Arithmancy, and the Fifth
Year schedule matched the Sixth Year for electives in that period, leaving Hermione open to join. The consistent duelling helped her considerably in overcoming her tendency to hesitate in combat as she debated with herself what spell to use. There was no time for over-thinking when sparring with serpents.
As much as she tried to resist, Hermione couldn't help count down the days until Edgecombe betrayed the DA. That evening study or a nap was impossible so she sat nose deep in bubbles in the Prefects' bathroom trying to relax. Hot water didn't work. Meditation and Occlumency exercises were a washout too. Rather than react to her Housemates' glee, she went to bed after taking a hypocritical dose of Calming Draught.

After breakfast and Umbridge's crowing announcement of the change in regime, Hermione felt no better. The defiant fireworks cheered her a little. In the face of the Professors' passive-aggressive refusal to deal with the sparklers, the Prefects were called upon to restore order. She took herself off to the dungeons ostensibly to check no one had put pyrotechnics in the Potions store then disappeared into her lab.

That afternoon, Umbridge issued a Decree establishing the Inquisitorial Squad and called for volunteers. Parangyo and Warrington organised a general meeting in the Common Room to discuss the Slytherin response to the opportunity. Hermione towed Bulstrode out of their dorm though it was doubtful the stocky witch could hear anything of the debate over the ringing in her head. The Occlumency lessons were giving her migraines but she persisted.

“I think we should grab this opportunity with both hands.” Warrington asserted, willingly taking the 'pro' position. “I'm bloody weary of being stepped on. Being able to dock points will bring some useful parity back to the halls.”

“Joining a heavy-handed pet group under an Acting Headmistress will gain us little other than more disdain.” Parangyo would've quashed the whole recruitment drive except her fellow Seventh Year Prefect was keen to do something. His patience had worn thin after two terms of sniping, petty attacks. He wanted to exercise his authority. He and the Head Boy Roger Davies had been arguing for months.

“Not joining will hardly garner us the esteem of our fellows.” Cassius's voice was so acidic it could've etched steel. There was an echoing murmur from the assembly. A chance for some reciprocity shielded by authority was an enticing prospect. “If members of the Inquisitorial Squad can take points from other Houses, we can ensure Slytherin gets the House Cup as we deserve. Regardless of your opinion of Umbridge, some of us need to volunteer.” Having stated his opinion, he opened the floor to others. “Comments?”

“That's a big 'regardless',” Belvina Burke spoke up into the cautious quiet. She didn't need the pink toady's approval. Even if the Ministry clamped down on her family's businesses, they'd simply take their valuable and discreet services elsewhere. “If this goes pear-shaped she'll drag us down with her.”

“If she's still Headmistress next year, she'll remember who didn't join promptly.” Muriel Rothley was audibly glum. If Umbridge was still in charge at Hogwarts, she'd beg her parents not to send her back. She'd take her Apprenticeship early and make up her NEWTs working longer for her Master. A year without music was worse than the Dementors.

“She's a useful connection.” Draco Malfoy remarked, quoting his father from innumerable cautionary letters. “I plan to join.”

“Kiss arse.” The words were out of Hermione's mouth before she could bite her tongue.
“Is that an offer, Rosier?” His smirk could have been cited as the holotype.

“No, Malfoy. Unlike you, I have some pride.” In for a penny, Hermione thought as she abandoned tact for venom. “I'm not going to lick Umbridge's boots for House points or a political edge. She's not reliable and she's not clever. Anything she touches will turn into a witch hunt.”

“The pink menace has certainly lit your wand.” Warrington quirked an eyebrow at the vehement witch. “Not putting your name down, then?” He favoured her with his most charming smile, which had no notable effect.

“This isn't an official House matter. Everyone is free to make their own choice.” Parangyo didn't quite trust Rosier not to lash out if goaded so she intruded quickly. “I recommend the Third Years and younger not sign up. Irrespective of the benefit, the Inquisitorial Squad will be a target.” She used her best 'voice of reason' tone. The younger students were free to make the choice to do as she suggested. “Anyone who does enlist, please do remember that any deduction of points from Slytherin will be subject to unofficial ratification by the Prefects.”

In the end only eight Slytherins signed on. Hermione was relieved to see the same people as last time. Her speaking out against the Acting Headmistress hadn't altered anything in this instance. Enduring Parkinson and Malfoy swanking around with their silver 'I' badges was only marginally less irritating the second go around. It paled in comparison to the harassment from the other Houses.

Hermione gritted her teeth as she shepherded the First Year Slytherins to History of Magic, with her wand drawn. The Snakelets walked in a tight group on their guard after being coated in slime en route to their previous class and showered with dirt that morning in Herbology. They crossed the hall, catching sight of Parangyo doing similar duty for the Second Years, then headed up the stairs two by two.

A Sticking Hex whizzed out from a crowd of Badgers on the steps below. Hermione countered it but did not retaliate. That part of the defence plan was not popular. However, the Prefects enforced the moral high ground and referred all the perpetrators to Umbridge. All the Prefects minus Rosier, who surreptitiously neglected to pass on complaints. No one had yet noticed. There were more than enough disciplinary infractions to go around.

Binns didn't remark on her presence out of class. As soon as the First Years were seated, he began his droning lesson. Hermione Transfigured herself a chair in the corridor and pulled out a book. She had time to escort the young ones to their next subject before returning to take History of Magic herself. It'd be Easter hols soon but she doubted many would be heading home, not with exams looming. Most parents wouldn't be able to get the time off work, skewing the student demographics further towards the anti-establishment.

By Saturday afternoon, Hermione had cast sixteen different counter charms, dosed seven different Slytherins with Anti potions, and had to physically restrain Hearne from punching Jack Soper after the Gryffindor hexed his underwear into sandpaper. The Inquisitorial Squad were making hay but the rest of the House were copping it left and right.

A Prefects meeting, enlivened with Warrington and Malfoy regaling their peers with tales of creative excuses for point taking, ended with Parangyo going to Snape to ask him to raise the wards on the Slytherin dorms so they could fort up over the holidays. He complied with very little persuasion needed. Study groups were formed, with request lists for books, which the Prefects fetched. The older Years went out in relays, in threes or fours, to run the gauntlet.

Most of the hexes and jinxes were relatively harmless in that they weren't permanent but no one wanted to come back from a simple trip to the quad bald, warty, and stinking of garbage. Someone in
Ravenclaw had a quick wand for itching spells. There were at least three different variants including one that was contagious and had half the Common Room scratching before they cured the vector.

Hermione, in ordinary clothes not her uniform, snuck out in the early morning to go to her lab. She had to take a longer route to detour around Filch then divert again to avoid Peeves. Emerging from a concealed passage behind a tapestry, she almost literally fell over one of the Weasley twins crouching at the base of 'Cliodna and the Three Birds'.

“Bugger!” Hermione swore softly as she righted herself. Neither of them had their wands lit as the gibbous moon was bright enough to navigate. And to string trip-lines, apparently. She forgot herself enough to speak as the redhead hastily stuffed his tools into his pockets. “Why fishing line, Fred?”

“I'm a keen nocturnal angler.” He grinned then took a second look at her. “Rosier?” His gaze flicked up and down as though trying to see through a glamour before smiling broadly. “Stick to Polyjuice, mate. You've made her tits too big.”

“Prat.” Hermione hissed as she went red. The second worst thing about being pale, first being the sun's pique in summer, was how obvious her embarrassment was. Granger might go a little pink but that was subtle. Cathal blushed rubicund.

“So it is you!” Fred raised his hands placatingly before she could curse him. “A thousand apologies for the personal remark, heiress of House Rosier. I grovel in supplication.” He sketched a bow, still smiling. “May I ask, oh most fearsome of Prefects, what has brought you to my humble corridor on such a fine morning?”

“Your brother is sneaking off with whatever you were going to plant, I presume?” She could have taken points or told him off but she'd missed the twins' banter so much she was in no hurry to exert her authority.

“I am wounded, fair maiden.” He clutched his chest, feigning a blow then shrugged. Fred reckoned his brother was bound to have heard them by now and made himself scarce. “Probably, yeah. Plan to haul us before the Puce Overlord?”

“Not if I can possibly avoid it.” Hermione stated fervently. Fred chuckled, 100% alive. She felt physically sick knowing what would happen. But that she could change. It wouldn't matter to time/space if she made sure he survived, surely. A little nudge at the end of the thread, that's all.

“You're an odd one.” Fred considered the Slytherin in hand-me-down clothes, purer than the pure, questionably Dark, and unquestionably tetchy. He liked to think he was good with all sorts of people, reading their little tells, but if held at wand point he still wouldn't be able to say which way she'd go. She was playing a complicated game.

“It's been said before.” She sighed then considered the tapestry. “Why Cliodna?”

“Her Toadiness uses this corridor frequently. We thought we could give her a little fanfare.” He hadn't decided yet on fireworks or dungbombs. Perhaps both. They’d run out of contraband Dittany from the Hufflepuffs, and the Badgers had refused to say where they were getting it. Fred had some ideas, though. “Thanks for the burn cream.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Hermione said automatically. She edged towards the concealed passage when she heard someone coming down the hallway but it was only George, ostentatiously nonchalant. He was even whistling softly.

“Rosier.” He gave her a nod. “Am I intruding on a torrid tryst?”
“A romantic rendezvous.” Fred confirmed.

“An erotic encounter.” George continued the alliterative patter.

“A mundane meeting.” She interrupted before they could get their stride. “And, no. I was just leaving.”

“Rosier was in the midst of denying she's our alchemical benefactor.” One twin informed the other. “Despite our knowing she's been skulking in old potions stores.”

“And hidden alcoves.” The stereo copy chimed in.

“And suspiciously well concealed light and airy solariums suitable for the tending on an astonishing amount of plants.” Fred waggled his eyebrows at her theatrically. “We didn't know Slytherins went in for surreptitious horticulture.”

“You have a point?” Hermione asked, admitting defeat. The twins aired mirror Cheshire grins.

“We have a plan.” The announcement came with a bow and a flourish.

“A large, explosive plan.” Fred mimed a blast with his hands and made some, quiet because they were actually trying not to get caught, sound effects.

“A large, explosive plan with a tiny, tiny flaw.” George amended with a melodramatic sigh. “We think we know what the problem is.”

“But it's a fiddly correction to one of the potions we're using, which we've tried to fix but...” Fred held up his left hand, noticeably pink from recent healing possibly by her burn cream.

“It's very fiddly.” George finished, his smile faltering a little in the face of Rosier's face. She looked sad, of all things. They seemed to have a rapport however unlikely. Did that upset her? “That goo you made us is top drawer, so what do you reckon? Fancy a little rebellion?”

She agreed.

It was probably foolish but Hermione felt if she didn't do something to stick two fingers up at Umbridge she'd explode. She did keep some Slytherin cred in negotiating a price for her assistance, a quiet favour at a later time, but she would've helped them for nothing. Ironically, the one of changes they needed doing to one of the precursor potions for the dragon firework was an alteration of the medium, something she had been experimenting with for years.

Hermione added the project to her schedule and asked Moppet to find alternate locations for the caches and plants. Fred and George could be reasonably trusted not to inform on her out of fellow feeling of mischief. Whatever interest they might have in the Marauder's Map could be passed off as nostalgia or hijinks. Once they had left the school, though, they might share their realisation of her activities with Harry or Ron.

She would need to move her laboratory, not something whimsically done, then talk to Hogwarts about making the new location unplottable. Or possibly reverse those tasks so she had somewhere definitely secure before she shifted a cauldron. Hermione trusted Harry, Ron, and her other self but in their shoes they wouldn't trust her or whatever lie she spun as to why she couldn't help them. She didn't trust herself not to cave and assist.

The rest of the Easter break was a regimented task-to-task slog. The unofficial lock-down of the Slytherin dorms and the approaching exams helped normalise her rush. No one asked why she was
making notes on potions at midnight in the Common Room or why she spent hours behind her warded bed curtains. The latter was a fib as Moppet popped her out of the girls' suite to her lab. Still, no one seemed to notice what she was doing amidst their own flurry.

The pranks and reprisals against the green ties didn't let up when classes resumed. Parkinson sported a rank of antlers for almost a week before Madam Pomfrey found a way to remove them without also excising portions of her skull. Warrington's cornflake skin similarly resisted easy cure and he shed disgustingly to the point where he had to wear a mask at meals. And Graham Montague...

Malfy found him in the U-bend and took him to the Hospital Wing. Hermione Granger had let her friends persuade her not to intervene, not to reveal the twins' part in his incapacitation. Her conscience had twinged for months particularly during her own prolonged stay in the infirmary after the Department of Mysteries. So Cathal Rosier went to the matron.

Madam Pomfrey didn't like basing a treatment program on 'information received' but without any other indication of what was wrong with Montague, she had to make the attempt. Neither did she like handing over students to Umbridge so Rosier's intercession went unmentioned except to Montague's parents, who had demanded to know what had happened to their only child. They pressed when Rosier refused to say who had assaulted their son. Her excuse of being told on condition of anonymity of the source did not win her their esteem.

Hermione was placidly, temperately, and blamelessly in the Library when Fred and George decanted their swamp then left bombastically. She didn't join the other students in the courtyard cheering their departure. She had an excellent view of the fireworks from the windows in the Astronomy section. They really were spectacular.

Umbridge was incandescent. There was little she could do however. The Weasley twins were of age. They had a right to discontinue their education, and given there had been no permanent damage to Hogwarts, there was nothing with which she could have them charged. Not that she didn't try. The Acting Headmistress Apparated back and forth to the Ministry several times during the run up to OWLs. Her absence gave more impetus to the pranksters. The Inquisitorial Squad were besieged on all sides, leaving the Slytherins who had spoken against joining smug indeed.

Hermione kept herself busy. She had to. Her chat to Hogwarts on unplottable locations within the Castle had diverted to the praxis of the Killing Curse. Avada Kedavra was an ancient spell, one of the oldest still in use largely unaltered. The Voice knew an astounding amount about the curse as it had at various times been taught in senior classes, though not since 1717 when it was made an Unforgivable. There were other spells that lingered in the fabric of reality, that once cast would always be cast at that time in that place. Many ritual castings left 'stains' upon the world.

She could sacrifice herself or put someone else in the way of Bellatrix's Avada. She could change Sirius's fate. It might be possible to substitute her own Killing Curse for the one cast by Lestrange, to kill the mad witch before she murdered her cousin. Hogwarts asked how certain Hermione was that she could end Bellatrix during the fight near the Veil. It would have to be done there. Someone would cast the Avada Kedavra there. How sure could she be that it would be her?

Hermione couldn't be sure enough. There was nothing to say there couldn't be more Killing Curses cast at that point. No guarantee that if she somehow managed to get into the Department at the right time that she could even cast the Unforgivable herself. Not everyone could put enough of themselves into wanting someone dead to compel their magic to kill. And if she couldn't do it, who could she trust to cast in her stead?

Manipulating the Death Eaters to do it was right out. None of her peers could either. That left the Order of the Phoenix, who were loath to use Unforgivables even during war. Maybe Mad-Eye might
do it but she'd never be able to convince him. Perhaps Sirius Black himself? That thought squatted in her mind like an unwelcome guest for days.

How much could she rely on Harry's godfather?

How much would she have to tell him for him to believe Cathal Rosier wasn't lying?

Would he even risk it, if he knew what would happen? Would he chance Harry or Remus being caught by Bellatrix's curse? Would he be willing to die himself rather than endanger his friend and his godson?

Hermione kept herself busy to avoid thinking about time counting down. She and Moppet moved her laboratory, caches, and the hidden garden. She brewed. She studied. She did her Prefect duties and stood guard over the younger Slytherins as the tension before exams wound everyone spring-tight. She wrote and burned half a dozen letters to different people, trying to find a way to cheat Fate. She took her exams.

Leaving the room after the History of Magic OWL, Hermione had to admit to herself she wasn't certain. Not enough. She also had to confess that she didn't trust herself not to try something, to let her heart do her thinking for her. So she called Moppet on her wire, let her know where she was going, and headed down into the tunnels to try to get into the Chamber of Secrets. Even if she knocked herself out testing the wards, she wouldn't be in the Department of Mysteries.

The sewers beneath Hogwarts had not improved in the time since her last attempt. She had mapped out more of the access routes and forgotten conduits, allowing her to skirt around some of the old nodes of defensive magic. Hermione had more experience in defusing them as well. Many were so tangled up that a sudden discharge unravelled them entirely, dissipating the stored magic. She'd undone two and was working on a third when...

“Moppet thinks Miss is a bit of a twit.” The house elf looked down at her witch, whom she had carried into the new laboratory that smelled of salt no matter how much Moppet cleaned it. The stone remembered being a cold larder and a cold larder it would stay. “Miss should wakes up now. Moppet got all the blood off Miss, even out of her ears.”

“Fuck.” Hermione slurred.

“No, thank you, Miss.” Moppet said politely just in case Miss was asking. Miss was naked except for the gold talking-to-Moppet wire and the fake tummy. Her wands and her backpack Moppet had found near her but everything else had gone away, unmade. “Wake up.”

“Damn it.” Hermione groaned as she roused enough to blink at her friend's concerned face. “What went wrong?”

“Moppet doesn't know. Moppet found Miss in her blood, in her skin in a tunnel that was all sparkly.” The house elf didn't know what magic had happened. There'd been a lot of it though.

“Another ward discharge.” She rolled onto her stomach then lay there with her cheek pressed to the cool stone. Nothing was sore exactly. She felt like she had been put through a mangle. “Someone should do a survey of the old magic. Do some controlled deactivation. Curse Breakers.”

“Would Miss like some trousers?” Moppet inquired, deciding she could ignore most of what her witch was mumbling. The groan she got in reply sounded affirmative so she went and got the nice soft comfy ones that were Miss's special sleeping clothes. They had rabbits on.

Hermione got into her pyjamas with help and achieved a sitting position propped up against a shelf.
She pulled her Map out of the marsupium, relieved to see both were functional. A new section of the dungeons had partially revealed itself but it blinked in and out of existence. Or the magic release had destabilised the area's connection to Hogwarts. Or she'd given herself a concussion.

“What time is it?” She asked after becoming aware she'd been staring dumbly at the vellum for several minutes.

“About two of the clock in the night.” Moppet peered at her witch. “Miss should go to Madam the Healer.” At the sluggish nod, the house elf took her friend's hand and popped her to the Hospital Wing. When the poppy witch asked questions, Miss just stared so Moppet did a bad thing and lied, saying she had found Miss in the hall on the floor not awake. There were no more questions after that.

Hermione was still in the Hospital Wing when the party from the Department of Mysteries returned. She woke to a thunderous argument between Harry and Ron about her. It took a few moments for her addled mind to spin up to speed. The boys were arguing about Cathal. About why Cathal was in the infirmary. She was puzzled about that too.

Opening her eyes, she saw her friends, her other self, and Moppet hiding behind her bedstead. The house elf wagged a long finger at her in a silent scold before vanishing. Hermione groaned. She'd be due a telling off. At least she had finished her exams and could take it fairly easy for the rest of the term.

Madam Pomfrey ejected the uninjured and the mended, ordering them back to Gryffindor Tower for Healer-mandated rest. She threatened to dose them all with Dreamless Sleep if they didn't go to bed. Which left Hermione and Hermione in her tender care. Hermione tried not to look at the brown haired girl unconscious and surrounded by translucent medical spells. She'd slept through that bit first time, rousing for potions. And potions. And potions. She made a face at the memory of the taste.

“And you, Miss Rosier.” The matron's voice jerked her attention towards her. “You are fit to return to your Common Room. I have reported your escapade to Professor Snape, whom I am assured will take a close interested in what you were up to.” Their gaze met and the older witch added staunchly. “Which was not a random hex gone wrong so don't try that excuse.”

“Yes, Madam Pomfrey.” Hermione complied, keeping her snark to herself about the matron suddenly finding her curiosity now Umbridge the Usurper had been overthrown. She didn't have the mental faculties to bitch right now. She biddably took herself off to the dungeons, crawled into her bed and slumbered until prodded awake.

“Miss.” Moppet prodded again as her witch blinked at her. “It is Sunday. You sleeped for a whole day.” The house elf's ears twitched, catching the noise as the snaky students came back to their nest. “You need to be ups.”

Hermione yielded to the third prod, shuffled to the bathroom to freshen up then got dressed feeling less stupefied. She had a lingering ache at the side of her head, which upon investigation was probably due to the communication wire, and a general feeling of being stretched then snapped back. Considering she could be lying in the Hospital Wing drinking a dozen potions every hour, she had nothing about which to complain.

“Has Miss finished punishing herself?” Moppet inquired, arms crossed.

“I think so.” She sighed. She had albeit unintentionally removed any opportunity for her to interfere with the events leading up to Sirius's death. Everyone would know the Dark Lord was back. Fudge would shortly be replaced, good riddance, and the world would become by increments a more
frightening place. “I hadn't planned to knock myself out.”

“Moppet is willing to believe Miss only because Moppet doesn't think Miss would on purpose scare Moppet so badly.” The house elf blinked then sniffled when her witch hugged her, apologising many many times.

“I can't promise I won't do it again.” As much as she never wanted Moppet to find her like that again, Hermione had to be honest. “We need to get into the Chamber. I think I'm getting closer to finding a way to…” She stopped abruptly as footsteps thudded down the hall. Moppet went invisible and Hermione was on her feet wand in hand when the door flew open.

“Rosier!” Millicent had expected her dorm-mate to still be in bed. No one had bothered the blonde, not with Granger in the Hospital Wing and rumours running riot. Something had happened. They'd all assumed it was a duel, an impressive one, until the Sunday morning Prophet had landed in their breakfast. “It's a bloody crisis!”

“The Dark Lord has returned.” Hermione stated calmly, not feeling up to pretending to be unaware as Bulstrode breathlessly broke the news. Millicent's eyes widened briefly before she schooled her face into blandness, a little harder for her now she wasn't numbing herself with Calming Draught.

“Yes.” She said lamely. “Malfoy, Nott, Goyle, and Crabbe's fathers have been arrested. In full regalia.” It was all over the school. “Umbridge's been recalled. Dumbledore's back.” Millicent took a breath. “And why aren't you surprised?”

“I was in the Hospital Wing when the Gryffindors arrived.” Granted she had been asleep but she doubted anyone would bother to check. Magical folk were not much acquainted with the deductive method.

“Parangyo and Warrington want a general meeting.” Again. Millicent was just done with being besieged. She'd joined the Inquisitorial Squad to get some of her own back, only to set herself up as a target. If not for the Occlumency, she would've been a nervous wreck pissing Calming Draught. Bloody Umbridge. Bloody Potter. And she couldn't run, oh no. The Bulstrodes had a reputation for being stalwart. Merlin, this was going to be bad.

They had a week until end of term. Parangyo emphasised the brevity of the ordeal. Whatever the other Houses threw at them, whatever the politics, the Express left on Saturday. Everyone would be on it. What happened after that was between individual students and their parents. So there was no need to panic. They were the cunning and ambitious. They would rise above.

The Seventh Year's words returned to Hermione as she checked her Map. Her preparations for the summer were done. She had three different escape plans if Snape or the Malfoys tried to nab her. In extremis, she had enough supplies on her to run at a moment's notice. Moppet was ready too.

Everything was as organised as they could manage. Which was why, when she saw who was in the Gunhilda of Gorsemoor Corridor she swore.

Nott was alone and cornered by a group large enough their names crowded and jumbled together. If she retreated back down the passage she had been about to leave, no one in the corridor would be any the wiser. She didn't have to do anything. Except Nott was alone and it could get ugly. And she was a Gryffindor.

Hermione strode out of the little side passage, stepping around the statue of a portly, self-important wizard. She was behind the right flank of the crowd, visible to the bulk of the group hemming Nott into the empty niche where a statue had been. Probably someone politically awkward who had been furtively removed for the good of the reputation of the school.
“Stop this.” Hermione shouted to be heard over the taunts. Junior Death Eater was the mildest. The vitriol was thick. No one in the throng was old enough to remember much of the first war but they had heard the stories and lived with the echoed fear of their parents and older siblings. They were scared, angry, and felt helpless. Hermione sympathised. She'd been left adrift half-sheltered, half-ignored by her elders, clamouring for information they didn't have or refused to share.

“We're lucky today, chaps.” Kenneth Towler, a Seventh Year with more nerve than sense, shoved forward drawing his wand to restrain Rosier. Two of You-Know-Who's minions-in-training. Even better. They could send the pair of them home with a damn clear message. If Potter and a bunch of Fifth Years could see off a dozen Death Eaters, then two Snakes would be no trouble.

Towler was halfway through his spell when he hit the floor. Hermione let him start casting, let everyone's attention turn to him before she dropped him with a Stunner. She wasn't a moving speaker or particularly charismatic so she needed every advantage she could garner. He'd drawn his wand first. He'd cast first. They'd all seen it, though whether they would admit to it later if this incident came before their Heads of House was hard to say.

“His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white.” Hermione flicked her wand, activating the trace spell she had worked into all the potions she'd made as Sredni Vashtar. The writing hands of the crowd lit up. Almost every last one. Umbridge had been generous with her punishments.

“What are you doing, Rosier?” Lee Jordan had joined in to calm people down not give Nott a good kicking. He took his chance now, wanting his friends to take a moment to reconsider. They were all worried, wrung-out from a gruelling year. Not really thinking straight. “No one do anything until we know what spell she's cast.”

“Everyone who's glowing has used some of my Dittany.” She jumped into the opening Lee had given her. “I've been brewing the stuff all year on the quiet.” That surprised them enough to cause glancing and muttering. The Hufflepuffs had been passing the Essence around generously. Buckets of it.

“Bullshite.” A Muggle-born from the back of the group scoffed.

“I didn't do it for free.” Hermione sneered her best sneer. “And I can undo it.” She paused to let that sink in. “The bleeding won't kill you but you all remember the pain, don't you?” She did, years after. “Dark magic lingers. It seeps in, making you feel dirty. Weak.” Her arm itched where the scar wasn't. “Nott, come here.” Her eyes didn't move from the crowd. The Slytherin edged over to her, keeping his back to the wall. “None of us want to see what I'll do to all of you if you cross me.”

Someone in the crowd muttered then another. The group stirred, caught between her threat and their wish for violence. Hermione reached behind her, gripping her second wand to cast a Shield Charm over herself and Nott. She couldn't channel any magic into the Dittany potion users. The tracer was just a tracer. But she had a wordless broad target stinging hex that might buy them some time to run away.

Then behind the gang, a statue exploded with a sound like a cannon, showering everyone in the corridor with bits of marble and billows of chalky dust. Hermione stuffed her wand in her pocket, grabbed Nott's hand and legged it down the hall, turning a fast corner before diving behind a tapestry. She didn't stop until they were two floors down in the comparative safety of an empty classroom. She dropped her Shield Charm with a muttered profanity.

Theodore Nott embraced her like a condemned man would a reprieve.
Because no one was suave at barely-sixteen, the hug turned into something awkward with Nott stammering his thanks and Hermione going red as she became aware her body had noticed it was being held by a boy type person. He had beautiful dark blue eyes, deep and clever. Stupid pubescent hormones.

He took a quick step backward with a sharp bow of his head and fled the room before either of them could say something stupid. Hermione stood there uncomfortable with the thought that other than Moppet, she couldn't remember the last person who had hugged Cathal. She presumed Derica Max had but that was another life.

Of course it would be now that she also recalled Snape's advice on her virginity. Hermione swore, hexed a table, swore, mended the table, and told herself she was twenty-three years old. Irrespective of magic or biochemistry, mentally she was an adult. She had shit to do that did not include giggling inanely or bursting into tears or having a temper tantrum.

Hermione took a deep breath, dropping into one of the Occlumency meditation exercises. After a few minutes of that, she felt more clear-headed. She shouldn't be surprised Cathal was starved for human contact. Anyone would be in her circumstances. Slytherins didn't go in for group hugs. She took another deep breath, putting her wand away.

What she wanted to do was hide in her laboratory. However, she was a Prefect. Hermione opened her map, scanning for any other lone Snakes. She had added a charm to distinguish the House status of the occupants of the Castle. The spell wasn't as precise as she would've liked as anyone who had attended Hogwarts living or dead displayed in their respective colours. It did show her the only lone green dots were ghosts however.

“Voice, did you detonate that statue?” She asked as she had the Map out.

“We did.” Hogwarts confirmed with perhaps a hint of devilment.

“Thanks.” Hermione was sincere. Her pride would happily allow her to run away from eight-to-one odds.

“The statue was poorly aligned. It's lack of congruence offended us.” The Castle defended its vandalism with an off-hand critique. She made an assenting noise, not mentioning that Peeves had to get his destructive urges from somewhere.

Hermione stuck it out until the last day of term. She was reasonably confident that Narcissa Malfoy had more on her mind than her wayward ward. Similarly Professor Snape was busy assuaging Voldemort's wrath. She could probably have left the school with son et lumiere like Fred and George. She had planned to slip away in Hogsmeade but after a scrum broke out between a load of Fourth Year Badgers and Snakes, she opted to ride shotgun on the Express to help keep order.

Kings Cross station was crowded with people pretending not to be frantic to collect their children. A burly wizard all but elbowed her aside as he hurried towards his daughter. Hermione wove into the mill, bustling out with the Muggle pedestrians heading north towards Pancras Square. She hurried into Camden Street Natural Park, stepped behind a tree, and Disillusioned herself. She called Moppet on her wire. The house elf appeared scant moments later then popped them both back to the safety of Hogwarts.
Hermione went immediately to her new laboratory in a 'sleeping' section of the castle. The room was only technically unplottable, in that her use of it was insufficient to rouse it from its inactive state. There were few truly unplottable parts of the school, all specifically made to be concealed and nearly all heavily warded. The Room of Requirement was an exception the Voice could share with her.

She'd meant to start another series of trials on food preservation spells and get another batch of potion media brewing. What she did was sit on the floor staring at the opposite wall as a wave of exhaustion washed over her. Hermione lay down on the tiles and let everything drain from her. Reaction, mostly, she guessed. No more standing sentry. No more Umbridge.

Moppet padded over to her witch and lay down beside her, hands touching. There was no talking. They just lay there like carpets, because maybe Miss was feeling a bit trodden on. Moppet understood that. Hogwarts was good and safe but lots of magical folk thought house elves was made for stepping on.

“This year is the last we have to prepare.” Hermione spoke after lying prostrate long enough for her bum to go numb. “I think Cathal'll have a much easier Sixth Year than Hermione did. I'll leave Malfoy to his bloody cabinet and keep my head down.” She inhaled slowly, willing herself to find some verve. “With Cathal's Death Eater kin still on the loose, I'd rather like to go unnoticed.”

“Miss can hide in the castle then on train day sneak into Hogsmeade.” Moppet didn't want her witch going anywhere the bad wizards might get her. “No going to London.”

“I'll need to be somewhere else when the Ministry sends out our OWL results.” She didn't know if her grandmother or Selwyn cousin knew about Rose Cottage. Taking that risk wouldn't be clever. “I'll stay somewhere ordinary. A hostel or registered camping ground.”

“Moppet doesn't like somewhere ordinary.” The house elf protested.

“Neither do I.” Hermione sighed. “But I can't be caught here. This would be a lot easier if the wizarding world had the equivalent of a Post Office box.” She sighed again then smacked herself on the cheek. No more moping. “I think today's going to be a write-off. Let's go to the Room of Requirement. I'll teach you how to ride a bicycle or ice skate. Something light-hearted.”

Hermione managed to jolly herself out of her ennui by giving herself a fortnight off. A proper holiday of pyjamas-at-noon and paperback novels. The Room of Requirement provided an adequate rink and transfiguring skates was fairly simple. Transfiguring knee and elbow pads because it had been years since she'd skated was also easy. Moppet, with a lower centre of gravity, was more stable on her feet once she got the idea of knives strapped to her soles. Hermione spent a lot of time on her backside on the ice laughing at herself.

The day before OWL results were due, Hermione went to London, to stay at a women's hostel in Earls Court. She wasn't too concerned about her results. Barring her own pride in her accomplishments, Cathal only needed Exceeds Expectations to continue with all her classes. The owl came during breakfast as its trip was short, another reason she wanted to be close to the Ministry, and she checked out as soon as the letter was in her hand.

The rest of July was lab trials and lists. She had a breakthrough with the camping food. The preservation charms didn't recognise any of it as comestible, affecting the dehydrated mixes the same way as grass. Hermione shrank, expanded, and re-shrank the freeze-dried instant lumpy powders. They retained their consistency quite well, far better than the home-cooked meals she used as a baseline. So while she couldn't put fresh food in magical stasis, she could store pre-packaged fare in an Undetectable Extension Charm trusting to the manufacturers' shelf life guarantees.
The dentists don't recommend high sugar snacks with lots of food colouring couldn't be magically preserved either. None of the charms Hermione had trialled as stable would stick to the marshmallow fluff or the sour gummy chews. Shrinking them did weird things to their viscosity, leaving her with crumby but sweet multicoloured lumps. Still technically edible but she gave up on the treats as they weren't nutritious enough to merit the effort of including them in her stockpiles.

Hermione went to the Leaky Cauldron on the thirty-first of July in anticipation of the book lists. She'd picked Diagon Alley as the best of a poor selection of choices. Wanted criminals were unlikely to show themselves in the busy shopping district. There were a few specialised purchases she needed to make for her NEWT classes. Cathal had got Outstandings in all her subjects, which had annoyed more than pleased her. Hermione had worked herself into knots studying. Cathal hadn't. Yes, she had to tell herself that she was older and she was Hermione so Cathal got the benefit of her groundwork but... Hermione had got an E in Defence Against the Dark Arts. That didn't seem fair.

Hermione told herself she was being silly. Moppet told her she was being silly. Hogwarts itself told her she was foolish if she thought neither her life experience or her new blood status had affected her results. It rankled. It continued to rankle after tea and Occlumency. She was in a sour mood when she checked in. Her sour mood continued when someone cursed her from behind while she was unlocking the door to her room. Red tinged darkness claimed her.

*  

The black turned to maroon then to vermilion. Hermione blinked, a flash of yellow, before instinctively reaching for her wand. Someone patted her hand. She jerked open her eyes, lying still until she had got her bearings. What she saw first was a woman with bobbed white hair and a smooth, aristocratic face. Not young but not old. Estimating the ages of magical folk was difficult. Hermione guessed the woman with her hand on Cathal's was anywhere between fifty to eighty.

"Siglinde Rosier." Hermione ventured, sitting up. She was in a huge bed in a spacious room with oak panelled walls. The witch smiled tightly, patting her hand again before straightening and gesturing imperiously to a house elf, who hurried forward with a tray.

"Severus said you were clever." She poured a cup from a tall silver salver, offering it to Hermione, who hesitated. "Here, test it." Cathal's paternal grandmother handed over Cathal's hawthorn wand. "An Invigoration Draught. You should recognise it."

Hermione cast a charm to detect poison before cautiously sniffing the liquid. Mandrake and pixie wings. The brew was unlikely to be anything other than an Invigoration Draught. There were potions that could be added to the Draught but as far as she knew they all changed the colour and sheen. It was probably safer than the woman offering it to her. She took a sip.

"Bit heavy on the ginseng." The bitter after-taste made Hermione lick her teeth. The potion worked quickly, clearing her head and filling her with an artificial bounciness. Rather like downing five shots of espresso then chewing raw ginger.

"The roots were old." Siglinde pinched Cathal's index fingernail, watching the pinkness slowly return. "Have two cups." She ordered, pouring herself one. The witch gulped it without pretence of manners, chasing the taste with her tongue. She covered her mouth belatedly, her other hand clenching into a fist. "Pardon."

"Hot cocoa works better for chronic exposure." Hermione felt like she was betraying Professor Lupin for sharing his advice with a Death Eater but she wanted to establish a rapport with Cathal's grandmother to expedite her escape.

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"My stomach has yet to reconcile itself with freedom." Madam Rosier spoke as though apologising for the dryness of the canapés. The tightness around her eyes betrayed her. Fifteen years in Azkaban took a toll. It was a accolade to Siglinde's strength of will that she could form a coherent sentence. "But that is a trifle. All that matters is that you are safe."

“What spell was cast on me?” She carefully did not accuse the witch of cursing her personally. Hermione didn't want to trigger an aggressive or psychotic response. She was expecting the matron to explode into shrieking fury a la Bellatrix.

“A familial spell. Blood compliance.” Long delicate fingers brushed over a signet ring on her left hand. Worn on the distaff side to indicate her possession by right of marriage, the intaglio was of the crest of the House of Rosier. “Narcissa said you were wilful. I did not want you running away. It is very important we speak.”

“I don't want stay with the Malfoys.” Hermione said quietly, probing to see a reaction. What she was truly thinking was rather more along the line of 'shit, shit, bloody hell, fuck’. Blood magic was old and inconveniently specific. It had only fallen by the wayside because although it could affect certain individuals very powerfully, broadening the working to include random folk was nearly unachievable. Unless you were Erzabet Bathory.

The problem for her was Cathal was a linear relative of Siglinde Rosier née Selwyn. Any magic the Death Eater witch did using her own blood would hit Cathal hard. Any magic she did with Cathal's blood would be impossible to shake off. She didn't have to be willing or conscious or even particularly close by if the witch knew the right rituals. She was in serious trouble.

“Of course you do not. Lucius is a traitor.” The words came out from somewhere cold and far away. Siglinde's gaze drifted to the carved bedposts, unfocused. Hermione counted to thirty-seven before the older witch spoke again. “Only his quick use of his tongue kept him from our Lord's wrath.” Her voice was more present and much more cynical. “Don't marry a pretty husband, my dear, no matter how good he is at licking cunt.”

Hermione choked on her draught and coughed into her hand as her face went red. Cathal's grandmother regarded her with a detached placidity that incongruously reminded her of Luna Lovegood. The mind in there looked upon the world askew. Siglinde patted her hand again as if to reassure herself her granddaughter was real.

“That's not my most important criterion in a spouse.” Hermione managed once she'd found her voice. “There's a concord between myself and Draco Malfoy.”

“The moment, the second, I can burn that parchment, I shall.” Madam Rosier shook with something Hermione hoped wasn't directed at her. “Piers had his little plans. He liked tidiness.” The words were over-precise, substituted for less socially acceptable criticism. “Fobbing off Malfoy would have been only temporary except my husband had to let himself die.”

“He was the Secret Keeper.” In spite of the instability of her hostess, Hermione was very interested in how Cathal had ended up in a forgotten cottage on a little island in the Irish Sea.

“He wanted to protect his heir more than avenge him.” Siglinde's voice was remote again, dissociative. “They killed our son. We couldn't even bury him. The Ministry incinerated Evan like he was garbage.” She was breathing fast, two spots of high colour on her cheeks. “My little boy should have come home. Some customs are inviolate. Without traditions we are nothing.”

“Did my mother think so?” Hermione asked, tautly ready to dive off the bed if Siglinde lashed out. Sirius used to smash things and scream at Walburga's portrait. Or drink. Or all three if he thought he
was alone. But he had been sane going into Azkaban. She had no way of knowing her 
grandmother's mental state before her incarceration.

“Derica loved your father. I was so pleased they got on well.” Madam Rosier smiled fondly at the 
memory. “It was difficult to find Evan a suitable wife not too closely related. Piers and I had such 
trouble conceiving I knew if we were to have grandchildren we needed to look outside England. 
Piers wanted a French witch but the best families are all Lestrange cousins. Very wild. The Maxs 
were perfect. Derica was perfect.”

“No one talks about her much.” She had got the impression Cathal's mother kept herself out of sight 
or at least kept her mouth shut. A good survival strategy considering the company she kept.

“Your mother is shy. There was the language difference too. Her English is good but people would 
comment on her accent.” Siglinde straightened, an echo of ingrained pride. Her daughter-in-law was 
clever and gifted and pure. No one had cause to look down their noses at her. “The pregnancy was 
difficult too. Derica was so sick we all worried she might lose you. She did everything to make sure 
you were safe. You are her darling little witch.”

“She's dead, grandmother.” Hermione said as gently as she could.

“Yes, dear, I know.” The older witch replied after staring into the distance. “Lucius told me. We can 
lay her death too at the feet of the Ministry. I saw the investigation report. An accidental fire.” Her 
mouth thinned into a grim line. “She was murdered. They killed her just like they killed my son. 
There will be a reckoning.”

“I want to do it.” Interrupting hastily, Hermione found some anger to share. Hell knew she had 
enough. It had to sound right because she didn't want the Auror's blood on her hands. “I was there. 
You avenged my father. Let me have the answering for my mother.”

“Darling, of course.” Siglinde smoothed Cathal's hair, out of practise with soothing a child. Her 
granddaughter wasn't the pink-cheeked curious toddler she'd been when they had last met. She was 
amost grown now, as tall as her father, so much a Rosier Siglinde had had no trouble picking her out 
from the patrons in that awful shabby pub. They'd lost years but that could be mended. “Whatever 
you wish. Whatever is in my power to give.”

“Where are we?” Shades of horror movies and cautionary fairy tales twisted the witch's words in 
Hermione's ears. She was fresh out of long spoons.

“Nott Manor. Tristan kindly offered houseroom.” The grim line returned, her mouth drawn 
bloodless. “Now he is shut away in Azkaban. As I would be too if I hadn't hidden in an elf-hole in 
the cellar while the Aurors sacked the place.” Perhaps she heard the brittle edge to her own voice 
because she paused there to draw in a slow, deep breath then another. “Theodore wishes to extend 
the same invitation to you.”

“That's nice of him.” Hermione considered demurring before opting against it. She had been 
kidnapped by a Death Eater who hadn't been sent as reinforcement to the Department of Mysteries. 
Nott's father had gone and he was of age thereabouts with Madam Rosier. It was possible she was 
doing something important for Voldemort or she was still infirm from her imprisonment. Or she was 
too mentally fragile to be relied upon, which with Bellatrix setting the bar had to be pretty damn 
unstable.

“I think he has a tendre for you.” Siglinde smiled indulgently. The Nott heir was a nicely suitable 
match for her granddaughter. A thinker, and if he were anything like his father, prone to giving his 
heart absolutely. Tristan still mourned his wife. He did not have any of the pretty little hobbies that
diverted many of their social equals. She wondered what had happened to Piers's Italian tart. Probably slunk back to Rome to find another husband.

“I've no objections to Theo but I want to concentrate on my schooling.” She was really feeling her lack of pure-blood etiquette right now. Was Cathal's grandmother hinting at an arranged marriage or just teasing fondly? You couldn't find the subtleties of interpersonal interaction in books. Hermione had crossed her fingers for five years that her inexperience would come across as aloofness or raised-in-hiding awkwardness.

“Of course, of course.” That got a firm nod. Best choice for a sole heir. No one wanted to trust their House's solitary hope to a duffer or one easily distracted by amusement. “Your cousin Sholto could still sire a child. Morgana knows he's aware of the process. My brother is forever on the watch for any mistakes from those half-bloods his son thinks he can sneak in.”

“Is he still doing that?” Hermione asked diffidently. She'd heard, they'd all heard, about Revels. If Siglinde was reminiscing about pre-war peccadilloes then fine. If her nephew was doing the same thing now, there were much more unpleasant connotations.

“I don't think so, darling. He doesn't like to be touched.” Siglinde said absently, another conversational leap from past to present. She stared into the abyss of memory and jumped when the tray-bearing house elf coughed circumspectly.

“Is dressing for dinner time, Madam, Miss.” He leaned away from the older witch as though expecting a violent reaction. He got a pensive stare instead.

“I had one of our elves bring over some of my robes from Rosier Hall. They should fit. When you've dressed, the elf will escort you to the dining room.” The words were airy, conversational, and probably two-thirds autopilot. Siglinde left, walking with a straight back that did not completely hide the tremble in her legs.

Hermione didn't move until the door had clicked shut. Then she was out of the bed, checking herself for damage. Physically, everything was where it should be. She was still in the clothes she had been wearing when she'd been abducted, including the wand sheathed at the small of her back. Her other wand was on the bedside table.

She tapped herself with a cleaning charm and sighed as her magic washed over her. Hermione had not liked the sound of 'compliance' in the spell Rosier had used on her. It was possible to weave prohibitions into a geas. Blood magic leant itself to puppeteering in that regard. Her shoes were set neatly by the chair polished to parade gloss. Her instincts told her to grab them and run.

Would Cathal dive out the window, legging it for the hills? Likely not. Hermione choked down a few choice obscenities. She was out of range for the gold wire. She could summon Moppet, which would mean the house elf would have to cross the Nott wards. Depending on the defensive magic, she might not be able to transit at all and the attempt would certainly sound an alarm. If she could get outside the wards somewhere discreet, she could let her friend know where she was. A postprandial stroll might be permitted.

“What's your name?” Hermione asked the house elf. His expression suggested he was surprised or perhaps disconcerted she'd asked.

“Esne, Miss.” They regarded each other hesitantly before Esne realised the problem. There hadn't been a young lady in the line of Nott since Master Tristan's father's older sister and the late Mistress had brought her own elves to serve her. Miss was embarrassed to be looked upon while changing. “Esne will stand in the corner looking at Esne's feet.”
“Thank you.” She hadn't wanted to send him out of the room because Siglinde had tasked him with escort duty. Hermione didn't know how badly the Notts treated their elves but Dobby's misuse had given her very low expectations. The house elf set the tray down on the dressing table and tucked himself firmly into the far corner.

Hermione went to the closet to find something to wear. Rosier had quite similar taste to Madam Flint though with a fondness for embroidery and the colour green. She pulled out a pseudo-Renaissance gown with slit sleeves. As soon as she touched the dress, snakes coiled around the hem, disappearing into the silk only to reappear at the cuffs and neckline. That frock went quickly back into the closet. Her second choice was embroidered with poppies on a green so dark it was almost black. It fit and she could pin back the sleeves to keep them out of her food. She made faces at herself in the mirror.
Hermione didn't know if Nott was making a show of dinner or if silver and crystal were standard fare at the family table. She'd vaguely expected to be led to the drawing room for pre-dinner drinks as though she were in a period drama. Instead Esne escorted her directly to the dining room dominated by a refectory table in figured walnut. The huge dark piece loomed like a sacrificial altar, the effect heightened by wrought iron candlestands and red flowers in the epergnes.

Nott had been staring out one of the Gothic windows fiddling with his cufflinks, preoccupied with something weighty enough that he didn't immediately notice the door opening. Esne scuttled away without disturbing his master's contemplations. Hermione strode over to him, the skirts of her gown swishing around her legs almost in protest. Tailored for dainty ladylike steps she wasn't taking, at least Cathal's height meant the hem was at her ankle not brushing the floor conspiring to trip her up.

“Evening.” Hermione gave her host a nod, opting for briskness to cover her nerves. She had no damn idea how she was supposed to behave. Her mother had been particular about cutlery but that was Muggle table manners. She wouldn't disgrace herself, just come across as a complete chav by pure-blood standards. “Thank you for letting my grandmother stay.”

“That was my father's hospitality. They were school chums, I believe.” Theo answered crisply then his internal editor, always very critical, castigated him as Rosier might interpret his statement as a lack of endorsement for his pater's generosity. “Our families have always been friends.”

“Hiding an escaped prisoner is a bit above and beyond.” Just how committed was Nott to Voldemort? He hadn't boasted like Malfoy, no one had been as keen as Malfoy, but his father was a Death Eater. That sort of mental disorder was heritable.

“While my father is in Azkaban, I will do anything I can to thwart the people who put him there.” He asserted, hoping to assure her of his politics. Her face hardened, the fleeting expression before she caught herself suggesting his words had had the opposite effect. “Afterwards too, of course.”

“Of course.” Not as bad as Malfoy but certainly not a moderate. Not someone she could trust. Well, Hermione told herself, that was hardly a surprise. He wasn't likely to help her slip away from Cathal's grandmother either. She found something commonplace to say, asking about his OWL results and his plans for NEWTs. The topic lasted them comfortably until plates started appearing on the dining table.

Nott held out her chair for her then circled around the monolith to sit opposite. Just two place settings in the middle with fine china arrayed in concentric circles small dishes to large. Service a la francaise with Warming or Cooling Charms to keep the food at the correct temperature. She'd been to a silver service restaurant exactly twice; once in London for her mother's fortieth birthday, once while on holiday in France. That preparation seemed very inadequate.

“My father doesn't entertain often. The elves are overexcited.” Theo usually dined privately with his friends in his suite or en famille at their homes. He'd thought eating alone with Rosier would seem presumptuous particularly with her grandmother opting not to join them. Too intimate. “I thought you might be hungry after the blood magic.”

“I'm used to less formal dining.” Hermione reached for a dish that looked like a starter and began filling her plate. She was ravenous.

“Eating with Muggles.” He shook his head. “You don't need to prove your point any more. With
your grandmother here, you can stay appropriately. Madam Malfoy won't try to assert her guardianship.” If his father hadn't been imprisoned because of Lucius Malfoy's incompetence, Theo might have been able to still his tongue. “Unlike her family, the Rosiers have never disappointed the Dark Lord.”

“You and Flint seem to think I'm having to bunk down with the livestock in some shack nasty hovel.” Hermione put her fork down firmly before she jabbed it in Nott's direction. “It's quite comfortable among the non-magical. No one gives a damn who I am. No one tries to jump me in corridors or curse me.”

Nott opened his mouth to refute the safety she might find among the great unwashed but the words didn't come. The previous year at Hogwarts and a summer spent watching the boundaries had disabused him of the security of their world. The ignorance of the Muggles might well be a relief, and Rosier took Muggle Studies so she knew how to pilot herself through the shoals.

“I meant no insult.” Theo ventured. Merlin, he wished he was Zabini, who could entrance witches with a glance. “Perhaps a better way of phrasing would be 'if it's convenient for you, you're welcome here'.” Too casual but she was quick enough she would understand all his different meanings of convenient. Not being dragged to the Ministry to answer for your father's crimes was very convenient.

“I'll consider it, thank you.” She might have to stay because she couldn't think of a good enough excuse not to spend the rest of the summer at Nott Manor. Hermione didn't want Siglinde Rosier anywhere near Moppet. “You're likely right about the Malfoys but I was quite comfortable where I was. I only ventured out for the book list.”

“Would you care to accompany me to Diagon Alley? I always go early. The morning of, if it can be managed.” He quelled his babbling. She couldn't very well go with her grandmother, however Rosier needn't embark with a callow boy who stumbled over a simple invitation.

“That sounds perfect.” Getting out of the house early tomorrow morning would give her a chance to talk to Moppet before her friend convinced herself she was dead in a ditch somewhere.

Her acceptance visibly relaxed Nott. The meal passed almost affably though neither spoke much; Hermione to avoid a faux pas and Theo to prevent the witch from realising how fundamentally uninteresting he was. If he were fortunate, Nott thought as he escorted Rosier into the drawing room after the meal, he would be able to show himself to advantage enough that she would think well of him even after he had to compete with his peers for her attention.

Siglinde Rosier joined them for self-consciously intellectual conversation as the evening drew to a close. The two pure-bloods raised to the social expectations of their class chatted about culture and the arts; Nott seemingly by rote while Cathal's grandmother fought to keep focussed and obviously struggled. Azkaban had stripped away her faculties and memories but cruelly not her awareness of her deficiencies. It was how Hermione imagined someone with dementia might try to conceal the extent of their illness, checking every word for correct enunciation and repeating what had been said as though ruminating on the subject.

Hermione felt sorry for her, and wasn't sure if she should despise herself for doing so. Death Eater. The elder Rosier hadn't been sent to prison solely for avenging her son. She was a true believer. She had the Dark Mark, the snake head peeking out when her sleeve rode up. Perhaps a sane person should feel something if only to cling to empathy at the edge of Nietzsche's abyss.

They retired early. Hermione found a nightgown laid out on her bed. She put one wand on the dressing table then covertly slid the spare under her pillow. Perhaps invisible house elves were
watching her, perhaps she was being scryed upon, probably her own anxiety was prompting her to obsessive care. She tucked herself in and stared at the canopy for hours.

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“You will be careful.” Siglinde Rosier spoke the words. Hermione tried to gauge her tone. A compulsion? A command? A plea? Cathal's grandmother had risen early or not slept; the morning was not kind to her either way. She breakfasted on dry toast and potions, a great many potions. “The Ministry may try to detain you.”

“We will be careful.” Hermione reassured, adding with an irony only she would understand. “It's old habit by now.”

“We will be back in time for luncheon.” Theo wanted to be done and away before the crowds. Flourish and Blotts did not owl order textbooks unless they had reserve stock, which usually occurred only after term began. He didn't want risk not having the required reading and have to wait until the Yule restock. “Is there anything you require?”

“Only your safe return.” The white haired witch said tensely then took herself off to the solarium so she didn't have to watch them leave in a flash of green too much like the Killing Curse.

The Floo took them to Gringotts so Theo could meet with the Nott trustee to get approval to withdraw monies from the family vaults. With his father in Azkaban, he was the de facto Head of the House but until he was of age he wouldn't have full access to his family's resources. He had an appointment thus did not need to wait unlike Hermione did for a meeting with her vault supervisor.

Once Nott left, she delayed all of about thirty seconds before locking the door and calling for Moppet. It took the house elf less time than that to appear, wand in hand ready to defend her witch. On seeing Hermione alone in a well-appointed lounge, Moppet pointed her wand at her friend.

“Miss had best have a good explaining.” Moppet had been so worried she had been dropping plates and folding laundry wrong.

“Cathal's grandmother snatched me from the Leaky.” Hermione held her arms out in a truce gesture or an offer for a hug, letting the house elf decide which she preferred. Moppet went for the hug, embracing fiercely and with a cautionary jab of her alder.

“Miss needs to not be with dark witches. Miss needs to come back to Hogwarts right away.” The house elf insisted to Hermione's bosom. She stepped back so she could glare. “Moppet is not going to let Miss out of Moppet's sight. You is not allowed to be taken away.”

“She used blood magic. I don't want to risk actively defying her.” Not yet, anyway. “I'm staying at Nott Manor. Nott's here for an appointment. I've one too. We'll be shopping for books etcetera next.” Hermione spoke quickly, conscious they didn't have much time. “I'll be back at Hogwarts for beginning of term.”

“Moppet is not happy.” Moppet's ears flattened like an angry cat's.

“Shows your good sense.” Hermione said grimly. “Madam Rosier isn't the full shilling. I'm going to have to feign compliance and I want you somewhere safe.”

“Moppet isn't afraid.” The house elf said stoutly, flourishing her wand.

“I am.” She confessed. “Moppet, please, stay at Hogwarts. It's only a month. Please.”
With a low noise of disfavour, the house elf reluctantly agreed. She disappeared with a sharp snap of her fingers. Hermione removed the Locking Charm from the door. She barely had time to compose herself before a goblin arrived to escort her to her meeting with Harnak. Whereat Hermione handed the vault supervisor a large bag of jewellery and braced to try to answer questions without incriminating herself.

Siglinde had lost her personal vaults to the Ministry when she was sentenced to Azkaban. Her husband retained control of the Rosier accounts, which should have included Siglinde's dower vault to be held in trust for Cathal and any other granddaughters. Piers had not petitioned to keep the dower. He had kept as quiet as possible about his only direct heir. Meaning that as the goblin bank had acknowledged Cathal, the Ministry was in illegal possession of Siglinde's bequests.

“The Wizengamot would consider the matter moot as your grandmother is a wanted felon. However, Gringotts operates under goblin law. A prisoner who is not in prison is therefore not a prisoner.” Harnak poured the jewellery out onto his desk. Beautiful pieces, goblin and human made, glittered and tempted. The banker bared his teeth. “Do you have the customary receipts?”

Hermione handed over a ledger filled with meticulous descriptions and small pictures of each piece as well as purchase details. Magical folk liked to keep their trinkets. Harnak matched each piece to an entry, noting down the Gringotts endorsed valuation. Siglinde had last had her baubles assessed after Cathal's birth in preparation for bequeathing some to her grandchild.

The tumult of those years and Evan's death had prevented her entrusting the jewellery to the bank so they had remained in a safe in her suite at Rosier Hall. The widow had sent an elf to retrieve her gewgaws once she had recovered enough to comprehend she needed money. Etiquette dictated that while she was a guest of the Notts, the head of the House of Nott was responsible for her expenses. Which had been fine while Tristan Nott had been free to spend his galleons as he wished. No one would question why he was buying expensive potions for medical conditions he did not have. Not so for Theo and the trustee.

Hermione was conflicted.

Cathal had been entrusted with the jewellery because she could open a dowry vault, which would allow her to borrow against it even under age. Unmarried witches often supported themselves in such a manner so that they did not need to make an accounting of their expenses to their Head of House. Of course, part of marriage negotiations included the state of the prospective bride's dowry. If she were significantly in debt, a potential groom might rescind his offer.

The plan was to borrow every knut she could in order to have ready cash to support herself, Theo, and Siglinde until the younger two were of age to access the Rosier and Nott vaults respectively. Or until the Dark Lord ruled Britain and compelled Gringotts to comply with his demands. It was the latter prospect that had Hermione in two minds.

If she withheld the money or deliberately got a poor deal on the amount she could borrow, she would not be supporting a Death Eater and a Death Eater's son. She and Moppet could go into hiding amply supplied to wait out the final battle. There would be no guilt from giving aid and succour to the enemy. The moral high ground had such lovely views.

Theo had spent all his available cash continuing Madam Rosier's potion regimen. With it, in time her health would recuperate. She would never be as robust as she might have been had she not gone to prison but her body and mind wouldn't collapse as her magic failed under the strain. Many former inmates never recovered from their incarceration.

Nott helped Siglinde now at least partially in the expectation she and Cathal would help him when
his father was released by the Dark Lord, which surely he would do as soon as he was able. That hope made Hermione taste bile. It would happen. Did that mean denying Siglinde the medical attention she needed mattered less because she would only have to wait months rather than years before Voldemort controlled Azkaban?

The Nott trustee would provide enough for Theo to attend Hogwarts and cover the household expenses. How much did his social obligations matter? Not much to the goblin, potentially a great deal to the young wizard. Not being seen as shabby was a powerful impetus among the pure-bloods. Hermione didn’t know whether Slytherin pragmatism would win out over pride. Would Nott evict Siglinde or would he beggar himself supporting her?

With Tom Riddle still infesting the world, Hermione rather thought Nott would hock the family silver to keep Madam Rosier. There would be absolutely no chance for her to return to Hogwarts if she kept the money for herself. Or donated it to a worthier cause. Or hit herself over the head with it until her thoughts fell into proper order.

“Do you wish to have the valuations brought up to date?” Harnak asked once he had finished the catalogue. He might have asked the young witch for a lie about the origin of the jewellery but her possession of the ledger rendered that effort worthless. Either the Rosier matriarch had given her the pieces or she had broken into Rosier Hall to liberate her dowry. Both were crimes. The vault supervisor truly did not care as both were crimes against the Ministry not Gringotts.

“How much will that cost?” Hermione asked. Harnak quoted a huge figure orders of magnitude beyond reasonable. She did some mental arithmetic then smiled in spite of herself. Holding out a hand for the ledger, the witch used it to sort out the goblin-made jewellery from the human-made. The sum total of the former at the listed valuation being the price quoted.

Harnak watched her hands over his own steepled fingers. He did not smile but he was pleased. This witch remained clever. He vastly preferred not to do business with the foolish. So many wanded thought ownership was something you could buy, that coins defeated craft. Miss Rosier showed her good sense by handing over the artisan work without protest, returning what her ancestors had only leased. When she had done so, Harnak summoned an assessor.

He could not be coaxed into giving the witch a bonus for her cooperation. Goblins dealt in absolute worth not venal whim. However, he could ensure the transaction was done swiftly and that she was paid conveniently in new galleons not battered, dented coins that would be challenged as counterfeit. The bank had many means of reprisal against vexsome clientele.

“There is still a lien against your account in the name of the House of Flint.” Harnak reminded her. He did not think the expense a matrimonial matter though that would come in time. Rosier was a valuable resource and he expected to be involved in ensuring she was an expensive acquisition for another House.

“I haven't forgotten.” She hesitated then opted for blunt. “I don't plan to pay it until I come of age.” She didn't want any new ties between her and the Flints until the war was over. That was all she could do to help Marcus and his parents stay out of the limelight. “The House of Flint isn't a priority.”

“As you wish.” Harnak put the document and matter aside. Hermione couldn't read his face though she did know he knew more than he was saying. The goblins were masters of realpolitik. Gringotts would survive even if they had to make a barricade of corpses.

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Theo tucked away the pouch of coin Cathal gave him before stepping out into Diagon Alley. The exchange of monies was awkward however one looked upon it but until they were of age there would need to be an unofficial pooling of resources. It frustrated and embarrassed him that he and the Rosier witches had to discuss galleons so vulgarly. Yet another mortification to stripe the Ministry's hide when he had the whip hand.

“Flourish and Blotts first, I suggest.” Everyone had to go there and the masses would insist on barging about, getting under foot. When he had gone to the shop for First Year he had feared he would suffocate in the mob. Theo took a deep breath of the dusty but reasonably fresh air of the Alley. “Best to get it over with.”

“Why don't you give me your list and I'll get our texts? You can go to Obscurus Books for the supplemental reading. It won't be as crowded there.” Hermione remembered Theo's struggles at the Yule Ball. “There's no need to rack yourself for the sake of the Standard Book of Spells.”

“We're safer together.” The offer was inviting. He badly wanted to accept and was ashamed of his weakness. He tried to make a joke of it. “If you are weary of my company, you have but to say, Rosier.”

“I enjoy your company. It's restful.” Hermione said honestly, curtailed by Cathal not to give him a reassuring hug. She strongly believed all Slytherins were touch-starved. It seemed to be a chronic pure-blood affliction. Perhaps it was simply cultural though she did wonder if the avoidance of personal contact was due to the magic, which could 'spark' from skin to skin. That sort of connection was apparently quite a rush.

“Oh. Good.” Theo ventured a smile. He told himself not to read too much into her compliment. She did share a dorm with four shrews. Well, three shrews and a half-blood non-entity. “I do think we shouldn't separate. I could keep a place by the till while you gather the books. That might actually be a more efficient way of doing things.”

It was, actually, though that may have been due to the other customers avoiding them. Hermione, sensitive to shunning, noticed the gaps forming around herself and Nott. As soon as someone realised who they were, the whispers started and everyone began keeping their distance. One witch even pulled her child back out of the shop when she recognised the young wizard loitering by the register.

Hermione tenaciously kept to her task, circumnavigating the store to put an impressive stack of books on the counter. The clerk couldn't refuse them service but he tallied their purchases in record time and hustled them out. The door didn't slam in their wake though Hermione felt it should as dramatic convention. She'd never been given the bum's rush before.

“You too?” The question, half-amused, half-exasperated, came from a stocky young man in a faded Slytherin jersey. Nott muttered something non-committal while Hermione did a double-take.

“Enjoying pariahdom? Apparently.” She grimaced, hiding her surprise at his changed appearance. The morning sun turned the window of the shop behind him into a mirror, reflecting the name on the back of his shirt. She didn't know him well and wouldn't have recognised Montague without the label. He'd lost considerable muscle mass during his sojourn in hospital.

“The herd can scent trouble on the wind.” He gestured absently at the nervous shoppers. No one was lingering or strolling. “They're restive, jumping at shadows.” His shoulders slumped. “It's bloody exhausting.”

“The three of us standing conspiratorially won't soothe.” Theo remarked, glad of something to say
other than 'you look wan'. The older boy, previously ruddy and fit, seemed a fetch. He really should be tucked up in bed fussed over by a house elf. With a sense of noblesse oblige, he offered his arm to Cathal. “Have tea with us, Montague.”

Hermione didn't feel the need for refreshment but the other Slytherin looked done in. He agreed with a shrug and they found a corner table at a quiet café. Service was prompt at least. Nott ordered scones, which they all picked at and pronounced not as good as the elf-made ones at Hogwarts. The tea was nice though Montague added four spoonfuls of sugar to his.

“Healer said I need to eat more, build myself back up.” He explained at Rosier's eyebrow. “Something about my mind needing fuel to mend itself.” He smiled wryly at her nod. The witch evidently understood more about that than he had. “Honestly, I was so glad to get out of the infirmary I would've agreed to anything.”

“How are you feeling, generally?” Hermione asked, her conscience sensitised from her neglect the first time around.

“Not too bad. That's down to you.” Montague asserted then waved away her polite demure. “No, I mean it. Madam Pomfrey said if you hadn't told her what happened she would've been spoon-feeding me potions for months.” As it was he'd have to repeat his Sixth Year but at least he had the wits to be able to do so. “She packed me off to St Mungo's and they did something there to get me realigned. I'm banned from Apparating, Portkeying, and Flooing for five years but I'm not dribbling.”

“Are you going to risk returning to school?” Theo asked diffidently. In Montague's place, he would have pleaded to be home-schooled or transferred Durmstrang. Being nearly permanently warped out of true due to a prank struck him as too high a cost to persist at Hogwarts. They weren't Hufflepuffs digging away blinded by scruples and dirt.

“My mum doesn't want me to go back. Dad only signed off because the f...” He stopped himself before he swore in front of Rosier. Graham didn't think she was a fainting damsel. He simply owed her more respect than to air casual obscenities in her hearing. “The Weasley twins aren't going to be there.” He met the witch's aquamarine eyes. “Memory's muddled but reckon it was them.”

“My source wasn't specific.” Hermione lied. The wizards pretended to believe her.

“I wouldn't want to be too specific about fingering those hooligans either.” They were bad enough on the Quidditch pitch without their practical jokes. Montague couldn't list all the bones Weasley bludgers had broken. “Should've listened to you and Parangyo about Umbridge. The Inquisitorial lark had nobs on.”

“That's how I expected it to play out.” She would've ranted more, campaigned harder against the Squad had she not been constrained by the timeline. Cathal would have fought to keep her fellow Snakes out of the firing line. “It's no fun being Cassandra.”
Summer was... difficult.

After morning tea, they finished their shopping as a trio and rode with a clearly exhausted Montague on the Knight Bus to Godalming in Surrey. They were decanted in front of the church of St Peter and St Paul then walked the short way to the river Wey, to a timber framed house nestled among trees. Their presence didn't keep Graham's mother from telling him off for being stubborn when he stumbled in grey faced. She sent him immediately up to bed and let Hermione and Theo use her Floo to hurry home to Nott Manor.

They were back in time for luncheon, just. The Nott elves set out the plates formally in one of the salons overlooking the garden. Siglinde Rosier was waiting for them there and they made stilted conversation about their excursion while the older witch studied them for any sign of injury or injustice. That meal set the tone for all the other lunches, regardless of whether they had left the house that day. It was as though Cathal's grandmother couldn't quite believe she wasn't dead.

Mostly she and Theo ate alone. Hermione didn't mind though she did feel a little daft hemmed in by china in the middle of the vast table. The elves refused to be persuaded to relax their catering. Miss Rosier was the first witch Master Theodore had hosted since he had left them to go to Hogwarts. Miss would be impressed by his hospitality.

Miss would take sudden canapés and no privacy to the nights when they dined in company. Several of Tristan Nott's cronies would invite themselves over to use the library or to escape Bellatrix Lestrange's infestation of Malfoy Manor. They weren't the rowdiest sort but Hermione hardly rejoiced at the company of her Selwyn cousin or Yaxley. The Carrows too scuttled in.

She couldn't say anything because it was Theo's house. She couldn't say anything because these were her like-minded folk. Hermione gritted her teeth so much her mother would've fitted her with a mouth guard. However Mrs Granger was far and safely away. Hermione practised her Occlumency instead and managed to spend a whole month in the company of murderers without becoming one.

If she divorced herself from the knowledge the other house guests were racist terrorists then she could find a new normal. Corban Yaxley, future head of the DMLE, was ascetic in his habits. He visited three nights a week to research compulsion magic, drinking tea and eschewing dessert. He didn't snout into the food like a truffle hound or make serious inroads into the Nott cellars like the Carrows. Or like Sholto Selwyn stare at himself in mirrors as though he had forgotten who was on the other side of the looking glass.

Avery was the worst. He came over late, helped himself to the spirits, and leered at her. He got handsy once when they were alone, stopping only when she Stunned him. Hermione packed him through a Floo back to Avery Hall and said nothing about it, trusting he would take the hint. When he returned a few nights later, Siglinde used the Cruciatus on him the instant he stepped out of the hearth.

“I do not care for you touching my granddaughter.” Madam Rosier spoke as though Avery had used his fingers instead of the sugar tongs. Sweat pricked out on her forehead as she held the spell and her victim writhed on the floor. To use an Unforgivable, you had to mean it. And she meant it, oh yes. “If you repeat this offence, I will petition the Dark Lord for permission to kill you. Which he will grant, because I went to prison for him while you hid.”

Avery gurgled and pissed himself, knocking his head against the bricks of the fireplace. Siglinde
dropped the curse as her hand trembled. Cathal stepped forward quickly to support her. Such a good girl. She leaned against her son's daughter, trembling at the release of magic. Her head buzzed. Little points of light flashed in front of her eyes. Tristan's boy was there too, cleaning up the mess Avery made with a flick of his wand.

“I do apologise, Theodore.” Siglinde found her voice from somewhere. “Such a nice rug.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Madam Rosier.” Theo said, imitating his father whenever there was any unpleasantness. Best not to remark on it. Just tidy it away and try not to think about it. “If I'd known there was some difficulty, I would have closed the Floo to Avery.”

“My elves told me.” Both of them looked at Cathal, who was staring at the prone, groaning wizard contemplatively. “Granddaughter?”

“What?” Hermione jerked back from the floor of the long gallery in Malfoy Manor. Had she looked like that when Bellatrix cursed her? All she could remember was the pain and her soul-deep determination to say anything except the truth.

“Why didn't you tell me Avery had made improper advances to you?” Siglinde asked gently, wanting to curse the bastard again but shamefully aware she didn't have the strength.

“It didn't seem important.” Hermione said absently, her mind still fogged with memory. At the time she had been more concerned with keeping her own temper. She’d wanted to get him out of her sight before she did something permanent to him simply because he was a target of convenience.

“Cathal...” Theo didn't know what he was going to say. Her stare sharpening on him stilled his tongue. He stood there with Avery twitching at his feet as the Rosier witches waited for him to say his lines. There was an etiquette for situations such as this. “Madam, I make no dispute with you. The House of Nott holds no alliance with the House of Avery.” He recited what his father had taught him. “You have not violated hospitality.”

Madam Rosier went to Malfoy Manor the next day and Avery never visited Nott Manor again. He wasn't dead, Siglinde informed her granddaughter in that distant voice Hermione was growing to fear. The Dark Lord hadn't punished him. That neglect seemed to stick in the older witch's craw. She had nightmares traumatic enough to wake the whole house. Hermione took to reading through the night in Siglinde's suite to reassure her.

Theo was a gentleman throughout. Nothing was any trouble. He provided potions, ran errands, conjured pillows when she nodded off in the middle of study sessions, and generally was a friend to her. Hermione saw it with pain. She liked Theo. They had a lot in common. Maybe they could be something more. And all of that would evaporate after the war once he found out how much she had lied to him.

Summer was difficult but it wasn't the worst she had endured. Hermione told herself that as she packed to return to Hogwarts. The summer of 1997, when Dumbledore was murdered and she Obliviated her parents had hurt worse than four weeks of cold sweat and tongue biting. She wasn't anxious to repeat this August. If this go around didn't work and she returned again... that thought had her heart racing and the edges of her vision going white.

Siglinde found her sitting on the floor with her back to her trunk folding and unfolding her cloak as tears dripped down her face. Cathal's grandmother hugged her, rubbing her back as she murmured promises into her flaxen hair. No one would hurt her. Everything would be fine. She was the most precious thing in the world. Precious.
She slept so heavily and dreamlessly on the eve of term Hermione suspected she had been dosed with something. Her tongue didn't taste of woolly socks, from valerian and wormwood, so the obvious culprit potion hadn't been used. Her pupils weren't dilated nor were there any other physical signs. In the mirror, she looked well-rested and pink.

Mindful of watching house elves, Hermione swore in her own head rather than aloud. She bathed and dressed, running through the obscenities she knew starting again from the top when she saw the clothes laid out for her. Her wardrobe, such as it was, had remained at Hogwarts. Siglinde had provided her with garments appropriate to her station. To Hermione, she looked half Edwardian schoolmistress, half poster proletariat; a uniform pretending it wasn't.

They used the Georgian terrace house, leaving as early as was sensibly plausible and using Muggle-Repelling Charms to slip through the rush hour crowd undetected. As neither of them were particularly chatty, it was a pleasant wait reading until the Express chugged into the station. For the same reason, they opted for the last compartment rather than the open carriages where the older Slytherins congregated to jockey and network.

The next people to arrive were all First Years, anxious not to be late, with harassed parents or elder siblings. That cohort included Millicent Bulstrode, who shouldered into the compartment to present her little brother. The boy was round and short with dark hair clipped close to his skull, making him look unfortunately like a bowling pin.

“Cathal, this is Amalric.” Millicent didn't quite scruff the lad but she did have a firm hold on him. “Amalric, this is Miss Rosier, one of the Prefects in my Year. You will do absolutely everything she tells you.” She didn't add a threat. He was the heir so she couldn't do much to him but a harsh word from the Rosier heiress would have Morphia Bulstrode correcting her son quickly.

“Good morning.” Hermione said after the conversational pause that hinted it was her turn to say something. “Care to join us?” She offered as Bulstrode looked like a ticking bomb. The witch sat quickly and glared her brother into the seat opposite. “Did you have a good summer?”

“Not really.” Millicent dragged out the Occlumency primer Rosier had given her and showed her the bookmark halfway through. “I see why you're always staring at your plate at mealtimes. Conscious focus turns my stomach.”

“I do my distraction contests then. All the noise and motion.” She clarified. Hermione made sure she didn't skip meals. That was a bad habit to get into, particularly as Cathal's body had more muscle mass to sustain. Low blood sugar really affected her mood too. She'd not noticed in her original form as she'd always just pushed through, getting more and more frazzled as she overextended herself.

“Is that something I need to learn?” Amalric consciously sat up straight in the company of the older students. He wasn't stupid. Millie hadn't introduced him to Miss Rosier because she thought they'd be great friends. Bad things were happening and he was a Sacred Twenty-Eight name heir, as were Nott and Rosier. They needed to work together, and Amalric didn't want to forever be the little brother dragged along.

“Yes.” The trio answered almost simultaneously. The two witches looked at Theo, who shrugged. His father had drilled into him the need to keep his mind his own. He was simply more reticent than to admit to his competence in public.

“But do it privately. Hogwarts doesn't offer classes on mental defence, except only peripherally in DADA.” Theo observed, his mouth twisting into a frown. “Assuming the teacher is half-way
“Big assumption.” Millicent groused. The revelation of the Gryffindors’ defence club had shaken her confidence. She knew the elite Slytherins had a duelling club but she had never merited an invitation. Given what she had seen of the grand melee, she had been glad of the disregard. Not now though. She needed to be a better witch.

They all bent their heads to reading. Hermione to her covert delight saw Amalric had a copy of Hogwarts: A History. She didn’t remark on it, continuing with a book on ward and circle magic she had borrowed from the Nott library. She would’ve borrowed more, Theo had generously thrown open his family collection to her, except with the Aurors searching the students’ luggage she didn’t want anything confiscated. Albeit complicated, ward magic was not banned. Blood magic absolutely was.

Malfoy swaggered into their compartment on his way to the rear of the train. He lingered long enough to jeer, all but baring his arm to Nott and Rosier, neither of whom had been summoned to pay court. Goyle and Crabbe might have fathers in service to the Dark Lord too but the lumpen wizards were hardly rivals. The studious pair were and they all knew it. But he had been the one chosen.

When the blond left, Theo met Cathal's gaze. Her fists were clenched. He shook his head. They couldn't discuss it here and if he were honest with himself, following in his father’s footsteps was not something he wished to do until he had completed his schooling. Draco’s premature recruitment was a poisoned chalice. His inevitable failure might perhaps buy them some time.

There were Aurors on the train. It would have been difficult for the Bulstrode/Nott/Rosier carriage to remain ignorant of that fact as the security force made a point of checking on them frequently. The surveillance was so invasive Millicent sent Amalric to sit with his friends in hope he would be more anonymous. She didn't want the Aurors to recognise her little brother by sight.

Hermione left for the Prefect meeting. Cho Chang and Eddie Carmichael were the Heads. She saw her other self hide a frown and even years after, Hermione had to agree. Cho had been selected because of her connections to Cedric Diggory and the DA. Carmichael had got the nod because of his gift of the gab as much as his marks. Excellent students, both of them, but burdened with the Headmaster’s message.

There was a lot of talk and not a lot of resolution. The actual work would fall to Granger and the Hufflepuffs. The Slytherin Prefects dispersed without discussion; they all knew there would be a meeting with their Head of House after the Welcoming Feast. There was no need to woo the interest of the Ministry bully-boys by convening on the train.

The Auror presence was no more discreet at the gates of Hogwarts. The mountain of luggage, the purposeful sentries, the checking in with teachers who had known them for years, all pointed to the Ministry wanting to be seen ‘doing something’. The badged students were roped into crowd control. Harry Potter's absence was remarked upon, prompting Tonks to go looking for him. Hermione refrained from punching Malfoy in his smug face solely because she wouldn't be able to explain why she had done so.

Once everyone was inside the castle, the Sorting and the Feast happened without incident. Amalric joined his sister in Slytherin to Millicent's immense relief. The induction and Snape's speech to the new Snakes occurred at its proper time as did the Prefect meeting in the chintzy room. Nothing jarred the expected pattern until Hermione slipped out of the dorm at midnight to meet with Moppet.

Ordinarily, she would have been able to sneak around fairly directly with her Map, avoiding Filch
and Mrs Norris. Peeves rarely showed up during the first week of term as the excitement of the firsties more than sated him. Similarly the teachers were knackered with the influx after a leisurely summer. Few patrolled longer than an hour after curfew.

Not so this year. The Aurors would remain on high alert for most of September before relocating to Hogsmeade until the winter break. They were temporarily quartered on the school grounds, meaning they were at liberty to prowl about inconveniently close to the dungeons. It took Hermione half an hour to reach her new laboratory.

When she finally shut the door and rearmed the wards, she let out a long sigh before beginning the demoralising task of inspecting her potion experiments. Before leaving for the Leaky Cauldron, she had finished up any brewing that couldn't be rested for a few days just in case she was delayed in her shopping. Hermione had not planned to leave her work for a month.

Moppet had done her best. Nothing had exploded and she'd covered all the cauldrons so the potions wouldn't be contaminated but at least half were ruined. Hermione got out her lab journal to make notes on the resultant noxious liquids, goos, and powdery residues. One had solidified so thoroughly it resisted Vanishing. To take a sample, she had to charm the cauldron into water and pour it off. Even then there was a metallic film left on the translucent lump remaining. Perhaps it would be useful, if she could replicate it.

The rest of her experiments were salvageable though they wouldn't be her best work. Hermione kept them, vaguely thinking that she could turn them in to Slughorn. She didn't want to catch his attention. He wouldn't invite a Rosier to join the Slug Club and having a potion already done would give her time to improvise in class, something she could never have done under Snape's scrutiny.

“Miss!” Moppet popped into the lab, flinging herself at her witch. “Moppet is happy again!”

“Me too.” Hermione hugged her friend, shuddering with the release of tension. “It's such a relief to see you. Cathal's grandmother is obsessed with her. I think the poor woman had a breakdown when her son was killed.” The words tumbled out as she tried to strategise. “God, I think I'm going to have to go back every holiday. She'll be frantic when she hears Aurors are at Hogwarts.”

“Is the witch a very nasty witch?” Moppet asked, hugging her witch tighter.

“I think we can safely say Madam Rosier is not on the side of the angels.” She couldn't shake the sight of Avery flailing on the hearth rug. “I'm not sure but I think she is one of the ones that Disapparated when Harry came back to life. The white hair makes her distinctive. I can't be sure without a Pensieve. My memories of the battle are patchy.” Hermione took a deep breath. “I'm back here now so we'll be okay for the term.”

“Moppet doesn't want to be nasty witch's elf.” The little arms eased their grip as Moppet stepped back to stare up at her Miss. “The bonds makes Moppet belong to Miss's blood.”

“Yes, no, that's not happening.” Hermione said ineloquently. She suppressed a manic laugh. She was not tying Moppet to the House of Rosier. “There are bound to be, sorry, unintentional pun.” She took another breath to calm herself. “I mean I'm sure I can find an alternative ritual to bind us without involving Cathal's lineage. I expect the older rites are one-to-one like familiar bonds.”

“Miss is good with books.” Moppet reassured herself and her witch that some good thing would be found. She looked towards the cauldrons, wincing at the empty ones Miss had cleaned up. “Moppet tried to put the stay-as-it-is magic on Miss's brews but the magic slid off.”

“Some of them can't be put in stasis. They decohere, which is a change of state, which disrupts the
charm.” She explained, familiar with potion disasters from tutoring Neville. “It's alright. I've got time this year to build up my stockpiles again. How are the plants?”

“All the garden things are green. Moppet did everything Miss showed Moppet to do.” The house elf asserted confidently.

“Great.” Hermione took her word for it. Herbology came naturally to fey of all sorts and the literature on the subject wasn't as abstruse as other magical theory. Moppet had an edge there being a Hogwarts elf. Most house elves learned their human languages through eavesdropping and shouted commands. “We'll do the pruning during the new moon on the 12th, which should synchronise the growth rates.”

“No horrid pink witch this year.” Moppet had felt grubby sick with that nasty witch was Acting Headmistress. All the elves had, like she was bad food they'd eaten.

“Just Malfoy letting Death Eaters into the school.” But that was a problem for June. “I might actually have quite a restful year this time around. All Hermione's problems are not mine.” Hermione grimaced, uncomfortable at how relieved she felt she wouldn't be pining for Ron as he snogged Lavender Brown. It was just as well that Cathal wasn't in love with the redhead. That would be a very Escher love triangle.

Emotions were biochemistry, a feedback loop entwined with thoughts and experiences. Cathal's heart didn't skip a beat at Ron's boyish grin. She didn't feel anything for him other than echoes of a friendship she couldn't acknowledge. Hermione rubbed her neck, fingers digging into taut tendons, letting the pain distract her from her contemplations. Down that road...

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As she wasn't doing Ancient Runes, Hermione had a free period first thing on Monday. She used it to write to Esne, the Nott house elf. She'd made a point of asking the names of all the elves she had met, particularly the Rosier elves she might one had inherit. The prospect made her skin crawl but she'd learned from Moppet that the interaction between humans and house elves was more complicated than she'd understood at fourteen. It was still substantively slavery; really complicated old magical slavery.

Theo had assigned Esne as her personal attendant, in addition to the Rosier elves as the latter were also guests at Nott Manor. Relations between the two factions were polite but territorial. There were strict demarcations, one of which was the reception of owls. If she wrote to a Rosier elf, the letter would go automatically to Rosier Hall, which was under Ministry surveillance.

Nott Manor was probably also being watched but the Aurors didn't have legal interception or seizure writs. If there was any funny business, Theo could complain to his trustee, one of whose responsibilities was the security of his ward's possessions. Goblins viewed theft as worse than murder, their rationale being you could only be killed once but you could be robbed many times. They took the same stance with assault, which caused significant friction with a wizarding society that had the opposite view.

Most of what she wrote was anodyne but it confirmed she'd arrived safely, that she would sensibly avoid the Aurors, and that she intended to avoid Malfoy, who was being a prat. That ought to reassure Cathal's grandmother while simultaneously be dull enough not to excite the interest of anyone tampering with the mail. To cover for the fact she was writing to an elf, she added a request for the cedar oil shampoo she had allegedly forgot to pack.

Hermione trekked up to the Owlery and sent the letter off, taking advantage of privacy to sketch a
plotting rune on the floor to add this part of the West Tower to her thaumaturgical survey. She shifted some of the detritus of pellets and feathers to cover the sigil before heading to Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Wherein Professor Snape and Harry displayed their continuing intractable enmity. Hermione ignored the exchange. Snape had provoked Harry without doubt. Her Head of House might be an adept spy and have the excuse of being under considerable stress but he was a bully and unprofessional. She wondered how many students who might've been Healers or Aurors had missed out on the chance due to a lack of a Potions NEWT.

Her pensive mood was not improved by her next class. There were relatively few students for Advanced Divination. Many who had taken the subject as an easy OWL dropped it to concentrate on 'real' classes. Hermione had considered doing so but as she planned to under-perform in Potions and Muggle Studies required little work, she'd opted to continue with the extra class as something to keep her mind occupied.

Professor Trelawney and Firenze had divided the Sixth Years between them by drawing lots. Trelawney got Lavender and Parvati, and MacDougal and Perks. Firenze got Rosier, Zabini, and Anthony Goldstein. Hermione met the two boys outside the lower Divination classroom. Neither of them looked happy to see her or each other.

“The door's warded.” Zabini informed her, his tone suggesting if it were his door, he'd be firing his servants. He tapped his wand against the wood to demonstrate the flare and ripple of an offertory ward. “I presume we have to figure out what token we need to pass.”

“We've tried three communion charms and the mental clarity ritual in chapter three.” Goldstein held up volume four of Unfogging the Future. He'd read through it during the holidays, trying to dovetail the theories with his studies of the Kabbalah. Many of the traditions were the same or of similar origin and praxis.

Hermione assumed they were competent enough to have done everything properly and took it as read that nothing had worked. She held out her right hand towards the door, watching the magic stir. Offertory or sacrificial wards could be endlessly finicky. It was possible to set the parameters to anything; an unmated female long-eared white rabbit born on a rainy Tuesday was the example in the book. The only security drawback being that the offering type could not be altered once the ward was set.

The standard method of discovering the requirements of a ward involved augury Divination, usually crystal gazing. If Trelawney had set this little test, Hermione would've recommended they get their orbs out to waste an hour staring at the door until the Professor got bored and let them in. Or assume the sacrifice was a bottle of alcohol.

Perhaps that was unkind but Trelawney's drinking was an open secret. However, it was Firenze who had raised the ward. Hermione thought back to what he had said to her the first time she'd entered his classroom. He couldn't ban her from the subject prior to her OWLs but NEWTs were by invitation. Professors had far more discretion over who they taught in the advanced classes. The sacrifice didn't have to be tangible.

“There are no stars for me.” Hermione put her hand on the door, letting the ward magic swirl around her as she focussed her mind on her sudden decision to drop Divination. She concentrated on her memories of storming out of Trelawney's class in Third Year. That had been a very satisfying departure.

The ward collapsed with a crackling sound and the door clicked open. Hermione turned and walked
away.
Professor Snape signed off on her withdrawal from Divination with minimal mockery. His quill hovered over Muggle Studies but Hermione shook her head. Although the subject would become a farce in Seventh Year, this year the class was a convenient excuse to cover any association with students from other Houses. He dismissed her without comment.

With time on her hands, Hermione verified an impression she had got during the Welcoming Feast. The snake pit was deserted during that period so she had no difficulty going from dorm to dorm counting the beds. Hogwarts provided exactly as many as required rather than an arbitrary static number. The escort duty rosters from the previous year confirmed what she had suspected. Slytherin attendance was noticeably reduced across all Years.

She took a long lunch, doing a visual survey of the green table. Cathal was a loner but that didn't mean she wasn't aware of the other people in her House. The half-bloods from well-to-do families had gone. Those with the means and significant ties to the Muggle world had quietly withdrawn their children. The canny moderates had decamped before they had to pick a side.

Hermione couldn't blame them. Neither could Cathal. From either perspective, the Ministry had failed and the Death Eaters were lashing out. There was not a safe bet to be had. On that grim note, she headed to the library to do some preliminary reading for Potions. The Draught of Living Death was one of the most potent sleeping potions and Hermione had an idea how to weaponise it, if she could combine it with the potion medium that produced a volatile vapour.

The project had a fairly large IF as the vapour medium didn't combine well with many potions and the Draught was fiddly. She hadn't been game to experiment with it without supervision, which was why she was going to attempt her first brew in class. Slughorn knew his poisons. If she accidentally knocked herself out, he'd be able to revive her with a quick dose of Wiggenweld Potion.

Slughorn's oration raised a question Hermione found difficult to answer. What would she smell if she sniffed the Amortentia? Freshly cut grass from her grandparents' lawn, parchment from scholastic achievement, spearmint toothpaste for her parents, and Ron's hair all belonged to Granger. She held back as the other girls edged forward. Did she want to know?

Yes, she did. No angsty shilly-shallying. She'd get a good nose of the swirling steam and have a proper think about the implications. Without an existential crisis. Hermione gave herself a mental shake. It would be nice to have some answers. Later. Right now, she needed to skive off in class while looking busy.

She took a table in the back of the room, sharing with Parkinson, who huffed over after Zabini nabbed the place beside Malfoy. The dark haired witch eyed her compatriot as they set up their cauldrons. A decade of enduring her disdainful remarks gave Hermione a preternatural instinct for when the Slytherin was going to be snide. Just as Pansy opened her mouth to opine on her scavenged supplies, she picked up her flint knife and tested the edge with her thumb.

Blood welled, dripping down her hand. The stone blade was better-than-razor sharp. Cathal Rosier stared fixedly at her dorm-mate. She did, after all, know where Parkinson slept. The other witch got the message, shutting her mouth with a click. Hermione healed her thumb with a murmured Episkey. She didn't mind if Parkinson thought she was unstable so long as the girl also thought she wasn't bluffing.

Hermione measured and charted how the wormwood reacted with the modified medium. She was in
an oasis of calm while her classmates sweated and muttered or swore outright in the case of Finnegan. This iteration was much less stressful without fretting about why her potion was purple instead of lavender or worrying whether Harry would explode something because he wasn’t following the instructions.

The instructions were, as she had come to realise after acerbic years of conflict, only guidelines. She didn’t have to follow the rules. So when Professor Slughorn ambled up to her table and asked jovially why her cauldron was smoking, Cathal answered quite placidly.

“That would be the moondew, sir.” And probably the powdered apatite, whose phosphorus content didn’t get along with anything. It was off-gassing in a fairly controlled way though the chemiluminescence was brighter than she had expected. Her potion had a nice ominous eldritch glow.

“You mother went to Durmstrang, didn’t she?” Horace carefully wafted some of the vapour under his nose. His eyes drooped. He shook his head to clear it and said sharply. “Stick to the Hogwarts approved brewing instructions, Miss Rosier. It’s meant to be drunk not atomised.”

“Yes, Professor.” Hermione let Cathal answer, again serenely. She wouldn’t be adding anything else off the books to the brew within class. It wouldn’t be finished, this potion medium wasn’t something you hurried along unless you wanted to smoke out your laboratory, but she’d made good progress. Slughorn drifted over to Parkinson, gave her a sigh and advised more asphodel, then migrated to the Gryffindor table.

“Is it better with moondew?” Pansy demanded once the teacher was out of sight. Her potion was sort of purplish if you held it up to the light. Mostly it looked like blackcurrant jelly that'd been left out in the sun.

“More potent, less stable.” Hermione put the lid on her cauldron and cast a Tempus charm to sound an alert in a minute. She pulled her stool closer to the table so she could write, keeping an eye on the burner. A slab enchanted to heat would probably be safer than an open flame. She made a note to look up fire charm variants for something that provided a reliable ambient temperature. It might be more efficient to pre-heat the cauldrons.

“Where did you find that out?” She flicked through Advanced Potion Making fearing she’d missed an addendum. With Longbottom dropped from the subject, Pansy didn’t want to be the new Potions duffer.

Hermione caught herself before she answered with a cited reference. Granger would have shared the book and directions to it, even to a twenty-four carat bitch like Parkinson. Cathal was under no obligation to be the better person, turn the other cheek, take the moral high ground, or even be civil. She didn't smirk though. No need to salt the wound.

“The Library. I trust you know where it is.” She answered tersely, ignoring the reciprocal sneer. Hermione didn’t look up until her charm chimed then she focussed on observing the reaction of her potion to the influx of air. Smoke, mostly. Some sparks. The apatite needed to be ground more finely. She slapped the lid down quickly as a wave of dizziness made the room cant askew. Definitely not an experiment to do unsupervised unless she was very sure of her Bubble-Head Charm.

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The week progressed in fits and starts as students and faculty found their pace for the term. Hermione was leaving Muggle Studies Wednesday afternoon when a loitering Justin Finch-Fletchley fairly
subtly signalled he'd like a word. Hermione stepped into a classroom and waited, jotting down a reminder to find a few ticket stubs from the Tube to include in a report on transportation systems. He didn't leave her waiting long.

“I'd hoped you would get in contact with me over the summer.” Justin had been waiting on her letter. He would've written as soon as he had news except he had no idea where she stayed over the holidays. “I'm sorry it took longer than I thought.” He proffered a manilla envelope. “I hope you didn't think I forgot.”

“I was incommunicado.” Hermione couldn't explain further as Justin would report anything she said about Cathal's grandmother. He'd feel it his duty. She took the envelope, noticing the bank logo on the front and opened it. “Credit Suisse?”

“Father thought it'd be better for you as a, um, private citizen, if you had an international account. There's lots of issues with British banking and taxes, and as a minor you'd need your parent's or guardian's signature.” He stopped himself before he said something more callously impersonal. Justin had heard a rumour that Malfoy's mother was Rosier's guardian. That couldn't be nice. “There's a booklet in there about the account details. They offer asset management services too, if that's something you need.”

“I'm not trying to smuggle the family silver out of the country.” There was something in his voice that hinted he thought she should run.

“Perhaps you should consider it.” Justin didn't want to believe Rosier was as bad as MacMillan said she was. Ernie was biased. Rosier was biased too, he'd seen that himself, but surely someone as perceptive as she was couldn't be stupid enough to think blood mattered.

“You need to listen to your own advice.” Hermione took a deep breath. This was inching close to the edge. Justin had fled the country so she could almost square it with her conscience that she wasn't interfering. “Fanatics cannot be persuaded you aren't filth.”

Justin had always admired Gryffindors. At eleven, he'd been a little abashed not to have been thought brave, the stuff of Richard the Lionheart ready to leap into the fray. He'd been thinking like a child, of parades and kudos not the oft grim path that lead to glory. Umbridge had shown him it took more courage to endure, to hold the line. His admiration had been tempered with understanding that sometimes it was better to put the fire out than leap into the flames.

So he didn't snap back a retort at Rosier's insult. He mulled over her words as the sting ebbed, shifting the emphasis from the last word to the first. She knew who she was referring to. Literally, she was acquainted with them. Malfoy was a pillock. Crabbe and Goyle were thuggish lackeys. Nott was the 'moody loner' the Americans warned against. Rosier was...

“How long do I have?” Justin asked, gearing up to be practical.

“I don't have specifics.” Hermione lied and cautioned. “You should be safe enough until the end of the school year. A lot depends on the Ministry.” Here, in one mind, both of them made a derisive noise. Scrimgeour faced a Sisyphean task in marshalling the Wizengamot to actually do something. “The best I can say is to be prepared for it to be awful.”

“Do I need to get my parents out too?” He saw her expression change, her body stiffen. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that.”

“It's fine.” She said through her teeth. The Finch-Fletchleys hadn't had any help from the Order of the Phoenix to get out of Britain. Their efforts in taking several Muggle-borns with them had been
commended at a meeting and then the matter had been put aside. Just like her own parents. A fiddly job applauded as well done. Not a priority. Not like the bloody Dursleys. “Yes. Yes, you do.”

Justin stared at the tall girl with her shoulders squared, and didn't know what to say. There was bound to be something cleverly persuasive that he'd think of later. Diderot's 'wit of the staircase'. Right now he simply nodded and left the room, hurrying away to the Hufflepuff dormitory to begin a very difficult letter to his parents.

Hermione sat down on the floor to spend twenty minutes on an Occlumency exercise to stuff her curdled outrage at the Order back into the recesses of her mind. It shouldn't bother her as much as it did. Hermione had got them out of the country safely and with a bit of help from St Mungo's, Monica and Wendell would be back to their old selves after the war. They might even look on the excursion as a sabbatical. They might even forgive her.

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It took the rest of month for Hermione to realise how much time she had dedicated last year to protecting the younger Slytherins. There were still incidents but they were more personal and targeted, not a systemic harassment of an entire House. With Umbridge's poisonous influence gone, the Castle settled down to a tense sort of normality.

Expectant would probably be a better word, Hermione thought when the Daily Prophet published news of the murder of Hannah Abbott's mother. There was shock and condolences, and morbid curiosity, but there was also an undercurrent of fulfilled anticipation. Those students and teachers clued into current events didn't look surprised. The newspapers weren't printing all the details of all the attacks. There was enough though.

The Slytherin Duelling Club convened a meeting on the last Saturday in September. Manami Ichijoh had taken over Ona Parangyo's duties as Club doyenne in addition to donning the Seventh Year female Prefect's badge. Ethel McHavelock, the previous Sixth Year Prefect, had not returned to Hogwarts for her final year. All of children of the wealthy merchant clan had transferred to Ilvermorny, leaving Ravenclaw down two and Slytherin down four.

“We have to restructure.” It was traditional for a witch to run the Club, ostensibly to enforce decorum, but functionally because a woman was more trusted to keep a rein on her temper and not allow any violence to spill out into public view. “The bulk of our members graduated last year. With the transfers and Montague's resignation on medical grounds, we are as you see.”

Rosier, Tancred Vaisey, and the Carrow sisters did indeed see. There had been lean times before. The Club had limped along in the early eighties often with a single member in each Year. An exclusive group within an already rarefied House often simply didn't have acceptable candidates. The five of them sat down with tea and scones to nut out who to include.

“Meads and Peebles are middling academically. I don't see them adding anything to us.” Manami had nothing against her fellow Seventh Years. They were pleasant enough company in the dormitory but they didn't strive. “Bletchley and Urquart remain oafs.”

“They're sporting.” Vaisey defended his team-mates as a matter of form. He tellingly did not insist they be asked to join.

“I recommend Nott, Bulstrode, and Davis.” Hermione asserted when Ichijoh looked in her direction. Cathal had joined the Club much younger than most but had not been granted sponsorship privilege until the usual Fifth Year. She hadn't thought to petition for anyone's inclusion last year, an oversight she wanted to put right.
“Nott hasn't done anything impressive, and the witches are half-bloods.” His objection this time was deliberate. Tancred didn't think much of the Year below his. Malfoy was a hothead on and off a broom, Zabini and Greengrass were languid, Parkinson was a shrew, and Crabbe and Goyle were idiots.

“Our Head of House is a half-blood. He'd skin you alive then pickle your hide for Potions ingredients.” She didn't feel she was exaggerating. Anyone who had devised Sectumsempra 'for enemies' wouldn't pull punches in a duel. “Theo's clever. Millicent's keen. Tracey's precise.” Hermione advocated. Flora and Hestia shrugged so in time their shoulders made a wave form. The older Snakes didn't look convinced. “I insist.”

They just caved! She held herself stiffly as Ichijoh and Vaisey nodded acquiescence. Hermione added the names to the roster in Cathal's blocky almost runic handwriting. She couldn't be sure why they'd agreed. On balance, she'd prefer it to be because she could defeat them both if it came to a challenge rather than her family connections.

“Corwin Yaxley is talented.” Hestia Carrow put in when she saw the matter of the Sixth Years was settled. Rosier was dutiful. Whatever obligation spurred her to sponsor the half-bloods would also entail she kept them in line. “No one else is up to snuff in our Year.”

“Astoria Greengrass has potential.” Flora ventured, aware that as the youngest members of the Club they needed to spot for gifted protégés in the lower Years. “I don't know if her parents will allow her to join. They're clinging tight to the fence.”

“This Club is apolitical.” Manami said firmly. Rosier backed her up with a nod, which she had expected. The inclusion of Millicent Bulstrode and Davis, who came from no family worth knowing, would be enough to offset a Nott and a Yaxley. “We are about excellence in spell-casting.”

“You could write that in great fiery letters in the sky and no one would believe you.” Vaisey had been informed by his mother that the moment, the breath after he graduated there would be a Portkey to take him to his uncle's villa in Andorra. There would be no argument. His maternal grandparents had arrived in Britain with only their wands and the robes on their backs after their estate had been razed by Grindelwald. There would definitely be no politics.

“We don't need their belief.” Hermione asserted, aware they wouldn't have it even if begged for. “Just their disinterest.” As a registered Club, the Duellists were her excuse to train. She couldn't stop the Professors from being suspicious of Cathal but she hoped to avoid their attention. “Is there anyone else among the younger students who looks good?”

“Archana Shetty and Darius Berrow might've been worthy, but they've both gone to Beauxbatons.” Flora named a Third Year and a Fourth Year who had impressed her as suitably dexterous. Archana's Charms-work had been particularly elegant for a thirteen year old. “Most of the really good ones have gone.”

“Do they know something we don't?” That wasn't the actual question he was asking Rosier. Vaisey was leaving regardless. What he wanted to know was how many of his cousins he should warn.

“There's going to be a war.” She confirmed. There was a lot to be said for the certainty of precognition. “Neither side can afford a long conflict. It's going to be vicious.”

“The last one was fairly bad.” His family had tried to keep out of it but no one could, and the sniping had gone on interminably. One of his earliest memories was of his father checking the boundary wards. He'd done that every night for years after Voldemort had gone.
“Put ‘fairly bad’ in Azkaban for fifteen years.” Hermione had seen for herself Madam Rosier curse Avery until she couldn't physically sustain the spell any longer. She hadn't stopped because of any moral qualm. If there was a next time, she doubted if Cathal’s grandmother would stop at all. And Siglinde Rosier was mostly sane. “Then reap the whirlwind.”

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Friday afternoons was double Care of Magical Creatures. Cathal Rosier and Wayne Hopkins were the only Sixth Years doing the elective so they took the class at the same time as the three Seventh Years. The overlap was supposed to look like efficiency though Hermione interpreted it as penny-pinching and perhaps a tacit critique of Hagrid's teaching ability.

His low class numbers had put a dampener on the half-giant's enthusiasm and the rising tensions made field trips almost impossible. Hagrid took the class, with Auror escort, into the Forbidden Forest to check on the Acromantula colony. With Aragog ailing, the spiders were becoming increasingly restless and aggressive. While the group escaped with only minimal injury, the Aurors were sufficiently unsettled to refuse a second trip leaving few options for hands-on study.

Hermione warred with herself before finally deciding Cathal had nothing personal against Hagrid. He didn't particularly like her but if she took her tie off she could blend in with the four Hufflepuffs and that was enough for her House to slip his mind when he got talking on a favourite subject. In ordinary clothes, her own scavenged attire not the Victoriana couture packed by the Rosier elves, she headed down to the gamekeeper's hut to advocate a change of curriculum.

She felt particularly Slytherin in doing so but she didn't want another year of Flobberworms or Blast-Ended Skrewts. So she drank the stewed tea Hagrid offered because the pot was on the table and suggested that if they couldn't go to the monsters, they could go to the Department that controlled them. The DRCMC was just a Floo away.

Hermione started with the entirely true statement that knowing about the regulations and government classifications of magical beasts would be very handy. She added a sweetener with the possibility of seeing a capture team in action then finished with the ephemeral chance of Hagrid fostering any injured creature thus impounded. Hogwarts certainly had the space and he had the expertise. They needed permission of course but how much trouble could a bunch of Hufflepuffs be?

Hagrid liked the idea. He told her about how awful it was when he had attended Buckbeak's trial, how helpless and nervous he'd felt. Hermione fought not to wince when he waxed on about Granger's assistance and how clever her other self was. She was sufficiently pragmatic to use that to her advantage, suggesting if his class were familiar with the Department they would be better able to advocate for the creatures.

It was probably that point that finally convinced him. He shooed her out of his hut so he could put the idea to the Headmaster. Hermione hoped Dumbledore would go for the plan. It had the right sort of finger-giving attitude to the Minister, Scrimgeour had never struck her as a fan of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian, and it would provide an opportunity for proselytising. The Order of the Phoenix was recruiting.

The Death Eaters must also be doing the same but she didn't see much of it at Hogwarts. Perhaps it was such a given or something discussed behind closed doors that banging the drum in the Castle's halls was unnecessary. Snape didn't seem to be dripping poison into anyone's ears. Slughorn fought to defend the school so he certainly wasn’t leading his students down a dark path.

There had been hundreds of Snatchers. Was it really as easy as bribery and the promise of violence? Was there a disenfranchised underclass seething ready to riot? Hermione wondered how much of an
ivory tower Hogwarts was. There was certainly no information on population demographics. How many marginalised near-Squibs resentful of the influx of Muggle-borns were there?

Or was she looking for an excuse so she didn't have to believe a fair potion of the wizarding population were malicious arseholes? Was it worse, a creeping sort of nationalistic rhetoric? That sort of rot could never be cut out entirely. It festered.

Hermione kept walking as her thoughts popped and fizzled. She had so much to do. She had lists. Her lists had lists. She had a cross-referenced master schedule with alarm spells to remind her of important tasks, all twice encrypted. She'd used a phonetic Futhark transcription for the first cipher and a modified Phoenician abjad for the second. Not impossible to decode but hopefully sufficiently obscure to keep her secrets long enough.

When the first raindrop splashed on her face, she stopped abruptly, finding herself on the lake shore. It was getting late. She'd been rambling and brooding quite long enough. Hermione headed back to the Castle, not wanting to miss dinner. Her hips were aching in that bone-deep way of a growing phase. That at least wouldn't be for much longer. Cathal was nearly six foot, something Hermione vicariously enjoyed. No high shelf eluded her.

“Rosier.” The voice brought back a memory of a teapot, which she didn't understand until she turned in the direction of the summons and recognised the wizard stepping out from the shadows of the arcade. Auror Williamson. “What are you up to?”

“Fomenting rebellion.” Hermione replied blandly as the clouds opened, dousing them both in icy droplets.

“Don't be clever.” Williamson castigated. He didn't want to dislike a child, a young woman now, but Rosier's persistent defiance nettled him. He really understood now why his grandfather was so irritated by backchat. The girl only had to open her mouth and he wanted to smack her.

“Too late for that, I'm afraid.” She smiled grimly, remembering now where Granger had met him. While he had been at the Department of Mysteries, she hadn't been in a fit state to register his presence. Their first encounter had been in Hogsmeade with Tonks just before Christmas. After Malfoy let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, Williamson had been hexed. He'd been found and transferred to St Mungo's. She heard nothing of him afterwards.

“Don't think you have fooled anyone. The DMLE knows you know where your grandmother and cousin are hiding.” He warned her. Seeing her and the other Death Eater kids strutting around the halls grated on him. All the escapees could be rounded up to be bunged back in prison if only someone broke ranks to inform on them. “Do yourself a favour and cooperate. You're under-age. You won't be punished.”

“How did you find my mother's cottage?” Hermione asked something that had been niggling at her for years. Rose Cottage had been under the Fidelius until Cathal's grandfather's death. Three weeks later Derica Max was dead and her daughter reborn.

“Anonymous tip.” Williamson wasn't the only Auror keeping an eye on the 'Imperiused' Death Eaters. The Ministry might be paid off but he had more integrity. “Your grandfather mustn't have kept you as quiet as he thought.” Evan Rosier's wife, a foreign witch from a pro-Grindelwald family, had gone into hiding and had stayed out of sight for a decade. “It's all on file. Wouldn't you like to know the truth?”
The truth. Hermione turned the concept around in her mind. It was sweet. Tempting. Getting access to her family's Ministry file would certainly answer many questions. Not all unfortunately as she doubted Piers Rosier was free with his secrets. He had shut away his daughter-in-law and granddaughter then carried on living his life, with his wife in Azkaban. Would it help Siglinde to know what he had been doing in her absence? Would it help anyone if she bargained with the Auror?

Hermione reminded herself abruptly that she wasn't Cathal. She had forgotten for a moment in the allure of discovery. Knowing who had tattled on Derica would sate a lingering intellectual hunger but did it actually matter? Well, probably, yes, depending on motivation. Someone might still be out to get her. Did it matter when compared to May 2nd 1998?

“No.” Hermione answered her question and Williamson's. “I don't trust you.” He still had that hungry look. “I won't help you feed my family to your vendetta.”

“Listen to me, you spoiled bitch.” Jeffrey heard his voice raise and didn't care. This was about justice, not a grudge. Justice for all the Death Eaters' victims. “You will tell me what I want to know or...”

“Or what?” Professor McGonagall's cut glass voice bisected his threat. “Do please furnish an explanation for why you are ballyragging a student.” The Scottish witch strode across the courtyard, moderating her volume as she approached but not the austerity of her tone. “You are here for our protection, Auror Williamson.”

“Rosier is withholding vital information.” He hastily unclenched his fists. He wouldn't have hit her even though he owed her for the teapot and the subsequent testiness of his boss. There was no need to start anything now. Williamson fully expected to meet the chit with a silver mask on her face.

“Miss Rosier?” The Professor arched an eyebrow at the Slytherin, whom she had not recognised in mufti. All she had seen from across the yard was a man in a trenchcoat bullying a teenage girl. The intimidation had been blatant.

“Williamson was reminding me he killed my mother.” Hermione pushed the Auror into the deep end. She didn't expect a lot of help from her former Head of House regrettably. There wasn't much she could do regardless of her inclination. “Apparently there's a lot of that going around.”

“She started the fire.” Williamson snapped. He hadn't meant the unauthorised raid on the cottage to get so out of hand. The German witch had started cursing the instant they had touched the wards. The back-up he'd brought in, all retired or pensioned off ex-Aurors, had the devil of a time bringing down the defences while he duelled the mad widow.

“Dear mama was in fear of our lives.” She stuttered a bit over the first word, covering a hasty change from 'Derica' to 'dear'. Pure-bloods absolutely did not call their parents by their first names. It was the height of insolence.

“She Disapparated. She abandoned you.” He'd been doubled over on the ground trying not to cough up a lung under a wracking curse when he heard the distinctive crack of Apparition. The wards had just dropped so his mates had rushed forward to help him, dragging him away from the Fiendfyre. “I saved your life!”
“Regret that yet?” Hermione inquired, snidely. She was grateful she hadn't died mere minutes after being reincarnated but she didn't believe the Auror had acted out of altruism. She didn't think him a sadist who would watch someone burn to death. His choice to take her to his home rather than St Mungo's was telling however.

“Rather.” Williamson ground out between his teeth.

“That is quite enough.” Professor McGonagall intruded. She had been thrown by Rosier's allegation and by the Auror's lack of a firm denial. There were undercurrents to this conversation she did not like. “Miss Rosier, dinner is being served. I suggest if you wish to eat, you go now.” The girl obeyed promptly and without sneer, rare courtesy from a Slytherin. Minerva waited until she was out of hearing before reading the riot act to Williamson.

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Hermione dried herself and took her place at the green table. Crabbe and Goyle were finishing off the last of everything within reach. Hestia Carrow passed up a tray of roast beef and a bowl of vegetables came down from Ichijoh, floating out of range of the Sixth Year boys' gluttonous hands. She filled her plate via a Levitation Charm and the platters retreated.

The dinner conversation was desultory. The excitement of the start of the school year had ebbed. There was nothing much to look forward to until the first Hogsmeade weekend, which in the face of their study workload seemed a paltry respite. Hermione eyed Crabbe and Goyle stuffing their pockets with bread rolls and pastries, her train of thought heading towards Extension Charms.

She went to the library after dinner to check on something. The charm she had used to extend the beaded bag was very stable and portable but there were other variants. If she opted for something sessile, she could have undetectable supply caches all over Hogwarts, not just well hidden ones. Hermione was quite pleased with that idea until she found the charm she was thinking of; it wouldn't work on already magical objects. She couldn't embed it in the fabric of the Castle.

“Bugger.” She flipped to the beginning of the book and read more methodically. First go, she had chosen the most tested and reliable charm for luggage, duplicating the one used commercially. There were dozens of others tailored for various materials and containers. Hermione reread a marginal note at the end of a chapter on collapsible objects, tents and the like, then headed to the Ancient Runes section to find that tome on enchanting paper.

She'd chanced across it stuffed in with the other 'foreign' language books consigned to Runes because some past librarian couldn't be bothered with translation spells. Most of the Hogwarts collection was written in the Latin alphabet, with significant portions in various runic or Greek scripts. There were some Cyrillic documents but the bulk of the works in those languages were held at Durmstrang. Magical scholarship could be very parochial.

The book she wanted was still there. It was actually a woodblock printed codex carefully bound into a journal; part laboratory notebook, part instructional text. The crest on the frontispiece identified it as part of the 1692 Thurkell bequest; a large posthumous donation of books after the collapse of the lineage. Thaddeus Thurkell had been an arse but various Thurkell antecedents were inquisitive and well-travelled.

Hermione wasn't sure she remembered the spell to translate Ming dynasty Chinese so she dug out a book of antique translation charms from a bottom shelf in the History of Magic section. Library research was so much faster when you already knew where everything was. She'd had to hunt for weeks to find a reliable spell for fifteenth century Mandarin.
She was happily copying the result with an amanuensis charm when Nott appeared at the table. He hovered, arms full of books until she nodded permission for him to join her. He set his paraphernalia down gently so he wouldn't jolt the busy animated quill. Hermione tilted her head to read the titles, guessing he was working on the mammoth essay Binns had assigned them for their term assessment. Forty inches on the factors contributing to the decline of giants in the United Kingdom.

“As soporific as Binns is, I find the subject fascinating.” Theo said self-consciously, aware Cathal napped as often as the rest of the class during the droning lectures. “Have you started your essay?”

“Yes.” Hermione answered off-hand. She'd finished it and was half-way done with the spring term assignment. Binns posted the essays due for each Year on a bulletin board outside his office. They hadn't changed in decades, possibly only ever altering as the posted paper became illegible with age. “Don't forget to cite the weather patterns, particularly the 1540 and 1666 droughts.”

“Binns has yet to mention meteorological conditions.” He flicked through his draft, checking the headings he'd jotted down. Nothing about the climate.

“Lafcadio Hanes, the previous incumbent, published his lecture notes. They're equally dry but he referenced meticulously.” She wrote down the title and approximate location of the compendium, handing it over in hope Nott would toddle off before he noticed what her spell was copying. He favoured her with a heart-fluttering smile then whisked away to retrieve the notes.

By the time he returned, the amanuensis was finished and the translation safely out of sight in her randoseru. She would've preferred to stash the notes in her marsupium as she really didn't want anyone taking an interest in why she wanted to bind complex charms to paper but stowing parchment in her backpack was more discreet than hoisting up her shirt to bare her belly.

They worked quietly until the close of the Library. Nott escorted her to the dungeons, starting to say something at the staircase when they missed the steps but mumbling into silence with an apology when Vaisey noticed them and veered over. The Seventh Year brought them up to speed on the Duelling Club schedule then sauntered ahead of them to intercept Urquart as the Quidditch Captain entered the Common Room.

“Would you care to accompany me to Hogsmeade?” Theo asked quietly and hurriedly before another athletic older boy intruded to make him look more rabbity and nervous than he already was.

“I would.” Hermione wasn't unkind enough to hesitate, showing obviously how much she was weighing up whether it was a good idea or not. She just assumed it was a bad choice and jumped in because Nott seemed so lost puppy she couldn't help herself. He didn't fawn over her at least, simply resuming the polite escort.

The ambiance of the Common Room was fairly relaxed, something almost close to the easy communality of Gryffindor Tower that years on Hermione still missed. No one was quite slopping about snoring in front of the fire but there was a sense of togetherness. She found an unoccupied chair, pulled out a book, and savoured the atmosphere. Until Malfoy ruined it.

He stormed in forty minutes after curfew, slamming the door and stalking across the room to the boys’ dorm entrance. Crabbe and Goyle trailed in his wake. Both had bags over their shoulders and moved warily. For his part, Malfoy had a face like thunder. Parkinson stood to intercept him, reaching out a hand to catch his arm but he shrugged off the touch and strode out of sight to his room.

The repair work was evidently not going well. Hermione closed her book as the burly pair hesitated before following their lordling. They returned five minutes later sans bags but looking grim.
Parkinson tried to browbeat them into telling her what was going on with little success. She stalked away in a huff to the girls' dorm. Hermione opened her book again, deciding she'd give the witch some time to calm down before going to bed herself. She didn't want to be on the receiving end of Parkinson's pique.

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Hermione got up later than usual, showered half-awake, braided her hair on autopilot then went to breakfast. She was thinking of paper and origami and topology and whether acoustic charms could be bound to perishable material when a tiny thought prickled in her head. Amortentia. She was putting it off.

Purposefully because she didn't want to think herself a coward over such a little thing, Hermione went to the Potions classroom. Slughorn locked the door but provided the Sixth and Seventh Years with the password, which they were enjoined not to share with the younger students for safety reasons. She let herself in, marched over to the gold cauldron, whipped off the lid then stared at the pearly potion for several minutes before taking a sniff.

The scent of parchment gave her a false sense of security. Hermione inhaled again expecting grass and spearmint. She smelled instead rain on cold stone, roses, and Moppet's soap clean aroma. She put the lid back on the cauldron. Parchment for scholarship, rain and stone for Hogwarts, roses for Cathal's childhood home, and her only friend.

“Well, shit.” Hermione commented to the ether. She wasn't upset about the odours. She was sure she loved three of them. The roses puzzled her. Was it a lingering link from the body? Was it a sign of affection for Cathal herself? Some portentous omen of great symbolism? Magic being esoteric shite?

She went to breakfast and played with her food. She had to accept she wasn't Hermione Granger. Next year she would be totally independent of herself, her experiences. She had to be Cathal all the time. Clinging to the past would not help her fight the war. Whatever reassurance she was pining for wasn't there. Losing her nerve now would make everything she had done thus far worthless.

Tracey Davis, polished as usual, took a seat opposite and fidgeted with her toast. That was odd. Her table manners were always as tidy as possible, straight out of a book on etiquette. After she picked up and put down her fork for the third time, she met Hermione's eyes. Her posture became even more correct.

“Is it patronage? The invitation to the Duelling Club?” Tracey asked with careful diction. Parkinson had got into her head again. The bitch knew exactly how to twist the knife. Rise above, her grandfather always said. What she'd actually like to do was curse Pansy until she was screaming on the floor.

“Do you want it to be?” It probably was, by the lights of pure-blood society. Hermione hadn't considered that point of view.

“No, thank you.” She replied tightly. “I'm grateful, of course, for the opportunity.”

“I don't need my arse kissed.” Hermione cut in. “Yes, I had to pull rank to get you and Bulstrode in. Yes, that possibly means something to anyone keeping score.” She paused for a moment, remembering Fourth Year and dresses. “Parkinson or Greengrass?”

“Parkinson.” Tracey answered swiftly, relieved she didn't have to spell out her insecurities. Rosier was so steely arrogant she could afford not to give a damn about what people said of her. That assurance came from generations of magic and money. It must be nice to be so sure of your place.
“Who will not be getting sponsorship from anyone to join us.” She poured herself some pumpkin juice as something to do with her hands rather than clench them. Hermione hoped, really really hoped, that after the war Parkinson had to bite her tongue. For years. Just keeping her poisonous mouth shut because no one cared what she had to say.

“I like to know what’s expected of me.” The words were careful, not a demand or a whinge.

“Show up on time, be good at what you do, follow the rules.” Hermione said lightly as Nott and Zabini approached the table. The latter was always fashionably late to meals on the weekend. He had a very active social life. “No more obligation than that.”

“Good morning.” Theo sat a decorous handspan from Cathal, accepting the carafe from her. He set it on the table for a moment as Zabini languidly arranged himself on the bench on the other side of the blonde witch. “Would you like to leave shortly for the village?”

“Best to evade the horde.” She agreed, wanting to be back at the Castle before Katie Bell was cursed by the necklace. Seeing it the first time had been shocking, her mind had gone blank from the surprise. All that had popped into her head was a worry whether you could give a curse victim mouth to mouth. She hadn't known what else to do.

Theo Nott was unfortunately pleasant company. He strolled at her shoulder, chatting about spell theory as they wended their way around Hogsmeade. He didn't want to go into Splintwitches or even stare longingly at the window display of this year's must-have sporting gear. He didn't complain about spending time in Tomes and Scrolls or Scrivenshaft's. It had to be one of the nicest outings to the village she'd ever had, which was rather depressing when she mused on it.

They headed into Dogweed and Deathcap to pick up some Scythian Thrashing Nettle seeds Hermione had ordered. If she was going to know far more than was sensible about genus Urtica then she might as well get marks in Herbology for it. To give everyone enough workspace in the greenhouses Professor Sprout had offered the more advanced students independent study projects. It was more work but they were excused from the practical part of the class providing they attended tutorials Monday evenings.

“I'd prefer to have cuttings but the freight for those is ridiculous.” Hermione levitated a sack of specialty potting mix and was about to add ask if Theo needed any when a customer tripped over a display of salt glazed pots. She stared at the burly, waistcoated man as he muttered apologies trying to extract his foot from a planter. “Lots of clumsy people out today.”

“It was a witch who knocked over the journals in the bookstore.” Theo had been mindful of anyone near them. Not that they were discussing anything salacious or secretive but he valued his privacy. He'd been particularly watching for beetles.

“Auror Tonks is a Metamorphmagus.” She said tonelessly to a shelf of Boom Berry seedlings. She couldn't be sure, people were klutzes, but if she were an Auror then following two children of Death Eaters would be tactical. They might not be up to anything. Teenagers did like to talk though.

“Let's get back to the Castle.” He suggested, disappointed at their abbreviated jaunt. After paying for the purchases, they slipped out the side door and plodded through frost-blighted grass. Once they were alone, Theo found his nerve. “Cathal, I know this is forward of me but would you do me the honour of allowing me to court you?”

“Oh.” Hermione said, marvelling at her own wit. Really, was it that difficult not to sound like an idiot? She breathed in slowly. “I'm not saying no.” God, that was worse. His face went neutral. This would be a lot easier if she were more of a bitch. “I like things tidy. I don't like being a spectacle.”
He nodded at that, not getting angry as Ron would have at the suggestion she didn't want him. “I don't think we can do anything personal properly while there's a war on.”

“That's... true.” Theo had expected rejection. It hurt to see her with other boys. She was so confident, so determined. Ruthless, perhaps. He admired her. “May I be so impertinent as to ask if there is anyone else seeking your regard?”

“It's not your impertinence I'm worried about.” Hermione put a hand on his arm before she could catch herself, the gesture an echo of her friendship with the Gryffindor boys. He put his hand on hers for a moment then let go. They shuffled apart half a pace to a more seemly distance. “There's a concord of sorts between myself and Malfoy, which is never going to be fulfilled, and a few years ago Marcus Flint told his mother he was interested in me.” She ventured a smile. “Adrian Pucey proposed to me once in the Hospital Wing. He retracted the offer quickly. I think he was genuinely frightened I might demand he make good on it.”

“Malfoy and Flint.” He mulled that over. Flint was off playing Quidditch in the New World somewhere. Draco was being a prat right under their noses. “Are you inclined towards someone?” He wouldn't be so crass as to push his suit if she was fond of another wizard. His mother had been forced to abandon a beau when her parents accepted his father's offer for her hand. Their marriage had been cool at best. “Feel free to tell me to bugger off if you'd rather not say.”

“Civil question gets civil answer.” Hermione shrugged. “I'm not in a relationship or pining for anyone. I find most of our peers tiresome.” The difference in years made her classmates seem so immature. Granger had the same impression, and Cathal was even older. “It's just that my mother was married for less than two years before she was widowed. I don't want that life.”

“I understand.” He did, truly. His father had wed late to a much younger witch, who had wilted in the marriage. She wasn't saying no, she made a point of that. It was common sense to wait until the Dark Lord had the country in hand. He rubbed his left arm surreptitiously. “Do you intend to pledge yourself?”

“I will not refuse if asked.” Not refuse, no. Flee the country with Moppet and not stop running until she reached the Antipodes, yes. “But I think I would offer more as a Healer, which is difficult with too much Dark Magic.”

“You have a hawthorn wand.” The wood was well suited to healing magic, and conversely to curses as well. A dichotomy but at least one with some direction. He was envious. His was pine and phoenix feather. A wand for a lonely scholar, Ollivander had said.

“I'm not convinced much of the wandlore isn't superstition. I think...” Hermione stopped abruptly as someone young shrieked. She was off and running, drawing the hawthorn they had been discussing as she sprinted. Theo was on her heels more out of chivalry than any desire to get involved in a juvenile fracas.

Just within the school bounds, two boys were on the ground brawling while a girl, too small to be anything but a First Year, tried to stop them. She was in tears and when the Slytherins arrived she tried to explain in between gasping sobs. Hermione cast a Full Body-Bind on the boys then crouched in front of the girl, who gulped and accepted the handkerchief she offered.

“Your brother is the Hufflepuff.” The resemblance between the two auburn haired youngsters was obvious. The little Gryffindor nodded. “Why is he fighting with your Housemate?”

“He's a Prod.” The girl choked out, Irish accent thick in her distress. “Our Joe said he'd see to him. Will's been shoving me about.”
“Have you reported him to your Prefects?” Hermione asked gently as Nott shifted restlessly beside her, obvious not following the conversation.

“Did.” She breathed in shakily. “Weasley said it didn't matter 'cause we're all in the same Ministry.”

“Ronald Weasley is an idiot.” Not for the first time in either of her lives, Hermione rued the complete lack of comparative history in wizarding education. She'd known more about both worlds at eleven than most of her peers knew about their own. Generations of students sleeping through Binns's monologues had made a society disinterested in the past except where it applied to maintaining the status quo. “Come with me.”

Hermione levitated the two boys because this was not a conflict that would be settled by one person's wagging finger, and walked the girl to McGonagall's office. The sight of the Slytherins, the floating bodies, and the tear-streaked young witch, caused a lot of comment but with the bulk of the older students in Hogsmeade, no one challenged Rosier and Nott.

Professor McGonagall was in, working steadily through essays quietly thankful she had not drawn chaperone duty for the village. She trusted Tonks to keep the Aurors on an even keel, she'd had a private word with the former Hufflepuff about Williamson, and Filius and Pomona would mind the children. Minerva couldn't help but see again the fear and trepidation sapping her charges as though Dementors lurked at every corner. She felt old and tired and angry.

“Enter.” The Scottish witch said in reply to the firm rap on her door. In drifted O'Neill and Mackay, ending propped up against the chairs in front of her desk. Miss O'Neill hurried in in her brother's wake, looking behind her for reassurance from Cathal Rosier of all people. “Miss Rosier. Mister Nott.”

“Professor.” Both Sixth Years replied promptly though it was clear the witch was running the show. Nott faded into the shadows as he was wont to do, bringing a frown to McGonagall's face. Too easily overlooked, that boy.

“An explanation, if you please.” Her attention was on the Slytherins so it was with a little surprise that she turned to Miss O'Neill when the girl started speaking. It wasn't a new story. Muggle-borns brought their parents' prejudices to Hogwarts just like the pure-bloods did. Minerva knew about the Troubles. She wished she could protect the young from that war too.

The Professor listened, dismissed the Body-Bind on the boys, heard their angry denunciations, and the echoed malice of their parents. How to make them understand that as wizards they absolutely could not involve themselves in Muggle internecine strife? Not because it wasn't worthy or righteous or traditional but because they were magical and magic put to war would be noticed.

She gave them detentions.
“What was that about?” Theo asked later in the privacy of the Slytherin Common Room. As Sixth Years they had to defer only to the Sevenths, who were either at Quidditch practise or immured in the Library. They had their choice of seating, which for their tete-a-tete was two wingback chairs in the corner with the Safavid carpet. It was a beautiful piece with flowers and arabesques in silver, browns, and subtle greens. Hermione nudged off her shoes before sinking her toes in the wool pile.

“Muggle politics.” She didn't particularly want to discuss it, feeling that she would be giving ammunition to someone who already thought Muggles were bestial.

“I got that far.” He sat and stretched out his legs, adjusting the ottoman with a flick of his wand. “What is a prod in that context?”

“A Protestant.” Hermione supplied, settling back into her chair. She rubbed her stockinged feet across the rug, a shiver tingling up her spine at the sensation on her soles. “The siblings are Roman Catholics. It's an old argument stemming I think from Cromwell's invasion of Ireland in seventeenth century. There were wars before that but more about land than religion.”

“The Lord Protector.” Theo had only heard of one Cromwell in the course of his historical studies. A religious fanatic, a puritan who had been a significant threat to the magical communities of Britain. He'd razed ancient groves in Scotland to make siegeworks. “The Muggles are still fighting that war?”

“In fits and starts. There was a flare up in the Sixties that's continued until now. Bombs, marches, and walled neighbourhoods. It's all rather depressing.” She’d been old enough to remember watching news footage of Lockerbie, which had been Libyan not Irish terrorism, and asking her parents why people did that. They hadn't had a good answer. The rash of bombings in the summer of 1990 had frightened her. So she had read.

“How do you know all this?” He doubted Muggle Studies covered current politics. Too useful an application for the filler class.

“Muggles publish books, Theo.” Hermione snapped, his sceptical tone irking her. “They have libraries. It's not difficult if you make the effort.” She reined in her temper. “Their history runs parallel to ours, adding context. Binns cherry-picks dates without any grounding. Want to know why the Ministry was so frantic to sign the International Statute of Secrecy? Look up the Glorious Revolution.”

“You needn't rant at me.” If it were up to him, he'd have Binns exorcised or bound to an empty classroom to drone without an audience. Surely there was a half-blood somewhere competent to teach a well-rounded History of Magic curriculum. “I want to know these things. Limiting our scholarship because of Ministry histrionics is foolish.”

“You'd learn mundane history?” She couldn't hide her surprise.

“I'd learn anything.” Theo said with fervour. “No knowledge is wasted, whatever the source.”

Hermione muttered an agreement and changed the subject. She couldn't decide whether Nott's desire to broaden his mind was ominous. The Knights of Walpurgis had started as a fraternity keen to explore the reaches of magic. Or she could give the boy the benefit of the doubt and not assume his intellect would take him down Dark paths. It was hypocritical of her. She was the one making potion grenades.
The rest of the first term passed quietly. Hermione kept entirely removed from the Golden Trio as they clung to normality and from Malfoy, who withdrew further. She got an astounding amount of work done. Slughorn signed a permission slip for the Restricted Section after some of the old oil. He might not think her a good mentee with her Death Eater connections but he was prepared to encourage a potential Healer.

Zabini swanked about the Christmas Party, rubbing it in the noses of the Sacred Twenty-Eight heirs not invited. The Carrow twins were smug too, insulated from the calumny of Alecto and Amycus by their father’s public repudiation of his cousins. Lycus Carrow knew when to cut his losses. Hermione wasn’t sure how or if he’d survived the second war. She expected she would find out next year.

She left Zabini to his gloating to get some brewing done. Things were going well. This autumn’s Dittany crop had been bountiful, emphasising how much she had harvested last year under Umbridge. Moppet was having a lovely time learning freezing charms and the Reductor Curse. Wand casting exhausted the house elf far faster than her natural magic but her precision with the spells was impressive, more than good enough to powder ingredients for potions.

“Is Miss going to that boy’s house to Yule?” Moppet asked from somewhere in a cloud of dust. Hermione carefully cleaned her up with a siphoning charm, sending the fine limestone powder into canisters for later use, and temporarily putting off answering her question. “Miss will say to Moppet what she does.”

“I can’t think of a way to avoid it.” Her sporadic letters to Esne had barely been enough to keep the edge off Madam Rosier’s fears. The woman wouldn’t last a whole school year without seeing her granddaughter. “I thought I could plead the lack of a public chaperone.” Using the ridiculous pure-blood conventions had been a convenient excuse. “Unfortunately Theo thought of that and invited the Radnotts to stay for the holiday. Their son isn’t coming home for the season. He’s avoiding the war by staying in the Seychelles.”

“Is he a bad wizard?” The house elf's hand tightened on her wand. If they hurt her witch, she was going to make all the bad witches and wizards into tiny tiny bits.

“He sounds extremely sensible.” Hermione grumbled. After the run-in he’d had with the Ministry, Algernon had gone on a Grand Tour. He’d fallen in love with an African witch, followed her home, and decided he’d much rather have tropical beaches than English drizzle. “His wife teaches at the local campus of the Merge School of Under-Water Spellage and he writes monographs on magical sea life.”

“You could say no.” Moppet suggested staunchly.

“I could. Cathal wouldn’t, though.” She made a face. “Siglinde's not sane. I don't think it'd take much for her to convince herself I was being held prisoner here and come storm the Castle.” Hermione knotted her fingers in her hair, yanking on her braid as though she wanted to throttle someone with it. “I don't want to press the issue or provoke her.”

The house elf scowled and muttered but when their work time was over, she hugged Hermione fiercely. The witch returned the embrace with equal affection. She really did not want to go to Nott's house for the holidays but she was stuck until she was seventeen and could claim Rosier Hall outright. The Ministry couldn't keep the estate 'in trust' any longer without charging her with some crime. She rather expected with the change of government she would have no trouble taking up residence before she came of age.
Glumly, Hermione went to the Slytherin dormitory. The four other girls were tucked up but awake. Millicent and Tracey were reading. Greengrass had a mirror in front of her and was trying out cosmetic charms. Parkinson was doing her nails, comparing them to a swatch of fabric, then redoing them. Hermione took her pyjamas into the bathroom, showered, dried her hair, and dressed for bed. When she returned, Bulstrode had Greengrass pinned on the floor, Parkinson's bed was on fire, and Davis was shooting hexes at the black haired witch from behind a barricade of trunks.

Hermione knew which side she was on. She Stunned Parkinson, extinguished the fire, and shouted at Millicent to stop before the sturdy girl thumped Greengrass's face into the rug again. She'd like to join in but being a Prefect meant she had to be the voice of reason and restraint. The two half-bloods collected themselves. Hermione Stunned Greengrass then rolled her into the First Aid recovery position.

“Some context please?” She asked. Daphne's pert nose was bloodied but not broken. A healing charm took care of the damage. Her face would be a bit sore in the morning, no swelling or discolouration though.


“Raised in a cottage then orphaned.” Hermione played the complete social ignorance card, crossing her fingers it would be enough. She knew about the old magical festivals but she had never participated in them. The Weasleys either didn't celebrate the rituals or hadn't invited her to participate. “Foreign mother.”

“Sorry, of course, your rites would be different.” Bulstrode looked contrite. She hadn't expected to have to spell out the cause of her anger to a pure-blood. “The old families all send each other a stave or branch of ash wood so we can bind them together for the hearth fire on the longest night. It's not quite a loyalty oath but it's serious. If you're included, you're part of the community. If you're not, well, you're literally out in the cold.”

“With you so far.” The Muggle-born did not sigh, smile, or smirk. She did not roll her eyes at the young women fighting over firewood. She did not comment on the Yule log or remark that a bundle of sticks was a fasces, the root of the word fascist. Cathal would not have mocked this tradition so Hermione held her tongue.

“The Greengrasses and the Parkinsons returned the branches my family sent them. Broken.” Millicent ground the words out. She was embarrassed she had lost control in reacting to the girls' sneers but it hurt. No one wanted to be an outcast. “The official word is it's because of my father's conduct. Divorcing two wives leaves him open to allegations of oath-breaking.”

“To lose one wife may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose two looks like carelessness.” Hermione paraphrased Oscar Wilde. Bulstrode and Davis clearly recognised it as a quote but didn't seem to know the source. A bitter nod and a wry shrug greeted her comment.

“It's really because the Bulstrode heir is a half-blood. They want to be pure, to protect themselves from You-Know-Who.” She was upset about her parents' divorce. It wasn't finalised yet, just inevitable. Her mother would get a good settlement and access to her children, all stipulated in her marriage contract, but it would be a big step down for her socially. “I thought my father would be able to keep in enough to avoid us being singled out. It's not safe to be noticed, you know?”

“I know.” Cathal, daughter and granddaughter of Death Eaters, knew completely.

“Of course you do.” Millicent shifted uncomfortably. She'd forgotten in the rush of anger and hurt that Rosier was even closer to Voldemort's inner circle than the two Stunned bitches. “It's not that
we're not loyal.” She said hastily. “Muggles are awful and Muggle-borns just don't understand but…”
By force of will, the witch halted her babbling before she said ‘I'm frightened’. “Amalric is eleven. He's a child. If anything happens to our father, the House of Bulstrode will be in a bad way.”

“If the insult is serious enough that you were making Greengrass kiss the rug, I think your father should parley it into a full retreat.” How much could she say? Not enough, probably. Hermione tried to sound like Cathal and Cathal tried to sound cunning. “In the wake of the debacle at the Ministry, there's a lot of jockeying for position going on. This may be the last clean moment to withdraw. Leave the broken branches on your threshold and move.”

“Why do you want the Bulstrodes out of the way?” Tracey asked because if they were being honest she had little to lose. She'd hexed Parkinson, and enjoyed it, but she didn't have a dog in this fight. Neither side wanted a half-blood Slytherin with no political connections.

“I want to limit the collateral damage.” Hermione said candidly then added more adroitly. “A surgical coup is far better than a free-for-all. I have no problem with people sensibly disengaging. When the war is over, the moderates can return and we can all be civilised again.”

The young women stared at her, assessing and hesitant. Rosier was clever and violent, quiet and angry. Could they believe she had insider knowledge of the approaching conflict? Oh yes, certainly, they could. Her skirmishing with Malfoy and apparent alliance with Nott might well mirror the manoeuvring of the elders of those names.

It was a very thoughtful duo who tidied up their dorm while Cathal levitated the Stunned pair into their beds. She took their wands to Professor Snape, the usual protocol for intra-House disputes. Slytherins were obsessive about keeping their quarrels out of sight. Hermione doubted anything would be done to punish anyone involved. Discreet did not mean just.

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The ride to Platform 9¾ was boisterous but Hermione wasn't feeling the holiday season. It was the day of the winter solstice. There inevitably would be a ceremony that night, the shortest night. Neither she nor Theo had heard anything definitive on whether they would be invited, compelled, to attend the rite at Malfoy Manor. The Dark Lord would be avid to celebrate the darkest time of the year.

She patrolled the train, noted the disposition of the Aurors, swapped the duty with MacMillan, and sat in a closed carriage with Nott, Bulstrode, Davis, and the Carrows going over spell theory for duelling. Some charms and hexes 'flowed on' well together, though which ones varied caster to caster. They flicked through records of the All-England Wizarding Duelling Competition, which listed the spells used by the winners in each category.

The trial and error was sufficiently fiddly that Hermione distracted herself almost completely until they pulled into King's Cross station. Tracey said good-bye before veering off into the scrum to catch another train. The twins' mother was there to collect them, walking with the group to the Georgian house. The Slytherins limited themselves to conventional good-wishing and farewells before Flooing to their respective homes.

The Radnotts would arrive tomorrow but Siglinde Rosier was there waiting when Hermione stepped out of the hearth. She didn't say anything, just drew a long shuddering breath and gave her granddaughter a nod, feigning calm. It seemed as though all was well. But she was in every room Hermione visited for longer than five minutes and watched from the windows when the younger witch went outside.
The other shoe dropped when they were summoned to Malfoy Manor an hour before midnight. Theo had planned a small ritual of wassail and candles, suitable for the bereft, and a feast because the house elves refused not to set out platters of fruit cake and roast meats. He had sent the ash staves to the customary allies of the House of Nott and had kindled his own Yule bundle at sunset. All was well until Madam Rosier's Dark Mark burned.

The matron left and returned rapidly. On her reappearance, her face was as fixed and white as marble. It took her several moments before she could find words, so long in fact Theo thought she was about to faint and offered her an arm. Hermione poured her grandmother a tankard of the mulled cider thinking the heat if not the alcohol might revive her. Siglinde stood rigid as she gulped down a mouthful, speaking at last once she had swallowed.

“The Dark Lord requests your presence.” Each syllable was carefully enunciated as though each demanded to be heard individually. “The Malfoys delight in inviting Master Theodore Nott and Miss Cathal Rosier to their solstice ritual.” That came out high, a meaningless pleasantry. The Malfoys' delight at the attendance of two teenagers at the cusp of the long night was certainly not their own.

Hurrying upstairs to change into something formal, Hermione grabbed the Renaissance gown with the illusory serpents because there was no such thing as being seen as too loyal to the iconography. Oh bloody fuck she was going to die. The insane snake-faced murdering bastard was going to crack her skull, devour her secrets, and kill her slowly.

Her mind full of fear, corpse green light, and memento mori, Cathal's hands clumsily guided themselves to dress her body. Cathal's feet took her body downstairs to the Floo. Theo was already there in dress robes, the trousers tucked into boots to hide the too-short hems. He was wearing the same set his father had bought him for Fourth Year, still a reasonable fit to his chagrin. He'd grown up but not out, a lack his elves were determined to remedy with pie.

By the hearth, he offered his arm to Madam Rosier. She waved off his gallantry with a sharp twitch, her hands going to her wand in a decorative sheath at her waist more like a chatelaine than a scabbard. She wasn't garbed for war but Theo couldn't shake the impression that was for what she was gearing.

He gave his arm to Cathal, whose hands were cold. She had the same look as her grandmother with eyes staring into the distance. Did they know something he didn't? Theo did not ask before they stepped through the flames to Malfoy Manor and when they were greeted by the lady of the House he limited himself to the conventional. He could smell the blood already.

The sacrifice was a stag. The animal hung from its back legs, suspended from the ceiling in the ballroom. It swayed under its own weight, spattering red around the vessel set beneath it to catch the blood from its cut throat. A bit gruesome, Theo thought as they were escorted across the parquetry to join the circle, each before a candle twisted around with a wreath of pine and ivy, but not beyond the pale.

Then the stag's head swung, antlers dragging close enough to the vessel to tip it, and brushed right through it. He stared as the illusion faded washing out to a ghostly sketch over the body of a well-built man with long fair hair. His breath caught as for a moment he thought the sacrifice was Lucius Malfoy before telling himself the Malfoy patriarch was in Azkaban. He kept looking drawn entirely to the spectacle of the person dangling from the ceiling rose; a macabre chandelier.

“Who is he?” Theo flinched when he heard his own murmur. He shouldn't have said anything. Looking around the circle Yaxley was implacable, Vincent and Gregory excited, Draco whey-faced, and Madam Malfoy meticulously expressionless.
“Sturgis Podmore.” Cathal said remotely. Theo looked back to the dead man's congested face streaked with his lifeblood and wasn't sure knowing his name didn't make it worse.

Severus Snape swept into the room, taking the place beside Theo opposite his godson. A few moments later Bellatrix Lestrange entered and stood a space to the right of Narcissa Malfoy. There was a pause, a silence, a stillness before the Dark Lord entered the chamber. His gaze scythed across the company. The Death Eaters lowered their heads. The unMarked copied the gesture of obeisance a beat later.

A ritual happened. Afterwards Hermione was hard-pressed to describe it. There was chanting and old magic; a feeling of something rising from deep beneath the earth to swirl around them. The body was entirely consumed by the energy leaving only the red droplets on the wooden floor. They shared a chalice of mulled wine with a salty, metallic aftertaste she found distressingly easy to identify. Throughout, Hermione concentrated on thinking nothing, feeling nothing, being only the hollow shell that was Cathal.

When the magic settled and the candles were extinguished some semblance of normality returned. House elves appeared with canapés, dainty cuts of meat artfully arranged, still appropriate for the season albeit froufrou. The guests mingled. Siglinde Rosier remained resolutely at her granddaughter's side, an unnecessary diligence as Hermione had no intention of leaving her protection.

She tried to memorise names and faces. Most were already known to her in passing at least. Gibbon turned out to be a brown haired man of middling height with an undershot jaw. Harper, father of the idiot Slytherin Seeker who'd replaced Malfoy, was tall and had a beaky nose in an otherwise handsome face. Lowe, nephew of the author of the Muggle Conspiracy and other racist propaganda, wore a pince-nez above a walrus moustache reminding Hermione of Groucho Marx.

What was it that Dumbledore had said? A motley of the weak, the ambitious, and the thuggish? She couldn't recall his exact words but the approximation felt right. The fear of change, of insecurity, and a romanticisation of the past. Hermione had seen that rose-coloured nostalgia more benevolently in the Radnotts. Here it was an intoxicant.

Bellatrix Lestrange approached almost skipping ahead of Voldemort, half-herald, half-jester. She said something to Madame Rosier that Hermione didn't hear over the roaring of her blood in her ears. No more than a pace separated them in this place where she had been tortured. She knew she should be panicking, her heart racing, except the adrenaline rush didn't come. Her body, this body, had no muscle memory of the Cruciatus. It was all literally in her head.

Tom Riddle greeted her grandmother with a good facsimile of old-fashioned manners. They were something he had learned to ape the pure-bloods and aired when it amused him, Hermione tried not to think. When the dry hand took hers the only reason she didn't flinch was her fixed concentration on her Occlumency. Voldemort said something. Siglinde answered for her swiftly and the Dark Lord moved on to Theodore Nott.

“Cissa wants her for Draco.” Bellatrix said in a manic voice, snatching Cathal's long braid to tug on it like a bell rope. “She'll do, I suppose. If she's loyal.” A sharp yank on her hair jerked her head up, their eyes meeting. “Are you loyal, little girl?”

“To my own.” Hermione gritted her teeth and fought not to spit out all the hate and rage the mad witch engendered. Like a well-spring, it flooded up until she shook with the effort of holding back the tide.

“She's mine!” Siglinde hissed, knuckles white on her wand.
The moment wobbled, tipping close to spells flying, when the gyroscope of Bellatrix's madness suddenly spun in another direction. She giggled and released her hold on Cathal's hair, scampering away to rejoin her Master at heel. Hermione straightened as Madam Rosier grabbed a handful of hors d'oeuvres off a passing tray. Stuffing one into her mouth, she thrust another at her granddaughter.

“Eat.” She ordered. “Make feast with the Malfoys so we may leave.”

Hermione choked down the morsel and went willingly when Siglinde dragged her to the nearest Floo. They left without announcing their departure, without taking their leave of the Dark Lord. The consequences of their breach of etiquette didn't seem to bother the Death Eater. She hustled her heir upstairs to her suite then locked her in before Hermione could protest. Hearing through the door the witch screaming frenzy at the house elves, Hermione did not protest.
Because nothing good had ever come of her being locked up, Hermione did not sit about and pine. She changed out of the serpent gown, had a shower that was more scour than wash, and dressed for tumult. Checking the door, she couldn't hear Siglinde Rosier any more or much of anything. The house was quiet.

Her instincts told her to escape. Her rational mind, such was still operating in a stew of adrenaline and fear, told her to sit tight. She paced. They'd left Nott at Malfoy Manor, which was not something she was proud of but she'd hardly had the chance to drag him away. He didn't have a crazy grandmother to hide behind. His father had gone to school with Tom Riddle. It was questionable whether Theo would've left with them even if she'd had a moment to explain.

Sturgis Podmore was dead. Before, a past on the other side of an increasing gulf, he'd disappeared. The Order had thought he was upset and/or embarrassed about trying to steal the Prophecy or traumatised after six months in Azkaban. He'd made sporadic contact after his release then they'd lost touch. Hermione didn't know if anyone had tried to track him down during the year she'd been on the run.

She wondered if the same thing had happened to Caradoc Dearborn, whose body had never been found. All that had been left of Sturgis was the sacrament, the thought of which turned her stomach. Hermione went to the bathroom and stuck her fingers down her throat but all that came up was bile and the remains of the canapé. The magic of the rite had already been absorbed into her body.

That gave her something practical to do. Hermione sat on the edge of the bed and cast diagnostic spells on herself. Every last one she knew. What she learned was other than many things she was not, she was healthy, not counting a slight vitamin D deficiency, near the end of her monthly cycle, over-stressed, and had recently been exposed to a significant amount of Dark magic.

That last detection charm would've been extremely useful during the horcrux hunt to give an impartial assessment of exposure. She'd found it in Fourth Year this time around when she'd had leisure to read rather than frantically search the library for ways to keep her best friend alive. This was the first time she'd had an unequivocal result.

Unfortunately the spell only showed the presence not the cause or result. There were charms for that but they were restricted to Aurors and medical personnel. Quite possibly because the Ministry wanted to discourage idle forays into the Dark by the cautious. The stupid or the ambitious would always jump in but sensible intellectuals who wanted to dip a toe into the forbidden would want means to monitor their exposure. By limiting access to 'first aid' the curious would be reluctant to risk contaminating themselves.

That was the same sort of thinking that assumed not teaching about contraceptives would keep people from having sex. Hermione would much rather be armed with a condom and a solid understanding of Emunda Malus Vitio spells than to go into either life experience unprepared. That chain of thought brought her to Snape's advice about the purity of her body.

Would it count if she did it herself? She wasn't innocent of spirit or of mind, though she blushed a bit at the prospect of asking someone to lend her a hand. Or any other body part. And she definitely didn't want to attempt her insurance while under the influence of the solstice sacrament. Seducing Nott while Beatrix and Eustace were guests in his house wouldn't be impossible. Magical chaperonage was more about unauthorised bonding than free range copulation but still... awkward.
Siglinde Rosier would seclude herself in Tristan Nott's private apartments while the Radnotts were visiting. They would not, as guests of the old school, snoop or pry. Whether they suspected Theo was hosting Death Eaters, who could say? Their sympathies were not with the Ministry and they were traditionalists but Hermione didn't think they wished to be involved in bloody politics. They were a nice old couple who had taken an interest in two young persons in need of counsel.

Hermione stood to pace some more and compose lies. She shouldn't have told Theo who the sacrifice was. Cathal didn't know Podmore, only seen him in passing in the Daily Prophet. Would he ask outright? Maybe. She needn't furnish an explanation unless he did. Over-justification made you look guilty. Having something in reserve would be handy though. She was pants at hasty improvisation.

Someone knocked on her door at 3:12am. Hermione drew her wand before trying the knob again. Still locked. An Alohomora did nothing. She hadn't expected it to. Siglinde wasn't going to protect her heir with a charm a child could undo.

“Cathal?” Theo's voice came faintly through the wood.

“Yes.” She could've said something witty but frankly she was feeling a bit lacking in that department.

“Stand back.” He cautioned before there was some muttering. The door slammed backwards and would've collected her if she hadn't followed his suggestion. Esne stood by his Master, looking drained. Theo dismissed him to rest. House elves could open any lock within their demesne however overcoming wizarding magic took a toll. “Are you alright?”

“I should ask you the same question.” Hermione looked him over. He seemed fine if perhaps a bit worn at the edges.

“Not a party I'd care to repeat.” Theo stepped quickly into the room, shutting the door behind him. Madam Rosier had collapsed into exhaustion after warding half the house. She couldn't keep him out but anyone with hostile intent would have painted the walls red. His house elves had told him what she'd done, before integrating her protections into the domestic schema. They weren't feeling hospitable either.

“Sorry about leaving you there.” The apology seemed feeble.

“I've been to gatherings before. Father took me to a few. It was expected.” Theo shrugged, not sharing his revelation of how different the meeting had been without his dad's presence. Madam Lestrange hadn't looked at him like he was carrion under Tristan Nott's dour eye. With his father in gaol, he could hear the hounds baying.

“The opposite of fun, though.” If she hadn't been so shaken, so relieved she hadn't gone shrieking to her death, she would've reined in her tongue. Now it was all she could do not to babble. “I wasn't sorry to be dragged away, not if Bellatrix is keen on me marrying her nephew. Their crazy is definitely heritable.”

“Your grandmother...” He didn't catch his tongue in time. Her cyan eyes sharpened on him. He bowed his head fractionally. “I mean no disrespect.”

“I'm aware my grandmother isn't mentally robust.” Hermione picked her words carefully, suddenly brought back to the realisation she wasn't safe here either. She'd temporarily forgotten in her haste to get away from Voldemort that Theo wasn't her ally. Inhaling slowly, she sought for tact. There ought to be a potion for it, she was always running out. “Is there something else you'd like to say?”
There wasn't. Nott excused himself, leaving her in the unlocked room. Hermione swore once she was alone, or probably alone given house elves were ever-present. What they thought of Cathal's potty mouth she hoped not to find out.

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The rest of the holiday was sedentary. The Radnotts arrived for brunch and tried their best to jolly the teenagers into some festivities. They exchanged gifts for Yule and played a traditional game of catching dancing puddings. Theo got the one with the hidden sixpence. The weather was stormy and miserable, resistant to Warming Charms. Hermione went out once, came back saturated even with an Impervius Charm and not entirely convinced that she shouldn't have worn a wetsuit.

She stood dripping on the threshold trying to juggle her shopping, dry herself with her wand, and shut the door discreetly. The wind took the heavy oak out of her hand and slammed it. Nissy, one of the Rosier elves and Siglinde's personal attendant, appeared instantly at the noise. Beatrix stuck her head around the parlour door. Theo came quickly wand out down the stairs from the library.

“Just the door.” Hermione said, pinking already at the inevitability of the required explanation for her excursion. She’d slipped away after breakfast with the vague excuse of gathering holly in the spinney. No one had been enthusiastic enough about the errand to offer to go with her so she’d simply kept walking out of the copse of trees across a fallow field to a road lined with hedges. During the summer she'd seen the lights of the distant village of Grasmere when stargazing.

The charm of the Lake District was rather diminished in the sodding rain but she had found the pharmacy for some essentials and diverted to the Gingerbread Shop for indulgences. She'd cut some holly on the way back. The bundled branches lay at her feet where she had dropped them to free a hand.

“You look all of a muddle, dear. Let me help.” Beatrix padded into the hall in crimson house slippers, which she wore for the season and the stone floors. “Tergeo.” She siphoned the water off the girl so she could hang up her coat. Privately the older witch thought the ratty tweed should go out with the rubbish but she minded her tongue. Too many Misses would pettishly demand new things rather than make do with mending charms. “Give your boots to the elves or they'll smell like a swamp when they're aired.”

“I need to look up the fabric interactions with repellent charms.” Hermione unzipped her footwear, feeling boggy in her socks. The boots were a found pair from the Room of Hidden Things she’d put aside until she'd grown into them. She'd thought they were leather but evidenced by their disdain of the Impervius Charm they must be synthetic. Plastics did not take magic well.

“Miss should wear proper Rosier clothes.” Nissy snatched Master Evan's little girl's horrible coat as soon as Miss shrugged off the nasty thing. If young Mister Nott was not seeing, she would take all Miss's wearings. “Socks!”

Hermione complied with the command. She gave Theo the holly, which they needed for a Potions exercise, but determinedly kept the shopping bags. He raised an eyebrow at her insistence on going burdened to her room.

“Secret women's business.” She said tersely. Theo took the hint, himself, and the holly off to the laboratory. Beatrix waited until he was out of hearing before speaking.

“There are some charms for the red moon. I know it's not done now at Hogwarts to teach shriving and purification magics but I could show you.” Madam Radnott had never enjoyed that time of the month. She had been grateful to become a crone, to be done with all that mess and discomfort and
disappointment. “You needn’t resort to Muggle things.”

“Madam Pomfrey has a class for 'private matters for girls'. “ Hermione couldn't help rolling her eyes. Her parents... Granger's parents had handled her health education much better. Her mother had shown her different products and how they worked well before they were necessary. Her father had answered questions without any squeamishness. There had been informative diagrams. “But I'd be happy to learn the charms, thank you.”

Beatrix shooed her upstairs to change before they settled down to an interesting excursion into the menstrual rituals of yesteryear. The popular current products were all pads with some version of a vanishing charm. Some attached to belts while the newest mimicked Muggle products by sticking onto underwear. There were permanent ones too, built into knickers, though they tended to be expensive.

The 'sitting in blood' aspect revolted the genteel Beatrix, and Vanishing Charms didn't always send the substance into non-being. With tailored spells, unscrupulous people could collect what was vanished. In this instance for blood magic or dark potions. Far better to personally cast a charm that rested inside and could manage even the heaviest flow.

Hermione repeated the intricate wand movements, likely the reason most witches had switched to the easier products, until she was certain then cast the spell. There was a slight feeling of pressure. It wasn't uncomfortable but enough was going on down there that another sensation wasn't appreciated. Still, she wished she'd known this charm during the Year in the Tent. She would've felt cleaner at least.

There were all sorts of personal grooming spells that were no longer taught. Most were commonplace but there was a large contingent for ritual purification to render oneself inert to avoid contaminating magical workings. Hermione got out her journal to make notes as Beatrix cast her mind back to all the cleansing spells she'd learned. The class had been combined with a domestic charms course after she had graduated then later the subject had been dropped entirely as something best taught at home.

Which neatly cut Muggle-borns out of learning any of it.

After the lesson, Hermione went upstairs. She removed the charm and used a tampon instead. Her decision had little to do with hygiene or comfort. She'd bought the Muggle sanitary items because she needed blood to experiment upon and this was the most surreptitiously plausible means of gathering it. There were ways to buffer oneself against blood magic, even familial blood magic, but all the methods she'd found required something of one's own self.

She could cut and heal herself to gather the blood she needed. Hermione had considered the quick way then put it aside. Defacing Cathal's body even if she could heal the wounds afterwards didn't seem right. Plus depending on the wards on Nott Manor, she might either deliberately bind herself to them or set off an alarm. Magic was intention. Allowing Mother Nature to give her the resource she needed was passive enough not to invoke any binding.

Still a bit ick, though.

It took the full course of her period for Hermione to collect enough blood and tissue to attempt one of the protection charms. The spell was archaic; she'd translated it from medieval Latin and guessed it had originally been in Old Irish as some of the Ogham script had remained sketched in the margins. The spell was supposed to make a charm that would deflect or absorb a blood magic compulsion. The text was a bit vague on exactly how it did what it did, which was a chronic lapse in old magical theory.
She ended up with a fingernail sized red bead that looked more like carnelian than ruby. Something marbled and opaque, anyway. Not particularly impressive and she wouldn't know if it had worked until Siglinde Rosier tried to force her to do something. The peace of mind was valuable though. Hermione didn't want to sit on her arse like a fairytale princess waiting to be saved. She might not be able to resist but she could try to protect herself.

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New Year's Eve was a half bottle of champagne split between the four of them and for Cathal a Muffliato toast later with her grandmother. They were left alone until the afternoon of the first when an influx of Death Eaters began arriving by Floo from Malfoy Manor. Only the ones without warrants, Hermione noticed. Yaxley came for the library but the others, mostly unmarried men in their twenties, were evidently to be garrisoned at Nott Manor.

From Theo's carefully bland face, Hermione guessed he had been told not asked. He made himself act the host, assigning rooms to his guests and informing them of the amenities of the house. He didn't say outright he expected them to conform to the traditional rules of hospitality but that was the impression he worked hard to give. His ancestral home was not a hotel or barracks.

They were heading back to Hogwarts on the fifth. Hermione reminded herself of that when a second man swaggered past her with a wicked grin. No one had raised a hand or wand against her. The house was full of arrogant sons of bitches who wanted to impress the high status pure-blood girl. It was uncomfortable not unendurable. What she was finding difficult to outlast was her own anger.

These wizards were second or in some cases third generation Death Eaters. Dyed in the wool. She couldn't see them without picturing them in SS uniform. She couldn't see them as people without wanting to grab them by their hair and smash their faces into the walls. Maybe some had no choice. Maybe some had picked the lesser of two evils. But Voldemort was a pretty fucking big evil so whatever was worse had to be Abaddon.

Hermione shut herself in the library. Yaxley was probably crueller that the younger recruits however he didn't smile or try to chat her up. He read and made notes. Theo joined her at the table by the window, to read and make notes. She read and made notes. They were so damned scholarly. It didn't make the days go any faster.

The Radnotts saw them to the Platform then headed back to their own home with a sense of relief. No less eased, Hermione found an empty carriage and shared a heartfelt sigh with Nott. He levitated their trunks onto the luggage rack with more force than necessary. She slammed the door shut. They couldn't allow themselves to air more of their suppressed feelings.

They didn't talk much during the journey north. Hermione did her Prefect duty. She'd made a rough count of the students on the way down. Her tally now was about a dozen short. They might have returned earlier. However, something she knew because she hadn't sent her parents to Australia blindly was that the school year there started in late January. The Ministry closed over the holiday season, giving a Ministry employee with a yen to get out of the country quietly more than a week before they were noticed missing.

Neither Bulstrode was on the train. Hermione wasn't sure whether she was relieved about that. She hadn't particularly noticed Millicent during Sixth Year. That could've been due to her absence or to teenage romance induced obliviousness. Had the timeline changed? Would Baldwin Bulstrode listen to his under-age daughter's advice?

In the moment, she hadn't considered the implications of her suggestion on temporal integrity. She'd run her mouth thinking that getting Millicent out of Slytherin before the Carrows took over could
only be a kindness. Tracey too, if she could manage it. She didn't know as much about Davis's background or family situation other than the impression they weren't wealthy. There were other half-bloods in her House. How many had come back next year?

Hermione was still mentally planning when they arrived at Hogsmeade. She'd been preparing for years but there was still so much to do. She had to get into the Chamber of Secrets and get enough food into the school to support the students who hid in the Room of Requirement. Setting up another hiding place for the Slytherins would probably be a good idea too.

The Aurors searched their baggage again, with varying degrees of impartiality. An impressive amount of Weasley products were confiscated as well as several books restricted by the Ministry. Nothing overtly Dark though if someone was bringing something dangerous into the school it was unlikely they'd pack it in with their jumpers. Hermione had her contraband in her marsupium.

Tracey was there in the dorm gritting her teeth at Parkinson's smugness over Bulstrode's absence. Greengrass had less to say. None of their parents had been at the Malfoys' solstice rite and Hermione wondered if Daphne was aware her family hadn't been included. Did she have enough social nouse to be worried?

"Shouldn't you be drooling over Malfoy, Parkinson?" Hermione asked snidely once her patience started to fray with the witch's bon mots. She was actually quite witty in a poisonous way. Hopefully she'd never go into journalism or there would be a second incarnation of Rita Skeeter.

"He has detention with Babbling." Pansy groused. Draco was up to something he refused to tell her about. At the beginning of the year he'd hinted significantly but since then he'd been increasingly distracted and busy. She didn't appreciate being ignored. Even flirting with Blaise in front of her quasi-boyfriend hadn't got her the attention she wanted. “I told him to drop that dull class. Who casts in runes any more?"

Artisans. Warders. Potion Masters. Anyone wanting to bind magic to perishable goods. Hermione could have rattled off half a dozen applications that utilised runes not counting the research and linguistic aspects. She missed Professor Babbling’s class. It was one she could maintain through self-study so Cathal hadn't taken it. Therefore she did not answer Parkinson's rhetorical question.

As the term progressed, Malfoy had more and more detentions for non-submission of work. Most Professors would allow a late scroll or two or rely on a Troll mark to get the errant student back on track. Granger was vocal about his non-attendance at Prefect meetings, quizzing Rosier on her Housemate's whereabouts. Hermione remembered Parkinson's sneers when she'd first asked the same questions. Arguing with herself gave her such a headache she volunteered to take Malfoy's patrols just to avoid the dispute.

Word got back to the Deputy Headmistress that Malfoy was shirking his duties. Hermione wasn't sure who'd tattled. It was possible McGonagall simply noticed a lack of pasty git in the halls of an evening. She went to Snape and Snape called the Slytherin Prefects in for a meeting. He spoke mostly to the wall, remarking on House unity and pride. Message delivered, he left them to sort it out amongst themselves.

The upshot of that was the Fifth and Seventh Years separately and alone broaching the issue with Cathal. Hestia Carrow, the more socially adept of the twins, was not intimidated by Malfoy's Death Eater connections. She was forthright about the reason why she wanted to be unobliging; she thought Draco was putting it on. Yaxley had been told to keep his distance from the blond wizard but didn't know why. Vaisey had Quidditch commitments as well as his own Prefect duties. He didn't have the time. Ichijoh alluded to but did not spell out her misgivings.
Manami's family had already been expelled from one country. She was leery of extremists and did not wish to be associated with anyone fanatic enough to have been recruited young. On seeing something in Cathal's expression, she amended to statement to 'or unfortunate enough to have attracted the attention of fanatics'. That'd covered her own experience so nicely Hermione couldn't bring herself to dissemble.

It took her four days to corner Malfoy somewhere away from his thuggish minions. As someone accustomed to sneaking out of the Slytherin Dungeons, she had a good selection of alert charms to let her know if someone was crossing the threshold. She didn't want to talk in the Common Room as it was too prone to eavesdropping, and Crabbe and Goyle stuck close to Malfoy almost everywhere he went.

He snuck out on the night of a snowstorm cold enough to tax Warming Charms and keep all sensible folk tucked up in bed. Hermione swore as her spell roused her. She debated rolling over, leaving him to his idiocy but she couldn't remember any official disciplinary action against Malfoy and if she didn't do something that's where he was heading.

Throwing on her robes over her pyjamas, she cast a muffling charm and padded out after the blond toser. Her map showed her he wasn't heading to the Prefects' Bathroom, she wasn't going to corner him starkers, or to Moaning Myrtle's so she pursued. Hermione thought for a moment he was heading to the Room of Requirement but he diverted on the fifth floor and went instead to the Astronomy Tower.

To the Astronomy Tower in a damn blizzard. Hermione was seriously tempted to leave him to court hypothermia alone. Something prodded her onwards. He wasn't going up there to look at the stars. He wasn't doing all those stairs for his health. It had been a chance, hadn't it, that he had faced Dumbledore there in June. With so many particles in the air, any safety spells would be blurred, over-stretched enough they might not trigger. A clever boy like Malfoy would know that.
He was still there when she arrived. Hermione hadn't expected to feel relieved. She didn't want him dead, most days, but he was hardly a bosom friend. Even to Cathal he was a prat. However in some obscure way he was the inverse of Harry and in that same helplessness to fate she could sympathise. Malfoy might have jumped into the Dark Mark, and flaunted it, but he'd never frightened her. She knew evil when she dined with it. Malfoy was still at the kiddie table.

“Whatever you're looking for, you won't find it up here.” Hermione tucked her Map away. He didn't turn around.

“Piss off, Rosier.” Malfoy told the storm.

“Shan't.” She replied crisply, striding over to the balcony until he was within reach. He had a foot propped up on the railing. Hopefully a resting stance for balance against the wind. How did you ask someone if they wanted to kill themselves? Do you just blurt it out bluntly hoping to shock them into reconsidering? If she lived through this herself, she'd make sure to take a counselling course, Muggle if it wasn't offered at St Mungo's. Something that would help her know what to say.

“Did Pansy send you?” He glanced at her. His eyes raked her faded robe and ratty slippers. Rosier wore her poverty like defiance. She made no excuses, justifying herself to no one. What must it be like to have that sort of self-confidence?

“I try never to oblige Parkinson.” Hermione couldn't help but see his pallor, the smudges under his eyes. He wasn't wearing a glamour to hide the effects of stress and sleep deprivation. He looked awful, shaky and wrung out.

“I won't tell you.” Draco gritted the words between his teeth. He had been tasked by the Dark Lord himself. For the first time in his life, he wasn't an adjunct to his father. He was the Chosen One.

“Muffliato.” She doubted anyone could hear them over the weather. That went both ways though. Harry had hidden below the stairs unobserved to see the whole of Dumbledore's swansong. “You've been ordered to fix the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Hidden Things.”

He paled into something blind that lived in lightless caves; a bloodless colourlessness. He could've been an Inferius. When he made a convulsive movement towards her she jabbed her wand into his chest. That stopped him. Malfoy knew in shuddering detail how much pain a wand could give in the hands of a witch. Auntie Bella was an excellent teacher.

“No, no, don't try anything.” Hermione wanted him to listen. She'd definitely got his attention. “I'm not going to muscle in on your mission. That glorious quest is wholly yours.” His expression changed. It wasn't relief. “But I'll do your homework.”

“You?” Draco scoffed before he could stop himself. The wand prodded. “You haven't taken Runes or Arithmancy. You can't pull an essay from the ether.” He wanted to let her help him. He needed someone to help him. The horrible, sickening realisation that he didn't have enough time gnawed at him. He could fix the Cabinet, he was almost sure he could, but he had to concentrate on it. Everything else was noise and waste.

“The significance of the interactions between the higher factors of seven and the unreal numbers derived from Pi is most visible when calculating in base twelve.” She said, quoting from this year's Arithmancy reader. “I can repeat that in Old Norse, if you'd like.”
“Cow.” The ghost of a smirk twitched his mouth. “How long have you been studying on the sly?”

“Since First Year.” Hermione smiled. Who knew why he found her prevarication amusing but she’d use that little spark to coax him onwards. “I’m interested in everything. I just don’t want to be Granger with her arm always in the air.” Truer words she’d never said. “Let me help.”

“I haven’t done any of the winter assignments. Haven’t even started.” Draco confessed to test her mettle. She muttered an obscenity a nicely reared pure-blood girl shouldn't know. “I spent the hols frantically catching up on what was overdue. I haven’t even looked at what's due now.” Exhaustion dragged at his shoulders. “I can’t think of anything but the Cabinet.” The wind howled around them but could not steal his words however faint. “He'll kill my mum if I haven't made progress by the Easter break.”

She hugged him. It was stupid and probably violated half a dozen daft little etiquette rules. She did it anyway. He needed some physical contact before he collapsed in on himself. His surprise lasted less than a second before he sagged against her, burying his face in the collar of her robe as he shook as though under the Cruciatius.

Hermione held him, thinking randomly that it was handy Cathal was so tall. Malfoy didn't have to stoop to sob into her shoulder. Not that he would've lowered himself to cry on Granger. Nor would Granger, still innocent of a war, be much inclined to offer sympathy. Knowing how this durance vile would end made quite a difference.

“Why did you come up here?” Hermione asked quietly because saying ‘there, there’ or ‘it'll be okay' seemed monumentally feeble.

“To remind myself there's a way out.” Draco muttered, his lips moving against her neck. She smelled of herbal soap and girl with a hint of cedar that lingered on all laundry done at Hogwarts. Her body, her curves he noticed were pressed against him, was warm. He should've reacted but all he could feel was an emasculated sort of gratitude that someone cared enough to look for him.

Hermione didn't have anything to say in reply. What could she say that wouldn't sound trite? She couldn't tell him that he wouldn't run, that no matter how pants-wetingly terrifying the war got, he didn't flee the country. That for love of him his mother defied the Dark Lord. That whatever fear had him in its grip, he wasn't craven. He didn't turn them in. She couldn't tell him. He'd have to learn what line he wouldn't cross for himself.

“It's perishing cold up here.” Hermione complained instead, still holding him. “Next time you want to contemplate the void, do it in a nice warm potions classroom.”

“You should've dressed for the occasion.” He said with a sniff they both chose to hear as criticism not soppy emotion.

“I am dressed for all I planned to do tonight.” She huffed. Malfoy slowly disengaged, reluctant to leave the solace she offered. He mopped his face with a handkerchief because of course he had one. It was monogrammed. Because, again, of course.

It was late or early enough for them to get something to eat in the kitchens. Hermione insisted they go there and was similarly adamant that Malfoy do more than pick at his food. She got two bowls of soup into him along with half a loaf of bread, and a promise not to skip meals. His appetite might be shot but his magic needed fuel.

“Hufflepuff.” He grumbled, mopping up the dregs with a crust.
“You'd best hope I'm a Ravenclaw.” She pulled her journal out of a robe pocket and a fountain pen from another. Quill and ink were mandated for class but pens won hands down for convenience. “Which classes are you taking?” Hermione knew though she supposed Cathal wouldn't give a damn. “And in which one are you lagging most?”

“Charms, Defence, Transfiguration, Potions, Runes, Arithmancy, and Astronomy.” Draco supplied then chewed glumly. “Hard to say. The classes all seem so pointless.”

“What subjects do you need?” The question had rather a lot of emphasis on the last word.

“Merlin knows. Every time I think I've made progress there's some fiddly thing I have to correct.” He dropped his head into his hands, slumping into his chair. “Charms and Transfiguration. I have to keep Potions. And Defence. Arithmancy is important too.” The complex mathematics were his best route for finding the spells necessary to mend the damage to the Cabinet. It was not an object at which to randomly sling charms.

“Drop Runes and Astronomy.” Hermione suggested, feeling a sense of deja vu. She'd had a similar conversation with Marcus Flint, who she hoped remained very busy across the pond. “Anything you need from Ancient Runes you can find in the Library on your own. It'll save time. And with your name, you can't tell me you don't already have a handle on Astronomy.”

“I like stargazing.” Draco muttered at the table. He'd not thought much about his course load going into Sixth Year. He'd assumed repairing the Vanishing Cabinet would be a few weeks work then he could refine an ambush. Something stealthy and efficient. Now the school year was half over and he had little to show. The Dark Lord had been unimpressed with his progress.

“You're named after a constellation. I'm sure you've looked at yourself quite enough.” Her tartness made him laugh.

“You're one to talk. Cathal is a boy's name.” He smirked. The British branch of the Rosier family favoured Celtic names out of centuries old tradition beginning when Everard Rosier had found sanctuary in Ireland after fleeing Normandy under Papal interdict. The Rosier arrival in the British Isles pre-dated the Malfoy family's establishment by eight years, giving the former ever so slight precedence. That had rankled the Malfoys for the better part of a millennium.

“It means 'battle rule'. My middle name Machtilde means 'battle strength.’” Hermione didn't know why Evan and Derica had chosen those names but she could guess. “I rather think my parents had expectations of me.”

“Very probably.” Draco agreed, weighed down by parental expectations of his own.

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That weekend, she discovered Malfoy had not been exaggerating when he said he had done nothing towards his assignments due this term. Even discounting the work for Astronomy and Ancient Runes, there was a perilous mountain. He brought everything he had pending to the study room she specified, dumped it on her table, then collapsed into a padded chair.

Courtesy of Harry and Ron and their perpetual last minute homework, Hermione was prepared. She had a calendar to mark off the sequence of due dates, one of Malfoy's quills charmed to take dictation then scribe in his own handwriting, the text books for all the subjects, and thermos full of hot chocolate because one did not cheat by strength of will alone.

She couldn't help him with any of the wandwork or practical lessons, hence his presence, but she
could do the observations and write up the notes. Hermione started with the essay on the Water-Making Spell due on Monday. Granger's work had concentrated around the uses of Aguamenti to better society. Rosier had written the required three feet on shaping and control of the created liquid. In toto, Malfoy had written 'water is necessary'.

“How much do you actually know about water magic?” Hermione asked after beginning with the classic introduction framing the question, defining the spell, and its origin. That padded out six inches as well as testing the quill. The script wasn't elegant but it looked passably like Malfoy had scrawled it in a hurry. It'd do. She was aiming for par not Pulitzer.

“Salazar Slytherin was a water mage. There's an ancient tradition in the fens of aquamancy. The liquid itself comes from vapour in the air so casting unbound water charms in arid conditions can blight the locale.” Draco rummaged through his head for some snippets. As a boy, he'd read stories about the Founder flooding Muggle settlements with giant waves. He'd drawn a few pictures of tiny stick people running from a great magus with blond Malfoy hair.

“Right. Climactic contingent effects it is.” Hermione added a few quotes from the text then scribbled down some references. She flicked the parchment at the supine boy. “Check those books out of the Library. Be seen checking them out. Oh, and put your name down for 'Of Flocks, Murmurings, and Bellowings' by Ernest Pluckett. You'll need it for Transfiguration.”

“Name down?” Draco asked, distractedly perusing Rosier's blockish letters obviously never softened by a governess. If he'd presented a hand like that, his mother would've had him copy out an entire manual of calligraphy.

“There's only one copy. The Ravenclaws are serially checking it out. Madam Pince has a priority list for the other Houses. You won't get a look in if your name isn't on it.” She'd grabbed the book in October and had done her essay on Avis well before the rush. Temporal precognition made life so much more efficient.

Malfoy dragged himself off. Hermione poured herself a cup of hot chocolate and sipped it meditatively. She had time in hand, enough to do his work to catch him up to the spring holidays. After Easter, she'd reassess. He wasn't going to sit his exams this year. With the death of the Headmaster, all exams were cancelled. The Ministry had made special arrangements for the OWLs and NEWTs but the other Years received interim marks. Hermione doubted the Carrows held the deferred assessments in September.

Which was not so far away.

She got back to work, knocking out the framework of the essay with spaces left for the insertion of relevant quotes. Leaving the DADA report because Snape would likely accept anything Malfoy handed in, Hermione turned her attention to Potions. Malfoy didn't even have the class hand-out. Had he been there? She'd been messing about with agave extract for the Everlasting Elixirs in the back of the room and hadn't noticed.

Duplicating the parchment, she filled in the easy bits about Libatius Borage. Granger had added a page about the accomplished potioneer including extracts translated from the Spanish. Rosier had dashed off a precis about the developer of the Elixir then filled the page with observations just in case Slughorn had noticed she hadn't in fact brewed the potion in class. She'd handed one in she'd made the week before.

If Malfoy hadn't brewed the Elixir or at least stuffed up the brewing of it, he'd have to make an attempt out of class. Unless he was a good enough liar to bluff his way through. She doubted he cared enough to try to cover himself. What sort of mistake could an inattentive brewer make?
Running through the process in her head, Hermione had the bespelled quill write down the standard results for the first three steps then had Malfoy let the Syrup of Hellebore boil, which meant when he added the Sal Ammoniac it would clump thus rendering the potion so much noxious gloop. He could follow the instructions all he liked after that and he'd still end with the same yellowish-purple lumpy slime.

Thinking of hellebore diverted her for a moment. She used her own quill to scrawl a reminder in her journal. The effective dosage of hellebore was very close to its toxicity, which had led to the creation of several charms to gauge its concentration. One of which had been included in the 1968 edition of Advanced Potion-Making though removed in later editions. The Half-Blood Prince had included a reference to two other spells for the same purpose. Harry hadn't paid any attention to the addenda in his cheating but Hermione had.

Her musings on how to not poison herself while experimenting were interrupted by the return of Malfoy. He set the library books on the table then collapsed into the stuffed chair. She flicked his Charms essay and Potions classwork to him, frowning as he nearly fumbled them. He was a Seeker, impartially a very good Seeker. He looked up, saw her about to speak and shook his head.

Hermione didn't ask when he'd last slept properly. She didn't fuss over him or even air her opinion that he'd be no use to anyone if he put himself in the Hospital Wing through idiot stubbornness. She left him to familiarise himself with his homework. When he nodded off she didn't rouse him until the bell for dinner.

The pattern of their meetings was erratic but frequent enough Parkinson got snippy about it. Nott asked with reasonable tact if he could assist. Hermione palmed off a Transfiguration essay onto him, which answered both spoken and unspoken questions. There was no budding dalliance between herself and Malfoy.

The Slytherins weren't the only ones interested in why the two Sixth Years met in the unregarded room tucked behind a disused pantry now filled with crockery. Hermione knew Harry was watching Draco so when on Prefect patrol Hannah too casually asked how she was managing with Malfoy, Rosier told Abbott to tell Granger to tell Potter to mind his own damn business.

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Valentine's Day happened. Hermione skipped that Hogsmeade weekend in favour of more of Malfoy's schoolwork during the day and skulking around with Moppet at night. The two of them scouted out possible cache or safe-room locations. There were rooms in the 'border zone' half-forgotten but not asleep, thus still physically attached to the manifested fabric of Hogwarts. Hermione learned more about slip-zones and phase transition theory from the Voice than she ever had from her Professors.

Nett result was four rooms that were stable, large, secure, and accessible enough to shelter people during the Carrows' regime. None of the rooms could expand in size like the Room of Requirement but they were outside the 'live' parts of the Castle over which the Headmaster or Headmistress had sway. With some ward legerdemain, Hermione set up defences that would respond to her and to Moppet once the house elf was no longer bound to Hogwarts.

She keyed the wards so anyone inside could leave freely, to ensure no one was trapped if something happened to her, but to enter she or a pass token keyed to Moppet needed to be present. They could have sneaked into the Room of Hidden Things to purloin furniture when Malfoy wasn't working there but Hermione thought it too risky. Instead she taught Moppet how to transfigure simple beds and chairs with her wand. House elf magic could mend but not create. Once she had shaped the furnishings, Moppet could tweak them to her liking. She had a lovely time decorating the rooms.
Apparition lessons were considerably less irksome than the fourteenth day of February. She wouldn't be able to get her license until the end of summer due to her August birthday. However Hermione wanted to take the lessons to make sure she hadn't lost her knack. Her first few jumps as Cathal were a bit wobbly from nerves but once she'd shown herself that in this at least nothing had changed, she was translocating happily. The instructor was sufficiently impressed he signed off on her competency that afternoon.

To celebrate retaining all her limbs, Hermione went to bed early. She slept like the dead and when she woke seedy at her alarm she had to concede that Cathal was not used to chain Apparition. Her body felt put together incorrectly from creaky hinges and over-stretched elastic bands. A hot shower did little to improve things. It seemed like each of her vertebrae were complaining individually.

That evening, still feeling poorly assembled, Hermione checked with the Voice. Had whatever Hogwarts done to put her in Cathal been affected by Apparating? The answer was 'possibly perhaps'. When she pressed for details the Castle gave her doublespeak. What had been done could not be undone by Apparition so while the sensations were likely physiological she could put them aside as a product of her current corpus not being as accustomed to translocation as her previous corpus.

Grumbling, Hermione took herself off to the Prefects' Bathroom. She filled the tub with Epsom salts and multicoloured bubbles then stewed. Granger had Apparated too often for counting. She recalled being nervous about the lessons but they were so long ago she couldn't remember if she'd felt poorly afterwards. Maybe rushing through hadn't given her body enough time to get used to the strain. She sank into the steaming hot water up to her nose and grumbled some more.

Hermione had just about talked herself out of her sulk when the Bathroom door opened. Graham Montague lurched in like an old man. He pulled off his sweater and shirt as one, swearing as he did so, dumping the garments on the floor before he looked at the bath. Which was full of water and witch. He groaned.

"Please say you're almost done, Rosier." He begged as he turned abruptly, slipped on his shirt, fumbled for a towel rail, and ended up on his bum on the tiles. The obscenities he uttered undid his gentlemanly attempt to preserve her modesty.

"You alright?" Hermione slid to the edge of the bath to peek out through a wall of foam. She might have overdone it with the bubbles.

"Peachy." Graham got as far as his hands and knees before his arms failed him. He twisted enough when he collapsed that he didn't impact nose first. "Just leave me here to die of mortification." He groaned again as a spasm shot up his back. It hurt enough he forgot to censor his language. "I fucking hate the Weasley twins."

"Are you still having seizures from the Cabinet?" She levitated a robe to her, donning it hastily then securing it with a sticking charm. Montague didn't seem in a fit state to importune her had he been an importunate sort of fellow. She got out of the bath to help him into a sitting position. He winced when she touched him. "Sorry."

"Not your fault." He gritted his teeth. "I thought I was up for some flying. Madam Pomfrey said I could do some gentle laps." As much as he'd wanted to cut loose, he had heeded her cautions. A few turns around the towers, nothing too fast. "I reckon it was the cold." Graham took a slow, deep breath. "Merlin, everything hurts."

She helped him out of his clothes down to his boxers and into the bath. He squeezed his eyes shut against tears as the heat invaded his muscles. Hermione rolled a towel into a neck pillow, sticking it
to the edge of the bath so he could lean back. He subsided, still with his eyes closed. Rosier adjusted taps, filling the room with the scent of marjoram and peppermint as she added those oils to the water.

“I did lock the door.” Hermione remarked. “You should've knocked.”

“Wasn't locked when I tried it. I apologise unreservedly.” Graham wouldn't have minded sharing a bath with the curvy Miss Rosier, however he stepped on that thought bloody quickly. It wasn't appropriate. “Madam Pomfrey can open all the doors in the Castle. Must've undone your charm on the door when she sent me here.”

She hadn't realised the matron could do that. A sensible precaution in medical emergencies. Either the access was keyed to her wand or to her badge of office, as Hogwarts: A History made no mention of an investiture ceremony. Hermione wondered how much that passkey ability superseded. She might be able to get into the Chamber of Secrets with a little larceny.

“Are you alright to be left?” She asked. He nodded with a muffled grunt. Retreating into one of the lavatories, Hermione rinsed and dried herself then got dressed. She hung up Montague's clothes for him, putting his wand on the little shelf by the bath designed for that purpose. “When you're done, find me in the Common Room and I'll cast some massage charms on you. They're better done by someone else.”

“My mum did them for me over the summer. Haven't asked any of the blokes in the dorm to help. Not really the done thing.” Graham didn't know any of the Sixth Years well enough to ask and didn't trust any of the Seventh Years to cast properly. Vaisey wasn't a duffer like the others. He simply had no knack for healing spells. He'd once switched his toes accidentally while trying to mend an ingrown nail.

Armed with a cast iron excuse, Hermione went to the Hospital Wing. Hunting for horcruxes had provided her an extensive repertoire of detection spells. She cast three of the most likely out of sight before approaching Madam Pomfrey. The matron was busy with a patient so Hermione had a good few minutes to scan her.

The passkey was the old fashioned watch brooch the nurse wore on her pinafore. There was an anti-theft hex on it as well as a locator charm, though judging from the sharp border on that spell Hermione thought Pomfrey had put that charm on her badge herself. Blinking, she dismissed the detectors before the older witch turned around. Her question about appropriate charms for muscle strain confirmed she could help Montague without undue harm.

She went to the dungeons and, ensconced in her bed with the curtains drawn, called for Moppet. They had a short conversation under Muffliato then arranged to meet at one o'clock in the morning. Hermione took a book on advanced ward theory into the Common Room to bone up on the tricky bits while waiting for Montague.

He came in just before curfew, moving a little more freely but still grateful for her offer of help. They went together to the Sixth Year boys' dorm. Graham changed into a pair of sleeping shorts in the bathroom while she pushed the covers back on his bed. Once he was lying on his stomach, Hermione started with a Warming Charm then the mildest of the osteopathy spells she knew.

“Effleurage.” She moved her wand in a circular motion. Montague sighed, pressing his forehead into his pillow. When he had relaxed, she increased the pressure differential of the spell for a firmer kneading sensation. Her patient moaned when she swept her wand over his shoulders. “Too much?”

“No, ow, no, it's fine.” Graham muttered. “Just tight along the backbone.”
Hermione cast an Episkey with her second wand while maintaining the first charm. Montague flexed then muffled a curse in his pillow as his ribs crunched back into their proper setting. All his mother's nagging about stance and correct form on a broom came back to him. He'd been slouching over the stick.

“Better?” There was some redness there, localised inflammation. Nothing too bad but soft tissue injuries ached for days even after healing.

“Much, thanks.” He let his breath out. “Need to work on my core strength. My posture's rubbish.”

She tried a 'grabbier' massage charm that was supposed to encourage lymph drainage and remove fatigue by-products. Hermione didn't tell Montague the spell had been developed by a Muggle-born to help in physiotherapy. St Mungo's didn't use the charm but the wizard had self-published a handbook. Her cousin Bastian Max had recommended it to her in an idle conversation about Quidditch injuries as Krum swore by the book.

Montague was grunting and intermittently swearing when Nott strode into the dorm. He assessed the witch, fully dressed, and the wizard, barely dressed, and Parkinson's sly hint he should check his room. Rosier gave him a nod as he crossed to his own bed. Rigid self-control had kept him from bursting in like a Gryffindor.

“A silencing charm, perhaps.” Theo suggested with deliberate casualness, tamping down the juvenile pathetic jealousy bubbling inside him. He wasn't a child to have a temper tantrum when someone played with his favourite toy. Thank Morgana, Rosier wasn't a Legilimens or she would never speak to him again. “From the hall it sounds like you're torturing someone.”

“Is.” Montague panted as the witch released the charm. He flopped onto his back then lay still, breathing deeply. “Much obliged.”

“No trouble.” Hermione flicked the blankets over him and cast yet another Warming Charm. “Try jogging instead of flying, at least until it's warmer.” His answer was a heartfelt groan. She drew his curtains to keep out the draughts. “If he's stiff in the morning, please help him to the shower.”

“Of course.” Theo said, with a face that could have played poker with the Devil.
The planning of it was easy. Most of the doing was easy too. Once she had identified the brooch as the passkey, it was simple for Moppet to borrow it without asking. They met in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom after Cathal had confirmed on her Map that the ghost was elsewhere. Moppet used elf magic to shield the area from the undead, an abjuration that would last until sunrise. So they had the means and the opportunity.

“Fuck, I do not want to do this.” Hermione let the words out with a gust of breath. She stood at the sink marked with the snake. Her hesitation now was a melange of memory and the lingering touch of the repelling wards, and probably a fair dollop of common sense.

“Moppet could go down once Miss opens the drain.” Moppet volunteered with as much enthusiasm as her friend.

“Slytherin warded the Chamber against house elves. No, I'll do this and you stay up here in case of emergencies.” She gave herself a mental slap. “I just need to check nothing ominous is happening and maybe have a poke about.”

“And not get et.” Moppet added. “Or 'sploded.”

Hermione laughed in spite of her tension. She touched Madam Pomfrey's brooch to the tap. There was no pause for drama's sake. The sink swung back immediately. She pinned the passkey on securely, adding a sticking charm for good measure as losing it might leave her stuck in the Chamber. Down the sluice she went.

The great snake door proved more resistant. It unlocked but rolled barely a handspan. She changed into her Animagus form to squirm through the gap. Damn quickly in case the door rolled back and crushed her. To her stoat nose the watery chamber beyond smelled overpowingly of reptile. Her fur stood on end. Too bad she wasn't a mongoose. That would've been nicely symbolic, Hermione thought as she changed back to human.

The room didn't smell noticeably better. She got undertones of dank and mould as well as vintage basilisk. She cast a spell she'd translated from Cornish, used by miners to see in the pitch black. Using Lumos seemed too like painting a target on herself. Hermione tapped her gold wire, checking the connection.

“I'm in.” She murmured.

“Moppet hears Miss.” Came the reply. “Moppet thinks Miss shouldn't hang about.”

Hermione took her friend's advice. She made a circuit of the serpentine room with the overcompensating statue and the basilisk corpse. Magic kept the carcass intact, which was a relief as she did not want to encounter anything that could eat giant poisonous snake. Scribing a locus for her Map, she stepped into the centre of the chalk sigil to scan for any concentrations of energy.

There were two doors in the back, each recessed into the circular tunnels either side of the carved wall. Nothing else glowed or even rippled. It was possible that someone did something down here during the battle but when Granger and Ron had come down here for a fang, there'd been nothing going on. Had the death of the cup horcrux destabilised Slytherin's wards?

It wasn't impossible that the release of that much Dark magic could tip the balance of a fragile lattice. But the Founder's concealment matrix had lasted centuries. Hogwarts had a lot of downstairs. There
were dozens of places a coven could conduct ritual magic without anyone stumbling across them.
The Chamber of Secrets had been an easy pick. Too easy for her luck.

She chose the door on the right to try first, climbing up into the broad pipe. There were bits of shed
scale and fragments of bone sharp enough Hermione was thankful she’d worn gloves. Knee and
elbow guards would’ve been handy. When she had money, she’d buy herself a set from a sports
store. Or mould some out of that potion that set like concrete.

The door didn't open when she touched it with the brooch.

She touched it again, gave it a push, kicked it, tried an unlocking charm then studied the damn thing.
Why didn't the passkey work? It should open everything that didn't respond to her bond with the
Castle. She could get into the other Houses' Common Rooms. There wasn't a ward that she could
sense. Was there?

She went stoat again and pressed her nose close to the stone. What did thousand year old magic
smell like? What did thousand year old anything smell like? Hermione sniffed, waiting for her hair to
stand on end or her whiskers twitch. Something to indicate she wasn't trying to open a decorative
groove in the wall.

There was something. She stretched up on her toes to scent the edge of the door. A whiff of
something. Hermione concentrated. Humans were nose-blind compared to other mammals. She was
trying to use olfactory nerves she didn't have ordinarily. The mental connections were new and
unfamiliar. Something like old meat.

A blood ward.

An old, possibly decaying blood ward. 'Live' magic like blood magic didn't hold well under stasis
effects. You could sustain an animal in magical sleep but keeping the magic of flesh or of growing
things dormant was counter to what the magic itself wanted to do. Hermione reverted to her human
body and grimaced at the dark stone.

Tom Riddle had used a blood ward to conceal the cave where he'd hidden Slytherin's amulet. She
didn't think this was his work. She hoped he'd been unaware of the doors. Basilisks were territorial.
Parselmouth or not, the giant snake probably wouldn't have liked a wizard crawling around her
nesting tunnels.

She hadn't come down here to sightsee. Hermione cut her hand with a slicing hex and pressed her
bleeding palm to the door. There was a dusty flash like vintage photography. That would be the
ward expiring. She healed her hand, careful to clean it thoroughly first because the microbes found
down here would probably put y. pestis to shame.

The door rocked back with a grinding clunk, shifting about a centimetre. Was it counterweighted?
The Founders would've had access to examples of Roman engineering. Hydraulics maybe? Slytherin
had come from fen country. He was a water mage as Malfoy had remarked. The pools down here
might not be entirely decorative.

“Aguamenti.” Hermione shot a jet of water at the door, the strongest she could hold steady. The
stone swelled as it absorbed the liquid. Gradually it sank under its augmented weight into the floor.
She edged forward cautiously. Nothing lethal happened. Stepping over a grate, she traversed a short
corridor into a room lined with shelves stacked with books and scrolls.

Hermione licked her lips.
It was theft. She had to admit that to herself as she packed up the contents of the study with wincing care. She knew how to handle old books, what charms to use, how to stabilise and protect them. She wasn't going to leave them down here. But neither was she going to hand them over to the Headmaster. Hermione didn't trust him to share the scholarship Salazar Slytherin had left behind. He'd already winnowed the Hogwarts Library of 'suspect' books. This trove she would keep until she could entrust it to Professor McGonagall.

So temporary theft.

Even with magic, it took her hours to clear the room. She kept in communication with Moppet, who hopped back and forth to the Hospital Wing to check Madam Pomfrey was still asleep. Hermione opened the second door with reluctance, knowing that if it was also filled with books she wouldn't have time to take them too.

The second room wasn't full of books. It was full of potion supplies, all meticulously labelled in Old English. Hermione stared wide-eyed at the ranked bottles and jars. She heard herself make a sound somewhere between a sigh of contentment and a moan of lust. Yep, she was going to take all this too.

Working frenetically, she transfigured more boxes from bones, turned scraps of snake skin into packing peanuts and cleared the shelves. Hurrying back to Moppet, she levitated the loot up to the house elf, who whisked it away to one of their caches. She shut all the doors, scrambled up after the last container, shoved the sink back into position, Scourgified herself, and punctiliously cleaned her magical residue off the brooch.

Moppet took the passkey back to the Hospital Wing. Hermione hastened to the dungeons at a nonchalant walk. As she moseyed, she cast a few more cleaning charms to make sure she didn't smell of eau de chambre de serpent. She wasn't sure what her next move should be. She could, assuming Madam Pomfrey hadn't noticed the absence of her brooch, purloin it again and do a more thorough investigation of the Chamber.

She'd check her Map to see what the locus had added, assuming a single reference point could integrate the hidden area. If it didn't, she would have to go down again to chart the snake tunnels. Or she could chart around them and flag areas where old magic made access difficult. All she'd sensed before the unravelling had been a tremor in the courtyard.

“Good morning, Miss Rosier.” The sardonic greeting jarred her out of her abstraction. Hermione turned to face Professor Snape's buttons. He was dressed for class; cuffs starched and shoes polished. She wondered if he thought of his clothes, his uniform, as armour. She couldn't recall seeing him in anything else not counting Neville's boggart. To keep her mind busy, she tried to imagine him in pyjamas. It was a struggle.

“Good morning, sir.” Hermione kept her stance open but suspected the veteran spy already knew she'd been up to something. After nearly two decades of teaching, he probably assumed all students were skulking troublemakers.

“I have noticed you have not yet put down your name for leaving over the upcoming holidays.” He remarked blandly. She blinked at him. The lists had gone up yesterday. “Do not bother. You will be required to assist me in remedial Defence Against the Dark Arts classes for the younger members of our House.”

“I was anticipating staying with Nott.” Hermione ventured. She didn't want to use a Muffliato, one of Snape's own spells, to enable a more discreet conversation. He'd demand to know how she had learned it, which would bring his attention to Harry's use of the old textbook. “I left behind
something there I value and I want to check on it.”

“I am sure it is fine.” The Professor said, a heavy pause on ‘it’. “I feel confident that anything you left behind can tend to itself while you remain here.”

“Is Theo going home?” She asked slowly, unsure whether the request she stay came from her grandmother or Voldemort.

“Yes.” Snape clipped the word, turning it into a command. Her chin jerked up. Her eyes got as far as his nose before she caught herself. She relaxed her clenched hands. First time around, Nott wasn’t Marked in his Sixth Year. She wasn’t sure if he had been initiated at all. The masks hadn't helped but frankly during the fighting all her attention had been on not dying. There’d been no time to identify her foes.

“May I have the lesson plans for the remedial classes to read up on them?” Hermione said, stuffing her agitation into the recesses of her psyche. Occlumency made her feel numb, a floating sort of otherness like going under anaesthetic. Snape's affirmative sounded like he was speaking underwater. He waited for her to enter the dormitory before he left.

Hermione relaxed once she was lying on her bed with the curtains drawn. She'd had that reaction before sporadically. She suspected it was from having her shields actively probed. Reactions to Legilimency attempts were very personal. Some subjects felt dizzy, others interpreted the contact as pain or itching. The disassociation she experienced wasn't anything concrete enough she could trust as definitive. Being Cathal was easier than it had been but if she dwelled on it, she still felt alien.

Snape had been testing her. Possibly. What had he been looking for? Had he found it? Hermione rolled onto her stomach and thumped her face into her pillow so she could swear without having to bother Silencing her bed. Sometimes magic was a pain in the arse. Marvellous, fantastic, astonishing, beautiful... and bloody awkward.

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She got a chance for a private moment with Nott after lunch. It probably wasn't Slytherin credo to bluntly tell someone something confidential but if Snape had been hinting that Nott was going to be Marked, Hermione wasn't going to hedge that information. They slipped away into a classroom, she cast Muffliato, and she told him baldly that she had been instructed not to go to Nott Manor over Easter.

“This could be done on Madam Malfoy's insistence.” Theo observed after considering the news through several filters. His father was still in Azkaban. While the Dark Lord was not best pleased with the Head of the House of Nott, they weren't held in the same disdain as the Malfoys. When he was Marked, his father would certainly have the honour of attending. “Snape is Draco’s godfather. He and your guardian could have arranged this between themselves.”

“I hadn't thought of that.” The stupid concord between her and Malfoy was so irrelevant it'd slipped her mind as a factor in her immurement. “The Professor was a friend of my father. I thought he and my grandmother might've conspired.”

“Your grandmother might want you away from my... house guests.” It took quite a bit of effort to put a polite polish on the people infesting his home. They weren't mannerless, which was damming with faint praise, but Theo couldn't shake the feeling he would be sleeping in a bear pit. “I have to go home. I am the Head. Staying away would be a pointed snub.”

“Do you think it's worth me defying the order?” Hermione would happily sneak off to Nott Manor if
this was a ploy cooked up by Narcissa Malfoy. If Snape was transmitting instructions from Voldemort, she was less enthused about rebellion. Nott's contemplative silence lengthened into prevarication. “What's bothering you about this?”

“I am abashed to admit I would rather you not stay here with Draco.” Theo weighed the frankness Cathal preferred against his own reluctance to leave himself vulnerable. She was vengeful and kind. He thought she would much rather be offended than have him stand on his dignity. He wished fondness didn't make him feel so flayed. “Or Montague.”

“Oh.” She bit her lip before she could laugh. Nott would not take that well. Teenage boys were ridiculously sensitive. Teenage girls too. She did not miss being sixteen and thin-skinned. “I have no romantic yearnings for either Malfoy or Montague. I like Graham but we have little in common, and he's not Sacred Twenty-Eight.” Hermione added that last bit of snobbery to bolster her disinterest. “I'm doing Malfoy's homework to keep him from a nervous breakdown. He has a task to complete.”

“So he wasn't just peacocking?” He'd known Draco since they were in nappies. The blond had been arrogant from the cradle.

“Not this time, no.” Hermione said grimly. “He's pushing himself to the brink. I stepped in to keep him from being expelled.” That sounded too compassionate. “If he fails, we may be press-ganged. I want to finish my schooling before joining the war.”

“So do I.” Theo replied, dour and pensive. He didn't like this. He particularly did not like they could do little about it. He didn't delude himself to think he was the Captain of his fate but he would like to believe he was at least sitting near the tiller. “Write to Esne for confirmation from your grandmother. I rather fear we will have to be seen to be compliant.”

Hermione wrote, and received a short reply assuring her that the books she requested would be sent to Hogwarts so she could study over the holidays. She showed the note to Nott and they both glumly contemplated the looming break. He took Malfoy's Charms essay as well as one for Defence, mostly as something extra to do in between playing Lord of the Manor.

For her part, Hermione didn't have any time for extracurricular activities. Snape kept her busy with the First, Second, and Third Year Slytherins while he tutored the Fourth and Fifth Years. No one had learned much during Umbridge's tenure and while Professor Lupin was a good teacher he hadn't made up for Lockhart or Quirrell.

Hermione took a page out of the Dumbledore's Army manual and began with a group casting of jinxes. The Third Years thought this beneath their dignity until she put Pritchard on the floor with a quick combo of Sneezing and Tripping Jinxes. She pointed out that there was a broad array of spells that did not trigger the standard Shield Charm as they were either cosmetic or medical and thus considered non-violent. The children were sufficiently leery of her that when she asked for volunteers she got none, whence she pointed out she had cowed them with two jinxes.

That got Baddock to step forward. She asked him to maintain a Lumos spell while she used a Charm on him. He gripped his wand confidently, lit it, then nodded. He was focussed and ready. Hermione cast wandlessly and voicelessly. The glow on his wand winked out as the Third Year yelped. He shoved up his sleeve to see a pink stripe running up his arm.

“It's a rare wizard who can hold a spell when their hair is being ripped out by the root.” She demonstrated the Depilatory Charm on a transfigured mouse. The little animal squeaked in objection as she 'waxed' off a section of hair on its back. “You've been taught that magic is intent. That's true. But many spells have the intent built in. Usually it's part of the matrix as a nursemaid and it's hard to remove without unpicking the entire spell. So most people just ignore them as no threat.”
Hermione pressed her wand against her forearm, casting the charm with much more than necessary vigour. The fine hair vanished leaving little dots of blood at the follicles. She looked around the gathering and saw understanding in the eyes of more than one student. Any spell that drew blood could be used to anchor a curse.

The Snakelets paid much more attention after that. They worked through the First Year syllabus until everyone could cast any colour of sparks they wished and control the Smokescreen Charm. The combination of the two spells turned the classroom into a discotheque, wherein Hermione had the Third Years duel. Which resulted in an impromptu lecture on first aid when the teenagers got overenthusiastic.

Ten days of revision and praxis couldn't make up for years of erratic teaching but it did give the younger Years something to show if the examiners asked them anything outside the standard questions. A bit of creativity could turn a Poor into an Acceptable. Professor Snape did no more than nod in commendation at the end of the holidays.

Theo came back wearing a glamour to hide the smudges under his eyes. He shook his head when she asked. Nothing dramatic. Just grinding anxiety enough to curdle his stomach and give him insomnia. Her grandmother had shut herself in her suite refusing to acknowledge anyone except her host and the house elves. She was brewing, that much he knew but she wouldn't say what.

Malfoy came back wearing a glamour to hide the smudges under his eyes too. It couldn't hide the tremor in his hands from the Cruciatius or the thousand yard stare of constant Occlumency. He accepted the homework she and Nott had done without blinking. When she asked how much Pepper-Up he'd drunk that day, he'd snarled something barely intelligible and stormed out of the Common Room.

April staggered along. The Slytherin Duelling Club meetings helped Hermione blow off steam, a badly needed pressure valve as the school year drew to a close. Knowing the future was not nearly as much of a burden as doing nothing about it. When she couldn't sleep, she roamed the dungeons charting forgotten corners for the Map. And making lists.

She turned seventeen on the 3rd of August, which gave her three weeks to get everything she needed done before Seventh Year. Hermione made contingency plans with Moppet and together they chose a binding ritual, an old one witch-to-elf that didn't use blood magic. The rite was more like a familiar link than the servitude geas currently used. Moppet would be Cathal's elf not one of her House's, the shared magic freeing her from all other bonds; a wonderful and terrifying trust.

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An unfortunate side-effect of her Easter seminar on the application of jinxes was an uptick in the harassment of the other Houses. The Prefects stepped in when they were aware however the little Snakes had taken her lessons to heart. There wasn't a Gryffindor under thirteen with eyebrows and there was an epidemic of minor bad luck among the opposing Quidditch teams. Hermione weathered pointed questions from Snape but she had not actually taught any blood magic to the younger students.

The misfortunes had become so frustrating to the players they had complained to their Heads. They couldn't touch a quill without it breaking, soap failed to lather, there were no pairs of socks to be had, and more little irritations than could be shrugged off as random mischance. Professor Flitwick investigated, discovering his team were under a weak voodoo curse. Professors McGonagall and Sprout joined him in insisting the Slytherin dormitory be searched for poppets.

Hermione stood in as advocate while the Professors searched the girls' dorms to ensure the younger
students didn't feel unfairly targeted by the not-quite impartial witches. She thought none of the teachers expected to find anything but the rummage would ensure the quick disposal of any foci. As the only suspect items found were candy, her supposition seemed correct.

Dismissed once her own dorm had been searched, Hermione hurried upstairs to grab something to eat before heading to the library. She left just as Professor Snape found Crabbe's stash of pornography. Apparently there were some very niche publications in the wizarding world of which she had been previously thankfully unaware.

Her mind was on the defensive possibilities of obeah when someone barged into her as she was entering the Great Hall. She stepped back to remonstrate about the rudeness when she saw it was Harry hurrying past. Avoiding him had become second nature. She turned away to get her meal and was about to sit down at the green table when she noticed Katie Bell returned from hospital.

Hermione was up and out of the Great Hall as fast as false nonchalance could take her. She didn't run. Stopping Harry would mean he kept the book. He needed to be shot of it. So she had to let him and Malfoy fight. But Snape was in the dungeons not on luncheon duty ready to be found to give immediate medical attention to a badly wounded boy. Snape was in the dungeons because she had taught children a vicious trick.

She'd meant to show woefully under-taught pre-teens how use what they did know creatively. Next year was going to be horrendous and everyone needed to be ready to defend themselves. Except next year wasn't happening yet. In her anticipation of the worst to come, she'd forgotten to mind the now. Right now it was petty squabbles in the corridors. And grievous bodily harm in the toilets.

“Sectumsempra!”

Hermione heard Harry cast the curse. He stood there staring as she walked into the bathroom and knelt beside Malfoy. He didn't say a word as she snapped an order to fetch Madam Pomfrey though he did leave at a run. She ripped the blond's shirt open wanting to see what she was healing. He whimpered as his blood stained the water pink.

“Vulnera Sanentur.” Hermione chanted over and over, grimacing at the draw of the magic. She'd imagined it would be less of a fight to undo the spell with the proper counter. She'd been wrong. Healing the razor slashes criss-crossing Malfoy's chest felt like yanking out handfuls of herself. He sobbed, clutching her hand as she worked. The physical connection seemed to help so she squeezed his fingers to reassure him and kept chanting.
No one asked her any questions until Malfoy was safely stabilised in the Hospital Wing. His wounds were almost closed when Madam Pomfrey splashed into the loo, leaving the matron to patch up with healing charms and Blood-Replenishing Potions. The pain and shock necessitated more draughts, effectively knocking him out so his heart rate would decrease. Only once Draco was unconscious did his grip on her hand ease.

Red smudges of pre-cursor bruising decorated her fingers. Hermione massaged them as she rested, ordered to a bed by Pomfrey as a precaution for magical exhaustion. She didn't argue. She felt light-headed and punchy, too spent to care her tights and skirt were soaking wet leaving ruddy smears on the sheets.

Professor Snape had come and gone, likely to notify Malfoy's mother, and Dumbledore had looked in, briefly speaking with Madam Pomfrey. He hadn't spared her a glance. He had however cast Prior Incantato on Draco's wand. Hermione did not know what to feel about that. She was angry with Harry for his recklessness. She was angry with Malfoy for fixing the fucking Cabinet. She was extremely angry with Dumbledore for sweeping it all under the rug.

He fancied himself a chessmaster and Hermione could not forgive him for turning her best friend into a pawn. So she made no effort to catch his attention or to be anything more than a random passer-by to the incident. Snape would demand more. She was not sure how much he would tell the Headmaster. Hermione flopped back onto the pillow enervated. She had no yen to be a spy.

“Miss Rosier.” The greeting roused her instantly. Her eyes snapped open, looking directly into the shuttered face of her Defence Professor. Dark, dark, limpid pools gazed down at her. She stared, noticing for the first time how long his eyelashes were. He'd never need mascara.

The nonsensical thought broke her daze. Hermione quickly looked away. She couldn't tell if he was in her mind. She was too fuzzy from magic drain to distinguish one fog from another. Well, shit.

“You will tell me how you learned that spell.” He commanded, brooking no prevarication.

“You haven't pulled that from my head?” She asked petulantly.

“Don't be facetious. You know very well how much effort you have put into making such access difficult.” Professor Snape said the words like venom.

In her surprise, Hermione nearly looked him in the face again. He could be lying, luring her in for another skim. His body language hadn't changed though. An irate man stood before her, intolerant of excuses. A tiny flicker of hope that she hadn't damned the world lifted her like a sky lantern. She sat up and threw Harry to the wolves.

“I read it in an old Potions textbook.” Hermione began semi-candidly. “I put it back once I found a more recent copy. I would presume Potter found it much in the same way. He hadn't bought his book for Potions this year.” She turned her head towards Malfoy's bed. “I don't think he realised how much power you could put into the spell. Reversing it took all I had.”

The blond was out cold in that boneless way that made you wonder if the sleeper was dead. Madam Pomfrey had given him three Blood-Replenishing Potions in a quarter of an hour, which was the maximum for his weight. The potion added fluid from nothing and accelerated the growth of new cells in the bone marrow, creating a blood analogue until the patient responded to healing magic.
Hermione suspected that if she studied cellular biology she would be able to find the mechanism the spells and potions boosted. She also suspected if the Ministry became aware of research of that type, she would be slapped hard with the Statute of Secrecy.

“What else did you learn from the book?” Snape's tone had levelled off, papering over any cracks. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw him adjust his cuffs. So they were going to pretend this was a casual chat, were they? Hermione didn't have a rat's arse to give for society niceties right now. All that blood. If she'd known Vulna Sanentur the first time... well, Granger didn't have a chance to even look at the book. If Harry had learned that spell too, he would've been able to help when Ron Splinched himself. And she wouldn't have the fear-memory of Ron dying in her arms.

He hadn't, of course. She'd had Dittany and had patched him up. She'd been prepared. She'd always had to be the one with their head screwed on right. At least this time she had Moppet. Without her, Hermione thought she would've lost the plot. Snape made an impatient noise, recalling her to his question.

“Everything I could. Your innovations were fascinating.” She wasn't going to feign ignorance of the identity of the Half-Blood Prince. “I had to wait to try the practical side but I could read up on the theory.” He really was brilliant when it came to Potions. Pity he was pants at teaching. “It's interesting to see which references are missing from the Library.”

“Indeed.” He said blandly, the totality of all he would say on the subject. He had walked into Hell seeking knowledge; little steps all the way down. “You would be wise to keep any such observations to yourself.” She nodded in acquiescence. “I was remiss in leaving my notes accessible to the curious. I will remedy that oversight forthwith.”

“Sounds ominous.” Hermione remarked to the middle distance. She didn't think he'd go so far as Obliviating her. Professor Snape had made no move to batten down Harry beyond detentions. Perhaps he was just disconcerted at his own oversight. Tripping over your mistakes was galling. She had the uncomfortable feeling she had forgotten something.

“Unlikely to be. The Headmaster will treat this as laissez-faire as usual.” Cutting himself off before he said more, he contemplated the young witch. He suspected Evan would be proud of her. She was tired but far from hysterical. The near death of a classmate had barely ruffled her. Even in revenge, Evan had striven to be implacable. “Is there anything you require, Miss Rosier?”

“No, sir.” She'd sleep it off in the Hospital Wing. If Madam Malfoy was going to inflict herself on Hogwarts, she'd rather limit the witnesses. Madam Pomfrey could be trusted not to gossip unlike the wagging forked tongues in the dungeons.

As it was, she slept through Narcissa's visit. Madam Malfoy had been accompanied by Corban Yaxley ostensibly to express Ministry disapprobation of the assault on the Malfoy heir. They had stayed only long enough for Narcissa to assure herself of her son's recovery before she was escorted back to what must be an excruciating house party. Hermione learned this from Nott, who had heard it from Ichijoh, who had seen the pair Floo from the Headmaster's office.

Theo had brought a few books to read while he waited for her to rouse. He was intent on Grammatica by Carneiro when she woke. She watched his lips move as he tasted the Latin phraseology and wondered what it would be like to kiss him. Discounting relatives, over two lifetimes she had kissed two boys. Rather a poor average. He sighed, closing the book as he noticed she was awake.

“Are you alright?” Nott asked quietly.
“Fine. Just weary.” She sat up, having felt worse. She hadn't even passed out.

“We were told nothing. Greengrass saw the bathroom before the elves cleaned it. All the Bloody Baron would say was he had been forbidden to speak of it.” Theo put a hand on hers. “I was worried.”

“I'm tired from healing Malfoy. He and Potter were duelling. Mad, the pair of them.” Hermione explained briefly, expecting that gossip had already provided a dozen different versions of events.

“Potter has detentions for the rest of the year.” He fished for how angry he should feel about that. Cathal shook her head. There was nothing to be done about it. “Dumbledore's pet.”

“It won't matter soon.” She rummaged about for her wand and cast a Lumos to test her magic. It shone bright as ever. She yawned. “Bugger. I'm going to have to skip Duelling Club tomorrow.” There was no chance the matron would give her Pepper-Up. “The matrix on that spell must be dense.”

“We can work through the Arithmancy on it.” Theo suggested, covering his request for her time with genuine interest in spell theory. “Base six allows directional plotting for flow, giving a good starting frame for energy transference.”

Cathal was excused from classes for the rest of the week, and Professor Vector signed off on a out-of-class project allowing Nott to have short days Thursday and Friday. They squirrelled themselves away in a reading room on the fourth floor to pick over the bones of Vulnera while recuperating from an exhausting experience; magically for Hermione and emotionally for Theo.

He didn't tell her the rumours that she had died in Malfoy's arms. Tracey did on Thursday night once Parkinson and Greengrass had gone to sleep. Just who had been bleeding out on the tiles had been unclear in the first wave of gossip. A Gryffindor had seen Potter running for the Hospital Wing and had put it about that Weasley or Granger was the victim. A Ravenclaw had seen her follow the Boy-Who-Lived and had been sure it was Potter in a red puddle. By the time the news reached the dungeons via the Badgers, it had been either or both of the Slytherins killed.

When she was asked, repeatedly, what had happened, Hermione kept to the gist. Bitter past experience with the Hogwarts rumour mill had taught her there was little she could do to steer or correct the maelstrom of speculation. She gave the same terse answers over and over before taking refuge in the reading room.

“You've had your birthday.” Hermione remarked when Nott joined her. She had at last recalled what had eluded her. He had been absent from Potions when the seventeen year olds took the test for their Apparition licenses. “You're seventeen. Why didn't you say something? I would've got you a present at least.”

“I had nothing to celebrate.” Theo had marked his maturation by signing a sheaf of forms from his solicitor and Gringotts. “I have full control of my own vaults.” He had access to the estate account books now at least and could hopefully trim some expenses. “But I'm still only the heir. I can't touch anything in Father's name. It's all so frustrating. The Ministry will only take petitions from the Head of House, which my father as a prisoner cannot make. I can't even apply to visit him.”

“I'll be the Head of the House of Rosier in August.” She reminded the both of them. The Ministry would fall two days before her birthday. Spending the summer waiting for the other shoe to drop would not be fun. “I can petition. I plan to take a pound of flesh out of the Ministry. I still owe them for that summer of protective custody.”
“You hold a grudge.” He said affectionately.

“I do.” Hermione smiled. “I have a list.”

* 

In addition to her lists, she also had schedules and rosters. Hermione got through the ebb-tide of term by ticking things off and by crystallising her emotions. Everyone was a bit frazzled so being slightly off-kilter caused no comment. She sat her exams, and had to laugh when for Herbology one of the viva voce questions in the practical was on the use of nettles. The invigilator asked her to stop after fifteen minutes then once the assessment was over offered her an apprenticeship.

She swapped with Macmillan so she was on duty on the fateful night. Malfoy had said little to her since the bathroom. It was difficult for him to avoid her as she was doing his homework but he didn't talk, and certainly not about the life debt. The morning of, he pulled her aside then stood mute. Hermione supplied both sides of the short, awkward conversation before telling him she would ensure no Slytherins were roaming the halls.

The Seventh Years had needed no persuasion to hold a party though they had grumbled about including the younger Years. Professor Snape's insistence that there would be no celebration unless the entire House was included quelled the whinging. Moppet made cupcakes and undertook to keep the tables laden with goodies so no one wandered.

Most of the students were in casual clothes but Hermione was carefully in uniform with her green tie prominent on her white blouse. A little insurance against the hex-happy. She didn't plan to be anywhere near the Astronomy Tower but the battle had spilled out chaotically as the Order tried to contain the Death Eaters.

She headed up to the sixth floor to roust anyone out of a popular snogging spot, taking points from two Hufflepuffs, then down to the first floor near the Marble Staircase to keep the Entrance Hall clear of bystanders. Granger, two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Lovegood would be alert on the seventh floor and they'd raise the alarm. The Aurors stationed in Hogsmeade had shown up quickly. The battle didn't last long. Most of the DA hadn't had time to notice their coins before it was all over.

Her Map showed her how events upstairs were progressing. She had to try hard not to stare fixedly at the names, willing them to do otherwise than she knew they had. If only Flitwick had been more suspicious of Snape... Hermione headed herself off before she did something unwise, climbing to the second floor to intercept Jatin Agarkar.

The Ravenclaw had paused in his transit of the colonnade, which would have taken him safely out of harm's way, to chat with one of the portraits in what she presumed to be Hindi. He paused when she hailed him, held up a finger for one minute, then concluded his conversation with the frock coated gentleman standing in a meadow dotted with purple flowers.

“Rosier, there's something wrong with the portraits.” He said earnestly. She and the Fifth Year had maintained a courteous relationship since their holiday-mandated study together. He did as she asked him in her capacity as Prefect and she didn't ask much. Hermione had requested he curtail the incidents of bullying in his House or at least spread the word that she would be officially put out if she saw any Ravenclaws wandering around without shoes. She couldn't do much more to help Luna.

“All of them or specific ones?” This was news to her.

“There are eleven portraits who speak Marathi.” Jatin began then for the sake of accuracy amended. “Along a spectrum of fluency.” He missed speaking his mother tongue and had sought out any
portrait who could talk with him. If the sitter had an imperfect command of the language or if the painter was not as adept as they might have been, the conversation was limited. One of the eleven could only say 'good morning' and 'boy, make me some tea'. A charming legacy of the Raj. “We were to meet tonight at the Picnic with Lilac in Bloom.”

“We always have a jolly time. Can't think why not a jack of them have popped in.” The portrait remarked before tipping his top hat to the young lady. “The Honourable Julius Caversham-Blimpf. Have seen you about on your rounds.”

“Sir.” Hermione returned the greeting politely because stating flatly that art conversation was not her priority would cause offence. “I suggest you sit tight while Agarkar and I report this anomaly to the Headmaster.”

“Good show.” Caversham-Blimpf settled down onto the picnic blanket to take his leisure in the sunlit lea. Jatin turned to head for the Grand Staircase, jerking to a halt when Rosier caught his shoulder. His query as to her reasons for manhandling him was never uttered, superseded by a woman's exultant shriek from the floor above. Hermione hustled them both behind a statue as running footsteps thundered up the Stairs.

“What's going on?” Jatin murmured, assuming whatever it was wasn't safe.

“Malfoy has been up to something.” She whispered the edited truth. “I think tonight he's done it.”

“We need to warn the teachers.” He insisted and was relieved at her nod. Although by chance of marriage he was a pure-blood, the Agarkar family was traditionally and proudly half-blood.

“Whatever's happening is between us and Professors Flitwick and McGonagall.” That seemed a reasonable assumption for a bystander to make. “You go to Professor Sprout's office and I'll go to Professor Snape's.” Hermione suggested. The greenhouses were a sufficient distance from Hagrid's hut that Agarkar was unlikely to run into any of the fleeing Death Eaters. Jatin nodded, heading quickly away.

To tin-plate her arse, Hermione legged it down to the dungeons. She knocked loudly on Snape's door and unsurprisingly got no answer. Waiting a moment, she knocked again. A nearby portrait told her, slurring his words, that the Professor was not in. She walked back to the Entrance Hall with her wand out. Dumbledore would be dead by now, the battle in full flower.

She felt useless. Standing around waiting for something to happen. Hermione had to admit to herself that she didn't mourn the Headmaster. The ring and his own regrets had killed him. He'd known he was dying. He could have sat them down, told them everything, prepared them. Instead he'd kept secrets and bequeathed trinkets. Hermione would've gladly swapped a book of fairy tales for a page of instructions. Hell, she'd have settled for a Post-It note with 'use Fiendfyre' scrawled on it.

Was she being hypocritical? She'd told no one what she knew. She could've changed things. Maybe. If she'd had an adult she could trust, perhaps she would have risked more. But one of the drawbacks of time travel was while you knew what happened, everyone else had to take it on your word. The only people who would've believed Cathal Rosier were precisely those she wanted least to tell.

SMASH!

Hermione jumped as glass shattered, followed by Bellatrix's scream. She shrank back around a corner to listen to Snape's cadent stride as he lead the Death Eaters out of the Castle. He wasn't quite running but he certainly had somewhere to be. If he lingered, his comrades-in-arms might find someone to entertain them.
She waited through the silence after their passing for Harry's rushed pursuit. Only once he had gone
did she emerge to head upstairs to help. It would probably be more sensible to slink off to the
Slytherin Common Room but she was on patrol and questions would be asked if she didn't show
herself. Questions would be asked regardless in the aftermath of Dumbledore's death.

Bellatrix had made a mess wherever she went. Glass crunched underfoot. She'd slashed portraits too.
Hermione stood transfixed in front of a large painting, the occupants trapped in the shreds unable to
flee. Had the odd stutter in the magic of the Castle been caused by the demise of the Headmaster?
The magic would right itself soon, her first self hadn't even noticed a disruption, but the short-circuit
made her remember.

Snape had died on the grounds while the defences were active. Hermione doubted Hogwarts had
been so awake for centuries thus the shock of losing the connection with the Headmaster must have
been intense. Could someone have tried to exploit that break to disrupt the wards and protections?
Who would know?

The obvious answer of Tom Riddle didn't sit well. If Voldemort had known that killing the
Headmaster would weaken the school, he would've tried to assassinate Professor McGonagall while
she was Acting Head or would've killed Snape as soon as the siege on Hogwarts began. How quick
was the transition from one to the other? She and the Voice would need a long chat on this.

A groan caught her attention. The acoustics of the Great Hall bounced the sound and obfuscated the
source. Hermione pulled out her Map, focussing on herself before zooming out slowly until she
found a name unmoving near the stairs on the floor above. An unworthy impulse to leave him
gripped her. He wouldn't thank her.

However she wasn't doing this for anyone but herself; to be one of the goodies when she could.

So Hermione went to the aid of Auror Williamson. He had been cursed, blasted against the wall and
left in a heap. He was conscious but unresponsive with blood oozing from his ears, which might've
been mistaken for ruptured ear drums except for the clear liquid dripping from his nose. It was
cerebrospinal fluid, indicting severe cranial trauma.

Hermione immobilised him, paying particular attention to keeping his head and neck from moving.
She levitated him very, very carefully, reinforcing the uplift with cushioning charms. He needed to
get to St Mungo's immediately if he was to avoid brain damage. Granger wouldn't stepped with him
through a Floo and trusted she could return to the Castle with a reasonable explanation. Rosier didn't
have that trust, especially not this night.

She did however have a good set of lungs. Hermione brought Williamson with her to the edge of the
stairs and with a Sonorous Charm shouted for help. Two Aurors came running, wands out, and
when they saw a Slytherin with their comrade the wands turned on her. She regretted her obvious
green tie as she tried to get them to understand what Williamson needed.

They were still there insisting she release the injured man from her spells when Madam Pomfrey
joined them with pinny red from healing Charlie Weasley. Hermione told her where she had found
the Auror and what she had done to treat him. The matron wasted no time sending her with Tonks
through to St Mungo's. As they stepped into the green flames, she heard the normally mild witch tear
a strip off the obstructive Aurors.

The Healers didn't look at her tie. She was asked, once, what happened then Williamson was
whisked off to the Spell Damage Ward. Tonks escorted her back without saying very much. Her hair
was a mousy brown despite the excitement of battle, which reminded Hermione dolefully that she
would speak to Remus tonight. They'd get engaged soon and would be married less than a year
before they died.

Unless the future changed.

She could only allow herself to alter the course of the Battle after she had stopped whatever had ripped the fabric of time. A daunting ‘to do’.

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Slytherin House had taken news of the Headmaster's death solemnly. Their Head's role in it had surprised few. That he was a Death Eater was an open secret among the Snakes. The presumption was he had been acting on the Dark Lord's orders since his return. The assumption that Malfoy too had long been in service bled over to include all the heirs of the traditionally Dark families. Anyone in green had to walk the halls in groups for safety. Again.

Weasley accused her of being part of the plot and outright refused to patrol with her, a hollow protest as Granger never scheduled the two of them together. The Hufflepuffs took up the slack. Which was how she got a note from Justin Finch-Fletchley requesting a meeting. Hermione went, though she had Moppet shadow her just in case it was an ambush.

Justin was pacing when she arrived in Classroom 7a. When she entered, she caught him running a hand through his hair. He looked rumpled and appealing, which was so inappropriate for Cathal that Hermione pinched herself to interrupt the thought process. She did not need that in her head.

“Finch-Fletchley.” She greeted him curtly.

“Rosier.” He replied automatically then took a deep breath. “We're not friends, I realise.” He was very consciously holding his arms still by his sides, she noticed. A carefully non-aggressive stance. “And I do understand how little you can tell me without endangering yourself.” He spoke like a barrister, weighing each word. “I would like to ask you if you think this summer is a good time to holiday overseas.”

“I think it's a very good time. I think you should invite everyone you can.” Hermione answered with laboured nonchalance. “And not hurry back.”

“Damn it.” Justin said on a long sigh. He looked at her directly. “Fancy a holiday on the Riviera?”

“Thank you, no.” The refusal was instant. She wasn't going to run. Hermione had already stuck it out through tough going. If she hadn't deserted when Ron did, she wouldn't now. She didn't think she would survive this intact but she was still going to jump in with both boots.

“You should get out of it before you're dragged so far in there's no escape.” Some of the Slytherins were such rat bastards he'd gladly shove them off a cliff. But Rosier didn't go in for casual cruelty. Whatever her ambition, the Sorting Hat had got it right with her, she had a code of ethics albeit arrogant and slantwise.

“I have an exit strategy.” Hermione recalled the phrase from the newspapers she'd read to keep up with Muggle milieu. It sounded far more organised than she was. “Warn Professor Burbage to leave the country too. She'll be a target, and from me the warning will sound like a threat.”

Justin offered her his hand to shake before he left. Hermione hesitated then turned her back on him. She didn't want that memory either. She left the room without looking at him, not wanting to see his expression. Not wanting him to see hers.
Summer at Nott Manor was not an idyll. The Death Eaters barracked in the house had missions, returning bloody and intoxicated seemingly every other night. Riding highs from Dark Magic, there were duels and outright brawls. After a drunken swain attempted to woo the heiress at one in the morning, Madam Rosier stationed family elves nightly outside her granddaughter's suite with orders to stun anyone who tried to 'visit'.

Hermione kept to a regimented schedule of research and lab work. She had brought everything she'd liberated from the Chamber of Secrets to carefully read and test. Translating all the notes took weeks. Idiomatic Old English mixed with Old Welsh rendered phonetically in futhorc runes taxed translation charms. The Nott library was fortunately well stocked with runic works. Theo did query her interest but she had an excuse in refining her healing potions.

She had plenty of opportunity to test them. The cadre of young Death Eaters were shock troops and Voldemort never did gain control of St Mungo's so their access to competent painless medical attention was limited. Healing spells were a specialist branch of magic very dependant on the skill of the caster. Potions were more reliable in emergencies, assuming the brewer had made them correctly.

Hermione watched her patient's leg turn from the purple of subcutaneous haemorrhage to the yellow of a healing contusion. He had stopped thrashing when she had dosed him with a Stunning potion, letting her spray on the experimental bruise removal mist. She'd modified the Weasley twins' paste with a different potion medium. It wasn't quite the aerosol she'd hoped for but it did work very quickly once she'd set the broken bone.

“That should do.” Hermione cast a diagnostic charm. The fracture had been a straightforward transverse break of the femur but a hasty Side-Along Apparition had caused extensive internal bleeding. Hermione guessed someone had clipped him with one of the many Os curses. The knee was luckily intact as mending a joint without lingering arthritis was a bit beyond her ability. Not that she particularly cared if any of the masked brigade were hobbling about post-physic.

“He's still out.” The fair haired young man scowled. He had barged into the library demanding assistance for his wounded friend, tracking mud and noxious detritus across the antique carpets. Hermione thought his name was Holt but she wasn't sure. She tried to avoid being introduced to any of Nott's house guests.

“And he's going to stay out for several hours while everything sets.” She said crisply. “Next time, vanish the bone rather than Apparate with someone with a fracture. Skele-Gro is easy to buy. If you'd jolted the ends of the femur, they could've severed the femoral artery.” Hermione gathered her kit. “I'll have the elves take him to his room.”

Holt looked like he wanted to snap at her but the presence of his host kept him civil. He left, taking his friend's mask and cloak with him. Hermione looked to Theo, who beckoned towards a corner of the room. A Nott elf, previously invisible, hurried forward. His Master asked him to convey the injured man to his bedroom. Gently, he added as an afterthought.

The tension in the house made the Nott elves and the Rosier elves fractious. To soothe feelings, Hermione and Theo only gave orders to their respective house elves. Cross House communication was done with wincing courtesy. It wasn't the most convenient method but Siglinde refused to send any of the Rosier elves back to the Hall. After so long in an empty home, they needed the presence of their witches.
Madam Rosier occupied her household with preparations for her granddaughter's coming of age party. Hermione had asked for something low key and been told that she would have what was appropriate for the heir of the Houses of Rosier and Selwyn. As the party planning kept her grandmother and the Rosier elves happily busy, she didn't object too hard. She did draw the line at the Abraxans. She was not going to make her entrance flying anything.

Sholto Selwyn was regrettably also involved in the planning. In a lucid if temporally displaced moment, Siglinde had invited her nephew to assist. He had come to Nott Manor to stare at ordinary things and to walk in circles. He seemed half asleep most of the time. The swaggering young men had mocked him, barging past in the hallways until he had roused to Crucio one.

Hermione had rushed to the source of the screaming to find her cousin telling his flailing, shrieking victim that he should thank him as the Crucius didn't detach anything. He knew so many other messier curses but out of respect for young Nott, he hadn't used them. The carpets truly were works of art and soaking them to get the blood out would ruin the dye.

He had released the spell when he noticed Cathal. He asked her if she preferred blueberries or raspberries for the trifle. Hermione had said raspberries after a moment's pause and he'd nodded, remarking that blueberries turned everything purple, which rather spoiled the layering effect and made the custard look odd.

Then he had strolled away humming to himself.

* 

August ambushed her before she was ready. At five minutes to midnight on the 2nd Hermione snuck out of Nott Manor. She left a note for her grandmother in case her absence was noticed but she hoped to be away and back unregarded. Quaffing several potions, she climbed out her bedroom window, shinned down the facade, and walked to the edge of the ward boundary before Disapparating.

Such a ballsy method probably wouldn't work twice but the magic protecting Nott Manor hadn't been sensitised to her potion-bound spells. Most wards detected active casting or the patterns of magic embedded in permanently enchanted objects. Potions were a grey area though having used them once, the wards would probably 'ripple' or 'stick' if she tried to slide through the same way again. The older the ward, the more they were alive and could be pernickety.

But she had promised Moppet that the moment they could perform the binding ritual, they would. And that moment was a whisker past midnight as the second changed into the third. Hermione didn't know exactly what time Cathal had been born. Traditionalists avoided looking at clocks on a birth day. It was bad luck to remind oneself of mortality on such an auspicious occasion. The transition from one day to the next depended on the culture; some used dawn, some sunset.

She was a citizen of the modern, time-keeping world and thought of midnight as the change. Like so much of magic, it was what you believed it to be. Cathal turned seventeen the moment the clocks stopped chiming twelve. Thus at that moment, Hermione was sitting in a chalk circle among the blowsy flowers of Rose Cottage facing a house elf with a knife in her hand.

The ritual was old enough to be simple. With a new blade, the participants nicked the fingertips of their left hands and touched the wounds together, thumb to pinky, pinky to thumb, so the hands were linked like a yin-yang. The clasp was called a 'flowing knot' meant to symbolise the link and current of the magic between the pair. Then the thumb to the lips of the partner, an old oath-making gesture.

Moppet's blood tasted saltier than her own but so barely different Hermione felt her anger at the
oppression of house elves stoke again. This binding was personal. When they spoke the words together, their auras meshed. She could feel Moppet's heart beat along with her own like the way she had imagined she would feel the heartbeat of her child in utero. They were together.

“Miss has strong magic.” Sweat prickled on Moppet's face as the shiver-tingles made her ears stand up.

“Call me by my first name, if you like.” Hermione felt the bond solidify. It was as though she had grown another set of hands, another pair of eyes. Sometimes with Crookshanks she had known where he was or how he was feeling. This was even more so, disorientatingly intimate. “I can see why they stopped using this rite. It's too close. Too personal for the wizard or witch to be in command.”

“Moppet thinks wanded folk don't like sharing.” The house elf moved her hands slowly through the air as though she'd never used them before. “Moppet likes Cathal-Hermione's magic.”

“Just Cathal, please. I'm not going to tell anyone about the reincarnation.” She stood up and shuddered as she felt the ley lines. Really felt them like the wind on her face or the scent of roses in the air. She was a part of the world. “Wow.”

“Wow.” Moppet echoed, grinning. She pulled out her wand and sent the fallen petals swirling into the air in a millefleur whirlwind. Hermione laughed, spinning herself in the euphoria of the fresh bond. No wonder so many old rites included dancing. She wanted to kick up her heels and run barefoot through the grass.

They jumped and skipped like children as their magic melded. Hermione, dizzy from turning in circles, tripped over a rock and ended sprawled on the ground laughing like she hadn't in years. She got a stitch in her side. Her chest burned. Her eyes were running with tears. She couldn't remember feeling this happy in forever.

Then a second stabbing pain shot through her heart.

“I have to get back to Nott Manor.” Hermione gasped, hands scrabbling at her throat. Her fingers came away gritty with red streaks. The bead she had made had broken. She stared at the smudges before the urgent need washed over her again. A compulsion. “Grandmother is calling.”

She Disapparated.

She arrived on the threshold with a thunderous boom awash with magic from the wards. The defences let her cross with little push-back; Theo wanted her there. However the density of the security matrix would not allow so brazen an entry to be done quietly. The noise of her Apparition rattled the windows. Hermione staggered, falling over sideways into one of the decorative planters framing the door.

Which was flung open by Siglinde Rosier.

“IT's not yet dawn.” Madam Rosier observed as Cathal picked herself up, wiping grubby hands on her trousers like a street urchin. “Where you have been?”

“Rose Cottage.” Hermione replied instantly to the demand. Now she stood before her summoner, the urgency of the summons abated. She had mental presence to air a polished lie. “I thought I should pay my respects. Acknowledge the past and the like.”

“You mustn't leave without telling me.” Siglinde choked off her rising voice, breathing rapidly. “You mustn't.”
“I left a note.” She said, thus proving even clever people could say stupid things.

“A note!” Madam Rosier hissed. She drew her wand and a wave of power swept Hermione's thoughts from her skull. “You will not leave me, You will not!” Tears poured from her manic eyes. “I will not lose you like I lost Evan.”

Hermione was starfished on the ground when the Rosier elves rallied to her aid. Bonica, the eldest of the household, put herself between her Mistress and Siglinde. Ruddy pulled the door rug out from under the elder witch while Mardi and Petal threw themselves atop her. They couldn't use magic against a Rosier but they were compelled to protect their Head of House. Nissy, a Selwyn elf by heritage, tried to defend her Miss, launched herself at Ruddy to bite and kick.

“Enough.” Hermione rolled onto one side, her legs shaking against the blood compulsion that manifested as enforced stillness. “Enough!” She shouted, bracing her hands against the front step so she could push herself upright. “I am your materfamilias.”

“You are my child's child.” Siglinde thrashed, struggling to get an arm free to cast. Bright spots of red discoloured her cheeks as she flailed against the elves.

“Do you want to be a Selwyn again?” This was dirty pool but as the Head of the House of Rosier, Cathal could send her widowed grandmother back to the House of her birth. The threat shocked Siglinde to immobility. “Listen to me.” Hermione insisted as her head spun. “Release the compulsion. Calm yourself, please. I am alive and safe.”

“I want you to stay that way.” Madam Rosier said forcefully, though she did ease her grip on the link between them. She had woken early and sent her attendant Nissy to deliver Cathal's name-day gifts thence to be told her granddaughter wasn't in the house. The abject panic that had gripped her had dug its claws in deep. Only the warmth of the blood magic connection had kept her from rousing the whole house to action. Waiting had been agony. She wanted to wrap her grandchild in protective spells so strong Merlin himself couldn't harm her. But that power was beyond her now, perhaps had never been within her ken. She could do so little gutted by Azkaban.

“So do I.” Hermione inhaled slowly as the numbing fog lifted, the red at the edges of her vision dissipating. “I know our world is dangerous. I'll be careful. I'll be ruthless.” She straightened trying not to wince at the feeling she was made of plasticine. “Let's have an early breakfast and rest before visiting Gringotts. We'll go together.”

It took Hermione hours to convince her grandmother that she would be cautious, that she would limit her excursions, and always assume she was under threat. She took the time to soothe Siglinde patiently, blaming herself for lingering with Moppet. She hadn't realised the euphoria of the bond would be that intense. She had lost track of time and this was the consequence. So she listened and reassured and helped Madam Rosier through her panic attack.

The thunder of her arrival had roused most of the Manor. Theo joined them in the small parlour while the Death Eaters trickled into the morning room grumbling. When the cause of the noise was explained, two offered to give her Apparition lessons as though Splinching was a double entendre. Hermione refused frostily.

The Rosier elves fussed and fetched, jumping back and forth from Rosier Hall to bring dainties to the witches without the need to rouse the Nott elves, who retaliated by making huge breakfasts. Stuffed to the gills, Siglinde dragged herself to her suite to rest for a bit before they Flooed to Diagon Alley. In the meantime, Hermione had a conference with her allied house elves.

She assured them they wouldn't be punished or dismissed. That took some repetition. Piers Rosier
had not been a man of patience when it came to his servants. Hermione held their hands clasped between hers in ritual homage. Nissy hung back. When she was the last who had not pledged, Bonica nudged her forward.

“I won't make you promise yourself to me.” Hermione wasn't sure of the reason for her reluctance but it clearly mattered. “Do you want to stay only a proxy Rosier elf?”

“Nissy wants to stay Miss Siglinde's elf. Nissy waited so long for Miss to come home.” Nissy spoke in a rush as though expecting to be cut off, insistent as usual. The reactions of the other elves showed how little they approved of her request. “It is not disrespect I am saying.”

“Alright.” She didn't have to be persuaded at all. Hermione was not going to bind an elf without their consent. She rummaged through what she knew of the protocols to find the right words. “As the Head of the House of Rosier, I acknowledge Nissy's bond foremost to Siglinde Rosier. I esteem your loyalty to my grandmother.”

* 

At nine o'clock on the chime, Cathal and Siglinde Rosier went to Gringotts to arrange the transfer of the Rosier estate to Cathal's name. Paperwork and legalities took most of the day at the bank, and all of seventeen minutes at the Ministry. Corban Yaxley had escorted them through, not with Cathal on his arm as that would be presumptuous, but with every appearance of courtesy. Hermione might have been surprised by his attention had her owl not delivered a petition of courtship that morning.

He wasn't the only one. She'd received offers from half the Sacred Twenty-Eight and a great many from the tonier pure-blood families. Hermione had not been flattered. She felt like she was being raffled off. Her grandmother's airy reassurance that the requests were just to get a foot in the door did not ease her mind. Siglinde wrote down all the names in a calfskin journal then set fire to the letters. Hermione didn't ask if that was proper etiquette as she'd wanted to do the same.

Cathal kept her business in the Ministry to a minimum. She had quietly registered herself as an Animagus during one of the Care of Magical Creatures excursions with Hagrid in Sixth Year. She had the receipt tucked away in a safe place just in case there was any editing of the Registry. What she could not avoid was the confirmation of her ancestry.

The Department of Heritage and Lineage, previously a backwater archive, was undergoing extensive refurbishment. There was queue; the first wave of witches and wizards anxious to verify their blood status. In defiance of British custom, Yaxley cut to the head of the line. Hermione followed trying not to look apologetic.

They were out of there in a laughably short time. The Rosier pedigree had its own tome. Illuminated parchment showed with gemlike colours who had borne whom for more than two thousand years. Much of the early records had been provided by the family itself, asserting ultimately a Thracian origin during the reign of Darius I.

Thrace to Greece to Rome to Gaul to the British Isles, a journey carefully noted down to ensure everyone knew how very very magical the Rosiers were. And there Cathal Machtilde was, the latest name under the aegis of the British Ministry. All she had to do to claim that august lineage was sign her name in the book. No fanfare.

There were some forms to collect the keys, to Siglinde's displeasure, and a Ministry Curse-Breaker accompanied them to Rosier Hall in Derbyshire. The Peak District was wild country, and the northern part called the Dark Peak even more so. Gritstone outcrops and moorland plateaus were not a welcoming landscape. As the lurch of the Portkey faded, Hermione felt the old magic of the land
soak into her.

They'd arrived on an area of paving about ten metres square, cut from the local grey sandstone. In front of them was the perimeter wall of the estate, behind them was miles and miles of empty landscape. Hermione recalled stories of ghost planes spawned from the many crashes of military aircraft in this bleak country. Feeling the intensity of the imprint of the decommissioned Rosier wards, she didn't doubt magic had been responsible for many of the accidents.

The gates were wrought iron shaped like trellises of climbing roses. At the Curse-Breaker's instruction, Hermione placed her right hand on the central lock. A heavy click happened. She pushed, and with no sense of the dramatic the gates swung open quietly. No ominous clanking or shrieking of metal on metal. She was obscurely disappointed.

Rosier Hall itself, at the end of a long paved drive lined with decorative trees, was a square solid Norman castle with crenelations. There seemed to be four floors, judging from the tall narrow windows spaced regularly across the facade, and a dome of sorts behind the raised roof line. The building didn't loom gothic and portentous. It sat in the gardens like a sentry. Watchful and well armoured. Cathal's ancestral home was built to outlast.

And there were roses. Roses everywhere, edging the bare killing ground around the Hall itself, planted in complex patterns across the lawns, twined around arbours, nestled under shady trees, rambling over statuary, and espaliered across low stone walls. As they cleared the avenue of trees, Hermione stared left and right. From a distance the gardens looked like a tapestry.

“My ancestors certainly had a theme.” She remarked when Siglinde Rosier glanced to her for a reaction.

“The elves have always loved the grounds. Even my dower elves.” Siglinde ruminated then nodded to herself after her inner monologue ran to its conclusion. “It is good to be back.”

The Curse-Breaker left the instant they got into the Hall. Hermione wondered if he would leave the Ministry after contact with the two Death Eaters. Sensitive individuals could feel the subtle wrongness of the Marked and sought to avoid them. She didn't comment on his departure. She walked the halls acquainting herself with her new home.

The Rosier elves joined them as soon as she had attuned herself to the scant defensive magics left by the Ministry and the executors trying to get into the Hall. Not a completely blank slate but some areas of the estate were so washed clean that Hermione speculated how nasty Piers Rosier's wards had been. He certainly had not wanted to make access easy.

The open house was handy for the party. Siglinde didn't need to send Portkeys to the guests. They could simply Apparate in, though most were courteous enough to use the arrival area just beyond the gates. That way they could enjoy the approach and the vision of Rosier Hall lit with foxfire from the lichen growing on the masonry. More artifice had been used in the illumination of the garden; fairy lights and willow-the-wisps tantalised guests into picturesque nooks.

Hermione marvelled at the number of people who felt obliged to celebrate Cathal's coming of age. Siglinde Rosier in moment of vague incomprehension of the time passed had invited all the Sacred Twenty-Eight families, including the Prewetts and Potters. She found this out when her grandmother tutted over the lack of a formal reply from those Houses. The Longbottoms had sent a refusal and a bouquet of oleander and monkshood.

That acidulated bitch Aunt Muriel had come. She made a point of mentioning she had five unmarried nephews. Hermione remembered all the sniffy comments the witch had made during her
acquaintance with Granger and quietly resolved to tattle on her as soon as possible. Ginny would be at Hogwarts. She smiled pleasantly at the shrew while thanking her for her gift.

The Parkinsons were there. Pansy was so very very affable, just like they were bestest chums, that Hermione suspected she'd been Imperiused. The Greengrass girls were less effusive but no less feigning. Zabini was his default charming. Crabbe and Goyle hung by the buffet as their mothers sang their praises. Fortunately for Hermione's temper, Siglinde Rosier sent them packing with the insistence no one without an O in their OWLs would court her granddaughter. Only the cleverest for Cathal.

Nott was there. He got to dance with the birthday girl twice, a public sign of favour, but didn't otherwise have much time with her. Corwin Yaxley and Corban Yaxley both twirled her across the floor. The younger muttering an apology that the feud between his father and his uncle had resulted gauchely in two offers from the Yaxley family for her hand. The elder made polite conversation, a gentleman in every aspect except the look he gave Draco Malfoy when the boy asked for the next dance.

Hermione let herself be towed around the dance floor by the grey faced blond. He moved by rote, by muscle memory. His hands were clammy. Narcissa watched unblinking from the sidelines. Bellatrix was somewhere in the throng too. Lucius had sent his regrets, pleading weakness from his recent release from Azkaban. Draco looked like he should have stayed home too.

“I need to speak with you privately.” He whispered. She didn't hide her expression well enough. “Please.”

He begged. He actually begged. Hermione wanted to refuse but the sound of him pleading weakened her resolve to tell him to bugger off. She really was a soft touch for the downtrodden. Malfoy looked like a kicked puppy. She agreed. They couldn't walk off together so she excused herself to her grandmother for a call of nature and met him casually by chance in an upstairs hallway.

He dropped to his knees. For a loathly moment Hermione feared he was proposing. When he offered her his wand with both hands she realised he was giving her his fealty. He hadn't wanted to abase himself in front of all the guests. She felt nauseous at the thought she could have made him crawl before the great and not-good of magical Britain. He took her hesitation as indecision.

“Please, Rosier. I owe you my life.” He implored. Life debts were old magic. There were consequences for not acknowledging or settling them. Malfoy had done nothing about the debt for months. No wonder he was sweating now.
Nephele

“For fuck's sake, Malfoy.” Hermione swore as she snatched the wand from his hands. “Get up before someone sees you.” She reversed the hawthorn, offering him the hilt. “I accept your fealty.” She felt a warmth settle in her chest, a wan shade of the bond she had with Moppet. “Your first task is to tell me why you thought this antiquated custom was the way to settle your debt.”

“You wouldn't trust anything else.” Draco tucked his wand away. He had researched, putting off his decision while trying to find something palatable. Most of the easy options involved him living long enough to marry and sire a child, either for her to adopt into her service or to marry one of Rosier's own children. He didn't believe he would see his next birthday far less fatherhood.

“I don't trust this.” She took a step away from him. “But refusing would've made it worse. You would've been constantly hovering at my back trying to save my life.”

“I thought this way would save us both the discomfort of each other's presence.” He stood upon his dignity, battered as it was.

“Oh come off it.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Martyrdom doesn't suit you. Let's get back to the party before someone notices.”

“Don't shrug this off, Rosier.” Draco snarled. His hand twitched to grab her arm to halt her leaving. The gesture died when her gaze snapped to his face. He froze, lowering his eyes.

“I understand what you have given me.” She spoke to him with a predator's stare. “I understand what I could make you do.” Hermione shoved down hard the urge to hit him. “I also understand you fear becoming a squib if the debt consumes your magic or being trapped as a ghost if you die owing me.” She couldn't keep her hand from prodding his chest. “You're a squirrelly bastard, Malfoy. Don't think for a moment I don't know your loyalty is a matter of convenience.”

She stormed off back to the party, to dance with Thorfinn Rowle, who despite being a behemoth moved like Nureyev. He kept his hand chastely at her waist and his conversation was a series of muttered affirmatives and negatives. Hermione didn't unbend an inch despite his anodyne behaviour. She hoped he took her frost for arrogance. None of her suitors had yet complained she wasn't delighted by their attentions, though considering half of them had just got out of Azkaban perhaps they were still numb.

Adrian Pucey was the next on her card. He was strong-armed into stammering a request for her time by the combined forces of his mother, two sisters, and a maiden aunt. He got so tongue-tied one of the brusque girls informed Cathal he was delighted to offer for her hand and wished nothing more than to prove himself a companionable prospect.

“Sorry.” Halfway into a pavane, once his blush had faded from cerise to rose, Pucey ventured an apology and a mumbled explanation. “Only boy, you know.”

“How many sisters do you have?” Hermione craned her neck to see the cluster of witches plotting by the ice statue of the goddess Hebe. She was charmed to dispense champagne and seemed to be struggling to keep up with the demand from the Pucey contingent.

“Five.” Adrian spoke to the air above Miss Rosier's left shoulder. Her dress, silvery and floaty, showed her frontage to advantage. He tried to think of her as a swotty twelve year old as she had been when they first met. He was actually fairly good with children. Just not women. “Four aunts.
Eleven female cousins."

“There’s your out, then.” She smiled, which didn’t visibly relax him. “I need sons to be name heirs for Rosier and Selwyn as well as my husband’s line. If the Pucey magic has taken to giving daughters, we’re not a good match. I’ll even pen a nice note to the effect if you’d like me to refuse your suit in writing. Not your fault, that way.”

“Didn’t think I was in with a chance.” He took a deep breath, marshalling himself through several steps of the stately dance. “Here for Marcus, really.” He swallowed. “Asked me to ask you to meet him at the tavern with the blue hats. He’s staying there.” Adrian gulped, having got the words out in a rush. “Said you’d know it.”

“Right, yes.” Hermione nodded. She remembered the pub in Glasgow where they’d gone Polyjuiced to meet Oliver Wood. “Did he say why?” Pucey shook his head, “Tell him I’ll be there as soon as I can get away.”

Her partner’s inarticulate murmur was all the confirmation she got. They finished their set, Pucey bowed, and with well honed avoidance skills, dodged away into the garden before his relatives noticed the dance had ended. Hermione envied him as she headed back to her grandmother for instructions on further frivolity.

* * *

The last guests went home at dawn. Madam Rosier took a stirrup cup with them then collapsed. Nissy put her to bed, refusing Hermione’s offer to fetch a Healer. Miss Siglinde was exhausted not ill. Miss had seen her grandbaby all grown up. Miss would sleep happy. Rather spent themselves, Hermione and the Rosier elves put up temporary wards, little more than jinxes and aversion spells to mesh with the Anti-Muggle protections the Ministry had allowed to remain, then went to bed too. Bonica protested but the Head of the House insisted. The mess could wait.

Hermione woke unwillingly with her alarm in time for lunch. Mardi was nominally in charge of the kitchens, though all the elves helped with catering for an event. She presented her Mistress with a tray of fried everything and a glass of Firewhiskey. Piers Rosier’s dining requirements had not helped the inherited predisposition to heart disease.

Tactfully, Hermione made some changes to the menu without criticising the cook. Alcohol was for special occasions, black pudding was for never, and fruit was more than a slice of lemon in a cocktail. Sipping orange juice, the new Rosier materfamilias confirmed and reassigned household duties. Nissy was excused from anything but attending Siglinde, which would be a full time occupation until the elder witch recuperated.

Hermione asked for the preferences of the elves; Ruddy wanted the garden, Petal wanted the cleaning, Mardi the cooking, and Bonica the wardrobe and tending of Mistress Rosier. They all received what they wished and with the exception of the senior house elf popped away to get to work. They weren’t quite whistling but the rejuvenation of the House refreshed their personal magic.

“Miss has other bonds.” Bonica remarked once they were alone.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that.” Hermione thought lying would be a slap in the face to the old elf. “What can you sense?”

“Miss is tight knotted around.” She frowned, her pendulous ears fluttering. “The Malfoy boy gave some of himself to you, the crumbs left after the dark wizard ate him up.” There was an appreciable pause as Bonica waited for lordly wrath. None came. “There is a big one too, like but not like a
familiar. An old old rite for a new new bond.”

“I forbid you to tell anyone about that big bond.” The witch spoke. She felt it was more of a spake or decree. Shades of pompous, anyway. “My partner will be with me at Hogwarts. It'll be dangerous for us both if anyone knew we're linked.”

“Even grandmother Rosier?” Bonica asked.

“Even her.” Hermione confirmed. “Just as long as I'm at school. After I graduate, there'll be no secrets between us.”

“We need Miss.” The house elf insisted, with little begging in her tone. She was stating a fact not pleading a case. “Miss is the last.”

“There are Rosiers in France. Fourth or fifth cousins.” A distant relation, particularly with magical lifespans but still family, at least on the books. “If something happens to me, someone from that branch will inherit. I expect they'll be quite keen for the lucre. You won't be left alone.”

“The land doesn't know them. The house doesn't know them. We is house elves.” Bonica said the last with emphasis. “If they isn't of this place, never crossed this threshold before Miss dies, then they isn't for us.”

Elves varied. That was one of the major nett results of her research of the species. Unbonded domestic magical creatures found a place. They needed that link with a home or territory. They could, if they were strong and determined, bond with an idea. Dobby had embraced his freedom as his place. Not all elves could sustain themselves the same way.

“Is the ambient magic on Rosier land enough to sustain all of you?” Hermione asked, adding the post-mortem support of her elves to her To Do list. Cathal didn't have great chances facing the Final Battle. She didn't want to leave anyone to descend into deprivation and madness like Kreacher. “I could invite my cousins here or find someone you prefer to act as my heir for you.”

“Bonica will stay on the land. Am too old to change her bond.” The house elf matron spun slowly counter-clockwise to check the tide and currents of the magic. “Everything wakes up with Miss here but the Hall is tired. Slept bad with Ministry poking and Dark wizards prying.” She flicked a glance at her Mistress, saw no censure, and continued. “Land can keep Bonica, maybe Wuddy because land knows him best. Too weary yet for more. Miss needs to be here longer.”

“I'm returning to Hogwarts in a few weeks.” She remarked to a nod from Bonica. “I'll be back for the holidays.” That was the plan, honestly because she expected to need to smuggle people out of the Castle. “Is there someone you know who you like?”

“Old Master Piers had bad friends.” Bonica's tone was so bland it drew a laugh out of Hermione. Massive understatement there. “We don't knows anyone trusty.”

“I think I have someone. I'll ask her when I drop by.” Hermione didn't want to make any promises she couldn't keep but the possibility seemed to be enough for the house elf. Perhaps this was a test of how much Mistress gave a damn about them. Bonica left to arrange Miss's clothes for a day of Apparating. Hermione spent several minutes staring in the mirror wondering if anything had changed. She owned people now.

Her first stop was to Moppet. Their bond gave her a direction, north-east, and her grasp of geography suggested the Isle of Man. When she arrived at Rose Cottage, Hermione was astonished to find it partially repaired. The debris had been cleared and the stone foundations, largely intact despite the
Fiendfyre, scrubbed clean. A waist height brick wall ran around the edge of the pad albeit without gaps for doors or windows.

“Cathal must stop leaving Moppet sudden.” The house elf lobbed a glob of mortar at her friend. “Moppet does not like it.”

“Blood magic,” Hermione dodged the projectile without effort. It had been more comment than intent.

“Moppet knows that.” She snapped, plonking a brick into place with a flick of her wand. “You must stop that too.”

“I have an idea. I'll need to go to Borgin and Burkes.” Pacing around the cottage, Hermione noticed the bricks were mismatched and weathered. “Where did you get the materials?”

“Moppet went to old barns and places, falling down places, and took what was on the ground. Like fallen apples.” Pausing to admire her work, she looked her witch up and down and up again. “You are not hurt?”

“I'm alright. The party was a bit Alice in Wonderland.” Hermione shrugged. “But I'm an adult and rich now so let's do unwise things.”

They began slowly, working up to danger. The first stop was Gringotts to confer with Harnak and move money around. By dint of handing over centuries of accumulated goblin artefacts, Hermione guaranteed cooperation. The bank would have done as she requested because she was a wealthy client but this way there was absolute surety of discretion. Particularly about her withdrawal of a stonking great number of Galleons and converting a fair bit to Pounds.

Next stop was Knockturn Alley. She had to pay ten times the amount to get back the brooch she had sold to Borgin six years before. The shopkeeper was obsequious but would only barter so much. She paid cash and didn't complain. Hermione would like to see him go to prison. Unfortunately, it would be hypocritical to denounce him for dealing in Dark objects when she was buying one.

She didn't bother with any of the other magical shopping she needed to do. Owl order would be good enough and it would placate Madam Rosier. Hermione reckoned she wouldn't get many opportunities to travel unsupervised so she wanted to make hay. The first step was going to Heathrow and looking casual while an invisible Moppet borrowed the passport of a tall blonde woman about the right age for the witch to duplicate.

The fewer alterations necessary made the spells stick better in her experience. She would require some sort of identification to avoid or limit using the Confundus Charm. Hermione altered her clothes to a nice suit like she'd seen in the high street but would never have bought because Granger wasn't the sort of girl with a thousand pound jacket.

She registered a Royal Mail PO box because she didn't have a residential address then went to the bank. Posh clobber or not, she still had to answer questions. Hermione would've preferred depositing her money in dribs and drabs to stay under the radar except she simply didn't have the time. So she sauntered in, asked to see an investment adviser then explained her eccentric aunt had left her some money.

It helped Hermione's conscience that the adviser was a patronising middle-aged man with an ostentatious Patek Philippe. She didn't feel all that sympathetic to him when she used magic to coax him to find the most plausible route to deposit a hundred thousand pounds. She avoided using the Imperius Curse, which was like using a hammer to shell an egg, but if she were found out she
probably would face Ministry charges.

This was her insurance money. If she and Moppet had to disappear into the Muggle world, this nest egg would help them survive. Hermione hoped it wouldn't come to that. She'd already arranged for money to be transferred from her private vault to the Gringotts branch in Chur, Switzerland. The goblins didn't care about countries so long as they had their hands on the Galleons.

She couldn't empty the family vaults without someone noticing. Even with magic, it took dough to run an estate. Mostly it was the price of food, which for entertaining at a pure-blood society level was astronomical. So Hermione diverted what she could, pruned where possible, and set up a preferred customer account at six different apothecaries. Much of the last was for the rehabilitation of Siglinde and of Tristan Nott. She'd taken over the costs of their potions as it was easier for her than Theo to arrange things until Nott Snr. was compos mentis again.

From the bank, Hermione went to a newsagent, bought a local paper and picked the first listing for a minivan she found. She went to the address listed, chatted to the housewife whose soldier husband was being posted overseas, paid cash for the reliable vehicle, and drove off. Once she had found a concealed parking space, which was harder than it looked in the inner city, she shrank the vehicle and Apparated to Derby.

In total, Hermione went to two different grocery wholesalers, a sports shop, and three military surplus stores. Everything went into the minivan, which was why she had bought it. Walking out with a trolley full of bulk food then trundling off across the parking lot into the shrubbery would cause comment. She was out of practice driving, she only had a provisional license or rather Granger did, thus the minivan had a few more dents then when she started.

Once she had bought everything even an obsessively over-prepared conspiracy theorist could want, she drove north until she found a wooded area reasonably presumed not to have surveillance cameras. Hermione hopped out, helped a queasy Moppet down, then pulled out one of the great finds from the Rosier vaults; a flying carpet.

It was a red and black Chiprovtsi kilim rug listed on the vault inventory as 18th century. The spells on it were still intact. Hermione added a Disillusionment and an invisibility charm after loading the cardboard boxes onto it. Moppet paced around securing the load then took the carpet for a ride around the spinney. The laden rug handled like a brick but the house elf assured her friend she could manage. They parted ways, with Moppet heading up to Hogwarts and Hermione driving to Bury St Edmunds.

Tracey Davis lived in a neat brick bungalow near Hardwick Heath, which Hermione knew because she'd asked Moppet to follow the girl home from school at the end of term. Pulling into the drive, narrowly avoiding the dustbins, she changed her clothes back to the traditional robes Bonica had laid out for her. They were pale blue, quite flattering, and hopefully would pass as a summer maxi dress to any curious neighbours.

Hermione used the brass knocker then waited. The garden was weeded, the front step swept. The windows sparkled. It was a very clean house. No cobwebs either, not even in the fiddly spaces under the gutters. She couldn't feel the warmth of elf magic or the tingle of wards. Tracey's birthday was in April, she always received a cake from home, so it was possible this was a recent scrub-up. Or someone else was as chronically tidy as Davis.

The old man who opened the door was a wizard. It wasn't obvious by his attire, a sweater vest and slacks, or his clipped hair but through her tie with Moppet Hermione could better sense the personal magic of individuals. The carefully ordinary senior citizen in front of her was unquestionably not a Muggle.
“Good afternoon, sir. Is Tracey in?” The 'sir' was probably a bit much. She sounded like she was selling something but Hermione didn't want the door shut in her face.

“She didn't say she was expecting anyone.” He said mildly, casting a very good wandless and wordless Repelling Charm. The spell washed over Hermione making her hair stand on end. She didn't feel any particular urge to leave, which suggested the working had been targeted against pure-bloods. Her body reacted but her mind did not.

“She isn't expecting me. It is rather important we talk.” She met his steady gaze. “I'm here to help.”

“We'll manage, thank you.” He made to shut the door. Hermione put the boot in, literally. She stuck her foot in the doorway. Steel cap boots, courtesy of the surplus store. She followed with a shove, letting herself into the front hall.

“Davis!” Hermione shouted. “A word, please!”

Tracey came down with her wand out. The old man shut the door. He didn't draw his own wand, which surprised Hermione. Davis didn't relax when she recognised Rosier, not even when the blonde raised both hands to show they were empty.

“How did you find out where I live? I always jump trains and check for Tracking Charms.” Tracey demanded after an Expelliarmus. She got on alright with Rosier but that was a school. They weren't really friends.

“I asked one of my elves to follow you. Misdirection charms don't work if your intention is to go home. House elves can follow that domestic link.” Hermione explained, because that was something she'd had to discover herself. Where the fundamentals of magic were concerned, Hogwarts needed a 'Mechanics of' far more than a 'History of'.

“For Hell's sake.” The Slytherin witch muttered. She did not lower her wand. Rosier wasn't threatening, yet, but Tracey was protective of her home. “Why are you so interested? What do you want?”

It took some explaining. As Hermione expounded on her requests, the trio migrated into the front parlour. Tracey's grandfather, who had pointedly not introduced himself, outright refused to leave when his granddaughter asked him if he would mind making them tea. He would mind, he replied, and as this was his house, he wouldn't be dismissed.

Tracey's parents came home from work just as Hermione was literally and metaphorically putting her money on the table. Their arrival necessitated a synopsis of the discussion. Mrs Davis went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine. She poured five glasses then gulped hers. The cheap red didn't help much.

“You want Tracey to inherit your elves if something happens to you, and you want us to go to France for a year.” Mr Davis had listened closely to what the snooty blonde was saying. He'd been saying much the same to his obstinate father since Fudge left office. “Which you'll pay for, if we leave right away.”

“Yes.” Hermione opened the moleskin pouch of Galleons she'd ponied up as proof of her sincerity.

“Is Hogwarts going to be that bad?” Tracey didn't look at the money. If she agreed, it wouldn't be for the cash she could already see persuading her father. Both her parents were Squibs. She'd been a lucky throwback. Not at all important in the scheme of things.

“Alecto and Amycus Carrow will be teaching. Muggle Studies and Dark Arts, respectively.” She
couldn't keep the sneer from contorting her mouth as though she had eaten something gone off.
“We'll all be hostages.”

“And I'm the only Seventh Year Slytherin who isn't Sacred Twenty-Eight. Except Zabini.” The amendment came with a shake of the head. Zabini might not be British wizarding aristocracy but his mother was a Dark Witch. Anyone who threatened Signora Zabini's darling boy would have their heart eaten. “A nice example to demonstrate their ruthlessness. Look at what they'll do to one of their own, think of what they'll do to you.”

“They'll go for the obvious target. They're unimaginative and vicious.” Hermione didn't like her chances avoiding the Cruciatus.

“Close friends of the family, are they?” Mrs Davis asked tartly. She recoiled, actually jerked back in her chair, when the Rosier girl glared at her.

“You can stay to verify their character for yourself. A Death Eater has control of the Hogwarts elves. A Death Eater heads the DMLE. You'll disappear into Azkaban with the Muggle-borns, assuming someone doesn't try to clean their family tree.” She looked to the elder Mr Davis. “I assume your surname is a pseudonym.”

“It is.” The wizard answered, back straight. “I was cast out when I refused to disown my son. I'm cursed not to be able to speak their name so I picked one very close.” He quirked an eyebrow at the young witch, who nodded. She could guess the pure-blood family with a name very like Davis. “My parents were ashamed of the failing of their blood but they weren't Death Eaters. My younger brother was happy enough to step up as the heir. I don't know about his descendants.”

“His scion is a snob but apolitical.” Hermione spoke with the confidence of two lifetimes. The former Head Boy had enjoyed his position more for score-keeping than influence. He hadn't returned for the Final Battle.

“He likes pretty girls.” Tracey said with unexpected sourness. She'd kept her crush on the dashing Quidditch Captain very much to herself. He hadn't looked at her twice. The age difference and the House difference had seen to that. He had been, however, a safe enough infatuation. Not for anything would she have thrown herself into the clutches of any of her fellow Snakes.

“We're getting off topic.” The junior Mr Davis interrupted stolidly. “We need to leave, and Miss Rosier has provided the means.”

“Lady Rosier.” His father corrected. “Head of the House, by dint of dead man's shoes.”

“Isn't that the usual way?” Hermione remarked, unsure of his gist.

“Father and grandfather dead before their time, mother obscurely absent, and I'd wager your grandmother is away with the fairies. Convenient for you. If you're not the youngest Head this century you're certainly one of the few.” He read the Daily Prophet more as a hair-shirt than for the news but before his expulsion he'd socialised regularly.

“Don't forget my great-aunt in St Mungo's and my maternal great-uncle late of Azkaban.” She wasn't hurt by the allegation of suspiciously speedy inheritance. Cathal had been locked up in a cottage while her relatives succumbed to Fate. “I have a few spare cousins yet for the pyramid of skulls.”

“You have bottle. I'll give you that.” For the first time, the wizard looked at the Galleons. His son made a frustrated noise, wanting to insist. It was Tracey who took the money, though. Neat as ever, she picked up the pouch and tucked it in a pocket.
“I expect Beauxbatons will accept my transfer without quibble. I'll hardly be the only one.” She stood and offered Rosier her hand. They shook on it, no mention of debt or terms. They'd sort that out later, mostly likely as patronage and sponsorship. The House of Davis was hardly august but Tracey had ambition in spades.
The ritual for the inheritance bonding was enough like a wedding to be awkward. The witches made a circuit of the Hall hand-in-hand, ending with the blonde lifting the brunette over the threshold so she didn't 'undo' the circle by physically crossing the border herself. They shared wine and broke bread together. The house elves acknowledged Davis with gifts of fruit and flowers.

“I don't feel any different.” Tracey commented quietly after eating the fruit and tucking the flowers into her hair. She and Rosier were walking quickly to the boundary wall to avoid any witnesses to the rite. Gringotts were sending a team tomorrow to raise wards. Hermione didn't trust anyone at the Ministry not leave backdoors through the defences.

“You won't unless I predecease you. Fingers crossed and all that.” She had to shrug but at least this way the house elves would be protected. “I don't know who'll inherit the Hall and the estate vaults. From what I was told at the bank, there could be a brawl. Malfoy or the Shafiqs could challenge the French Rosiers if they get the solicitors onto it.”

“You're really selling being landed gentry.” The unfettered commoner surveyed the blasted heath surrounding Rosier Hall and did not lament her lack of property. This land was too Bronte for her taste; the heights were wuthering.

When they made their farewells, Davis didn't give any details on where her family were going. Beauxbatons had a large catchment area. What Rosier didn't know, she couldn't be made to tell. They had enough money they could be a little picky about where they hid though the language difference would be their biggest hurdle.

Hermione didn't let herself linger to fret on someone else's problems. Davis was sensible and she wasn't alone. Her parents and grandfather could sort themselves out. For herself, she had more errands to run. She Apparated to Glasgow for dinner, uncertain whether Flint's presence in the United Kingdom was bad news. As far as she knew, his parents were still out of the country.

The difficulties in two Polyjuiced people meeting without previously being aware of the other's appearance was solved in their case by blue hats. Hermione thought she moved like she'd put her knees on backwards in the body of a thickset lorry driver she'd seen at one of the grocery stores. She couldn't get his stride right and shinned herself on two benches crossing the taproom to the slim woman in the ugly azure bonnet.

“We should have a secret handshake for this.” Hermione remarked, ready to apologise if she'd picked the wrong target. The gruff laugh from the petite witch gave Flint away.

“Rosier.” The woman said as she sat down at her table. “Fancy going up to my room? I feel like a prat in this body.”

Upstairs, he paced clumsily until the potion wore off then kept pacing, long legs quartering the room restlessly. Hermione sat on the bed, the only piece of furniture suitable for perching. This was a place to sleep not live. She couldn't see any luggage but with a wizard that was no significance. Flint could have half his manor in the cupboard.

“I'll start right out. This isn't a betrothal or wicked dealings or anything suspect.” Flint thought it best to assure the seventeen year old unmarried girl that he had no plans to accost her. “I bet my mother sent an offer for you.”
“She did indeed.” Hermione confirmed wryly. Flint made a face, which made him even more unlovely.

“I've got a place. Nice little house. There's room, we wouldn't be living in each other's pockets. Come back to Canada with me.” The offer came out with more force than she expected. He stopped pacing to grind a fist into the opposite palm, still tense. “England's not safe.”

“You came back to ask me to run away with you?” She said this aloud to verify that was what he wanted. Hermione wasn't convinced. Something about this had her ill at ease.

“Not just you.” Flint grimaced. “Olly won't leave.”

“You quarrelled.” Hermione guessed.

“Yeah.” That one word held a world of hurt.

“He's a Gryffindor.” She said gently, not wanting to rub salt in his wounds.

“He's supposed to be mine.” Flint snarled. “From the first time I saw him...” He cut himself off before he said something weak. Soppy romance wasn't him. He was fighting and hard shags and stupid arguments. “If only he did what he was bloody told.”

“Really, from the first?” Hermione asked, more curious than she was sympathetic. She wouldn't be bloody told either.

“We talked about Quidditch on the train, before he was Sorted. His dad used to play for the Tornados.” He spoke to the sky, well, to the roof but he was seeing the sky in his mind's eye. Olly was born to be on a broom. Even his Muggle mother recognised that. She used to take him out in the evenings dressed up as a kite so their neighbours wouldn't notice him flying. Marcus had laughed when his boyfriend had told him that, half a mile above some resort town in the Rockies.

“There are a lot of guys who play Quidditch.” She ventured, in case it was more about the play than the player.

“He's my soul-mate, Rosier. I can feel it.” Flint took a deep breath in the aftermath of his declaration. When she didn't say anything, he looked at the witch and her pained failure to hide her scepticism. “I'm not thinking with my cock.”

“I wouldn't put money on you thinking with your brain right now.” Soul-mates, honestly? Was that a thing too? Magic was stupid like that but Hermione didn't think it was that daft. One perfect match destined across time and space? Twin threads wound together? “Look, Flint, I'm not saying you don't love him, just take a breath, alright?”

“He's going to fight, Rosier. That's what we argued about. He isn't going to stay on the sidelines. He's going to throw away his career, his life, me, everything, because the fucking Chosen One is calling.” Marcus spat out the words, feeling each cut him inside. “What can I do when he won't leave?”

“Stand with him.” Hermione said before Cathal could stop her. Flint looked at her as though she was speaking tongues.

“It's not that simple. I'm not...” He stopped. He didn't know what he was.

“If you truly believe Wood is the man for you beyond all others then you have three choices.” She'd had this talk with herself in the tent after Ron left. “Either you leave alone, drag him away with you
forcibly, or you stay beside him.” Harry had refused to give up nor could he quit the field so she'd stayed. “I don't think he would ever forgive you if you kept him away from this fight.”

“He wouldn't, no.” Flint said on a long, fraught sigh. Why the fuck did he have to fall for man with no sense of self-preservation? A little bit of common sense and he could have whisked Olly away. Marcus didn't care who ran the Ministry. “Shit.”

“What's Wood doing at the moment?” Hermione asked, wanting to offer suggestions.

“I'm not going to tell you that.” The refusal was harsher than he intended. For a moment she looked as though he had slapped her before shrugging. “If you're not leaving with me...” He began a cautious explanation by way of apology, She waved him off.

“It's fine. I shouldn't have asked.” The Head of the House of Rosier reminded herself that she was not on the side of the angels. “Whatever you decide, whether you keep out of it or not, the Dark Lord's name is Taboo and he has Fenrir Greyback's pack at heel. You will need to be careful.”

“Are you going to listen to your own advice?” Marcus inquisited.

“Probably not as much as I should.” Hermione conceded. She stood and dipped her head in polite farewell. No hug, no handshake. Learning the basic courtesies of the wizarding upper classes had taken longer than it should but she’d got a reasonable grasp on them. Flint let her leave, though she didn't feel the conversation was over. Cathal didn't have anything more to say to him and she wouldn't let Granger off the chain.

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After years under Ministry purview, Rosier Hall needed a fair bit of work. The house elves had managed the upkeep and maintenance but they couldn't embark on any major projects without the permission of the Head of House. Hermione spent several days after her excursion being shown around the buildings by Bonica or the grounds by Ruddy or the boundaries by a team of goblins.

The Ministry had used their own Curse-Breakers to deactivate the wards after Piers's death, taking the opportunity to have a poke about the property. The executors had done much the same with the interior. Cygnus Black, acting on his ailing wife's behalf, had appropriated everything Druella was entitled to as a Rosier by blood. Bonica gave her a list of what he had taken, which Hermione dispatched to the Rosier solicitors to confirm.

She didn't particularly care about the baubles, she just wanted to have a plausible excuse to meet privately with Narcissa Malfoy if necessary. Hermione didn't think the witch would be much help but when dealing with psychotic mind-readers, you could never have enough plausible deniability. Lucius Malfoy hadn't lowered himself to filching anything though he had done a lot of snooping. Hermione wouldn't be inviting him over for tea.

The Rosier owls were a fat and factious lot. They had been living the life of Riley, eating and breeding with only the house elves to disturb them. The younger ones were healthy specimens but they hadn't been dedicated with the postal rite, leaving them clever though unfortunately mundane birds. Hermione removed the inherited binding tying them to the Rosiers and released them from the owlery. They scattered to find territory of their own, leaving their collared elders without a glance.

There were some ruffled feathers when she dispatched the enchanted owls with purchase orders. Hermione didn't expect to receive her goods promptly. She'd give the parliament a few days to stretch their wings. The Hall laboratory was well stocked. Piers had dabbled with potions, mostly Hangover Remedy, and self-medicating when necessary judging from the ingredients.
The hardware was top-notch if antiquated, an accumulation of generations of Hogwarts supplies. Hermione warded the spotlessly clean workroom and stores then began all the short brews she could finish before start of school. She’d bought a bandoleer at the military surplus store and a box of what she thought were aluminium cigar tubes the camping supply store had sold as ‘waterproof emergency travelling containers’ at a horrendous mark up.

The tubes were of a size to contain a dose of most potions and they fit neatly in the leather loops of the chest belt. She wouldn’t have to worry about smashing a pocketful of glass vials if she fell or was thrown. She could even colour-code the potions, which appealed to her Muggle sense of order. All geared up she’d probably look like an extra from Mad Max but she didn’t care.

Four days later when Siglinde had recovered enough to leave the house, they Flooed to Nott Manor with an array of philtres and unguents. Most had been made by apothecaries but Hermione had brewed some of the simpler ones herself to compare the quality and palatability. Cathal’s grandmother preferred the home-made potions though that was likely familial bias.

Theo was at the hearth to meet them, they’d been corresponding by owl, and was every politeness. Hermione raised an eyebrow when he bowed over her hand. He murmured 'Father insists' before offering Madam Rosier his arm. Siglinde allowed herself to be escorted to the solarium and settled on a chaise in front of the long window. Tristan Nott, reclining like a Roman Emperor, nodded in greeting to the witches. He didn't rise and they didn't remark on it.

There was some stilted chit-chat, Theo going through the motions before he poured tea. Hermione set the caddy of potions on a low table beside her, passing an atomiser to Siglinde and a more medicinal looking brown glass bottle to Nott Snr. The wizard sniffed the contents with a grimace of distaste while the witch misted the liquid onto her tongue like breath spray.

“Same?” Tristan asked hoarsely. He had screamed enough in Azkaban to damage his vocal cords. Magical healing and pain potions had eased some of the strain, though it would be months before he could speak without discomfort.

“Essentially.” Hermione confirmed. “I modified the medium to decrease the viscosity. It absorbs more quickly. I have some for you to try, if you'd like. I've put enough mint essence in it to mask most of the bitterness from the gentian.”

Nott was willing to sample her variant of the appetite stimulant, which was supposed to help the partaker recover from malnutrition but for both Death Eaters made everything taste of ash. He sprayed some on his tongue, coughing as the scent of mint overwhelmed his senses. The slight rush of the potion activating, it had many of the same ingredients as Pepper-Up, told him it was working. Tristan raised his cup of tea in salute to the Rosiers and sipped.

He swallowed, waiting for his stomach to rebel. There was a minor cramp at the warmth of the liquid but none of the violent spasms that had greeted any food without the standard potion. He proceeded slowly though not wanting to jinx his luck. Siglinde was looking better than she had been, suggesting the presence if not the brewing of her heir was restorative. His own heir certainly had perked up at the arrival of young Lady Rosier.

A suitable girl, Tristan thought, letting his mind dwell on happier prospects. He had few enough left. He'd fretted about his son while in prison. Theo didn't make friends easily and felt too deeply. He needed a sensible helpmeet. In the fullness of time, the House of Nott would make an official offer for an alliance with the House of Rosier. He wouldn't harry the schoolgirl like Malfoy or Yaxley. Yaxleys, Tristan corrected with a snort. Sniffing like dogs around a bitch.

“Potions Mastership?” He croaked, indicating the caddy with a palsied shake of his hand.
“I plan to, after qualifying as a Healer.” Hermione unpacked the lie without wrinkles. She certainly wouldn't mind undertaking an Apprenticeship, assuming she wasn't dead and Britain wasn't aflame. “I'd like to...”

Her preferences were interrupted by the crackle of the Floo. Esne scurried in to announce the guests a bare stride ahead of the wizards. They needed no introduction. Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood were neither in Death Eater regalia; Dolohov was in faded black robes cut for a man two stone heavier and Rookwood was in tailored navy blue he wore like a pantomime costume. They didn't have their wands out, which was the only reason why Hermione hadn't dived for the window.

“Uninvited.” The lord of the manor remarked coldly. Rookwood sketched the shadow of a bow, a gesture that would've been affable except for his gimlet stare. He'd been beyond suspicion, a good chap, before Karkaroff had denounced him. All those careful-casual mannerisms had withered in Azkaban and now played false.

“We are not here for you.” Dolohov's comment wasn't quite a sneer. Far from the featureless morass of evil Hermione had taken them to be, the Death Eaters were schismatic; lines drawn over old money and new, pure and half, school chums or recruits, inmates or Imperius. Too many divisions to discover without an anthropological survey. “The Dark Lord sent us for Lady Rosier.”

“She's made no petition for the Mark.” Siglinde spoke so quickly her words were a hiss. Rookwood smiled, a tic of nod too abrupt to be affable.

“She's young and unmarried.” That was simple fact but from the former Unspeakable there was subtext Hermione didn't like. She felt naked when he looked at her, like a laboratory specimen. “There's time yet. What interests our Lord is her medicinal innovations. Several of the new lads have sung her praises.”

“I haven't invented anything.” Well, nothing she was prepared to share with Death Eaters. “Just adapted variants.” If the wizarding world had any sort of standardised education her work wouldn't be remarkable. The lack of peer review or even a patent system meant people kept rediscovering the same thing. “What do you want to see?”

Everything, basically. They frogmarched her through the Floo back to Rosier Hall. Hermione was reluctantly reminded that an Unspeakable and a Curse-Breaker were likely to be intellectually curious. Their fanaticism and incarceration had limited their access to developments in their own fields. Rampaging across the countryside at the behest of an ideologue did not leave one much opportunity for research.

Hermione did show and tell in her laboratory, infinitely thankful she'd left the good stuff at Hogwarts. She talked at length about her efforts to vaporise the usual medical stand-bys, as there had been enough witnesses to her use of her sprays that she couldn't dissemble, but left out her work with other potion media. Topical use was limited to poultices and ointments, messy in the field and subject to more degradation than potions taken internally. An atomiser would be novel enough, she hoped.

She tried to be a pedant but it didn't seem to discourage. Dolohov and Rookwood were so starved for intellectual stimulation they hung on her words. When Hermione finally ran down, discomfited by their attention, she tried not to fidget awaiting their response. First twitch of hostility and they'd get a boiling cauldron to the face.

Astoundingly, Dolohov was the more tolerable. He inspected her tools, wafting the scents of the brewing potions properly with a hand and caution not taking a good sniff as the unwise did. He had offered for Cathal but she could believe he wanted her for her magic not her body.
Rookwood's eyes were thick on her skin. His oily gaze made her feel unclean. When she talked, he looked at her mouth not at the pots or vials. When she offered her lab journal, her public copy with her class notes in it, his fingers lingered on hers; his touch like Midas's; unwarm and cursed.

She flinched, withdrawing her hand gracelessly. He smiled. If they had been alone, she would've lashed out sure he would try to molest her. Dolohov took the journal, turning his back on her to flick through the pages. Had he positioned himself to screen her from his comrade-in-arms? Hermione didn't hesitate to step into his shadow, putting distance between herself and the Unspeakable.

They left shortly after. She called for Petal to clean the lab, her own hands too shaky to manage the charms as quickly as she wished. She wanted any trace of the Death Eaters gone from her workspace. Hermione didn't know much about Rookwood. He wasn't at the forefront of the violence like Greyback or Bellatrix so somehow he hadn't seemed as bad. There was something cracked about him; the sort of person who wrote down his observations as he pulled wings off flies.

She tried not to think of Rookwood that night when she gave herself a little more insurance. Hermione had considered asking Flint to help her with the little problem of her virginity. He wasn't too close like Theo or too risky like Malfoy. Too many men had offered to marry her for her to pick one for a no-strings tryst. She couldn't invite any of the boys she trusted because they didn't trust Cathal. She doubted even Fred or George would think deflowering the daughter of a Death Eater a laughing matter.

Flint was enough of a man of the world to have spared her blushes, but she hadn't found a tactful way of broaching the subject of how far along the Kinsey Scale he was. And any speech she might've prepared she would have discarded as soon as he mentioned soul-mates. Violating that intimacy would've been worse than any 'it's not you, it's me' refusal.

So the solution fell to her own two hands. In the fine tradition of Granger over-researching, Cathal's readings on the topic had been extensive. Hermione had kept herself from revulsion over the subject matter, and the consent issues, with humour. She pretended she was writing one of those informative books she'd found so often in the bargain bin at Flourish and Blotts. 101 Things to Do With a Hymen.

Not that funny honestly, but she had confirmed that one could harvest one's own virginity. There was no need for candles and mood music either. She found the rite in a manual of purification magic, recalling Beatrix Radnott's commentary on personal cleanliness spells. The description was a little coy and there were numerous references to spinsters but she could remove her own innocence herself. Or at least the magically significant part that qualified someone mystically as untouched.

A circle of iron salt and a philtre of unicorn tears to bathe the pelvic chakra, a calming chant and a stoppered vial for the blood and tissue. It stung a bit, more so when she rinsed herself afterwards, and despite all rational feminist ideology Hermione did feel as though she had lost something. Perhaps it was the drain of the ritual. Perhaps it was her own fear of being a convenient ingredient.

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The rest of the summer was brewing and lies. People came to visit, eligible men mostly accompanied by mothers or sisters for the social fiction they weren't dropping by to inspect the goods. Hermione made a point of taking tea in her lab apron and trousers, hair scraped back under a kerchief. She received no censure from Siglinde. Madam Rosier was mentally somewhere around 1980 and was having a lovely time riling anyone who had snubbed her daughter-in-law.

They didn't say a damn thing to her face, Hermione noticed tartly. All smiles and compliments, the latter somewhat laboured if she came in smudged with green or reeking of smoke. She wondered
how far she could push, how offensive she could be before someone called her out on it. When her grandmother set the teacups on the Burkes after a left-handed compliment on how good her English was, Hermione reckoned she had quite a bit more insult to go before it was wands at dawn.

The Death Eaters got no backtalk. Yaxley sent an owl requesting permission to cross her threshold and arrived with herbal wine for Siglinde and an Ottoman treatise on healing magic for Cathal. The book was so rare, Granger had only heard of it by reference, that she had a hard time not grinning with delight. Because of his thoughtfulness, Yaxley got the company tea out of the fancy cups and some of the petit fours Mardi had made for the 'acceptable' suitors.

Malfoy wasn't on the shortlist so he got leftovers in the kitchen when he stumbled in at four am to have a panic attack on the hearth. They couldn't close the Floo to Malfoy Manor, Death Eaters didn't have to ask, but Hermione had set enough alarms to animate the dead let alone wake them. Wand out, she found him sweating and shaking, and towed him to the pantry so she could pour hot chocolate into him.

He threw up the first cup and didn't bat an eyelash over the fistful of sugar she added to the second. It stayed down however. Hermione didn't ask him any questions. She really really did not want to know. Rookwood had hinted at research that would've turned Mengele’s stomach. Instead she supplied company and a damp cloth to mop his face and marshmallows.
Hermione felt a curdled resentment when she opened her Hogwarts letter and the badge fell into her hand. Head Girl, just like she always wanted. In green. No amount of rationalising was going to ease that sting. Even if everything was resolved and Granger went back to school, she'd never be Head. McGonagall might offer it to her but Granger wouldn't elbow aside Ginny or Luna or any of the other girls who’d endured the Carrows.

It was the OWLs all over again. Cathal Rosier didn't have to work as hard or put up as stubbornly and good things just fell in her lap. She wanted to throw the fucking badge into the fire. Instead she took a deep breath and reminded herself that she had the rare, blessed chance to be in two places at once. Fight the war on two fronts. See how the other half lived.

Who knew what would happen when the school's magic unwound from her. Cathal might cease to exist or be forgotten, the name in the rolls the only indication she had ever been. Why spurn her a memento mori? Hermione breathed in slowly, deeply and as she had done so often, crystallised her rage for extraction.

The debut of the school year had her extracting rather a lot of anger. The suspiciously well-timed congratulations from various suitors, a stitch-up from the start, and the stilted but beautifully calligraphed little notes from her peers in response to the announcement of her position in the Prophet had her tapping her wand to her temple.

Siglinde had put the quietly smug notice in the newspaper as it had been done in her time at school. Head Girl was a coveted position, an indication of excellence in politics as well as scholarly endeavour. There hadn't been a Slytherin Head since Dumbledore's ascension to the Headmastership. Two green Heads in the one year, quite a triumph.

Nott was the Unlucky Charlie who received the honour of being Head Boy. He'd sent her an owl as soon as he got the badge, wanting to confirm they would be sharing the responsibility. They met to agree a strategy then rendezvoused on the Platform to present an united front. Both knew the Carrows personally and expected neither competence nor professionalism.

Even with precognition and Occlumency, her last first day was awful. Siglinde came with them with camera clicking. She had not had the experience of sending her granddaughter off to Hogwarts openly and didn't want to miss a moment. Hermione dutifully posed in front of the luggage mountain in the Georgian house, in front of the brick arch, and in front of the steam engine. Madam Rosier took several photos of the Head Girl and Boy together, for herself and for Nott Senior, still too frail to see his son off.

Hermione could spot who was missing easily. Regardless of House, she knew all the Muggle-borns by sight if not by name. The Gryffindor contingent seemed even smaller by their quietness. They walked as though heading for a funeral. The Ravenclaws filled the Platform with high-minded chatter, distracting themselves with esoterica from the looming presence of Snatchers. The Hufflepuffs kept their heads down, stayed in groups, and shouldered their way onto the train.

The Slytherins... well, the idiots preened. Crabbe and Goyle swaggered, standing proudly with their fathers. Hermione picked out the Death Eater parents with ease. They looked so pleased with themselves she wouldn't have been surprised to see some of them with hard-ons. This was the sort of power differential they wanted; lording it over their lessers indiscriminately.

The sensible Snakes had carefully composed faces. They didn't linger on the Platform, didn't see the
scruffy men loitering at the exits, didn't make eye-contact with anyone. They put themselves tidily into compartments and waited. The Carrow twins walked past her without a glance, walking in step like automatons. With black ribbons in their hair.

The Head Boy and the Head Girl did their duty. The Hogwarts Express chugged out of Kings Cross and Hermione could almost hear the collective sigh of relief once they were out of sight of the station. Hermione started her patrol immediately, not wanting any of the excitement to earth itself as fights. Conflict was inevitable but she wanted to put it off until the victims could run and hide. Everyone was trapped on the train until Hogsmeade.

There were more than the usual amount of older Years lingering in the corridors, keeping watch as the younger students got settled. She passed Ernie MacMillan standing sentry for the Badger kits. His knuckles whitened into fists and he muttered something. Hermione could have let it go. Granger would have but Cathal needed to exert her authority to the nth degree.

She turned, stepping up to the Hufflepuff until they were nose to nose. She was, she noticed, slightly taller than he was and used the scant inch to look down said nose at him. The expression didn't do much to intimidate him. Her wand jabbed into his belly did. He hadn't drawn at her approach. He really should have and she needed him on his guard.

“"You have something you would like to say, MacMillan?” Hermione asked placidly.

“I noticed your grandmother on the platform.” He gritted out between his teeth. “Nice to have family see you off.”

“Yes, it was pleasant. She has been looking forward to it for years.” She prodded him with her hawthorn. “I have enjoyed this chat, MacMillan. However, this year I think it best if you kept your pithy comments to yourself. I am the soul of compassion and reason when compared to the new Hogwarts staff.” Hermione stared him in the eye. “Be told.”

He wasn't, of course.

An hour after the Sorting and the menacing speech of the Headmaster, MacMillan was in Amucus Carrow's office. Hermione heard the DADA professor's laughter as she gave the First Year Slytherins a tour of the fastest route from their dormitory to the Hospital Wing. She didn't take them past Carrow's office. His guffaws were loud enough to echo.

This year, Professor Snape's induction speech for the new members of his House had been terse. They would conform to every stricture and ordinance. There would be no pranks or frivolous behaviour. They would not speak to, look at, attract the attention of, or in any way obstruct the guards posted in Hogwarts. Or the consequences would be severe and permanent.

The Prefects meeting afterwards was even more dire. Snape lowered the boom on them; there would be no tolerance of juvenile behaviour. It was their responsibility to ensure the smooth running of their House and by extension the school. Given their surnames, he trusted he did not have to elaborate on the dangers or the punishments for any infractions.

He didn't want to say they would be using the Cruciatius, Hermione thought afterwards. Either that or he knew how slack a leash he had on the Carrows and wasn't certain himself how far they would go. The Professor had asked her to stay after the meeting. He informed her he had arranged for her to act as an assistant to Madam Pomfrey, who would likely be busy this year. The post would be useful for any future career as a Healer or Medi-Witch.

She didn't ask any questions. She stared at the wall over his shoulder and thought about dinner; every
item of cutlery carefully in its place. Hermione mentally polished the silverware until he dismissed her. Then she went to do what she could to prepare the First Years without terrifying them. There were only seven new students in Slytherin House that year, and from the look of them they were all regretting their enrolment.

Once she had shown the eleven year olds the route, which diverted around the moving staircases and avoided blind corners as much as possible, she escorted them back to the dungeons. They were not to explore the castle on their own. Curiosity was not a virtue of their House. Hermione assigned each of them to an older Year, who would show them the ropes and to whom they were to report each day after class.

Both older and younger students protested at this arrangement. Hermione listened to their objections then called for a general assembly in the Common Room. There was a little grumbling; most of the Slytherins were writing letters home to assure their parents they had arrived safely. There had been students dragged off the Platform and the train. No one in green had gone missing. Yet.

“Good evening.” Hermione said crisply, surreptitiously sliding her wand into her hand. She was carrying three; two in wrist holsters and one at the small of her back. The wand in the quick-release holster on her off arm was vine and meant to be sacrificial. She'd put a charm on it that would hopefully draw Expelliarmus to it. The Disarming Charm was old and not much innovated thus easy to work around, in theory. She hadn't had a chance to test it in the field yet.

“Already lording it, Rosier?” Parkinson asked snippily. She was wearing a very firmly secured cosmetic charm but couldn't conceal the pinching of her mouth. Hermione suspected there was substantial bruising on one side of her face, enough that the standard bruise paste was slow to mend it. She didn't imagine Parkinson had been all that keen to return to school.

“Expecto Patronus.” A lithe ethereal shape formed, growing whiskers and an inquisitive twitchy muzzle. Her stoat, regal ermine in its silvery coat, scampered around the room. It ran up to Theodore Nott, sniffing him, before jumping sideways to bristle at Malfoy. The little creature dove into a curio cabinet and vanished from sight. “Unless you can cast that Charm too, shut the fuck up, Parkinson.”

“There aren't Dementors in the Castle.” An anonymous voice in the crowd, old enough to have been a firstie during her Third Year, objected. The undertone strongly suggested they were delighted by the absence and wished very very fervently for it to continue.

“They've been released from Azkaban. They're hungry.” Hermione replied with emphasis on the last word. “We are a buffet, and the more Dark Magic generated inside the school, the easier Dark creatures will find it to slip through the wards.” Her wand jabbed forward, slicing through the air like a sword. “Argento Ferro.” A slash of white bisected a footstool. The cut edges smoked, briefly limned with a metallic sheen. “How many of you can cast any of the silver battle spells? Any of the protective charms to ward off lycanthropes or treat their bites?”

“But they're on our side.” Crabbe said that.

“They're hungry too, Vincent.” She spoke softly. “Many of the Snatchers are werewolves. They're in here with us. Day after day, all the tempting sights and smells. They probably won't go for a Slytherin first. But how much are you willing to wager on a monster's self-control?”

Very little, as it turned out. One of the strategies she and Nott had devised had been keeping their House as occupied as possible, not out looking for amusement in the halls. They repurposed an empty classroom nearby to be a sparring chamber, with the members of the Duelling Club present to give instruction. Another room, full of not-quite-posh enough furniture was allocated as a study hall to act as a quiet refuge from the emotional hothouse of the Common Room.
She couldn't do everything. As much as Hermione would like to be the reincarnation of Nimue, there was a limit. She had to delegate and that meant trusting people. Slytherin House was not a font of altruism but there was an endless supply of enlightened self-interest. Reopening her old laboratory, she invited Greengrass, Zabini, the Carrow twins, and Sixth Year Corwin Yaxley to assist in making healing and pain potions. They needed a lot.

She couldn't do anything about the Crucio. The other Carrow siblings were riding high on a wave of power and malice. Any little infraction had their wands out. Hermione had to sit through Muggle Studies untouchable while Alecto spat bile, cursing the combined Sixth and Seventh Years at the slightest twitch. It was just as bad in Defence Against the Dark Arts except Amycus had more targets.

The only positive thing about Umbridge's tenure was it gave the Slytherins a benchmark for how to avoid trouble. The other Houses fared less well. In the middle of October, Hermione called a Prefect meeting. She could post notices for that openly, one of the few instances of cross-House communication not looked upon with suspicion by the Carrows. They had Snatchers watching the Owlery around the clock.

By arrangement, she was the only Slytherin in attendance. Nott was teaching a remedial class in DADA to ensure no one had to go to Carrow's office to explain a failing mark. The Snakes were sure he marked at random, as the whim took him, but if they were ever called upon in class and couldn't perform the spell, they would be punished. The Sixth Year Prefects, Carrow and Yaxley, were on patrol and the Fifth Years, Travers and Orpington, were posted in the Library to quell trouble.

Longbottom and Abbott were in the room when she arrived. Neville was sitting in that careful way that spoke of abdominal bruising or cracked ribs. Hannah appeared unharmed but she fusssed, shifting chairs, straightening knick-knacks as she watched the door while trying not to look like she was watching. She jumped, actually left the floor, when Cathal stepped out from behind a wall panel.

“No one from Ravenclaw.” Hermione commented as she took a seat at the square table perpendicular to Longbottom. The wood twitched a little then subsided, not needing to expand with only one person per side. Various wags had tested the dimensions of the table, even dragging it outside for pranks. It expanded to accommodate an entire House along one side, getting its revenge by snapping back to a card table with a concussive blast wave when everyone stood up at the same time. Gryffindors, because of course it was the Lions, had been sent sprawling across the Quidditch pitch. Oh, the joys of yesteryear.

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“Study night.” Longbottom said blandly. “We said we'd let them know if there were any changes.”

“Muffliato.” She cast in case things got heated.

“That's Hermione's spell.” Neville recognised the anti-eavesdropping charm.

“Actually, it's Professor Snape's. I got it from the same place Granger did.” That was so so true. “Useful trick, isn't it?”

“It is, when you won't own up to your own words.” He snapped, the lying and skulking already wearing on his nerves. Sometimes he just wanted to stand up and shout the truth.

“Could we have some Dittany?” Hannah asked in a rush before Neville said something to rile Rosier. “You helped us in Fifth Year. I don't know what Justin paid you but I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. Please.” She said in one breath then gulped. “There are always Snatchers near the Hospital Wing. We have to sign for potions.”
“So do we.” Hermione replied mildly. “Headmaster Snape is concerned there is a black market in therapeutic brews.” That was what he had said when he enacted the check-list after a spate of near overdoses of Calming Draught. “I will supply you with medical aid, on the condition I am informed of any resistance activities prior to their occurrence.”

“So you can tell Snape?” Neville shifted, biting back a grimace. When Hannah had told him of the source of the Hufflepuff Dittany, he had been sceptical. There’d been rumours of a confrontation between Rosier and a load of senior Gryffindors at the end of Fifth Year but he’d never got a good account of what had actually happened.

“So I can shield my House from the inevitable reprisal.” She returned calmly. “The Carrows have no loyalty to Slytherin. They just want to get their rocks off, and from previous experience I know your lot is happy to drop us in it.”

“I'm not sure anyone will be willing to risk that much.” Hannah couldn't dispute that the Hufflepuffs would go to detentions happily if it meant a Snake got what was coming to them. Unconsciously, her gaze fell to the blonde girl's left arm. One of the reasons only she and Neville had come to the meeting was the possibility it was a trap.

“To my certain knowledge, only Malfoy has been Marked.” Hermione pushed up her sleeve to show unblemished skin. “Though several are champing at the bit to be inducted.” She straightened a little in her chair, not wanting to get too chatty with Hannah. “You have little choice. Either you accept my terms or you find your own source.”

“It's as easy as that, is it?” Neville would've refused if it had been only him. He could take his lumps and his chances. But the Carrows were deliberately targeting the younger students, the ones easiest to intimidate. They liked instilling fear. They didn't like putting a lot of effort into it. “You could just help us. Or do you fancy being the lesser of two evils?”

“I don't fancy being the lesser sort of anything.” She retorted, wanting to shake him and hug him at the same moment. “It's simple logistics, Longbottom. Gryffindor has allies in the other Houses. Slytherin does not. I need informants. As much as I wish to fulfil my duties as Head Girl to the entire school, if you don't trust me, I can't afford to trust you.”

“Your father was a Death Eater.” He got to the crux, the line that could not be crossed. His parents were in St Mungo's because of people like Rosier's sire, grandmother, uncle, and cousins. Bare arm notwithstanding, she'd been born for the Mark.

“Yes.” Hermione answered simply. “Aurors killed him. Aurors killed my mother too. Yet I am here talking to you, willing to help people standing with those happy to send me to join my parents.” She arched an eyebrow deliberately to mimic Snape. “If our positions were reversed, how much would I have to give for you to help me?”

“Rather a lot.” Hannah, unwilling but fair, admitted. “Anything Hufflepuff does against the Carrows, I'll let you know. I can't promise you'll hear about everything. It's not all planned. But, yes, alright.” She held out her hand, wanting to shake on it to reassure herself Rosier was prepared to unbend that far. When the blonde touched her without flinching, she was surprised.

The next thing in her hand was a slip of brightly patterned paper. Hannah smoothed it out, noticing the many folds creasing it in a regular pattern. Origami, she realised, thinking of the lucky cranes she'd made in primary school. She looked at Rosier, who was folding a square of her own into a simple box shape. Hannah did the same easily, following the creases. When she was done, Rosier reached into the paper container and pulled out a roll of adhesive plaster like you could buy at the chemist's.
“The wound pad part has been infused with dittany. You cut bits off the strip as necessary, stick it on, and leave it for a few days.” Hermione was quite pleased with her little cheat. “It's not instantaneous like the essence but this way anyone using it will have both an excuse and damn well keep the pad on until the dittany has properly soaked in, like they're supposed to but never do.”

“What else is in there?” Neville asked and got a sheet slid over to him. He folded, stuck his hand in, and felt all sorts of shapes. He pulled one out at random. It was a sachet, shiny silver with words printed across it.

“Sports drink powder. You add that to a glass of water. It replaces electrolytes.” She saw his non-comprehension. “The nutrients and salts you sweat out with exertion. Keeps you from becoming dehydrated.” Hermione explained. If he asked any of the half-bloods, Neville could confirm what she said. “There's food and medical supplies in each. Keep them folded like bookmarks and no one will notice.”

Deep, deep within the innermost recesses of her soul, Hermione would forever proudly treasure the expressions on Hannah and Neville's faces when she set another forty papers in front of them. Two for each Year, for each House. They were gobsmacked. Score one for the swots and the bookworms. She probably didn't keep the grin off her face.

* 

She wasn't grinning when she met Moppet that evening. They'd checked in with each other at the start of term but in the busy days since had seldom had time to chat. Moppet had the onerous task of probing the bond between the Hogwarts elves and the Headmaster. They couldn't ask the elves for help if it meant directly defying the will of Snape.

“It's not all the way stuck but it's sticky.” She was protected by her joining with her Miss. Moppet liked that very very much. “Professor the Nose hasn't the rites of the office but his bum has the chair.” The house elf flopped into her stuffy seat in the really secret laboratory. Touching the magic of every and each elf made her so tired. “He can make orders while he's in the Castle. Like a wormy in the brain.”

“We'll have to time anything we ask from the elves for when he's off the grounds. Without a ritual tie to the school, he might not sense something's up if he isn't in the Castle but I'd prefer to be sure he's out of range.” Hermione poured herself and her friend some hot chocolate. “I don't want to put him in the position where he has to report something to his master. Bliss and ignorance and so forth.”

“We could push him off a tower like the one before.” Moppet suggested. She was free not to like the man the awkward booky boy had become. He had been no trouble when he was a student, Now, though, now he was bad. “I wants to poison the Professor Carrows. They hurts the elves.”

“I'll find something slow acting, debilitating but not lethal, at least not until the final battle.” It had been years since she would've cavilled at the notion of gradually murdering someone. She had fantasised about slipping Umbridge rat poison. “A contact toxin. We can't risk putting anything in their food.”

“Moppet poisons their socks. Nobody touches those.” The Hogwarts elves did the minimum required to avoid the wrath of Alecto and Amycus. Shirking a little more on their laundry would not be a difficult ask.

“Ideally we can keep them weary but not suspiciously so.” Hermione sighed. “This would be bloody easier if all four Houses would work together. I wish I was in Hufflepuff.” She grumbled. She would've taken her whinging to Hogwarts itself except the Voice had requested she not
communicate directly while Snape was within its precinct. She had been informed of this via a
dismembered Daily Prophet; the torn out letters arranged on her bed like a ransom note.

“The nice yellow hair girl who cleans up after when she bakes talks to you.” Moppet pointed out
before her witch caught the doldrums. “And yellow hair Lion who comes back again looks at you all
the time.” She frowned as she thought of the shouty wizard who always had elves remake his bed.
“Mostly when Miss bends down.”

“McLaggen stares at the arse of anything in a skirt.” She got an impression of a tall, fair haired boy
from their link. Nothing distinct but she was regretfully familiar enough with Cormac to recognise
him from reflected arrogance alone. “If he wasn't such an octopus, I'd try to get his help. His family
are well-connected.”

“Moppet could poison his socks too.” The house elf offered enthusiastically.

“Thanks, but he's well down the list. You could start with whoever keeps sending me carnivorous
plants.” Since her coming of age, her mail had become eclectic. Various suitors taking a page out of
etiquette books sent her gloves or scarves or the old standby of bouquets with carefully romantic
meanings. Various others with more nerve or less to prove sent poetry or handmade things to show
their skills. Yaxley, who was hitting closer to the target than she was prepared to admit, had sent her
a sampler of Chinese ink in anticipation of her increase in correspondence. Other less welcome gifts
arrived too.

“Does Miss need Moppet to check her owls?” If someone was posting bad things to her witch,
Moppet would happen to them.

“Oh so much.” It wasn't quite used underwear or bodily fluids but Hermione was rather put off by
books bound with human skin or Dark Magic curios. “But we should probably leave it. I think the
worst, coyly anonymous, are coming from Death Eaters. They may actually be so addled they forget
to sign their gifts. For all I know, the Carrows may be reporting on my reactions. I'll get my
grandmother involved if it gets more creepy.”

“When this is not this any more, Moppet wants to go somewhere far away with less eyes looking all
the time.” The house elf gulped her chocolate, chasing the sugar settled in the bottom of the cup.

“There's going to be more eyes on us after the war. There'll be trials and questions and the whole
legal circus.” Hermione hoped that if Cathal was still around for all that rigmarole that she could at
least keep her head down to avoid the worst. “If things go really pear shaped and we're separated,
head to the States. Macusa has some of the friendliest legislation for free elves. No one will bother
you there.”

“And what will Cathal be doing while Moppet is across the sea?” She asked tartly.

“Five to ten in Azkaban, if I'm unlucky.”
The first body she saw in the corridors she didn't recognise. Hermione was on patrol, an activity increasingly becoming a farce. The Prefects did not need to encourage their fellow students not to go about after curfew. As soon as the hour approached, everyone bolted for their respective Common Rooms. She was alone as her rostered partner, Longbottom, was in the Hospital Wing again. His tactic of keeping the Carrows’ attention on him rather than on the younger students was working but it cost.

The little form was curled up at the base of one of the staircases. She almost trod on him in the gloom. Crouching, Hermione did the first aid checks her... Granger's parents... had taught her. He was still breathing, though there was vomit in his mouth and nose. She cleaned him up then rolled him carefully into the recovery position.

He was a First or Second Year Ravenclaw and from the look of him he had been subject to the Crucio. His limbs trembled under her hands, indication of sloppy spell-casting, and Hermione suspected the detention cursing had begun. Neville had mentioned it briefly in the whirlwind of catching up after the Trio returned to Hogwarts. No general notice had been given to the student body. The Headmaster had not mentioned it.

A little side project from the Carrows, it seemed. Hermione straightened and with wincing care levitated the boy. He shuddered as her spell washed over him, twitching enough the magic couldn't get as secure a hold on him as she'd like. Four flights of stairs with only a half-grip on a badly hurt child was not a good prospect. She got her shoulders under him, settling him into a fireman’s carry before dismissing the levitation.

He wasn't hefty but Granger wouldn't have been able to manage it. Hermione plodded up the steps, pausing on each landing to check she wasn't being followed and to catch her breath. When she got to the Spiral Staircase, she stopped again to look up at the elegantly winding curve and swear. Cathal might be built like an Amazon but there were limits.

She set the boy down gently, wiped her sweating face with her sleeve then sent her Patronus to the Tower to rouse assistance. Hermione shifted herself and her passenger into the centre of the spiral where they would be visible to those above so they would see it wasn't a trap. She could have left the kid but she wanted to be sure he was found and she wanted to chew the ear of whoever had missed him.

Patil and Goldstein came down with wands drawn. The witch stood in a duelling posture keeping her covered while the wizard checked the hallway for lurkers. Hermione waited semi-patiently, wanting to hurry them along but aware she would get nothing useful if she tried. She did want everyone to be cautious. Constant vigilance etc. So she waited.

“I thought the Dark couldn't cast the Patronus.” Patil remarked when Goldstein returned. They swapped guard duty so she could check the boy lying at Rosier's feet.

“The spell requires you to be happy. It doesn't specify what you are happy about. Umbridge can cast it.” Hermione informed her, taking a step back when Goldstein indicated for her to do so. “Don't you do a head count?”

“We do. We did it.” Anthony replied, testy with the proof they had made mistake. “Everyone was in.”
“Melwidge didn’t sign himself out.” Gently, the witch lifted the boy’s eyelids. They were pink, not red suffused with blood. No cranial trauma, at least. “So someone either covered for him or he snuck out or the count was off or...” Padma stopped herself, taking a deep breath. “All control begins with the self.” She murmured then looked up at Rosier. “Why didn’t you take him to the Hospital Wing?”

“Madam Pomfrey is out of pain potions. The next batch won't be ready for three days.” The boy was unconscious at the moment but when he roused he'd need pain relief. She'd included a generous amount in the paper slips.

“Which you know because you’ve been apprenticing there.” Goldstein's tone suggested he thought her presence in the Hospital Wing suspiciously convenient. Hermione did not comment. She'd worked for seven years to overcome Granger's habit of vomiting discourse at every opportunity. Personally she gave her efforts a Pass at best. “Firenze doesn't like you.”

“I'll add him to the list.” She snarked. Padma glared at the two of them but Anthony was evidently not trying to pick a fight.

“I've read your numbers, Rosier. They don't make any sense.” His stymied intellectual curiosity made him sound plaintive. “I think I have you reconciled like Malfoy then you do something like this. I keep drawing the High Priestess reversed and the ten of wands. I don't trust consistent readings. You can't have been doing the same thing for seven years.”

“You want to discuss tarot now?” Hermione gestured at the unconscious Melwidge, shamelessly using the boy to divert the conversation. Goldstein recollected himself to the urgency of the moment and apologised, sheathing his wand to assist Patil. While the Ravenclaws were gathering their Housemate, she made her exit.

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The second body she saw in the corridors she did recognise. Seamus Finnegan was sitting slumped under the portrait of Merwyn the Malicious portentously near the secret corridor to the Entrance Hall. His head jerked up when she approached. He had his wand out but he pointed it half a metre to her left. He was however aware enough to swear.

“Fuck, Lovegood, am I glad to see ye.” He slurred, his blue eyes squinting to bring her into focus. It didn't evidently work as he didn't recoil when she crouched beside him to examine the blood crusting the side of his head. “Took a bit of a wallop.”

“Hmm.” Hermione agreed, deciding that he could think she was Luna for a while longer. The wound was from a blow not a curse and when she touched his head delicately she felt bone shift. Cranial fractures were not something she was willing to treat in a hallway. She slid an arm around his waist and helped him to his feet.

“Got me in the knee too.” Seamus shifted his weight onto his good leg, leaning heavily on her. If he noticed she was almost a foot taller than Luna, he didn't remark on it. Mostly he just swore as she took him the quiet way to the Hospital Wing. He smelled of wood smoke and cheap booze with undertones of something gamy. Goat, she suspected.

Madam Pomfrey had a single bed free when they walked in. She was treating a Slytherin Third Year and simply nodded, trusting Cathal to know the drill. Hermione lay Seamus down, removed his shoes, stowed his wand on the bedside table, and cast a diagnostic charm. Yep, cranial fracture though thankfully a minor one. Concussion, extensive contusions, curse damage to the left leg, and a fair bit of abrasion of the knuckles of his off hand. Seamus had given as good as he got.
“Snatcher scuffle.” Hermione informed the matron. Not the first, not the last.

“We'll swap. Use a mild massage charm to help Crowdy with the muscle spasms.” Madam Pomfrey left the Slytherin in the charge of the Slytherin, turning her back on the pair in hopes the girl would tell Rosier who had hurt her. It wasn't the Cruciatus but it was something nasty indeed.

Hermione stood at Elspeth's bedside and hated herself when the girl flinched. She was a half-blood and moderately clever. No trouble. But she'd dragged herself into the Common Room late three times this week alone and her family were wealthy landowners; a prominent lineage unconcerned with blood politics.

“Has Crabbe given a reason for his bullying?” Hermione asked, as though making an informed guess. If someone from another House was targeting her, Crowdy would've told someone. So, it was in-house. For morale if nothing else, she and Nott kept a close eye on the younger Years to ensure they weren't picking up any bad habits. So no one Fourth Year or under. None of the Prefects had time for private vendettas. Those few Fifth and Sixth Years not Prefects she could have asked. The same with the Sevenths. She could have made inquiries. What she had done was ask Moppet to follow the girl.

“No.” Her reply was a mouse-whisper.

“Do you think he's going to get bored of you any time soon?” What she wanted to ask was if the girl wanted her to dismantle Crabbe into an anatomical maquette.

“No.” Resignation with a bit of gritted teeth.

“That suggests he's been asked to make your life miserable, don't you think?” Hermione raised an eyebrow as a full body tremble shook the girl. The tremor looked like an electric shock and Crowdy had to wait it out before she could nod. “I think you should go home for Yule, and stay home.”

“Ministry says we have to go to Hogwarts.” This reply was trenchant, her mistrust obvious.

“The Ministry talks out of its arse.” The casual obscenity shocked a laugh out of the girl so Hermione pressed on. “I don't like Crabbe and I don't want him using a Slytherin for target practice.” She drew her wand slowly, telegraphing her movement. No flinch. She cast the massage spell. “Effleurage.” Elspeth relaxed onto the bed. “I have somewhere you can hide if your family can't or won't run.”

“I want an oath, ah.” Crowdy spoke quickly in between winces as the rub-down eased some of the curse residue. “A proper one. That you aren't lying about helping. Or trying to trap me.” She twisted her head to espy Madam Pomfrey then whispered. “Not an Unbreakable, ow, ah. On your House.”

“I, Cathal Machtild Rosier, Head of the House of Rosier, promise formally I mean no harm to Elspeth Crowdy.” The etiquette books had given degrees of oaths and vows. Hermione picked a tidy legal one. She could get around it with an advocate and a lot of rules lawyering but she would look shabby for doing so. “In the spirit of my promise, I offer sanctuary.”

“Yes.” The tired and frightened thirteen year old said quickly, her voice cracking. “Please, yes.”

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The third body was upright and in company. A week after she had given Elspeth a pass-token so she could slip away into one of the bolt-holes, Hermione was patrolling alone again. Neville was in the Hospital Wing with Ginny and Luna after they had tried to steal the Sword of Gryffindor. They had been brutally punished for their attempted theft.
The whole school had been made to watch.

She'd numbed herself with Occlumency, crystallising so much rage she hadn't felt a thing for hours. She'd stood unflinching while Granger's friends were tortured and cold bloodedly debated with herself how she was going to murder Alecto and Amycus. She wouldn't use the Killing Curse. She wouldn't stain the tapestry of time for them. They would have no marker, no memorial. She'd find a Muggle way of ending them. Pigs to the slaughter.

Hermione knew herself well enough to realise she was still partially under the effect of her excessive use of the meditation. Extracting that much emotion left holes; overstimulated thus subsequently desensitised neuro-transmitters. Or was it neuro-receptors? The transmitters were the chemicals? She frowned, her understanding of the science of brain function limited to documentaries and dental clinic medical journals. A sensible person would've read up more before they started yanking things out of their head.

She had a pen in hand to make a note to fill that knowledge gap when a sharp noise of discomfort and a low chuckle intruded on her ramblings. There was a wand in her hand before she'd even registered the malice in that laugh. She was striding down the hall like Snape on a tear before the 'no' and the sound of a scuffle.

Susan Bones's fingers were hooked into claws. She got the Snatcher a good one across the face as she brought her knee up to groin him but he shifted quickly to the side to protect himself, slamming her against the wall. He hissed something obscene and groped her, clawing her breast. She clamped her mouth shut refusing to validate him with a cry of pain.

"Hands off, arsehole." They were too close for Hermione to risk any of the curses she really wanted to use. "Let her go and leave quietly." She didn't add an 'or else'. She could probably get away with quite a lot of 'or else' if she played the vicious bitch card. None of the powers that be would be impressed with a rescue. Lashing out at an inferior, though. That'd pass muster.

"Fuck off." He didn't turn to look at her. He ground himself against Bones instead, confident both witches were impotent. Neither of them would risk the punishment they would suffer if he denounced them.

"Not tonight, thank you." Hermione reminded herself she was the Head of her House. Less swearing, more snoot. "Bones, do you know his name?" The Hufflepuff was staring at her, attention fixed on anything but the man touching her. She shook her head. "Does he have any friends? Not likely, I know but someone is going to have to identify the body."

Now the Snatcher looked at her, irritated enough by the interruption to glare. He apparently wasn't much impressed by what he saw because he sneered and reached for his wand, pushing away from the redhead to deal with the blonde. That was all Hermione needed. Once he was no longer pressed up against her schoolmate, she cursed him.

"Somnium papaver." The anaesthetic charm mimicked the effect of opium. Originally the spell had been used recreationally by magical folk wanting to 'chase the dragon' without having to slum with Muggles. Healers had adapted it as a powerful and reliable knock-out for patients too disorientated or hysterical to allow safe treatment. The charm was niche as there were side-effects not conducive to magic use.

The Snatcher didn't so much fall to the floor as deflate, gradually collapse into a heap. Hermione counted to ten before she cast a Full Body-Bind then approached to roll him into the recovery position. He was insensate enough to already be drooling. According to what she'd read of the anaesthetic charm, he'd wake up confused and forgetful. The fog would wear off after a few hours...
but he'd likely remain uncertain of events leading up to his cursing.

“Can I kick him?” Bones asked, straightening her clothes.

“Best not. Bruises would give him a clue about what he was up to.” Hermione rather regretted that.

“Are you alright?”

“No, but I'll last.” She took a deep breath, held it then sighed. “Thanks.”

“Some things are never acceptable.” They couldn't talk, couldn't share. Bones left with a nod, not-quite running back to the Hufflepuff Common Room. Hermione considered leaving the Snatcher to sleep it off in the corridor but if he reacted badly to her spell he could aspirate his vomit. She levitated him to the Hospital Wing against the demons of her nature.

*

She'd been lucky. Hermione knew that. Cathal's name and presumed allegiance had kept her from the worst of the reprisals but no one had enough spin to avoid every pitfall. She couldn't stop pushing, couldn't take a step back to let someone else put their hand in the fire. There wasn't anyone else for the Snakes.

Crowdy was the first. Then Haricott, Veng, and Moncrieff. All half-bloods and repeat guests of Madam Pomfrey. Every time they were dumped in the Hospital Wing or dragged themselves back to the Slytherin Common Room, Hermione took note. She was evermore thankful she'd convinced Bulstrode and Davis to stay away. They'd be prime targets.

The Carrows were not inventive in their ways of keeping the students in line. Hermione sat in the DADA Professor's office with her hands folded demurely in her lap. Amycus had called her in for a chat, the smirk on his waxen face all the warning she needed. He was a slimy, craven, feculent bully. She'd turn him to stone and let him scream soundlessly for eternity.

Even though she knew it was coming, the Cruciatus took her breath away. She was on the floor before she realised the door had opened. Like all toadies, Carrow could be surprisingly light on his feet. He cursed her in the back then walked around until she could see him, deliberately stepping on her clawing fingers as she writhed on the dingy carpet.

“Tell me where they are.” He smiled at her, showing yellowed teeth and his enjoyment of her pain.

“You're a clever girl, Rosier. I know you know where the missing students are hiding.” He dropped the Cruciatus for a moment so she could breathe or perhaps because he couldn't sustain it at full intensity any longer. Or perhaps because he liked to see her gasp and squirm. “Tell me and you won't have to suffer.”

“Don't know.” Hermione panted, squeezing her eyes shut when he cursed her again. Of course he would. He wanted to keep going. He could've used Veritaserum like Umbridge with her tea if he'd really wanted to know the truth. Carrow wanted to be powerful. She hoped, begged the Fates, to spare her from pissing herself. Couldn't help it but retaining some dignity would be a balm. Snot and tears already ran down her face, curdled clammy sweat over her body.

“You do. You must.” Carrow insisted, kicking her below the left knee; a bright flash of pain amidst the agony. “You're Head Girl. Tell me where they're hiding.” He put two hands on his wand, gripping it tightly to push more magic through. People did that when they didn't have the finesse to open a channel wider within themselves. “Tell me!”

Hermione bit her tongue, spitting out blood when it filled her mouth. She felt the reservoir brooch go
cold against her skin. She hadn't taken it off since buying it back from Borgin and Burkes. It was a
defence against blood magic, a little insurance, though now it simply healed the damage with a flare
of Dark Magic. The next mouthful she spat out was black.

Later, she'd rationalise her actions as borne of adrenaline and the altered state of consciousness
brought on by the Torture Curse. Later, when she had time to think of anything but the fire in her
veins Hermione would chastise herself. She shouldn't have done it. All her research into the Dark
Arts was meant to be educational only. Theoretical.

“Revanche sanglante.” She choked out the words. Carrow had helped. He'd broken one of her
fingers when he'd trod on them. Blood and bone and hate. That's all the Old French spell needed, a
legacy from the Albigensian Crusade after the massacre at Beziers. The pagan witches who had lost
family to the indiscriminate cleansing of the town had wanted to avenge the dead.

So they gave the Crusaders back the pain they had inflicted.

It was like floating. All the hurt lifted from her, drifting away. She could feel the residual ache of the
involuntary spasms but that wasn't any more uncomfortable than her period. Her pinky throbbed a
little, enough for her to notice. The Cruciatus had overloaded her pain receptors to such an extent that
its sudden removal left her bland. Not numb, just tepid.

Pushing herself off the floor took concentration. Her elbows didn't want to work and when she
shifted her innards protested. It felt like the morning after the first time she had gone skiing;
everything a bit sore. Nothing like the morning after Bellatrix. Nothing at all like waking up in Shell
Cottage certain something had been amputated, that she had miscarried, that she was dying. That
something was so wrong with her body it would end her.

Amycus wasn't dying either. He had spewed over himself and the rug. His nose was bleeding, which
was interesting as the spell hadn't mentioned any physical effects. Perhaps it had caused an
aneurysm. Hermione vanished the sick and the wet spot on the front of his trousers. Seeing him in his
own urine gave her no sense of satisfaction. She wasn't going to rub his nose in it.

Hermione righted the guest chair and sat down on it. She felt... She stared at the blotter on Carrow’s
desk, physically drained and mentally somewhere in orbit. She should do something. Something
constructive. She should probably check the Death Eater wasn't actually dead. It would be rather
awkward if he were.

Hermione stared at the blotter some more.

She was still sitting there, ankles neatly crossed, when Siglinde Rosier rushed into the room. Her
grandmother had thrown a cloak over her house gown and still had soot on her shoulders, Hermione
noticed in the same remote way she noticed her little finger was still throbbing. She yelped when the
older witch clasped her hands.

“Bruises!” Siglinde, wild eyed, hissed at the stoic wizard in the doorway. He had a red patch on his
face as though he had been slapped. Hermione raised her eyebrows. Who would slap Professor
Snape? “There's blood on her lips.” Gently, so gently, she smoothed off her granddaughter's face the
strands of hair come loose from her braid. “Cathal, darling girl, are you well?”

“Better than Carrow.” Hermione moved her mouth to make sounds. “I don't like the Cruciatus.”

A bark of laughter, cut off sharply, came from Snape. He strode in, inspected his insensate Defence
Professor then his insensible student. Her marsh coloured eyes met his guilelessly. He slipped into
her mind without resistance and found the kaleidoscopic aftermath he expected. It would be hours
before a Leglimens could discern anything. The Cruciatus might encourage answers but it did not help in their confirmation.

“What did you do, Rosier?” Snape asked sharply to get her attention. She blinked, then turned her hands up to show him the blood.

“I gave it back.” She said simply.

“This is a feud, Severus.” Siglinde snapped, shaking and furious. “My granddaughter should never have been touched.” She rubbed her knuckles against her sternum as pain flared here. “I'll kill him.”

“You will do nothing.” He didn't raise his voice. The gravitas of his decree stilled Madam Rosier for a moment. She hovered over her heir, more intent on protecting the girl than murder for the moment. Snape didn't mistake her pause for acquiescence. She had been Marked after her son's death, bartering her service for the name of Evan's killer before throwing herself into the fray without thought of her own survival.

“As Head of the House of Rosier, I will kill him.” Hermione stated as her grandmother drew her wand. “But not today.”

“He hurt you.” Siglinde said, anguished.

“Yes.” The younger witch agreed absently. Carrow had hurt a lot of people. She was going to kill him. She was going to cut him to pieces. She wanted to take her time. “I think I would like a lie down.”

* 

Hermione resurfaced from her fugue state on the 7th having slept through the entirety of Saturday. She woke clear-headed, with details of the immediate past percolating into her awareness. Face down in her pillow, she swore. When someone poked her in the middle of the back to rouse her, she rolled over with a jerk to swear at them too.

“Moppet keeps telling yous not to hurt her witch.” The house elf prodded a long finger into said witch's chest. “Does Cathal listen?”

“All evidence suggests not.” Hermione unwound herself from the blankets and sat up. “Where's my grandmother?”

“Not amok running.” Moppet answered promptly, sharing her worry. “Not-Quite Headmaster sent Madam home. Madam was very grey face.”

“She's holding the blood magic tie too taut. It hurt her when I bled.” Rolling her shoulders, and hearing them crackle and pop, Hermione groaned. Time to face the music. “I'm going to wash up then I'm going to present myself to Professor Snape for castigation. If I don't come back, I want you to run. Find Bulstrode and stay with her.”

“No.” The house elf said, adamant.

“Moppet, please.” Hermione didn't know what was going to happen, what if anything Snape had done to cover for her. She didn't want her friend going to the gallows too.

“No.” Moppet repeated.

They went together to the Headmaster's office because Hermione knew when she was beaten.
Scrubbed clean, with Moppet invisible at her side, she walked through the Common Room not meeting anyone's gaze. Some inkling of what had happened had obviously got around and even more glaring was that no one wanted to talk about it.

That seemed to include Professor Snape. He sat in Dumbledore's chair behind Dumbledore's desk still as always Dumbledore's pet. Hermione wondered if he was numb to the chains by now. Battered spouses rationalised their beatings as their own fault, and with the clarity of hindsight she saw how unhealthy their relationship had been. Such opinions she kept to herself.

The silence lingered. Hermione didn't try to fill it. Years ago in her other self she would have said something, broached the subject she presumed was the cause for her summons, pre-emptively offered an explanation, or simply launched into a query. Now she sat and mentally arranged her homework assignments due before Yule break. When that was done, she itemised a shopping list. She was on the point of pulling out her journal to jot down what she needed when Snape finally spoke.

"Professor Carrow will be fit to resume teaching on Monday." The statement was as bare and polished as a river stone.

"Yes, sir," She said, acknowledging she had heard him. Hermione kept her opinion on that well buttoned down too.

"He was informed there was backlash from the protections your grandmother placed upon you, resulting in him being stunned." Snape regarded her expectantly.

"Yes, sir." Hermione repeated, hands folded demurely.

"Because it is impossible for gossip not to whelp in this school, you may presume your classmates are already aware you are subject to blood magic. They will of course react in whatever dunder-headed or hysterical way they most habituate." Some of his annoyance was leaking out now. He really was not made to be a teacher. "If you say 'yes, sir' again in that naif manner I will slap you."

"Professor Carrow can burn in Hell, sir." She provided. "I'll stick to 'no comment'.'"

"I am perpetually surprised by your command of Muggle idiom, Rosier." There was no unbending, no cue they were now chatting. This was still a debriefing. “You need not mention your Outstanding in Muggle Studies. We are both aware how useless that class is.” Snape steepled his fingers, studying them for a long moment before he got to the point. "Are the missing Slytherin students dead?"

"No, sir." Hermione didn't pretend not to know what he was talking about. He wouldn't resort to the Cruciatius but that he was asking at all meant he was concerned. Did he think she was using blood magic like Siglinde? She knew her reputation wasn't shiny but she didn't think he of all people would assume she was dabbling in the Dark Arts.

Except she was and Professor Snape wasn't stupid. Hermione ratcheted up her mental processes. She felt dissociative, as though her thoughts were hovering languidly outside her skull, helium balloons bobbing in a light breeze. She should probably have stayed in bed; pulling the blankets over head until the monsters went away.

"You tread a dangerous line." He warned her heavily.

"So do you, sir." Hermione said, her gaze on the portrait of Armando Dippet behind him. “Do you have any antivenin for Nagini's venom?"

"Not at the present time." Severus spoke meticulously, eyes narrowing. The non sequitur recalled to him Rosier's interest in poisons. Slughorn had remarked on her off-topic dabbling in Potions class.
She was always careful so the corpulent Professor hadn't given her detention but he had informed on her to the Headmaster. “What are you playing at, Rosier?”

“Nothing, sir.” She straightened in her chair. “I give you my solemn word I have no intention of going anywhere near that snake.”

Unfortunately, her intentions didn't matter.
Hermione checked personally that all the Slytherins who had their names down for going home over the Yule break got onto and off the Hogwarts Express. She couldn't do much to help them after they disembarked but she could at least make certain that Luna was the only student dragged from the train. Not a great consolation but it would have to do.

The half-blood Snakes hiding in the bolt-holes she'd warded had all elected to remain. Communication with their families had been sporadic. At first, letters had been smuggled to the Owlery and mugged on their return. Hermione would've preferred to use an anonymous owl but anyone caught receiving a message on an unregistered bird was subject to Ministry questioning. Surveillance had got tighter with more random intercepts of messages, prompting the switch to the Royal Mail.

Most half-blood families had mundane postal addresses they were quiet about. Moppet collected the letters and dropped them off in a post box in Dufftown. Replies went to Tracey Davis's home, to which the house elf had access because of the inheritance bonding rite. Thus far, the system had proven secure though the missives themselves had been less than reassuring.

The Crowdys refused to leave their land. There would be no discussion of departing England. The Haricotts had more readies and could've fled but they'd missed their chance to go unremarked, leaving them stuck doing business with Death Eaters. The Vengs were middle-class, only one generation removed from Muggle-born, and with too many Muggle relatives to risk decamping. No one knew what was happening with the Moncrieffs. Jaakan hadn't had a reply since the end of November.

Unless she lay herself open to a charge of kidnapping, Hermione couldn't take the children out of the country without their parents' permission. She wasn't confident she had a safe place for them but in extremis she'd knock on Finch-Fletchley's door. Or see how much leverage she had over her Max relatives. Probably not enough to risk someone else's life.

But the quartet were marginally less frightened of staying in Hogwarts than they were of being Snatched. Moppet would look after them over the holidays and they had plenty of supplies, books, and entertainment. They could even pop between their cubbies with the house elf's help so they could socialise as they wished.

Hermione wished she'd shut herself up with them when she saw who was waiting for her. Rookwood and Dolohov stood flanking her grandmother when the Express arrived. Their presence cleared the platform like cholera at a Paris Masque.

There was an intimate little meeting at Malfoy Manor, an exclusive get-together for the Old Guard. Nott Senior was there, looking better than he'd been at the start of term, and Avery, who did not look at her at all, occupied one of the dainty chairs in the drawing room. Mulciber, Snape's friend whose father had gone to school with Tom Riddle, leaned heavily against the arm of a chaise like a swooning Regency lady.

And the Dark Lord, who filled the room with his presence until her gaze could go nowhere else. He sat in a wingback chair near the fire with the snake. The snake! Nagini coiled around his seat, basking in the heat from the hearth. Hermione wondered how much the change in size had affected her metabolism. Constrictors could get big but she was venomous. You can't just scale up and expect a viable creature.
“Lady Rosier.” Riddle's voice was silk. Hermione suppressed an urge to curtsey. She did bow her head and murmur a 'milord'. At least they weren't in the long gallery.

She held her Occlumency shields so tightly she could barely think.

“Severus tells me you are quite the Healer.” He smiled, near lipless, a thing that shouldn't be. “Antonin and Augustus spoke well of your research.” His eyes shifted to Madam Rosier. “Such a clever girl, isn't she, Siglinde?”

“Yes, my lord.” The words were beige or magnolia, a sort of off-white neutral that could be anything. Both witches evidently wished to be anywhere else.

“What is wrong with Weyland? Can you tell us, dear girl?” The rising intonation of his voice made him sound almost indulgent, a doting uncle encouraging his favourite niece to show off for his friends. He slid a thin hand towards Mulciber as his attention returned to her. Hermione looked where he indicated, studying the grey haired wizard.

Magical maladies tended to be obvious. He had all his limbs in the right place and nothing was on fire. Hermione stepped over to him, skirting Avery, for a closer inspection. He was sweating, a fine gloss on dry skin, and breathing shallowly. Once a big man, he had shrunk in Azkaban, wrinkles at his neck and wrists. Someone had pushed up his right sleeve, the veins prominent and cross-hatched with scars that looked like teeth marks.

Had he tried to bite his own wrists to kill himself while in prison?

“He's been poisoned, my lord.” Hermione put two fingers on his mouth and pulled down his lower lip. The interior was pallid with a yellowish tint. “Liver damage or bile obstruction, so a cirrhotic curse. Judging by the lack of jaundice or abdominal swelling, I'd say one of the ones that mimic arsenic. It could be chronic exposure. That school of curses are insidious.”

“You are not yet an apprentice?” The Dark Lord asked mildly. No one was fooled.

“No, my lord, just an aide to the matron.” Her stomach clenched. Someone was going to die. Riddle looked too pleased for them all to get out of this intact.

“Yet when Weyland went to his family's Healer, the wizard was unable to diagnose his symptoms. Put it down to malaise from Azkaban.” He made a 'tut, tut' noise then nodded to Avery, who scuttled out at speed.

He returned with Rowle dragging a beaten man bodily into the room to dump him at his master's feet like a hunting dog with downed bird. Hermione didn't recognise the wizard and was relieved. She wouldn't give herself away if she genuinely had no idea what was going on. Her ignorance didn't make witnessing this any easier.

“Please, no, forgive me.” He wheezed, trying to rise to ease the choke-hold. The Dark Lord dropped him abruptly back onto the floor where Moncrieff gasped, trying to clear his airway without coughing. Broken ribs, Hermione charted. She kept her hands folded in front of her. She could do nothing. One glance aside was enough to show her Siglinde Rosier would be no help. Her grandmother was staring at the hearth as though fire reading.
“How long has your family served the Mulcibers?” The question was idle. The Dark Lord was toying with his prey.

“Two hundred and thirty years, lord.” Moncrieff propped himself up on his knees, straightening his back but keeping his head lowered. He looked prepared to grovel. He looked prepared to do just about anything to get out of this alive. “We are honoured to serve.”

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“Of course you are, half-blood.” Avery laughed and Hermione decided she was going to kill him too.

* * *

It took Jabez Moncrieff a long time to die; paralysed by a curse before being slowly devoured by Nagini. Riddle didn't even ask him any questions. Hermione pieced together what happened later from Mulciber while she was treating him. The Healer had quietly taken it upon himself to remove the Death Eater with a slow poison mixed in with the restorative tonics he poured into the ex-convict. He would have succeeded and escaped notice if Tristan Nott hadn't shared one of her atomised potions.

Mulciber had vomited black bile for an hour then felt much improved. He was suspicious enough to go directly to his lord. They hadn't had any proof when Riddle sent Rowle to drag in the Healer. He was merely the most likely non-pure-blood. He'd already suffered a beating before she'd made her best guess diagnosis.

Hermione didn't expect due process from terrorists but they hadn't even checked. They had power and indulged themselves, lashing out at the nearest target. It was so fucking stupid she wanted to scream. They had magic and opportunity and they just wasted it like toddlers throwing tantrums. If she had a group of fanatics at her beck and call, she'd be ruling Britain before tea-time.

Dolohov escorted the Rosier ladies home, loitering in her potions lab as she gathered a treatment regimen for Mulciber. The Russian wizard asked intelligent if slightly off-the-wall questions, echoes of the rigours of his own profession twisted to fit hers so he could prolong their conversation. He seemed to enjoy her company, which made Hermione nauseous.

“I would live here, if you accepted my suit.” Antonin said carefully, the shoals of the English language ever present, the tenses making his offer awkward. “You need not worry of your grandmother. She will not be alone.”

“That's kind of you.” She decanted a potion that had thus far refused to behave with any of the alternate media. The miscibility of therapeutic brews was a very useful distraction from her desire to smack him over the head with a cauldron. She made conversation because telling him to fuck off would cause offence. “Do you have a residence in Britain?”

“My house has been given back to me.” There was dryness in his remark enough for her to flick a glance at him. He looked almost soulful. Very Uncle Vanya. She might have sympathised if the scar she didn't have didn't ache. “The Ministry did not mind it well.”

“They even manage to half-arse neglect.” Hermione agreed. Rosier Hall was almost a thousand years old; seven years in the Ministry's hands and it was looking its age. “I've hired someone from Gringotts to fix the worst of the damage. I expect as a Curse-Breaker, you'd prefer to put everything to rights personally.”

“I have no trust for goblins.” Dolohov said heavily, his disdain contorting his mouth, showing deep cut lines not visible when he was expressionless. Life, or rather his choices, had not been kind to
him. “I would, yes, work myself.” He held up his hands, calloused on forefinger and thumb from wandwork with the writer's bump on his middle finger, to show willing. “I am not an idle man.”

“You're too thin.” She said, keeping to her role as medic because maybe, maybe it was the safest path. “A little idleness would give you a chance to regain condition. How are you eating?”

He smiled at her. Actually a smile, directly at her. The sight was surreal. If she could show Granger this memory, she wouldn't believe it. There wasn't a spectacular transformation or a glimpse into some soft centre of his being. Dolohov looked less vulpine, less predatory but only marginally. He did seem to appreciate her attention, though.

For Yule, he gave her a specimen of Scylla's Waterwheel, an aquatic carnivorous plant, within an enchanted sphere of water. The delicate thing bobbed and twisted, its finial spikes twitching hungrily. While they were having preprandial drinks in the Malfoys' drawing room, Rookwood showed off by feeding the plant conjured insects, chuckling as they were devoured.

Hermione could just about put up with Dolohov courting her. He didn't try to touch her. He and Yaxley brought her things and chatted, wanting to show her how respectable they were. She outranked them. That mattered to them. She was someone valuable; young and healthy and pure and clever. To Rookwood, she was something.

His gaze was sticky. His eyes followed her around the room, seemingly through walls even when she slipped away in the company of her grandmother. This Yule was more ostentatious, the peacocking blatant. Riddle was certain he was going to win. He compelled the Malfoys to drag out every bauble and rite. He wanted the old ways; all the ancient rituals to compensate for the desolation of his childhood.

It would've been terribly sad if it hadn't been terrifying.

Hermione clutched a crystal goblet of ominously red punch, the cinnamon didn't hide the iron undertaste, and timed her breathing. Inhale one two three, exhale one two three, pause. Repeat. Do not look at the body hanging from the chandelier. The Dark Lord hadn't bothered with a stag illusion this year.

Fenrir Greyback had brought in people, the remains of people, for a pyre on the west lawn. The stinking smoke seemed to chase you. Hermione hadn't liked to think of herself as retreating from the horror but she'd jumped at the chance to escort Siglinde inside when her grandmother began to wheeze. They were hold up in a fussy parlour with lace hanging like cobwebs, her pulling potions from her pockets and various poorly Death Eaters compliantly drinking them.

She could honour the memory of Jabez Moncrieff and poison the lot of them. She'd happily dose Rookwood just to stop him looking at her. But after Mulciber's recovery, she couldn't risk it. She'd have to ask Moppet to stop with the Carrows' toxic socks. A copy-cat case would point the finger directly at her. Hermione consciously relaxed her jaw before she ground her teeth to splinters.

The heirs were kept close though the Inner Circle still kept its secrets. After the feast, the younger witches and wizards were dismissed, encouraged to amuse themselves with frivolities in a ballroom bedecked with ivy and mistletoe. No one protested their ejection. They slunk away, some with poorly concealed purloined brandy, to loaf and fret while their elders plotted.

Hermione decided that if she actually had to live in Malfoy Manor, should Bellatrix get her matrimonial wish for Draco, she would rip the roof off for some fresh air in the house. Every room was cloying; the ballroom considerably more so once Parkinson started mixing flaming cocktails. The junior Death Eaters flaunted their Marks trying to chat up the witches. To avoid committing
murder, Hermione grabbed Nott and opted to court hypothermia on the balcony.

“When this is all done, my Yule celebrations are going to be austere.” Theo observed, rugging himself in his cloak to keep the heat of the Warming Charm against his skin. “I don't like parties.”

“Sounds good.” She agreed, gazing pensively over the snow shrouded garden. Hermione wanted to go back to Rosier Hall and bury herself in her work. She was running out of time.

They lapsed into quiet, standing close to enjoy each other's company with the excuse of the weather. They hadn't exactly snuck off together but there might be comments from some of the saner adults present, if only to have something other than the Dark Arts to contemplate. Nott took a deep breath, held it then exhaled, a meditative cigarette break without the cigarette.

“Has Rookwood asked you about Runes?” He whispered the unsweet nothings into her ear.

“He's commented on my research but I got the impression he was more interested in me than my work.” Hermione replied after running through the erratic encounters she'd had with the former Unspeakable. He'd talked a lot to her breasts. She'd been uncomfortable enough not to have paid as much attention as she probably should. “What'd he want?”

“I don't know.” Theo couldn't hide his grimace. “Augmentation, mostly.” A noise from the ballroom caused him to hastily blank his face. Hermione twisted around to look through the French doors. It looked like some of the thugs were recreating a raid, savouring a graphic retelling.

“Muffliato.” She flicked her wand to be sure of the casting. “Augmentation? What, in spell adjunct for duration?”

“Proximity.” He shook his head marginally. “That's what puzzled me. It's a niche use. You only need to be so precise in fixing a ritual to a location. You work with the land, not pin something wherever. Unless you're trying to move a ley.”

“Is he?” Hermione asked in a studiously neutral tone.

“I hope not.” Nott breathed in slowly again, giving away how tightly he was holding himself. He was badly worried, she realised. “My family has the finest collection of Runic works in the British Isles. Rookwood's been visiting. Father can't forbid him access.”

“Can your elves track what he's reading?” She had dipped her toes into the Nott collection. Centuries of scholarship had given the family an immense and eclectic library.

“He's warded himself against them.” Theo said dourly. “Against fey in general, I believe. Probably a precaution against Dementors.”

“Yaxley is researching too. Compulsion magic.” Hermione considered the more coherent Death Eaters. “Is your father looking into anything?”

“He hasn't said so.” Unspoken was the acknowledgement that keeping his heir from perdition was a priority for Tristan Nott. He had not offered Theo for Marking, excusing the delay with the old chestnut of his son finishing his schooling. “Your grandmother?”

“Blood magic.” Her tone was as morose as his. “Though that may be more for me than the Dark Lord.”

“Merlin, it's going to be messy.” Nott groaned.
Messy was a gargantuan understatement. Over the Yule break, two prominent kinships had fled the country. One of the extended families had managed to get away, exploiting connections with the Spanish Ministry to obtain international Portkeys. They’d burned their homes with Fiendfyre to destroy anything that could be used for a magical trace, even their wands.

The other family had not been so implacable or so fortunate in their acquaintances. The patriarch had tried to bribe someone in the Department of Magical Transportation and had been denounced. Death Eaters had disappeared the whole lineage. It wasn't even in the papers. Hermione learned of it because one of their house elves had survived the attack to flee to Hogwarts.

Moppet found him and brought him to Cathal, able to convince the terrified youngster of her witch’s benevolence solely because of her own wand. Anyone would would give a house elf a proper magic stick for spelling was not someone who valued adherence to Ministry decree. Even so, a first sense of her aura, the house elf began to sob abjectly.

“Darks magics!” He wailed, cowering behind a cauldron.

“Cathal mine is not bad witch, Ouphe.” Moppet insisted, pulling him out into view and holding on. He was too exhausted to pop away but he was scared enough to go no-seeing and maybe never come back. “She'll help. We'll help. Rest still.”

“I won't hurt you.” Hermione soothed as she extended her left hand slowly; an offering not a threat. She couldn't and wouldn't claim him while he was in such a state but she could give him some of her magic to replenish himself. He hesitated an unflatteringly long time before timidly touching his fingertips to hers. Gradually the tears stopped.

“They's all gone.” Ouphe said to the floor. “Can't feel anys of them.”

“It's possible they're not dead.” She had to be blunt in giving consolation. “With the wards around Azkaban, you may not be able to sense your bonds.” Hermione looked to Moppet, who'd know better how elf magic worked. She shrugged hopelessly. Azkaban was as good as dead.

“Ouphe stays here, hides here with Moppet and Cathal.” Moppet ordered. She received a desultory nod. “Ouphe doesn't bond to Hogwarts, not with Professor Nosey sort of Headmaster.” Her ears twitched emphatically. “Cathal has magics enough to keep you.” Another watery nod. She poked the little male with her wand. “Moppet says so.”

“Moppet says.” Ouphe agreed, wiping his face with his hands. Hermione hugged him and held him against her like a child as he shivered.

She couldn’t actually do anything to alleviate the situation except sustain Ouphe until his family were released from Azkaban, assuming they were not in anonymous graves or werewolves' gullets or most stomach churningly the sacrifice at a Yule rite. Hermione had been to several, had shared libations, and the thought of having drunk... she put that memory far, far out of mind.

There were other things she had to sequester in her id; administering the Cruciatus during detention and casting Dark curses on her classmates during DADA. Cathal could no longer avoid overt use of the Unforgivable as since invoking blood magic on Amycus he was almost pathologically keen to see her do her worst. She suspected he got off on it, a consensus shared by Parkinson and Greengrass, who were happy enough to offer up Rosier to avoid the professor's attention themselves.

Malfoy was put on the spot too. Carrow enjoyed using the blond as a demonstration aid then
compelling him to use the same curses on his fellows. Just as misery loves company, so does corruption. Amycus wanted them all as filthy as himself. The only restraint he showed was in not cursing Cathal personally, which did not go unnoticed.

“He's running mad.” Zabini hissed, a monogrammed handkerchief pressed to a suppurating wound on his neck that refused to be healed magically. He would have leave it to drain naturally and tend it carefully to avoid a scar. They'd all seen the cicatrices left if the ulcer was scratched or abraded before it mended.

“I have noticed.” Hermione snarked as she poured a mixture of aloe and nixie's tears over Nott's hands. His skin was already peeling away from his fingernails despite prompt medical attention. Carrow had insufficient control of the flaying charm but that didn't stop him from demonstrating it.

“What are you going to do about it?” The beautiful wizard demanded with none of his trademark suavity.

“Nothing.” She snapped back. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Nothing?” His expression smoothed into the flawless marble of his mother the Lamia.

“That's right.” Hermione confirmed almost cheerfully. “Because unlike Harry 'Chosen One' Potter, I'm obliged to do fuck all.”

“Vulgarity does not suit you, Rosier.” Zabini reminded her of Oscar Wilde; all that wit and no ambition to be more than handsome.

“Nor ennui you.” She grinned with all her teeth at him. This morning she had held down a fourteen year old while Madam Pomfrey reconstructed eight of his ribs. He couldn't be sedated because he was on the Calming Draught and she couldn't use Skele-Gro on so many fine bones as it risked calcifying his entire chest or infiltrating bone into his lungs. Immobilising a limb was easy enough, not so the thorax. The boy had tried hard to keep still but he'd been in too much pain.

“You're Head Girl. It's your duty to act as our advocate. Get the Headmaster to rein in Carrow.” He ordered with all the arrogance of the spoiled princeling he was. Zabini bestowed his gaze upon Nott, whom he had long ago written off as too boring to contemplate. “You're Head Boy. Do something.”

“We have been 'doing something' for months.” Theo spoke in a measured tone, consciously keeping his hands relaxed. Cathal had given him something for the pain but he could only take so much before becoming addled. He needed to be aware enough to be careful. Montague had knocked himself out then degloved the delicate new skin from his fingers in his sleep. “All you've done is make potions for your personal use from Rosier's ingredients.”

Zabini sneered as he left. That he was feeling the strain showed how bad it was, if Hermione had needed another demonstration. She wrapped Theo's hands in soaked gauze then put an Impervius Charm on the fabric. He smiled wryly.

“Appealing to his better nature doesn't seem to work.” Nott held no sympathy for Zabini, who stood to lose little regardless of which side won. He could simply go overseas until people forgot his green tie or his fence-sitting then return in a few years to amuse himself among the socialites. He was high born enough he wouldn't be ostracised. “If it comes to violence, can we rely on him?”

“No. He'll run.” Future experience made her sure. “Not the only person shoving to the front of the queue but he won't stay.” Hermione grimaced, tidying up her first aid supplies. “We should put Hestia and Flora in charge of escorting the younger Years out of Hogwarts. They won't want to stay
with their cousins off the chain.”

“Bad business.” Even in trusted company, Theo limited himself to a single bland observation on the murder of the twins' father. Amycus and Alecto had got their own back on Lycus for disowning them. “I'll drill the First and Second Years, and have a quiet word with the Thirds and Fourths. If anything gets into the Castle, we need everyone sure of what to do.”

She couldn't tell Nott about the Final Battle. There was no sensible reason why Cathal would think Harry Potter would return to Hogwarts or that Riddle would confront him there. Instead, Hermione had raised the possibility of the Castle's wards failing due to the Dark Magic being thrown about inside. It wouldn't have to be a complete collapse to allow the creatures lurking in the Forbidden Forest to assail the school. Hence the need for an evacuation plan.

“Corwin's home is the closest. As the heir, he can call his family's house elves to Apparate the children away.” There had been some debate about where to withdraw. Nott Manor and Rosier Hall had been suggested, giving Hermione the devil of a time trying to find an excuse to refuse going anywhere near a Death Eaters' home. She'd opted for proximity and pushed for it but the decision had yet to be finalised. “Quick and quiet.”

“I'd like to think myself jumping at shadows.” Theo lifted a hand to instinctively rub the weariness from his eyes then stopped himself at sight of the gauze. “Regrettably, though...”

“It'll get worse before it gets better.” Hermione said, cast iron certain.
Genii

It got worse.

By the end of spring term, the students remaining at Hogwarts were shell-shocked, suffering beyond flinching in an Orwellian dystopia. Hermione did her best and knew it was inadequate. She hid who she could, depleted her caches of food and medical supplies, and ran what evolved into an extensive black market in potions.

Even her rage became a commodity. Students were failing to cast curses with sufficient verve to please the Carrows. Some of the children were so mentally exhausted by the regime that their wands were ceasing to respond to them. The Head Boy and Head Girl did what they could for morale but frightened youngsters often lost control of their magic in response to trauma. There was nothing Madam Pomfrey could do to help them other than rest and reassurance.

It was something Flora Carrow confided to her that gave Hermione the idea. The Fifth Year said she wasn't even angry any more, a throwaway comment in reference to Alecto's taunts. Testing the hypothesis on herself first, Hermione discovered she could fuel certain spells with the crystallised anger she had been extracting. Dark magic, mostly, or some of the more aggressive combat spells. Quite a few of the standard curses required emotional content.

Flora volunteered as she and her sister were perpetually singled out by their cousins. Crushing the soap bubble was easily done. The potion medium was stable enough that someone could carry a few in a robe pocket then pop one as necessary. Even if they burst prematurely, silk insulated against the effects. Soon Hermione was distributing furoshiki bundles to the spent and despairing of her House.

She tried not to think of the implications or the consequences of prolonged use of someone else's emotions. Her rage kept children out of detention with sadists. They'd square up later with any mental scars. Hell knew there'd be plenty.

“Rosier.” Susan Bones beckoned her behind a statue. They'd hastily arranged to meet in a hissed conversation in the greenhouses during Herbology, protected from eavesdroppers by the pungent odour of the Miasmic Lantana. The perennial didn't have an offensive scent so much as a great deal of it, penetrating even Bubble-Head Charms.

“Bones.” Hermione acknowledged her urgency and slipped into the niche. “Muffliato.”

“One of yours told one of mine you have something to help them cast.” The redhead recognised the spell, easing her hand away from her wand. Trust was ephemeral. A Ravenclaw had been informed upon by a Housemate and disappeared. No one in Hufflepuff had broken ranks. She was keeping an eye on Smith though. “Whatever you're giving the Slytherins, we need too.”

“It's not a cure-all and it's in short supply.” Her stockpile, which had been large enough to cause her concerns about her anger management strategy, was rapidly diminishing. She'd been strict, harping as necessary, about limiting the bubbles to classroom essential use only but she knew at least two students who were depleted enough to need the boost for any spell-casting at all.

“Then tell me how to manufacture it.” Susan needed more ways to keep kids out of detention. It wasn't... nice... to cast the curses the Carrows demanded from them but if you could do the magic, you could pull your punches. It only had to look good enough. “Whatever you want, Rosier. Name it.”
“Do you have anyone who's any good at Occlumency?” Hermione didn't barter a price. She wanted to help but unless she could train another donor, there was a fixed limit of production. Stumbling around so mellow she looked stoned off her gourd was not a viable solution. “They have to be able to hold a meditation and a charm simultaneously.”

“That's advanced.” Her aunt had been an accomplished Occlumens to remain impartial in her work, and to sequester unpleasant memories from the same, so Susan knew a bit about the mental art. “Is one of the teachers helping you?”

“I wish.” Granger could've appealed to half the faculty but Rosier was not nearly so trusted. “If you can persuade someone to crack open their own head for you, please do. Otherwise, I literally don't have it in me to help you.”

“I don't think anyone in my House uses Occlumency. It cuts you off from people.” You needed private tuition or at the very least detailed primers to guide you. Not many families had access to that sort of high-end specialist magic, and like Legilimency it didn't have that great a reputation. “Someone might have the basics, if one of their parents is an Auror or a Healer, but, um, not likely.”

“You'll have to ask the Ravenclaws. Patil or...” Hermione cut herself off abruptly as the wand in the small of her back vibrated. She had a proximity charm linked from her Map to her spare hawthorn. Quickly casting Concealment Charms on herself and Bones, she checked the enchanted parchment. And swore. Since the Trio's escape from Malfoy Manor, the Snatcher presence at Hogwarts had increased. The focus was more on keeping people in than out but the thugs delighted in hauling students to the Headmaster on the slightest pretence.

“What is that?” Susan asked softly, peeking at the scroll with the moving symbols on it. She wasn't stupid. It was obviously a map of the school. What she actually wanted to know was how Rosier had got her hands on it but couldn't think of a tactful way of asking from whom the Slytherin had 'borrowed' it.

“Trouble.” She stuffed the Map away. “The Snatcher who grabbed you and some of his friends are coming this way. Two teams of three. They're looking for someone.”

“Me, you think?” The redhead straightened, fingers tightening on her wand.

“Let's not stay and find out.” Hermione took Susan's hand and led her circumspectly away from the hunters. Some would be able to track by scent so she cast a quick and dirty ward with the Anosmia Jinx before ducking behind a tapestry depicting Levina Monkstanley's Development of the Wand-Lighting Charm.

Up a winding staircase, along an arcade decorated by suspiciously lifelike statues of surprised men in togas then into one of the old alchemy classrooms. Hermione opened the shutters on the third window and stepped out onto a narrow arched walkway to the Turris Medius. They were quite high up. The knee height stone railing did not reassure but Susan followed, closing the shutters behind her.

Once they had wound down the tower and slipped into the Herbology Store, where they both had every right to be, the Hufflepuff let her breath out. It felt like she'd been holding it for hours but really they'd made very good time getting a blamelessly long distance away from where they had been. She got a pot down from the middle shelf and opened one of the earth bins as though she were working. What she was actually doing was thinking very hard.

“Rosier.” Susan began then stopped. What could she say? What could she ask that would get a straight answer? Slytherins had minds like corkscrews and tongues like their emblem.
“Bones.” Hermione responded. She flicked her wand at a tray of seedlings, her own nettles carefully selected, and mucked about with potting mix to give her hands something to do.

“Can you teach me Occlumency? The refinements you specified, if not the full monty.” If there wasn't someone else able to help, then the obvious choice was to volunteer herself. Unafraid of toil and all that. “I know enough to start with. I have to do something.”

“There won't be time.” The desperation in Susan's voice dragged the admission from her. Hermione had been wrestling with her silence for weeks, gradually losing her hold. There was less than a month until the Final Battle.

“I'll find the time.” Bones asserted. Meeting Rosier's eyes, she put her wand down on the work table and held her hands out palms up. “The House of Bones beseeches the House of Rosier for aid.” She took a breath, hoping she remembered the words. “My work is your work. My voice is your voice. My body is your body.” Her magic buzzed in her veins. “I do homage unto you.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” That was not the ritual response. Hermione rubbed a hand over her face. She was coping. She had a thousand things on her mind and as many plans but she was keeping it together. Almost there, almost done. Still didn't know what had happened at the end or what she was going to do to stop it but, verily, hanging on. She took a breath.

Cathal Rosier stepped up to Susan Bones, placing her hands on the Hufflepuff's wrists in a comrade's clasp. The egalitarian gesture surprised the redhead, whose posture relaxed significantly. Having offered much, she was relieved not all had been claimed. Hermione sealed the plight with a light kiss to her forehead. The bond solidified between them.

“You... wow.” Susan breathed through the rush. Rosier was like a slap to the face on a winter's day. Her heart might have truly skipped a beat from the shock. “What do I feel like?”

“Loam and a spring breeze. You make me want to go fly a kite.” Hermione hid a smile as she flicked her wand. “Muffliato.” She straightened and released her hold on the other witch. “Right. That doesn't actually change my answer but at least this way I can give you an explanation.” Well, more like half an explanation. “Something will happen before the end of the school year, here at Hogwarts. We really don't have time.”

“Have you Seen it?” Bones didn't think Divination could be taught, and certainly not by Trelawney, but that didn't mean the whole discipline was hokum.

“Enough to be sure.” She didn't lie. “It's soon and it's bad.” Her acceptance of the bond meant she had to do something to help. “The easiest thing for anyone who isn't in a fit state to work magic may be to medicate them with liquid Cheering Charm. In potion form it can be measured out in a controlled dose. Without the Calming Draught's hellebore, it's not as potentially lethal if you overdo it.”

“I don't like drugging kids.” Susan didn't refuse the offer but she didn't leap at it either. Madam Pomfrey was very tightly rationing any potion that affected mood, and anyone caught brewing contraband was punished by the Headmaster. Punished so thoroughly they were unwilling to resume production.

“I don't either but the choice has boiled down to suffering or hiding, and the Carrows are obsessed with finding the students already missing.” Hermione couldn't mask her grimace at the memory of her interview with Amycus. The Cruciatus lingered. “If you think you can make a run for the Room of Requirement then give it a go but the Dark Lord knows it exists. Too much attention on the Seventh Floor and even the Carrows might get the nerve to ask his advice.”
“You know about the Room? Of course you do.” The Hufflepuff made a noise like her House's mascot. “We can't hide any more of us. We've already discussed it. Most who are left are old names or have family highly placed in the Ministry. Ernie suggested I go, I'm the last Bones, but someone has to be here.” Susan recollected to whom she was speaking. “If I asked you where the Slytherin half-bloods have gone, would you tell me?”

“No.” She answered promptly. “The homage vow keeps you from acting to my disadvantage but it does not extend to anyone else.”

“If I need to get someone out, can I bring them to you?” This was trust, and it hurt. She'd spent seven years thinking Cathal was cut from the same dark, dark cloth as the rest of the Rosiers. There was no certainty, this could all be to lure her in, but frankly Susan would take subtle poison over Crucio any day.

“If it's an emergency.” Hermione wasn't going to say no. “There's an old pantry, the one with the fretwork door.” Bones's nod showed she knew of it. “Behind the barrel of fish, there's a sliding hatch. It leads to a disused meat larder. There are supplies there and the hatch can be locked from the inside.”

“What if they need to go to the bathroom?” There were certain practicalities necessary if you couldn't yet cast a Vanishing Spell.

“There's a camping toilet.” She had bought several. Never again would she poo in a hole. When Susan giggled, Hermione joined in. Sometimes you had to laugh.

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She went home for Easter holidays unwillingly. Cathal Rosier had obligations. Siglinde and the house elves could manage the observances for the equinox but the elder witch insisted her granddaughter perform the rites to Eostre herself. Derica had cherished the Ostara ceremonies as a link to her home and the Rosiers had adapted their rituals to incorporate Germanic traditions.

Hermione had argued with various specious excuses, which had all been overruled. She had stopped short of her authority as materfamilias as Siglinde had raised a very salient point; the land needed her. There was too much magic swirling unfettered across the moors. There'd been a near miss with a civilian aircraft that winter. Its electronics had failed and only the pilot's skill had averted disaster.

Fortunately her excuse to be anti-social was more robust than her case to remain at Hogwarts. The vernal rites were governed by the Maiden. It would not be appropriate for the chatelaine of the estate to be courted while she was consecrated to the spring goddess. Siglinde wrote very formal and slightly snooty notes to their male acquaintances requesting they not allow their masculine energies to interfere with the seasonal magic.

There were no Death Eaters for the entirety of the holidays, for the wizards abided by the ban and the witches had ritual obligations of their own. As she had gone to the crone, Siglinde sequestered herself in her suite with doors and windows wreathed in green ferns and grasses cut with a silver sickle. They ate no meat, which was no penance given the stodgy meals at Hogwarts, though Hermione was well sick of eggs by the end of the week.

Gringotts had done an excellent job with the wards but they were impersonal. Cathal wound herself into the defences of her home, walking the land until she could feel the currents of energy. How it rushed through the valleys and drifted over the peaks. The slow heavy pull of the stone beneath her feet, the quick upswell of the river headwaters, and the calling secrets of the caves.
The strength of the urge to take all the magic into herself, to wash Britain clean with her wrath, shook her. Tales of the great witches and wizards of yore bending the land to their will, weaving ley lines like yarn were more than alluring on the eve of battle. She could drink deep of the power. The lure and the rush were hypnotic.

She didn't, because whoever she was Hermione or Cathal or some amalgam of both, she was the one who thought about consequences. She planned. Mystically overdosing and lashing out put her firmly in the Bellatrix Lestrange box; the one secured very tightly shut as it rattled in her subconscious. It would be too easy to be Pandora.

Hermione finished the rites, surreptitiously checking her notes whenever she got to an abstruse bit. Magical folk liked being deliberately obscure. The wards, land, and elves seemed to relax once she was done. It was still wild country but in some ephemeral way it was hers. Not domesticated so much as willing to suffer her touch.

“Miss is a proper witch.” Bonica commented, letting herself into the bathroom with an armload of undyed linen. You didn't just unsanctify yourself with a quick rinse and a bacon sarnie. Hermione was immersing herself in a stone tub filled with rainwater, steeping as she plotted.

“I've been telling people that for years.” The not-Muggle-born muttered, accepting the cloth to dry herself with. It itched. “Is that us done?”

“For the season, yes.” The elderly elf had adapted to the new Lady's brisk ways easily. Much better than old Lord's shouting and throwing. “The house needs more of Miss at the turn of the wheel.” None of the rites had been done by the Ministry pokers and sticky-beaks. “It is good for Miss to be home.”

“I may not be.” Hermione swathed herself in the linen, sitting down on the edge of the tub so she and Bonica could converse on a more equal footing. “We're at war. I might not come home.”

The house elf was silent for an uncomfortably long time. Hermione did her the respect of waiting for her to reply. Having dealt with Piers Rosier and his literally apoplectic temper, tactful caution was unsurprising. The witch hoped she'd given a reasonable impression. If she was going to own slaves, and she still winced at that, then the least she could do was be a good master.

“Miss will oblige us by not leaving like Master Evan.” When the answer came, it was very tidy. “Master Piers and Mistress Derica hid you from us. A bad thing, that was.”

“Do you know why?” Her curiosity had ebbed and risen over the years, remaining slightly unreal. Her grandfather's death could well have been an accident, her mother's slightly less so. Their motives in locking Cathal away might be simple post-traumatic paranoia. No one had come out of the First Wizarding War wholly stable.

“After the Potter and Longbottom heirs, Master Piers worried. It is an old, wrong thing to kill the last of a House. The ancestors scream.” Bonica made a gesture as though warding off evil. Hermione for no rational reason she could explain, drew her wand and cast the Patronus. Her stoat, busy and sharp-eyed, circled the elf before leaping into its own silvery shadow. “Master thought the dead would come looking.”

“Someone told the Ministry about the cottage on the Isle of Man.” Perhaps she should have cooperated with Auror Williamson. Regardless of saving his life, she still though he was a prick.

“Master Piers cast a forget spell about Miss. He turned Mistress Druella all upside-down in her head. They was twins. He made himself to be not forgetting but not her. Miss Derica was safe, her blood
was in the cauldron.”

“The Azkaban wards must've protected Siglinde.” Hermione frowned. “Snape too. He remembered me. I don't see him tattling on his friend's wife and child.” There was also Barty Crouch Jnr. Would his rage at Piers have been greater than his presumed respect for Evan's sacrifice? Who knew?

The Ministry did, and one of her swains was head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She'd bet Granger's beaded bag full of Galleons there was a record of every tip, smear, and vengeful denouncement the Ministry had ever received. All she had to do was embrace the corruption and ask Yaxley for a favour.

Hermione didn’t feel all that bad about hiding behind her grandmother’s skirts rather than brazenly approaching her suitor directly. She didn't want to encourage the Death Eater. He wasn't the worst but that was praise so faint it hardly mattered. His pass to Hell was assured. Siglinde dispatched the request couched as permission to visit now the rites were done.

Yaxley sent an owl with the information less than an hour later. Madam Rosier reciprocated as was expected with a dinner invitation. By the time the three of them sat down to the meal, Hermione had recovered from her surprise and had apologised, twice, to her grandmother for the language she had used.

Yaxley did not mention her query or cadge for any quid pro quo. He talked about Babajide Akingbade's recent veto of a censure motion against the British Ministry. The Supreme Mugwump was trying to play down the turmoil in the United Kingdom and Ireland, while simultaneously allaying the concerns of nations with their own blood purist movements. Hermione was very interested in the international politics and the evening passed pleasantly.

She'd penned, and burned, three letters in increasingly bad German to inquire of Gustav Max why he had written specifically to an Auror whose brother had been killed in the war. It wasn't definitive that Evan Rosier had murdered David Williamson, there'd been no trial, but after Malcolm Preece, Hermione had looked up the charges against Cathal's father and Williamson was listed as 'unconfirmed'.

Her chummy reunion with Bastian had coloured her perspective on Cathal's maternal relatives. She'd been cynical about the custody attempt because of the money. It had never occurred to her that her uncle's motives might be more sinister. Unfortunately for her peace of mind, she wasn't in a great place to make an impartial assessment of the situation.

Maybe Gustav had wanted help from someone who'd be willing to go against a powerful family. Maybe he'd disliked the Rosiers too. She'd got the impression Derica's consent to her marriage had been an afterthought. Maybe her mother's little brother had been trying to free both of them from Piers's heavy-handed protection. Maybe he had wanted them dead.

Whatever his reasons, Hermione was thankful now she hadn't risked sending anyone to Germany to shelter with the Maxs. Getting people out of the country had been on her mind. She'd almost recommended it to Davis except half-bloods needed sponsorship if they wanted to attend Durmstrang. She had thought too that she might appeal to her cousins for reinforcements for the first of May.

Which was soon. Very very soon.

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Hermione was back at Hogwarts with slightly more than a fortnight in hand. It felt like no time at all.
She did, however, have a countdown list and had been ticking off her 'to do' boxes with accelerating frequency. The sensation of critical rush was psychological, the witch told herself as she stocked first aid kits and closed down her laboratory.

Cathal or Hermione, she knew herself well enough to realise she wound herself into knots to avoid mistakes when faced with a deadline. She did good work under pressure but mentally, it cost. So she had given herself a brewing moratorium. Everything finished in April. Her lab notes went into storage with samples of any experiment not completed. Her remaining materials went to Rose Cottage, now a Escher brick box because Moppet liked it that way.

She had body armour moulded off motocross protective gear for the both of them. They looked like B-grade Hollywood legionaries but the hard-set potion medium deflected most curses. Although not as good as a Shield Charm, which was why magical folk largely ignored defensive materials beyond creature hides, it required no magic. Hermione expected to be running on empty for most of the Battle.

A significant proportion of her last minute preparations were hampered by her disjointed memories of that day. She'd made notes while her recollections were fresh the first summer as Cathal. Reviewing them now, Hermione realised how exhausted her past self had been. So much had happened so quickly. The Gringotts break-in bled into running from Snatchers into the meeting with Aberforth into reuniting with their schoolmates into the fighting and the fear, endless, endless fear.

It had been seven years. The details had been pared down to snapshots and impressions. Hermione made the decision to let Granger do what she had done. It had worked, after all. Probably. Well, in all that running around she hadn't seen anything inexplicable. She had a time, at least. D-day and H-hour. She put her notes away, reluctantly committing herself to winging it.

On a fortuitous Wednesday, Snape was off the grounds for three hours, just long enough for her to consult with the Voice and the Hogwarts elves. Until McGonagall took the helm, there was nothing the Castle could do to counter the Death Eaters. Hermione brought everyone up to speed on her suspicions about Rookwood and her working theory of the 'event' being something to do with the death of the Headmaster.

She gave the elves her supply of Draught of Living Death grenades as the modified potions were non-lethal, thus not violating the house elves' oaths of service, and she trusted them to be more responsible than any of the students. Madam Hooch would've been a good choice, with all that Quidditch she certainly had an arm for throwing, but Hermione couldn't rely on the flying instructor not to dob her in afterwards. If the grenades weren't illegal at the moment, they certainly would be in short order.

Ouphe wouldn't fight for her. He couldn't bring himself to do harm to others under the aegis of a dark witch. He said his sorrys and without a bond between them, Cathal couldn't order him to help her. She could ask though, and the young elf found no moral qualm with shining every mirror larger than half a metre square that he could find. He placed them all over the castle so the witch would be able to use the Mirror Road Charm.

Hermione would have liked so very much to have a command centre where she could expand her Map and have someone act as coordinator. A surveillance suite would've been nice too. A nexus of Vanishing Cabinets for rapid evacuation. Massive reserves of medicinal potions. An army of actual allies she could trust, who knew what was going on. If she had to fight this war again, she'd dig in somewhere like one of those survivalist militias in the States. Canned food and shotguns.
Hermione walked in step with Nott in the front row of the Slytherin contingent. She stood in place while Headmaster Snape spoke. She held her breath during his pause in the middle of 'equally guilty'. She didn't feel guilty. She felt free. Whatever happened now would happen with a cast of thousands. The momentum was so forceful all she could do was play her part.

Shifting out of place while Potter riposted, she froze when everyone else did at Voldemort's voice resonating in their skulls. Hermione knew what was happening; the cause of the screams and shudders but she heard no echoes herself. The Dark Lord did not whisper to her. Surprise put her on the back foot and she nearly missed her cue.

“But he's...” Parkinson pointed at the Chosen One then gave at the knees as Cathal's Stunner hit her in the back. Montague caught her with Quidditch reflexes and instinctive chivalry. Everyone else took a quick step back, looking for the source of the wordless curse.

“I think given the circumstances, Slytherin House will recuse itself, Acting Headmistress.” Hermione declared, consciously addressing Professor McGonagall to keep the flow of events.

“I think that would be wise, Miss Rosier.” The Scottish witch agreed. “Mr Filch!” Head of Gryffindor interrupted the caretaker as he charged into the Hall yelling. “Please escort the Head Girl and the rest of her House to their Common Room.”

They left in good order, they'd had a year's worth of practice marching in formation, and went obediently below stairs. Filch hung about to make sure no one tried to skulk away. Hermione politely shut the door in his face before turning to her fellow Snakes. She still had her wand out, which she rather expected most had noticed.

“Right, everyone knows the evacuation plan.” Hermione said briskly, keeping her voice level and regular. “Malfoy, open the Floo for Yaxley if you would be so kind.” The blond went to the hearth, touched his wand to his Dark Mark then conjured flame. Snape had closed to fireplaces to all except Death Eaters. “Corwin, fetch your house elves, please.”

The Sixth Year stepped swiftly through the green fire. The younger students did as they had been instructed. They packed their trunks as though it was the end of the school year, collected their familiars, and arranged themselves in their gendered Year groups. Yaxley was back within minutes with five house elves, who Apparated the boys and girls out starting with the firsties. Hestia and Flora ticked off names as they left.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle sneaked off sometime during the evacuation. When Nott brought their absence to her attention, he'd made no move to stop them, she shrugged. She'd announced that anyone who was of age could do what they liked, before adding an escape clause in a request that the older students accompany the younger to the Yaxley estate to help wrangle the children.

She and Nott were left alone in the empty room. Corwin had been the last to leave, having failed to persuade either of them to accompany him. They'd shaken hands. The classic Slytherin reticence kept him from asking what they planned to do. Hermione wouldn't have told him even if he had. She was trying to come up with a lie now for Theo.

“My father would want me to leave.” He remarked to the chaises and antique carpets.

“My grandmother would likely agree with him.” She had made as many precautions against blood
magic compulsions as she could find, more than half expecting Siglinde to try to force her home. “Common sense would lean the same way.”

“But you're not going.” Nott lifted his gaze to her wand. “You have a plan.”

“I do.” Hermione confirmed, surprising herself with how happy she felt. Nervous and keyed up also but it was so wonderful to finally be able to do something direct. She was looking forward to being able to curse Death Eaters. “I'm going to find Rookwood. He's up to something.”

“Perhaps at the Dark Lord's behest.” Theo objected with the air of a man observing the weather. A pleasant day, a brisk wind. Not something over which he was especially bothered.

“To curry the Dark Lord's favour, certainly.” Hermione tapped the gold wire behind her ear, sending the pre-arranged signal to Moppet. The house elf popped in already in her armour with headgear more like a bicycle helmet to allow for her ears. Around her waist she had a bum bag in an eye-watering orange, from which she drew her wand and pointed it at Nott.

“Moppet can make him sleepy.” Moppet said confidently. “Moppet does not think he is a nice boy.”

“That is part of your plan?” The wizard inquired, trying for sangfroid. The sight of a house elf with a wand, a bold elf with its own wand, shocked him.

“Moppet and I have been preparing for this battle for years.” The witch explained to his deepening frown. “After Rookwood, I'm going to get the Carrows then anyone else who needs to be put down.”

“And my father?” Theo asked tautly.

“I have no quarrel with him.” Hermione met his eyes. “When the fight turns, he'll Apparate for home. My grandmother too.”

“You think Potter will win?” His tone suggested he'd never given it serious consideration.

“I've seen it.” She used 'seen' deliberately, knowing Nott would hear the word capitalised. “I'm sure.”

“You've done nothing to stop it?” He kept his hands carefully away from his wand. “Your father died for the Dark Lord!”

“Many people have said that. No one has ever asked if I thought Tom Riddle was worthy of his sacrifice.” Hermione saw he recognised the name. Tristan Nott had gone to Hogwarts with the Heir of Slytherin. Someone had been telling tales out of school. “Voldemort is killing pure-bloods. He's ended more lineages in two wars than have died out in five centuries. He isn't about protecting our heritage. We're meat to him.”

“What if you're wrong?” Theo protested, holding up his hands to still her when she made to object. “Not about the casualties. I can count. I don't think you're incorrect about the numbers.” One of the first books he'd read was Cantankerus Nott's Pure-Blood Directory. Not for ideological reasons but because he was desperately lonely and wanted to find cousins to play with. “What if the Dark Lord wins? If you're lucky, he'll kill you.”

“If he wins, I'll run. Not my best hour but living to fight another day and all that.” She took a deep breath. “There'll be another fight. Even if he kills Potter, crushes the Order of the Phoenix, grinds everyone else under his heel, he'll have less than a decade in power. He's driven himself mad with Dark Magic. He's unstable. There's no way the ICW will let him run amok. He's a walking Secrecy
violation. They won't risk another Grindelwald.”

“The Confederation hasn't done much so far.” Other than in their very fine ostrich imitation, the International Confederation of Wizards had not distinguished themselves.

“That was under Fudge and Scrimgeour, neither of whom had lieutenants who amuse themselves with torture. Thicknesse is a figurehead and the crawlers like Umbridge behind him won't be able to contain the rabid Death Eaters. Someone'll Crucio an ambassador then it'll be obvious the lunatics are running the asylum.” Hermione had, regrettably, had a lot of time to consider the consequences of failure. “Tell me I'm wrong.”

“I can't.” Theo conceded reluctantly. “What do I do? My father won't survive another stint in Azkaban.”

“Go to Gringotts, withdraw all the money you can access then request an audit on the rest of the Nott vaults. For the price of every goblin-made thing your family owns, they'll keep your holdings from the Ministry for a while.” She anticipated there would be an epidemic of estate seizures in the aftermath of the war. “You won't be able to get a Portkey but a Nott elf will be able to Apparate you and your father to one of your holiday homes without a trace. Then your father goes to ground in one of the pure-blood bastions like Monaco or Andorra.”

“Have you made similar arrangements?” He was curious how sure she really was.

“Somewhat.” Hermione wanted to avoid any mention of hiding in the Muggle milieu. “Not as much as I'd like. The blood magic makes everything complicated.”

“Will you think poorly of me if I don’t stay?” Theo didn't consider himself a brave man. He would always fulfil his responsibilities but trouble avoided was trouble overcome.

“Not at all.” She favoured him with a wry smile, thinking of Ron, Zabini, and Zacharias Smith. At least Nott wasn't leaving her in the lurch or shoving his way to the head of the queue. Seeing practically all of Ravenclaw and half of Hufflepuff go had stung Granger. A few snakes slithering off rather than commit patricide hardly registered. “It's all in the manner of your going.”

“Is there anything I can say to persuade you to come with me?” He reached for her hand, brushing his fingers over hers but not clutching when she twitched away. “The Rosiers are well known for their vindictiveness.”

“I am nothing if not traditional.” Hermione chuckled softly, not sharing the joke.

Theodore Nott kissed her chastely before calling for Esne. He left without farewell, not wanting to acknowledge this parting as perhaps final. Hermione sighed when he vanished. There was no point in pining for a future Cathal likely didn't have. She changed into her own armour, swapping her skirt for cargo pants. No one was going to cite her for a uniform violation.

* 

She filled her pockets with all the weaponised unkindness seven years in Slytherin had inspired her to create. Her goal, Hermione reminded herself, was to stop the event that had ripped a hole in the fabric of reality. Reciprocity was a secondary objective. She spread her Map out on the floor before using one of the image projection charms she'd found when researching ways to get at her memory of the Chamber of Secrets password. She'd found another way to get in and this spell didn't work with a Pensieve anyway but it did make a crisp 3D image of Hogwarts.

“If I'm sure of anything, it's that whatever happened started underground. The earth shook. No air
burst or building collapse. Nothing big impacted.” A circling gesture with her wand rotated the
projection. “If we can sequester people out of the cellars, or at least compartmentalise, then we can
check faster. I'm going to activate all the loci. Assuming I've scribed the sigils correctly, they should
act as wards.”

“Assume means me and you is ass.” Moppet peered at the complex overlay of the Castle and
grounds. Hogwarts was alive. Shown this way with all the people and bits it looked like it was
innards of some beastie. A sick beastie with nasties nibbling on it. “Yous sits down before you does
the thing or Moppet thinks you definitely be ass.”

Hermione took her advice, stretching out beside the Map to make complex volutes with her wand
arm. She'd put a lot of work into marking the coordinates. Years of effort could have been wasted if
she'd done it incorrectly. Hoping that this wasn't the trigger of the temporal disruption, the witch
released her power into the network.

The drain was far, far greater than she had anticipated. It hit her like a blow to the solar plexus, all
breath gone in a rush. If she'd been on her feet, she would've collapsed. Even prone, she felt the
room spin and had to swallow gorge. It settled slowly, attenuating to an absence Hermione could
best describe as light-headedness. It was bearable but she wouldn't be in a hurry to experience it
again.

“We feel you.” The Voice spoke from the parchment Map not the projected image but the witch was
disorientated enough that the echoes seemed to come from everywhere. “You have done well to
share your awareness.”

“Yeah.” Hermione said eloquently, sparks dancing in front of her eyes.

“If you die so joined with us, you will become one with us.” Hogwarts remarked, its tone suggesting
approval. She answered with a groan. “It is an honour.”

“I would rather not die at all today, no offence.” Hermione heaved herself into a sitting position,
grimacing as her head felt ready to roll off her shoulders. Several long slow deep breaths and a little
time got her back some of what she had given. Her magic was trickling in to refill her. The draw of
the network was much lower than the opening cost.

“We have less discretion in the matter than we wish.” The Voice stated dourly. “Our children fight
each other. It hurts us to harm those who have given of themselves to us.” The silence lengthened
after this confession. “We wish this were otherwise.”

“So do I.” She agreed, pushing herself upright. “How much help can you give?”

“We are between two conduits. Our attention is divided further by the defences.” Hogwarts became
brisk, the echoes of a thousand Professors in its tone. “With the locus network, we can cede some of
our awareness to you so that you might shine a light in the dark places. Beyond that, you have made
no oaths of binding. The directions of the locum Headmistress and the pseudo-Headmaster take
precedence.”

“Can you show me any leys within or near the school?” Hermione wasn't fettered to the idea
Rookwood was tampering with the mystical bones of the land but there were few other ways for
today to go disastrously wrong. By and large, magic was predictable. Except when it wasn't.

She sensed rather than heard the Castle's reply. Through her link with Moppet, she had a heightened
awareness of the energy currents around her. What Hogwarts gave her was sharp sight of how the
buildings and wards distorted the currents; like a blueprint over a watercolour. Hermione blinked, the
after-image fireworks behind her eyelids.

“Right.” She said. “Well, I asked for that.”

Two aspirin and an energy drink later, Hermione headed with Moppet to the Hufflepuff Common Room. There were certain niceties she felt obliged to observe. She was the Head Girl after all, and the door opened for her so she had no excuse not to check. The sett was empty with every sign of a hasty departure. They checked the hidey-holes then moved on.

Most of the dungeons existed because even with magic the buildings above needed deep footings to be structurally stable. At various times when food supplies had been less secure, most of the understorey had been used as a larder. In the early centuries after Founding, Hogwarts had grown much of its own produce and accepted field labour as tuition payment. Closing off those parts of the Castle was easy, slipping them away into dormancy. But the problem had never been a random dry store or old cellar.

“I bloody wish for once someone did due diligence and cleaned house.” Hermione set a globe of light into the Portus Circumscriptus, used in the Renaissance as a holding area for the unruly. It had been the scene of several extrajudicial killings that later historians had cloaked in euphemism as duelling accidents.

The residual death magic made it a favourite place for necromantic experimentation until it had been circumscribed by Headmaster Swott. That prohibition had lingered with decreasing enforcement until Headmaster Egg had relegated it in his infamous bonfire of ordinances in 1896, shortly before he was forcibly retired.

The Portus would’ve been thematically ideal for a dark rite to bend the Castle to Voldemort's will. Fortunately there was no ley line nearby. Hermione sealed off the chamber except for a narrow access way between corridors to avoid creating dead-ends where students might be trapped. She did the same with the other most likely 'sympathetic' locations, working methodically through her list until she and Moppet heard the first thud of a magical explosion from above.

“No more spell bubble.” The house elf said grimly.

“I really wanted to beat Rookwood to the site.” Hermione remarked, equally bleak. “Fuck.” She gritted her teeth. A nice little ambush, something relatively safe. Safish. She pulled the Map out to hunt for his name.

Script flickered in and out of intelligibility as Death Eaters Apparated into the Castle grounds and were repelled. She’d try to help where she could but Rookwood was her best lead. Hermione wanted to batten him down before she joined the melee. Turning on the search function, another of her innovations, the Map scrolled swiftly to show his location. In the kitchens.

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“Is there a power source there?” The witch asked. “Something other than the hearth ward?”

“Moppet knows of nothing.” The house elf's ears flattened against her head. “Hearth crowds out anything else. Big old magic. Hufflepuff Founder was strong earth witch.”

From hovel to palace, the hearth ward was the centre of any magical household. A heart that grew or withered with the occupants. The longer a building was occupied, the stronger the hearth ward. Even mundane structures could develop a ward if they were a 'home' long enough. And there would be a ley line, likely a nexus.

They quickly thrashed out a plan of attack. It wasn't a great plan, particularly if Nott was right about
Rookwood warding himself against elf magic, but they'd run out of time. Finding a mirror was easy. Ouphe had been zealous in arranging them around the Castle. There were scrying spells as well as transportation spells that worked through reflective surfaces so they could look before they leaped.

Hermione cast the spell, picked up Moppet, and jumped onto the mirror she'd set flat on the ground. She fell out of the one above the mantelpiece feet first, rolling gracelessly on impact. Nothing broke or sprained but she ended up in a sprawl. The house elf immediately put a Shield Spell around them with her wand then flung knives at Rookwood with elf magic.

The cutlery bounced off his cloak with little more than a ripple. As her friend got to her feet, Moppet tried throwing bigger things. She'd always wanted to throw pots at wizards. So now she did; pots and pans and cauldrons and everything. Nothing hit the nasty man, which made her cross. So she threw more stuff.

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione tried for his wand and it jerked in his hand but didn't fly to hers.

“Sectumsempra!”

He fought. Oh, how he fought. He talked too, disgusting suggestions of what he would do to her when he won. The filth spewed out of him, worse in its way than anything Fenrir Greyback had said to her. The lycanthrope could be excused as feral. Rookwood was as sane as anyone could be after Azkaban. The perversions were a pastime.

In his prime as an Unspeakable, she doubted they would've been able to drop him. He was skilled and he was vicious but the Dementors had taken more than his happy thoughts from him. He tired quickly casting and dodging. Moppet made the floor greasy then shoved chairs forward to herd him into a corner. Rookwood blasted a route clear, rushing to a better position when his foot slid. Just a little misstep but it was enough.

Hermione's Slicing Curse caught his forearm, severing it. She followed with a flurry of blood-letting spells, opening him up before adding a Silencing Spell and a Full-Body Bind. Neither she nor Moppet approached until Rookwood lay in a red pool. The house elf retrieved his wand and snapped it. They'd already discussed what they would do with any captured wands. They had enough spares they could destroy those attuned to Dark Magic.

Hermione decapitated Rookwood. That was probably gratuitous given the mess she'd made of him but she want to be sure. She Vanished his body as the idea of putting her hands in his pockets to search him revolted her. Carefully, she put his head in a big jar, fastened the lid, and made it impervious to breakage. The Ministry would want confirmation he was dead.

Then carefully, very meticulously carefully, she cleaned up all the blood. Hermione did not want him haunting the Castle. Moppet began fixing the furniture, putting it all to rights to undo any connection the wizard might have to the place of his death. The Hogwarts elves emerged from their bunker in the root cellar and wordlessly joined them in tidying up. The ley thrummed around them refreshed by the sacrifice.

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Hermione was far from certain Rookwood's death had resolved the unravelling. She didn't feel any different, which wasn't all that reassuring. Seven years in this body had made it feel ordinary unless she dwelled on the identity difference. In some ways, she'd miss being Cathal. It'd been so long since she'd been her other self that she wasn't sure whether she'd be able to adjust. Of course, this life might fade into memory like the horcrux nightmares without magic to power them.

As an Unspeakable, Rookwood had been the most likely candidate, assuming the event had a single
discrete cause. Knowing what she did about magic, which wasn't nearly as much as she'd like even with two goes at schooling, it could be anything. She might well have already changed circumstances just enough that the perfect storm wouldn't happen.

Rookwood wouldn't be able to tamper with the ley at the hearth ward. Snape forewarned might have the anti-venom with him. Now they were at the bleeding edge, she could make changes. And high up on her List, were the Carrows. Using the Mirror Walk spell again to bypass the fighting, she wanted to stay out of sight until the last horcruxes were gone, Hermione took herself and Moppet to Ravenclaw Tower.

The Eagles' eyrie was deserted. They checked the dormitories in case anyone had been left behind. Moppet found a toad in a vivarium under a bed in the Second Year Boys' room, which she popped down to the kitchen for safekeeping. Hermione found a stash of alcohol, which she appropriated for the cause.

Alecto and Amycus Carrow were trussed up still unconscious. Tucked neatly away behind a sofa, the pair prompted Hermione to some contemplation. The things she could do to them. Her repertoire of cruelty was not inexhaustible and compared to the Death Eaters themselves she was an enthusiastic amateur. She could spend hours ensuring the siblings paid their pound of flesh.

"I'll take Amycus. You can have Alecto." Hermione offered Moppet. That seemed fair. The house elves had suffered as much if not more than the students under the Carrows' regime.

"Moppet thinks she doesn't have the times she wants to do a good job." Moppet mused, prodding the unconscious witch with her wand. "We has other chores."

"I don't want to learn anything more from them." The witch agreed. Letting her rage go now, before the war was won, seemed foolish. She didn't want to put off her revenge so she settled for efficiency, and two more pickling jars.

*  

The Map showed her the Weasley Twins. The Via Speculo brought her within two corridors of them. Actually approaching was more difficult as Fred and George were in the thick of it. Hermione had long ago discarded any sense of fair play or chivalry when it came to duelling. The codified rules were fine for competitive matches but this was life and death, and the death wouldn't be hers.

She got Avery in the back with an Os curse, calcifying his lungs to his ribcage. He dropped not even able to gasp. Her boot to his chest, shattering the newly formed fragile bone, was about seventy percent payback. Moppet grabbed his wand and snapped it. The house elf hadn't seen the bad wizard touch her witch but she could feel her wrath through their bond.

One of the new Death Eaters whose shiny mask she didn't recognise, turned when Avery crumpled. Perhaps he had time to realise who she was before the Weasley Twins got him with a spectacularly orange curse that turned him into a cloud of butterflies. The rabble scattered, a kaleidoscope of bright hues.

“What's a bad girl like you doing in a place like this?” Fred waggled his eyebrows at her, darting a glance over her unusual armour.

“Settling accounts.” Hermione answered crisply. She unclipped her helmet. “Gemino.” The potion medium liked being duplicated. Chiselling it out of the moulds was the trick. “Here, wear these. Don't ask. That's the favour you owe me.”
“This is Muggle stuff.” George said in a theatrical aside. “Have you been slumming?”

“Just duplicate them and pass them around. Falling masonry is as lethal as magic.” The witch accepted two jars from Moppet, stowing them in her randoseru with the others. The twins stared at her as she shrugged her pack back on. “Inferi require intact bodies. The Dark Mark links all Death Eaters to their Master. I'm not willing to assume they'll stay dead if it's convenient for him for it to be otherwise.”

“Rosier, are you quite sure you're on the right side?” Fred asked lightly, palming his wand in case the witch had been Confounded. A sharp look from her turquoise eyes convinced him if she had a sense of humour, she kept it in a jar with the rest of her collection.
They criss-crossed the Castle using the mirrors trying to hit and run to avoid those Death Eaters Hermione knew they couldn't take. Appearing suddenly as reinforcements for beleaguered defenders seemed to work. She passed out refreshments and wands and emergency medical attention. Moppet shot Mulciber off a fourth floor staircase. The protective spells that would've caught him had failed when the wards crumbled. Colin Creevey threw up when he saw the result as Cathal pulled him into cover.

She dragged the boy into the Great Hall, ordering him to stay there to defend Madam Pomfrey. The school matron didn't even blink when Hermione handed her a caddy of potions though she did ask what the purple liquid was when she noticed the Head Girl gulping it. Energy drinks got passed around too.

Marcus Flint grabbed two bottles and fed one to a recumbent Oliver Wood as the latter waited for the skin on his legs to heal from charred black to scarred pink. The Slytherins exchanged a speaking look as Rosier handed over an oak wand to replace the Gryffindor's burned one. Wood, away with the fairies courtesy of a double-strength pain potion, invited her to their wedding.

Hermione didn't look at the rows of bodies at one end of the Great Hall. She couldn't help but think of them as failures on her part. She'd known and she hadn't saved them. Moppet took her hand, steering her out of the chamber. The house elf had meant to find them a quiet place where her friend could catch her breath. What they found instead was a pack of werewolves.

Fenrir Greyback had been generous with his gift. The marginalised and disenfranchised and power-hungry had swelled his packs. They had little of the traditional culture of the skin-changers, not that much of it had survived the pogroms post-Statute of Secrecy. They were shock troops and they were flooding into Hogwarts already half-morphed.

“There's so many of them.” The statement ended in a gulp. Hermione pivoted to stare at the witch suddenly at her elbow. Lavender Brown, smoke smeared and resolute. She was shaking but she had come out to stand guard over the impromptu infirmary. “Confringo and hope for the best?”

“I need you to cast your hair change charm.” Granger had been reluctantly impressed when her dorm-mate had devised an improved tinting spell for hair that actually changed the texture and hue. Although Cathal knew now how she'd done it she still considered the charm itself innovative. It altered the structure of the hair shaft follicle by follicle. “Get as many of them as you can, as strong as you can do it.”

“If you say so.” The bubbly blonde's face showed clearly she thought the Slytherin was raving but Rosier was a madwoman with a plan so she went along with it.

They cast in tandem, Hermione piggy-backing a transmutation spell onto the hair charm. It was fiddly and she could do it only because after years of sharing a dormitory she knew Brown's magic by feel well enough to blend their workings. If McGonagall had been marking they would've scraped in with an EE but it did the trick.

The werewolves screamed as their hair turned to silver. Not just the colour or the bright sheen, the metal itself grew from their skin. Embedded in their flesh, linked to their blood by the vessels feeding the growing follicles, Selene's steel as pure as only magic could make it.

The weakest dropped from anaphylactic shock. It was an allergic reaction after all, though wizarding
medicine didn't refer to it as such. The tougher, or more likely those far away on bloodlust, chemical joy, or wolf mind, kept coming. They tore their own skin open as their silver hair dug like splinters of unquenchable fire.

“Hair growth charm?” Lavender suggested, eyes burning bright.

“Everything you can think of.” Hermione gripped the wand at her lower back to sustain the Shield Charm she cast over the three of them. “Polishing charms, Moppet. Keep the silver from oxidising in their blood.” The house elf nodded as the lupine charge broke and faltered. “Medusae Comam!”

Lavender's honed talent for cosmetic charms showed in her finesse. Anyone could change a single target. Most could affect under half a dozen simultaneously. The Gryffindor tagged and altered the full two dozen charging through the courtyard towards the entranceway. Her magic stuck, giving Hermione the channel to modify.

The werewolves' hair grew into long, lustrous tresses, the weight of it pulling the strands straight until the Slytherin's spell hit. The Medusa hex did not work as well on metal so the transfiguration into snakes wasn't complete. The writhing, tangling, serpentine strands didn't need to bite their victims. Tripped up and bound, the silver burned until even the most bloodthirsty were howling in pain.

Then the trio switched to Blasting Curses to finish off their foes because they weren't going any closer to the lycanthropes then they had to. In the distance, someone howled. Fenrir Greyback. Hermione couldn't have said how she knew other than the instinctive memory of prey. She was sure it was him and she was sure he'd seen them.

“Inside!” Hermione pushed Brown, who clearly meant to stand her ground. “He's true-born, more resistant. We need back-up!”

A strategic retreat sat better with the Gryffindor, who legged it inside. Moppet and Hermione were right on her heels. Part of that was wanting to keep Brown from being alone with her potential murderer, and part of it was wanting to get Greyback inside the Castle itself not just the grounds. The witch had a plan for the werewolf.

Moppet veered off with Lavender, using elf magic to hide their scent. Once they were out of sight, Hermione slowed. Greyback had covered the distance in a frighteningly short time. He hesitated when he reached the doors suspecting an ambush. So she taunted him, which Hermione admitted to herself likely won the gong for Stupidest Thing She Had Ever Done.

“Slipped the leash, mutt?” She bared her teeth in a deliberately provocative gesture and added a flaunting shimmy just in case he had any scruples about attacking a nominal ally. The lycanthrope's interactions with Cathal had been tense. He'd been warned away from her several times. Yaxley had once drawn a wand on him to add a curse for emphasis.

They were alone. She could sate several of his appetites. Hermione was already turning to run when he snarled in response to her jibe. Her flight was the last lure; he'd never be able to resist running prey. Not that she looked behind her to check he was pursuing. She had to reach the dungeon stairs before he did. It was literally a matter of life or death.

Her plan wasn't to fight him. She and Brown had been lucky with the pack; newly turned and caught between forms the werewolves hadn't been at their best. It took years to adjust to a body. Cathal knew that personally. Greyback had had those years and all the right instincts and the peculiarly human viciousness beyond even rabid animals. He struck where he knew it would hurt most.
Hermione was confident her trap would've worked. She could feel the thrum of the Castle in her bones. Her locus mark on the steps would have given her the control boost she needed to close the corridor behind her. Right behind her. She had her intention sharp in her mind; squishing Greyback between the walls like paté. Not even a werewolf could survive that.

So intent on her goal, Hermione ran right past the dark figure. She registered his presence only when her hindbrain recognised the pattern of movement that meant 'drawing wand'. The automatic reaction of dodging away almost bowled her off her feet. She had her own wand up though, and casting a Shield Charm as the flash of green light lit the Entrance Hall.

Fenrir Greyback was dead before he hit the ground.

“Filthy.” Antonin Dolohov spat. He gave the werewolf no more consideration than that. He turned to face her, incongruously holding out a hand to her as though offering to escort her home. “Are you hurt, Miss Rosier?”

“Ah, no.” Hermione fancied she could hear her mental gears grind. “He didn't touch me.”

“I could skin him, if you like. A wolf hide rug as a memento.” The Death Eater smiled sheepishly at his awkward joke. She realised with astonishment that he was trying to flirt.

“No, thank you.” Dropping her Shield Charm against all instincts, Hermione assayed a laugh. It echoed hollowly. “He probably has fleas.”

“I do not doubt it.” Dolohov chuckled. He twitched his arm, the chivalrous gesture more imperious now. She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. “You should...”

Hermione never got to hear what he thought she should do. Dolohov cut himself off, twisting and lashing out with the purple flame curse with which she was intimately familiar. Paranoia or excellent hearing had warned him of the rapid approach of an enemy. She hadn't heard them over her own heaving breath and pounding heart. Fear was said to sharpen the senses but for Hermione it filled her head with white noise.

Or maybe it was the purple curse. The witch felt her heart race. She was standing so close to Dolohov she could smell him; tobacco and leather and clean male human. He pushed her behind him, shielding her as he slashed his wand. He was very good with Dark Magic. Brilliant, really. He had created many of his own spells, including the curse that she could feel burning under her skin even in a second body.

That was psychological trauma, Hermione rationalised even as she drew one of her nasty surprises. She dropped the grenade at their feet. Thin white smoke billowed as the volatile Draught of Peace vaporised on contact with air. It engulfed them both but Dolohov didn't have a Bubble-Head Charm enchanted into his headgear. He staggered, she didn't. His body was already drooping like a wet noodle when she opened his neck with a slicing hex.

“Weeks, you bastard.” Hermione hissed. “Dozens of potions for weeks. Food tasted like ash and I couldn't sleep and it ached so badly I thought I'd never be rid of it.” She kicked him onto his back, hopping away from the spraying arterial blood. Her spell had cut vertically along the carotid, so close to him she could place it precisely, and he bled out before the Draught could slow his heartbeat.

“Miss Rosier.” Details like the identity of Dolohov’s foe intruded on her revenge.

“Professor Lupin.” Hermione blinked. She'd saved his life. The realisation made her grin. “Lovely to see you.”
He frogmarched her back to the Great Hall and made her sit down, waving Madam Pomfrey over so she could examine the Slytherin witch. Lupin had evidently assumed her delight in his presence was the lingering after-effect of a Confundus or more likely given the source a Dark compulsion charm. Her former teacher hovered as the matron cast diagnostics.

“Nothing.” Madam Pomfrey said after two minutes of concentrated work.

“Nothing?” Remus Lupin raised both eyebrows in frank surprise.

“Nothing beyond the usual, which I can't do anything about and Miss Rosier wouldn't consent to undo, I wager.” The older witch fixed a heavy stare on the younger, who shook her head. When Cathal had begun her unofficial apprenticeship in the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey had diffidently offered to help her with the blood magic, what little she could do anyway. Hermione suspected Hogwarts had used something akin to Siglinde's protections as there were only so many ways to stuff a spirit into a body. She politely refused the offer. She didn't want to be cut loose before she could finish her mission.

“I am naturally this quixotic, Professor.” Hermione lied because it seemed the moment to do so. “Chalk it up to adrenaline.” She chuckled, infinitely relieved she was alive. “Or maidenly scruples. Dolohov was courting me.”

“Do you need anything?” The matron asked in coded language. She'd had to ask too many of her students that question. Miss Rosier's firm negative was a relief. “I have to see to the wounded, excuse me.”

“What was that thing you dropped?” Remus asked, his tone insistent.

“Modified potion.” Hermione hooked a thumb in her bandoleer to bring it to his attention. A gentleman and married, he had not been looking at her chest. “I know what I'm doing, Professor. I'm no threat to you and yours.” His courtesy was limited. He couldn't hide his scepticism. “Bellatrix Lestrange personally promised the Dark Lord she would, I quote, 'prune her family tree'. I think you should find your wife.”

The best Defence Professor she'd ever had studied at her with misgiving. He looked more rubbed at the edges than usual, restive too. His wolf didn't like uncertainty. She met his gaze for a moment challengingly then let her eyes slide off his face, turning her head away to bare her neck. If he couldn't bring himself to trust her at her word perhaps she could convince him another way.

“You don't smell of fear.” Remus didn't like to bring attention to his nose. Sniffing people was what animals did. “Not nearly enough. Not nearly enough wolf either, to be as angry as you are.” He leaned close, caught by the ghost of a scent. Something familiar but too distant to place. “What are you?”

“Finally, the flesh reflects the madness within.” Hermione quoted. Those words had stuck with her indelibly. Most of that evening was branded on her mind, as was the regret they hadn't killed Pettigrew then and there. “I'll explain everything, Professor, but not now. Go protect your wife.”

He hesitated but he went. He didn't trust her but the guilt of not trusting Sirius, of thinking him a murderer and condemning a friend to prison, compelled him to take the chance now. Hermione watched him go. Perhaps he wanted to believe those beyond the Veil had sent help. She hoped he wasn't disappointed with the truth.
“Damn it.” The witch sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. Her eyes were gritty. Her chest ached.

“Yous knows worse words.” Moppet appeared at her shoulder, offering an energy drink.


“Moppet tidied up.” The house elf quietly passed two jars for her witch to stow in her pack. “But thems in the courtyard is too much mess.”

“The silver will inhibit their being raised as Inferi.” She said then considered her own grammar. Should it be ‘them’? Her phrasing had been clumsy. She was tired. Hermione finished the drink then offered her right hand to Moppet, who clasped it in hers. Magic flowed between them warm and welcome.

Oh how nice it would be to stay here, just we too, safe in each other’s company, Hermione thought as she drifted with the last of the energy as it equalised between them. They could tuck themselves into one of the bolt holes and sleep through the worst of it. Surely they had done enough.

If she did that, she would never forgive herself. Granger wouldn’t. Cathal certainly wouldn’t. Hermione sucked in a deep breath heavy with blood and dust. She patted herself down, settling her wands and checking her pockets. Vials clinked. Little jars rattled. She reloaded her bandoleer and handed Moppet a restock.

“Do you have any bruise paste?” Susan Bones inquired as the redhead limped over to them. “You look like a tinker who's pinched an apothecary.”

Hermione mutely handed over a small purple pot with a lid embossed with two raised dots; colour coded and shaped so she could identify it by feel. The Hufflepuff slumped down beside her and unafectedly hitched up her skirt. An impressive contusion the span of two hands spread out from her swollen left knee.

“Try this instead.” Hermione swapped the paste for her spray, demonstrating its use with a pass over the reddest part.

“Sugar!” Susan bit down on an obscenity at the sudden coolness then accepted what looked for all the world like a Muggle perfume bottle. The sort you could buy in a not very posh chemist. It was purple too, she noticed as she sprayed liberally.

“That's not curse damage.” The bruise pattern was different, too irregular. Hermione dug out a coagulant 'candy' and handed it over. “For the internal bleeding.” She was obscurely relieved when Bones popped the lozenge into her mouth without suspicion. “Suck don't swallow.”

“Heard that before.” The redhead's attempt at a saucy wink was ruined by a wince as she tried to straighten her leg. “No, I fell down a flight of stairs. Was blasted right off my feet. My Shield took the brunt of it.” She eyed Rosier's knee guards. “Got any spare?”

Hermione used a doubling charm on her protective kit, functionally strapping up Bones's knee. The spray had done a good job of stopping the spread of the bruising but the swelling would remain for an hour at least. In ordinary circumstances, Madam Pomfrey could have charmed it away but under triage the walking wounded were left to mind themselves.

Voldemort called truce just as Bones was getting to her feet. The Hufflepuff swayed, sagging against the Slytherin. Moppet hopped up too, ready to catch the witch if she fell over but after a shudder Bones righted herself. She straightened her tied in an automatic gesture then laughed at herself before removing the potential garotte.
“We have to go out. For the wounded.” Susan grimaced up at her feudal overlord and saw Rosier looked like she felt. “The dead...” She faltered. The taller girl nodded. “Is it wrong of me to not want to see them?”

“I don't think so.” Hermione marshalled herself. “It doesn't get any easier.”

* 

They went out and back eleven times within the hour given them. They conjured stretchers for the wounded who couldn't bear the touch of magic in the wake of curses. Moppet Vanished swathes of masonry because the Castle resisted human spells. Bones reassured and consoled and directed until the words lost all meaning. Rosier emptied her pockets of medical supplies until she was down to aspirin and chocolate, the last of which she and Susan finished before dragging themselves out to begin the twelfth.

Harry Potter is dead!

The echo distorted the cheer but Hermione had heard that exultation in her nightmares for years. The Death Eaters flanking Hagrid as he bore his burden into the Castle took up the chant. It spread along the ranks of the dark mob, reminding Hermione of football hooligans though she couldn't for the moment think of any teams with solid black kit.

She went out with the rest of the defenders, seeing the shocked horror on her own face mirrored in theirs. Granger was shaking and even the memory of that anger was enough to jolt her into awareness. Hermione moved to stand next to Malfoy. He glanced away from his parents, dully recognised her then looked back. His hand twitched reaching for her almost of its own accord. She caught his fingers and he clung.

“Harry Potter is dead!” The Dark Lord Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle stood like a prophet proclaiming the apocalypse under a Dementor blackened sky. He said more but Hermione wasn't listening. She studied the ranks of the Death Eaters, picking out faces, picking out targets. She didn't have many tricks left but by the Furies she had enough to make sure the worst of them didn't walk away.

“Draco!” Narcissa Malfoy's siren call jerked her son out of his stupor. He stepped forward, pulling Cathal with him until she dug in her heels.

“If you give me nothing else, give me this.” Hermione invoked the bond between them. “You owe me fealty, Malfoy. You will stand with me now.”

“I can't.” Draco said wretchedly, wrenching his hand away from her.

He crossed the courtyard but this time Voldemort did not embrace him. The Dark Lord was looking at her, a faint smile on his face as he caressed his wand with long taloned fingers. Hermione fought not to shudder. Even twisted in a fraudulent, cobbled together body, Tom Riddle had charisma. He was mad but he had power. So much power. She wanted him dead.

“Come, Cathal.” He beckoned with a dancer's gesture. “Honour your father's sacrifice.”

“Burn in Hell.” Hermione snarled and activated the loci she had drawn in the courtyard. She'd been obsessive about this place. Fortunately Fate had set the battle in the same location otherwise she'd feel a bit of a twit. Shimmering barriers bisected the cobbles, rising up beyond head height to box in the combatants and cut off the Dark Lord from his enforcers.

“Potter, now!”
Later, she would be fairly sure she had shouted the call to arms. Perhaps it had been Narcissa Malfoy. Possibly the words were a mangled war cry as both sides surged forward; the Light flooding into the courtyard to rain spells on Voldemort while the Dark lashed out at the iridescent wall separating them from their master.

Hermione was on her knees from the drain of the magic when Harry rolled out of Hagrid's arms. The battle was in earnest now; a frantic final push. At sight of the Chosen One reborn, Death Eaters fled. The fanatics stayed of course. There was nothing else for them. Someone hooked her under the arms and hauled her back up the steps. A woman screamed.

When she blacked out, Hermione thought that was it, all done and dust to dust. She woke suddenly a scant moment later when icy water splashed over her face, abruptly cut off as a familiar and much welcome voice scolded Aquarius for their overzealous application of Aguamenti. Sliding sideways, Hermione fell into Moppet's arms.

“Shit.” The witch groaned, rather letting down literary convention. Hermione hoped that wasn't her last word. She'd be rather embarrassed to go out on a dazed obscenity.

“Let go the shields!” Moppet commanded frantically. “Is too much out!”

Hermione clumsily closed the conduit between herself and the conjured barriers, the connection snapping back with force enough to make her body seize. Through their bond she felt her friend's worry and tried to reassure Moppet it would be alright but she couldn't find the words. Or her tongue to shape them. Or her lungs to breathe.

She felt as though she was unravelling, unwinding all of a sudden like a snapped elastic or cut puppet. Hermione fought with her eyes to keep them open, to see Moppet but the world as white at the edges. The reservoir broach burned cold against her skin. This was nothing like she had expected and Hermione feared it would get worse; that she would come apart like the frog she had dissected in science class.

Her world went red before it stopped.
Ancestors

She woke.

Dust hung like glitter in the air, sparkling in the light from nowhere. The stillness was soft and breathless.

She was breathless.

“You are not dead.” The Voice came from nowhere also. Spoke from on high, she thought disjointedly.

“If I have to go around again, some people are going to die.” Memory began slotting into place. She had been here before to this not here place. The space between breaths, she recalled thinking. Assuming those thoughts were her thoughts. Details remained foggy. “I think I’ll start with Quirrell. Putting his head in a jar might prove educational.”

“You are not dead.” The Voice repeated.

“Yes, I've got that far.” She snapped. “Am I stuck here?”

“No.” There was less certainty about that answer than the first. She did not like uncertainty in the matter of her existence.

“You are not filling me with confidence.” She drew in a breath, old habit, and marshalled herself. Piffling details such as which self she was could wait. “Did I stop the event?”

“You did.” Now they were back on firm ground. “While there is significant spell residue within the environs of the school, a problem in of itself, we are whole. There is a future ahead.” There was some sub-vocal consultation between the entities that comprised the Voice. “An acceptable one, as fewer of our children died. We are not as weakened as we were.”

“Good.” The sigh of relief was heartfelt even if only a gesture. So much of speech was breathing, she realised. Pacing and spacing and emphasis. And she was drifting. “So I can return to the present? The changed present, I mean.”

“Yes and no.” The Voice hurried on before its interlocutor could find something to throw. “There was a complication. There is only one thread, you must understand.”

“Must I?” The rhetorical question was tart. She puzzled out the theory though. “Granger and Rosier are the same thread, yes, I can see that.” There was a pause for reflection, a silence as she put one and one together and got one. “Cathal exists in the loop, with Hermione at either end. So why am I not a brunette again?”

“We cannot untie the knots.” There was anger there and frustration. Hogwarts in a state of thwart was irate. The combined knowledge of a thousand years of students and faculty was not easily stymied. “We pulled and loosened and unhitched as best we might but should we do more, you would become unfettered. That would be poor recompense for your service.”

“Define unfettered in this context.” She didn't feel alarmed. One felt very little in this non-place as emotions were biochemical, something she was not at the moment. She could think alarmed thoughts but they took a back seat to planning.
“If we do more, we would tear your soul apart.” The Voice told her bluntly then explained what it could.

Magical folk were paranoid, she knew that. They locked their research away behind curses and covenants, published only tiny parts of their discoveries, and hoarded knowledge. Secrets were like wine and a many of the most brilliant magi were intoxicated. Hogwarts had facsimiles of their minds while they were at school, refreshed whenever they returned to the Castle, and if they taught there it could plumb their consciousnesses. However, Pensieves stored memories outside the mind. There were also other, Darker, ways of locking parts of the self away from scrutiny.

Hogwarts knew much but could share far less as it was bound by the constructs of the memories within it. So she heard a rough outline of what it had done; a lace-work of lacunae. She could figure out some of what it wasn't telling her in that long, long lecture. There was infinite time to think. The conclusion in the end was easy.

“I don't want to die.” She had fought. She still had fight in her. There were still fights to be fought. “Or to un-be.” One disembodied phantasm hungering for reincarnation was enough. “Can you put me back into Cathal?”

“Yes.” Even in a place without time the pause after that confirmation stretched. “There will be consequences.”

“It'll be hard to undo the Obliviation on Granger's parents.” She, one of her selves, had tied the magic to herself to make the transition smoother for her mum and dad. There would be no hazy recollectons, no nightmares of the Other. Monica and Wendell would be sane and whole. “I could mimic her or piggyback like I did with Brown.”

“You could risk the attempt.” The Voice wasn't disagreeing.

“I could risk destroying their minds to tell them their only child is dead, you mean.” She snapped, partly because she was thinking the same thing.

“Not dead.” Hogwarts corrected as prim as a school marm.

“She'd be as empty as if she'd been Kissed, which is as good as dead.” Speaking of death, a horrible thought occurred. “If I return to Cathal, will I be trapped inside her forever? What happens when her body dies?”

“The strength of the bonds will weaken as you age. If you live to your senescence, your spiritus will float free of your corpus. Blood magic is intense but finite.” Knowing its audience, the Voice continued. “If your body dies before the bonds slacken, you will be moored. Depending on the condition of the corpus, perhaps an Inferi. There are however many ways to rectify undeath.”

“Are the bonds the reason I felt nothing near the Dementors?” She asked as her mind filled with other questions. A pen and paper would be very handy now. Yes, there was time enough to ask everything but the act of making a list helped her order her thoughts.

“Yes.” The Voice answered sharply, cutting off further inquiry. She waited and was rewarded with the skerricks it could tell her. “The creatures' dread aura could not grasp hold of you. Any fear you felt was a psychological remnant. You are, by happenstance, immune to the Kiss.”

“If I were a betting woman, I'd put my firstborn on the creation rite used to make the Dementors being an integral part in what you did to insert me into Cathal.” She wasn't angry exactly. That required too much physiology. What she was... was opposed. Yes. Very definitely anti this shit.
“Salazar Slytherin wrote extensively on the Dark creatures the Founders warded the Castle against. He makes no mention of Dementors. No one does, until Ekrizdis of Azkaban.”

“We cannot speak of it.”

“The Ministry repurposed the fortress after Ekridis died. The Minister at the time was Damocles Rowle. His niece was later Headmistress at Hogwarts.” She didn’t smile or smirk. “Binns never remarked on how closely linked the Ministry and the school were for centuries. The same families with their sinecures and political appointments.”

“We cannot...” The Voice reiterated before she cut it off.

“Send me back. I can't do anything here. I might be able to do something there.” She straightened her shoulders automatically. “I'll give it a damn good try. Ravel me back up again.”

“The process is somewhat more complicated than that.” Hogwarts sounded quite snippy.

She laughed before being remade.

*

Cathal woke.

It took her a long moment to realise time was moving, that despite the dust and the dimness she wasn't in the unworld of Hogwarts's pause, that the Voice made of many voices was an ordinary cacophony of people. She blinked because one liked to check and pinched herself because ditto. She was breathing too. That was nice.

Cathal... Hermione stared at her hands assessingly. Dirty with blood under the nails. No one had time or verve for a cleaning charm, though honestly with the amount of magic buzzing in the air she wouldn't have risked a Lumos. The aftermath of battle left traces, filling the Great Hall with the scent of ozone. Another tang amid the gore and sweat and fear.

A quiet person approached her cot from behind, sitting down beside her on the bare stone. His shoes were polished but the knees of his pressed trousers were grubby. Here for the clean up not for the fight. As she twisted around to look at him, he offered her a cup. The combined motion didn't synchronise, ending in the water spilling onto her hair.

Her long straight blonde hair.

Hermione sighed. She wasn't sure if she was disappointed yet. She wasn't sure of much other than her head felt like someone had gone at it with a mallet. Her whole body ached. The boy swore, apologised about the water and the rude word, and had half-risen to fetch more when she put a hand on his arm to stop him. She knew who he was but was less sure on why he was there.

“Theo, you left.” Her words were a croak.

“I got my father away. He came home just like you said he would. I had everything ready.” He covered her hand with his. “He wanted me to leave with him. Demanded it.” Nott's soft voice cracked. Defiance did not come easy to him. “But you were here. I'd rather be with you than him.”

“We'll probably be arrested.” Hermione felt her brain wind back up to speed and wasn't entirely pleased. Drifting dazedly without a care had its benefits. “Where's Moppet?”

“Moppet is here!” The house elf popped in immediately on calling. “Moppet was hiding, watching
Ministry twonks is already flat-footing about.” She clutched her bestest friend's arm and felt her 'her-ness'. Cathal, not the other one and not two. “Moppet is always here.” This was directed at the bad wizard boy. “Yous can leave now. Again.”

“You're not a Rosier elf.” Having hosted Madam Rosier's ménage, he was tolerably familiar with the elves pledged to her House. He hadn't noticed at their first meeting but this bossy one with the wand was new.

“Lady Rosier is my witch.” Moppet's ears flicked out, a bridling gesture that presaged discomfort for the wizard. She was not leashed, not a toady thing who had to scrape and punish. “You keep civil or Moppet will fix you.”

“Where's Granger?” Hermione interrupted, unequal to the task of arbitration. The question threw Nott with its seeming irrelevance. Moppet mutely pointed down the line of stretchers; towards the shrouds.

“When yous left, Moppet thought...” The house elf faltered. “But thread didn't untie. Some knots can't be undone without cutting.”

“You can loop a thread, direct it elsewhere, unweave it so it hangs loose...” She recalled the Voice explaining about time magic and the fabric of reality. There was so much she didn't understand but a little speck of revelation glinted in her mind now she had time to think of anything other than the Final Battle.

Cathal and Granger were the same thread. Hermione began, ran to the event that tore the tapestry then Hogwarts had woven a thread back into the cloth in the Cathal-shaped space left by the death of the Rosier heir. One thread, two names, one life. With the thread tangled irrevocably in Cathal, she would have to make her own way ahead in the spaces between, pushing herself into other people's lives. It would tighten the weave. She could not think it fortunate for her that the deaths of so many had left her plenty of room.

She should be back in Granger's body, mentally seven years older with the echoes of someone else's life. That was the logical end. You closed the loop, and the future Cathal Rosier would never have had would be just another 'what if'. Anger had been denied her in the non-place. Not so now. Angst too came flooding in. Dead man's boots.

“This was not what I planned.” Hermione complained then groaned at herself, at the world. Had she in fact planned anything beyond the Battle? Other than running if it all blew up in her face? She had a life now. She needed to do something with it. Like cover her arse. “Moppet, could you quietly get back from the Hogwarts elves anything left over?”

“Moppet speaks to Ouphe too. Tidies up.” The house elf nodded sharply and vanished. Hermione rubbed her forehead. It was time to begin Operation: Avoid Awkward Questions. “Where's my backpack?”

“Here.” Theo handed her the black satchel that had been acting as a pillow. It didn't seem of much significance until his hand brushed the leather and he realised how dense the bag was. As soon as he handed it over, he felt his interest in it ebb. He noticed that diminution, recalling also he had rarely seen Cathal without her backpack. “You really were planning this for years, weren't you?”

“As soon as I got out of that cottage.” Hermione confirmed, getting gingerly to her feet. She was, by the definition of the word, upright. A light breeze would fell her. New sympathy for Harry arose; dying took a toll.
“Why?” His question was not plaintive. Nott was a realist. This was a good ending compared to the dreams of looming futures that had woken him sweating at 3am. The world, though hostile, was at least passably sane.

“I do not believe in predestination and I will not stand with sadists.” That was a good start, something she would repeat when questioned by less cynical folk. The look her fellow Slytherin gave her made him look old. Old and world-weary. “Riddle was a liar. He fed our grandparents a fiction of paradise and power, gave them someone to blame. He grew up in a Muggle orphanage in the ’40s. He had an excellent role-model.”

“Grindelwald.” Theo said, shoulders sagging. He jumped when Cathal laughed.

“No, Hitler.” She corrected. “Grindelwald was small scale. An idealologue and opportunist. If someone had thrown the other two Hallows at him, he would have abandoned his war in an instant. It was all sound and fury.” Which everyone would know, if Binns taught something actually relevant. “Hitler had millions of people killed because he needed a scapegoat. He did more to rid the world of Muggles than all the Dark Lords combined.” Hermione took a breath. “Riddle used the same tactics. The Muggle-Born Registration Act was a Yellow Star.”

“I don't understand the reference.” Her verve made him step back. She wasn't hysterical. She was implacable.

“Talk to Goldstein. Talk to anyone with a Muggle grandparent.” Hermione snapped, feeling her magic crackle over her skin. She dropped into a Occlumency exercise automatically. Her heartbeat slowed from thunderous to steady. “Riddle knew and he exploited pure-blood naivety to get the power he craved. Then once he had it, he kept the altars red. My grandmother wasn't a killer until her son died. After that, she'd wade through a lake of blood.”

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Cathal could have taken a page out of Siglinde's book but instead she went quietly. She tapped Flint on the shoulder as she and Nott were passing. Marcus kissed Wood then left with them, slipping behind a statue into a dusty corridor rather than stay to explain to the Aurors how he had got into the country. Once they were out of sight, heading into the Castle's innards, Hermione pulled her Map out to check what damage had been done.

Extensive was the first word that came to mind. She'd remembered enough and guessed more so none of her bolt-holes were crushed but getting to them was going to be difficult. With Flint and Nott trooping mute behind her, Hermione led them to the first; a niche on the Third Floor near what had been the Forbidden Corridor. She rapped her knuckles on a door behind a sliding panel behind a statue with a hidden sliding catch. Best guess it had been used for a Professor's private stash.

Kosal Veng greeted her with a ready wand. The Third Year had all the stashed supplies packed away in the satchel she'd given him and a look of determination. A look that faltered at sight of Flint, who was big and mean and he didn't recognise, and Nott, who was neither and he did. Hermione moved to reassure him.

“It's over. The good guys won. You can head down to the Hall now. Slughorn is there.” She made no promises that the Head of Slytherin would look after Veng but he was at least present to object to any harassment.

“Where are you going?” Veng didn't think much of the new Potions hire. Anyone who was that comfortable was either an informer or an opportunist. Yiey talked about the bad times in the old country too often for him to trust a fat man in thin times.
“We're leaving to avoid being arrested.” Flint answered dourly.

He said the same thing three more times as they collected kids from hidey-holes. And they were just kids. Haricott was a firstie, who clung to Rosier as though she were Nimue herself, while adamantly refusing to rejoin the rest of the students. None of them wanted to throw themselves to the Lions. Crowdy started hyperventilating at the mere suggestion.

“Abduction it is, then.” Hermione resigned herself to more criminal behaviour. She wasn't going to abandon the Snakelets. She tapped the gold wire behind her ear and had a short conversation with Moppet as they hiked to the Sixth Floor. Specifically to an airy solarium made from a glassed-in balcony packed to the ceiling with shelves stacked to capacity with potted plants. Plus two elves and a large carpet.

“We won't all fit.” Nott objected, identifying the rug as the flying variety. He looked over the younger Slytherins. Moncrieff was the eldest but having seen him on a broom Theo was unwilling to trust him to steer a carpet. They'd need to Side-Along, which drastically limited where they could go as well as make them more traceable.

“It's a decoy. It's signature will hopefully cover ours.” She went to the windows and opened them, helping Moppet and Ouphe unroll the Chiprovtsi kilim. The unbonded elf sat in the middle of the exquisite red and black pattern, wiggling his toes across the tight weave before turning himself and the carpet invisible. Hermione spoke to empty air. “Just tour around the tower and for hell's sake if they start shooting at you, ditch the rug.”

“Yes, Lady Rosier.” The soft voice agreed. There was a waft of air and Ouphe was gone.

“Are they likely to shoot at him?” Crowdy asked, not pointing out that the elf was invisible.

“Any Auror worth their badge will have some sort of heightened senses charm running. They might not be able to see what he is but some at least will be able to pick out a blur.” Hermione explained, closing the windows. “Moppet, do you want to guard or transport? We need to take everyone to Rose Cottage.”

“Transport.” The house elf mulled it over. “You is still in with the Castle, and tired.” She added the last bit with some force. “Don't tries to nay it.”

Hermione didn't try to deny it. She posted herself at the solarium door to hold it in case they were found as Moppet took the Slytherins two by two to the Isle of Man. If they were lucky, they would have enough of a head start to blend into the Muggle population before anyone official took an interest in them. Then they could drop the kids off and hide out for a few days while the dust settled.

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They stayed at Rose Cottage long enough to retrieve the cached supplies and transfigure their clothes before catching the bus to Douglas. From there they took the ferry to Liverpool, with Hermione paying cash for everyone and the pure-blood wizards quietly boggling. The younger Slytherins took British public transport in their stride, with Veng confidently guiding them to the train that would take them to his uncle's house in Stoke-on-Trent.

Mr Veng hustled them inside, speaking urgently to Kosal in Khmer as he locked the front door. He looked tired and worried as although a Muggle he was clearly in on the political troubles of his magical relatives. His nephew's explanation seemed to mollify him somewhat. He shepherded them into the kitchen and put the kettle on.
During tea and buns, Crowdy and Haricott phoned their parents and received voluble promises of immediate collection. Moncrieff phoned too but received no answer. Jaakan shook his head at Rosier, who had told him what happened to his dad. He'd hoped his mum had got away. He called his aunt and his grandparents, checking the numbers carefully in a small diary. No answer.

“You can stay at my house.” Kosal said firmly to the Fourth Year. “We have plenty of room and mum's always on at me to bring friends home.” He looked to the Head Girl for confirmation. “The Ministry is going to start a witch hunt, aren't they?”

“Inevitably. They'll need someone to blame when it comes out how little they did. Depending on who gets their bum on the chair first, the Minister might even arrest both sides.” Hermione finished her second bun and licked icing off her fingers. “You, Crowdy, and Haricott should be safe enough. Your families don't have any direct ties to Death Eaters. The Moncrieffs were aligned with the Mulcibers. That will probably be sufficient for the Ministry even with Weyland Mulciber dead.”

“Did you kill him?” Jaakan asked, tautly. He knew his relatives had worked for the older pure-blood family for yonks. He also knew that since Voldemort had shown up, things had been tense. The Mulcibers weren't all Death Eaters but some of them had been in it from the beginning.

“I was there when he died. I give you my word your father has been avenged.” There hadn't been enough left intact to raise as an Inferi. “I'll submit an account with memories of what he tried to do, and if that doesn't work I'll ask Susan Bones to speak for your family. The Ministry won't ignore her.”

Nott's expression went very bland when she said that, and Flint raised an eyebrow. He knew Bones was in Dumbledore's Army, quite militant about it after the murder of her aunt. She'd never mentioned any tie to Rosier, at least not to Oliver. Marcus had tried to keep an ear out for any trouble his quasi-bride was in. General consensus was she was destined for a bad end.

They stayed in Stoke-on-Trent until the children had been retrieved. Hermione was cried over and promises of debt were made but she refused all offers of hospitality. She wanted to check on her elves and her grandmother. It was unlikely the Ministry had secured Rosier Hall yet but it would be soon once the Aurors realised Siglinde wasn't among the dead.

Caution had Hermione and Moppet Side-Along the wizards just in case the wards were live. It was that vigilance that had them bumped gently off the border of the Rosier property, arriving in front of the gates rather than smeared across the defences. The magic of the land reached out to the witch as soon as her feet touched ground.

“Everything is on.” Hermione shivered at the intense pulse thrumming through her body. “Blood magic too.” She took a few steps back because this was not a working one poked blindly. Nott and Flint gave her some distance, drawing their wands in case of boom. Nothing happened when Hermione cast an attunement charm to get a better read. “Elf magic as well.”

“Moppet's hairs stand all on end.” The house elf moved into position at her witch's right hand. “Is dead elf on other side.”

“Yes.” She could feel it too. More than one death to fuel the wards no one was monitoring. Hermione lowered the defences tied to the land, the ones she had anchored at the seasonal rite. The vivacity of the wards diminished slowly. A lot of power had been put into them. Concentrating on the attunement charm, Hermione studied the blood magic then stepped up to the iron gate. There was no push back for her, no resistance. “How do you feel, everyone?”

“I am not invited in but I'm not forbidden.” Flint approached, stopping about three paces behind
Rosier. He swore as the sticky acid heat of the blood magic hit him. “Fuck, that's strong.”

“The same.” Nott said, moving up to stand beside the older wizard. “The estate doesn’t welcome me but it's not hostile.” He traced his wand in an intricate pattern over the invisible surface of the remaining ward. “This is your grandmother's work.” He didn't like it. “We can leave it be. Go join my father or wherever Flint's been hiding.”

“Moppet feels fine from the magics and bad from the knowing.” The house elf looked towards the Norman castle wreathed in roses. “Could still cross, if pushed.”

“No, I'll bring it down first. Anything could trigger it, and the Rosier elves might be trapped inside.” Hermione put her wand away, extending both hands to contact the working. It did not fight her. Someone had very carefully ensured it would not hurt her. Energy, magic, and love flowed into Cathal Rosier, guiding her onwards. She stumbled at the draw but it wasn't a compulsion. It had started as one. Now it felt more like a desperate plea for her to come home.

The blood wards collapsed around her as she opened the gate. Hermione paused, the ghost of Alastor Moody practically shouting in her ear. She raised the land magic, turning the legal defences back on so if anyone followed them in she'd know. An experienced Auror or a Curse-Breaker would be able to sneak around the security if given enough time. She didn't expect she'd want to linger.

The front doors opened for her, a light breeze sweeping in her wake. When Hermione paused again it wasn't to check the magic on the threshold. She knew the metal scent of blood. Sometimes when she woke suddenly she could smell it on her hands. Instinct made her draw her wand and put her left hand on the second one at the small of her back, casting a Shield Charm without thinking.

There were only three bodies in the foyer. That was a relief. Nissy the Selwyn elf who had stayed true had given her Mistress a final service. She lay in a red pentagram posed carefully, a star within a star, bled as pale as chalk. A single sanguine line linked her to a second, larger circle. It was smudgier, the sigils drawn in haste, a broken wand marking one of the directions. Sholto Selwyn, son of Siglinde's only sibling, lay spread-eagled with veins at wrist, ankle, and throat open. An unwilling sacrifice, Hermione guessed from the bruises.

Siglinde had started a third circle to add more power to the protections she had drawn with the ichor of her servant and her nephew. She hadn't finished it. The white haired witch lay curled on her side contorted, killed by the demands of her rite with a knife still clenched in her hand. And around her, blown in by the breeze, their scent oddly heady, rose petals scattered like drops of blood.

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